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STORIES

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A NOVEL OF WORLDS UNBORN

## OUTPOST ZERO

by JAMES MacINTOSH



**SAVE GAS .. Up to 1 Gallon in Every 4**



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# MILE-O-METER

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*miles per gallon*  
**and motor tune-up gauge**

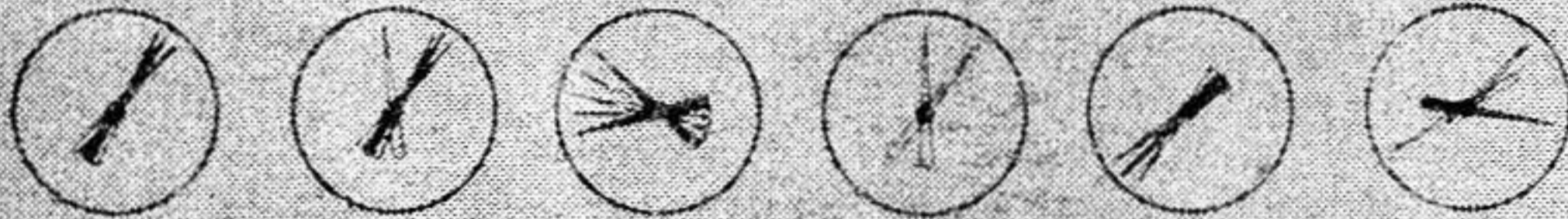
Up to 35 Miles Per Gallon

Mile-O-Meter is a gasoline mileage gauge as well as a motor tune-up indicator, very important in running your car economically.

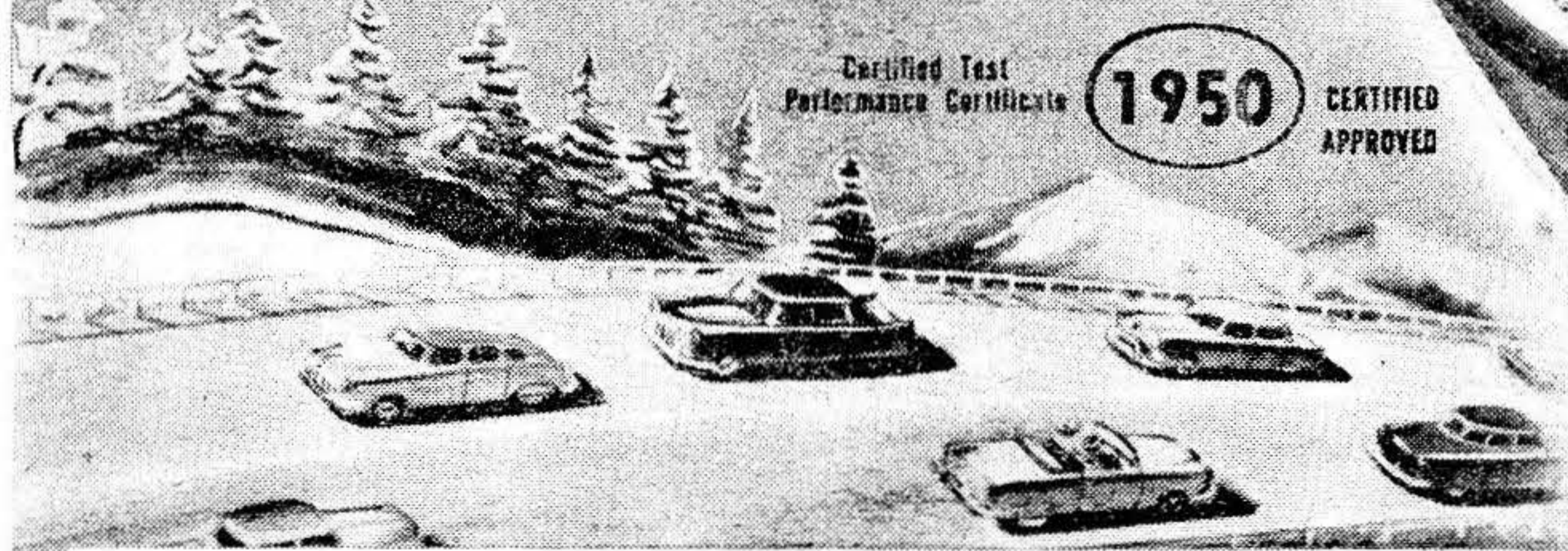
Fits all cars. Permanently mounted. Checks Spark Plugs, Carburetor and 31 other Motor adjustments. Shows how to increase miles per gallon at every speed. 1 to 5 minute installation — a color Easy-To-Read Dial. No holes to drill. Mounting bracket fits dash or windshield frame. No experience needed. Complete instructions and 16-page mileage book included. Tested and proved by leading Automotive Associations and manufacturers. Makes a perfect gift. (Beautifully gift wrapped at no charge.) Over 1,000,000 in use today.

**SURE ACCURACY  
AT ALL SPEEDS**

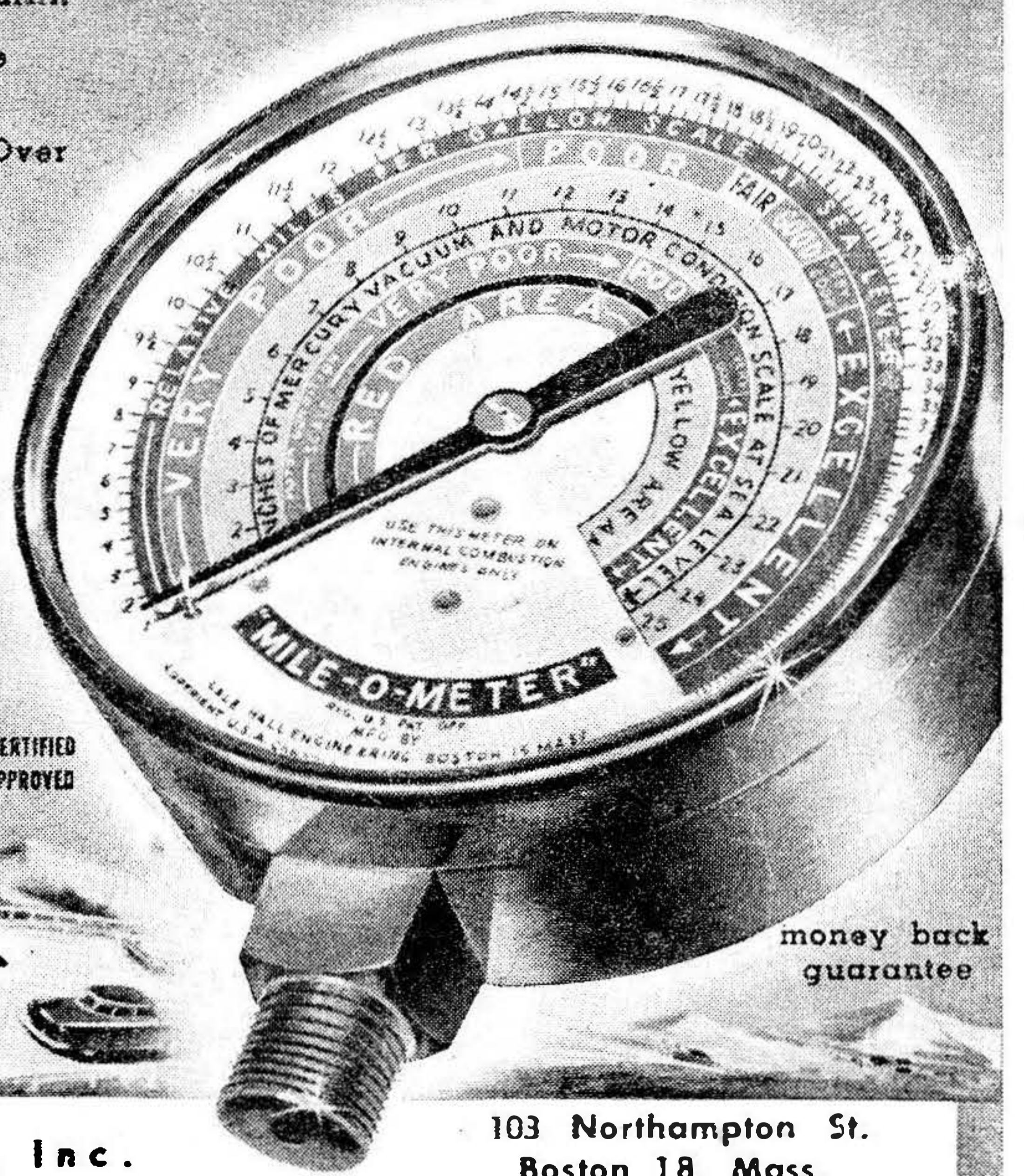
Send for yours today — Mile-O-Meter shipped prepaid — money back guarantee  
Deluxe Chrome Model 3 5/8 Dia. . . . **\$14.95 Ppd.**  
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Mile-O-Meter will tell you how to correct the **ENGINE CONDITION**



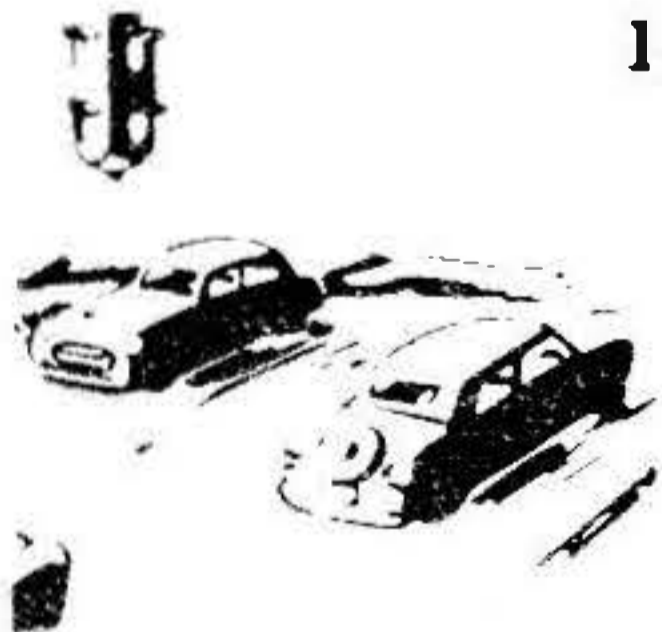
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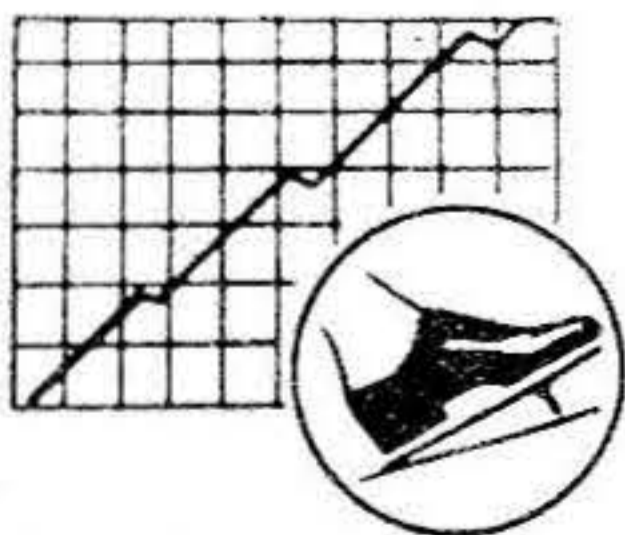
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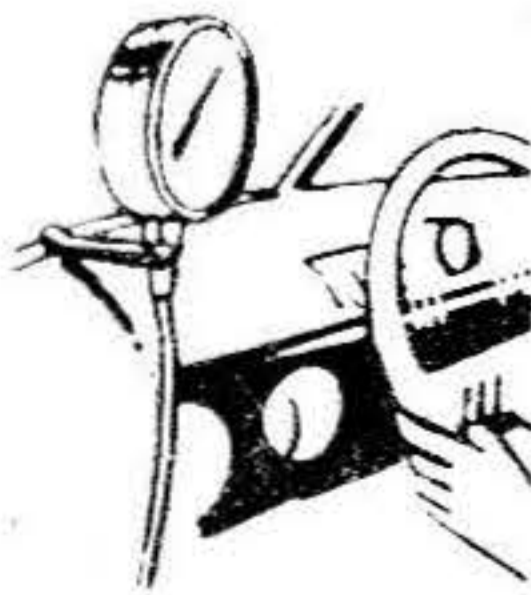
1. **TEACHES** you how to drive economically — eliminates the Jack Rabbit starts and passing on hills — that's where you really drink up fuel.



3. **YOU** can check your engine condition at all times, and if it is not operating efficiently, Mile-O-Meter will tell you how to correct the condition.



2. **PERFORMANCE** charts and suggestions are enclosed with every meter, enabling you to determine how many miles per gallon you are getting, and what adjustments to make to increase your mileage.



4. **SIMPLY** mount meter on windshield frame or on dashboard area to suit your convenience with the aid of mounting brackets that can be bent into practically any position.

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# BUD WENT TO THE RESCUE AND THEN...



HEY! WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA OF BEANING ME!

HER SHOUTS DROWNED BY THE ROARING WATER, KAY STEVENS THROWS A STONE TO ATTRACT THE YOUNG FISHERMAN'S ATTENTION, BUT THEN...



IT'S MY BROTHER! HE'S HURT ON A LITTLE ISLAND UPSTREAM

LET'S GET GOING! SUNSET'S ONLY AN HOUR OFF!



JUST A SPRAIN, I GUESS, BUT I CAN'T WALK

...AND I CAN'T CARRY HIM

WE'D BETTER GET ASHORE FAST. IT'LL BE DARK SOON



WHW! NOW IF YOU'LL MAKE OUR PATIENT COMFORTABLE, I'LL HIKE DOWN AND GET MY CAR

LET'S BUILD A FIRE FIRST TO GUIDE YOU BACK



AN HOUR LATER

DOC PETERS IS COMING AFTER SUPPER. WON'T YOU STAY AND SHARE OUR TROUT?

THANK YOU, YES! BUT WITH THIS BEARD I MUST LOOK LIKE A TRAMP

USE MY RAZOR IF YOU'D LIKE TO SHAVE



THESE ARE THE SLICKEST-SHAVING BLADES I'VE EVER RUN ACROSS. MY FACE FEELS GREAT!

SOLD ON THIN GILLETTES, EH? WELL, THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN



PROBABLY JUST A SPRAIN, BUT WE'D BETTER X-RAY IT TOMORROW

I'LL BE GLAD TO DRIVE YOU IN

COME EARLY AND HAVE BREAKFAST WITH US

ISN'T HE HANDSOME?

MEN, SHAVING'S A BREEZE... QUICK, EASY AND REFRESHING... WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY OUT-PERFORM AND OUT-LAST EVERY OTHER BLADE IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. THIN GILLETTES NEVER NICK OR SCRAPE BECAUSE THEY'RE PRECISION-MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY TEN-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT

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NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

1957 August 1957 SCIENCE FICTION

25¢

# SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

READ IT TODAY—LIVE IT TOMORROW!

VOL. 8 AUGUST, 1951 NO. 3

## NOVELETTES OF THE FUTURE

**OUTPOST ZERO**.....*James MacIntosh* 16  
 A cargo of death they bore, for themselves and the rest of the galaxy . . . with mere hours left to rebuild tomorrow's Earth . . . or face final oblivion, alone between the stars!

## TWO NOVELETTES

**WHEN EARTH IS OLD**.....*Raymond Z. Gallun* 66  
 They emerged at last, three humans from a mist-covered past, onto an Earth that had no need of them . . . unless they could unwind mankind's final shroud. . . .

**THE STAR KILLERS**.....*Neil R. Jones* 88  
 A war older than Man, fought among ageless stars. . . . Long after Man's day was done his last strange son answered its dread challenge on an invisible world of flaming terror!

## STORIES OF TOMORROW

**TERMINAL QUEST**.....*Poul Anderson* 36  
 An orphan of the eons was he, the last of a hated race . . . needing only death to make him immortal!

**HALF-PAST FEAR**.....*John Jakes* 50  
 He was lost in time—a fugitive from the past, which would not have him alive—and the future, which refused to accept him dead. . . .

**JOURNEY'S END**.....*Walter Kubilius* 58  
 Through chill space the ship plunged for a dozen lifetimes—on a journey which had no end!

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## DEPARTMENTS AND FEATURES

**FANDOM'S CORNER**.....*Conducted by James V. Taurasi* 6  
**MISSIVES AND MISSILES**.....*The Readers* 10  
**THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER**.....*Fred Pohl* 49

Cover by Leo Morey  
 Inside Illustrations by Finlay, Bok, Callé, and Van Dongen

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Conducted by James V. Taurasi

**V**OL MOLESWORTH of Sydney, Australia, reports that a national fantasy organization for scientific fiction fans in Australia is being formed. It is titled Australian Science Fiction Society and Graham B. Stone is the head man. The idea behind the organization is to have all fans in Australia belong to it and pay annual dues. In return they'll receive a regularly published fan mag, to be called, *Courier*. This official organ will keep all Australian fans informed on what is going on fanwise, and will also serve as a medium for fans to keep in touch with each other. All interested should contact: Graham B. Stone, Box 61, The Union, University of Sydney, Australia.

The American Science-Fantasy Society, now in its third year, is interested in forming chapters all over the country, particularly in the New York City area where it wishes to establish a headquarters. All persons interested in joining or who would like to be active fans may write to: Cal Thomas Beck, 7312 Blvd. East, North Bergen, New Jersey, Suite 2-c. Dues are only \$1.00 a year. The society is not limited to any age group or to professionals or amateurs. Mr. Beck claims that such fans and pros as Ray Bradbury, William F. Jenkins, Willy Ley, Quinn, Keller, Ed Noble etc., are members of the organization.

The Eastern Science Fiction Association celebrated its 5th Anniversary with its March meeting. Howard Browne and Sam Merwin, Jr., were chief speakers. The ESFA meets the first Sunday of the month at Newark, New Jersey. Director is Sam Moskowitz, 127 Shephard Ave., Newark 8, New Jersey.

The Fantasy Veterans Association is asking for members and for fans who are in the Services to send their address to them. The Fan-Vets are helping the fans in the armed forces of the United States to obtain their favorite fan and professional stf magazines, even though they may be thousands of miles away from a good old US newsstand. You can help by sending in the names and addresses of fans who join or are drafted into the Armed Forces. The Fan-Vets will contact them and see to it that their stf needs are taken care of. For full information write to Secretary Ray Van Houten, 127 Spring Street, Paterson 3, New Jersey.

Frank Dietz, Jr., informs us that he has purchased a new power printing press and that his excellent fan mag, *Science, Fantasy & Science-Fiction* will now be published at regular quarterly intervals. An issue should be out by the time you read this. For more complete information write to

(Continued on page 8)



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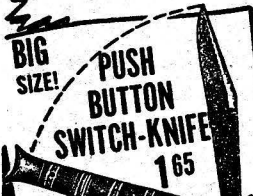
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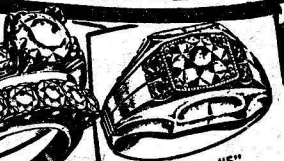


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(Continued from page 6)

Franklin M. Dietz, P.O. Box 696, Kings Park, L.I., N.Y.

*Super Science Stories* has seen its 5th British Edition, out in Great Britain. It's marked No. 2 of a new series and contains cover, illustrations and fiction from the American September 1950 issue. 64 pages, trimmed edges and sells for 1/-.

At the same time *Super Science's* sister magazine, had its second British Edition out. *Fantastic Novels* saw part of its May 1949 issue reprinted in England, and marked number 1, of a new series. It also contains 64 pages, trimmed edges, but sells for 9d.

*Challenge*, the semi-pro fantasy poetry magazine saw its 4th and last issue this month. This 16 page, poorly mimeographed fan mag printed some of the best fantasy poems seen. The present day high cost of printing forced it to fold. All is not lost, though, as the magazine will combine with *Different*, a general poetry magazine. *Different* is a well-printed, slick-papered magazine and will offer the fantasy poems better display. If you go in for fantasy and science fiction poetry, as well as poetry in general, we recommend this excellent publication to you. For details write to *Different*, Rogers, Arkansas. The well-known Lilith Lorraine is the editor and publisher.

Now for the fan mags:

*SCIENCE-FICTION NEWSSCOPE*, No. 7, published monthly by Fandom Press, 43 Tremont Street, Malden 48, Mass. Lawrence Ray Campbell is editor. 5¢ a copy. 4 to 6 pages of general stf and fan news. Mimeographed and improving all the time. This issue tells of *Fantastic Novels'* new logo and of the coming stf convention in England.

*IMAGINATIVE COLLECTOR* combined with *DAWN*, March 1951, published by Russell K. Watkins, 203 Wampum Avenue, Louisville 9, Kentucky. 15¢ a

copy. This issue contains some excellent articles by Arthur J. Burks and Russell K. Watkins. Also a long letter column. The material is excellent, but the format and mimeoing is very bad. I would suggest that better care be taken in laying out the magazine and that a few good fan artists be obtained to add a little life to it. Still we highly recommend this magazine and suggest you try a copy.

*SLANT*, No. 5, published by Walter A. Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast, North Ireland. Price: two issues for one current stf pro-mag (like *Super Science*) or 25¢. To British fans, 1/6 for two issues. One of the finest amateur fiction magazines currently published. Good stf stories with excellent illustrations, some in two colors, plus articles and reviews. 46 printed pages. A must for all fans and readers of science-fiction.

*WORLDS APART*, No. 1, published irregularly by The Stone Age Press, 3401 6th Avenue, Columbus, Georgia. 10¢ a copy. J. T. Oliver, Paul D. Cox, Van Splawn and John Keller are the editors. A neatly mimeographed 20 page magazine containing fiction, articles and features. A good first issue, we'd like to see it come out on a regular set schedule. The editors ask that you don't subscribe for more than two issues as they don't know if it will continue.

*FANTASY-TIMES*, No. 125, published twice-a-month by Fandom House, c/o James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Avenue, Flushing, New York. 10¢ a copy. Fandom's oldest news magazine is still going strong. Two of the features of this news-mag is a movie column by Lester Mayer, Jr., and a column announcing in advance stories appearing in the pro mags. Interesting sidelights are found in the column, "The Cosmic Reporter" by Arthur Jean Cox. Due to good reporting, this fan magazine contains many scoops.



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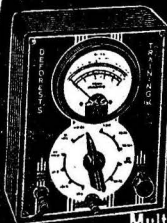
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City.....Zone.....State.....



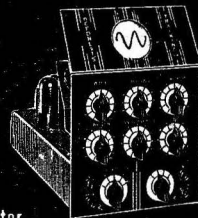
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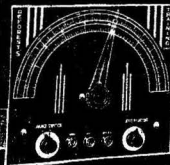
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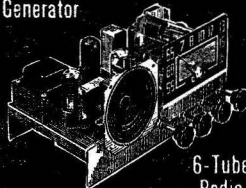
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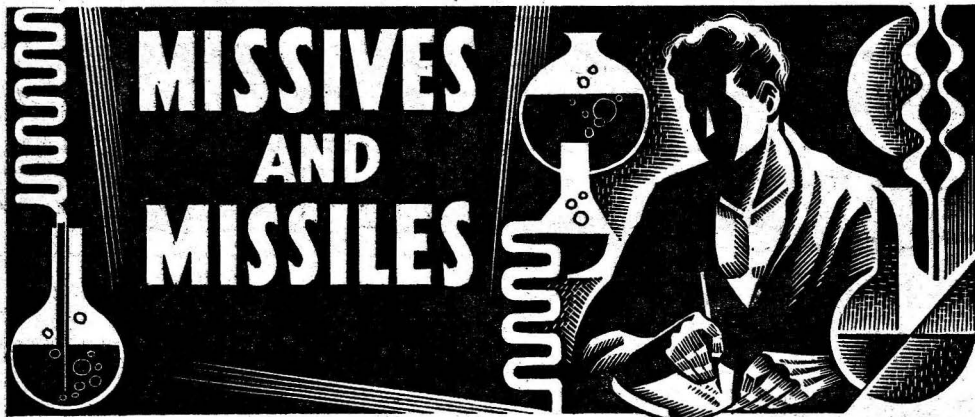
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Address comments to the Letter Editor,  
Super Science Stories, Fictioneers, Inc.,  
205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

**H**ERE'S one spot where we've got the edge on our BER's—the R is for you guys—if there're any questions to be asked, we can ask 'em first. With a due credit line to one of our favorite correspondents, Martin (What's-in-a-name) Brilliant, whose missive leads off your end of the deal, we'll ask it—What's an Sf. letter department?

With commendable tenacity, Martin poses an older query: What is science-fiction? To us, it answers ours—that's what these pages are for, so let's find out. We'll agree with Martin in that the question has never been satisfactorily answered, and also that his definition, incorporated in his letter, while good, is still, we fear, inadequate.

But let's get on with it, Martin Brilliant—and we hope you stirred up a hornet's nest.

Dear Eddie Tor:

Against the judgment of past experience, and no doubt at great personal risk, I am writing once again to SUPER SCIENCE STORIES. The first time I wrote to SSS, I received in reply a number of missives and missiles from fan clubs and book dealers. The second time, I was duly rewarded by a veritable bombardment, including a few personal letters from dear fans. This time I scarcely know what to expect, but I am prepared to answer any written correspondence.

Nevertheless, I am determined to take the

risk. I have a question on my mind, that I believe must be answered before any intelligent criticism can be made of science-fiction. The question is "What is science-fiction?" It is probable that very few of us, if any, have ever thought to consider this question; no doubt my own preoccupation with it is due largely to my being enrolled in a survey course in philosophy here at Washington and Jefferson College. Still, by any rules of logic, this question must be answered before the question of what good science-fiction is can be considered, and this question in turn logically precedes any attempt to decide what is good science-fiction. I myself think that science-fiction is the vehicle for the presentation of ideas that would be ridiculous if presented otherwise, but I am not sure that this is a satisfactory answer.

But now, at the risk of being illogical, I will render my judgments of the contents of the April issue, in the order of their appearance.

The front cover is bad. The costumes are senseless. Nobody would ever wear a jacket provided with a ring for sealing a helmet unless they wore the helmet. The girl is an outrageous anachronism; with her fanatical facial aspect and her ridiculous banner she could be taken for nothing but a misplaced Joan of Arc.

The stories are all good, but none are outstanding.

For this reason I make no attempt to rate them, but will give simply a few comments on some of the stories. HIGH FLIGHT is plotless.

Its central idea is uninspiring; the time has passed when a reader of science-fiction could be surprised by the discovery of teleportation. The physics is without foundation; an appeal to the properties of the gyroscope is fruitless, since by such principles rotation can produce only rotation. In what mad universe does rotating electrical machinery pro-

*(Continued on page 12)*



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*Frank C. Schultz*

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(Continued from page 10)

duce teleportation? THE UNFINISHED contains a suggested theory of evolution that is absolutely untenable.

The evolution of organic life on a planet depends on the geologic and meteorologic history of the planet, and since the chemical composition and physical characteristics of planets vary widely, there is no foundation for the belief that intelligent life will develop in the same form on many planets. CHILD OF THE GREEN LIGHT escapes such criticism only by being so indefinite that no theory can be found in it. Of these three stories, the first two are better science-fiction; while the third is neither good science-fiction nor good fantasy, although it would be good if considered as in an intermediate classification. The essence of science-fiction is fictitious science, whether valid or not.

Although none of the stories were outstanding—or rather, because no story was outstanding, the issue as a whole was excellent. The absence of outstandingly bad stories is unusual. The editors of SUPER SCIENCE STORIES are to be congratulated on having produced a magazine entirely devoid of adventure stories that claim to be science-fiction entirely on the basis of locale. S.S.S., in this issue, has attained the first step in the development of a truly great magazine; all that is lacking is a really outstanding story or two in each issue, and the removal of sensational elements, to make this magazine, already one of the best, unquestionably first in its field.

Yours sincerely,  
Martin Brilliant,  
Campus Club,  
202 East Beau St.,  
Washington, Pa.

Thanks for the bouquets as well as the brickbats—and if you need help with your correspondence, just call on us. And see what happens!

Like most people, we meet a lot of guys asking for favors—here's Cpl. Louis P. McNicoll, who's anxious to do somebody one. Who'll give him a chance?

Dear Ed:

When last I took a typewriter in my claws to hack out a letter to M & M, 1949 was in its death throes and Little Louie was in the Navy, sitting on an island in the Caribbean without a single bit of Stf obtainable within reason. I made an appeal for some kind person to help me out and I'd like to take this very belated opportunity to thank them. My thanks especially to the Eugene Science-Fantasy Society for their copies of *Eusifanso* and the promags.

Fate being what is it, I now find myself in the Air Force and in a position to get all the

Stf I want. So before I go into a critique of the April issue, I'd like to depay a debt in kind. If any serviceman, anywhere, is unable to obtain any science-fiction, then let him (or her) drop me a postcard or letter and I'll see to it that he (or she) gets something to read, no cost to them.

Now I shall gyre and gimbal for a moment to separate my wandering thoughts and emerge with these sage comments on the April SSS.

The best in this issue was DANGER DIMENSION, Mullen's little wonder. The concept was hardly the newest, but his fresh treatment helped it rate tops.

Next comes the reprint, Brackett's CHILD OF THE GREEN LIGHT. This was really a gem and well worth the revival.

The rest of the stories, in order of my liking, were . . . THE DEATH STAR. Good writing. Almost took second place, but who is Holden?

ETERNAL EARTHLING This smacks just a bit of Bradbury, but not with his abstract approach. Pretty fair reading, though.

HIGH FLIGHT and THE UNFINISHED were also fair reading, although they were nothing exceptional.

There was only one story in this issue that would be better described by the author's own words in his story . . . "It stank of incense rising from burners by an altar to the Four Kings." "Siva forbid!" But the Finlay illo to this story was one of the best I've seen of his work lately.

That for the stories! Now all I want to do is make a bit of comment on SSS in general. I've managed to get all copies published since your rebirth and a quick look along the line shows the remarkable improvements made to date. From the atrocious printing of that first copy to the clear, sharp reproduction of the latest is in itself an achievement, but the cleaning up of the cover, the growth of one of the best book-review columns in promags and able comments on Fandom by Taurasi all have helped to bring SSS to its present high level. As a pulp, it is outstanding, so keep up the good work and keep those stories coming. And please, please don't ever let go the string on which your artists are leashed. Gad, with Finlay, Lawrence, Calle, Bok and Leydenfrost on it now, all you need are a few interiors by Edd Cartier and a cover by Bonestell!

Well, my master is coming for me now so I think I'll crawl back into my sensipsych and glom this one final note. . . . Any fans in the San Antonio area? I'd like to get in touch with you if there are.

Yours till my van won't Vogt,  
Cpl. Louis P. McNicoll, AF-11202313,  
Headquarters,  
Human Resources Research Center,  
Lackland AFB, San Antonio, Texas.

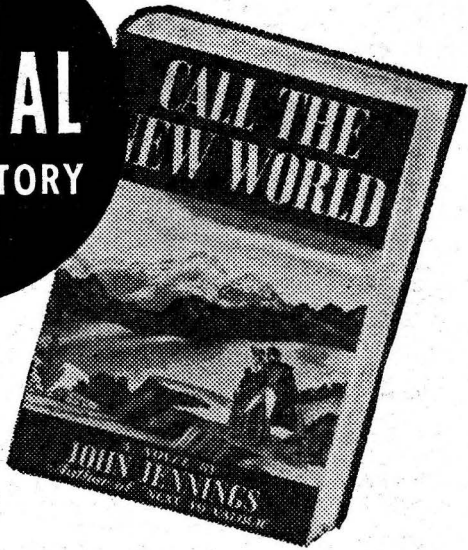
There's nothing we like better than see-

(Continued on page 14)





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(Continued from page 12)

ing two guys fight. In this corner, wearing a vortex blaster, Michael Wigodsky—over there, wearing this month's SSS cover, Francis M. Mulford. Break clean, boys!

You BEM:

Comments on the new issue. I enjoy reading it today, but I'd hate to live it to morrow. Pipe-dreams come true so etimes, too.

As for the current issue.

1. ETERNAL EARTHFLING by Walter Kubilius. One flaw in this story: Why that last sentence? Why should escaped specimens be dissected? A waste, *heim?* Wouldn't Jim make as good a zoo-specimen as before, knowing himself to be in a zoo? Or did all the specimens think themselves on their home-planets? And why, if that was the case?

2. THE UNFINISHED by Frank Belknap Long. This surprised me. I don't know why. I've read this twist often enough before. It was unusually well-handled this time, though. That, and not the surprise effect, caused me to place the story second. Since I *should* have foreseen the surprise ending, this would normally have the opposite effect. Rather like Rocklynne's *Quietus*, though less tragic. That description of the humans as "embryonic" should have given the show away, had I been listening to what I was reading.

3. HIGH FLIGHT by Katherine MacLean. This was better written than No. 2. Incredible, though. Nice detail. Berganholm any relation to E. E. Smith's *Bergenholm*?

4. THE LAST DARK by La Selle Gilman. Beautifully done, but don't you think that this shades off into occultism? Shaverism? Lemurianism? Diffusionism? Anyway, it was obviously copied from Doc Keller's BONELESS HORROR.

5. THE DEATH STAR by Fox B. Holden. Just one big flaw in this story. I've read it a couplahunner times awredy.

6. DANGER DIMENSION by Stanley Mullen. I hate to do it to you, Stan. For a consolation, this was better written than No. 5. This all-aliens-to-be-hated business went out quite a while ago, I thought. In s-f, I mean. In "real" life, we still have lynchings. And the attitude from which this is written is pretty close to the lynching mentality.

7. CHILD OF THE GREEN LIGHT by Leigh Brackett. For once, the reprint is simply awful. I know you can find better reprints than this. You've done it for two issues in succession. This monstrosity is (paper slightly scorched here by intensity of my feelings.) Brekex, brekex, Leigh.

Suggestions for reprint: Rocklynne's DARKNESS stories (omit the connecting links and run them as a novel. A real one.) The two VORTEX BLASTER stories (E. E. Smith), THE ETERNAL QUEST by Joseph Gilbert, anything by Walter Kubilius,

Heinlein's LOST LEGION, Brackett's OUT OF THE SEA and THE HALFLING, THE CRYSTAL CIRCE, NIGHT OF GODS, WE GUARD THE BLACK PLANET, THUNDER IN THE VOID, IMPROBABILITY and READER, I HATE YOU, and by Kuttner, PENDULUM by Bradbury and Hasse, THE DARKER LIGHT and THE PERSECUTORS by Cartmill, anything more by Asimov, and a story about periodic volcanic eruptions on Venus (I forget the title and author, but it was a novelette, which I think appeared in the same issue as NIGHT OF GODS and which I am almost sure was illustrated by Paul.)

About illustrations: I'd like covers by Bok, Finlay, Paul, Van Dongen, Paul, Morey, Finlay, and very occasionally Lawrence. Interiors should be by Finlay, Lawrence, Savage, Bok, Van Dongen, Stuart, Fawcette, Finlay, and very occasionally Paul. In addition to the artists you have now I'd like to see Napoli (interiors), Cartier (covers and interiors), Miller (both), Orban (both), Timmins Timmins Timmins Timmins Timmins (both), Schneeman (both), John Grossman (interiors) Sibley (covers), Bunch (interiors), Bonestell (covers), Karl Rogers (interiors), Don Hunter (covers), Pierre (interiors). That will give you an idea.

After seeing Tom Toney's letter I wish that I had some anecdote to tell of Chaddo, but I've only seen him once. He holds aloof from *isti* (a remarkably expressive word, unfortunately not duplicated in our poverty stricken language) wretched Houstonians.

Michael Wigodsky,  
402 West Clay,  
Houston 19, Texas.

Dear Editor:

Please do not let SSS start printing reprints. This is the last word in ugliness to spoil a worthwhile pulp. (Unless it is a mag devoted strictly to reprints.) First, VICTORY UNINTENTIONAL was not good. The mags of today insist on stories of almost slick quality. (Am I not right?) Writers of today are forced to meet higher standards than ever before.

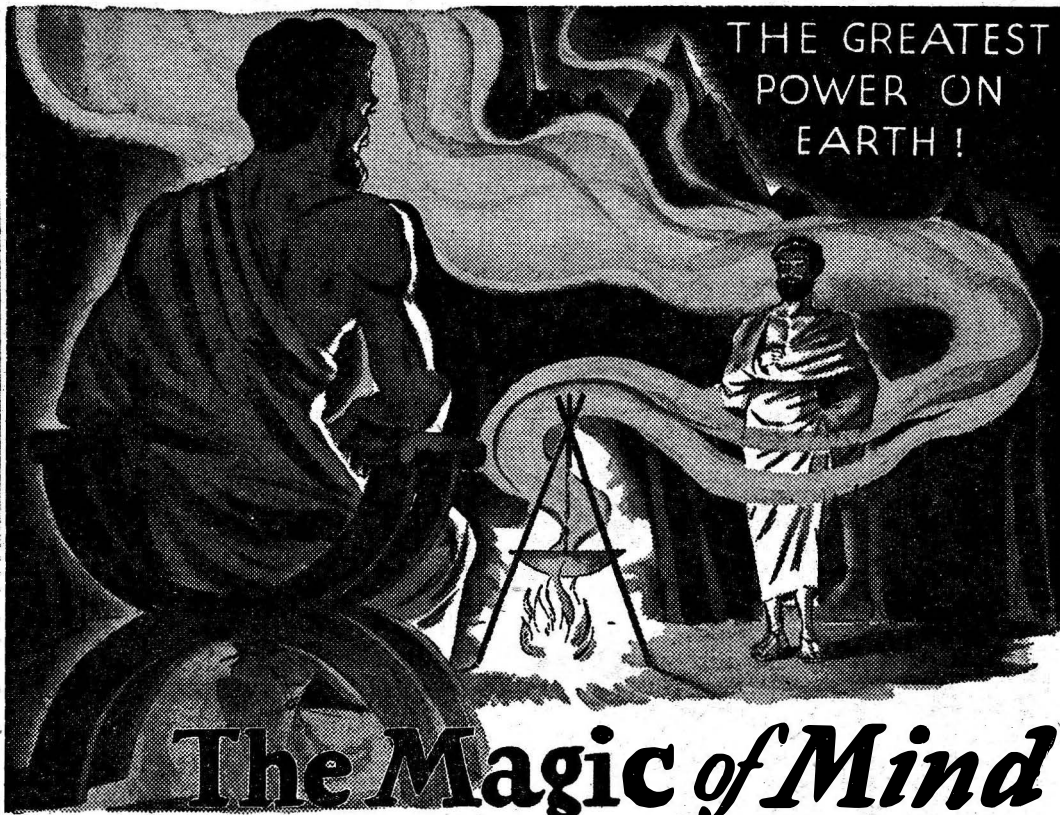
BLOOD STAR and RAMPART OF FEAR were among the stories grabbing honors for January. FIRST LIFE was pleasantly written but its theme was senseless. I would like to see what else Roger Dee has to offer.

SSS covers can be improved over January, I hope. (Another woman partially unclothed.) SSS sells without the need of these women on the cover.

Francis M. Mulford,  
512 Linwood Ave.,  
Buffalo 9, N. Y.

(Continued on page 111)





**WERE** the great personages of the past victims of a stupendous hoax? Could such eminent men of the ancient world as Socrates, Pericles, and Alexander the Great have been deluded and cast under the spell of witchcraft—or did the oracles whom they consulted actually possess a *mysterious faculty of foresight*? That *the human mind can truly exert an influence over things and conditions* was not a credulous belief of the ancients, but a known and demonstrable fact to them. That there exists a wealth of infinite knowledge just beyond the border of our daily thoughts, which can be aroused and commanded at will, was not a fantasy of these sages of antiquity, but a dependable aid to which they turned in time of need.

It is time you realized that the rites, rituals and practices of the ancients were not superstitions, but subterfuges to conceal the marvelous workings of natural law from those who would have misused them. Telepathy, projection of thought, the materializing of ideas into helpful realities, are no longer thought by intelligent persons to be impossible practices, but instead, *demonstrable sciences*, by which a greater life of happiness may be had.

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By  
JAMES MacINTOSH

# OUTPOST ZERO

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Black Moss Death

**A**LMOST with amusement Winter stood on the balcony outside the control room and looked down the well of the dying ship. From the gallery he could see everyone on board. Behind him, in the control room, Shaw and Souness scribbled feverishly in an effort to make two and two add up to thirty-seven. On the gallery ten feet below, on the opposite side of the well, the two girls tried to throw off the sleep which had been interrupted with the information that they had fifteen hours to live. On the same circle, directly below Winter, the three miners chattered like excited monkeys. And at the bottom of the well the cook, the engineer and the steward stared up at him

along the length of the ship. Eleven altogether, including himself. He had time to tell them individually exactly why they were dying, but it wouldn't be funny to them that their deaths were irrelevant adjuncts of his.

He looked round again, assessing anew the murder of ten people merely as a blind for the death of the eleventh. He weighed the crime in his mind and wondered if Barker had done that before him. Probably not. Barker never weighed anything. His course was always obvious to him. He worked to so many decimal places that there was never any question of hesitating between alternatives.

There was Shaw, whom everyone would blame for the disaster, because if any of them had a shadow of responsibility for it Shaw was the one, not the captain. Young Shaw had a wife even younger, a child

**The weapon was madness and  
the carrier was light. . . .**



*A cargo of death they bore, for themselves and the rest of  
the galaxy . . . with mere hours left to rebuild tomorrow's  
Earth . . . or face final oblivion, alone between the stars!*



Virgil  
Finlay



who could not yet walk, and his whole manhood before him; but still they would blame him for throwing away their lives. Shaw might have chosen the long course known to be free of black moss, but he had taken the infinitesimal risk of a new course and as a result they would die. Beside him was Bill Souness, the boastful spaceman, the shy lover, who would divide his last fifteen hours between raising futile hopes with wild schemes for survival and staring hungrily at the two girls who were now not merely passengers but companions in the last peril.

The girls, Esther and Marjory, were so-called colonists who had gone out to Ceres ready to work for far-off riches, but not ready, they had discovered, to live in a settlement millions of miles from civilization and only ten years old. They had probably relied on their beauty to help them, but it hadn't brought what they wanted. The miners were hard-headed, unambitious, placid men who had made enough in the first rush to last for the rest of their lives and were taking it away before they lost it or made too much more.

The cook was a woman who had found when she was eighteen that traveling was in her blood, and had spent twenty years gratifying her lust for long journeys behind and before her. The engineer was her second husband—the first had not shared her love of space and the marriage was dissolved quietly and without regret. The steward was nothing. Something must have happened to make him so, and the chances were about even, Winter thought, that they would discover what it was before they died.

That was Barker's crime—the murder of Black, the steward, who would accept death indifferently; Smith, Hawkin and Randall, the miners, who had won all they wanted and were now to have it taken from them; Mary and Robert Crispin, who had always known that death in space was catching up on them; Shaw, to whom death was an

incredible horror, and Souness, who would be too busy with other things to comprehend it until just before the end; and Esther and Marjory, who had been bound to settle down and have children before they were twenty-five and had not even had time for that.

Oh, yes, there was also Jim Winter, thirty-four, Captain Winter, who was the only one Barber wanted to murder.

The girls disappeared into Esther's cabin, and Winter turned from the rail and went into the control room. He lit a cigarette and threw one each to Shaw and Souness. As they stared at him, he laughed.

"We could smoke two at a time and still never get through them," he said. "And we could light a bonfire without having to worry about wasting the air."

"I'll find some way out," said Souness stubbornly.

"Don't let anyone hear you say that," observed Winter, knowing it was useless. "We've been through the black moss." He glanced over at the green ball, now dark again. "It's no use working out now a course that would cut it out. No use working out anything. But don't let me stop you."

He walked out of the room and went down the steel stairs. There was nothing to be gained by making a routine tour, saying a few casual words to everyone. But it was inevitable that he should do it. Any captain would. He saw the miners first.

"The youngster wasn't pitching it strong?" asked Smith, his hard face cool and expressionless. "We're all for the high jump?"

Winter nodded.

"I wonder he had the nerve to be the one to tell us," Hawkin growled. "He's the navigator, isn't he?"

"That was one thing I wanted to talk to you about. It's ridiculous to blame Shaw. You won't find Souness doing it, or the Crispins, or me. And we should know."



"He took a chance he didn't have to take, didn't he?"

"On Earth," said Winter carefully, "you might want to sail from Cape Town to Melbourne. You could do it the safe way—round Africa, along the Indian coast, down among the East Indies, and round Australia, hardly ever out of sight of land. And if the boat sank on any day but three or four, you could always swim ashore. But nobody does it that way. They go straight—less than half the distance, and less than a quarter the time. If the boat does sink, you may be sorry you didn't go round the coast—but you don't blame the navigator."

He saw he had made some sort of impression, so without adding detail he strolled to the door and left them.

He tapped on Esther Maxwell's door, and the eager "Come in!" showed how Esther's hopes at the knock had leaped toward safety. He set his expression to kill the hope as he entered.

THEY were the inevitable team, Esther tall and fair, Marjory small and dark, and the contrasts seemed to follow dutifully right through. Esther had started to dress, but with her pajama top changed for a blouse had realized how little it mattered. Neither of them wore any makeup or had brushed her hair. Soon, however, habit would reassert itself and Esther would realize she had put on a soiled blouse, and they would join the others looking like a couple of film stars again.

He said almost exactly what he had said to the miners. The first difference came when Marjory asked, "Will it be very bad?"

He stared at her, still absorbed in the effort to explain that Shaw wasn't to blame.

"Painful, I mean?" the girl asked anxiously.

"Not in the least. For ten hours you'll feel exactly as you do now."

"And then?"

"We needn't go into that. But it won't hurt."

"Tell her," said Esther. "She can't take pain. She must know."

"Your body gradually collapses inside. You can still move about a bit, but after another hour it's as well to sit down. You might fall and hurt yourself. You couldn't get up. You look the same, even at the end, and the last thing to go is your sight. It's like sleeping. You don't know much at the end. It's about the easiest death anyone could have."

"How do you know about it?" Marjory asked tensely.

"People have died from black moss with their radio turned on. They described everything, right to the end. We know everything about it until they can't speak any more. But they're unconscious by then."

"Can we write letters that someone might find?" Esther asked.

"No one will ever find anything. Soon after we die the ship will gradually collapse too. No one will come near it, for of course it's contaminated. We're stopping so that we'll drift in space. In a week there will be no danger to anyone—everything will be dead dust, quite harmless."

Esther shivered. "Can't you make it sound a little rosier?" she demanded.

"If you think it will help."

"Nothing will help, I suppose?"

"No."

Marjory looked up. "Can we talk on the radio?"

"Not even that, I'm afraid. Ceres hasn't a big enough station yet to hear our calls, and Mars, Venus and Earth are all too far. We could overload the radio and get a distress call out, but there's no point in that. Any rescue ship might hit the black moss too."

"So there's nothing to do but sit around and die?" It was Esther, the calmer, more self-sufficient of the two.



"I hope we'll all find something better than that."

He left them to complete his tour. They might have taken it much worse. Esther reminded him faintly of Pam, his wife. It was a memory he didn't want or need.

The Crispins met him philosophically. "You needn't give us the spiel, Jim," said Mary. They both laughed, the Crispins who could laugh at anything.

Of the three women on the ship, with two glamour girls above, Mary was the most beautiful, at thirty-eight. She had plenty of faults that they hadn't—a sharp chin, creases about her eyes, ruddy color, a strong nose, a big mouth—but it all made a glorious, lovely whole. She had always been beautiful, and she would never have quite lost her beauty. She and Bob were the best, the happiest people on the ship, Winter thought—and their death would be the smallest tragedy.

"Do the beauty queens want to be left alone, or do you think I could help?" she asked.

"I'd be glad if you'd see them, Mary. And, Bob, you might look in on the miners. You might be able to say the right thing, if there is any."

"Sure," said Bob, who was older than Mary but not as much as he looked. "What are you doing about the ship?"

"Leaving it right between the black moss and Earth. We can't do anything about ships coming the other way, but if by any chance a ship tries to make Ceres straight from Earth in the next week we may be of some use yet. When they saw us drifting they'd know what had happened."

"Chances are only fifty million to one against," Bob remarked.

"Anyway, they'll know about that patch now." The course they would follow had been filed on Ceres to provide for just such an event. In a month that spot of black moss would be charted and might never claim another victim. Black moss, whatever it was, kept pretty much the same

position in the system. Ships could pass safely within a million miles of a known patch with no fear of its having drifted that much. They often did, for it was a curious fact that you were never safer than when you had just passed a patch.

Black was in his room, but he looked up with an expression that said so plainly he wanted solitude that Winter left him and closed the door quietly.

Despite his efforts Shaw was going to have a bad time of it. It was a pity he could not tell everyone that Shaw was only the scapegoat for Barker. Shaw knew that Barker had worked the course, but he didn't, couldn't have any idea that Barker had known about the black moss. Barker had given him the course he wanted; he had accepted it in his indolent way, though he still checked it to make sure—but how could Shaw guess that Barker had seen his chance and taken it?

Even Winter couldn't be quite sure. But it all fitted neatly. Barker had once been an explorer, among the thousand other things, and though he had faithfully reported everything else, he had learned about that patch of black moss and stored away the information—perhaps even then with his purpose already clear. . . .

It was hardly human. It was typical Barker. Winter checked his climb back to the control room for a moment, suddenly amazed that he had known Barker only for such a tiny part of his life. He could hardly remember when he had not known Barker.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Threshold of Eternity

**L**IKE an egg dropped in water to see if it is fresh, the tiny ovoid carrier floated down to the broken surface of the asteroid and settled gently on one end. It landed on a spur, so that when it opened Winter had to jump outward and down-



ward to reach the ground. At first he floated down even more slowly than the carrier, then gradually gathered momentum and landed at a speed which looked much more dangerous than it was.

The man he was replacing stood ready, and waited while the five men standing about the telephone post checked that it was safe for him to leave. Two miles up, the launch would be prepared for him to be an enemy, and when the shell of the carrier slid back he would be met by a ring of guns held by men in masks ready to flood the ship with gas. Two miles farther up the launch would be drawn into the hold of the *Belligerent* with the care and caution which would meet a captured enemy who might still be dangerous.

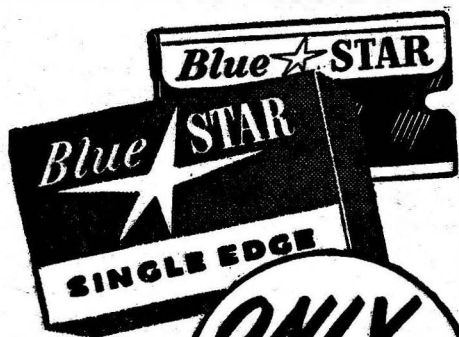
Winter watched curiously. A man he knew, Captain Stone, crossed to him. "Lieutenant Winter?" he asked formally, though for a year he had commanded a ship in which Winter was a midshipman.

Winter saluted and the captain acknowledged, but immediately dropped the formality and remarked, "Salutes are out, here, Winter. There's too few of us and we're too top-heavy in rank. But remember it lasts only six months. . . . Oh, this is Major Gresham."

Major Gresham's one interest in Winter appeared to be first whether he played bridge, and then if he was any good at it. Winter recognized the eye of the player who played for 5-1 adverse distributions, and sighed inwardly. Winter played cards well for a man who had no interest in the pastime, and realized that he had merely escaped the poker of the wardroom in the *Belligerent* to fall into the hands of Major Gresham with his bridge on Barker IV.

The carrier had disappeared, and the six who remained walked slowly to the blockhouse four hundred yards away. With the third member of the group he spoke to Winter had heard all about the station.

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"You'll see him at once," Lieutenant Morley told him. "He doesn't keep himself to himself or anything like that. In fact, this is the softest job in the system, for we're here to guard a man who couldn't escape even if we all helped him, and there's nothing else to do but read, see films, eat and sleep."

"And play bridge," added Winter involuntarily.

Morley grinned. "You should have known better. The major will take the pants off you, at five cents the hundred. Occasionally he makes the rest of us poor men at poker or gin rummy, but his heart isn't in it. There's only one thing that keeps the balance."

Winter looked at him inquiringly. Morley nodded to the blockhouse. "Him. He wins from the major and gives it back to us."

Winter smiled uncertainly.

"You can see how he was dangerous," Morley went on. "We're all his slaves. He gives the major little hints on how to play bridge. He quotes poetry to Cap Stone. He sings and plays the guitar, and between times keeps the rest of us solvent. He writes letters for us when we land in difficulties, and takes charge of any job to be done when no one else thinks he can handle it."

Winter caught the tone of amused, incredulous admiration. He couldn't very well miss it.

"He seems to get plenty of rope," he remarked.

"He does as he likes, as he always did. Colonel Martin is nearly finished here, and I can tell you what will happen when he goes. The new colonel will be shocked at the conditions here, and he'll take steps to see that Tom's reminded he's a prisoner. Tom will take it all with a grin and in three weeks he'll be doing as he likes again."

"Tom?"

"Sure, why not? Tom Barker. What do you want to call him? The Tyrant?"

The Ex-Master? The Last Dictator?"

Winter smiled. "He doesn't sound like another Napoleon at that."

"I never read history. I don't know how Napoleon got on on Elba and St. Helena. It couldn't have been anything like Tom. He wasn't the man Tom is."

He saw Winter's uneasy glance at the other four, only a few yards from them, and laughed so that they all turned and looked at him.

"You can say what you like, Winter—what's your first name?"

"Jim."

"Well, there's no secret police here, nor anywhere else."

"Mars," said Winter briefly.

"Do they say that, now? I've been here a long time, and the radio crackles so much I don't often listen. So Mars is the trouble spot now. But there will be weeks to talk. Here, let's go first. Tom will want to meet you."

There was no airlock, for the whole asteroid had its envelope of air. It was only eleven pounds, but Winter had been trained and pressurized so that he didn't even notice. They entered by an ordinary door, walked along an ordinary passage, and went into an ordinary room.

There were five men in the room. Two were reading, one cleaning a gun, one playing the piano and the other turning over music on the top of it. They all looked up as Winter entered with Morley, and even the pianist stopped.

"Jim Winter," said Morley. He introduced Winter all round, saying names that meant nothing to him until Morley came to Tom Barker. It was the pianist. Like Napoleon, he was a little man; but he was too ordinary to be insignificant. He looked the sanest man in the room, the most alert, the readiest to laugh. He should have been introduced as a villain, but it was as a conventionally modest hero that he shook Winter's hand and grinned at him. Winter had to tell himself that there were many kinds



of truth, or what he knew of this man would seem like a lie.

Barker must have been forty at least, but he was a man who would never age; a small but well-proportioned man, dark-haired, who could act the part of a boy seventeen if he chose. The face was familiar, but the fact that it was as smooth and contented as in the pictures was surprising. Seeing him was like meeting a beautiful film star and finding unexpectedly that she was quite as attractive, off guard, as on the screen.

Major Gresham followed Winter in, rubbed his hands, unconscious of what he was doing, cleared his throat and was about to speak when Barker grinned and said, "Yes, I'm ready for a game, Major, but Winter will want something to eat first. This way to the kitchen, Winter. There's some cold ham and salad."

It was fantastic, the way the captive ran the station, arranged its diversion and handled its personnel. Winter wondered if he did it to keep his self-respect, using his fabled personal charm to ensure that no one around him could pity him.

But the truth was that if Barker was acting a part it was clearly a part he believed in. Perhaps if he had the chance he would destroy all the members of the station without an instant's hesitation. But at the moment all he wanted was their well-being.

**S**EVEN weeks later Winter had learned nothing about Barker, and he had stopped trying. Winter was no psychologist. Occasionally before, he had met someone he realized he would never understand. Pamela Stonehouse was one. He had stopped trying to learn anything about her, except when to ask her to marry him and get the right answer.

Barker soon knew about that, too. Her relayed letters had begun to come more slowly—one every three days at first, then one a week, then a fortnight without one. Winter went mad with anxiety, seeing from

her letters that it would only be a matter of time before they stopped and Pamela began to forget about him. But Barker reassured him.

"It's the way you write, Jim," he said. "She liked you—I can see it in the first letters. Then she began to wonder if she'd been mistaken about you, if the letters were real and not the man she remembered. You write about the wrong things, in the wrong way. Try this."

Winter tried it, and the letters began to come every three days again. It wasn't that Barker wrote his letters for him. It was that he, who had never met Pamela, was able to tell Winter about her, so that his letters touched her instead of missing wildly.

It didn't seem strange that Barker should be reading Pamela's letters, even the bits where she wrote about "Napoleon II" and was surprised that Winter could not hate him.

There was a strange bridge session one night, not quite two months after Winter's arrival. Major Gresham, Winter, Barker and a private whose bridge was his only talent, were playing. They were changing partners after every rubber, and Barker lost consistently—with Gresham, with Winter, with the private. It wasn't that he played badly. The cards didn't run for him. His finesses were wrong, he was caught out on distribution, his contracts were not quite there, his doubles were unfortunate. But mere bad luck couldn't beat Barker.

"Ah, well, you can't win all the time," said the major happily, at the end, pocketing his winnings.

"I see that," Barker admitted.

Winter stayed when the others went. No one would talk about it. It was normal.

"What was the idea?" Winter demanded.

Barker grinned.

"Bright, aren't you?" he said.

"It was all deliberate?"

"You said so, not I."



"But why? You can't fool anyone that way."

"I think I fooled the major."

"I doubt it."

"You don't understand, Jim. Don't you know how easy it is to lose a reputation? The old witch-doctors did. Fifty successes, then one spectacular flop. Long faces, suspicious glances, short memories. Another flop, another witch-doctor. It was as simple as that."

"Maybe. You a witch-doctor?"

"In a way. Or watch the sports pages. A team—any team playing anything—is an odds-on chance for a game in a fortnight. They get slaughtered the week before. Some writers say they had an off-day. But their previous record doesn't wipe away that failure. The day comes, they win easily, and everybody mentally reinstates them. Or they lose, and people say they're on the slide. It's always easy to lose a reputation."

"And why do you want to lose yours?"

"Easy. I'm going to escape. With you. We're going to conquer Mars, you and I."

It wasn't theatrical, that was the horror of it. When Barker said it, Winter could see it happen. The only way to stop it was to make Barker change his mind or kill him, and one was no easier than the other.

\* \* \*

It was indescribable luxury to sit alone and light one cigarette from the end of the last and look into a blank wall. Winter had always had a weak throat, and he had always been a nicotine slave. Every time he smoked steadily it was fine while it lasted, but it caught up with him next day. He would cough, fight for breath, smoke a cigarette and be sick. It would be a week before he was right again, more if he didn't keep his smoking well down.

It wasn't worth it. He kept himself to ten cigarettes a day and had no more trouble with his throat and lungs than anyone else.

But now he knew he could smoke steadily for thirteen hours and never suffer for it. Just at the end, perhaps, his throat would begin to get ragged. But by that time he would have other things on his mind, if he still had a mind.

There was a tap he knew on his door.

"Come in, Mary!" he called.

She came in and shut the door, but remained leaning on it, not intending to stay long.

"I'm afraid one of the girls is going to crack later," she said. "It won't be nice."

"Marjory?"

"No. Esther. She's like a lot of those self-sufficient characters. She'll go on being calm and independent, drawing on her reserves until suddenly there's nothing left. Marjory will be all right."

Mary said it; it would be so. All his life Winter had relied on the judgment of others on others. First his brother, then Pam, then Barker, then Pam again, and now Mary. They'd always been far nearer the truth, all four of them, than he would have been in his judgments.

"Is there anything we can do?" he asked.

"I don't think so. She'll upset the others if we leave her with them. But it would be horribly cruel to her to shut her up. I think she wants to see you. Shall I send her?"

"She's like Pam," said Winter, half to himself.

"You can take it. You won't crack."

"No."

He grinned involuntarily.

"I think you have something on your mind. Can't you tell me?"

Mary would like to know. It was the kind of thing she could think over, tell Bob, of course, but no one else in a million years, even if she had a million years. They had their secrets, the Crispins, and they could keep them.

"No," he said. "I can't tell you, Mary."

"You can't tell me," she murmured in



wonder, without a trace of hurt or pride. "Can you tell me why?"

"Sure. Because though it can do no harm if we all die, there's always a chance we don't."

"How many millions to one?" It wasn't a question that demanded an answer. She knew possibly better than he did.

"More than that," he said elliptically. "Not one chance, but only a tiny bit of a chance—and only because anything which is still alive may live on. The heart stops beating. And starts again. The green light says black moss, but maybe we've found something that it can't distinguish from black moss. Or black moss has suddenly decided not to kill."

"And for that chance—you must keep your secret." Now Mary, in turn, was talking to herself. "It must be big."

"Not really. It wouldn't be a surprise if you said 'Is that all? I've known it for years!'"

"Not to you. I'll send Esther."

"You don't mind, do you, Mary?"

She laughed. "Mind? No. It will give Bob and me something to think and guess about for the rest of our lives."

She took it for granted that she could share it with Bob. Naturally.

"The miners are all right, Bob says," she added. "They've all taken things nearly as bad as this before."

He nodded. When he looked up again, Esther had replaced Mary at the door. Unconsciously she was leaning back against it in the same way, legs stretched out. Legs weren't one of Mary's good points. But they were one of Pam's. . . .

"You wanted to see me?" she asked.

That was how Mary would put it. He cursed Mary briefly for making him have to think of the right thing to say. It had always been an effort. He had never been able to deal easily with people.

"It's good for everyone to talk," he remarked. "I thought maybe you'd like to. I know I would."

IT DIDN'T seem quite right to him, but apparently it did to her. And that was what mattered. She sat in the armchair opposite him and looked steadily at him. With an unexpected sense of the fitness of things she had chosen the simplest dress Winter had ever seen, a plain gray frock without an unnecessary button or stitch, nothing but a natural shape. There was no bracelet, no necklace, no ring, no watch; she wore makeup because she would have looked and felt strange without it, but she could not meet death more fittingly—or looking more beautiful. Somehow in her simplicity he recognized quality he had previously missed in her.

"There really is no hope?" she asked.

He sighed. Black moss was a radiation that no one could see, hear or feel. So people who had passed through it, feeling the same as ever, always allowed themselves to hope until they felt the first dissolution in their own bodies. It was only to be expected. The girl opposite him was still physically capable of playing a hard game of tennis, running up and down stairs, lifting heavy weights or swimming long distances.

He shook his head.

"But we're relying entirely on that green ball? There's no other check?"

He looked at his watch. "Nearly two hours. There might be." He rose and went across to his bathroom, leaving the door open. He raised his voice to reach her. "Inanimate objects last longer, so we won't see things crumbling about us. But sponges show it early—ah!"

He came out of the bathroom and showed her his sponge. She looked at it closely. It had been an irregular piece, but it was beginning to make itself into a ball and lose its channels and whorls. Even someone who was unfamiliar with that particular sponge could see it had changed. Esther shuddered.

"That's the first thing to show it," said Winter. "We haven't the instruments to



detect any difference in the walls or air. But really this check wasn't necessary. Nothing has ever been found to affect the green ball but black moss. Maybe some day a ship will be lucky and find itself safe when it believed itself doomed. But not this one."

"I'm glad I know. I'd hate waiting to see if it was yes or no."

"That's how I feel."

"And your astrogator. . . ."

He didn't want her to talk about Shaw. Even if the youngster had been at fault there was no point in talking about it. He digressed wildly.

"Not 'astrogator', please. Sometimes the layman gets hold of the wrong word and stubbornly uses it instead of the right one. Like 'subconscious'. It was a man named Freud who discovered the unconscious centuries ago, and called it the unconscious. But for some reason people preferred their own word for it, and they won in the end. Even the Freudians call it the subconscious now."

"And what's wrong with the word 'astrogator'?"

That was good, that she could even pretend to be interested in etymology. She was all right yet.

"Some ignoramus in the past thought 'navigation' had something to do with guiding ships on the sea, and thought 'astrogation' would mean guiding ships among the stars. But 'navigation' came from *navis*, a ship, and *agere*, to drive, and is still right for star-navigation. 'Astrogation' would mean driving stars about."

She grinned. "I have to admire a man who can lecture at a time like this," she said. "Do all captains study the derivation of words in their spare time?"

"No, I got that at second hand from a man you may have heard of. Barker."

As he had hoped, she was more than ready to forget Shaw and talk about Barker. She stared at the mention of the prosaic name that had ceased to be pro-

saic in one generation and had been hurriedly changed by millions of Barkers on three planets. "You mean you're *that* Winter?"

"Yes, I thought you knew. After all, we've just come from Ceres. This ship landed him there six months ago."

"Tell me about him. What is he like?"

"You could have found out any time you liked on Ceres. He would have talked very charmingly to you and given you a ring or a bracelet, just for being a pretty girl."

"Oh, I'd never have dared go near him. They say he can do everything. Is that just a legend?"

Winter grinned. "Surely he hasn't had time to become a legend yet—again? No, there isn't much he can't do. But don't think he's a god or a superman. He's just a highly intelligent man with varied talents. He knows everything because he was always interested in everything. If you and I understood and remembered all we'd ever heard on history, music, philosophy, science, literature and art, we'd seem to know just about everything too. Well, we would if we'd been really interested in it. Barker is never at a loss, because everything he learns goes into a huge, live framework of knowledge, not a jumbled notebook of fact, superstition and memory. He never forgets anything that matters, because it's not an isolated entry somewhere, but part of a structure, always available until the whole structure falls down. No, what made Barker what he is was just intelligence, versatility, and his faculty of being engrossed by anything, literally anything. The rest was inevitable."

Esther accepted the cigarette he handed her and let him light it. "Do you mind if I ask something? Something a lot of people must wonder?"

"Not in the least." He knew what it was.

"Why are you—almost Barker's right-hand man—captain in a spaceship, trusted, allowed to see him when you like?"



"Because they can make you, tell the truth nowadays and know it's the truth—despite anything even a man like Barker may have tried to do. And they know I want Barker exiled forever. They know that I'm not against I. P., and never have been."

"I see. You were a sort of prisoner of Barker's, all along?"

"Not exactly that. Didn't you read about the trial? There must have been enough written about it to fill a thousand Bibles."

"No. I never read murder trials, and yours and Barker's were described in the same way by the same reporters. Sorry if that sounds. . . ."

"Never mind how it sounds."

"Anyway, I knew you were technically cleared, but I didn't think that meant you were still an I. P. officer, even in charge of the ship that took Barker to Ceres."

"You're not the only one. But in the I. P., not guilty is not guilty. The matter's closed."

He told her the story. It was a long story and helped to pass the time. What he told her was nothing but the truth—yet nothing like the whole truth.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Crisis

**H**E COULDN'T make Barker change his mind, and he couldn't kill him. Later Winter marveled at the assurance which had made Barker tell him the worst first and then persuade him into doing it. Anyone else would have worked on him gradually and reached the climax when the way had been prepared for it—not as a bombshell that threw himself in Winter's hands.

"What would you say," Barker asked him that night after he had brought out the first mention of escape, "if I told you I'm not a Bloody Tyrant at all, but a Savior of Humanity? Don't spare my the-

oretical feelings. Go on, now, and laugh."

But Winter wasn't laughing.

"Look at it this way," Barker went on. "Do you think I'm the sort of man who would get any satisfaction from sitting on top of a world, having everyone run to do as I told them? Reaching that position, yes. I was made to build empires—or pull them down. But it's too easy being a successful dictator. Look back on history. The dictators all decayed in success, because the comparatively easy business of keeping an empire was no outlet for the driving force needed to win it. No, I'm no emperor, Jim. Making empires is my game."

"So you want to make a new empire—just to break it down again?" asked Winter ironically.

"Not quite. I want to make a new empire, yes. But I'll have to let someone else break it down. The I. P. again."

Barker was beginning to make sense—dangerous sense. Winter fought against reason.

"The history books are already admitting that I helped human civilization on a thousand years," said Barker. "They don't admit I meant to do it, because they don't know. When I built the Venusian Empire, there was only one way to do it—to write its constitution in blood. If I hadn't done it, it would have taken at least a thousand years before anything like the Earth-Venus Alliance came about.

"I couldn't sail straight to my goal, of course. I had to go away off at a tangent, and let I.P. complete the curve."

"And forty million men died."

"More," said Barker blandly. "Far more. Forty million died in the war itself. But another twenty million at least died in the building of the empire. I don't think men ever died more valuably. It was worth every million."

It was sledge-hammer sense. Inhuman sense. The Earth-Venus Alliance was the most beautiful thing in history. It was



something that could not fail. It was hope for thousands of years. Its perfection put an edge in Winter's voice as he asked:

"And what do you want to do now—break it up again?"

"Oh, no," said Barker mildly. "Earth-Venus is perfect. But Mars isn't. I want to bring Mars in too."

A light burst in Winter's mind like a rocket, leaving him shaken with the knowledge that he was going to help Barker in his plans, despite the millions more who would die, another savage wound on the same battle-weary generation.

"It would be better in another hundred years," Barker admitted. "A hundred years for the Earth-Venus Alliance to grow and temper itself into the great thing it will be, and for Mars to seethe and surge in terror and despotism. But unfortunately I won't live forever, and I might lose my own gifts if I wait too long. I can't trust another Barker to be born in a hundred years. I have to do it now. Premature children often grow up strong and healthy."

"Have you had something to do with this trouble on Mars?"

"Me? No. I have no organization—only millions of Venusians who wouldn't stand for my death. That's why I'm here. After this, I still won't die. Maybe the Venusians by that time will be ready to allow it, having fought against instead of for me; but instead there will be millions of Martians who will only enter the Earth-Venus Alliance if my life is spared. Think of it, they'll lose millions, but the leader who brought about the loss mustn't be harmed. Next time they'll put me somewhere else—I'll try to make it Ceres."

It was fantastic the way he assumed success, foresaw failure and exile, and even chose the place of his second exile before he had escaped from his first.

"I was glad to come here the first time," Barker observed reflectively. "There's something beautifully ironic about a man being exiled on an asteroid he charted and

named. I was glad they didn't become vindictive and rename it Persephone or something similarly meaningless from classical mythology."

There was no argument. Barker had chosen the right man. Winter was no sentimentalist. His soul writhed in horror at the thought of the death of millions. But at the same time it reached out blindly, wonderingly, toward the great thing an Earth-Venus-Mars Alliance could be on the Barker plan. For Winter never doubted that. The layman had to trust the doctor, the mechanic, the dentist, the architect, the builder, the designer. He had to believe blindly when his foot was the first to tread a new building that the edifice would not collapse with him. And Winter trusted Barker's plan—if he could only trust Barker.

"Why am I necessary?" he asked.

Barker grinned, but it was only a gesture. "The dictator, the emperor always needs someone he can trust," he said. "He can't be awake twenty-four hours of the day, or be in two places at once. You're not the first to know of the larger plan. There was another young man, the Sergeant Williams you've heard about. He knew the whole scheme for the Earth-Venus Alliance long before anyone else but myself had any idea it was coming. Unfortunately he didn't live to see it. I've always been sorry about that. I'd have given a million other men to have George Williams see that he hadn't been wrong to trust me."

No doubt he would, Winter thought.

"But only he and you must ever know," said Barker, with sudden vehemence, underlining his words. "Can you understand that? Ordinary men are not made to see how they've been controlled, pushed into prearranged paths. Not until centuries have passed, and then it no longer matters to anyone. Some day someone will write a book suggesting that I may have planned the Earth-Venus-Mars Alliance, and a few



savants will say it's an interesting idea, but prove it's no more than that. And the man in the street will never even hear of the theory.

"Do you understand? Whatever happens, win or lose, you must keep the plan behind the plan to yourself. You'll marry Pamela Stonehouse and have children. She and they must believe that I was a half-mad despot, nothing more. Do you see that?"

Winter saw it. At the time he thought, sententiously but sincerely, that the ways of gods should not be shown to men. He was yet to learn that Barker was no god, no knight in shining armor.

**E**STHER asked Winter anxiously, the next day, "Is he really as black as he's painted?"

Winter was weary with the effort of telling half a story and making it sound like the whole story. "I know him better than any man alive," he said, "and I can't tell

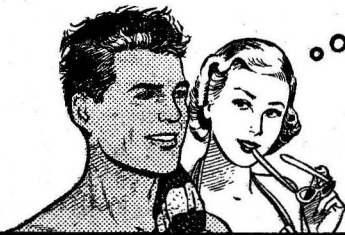
you. I've learned one thing from being with him that I ought to have known if he'd never lived. There's no such thing as black and white. A creature who was wholly good or wholly evil wouldn't be human, and if he was ever born we'd shut him up.

"Barker's no saint and no devil, though often he'd seem like one or the other. I've seen him as brave as any man and as frightened as a schoolgirl. He. . . ."

"But was he as . . . cruel as the newspapers said?"

"Oh, yes. A man like him had to be cruel." Winter lit another cigarette and went on telling what was true, but only some of the truth.

"It's not much use telling you about isolated acts of cruelty, for you wouldn't see them. It would be like the things we read in any newspaper. Woman shuts child in dark room for twelve years. Schoolboys throw dog down quarry three times, pour



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kerosene on it and set match to it. Man kicks sixteen-year-old girl in stomach, sets fire to her dress and piles firewood on her. It would make us sick to see anything like that happen, but when we hear about it we just shake our heads and think about something else.

"Barker was cruel, but there's no point in telling you about it. You wouldn't see him grinning because a man wasn't dead after all, and could take another hour of torture. Even if he were naturally gentle and hated causing pain, he'd have had to make himself cruel. But he isn't. The papers called him a sadist and they were right. On Mars he did all the things that terrorists have always done—but terrorists haven't usually had his incredible inventiveness."

"Yet they followed him—those same Martians," murmured the girl. "They loved him. They wouldn't let him die, though thousands of their own generals were executed for far less."

She made a sudden gesture of dismissal. "Let's forget all about Barker. We've talked of him enough. Strange, people have a natural sympathy for him. I'd have liked to hear you say he could be kind and honorable, and didn't hurt for the sake of hurting. But I don't want to hear the story of how inhuman a man can be."

She rose from the chair in one quick movement and moved about the room restlessly, letting Barker's ghost, the ghost of a man who would live long after she and Winter were dead, withdraw and lose its hold on them. Suddenly she turned and stood tense.

"Kiss me," she said. "That's one way to forget."

"Not a good way."

"What does it matter whether it's a good way or not? What difference does it make that if it hadn't been for the black moss I'd never have said more to you than 'Pass the salt' or 'I wonder what time it is'?"

Suddenly, they heard the unmistakable crack of a shot. They looked at each other, and ran from the cabin.

It was Shaw, of course. Having no interest in Shaw now that he was dead, Winter shot a quick glance around the people in the lounge. Before they had time to recover, to act parts again, he had seen who murdered Shaw. Marjory most, and she knew it, standing with a lost, tortured expression on her face; Hawkins next, though his set, stubborn expression showed that he did not blame himself. Then, perhaps, Esther, though her effort alone would not have been enough.

Not one of them had had any part in firing the shot, of course; Shaw had done that himself. But it had been Marjory, Hawkin and Esther who had made him fire it with what they had said to him, and all the others except the Crispins and himself with what they had not said. Black had not thought about it, Winter guessed; but he had contributed by letting Shaw imagine he had.

"Pretty," said Winter harshly. They were all in the lounge by now, everyone on the ship. He was hurting them all except the Crispins, Marjory most of all. He meant to do it. "Now you've got him out of the way, who's next? Is Souness the next scapegoat, or me?"

"Don't, please," said Marjory unsteadily. "I didn't know. . . ."

"The excuse of all history," retorted Winter bitterly. "'I didn't know. I never thought.' Why didn't you think? Leave him where he is. It won't be long enough to matter."

"No, not that!" Marjory screamed. "Do you want me to shoot myself too?"

"Has it sunk in?" Winter asked brutally. "Do you know what you did? Or are you just sorry he gave up his last few hours, but quite sure you didn't murder him?"

Marjory broke down completely. With a shrug Winter took the body by the shoul-



ders and Smith moved forward to take its feet. They bore it off to the airlock. When they returned Marjory was dry-eyed and startlingly sane. She had found an escape from responsibility.

"That's the best way," she said wonderingly. "Why don't we all die? They guard prisoners condemned to death, to make sure they don't kill themselves. That's because it's crueller to make them wait. But there's no one to guard us. And here I am sorry because Shaw killed himself. He was wiser than any of us."

Winter glanced round the others. "I'm going back to my cabin," he said. "Shoot yourselves if you like. It isn't my problem any more."

"Don't say you're going to break, after all," said Mary quietly.

"Do I look as if I'm breaking?"

"Yes."

He laughed, and the sound was healthy and sane. "Maybe I've seen too many people die," he retorted. "Certainly too many to break because of a few more, including me." He paused at the door. "Does anyone else want to talk to the father confessor? Because it's free. How about you?" He looked at Marjory.

"I would like to talk to you," she said in the same quiet tone. "But not when you're like this."

"I'm not like this. You only think so." He took her gently by the arm and led her to his cabin.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Way of a Superman

SOMETIMES it seemed as if everything was on Barker's side. Anything he wanted was at hand, anything that had to be done he could do. He had been making a deep-space vessel of the little launch that hopped about the asteroid, secretly, alone. No one had thought it was possible, so it had been easy for him. Ev-

eryone had known he spent a lot of time working on the launch, but no more than he spent on the atmosphere plant, of which little of the original remained, on a new wing he was building to the blockhouse, on a dozen other things. It had been simple for him to make the launch run imperfectly now and then, each time a new fault, and it was the natural thing for him to work on it again. Not one thought there was any danger that with a few spanners and some sheets of tin he could make the launch capable of space flight. Not until he and Winter were gone on it.

And sometimes it seemed that Barker had to fight for every inch as if it were a mile. Why should half the stolen provisions turn out to be bad, for example, why should the launch land on Mars in the first storm for years, why should Iden, the Martian general, after promising co-operation in which he had nothing to lose, unaccountably go over to the Alliance? There were some cruel tricks on Barker's road to power for the second time. He and Winter were often alone, always in danger, and there was plenty to destroy forever Winter's earlier belief that Barker had only to whistle for a wind and it blew.

But they built their new empire so swiftly and surely that by the time the Alliance even knew Barker was on Mars—he had been expected, not unnaturally, on Venus—it did not dare attack without preparation, and Barker was given further invaluable time. By that time only Iden, the Controller, had more power on Mars. It was soon after that that Iden went over to the Alliance. Barker had not foreseen it, he raged and swore like a very little man, a man of soft alloy, when it was known. Yes, Barker could be wrong. He had let Iden go over to the Alliance with a third of Mars' potential. That was no part of his plan.

For a time Winter ruled Mars alone. Barker's only hope now was what he could find in his laboratory. Barker would soon



be an emperor without an empire unless Barker the scientist came up with something good.

He had to—he did. It was an inhuman device, but that was nothing to Barker. He found his weapon and he found its carrier. The weapon was madness and the carrier was light. The combination was the most brilliant example of Barker's genius. His weapon fused the human brain so that instead of moving along a channel a thought spread like a pool of ink on thick blotting paper—except that the process was almost immediate. It was a simple thing, an electrical field which might in theory have been a means of higher thought for ordinary men. In practice it was horror and death.

A man in such a field tried to do everything at once. In his mind were thoughts of smoking, driving a car, walking, swimming, kissing a girl, fighting. His body was told to do them all. But it was not merely the conscious or nearly conscious functions of the mind that were disordered. The automatic functions went the same way. So his glands stopped or overloaded themselves and the rest of his body, and he might die at once or not until he suffocated himself or over-oxygenated his blood and passed into a trance from which no one ever wakened. No one ever lived more than five minutes in the field.

But the field of fusion had a range, at first, of about three feet only. Not until Barker succeeded in loading the new energy on light, like a man on horseback, did he achieve what he wanted. Then . . . a good searchlight on Mars can reach Earth. What matter if it is only a pinpoint visible in perfect conditions through a telescope? The light reached Earth. And so did the field of madness.

It was perfect. It was exactly what Barker needed. It was the most hideous, most powerful weapon ever devised. It gave him at once the power he needed. But that was only what everyone knew. What only he and Winter, at first, knew was

that it was not nearly enough. It could be beaten. Light could be stopped, shielded. Barker had built his second Empire on a terrible weapon, but one which would not save it. And then, at last, Winter knew he could trust Barker.

Winter had sometimes wondered why no one had noticed that all-revealing factor in the Second War. Barker used his weapon to kill millions, men, women and children, but not to rule the system. Why were people satisfied with shallow explanations of the fact that Barker had not swept Earth and Venus with such devastation that surrender would have been automatic? For they were. They believed that Barker was not as cruel as they had thought; that an emperor must have something to rule; that Barker had waited too long; that there had been sabotage—anything but the truth, which was that Barker would kill millions without a qualm, but had never had any intention of destroying the Earth-Venus Alliance.

The madness weapon went on being perfect. Once it was in operation, Barker had only to pretend to lose a battle gracefully. His ships killed whole cities, a careless beam from Mars destroyed more life than all his ships. And when Earth was duly warned, the beam from Mars enfolded Earth fully for the first time. The toll was still enormous, but nine out of ten people were screened by this time, and no one saw that Barker had planned that, too.

It was easy to make the war costly and still lose it. Barker refined his original beam once or twice, not to make Mars' capitulation too easy. But in the end he apparently reached the limit of refinement, and Mars was crushed.

Winter never knew how much was planning, how much brilliant improvisation. It was clear before the last Martian ship was accounted for that Barker's dream of an Earth-Venus-Mars Alliance was coming true. He had managed to keep it a comparatively romantic war. Martians, Ter-



rans and Venusians had died bravely, respecting each other—divided only over Barker and his weapon. He had kept the hate personal, so that the men who landed in their hundreds of thousands on Mars from the I. P. ships were ready to drink Martian wine and kiss Martian girls, and blamed everything on Tom Barker and the renegade Winter. Through the war the familiar refrain had run: "It's not the Martian people we're fighting. . . ."

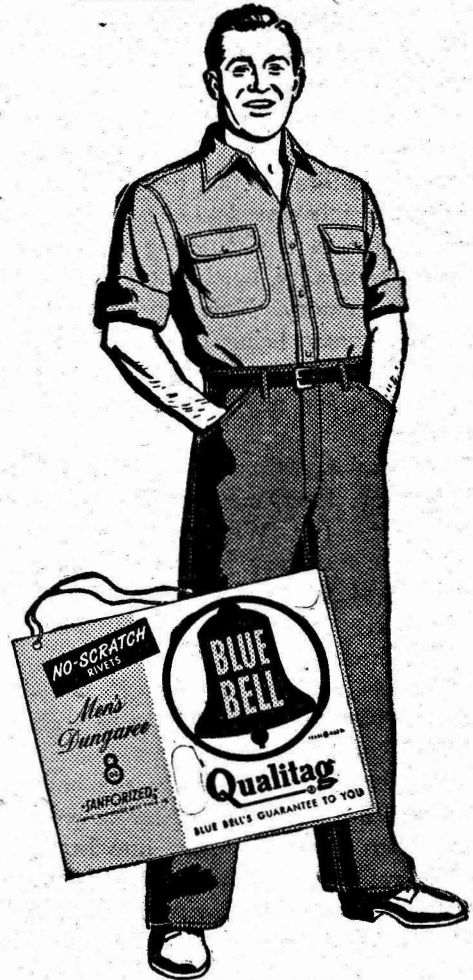
When they had him and Winter, they did exactly as Barker had predicted. He was able to save Winter completely. Pamela Stonehouse helped, by being there, by being in love, by being beautiful. She fell in love with Winter automatically when everyone was against him. She was that kind of girl. They were married long before Winter's fate was settled. Through the years of Barker's trial and Winter's afterward they were happy—Pam because she believed in Winter, utterly and sincerely, and because she also believed in justice. And Winter because he believed in Barker.

The judge said, "And you aver that this man worked under compulsion, day and night, for eighteen months—as your only trusted aide?"

Barker said, "No. He was not as trusted as he thought he was—but I knew he was no traitor. He worked with me and for me because he thought he could restrain me. Up to a point he could. You have his psychological record. You know he was working for humanity to the best of his ability."

At times Barker went dangerously near revealing the whole story, so that Winter caught his breath and looked at him and wondered if he knew what he was doing. He would tell a lie and know it would be believed; and he would tell the truth confidently, honestly, knowing that no one would believe it. He got a "not guilty" verdict for Winter—he and the transparently honest Pamela Winter. And perhaps something else. Through all the lying and

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subterfuge and traditional procedure, Winter still believed that he deserved to be acquitted, independent of whether or not Barker could work another miracle. . . .

**M**ARJORY talked, in his cabin, of her home, her family, her hopes, her whole life. It was refreshing to listen to her. She was twice the woman he had thought her. With the thought came the realization that unlike Esther she had completely ceased to be a woman. She had fought as a girl, using and striving against sensuality, her beauty, her personality, her history. Now she was going to die as a human being, cleansed by the affair of Shaw of knowledge of her youth, her beauty, and any responsibility for the disaster.

He was surprised she didn't talk of Barker too. Everyone seemed to talk about Barker to Jim Winter. Perhaps they wanted to test their judgment against the trial. Perhaps they were only interested in Barker.

Then it came.

"Do you want to stay here?" he asked gently. "Or would you like to be with the others?"

She stared, and he knew she had felt nothing. Perhaps it would be longer with her. Then awareness came into her eyes.

"I'd rather be with the others," she said steadily. "Are you staying here alone?"

"Yes. But there's time for one last round."

He led her to the lounge. Everyone was there except Esther and Souness. He handed Marjory to an armchair, and wondered if he should go for the others. Mary saw him wondering, and shook her head.

He had one last look around them; the three miners playing poker with Crispin, who was winning; Mary looking on. Black on a couch smiling coldly to himself, looking at nothing—no one would ever know his secret now, Winter thought, nor mine either; Marjory, as calm as Mary. He

raised his voice so as to take in them all.

"I wouldn't move much more if I were you," he said. "All right for the next twenty minutes or so. But better make sure at the end of that time you're comfortable and relaxed."

He waited, but no one said anything. Everyone looked blankly at him, except Mary, who knew she would not see him again, and who smiled a farewell. He went out and closed the door.

Outside he paused. Mary had shaken her head, but he had to tell Esther and Souness. Then he realized he didn't have to. Souness should know as much as he did about black moss.

He climbed the stairs to his cabin for the last time.

He lit a cigarette and calculated. He could smoke three more. He would be able to drop the last from his lips on the floor. There was nothing to burn—as if it mattered.

He wondered if he hated Barker. But as usual, his mind wouldn't help him out. Why had Barker given him life and then taken it away? A sudden thought shook him. Was Barker right—again? If Pam had been with him constantly, he would probably have told her the whole story. He had known Pam slightly as one of the girls, then better as a mail girl-friend, and then for two years as a wife. But then there had been the trial hanging over him, and he had been a prisoner, even if a prisoner without visible bars.

Would he, back on Earth with her, have told her?

He was leaving the service. His last job had been to land Barker on Ceres, wait six months, and take the ship back. Then he did—what? He had always meant to settle that with Pam. But was Barker right?

Was his secret, the secret which he said mattered so much, in danger?

So Barker was right. Barker had always been right, in the end. Winter, he



was now prepared to believe, was like a murderer caught before he decided to commit the murder. He had told no one who and what Barker was, but he was ready to break that silence. Barker would not have killed him otherwise. He had never meant to kill him—until at last he knew it was necessary.

Why did everyone make it so easy for Barker? He and Shaw had visited him for the last time. Shaw hardly knew him, but was already fascinated.

"Taking the straight line back?" Barker had asked no one in particular.

"Yes," said Shaw at once, as Barker must have known he would do. "It's a new route."

"Not entirely. I was over it once. When I was just an explorer. I had two ships." He paused and went on regretfully. "One of them was lost. Bad business."

"What was it?" Shaw demanded, scenting another of Barker's always fascinating stories.

"Nothing that need concern you. Here's the figures."

Shaw stared at him in that familiar admiration. Rapidly, without pause for thought, Barker had done the whole job of navigation from Ceres to Earth—on the theoretical side, at any rate—as they talked. It was impossible without tables. Except to Barker, the man who could do the impossible in his sleep. Shaw knew the figures would be right.

They were right, Winter thought. Barker had done his best for him. He had given him two years of happiness. Winter would never know for certain when Barker had planned to kill him—perhaps back on Barker IV, perhaps only as he talked to him and Shaw that last time. *Two ships—one was lost. Black moss. Nothing that need concern you.*

The door opened. Esther burst in. She was not pretty. Her dress was torn, she was dirty, and she was quite mad. She looked at Winter wildly.

"What did you do with Souness?" he asked quietly.

She giggled. "You'll never guess." She thought, and remembered something. "Souness? George? He's dead," she told Winter. Suddenly she pitched on the floor. It wasn't the black moss—at any rate, not principally the black moss. She lay and looked at him.

Then she began to scream. She writhed in an effort to get up, and couldn't do it. If she had been sane she could have done it in a dozen different ways. She seemed to be trying to flip herself to her feet with her stomach.

Unhurriedly Winter reached for his gun. He looked along it.

"Yes, please," she said suddenly, eagerly, breaking off her screaming. But he knew that didn't relieve him of any responsibility. She still looked like Pam.

He fired once. He was sorry about the noise. The others would hear it and would never know what it meant. Those who were most curious would be afraid to leave their couches, and Mary and Bob, who would know there was still plenty of time, would neither move nor tell the others it was safe.

Esther was dead. He wondered whether to move her, decided not to. She was pretty again. The bullet had sped through her hair, and a last jerk had cast a golden cloud over the wound, so that it was invisible from where he sat. There was a lot still to think about, and he didn't mind doing it while gazing at a girl who looked like Pam.

He thought. He had time to get everything in order. That seemed important. But presently he was lighting his last cigarette. He knew that from the time it took to light it.

He was sorry about that. But his throat was getting thick anyway—and not because of the black moss.

*Good-by, Tom, he said. Good-by, you, murderer, you genius, you. . . .*





"My daddy says an old-timer like you must know lots of things," she said.

# TERMINAL QUEST

By POUL ANDERSON

*An orphan of the eons was he,  
the last of a hated race . . .  
needing only death to make  
him immortal!*

THE sun woke him.  
He stirred uneasily, feeling the long shafts of light slant over the land. The muted gossip of birds became a rush of noise and a small wind blew till the leaves chattered at him. Wake up, wake up, wake up, Rugo, there is a new



day on the hills and you can't lie sleeping, wake up!

The light reached under his eyelids, roiling the darkness of dreams. He mumbled and curled into a tighter knot, drawing sleep back around him like a cloak, sinking toward the dark and the unknowingness with his mother's face before him.

She laughed down the long ways of night, calling and calling, and he tried to follow her, but the sun wouldn't let him.

*Mother, he whimpered. Mother, please come back, mother.*

She had gone and left him, once very long ago. He had been little then and the cave had been big and gloomy and cold, and there were flutterings and watchings in the shadows of it and he had been frightened. She had said she was going after food, and had kissed him and gone off down the steep moonlit valley. And there she must have met the Strangers, because she never came back. And he had cried for a long time and called her name, but she didn't return.

That had been so long ago that he couldn't number the years. But now that he was getting old, she must have remembered him and been sorry she left, for lately she often came back at night.

The dew was cold on his skin. He felt the stiffness in him, the ache of muscle and bone and dulling nerve, and forced himself to move. If he stirred all at once, stretching himself and not letting his throat rasp with the pain of it, he could work the damp and the cold and the earth out, he could open his eyes and look at the new day.

It was going to be hot. Rugo's vision wasn't so good any more, the sun was only a blur of fire low on the shadowy horizon, and the mist that streamed through the dales turned it ruddy. But he knew that before midday it would be hot.

He got up, slowly climbing to all four feet, pulling himself erect with the help of a low branch. Hunger was a dull ache in him. He looked emptily around at the thicket, a copse of scrub halfway up the

hillside. There were the bushes and the trees, a hard summer green that would be like metal later in the day. There were the dead leaves rustling soggly underfoot, still wet with the dew that steamed away in white vapors. There were birds piping up the sun, but nowhere food, nowhere anything to eat.

*Mother, you said you would bring back something to eat.*

He shook his big scaly head, clearing out the fog of dreams. Today he would have to go down into the valley. He had eaten the last berries on the hillside, he had waited here for days with weakness creeping from his belly through his bones, and now he would have to go down to the Strangers.

He went slowly out of the thicket and started down the hillside. The grass rustled under his feet, the earth quivered a little beneath his great weight. The hill slanted up to the sky and down to the misty dales, and he was alone with the morning.

Only grass and the small flowers grew here. Once the hills had been tall with forest; he recalled cool shadowy depths and the windy roar of the treetops, small suns spattered on the ground and the drunken sweetness of resin smell in summer and the blaze of broken light from a million winter crystals. But the Strangers had cut down the woods and now there were only rotting stumps and his blurred remembering. His alone, for the men who had hewed down the forest were dead and their sons never knew—and when he was gone, who would care? Who would be left to care?

He came to a brook that rushed down the hillside, rising from a spring higher up and flowing to join the Thunder River. The water was cold and clean and he drank heavily, slopping it into him with both hands and wriggling his tail with the refreshment of it. This much remained to him, at least, though the source was dwindling now that the watershed was gone.



But he would be dead before the brook was dry, so it didn't matter too much.

He waded over it. The cold water set his lame foot to tingling and needling. Beyond it he found the old logging trail and went down that. He walked slowly, not being eager to do that which he must, and tried to make a plan.

The Strangers had given him food now and then, out of charity or in return for work. Once he had labored almost a year for a man, who had given him a place to sleep and as much as he wanted to eat—a good man to work for, not full of the hurry which seemed to be in his race, with a quiet voice and gentle eyes. But then the man had taken a woman, and she was afraid of Rugo, so he had had to leave.

A couple of times, too, men from Earth itself had come to talk to him. They had asked him many questions about his people. How had they lived, what was their word for this and that, did he remember any of their dances or music? But he couldn't tell them much, for his folk had been hunted before he was born, he had seen a flying-thing spear his father with flame and later his mother had gone to look for food and not come back. The men from Earth had, in fact, told him more than he could give them, told him about cities and books and gods which his people had had, and if he had wanted to learn these things from the Strangers they could have told him more. They, too, had paid him something, and he had eaten well for a while.

*I am old now, thought Rugo, and not very strong. I never was strong, beside the powers they have. One of us could drive fifty of them before him—but one of them, seated at the wheel of a thing of metal and fire, could reap a thousand of us. And I frighten their women and children and animals. So it will be hard to find work, and I may have to beg a little bread for no more return than going away. And the grain that they will feed me grew in the*

*soil of this world; it is strong with the bones of my father and fat with the flesh of my mother. But one must eat.*

WHEN he came down into the valley, the mists had lifted in ragged streamers and already he could feel the heat of the sun. The trail led onto a road, and he turned north toward the human settlements. Nobody was in sight yet, and it was quiet. His footfalls rang loud on the pavement, it was hard under his soles and the impact of walking jarred up into his legs like small sharp needles. He looked around him, trying to ignore the hurting.

They had cut down the trees and harrowed the land and sowed grain of Earth, until now the valley lay open to the sky. The brassy sun of summer and the mordant winds of winter rode over the deep glens he remembered, and the only trees were in neat orchards bearing alien fruit. It was as if these Strangers were afraid of the dark, as if they were so frightened by shadows and half-lights and rustling unseen distances that they had to clear it all away, one sweep of fire and thunder and then the bright inflexible steel of their world rising above the dusty plains.

Only fear could make beings so vicious, even as fear had driven Rugo's folk to rush, huge and scaled and black, out of the mountains, to smash houses and burn grain fields and wreck machines, even as fear had brought an answer from the Strangers which heaped stinking bodies in the tumbled ruins of the cities he had never seen. Only the Strangers were more powerful, and their fears had won.

He heard the machine coming behind him, roaring and pounding down the road with a whistle of cloven air flapping in its wake, and remembered in a sudden gulping that it was forbidden to walk in the middle of the road. He scrambled to one side, but it was the wrong one, the side they drove on, and the truck screamed



around him on smoking tires and ground to a halt on the shoulder.

A Stranger climbed out, and he was almost dancing with fury. His curses poured forth so fast that Rugo couldn't follow them. He caught a few words: "Damned weird thing. . . . Couлда killed me. . . . Oughta be shot. . . . Have the law on yuh. . . ."

Rugo stood watching. He had twice the height of the skinny pink shape that jittered and railed before him, and some four times the bulk, and though he was old, one sweep of his hand would stave in the skull and spatter the brains on the hot hard concrete. Only all the power of the Strangers was behind the creature, fire and ruin and flying steel, and he was the last of his folk and sometimes his mother came at night to see him. So he stood quietly, hoping the man would get tired and go away.

A booted foot slammed against his shin, and he cried out with the pain of it and

lifted one arm the way he had done as a child when the bombs were falling and metal rained around him.

The man sprang back. "Don't yuh try it," he said quickly. "Don't do nothing. They'll hunt yuh down if yuh touch me."

"Go," said Rugo, twisting his tongue and throat to the foreign syllables which he knew better than the dimly recalled language of his people. "Please go."

"Yuh're on'y here while yuh behave yuhrself. Keep yuhr place, see. Nasty devil! Watch yuhrself." The man got back into the truck and started it. The spinning tires threw gravel back at Rugo.

He stood watching the machine, his hands hanging empty at his sides, until it was beyond his aging sight. Then he started walking again, careful to stay on the correct edge of the road.

Presently a farm appeared over a ridge. It lay a little way in from the highway, a neat white house sitting primly among

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trees with its big outbuildings clustered behind it and the broad yellowing grainfields beyond. The sun was well into the sky now, mist and dew had burned away, the wind had fallen asleep. It was still and hot. Rugo's feet throbbed with the hardness of the road.

He stood at the entrance, wondering if he should go in or not. It was a rich place, they'd have machines and no use for his labor. When he passed by here before, the man had told him shortly to be on his way. But they could perhaps spare a piece of bread and a jug of water, just to be rid of him or maybe to keep him alive. He knew he was one of the neighborhood sights, the last native. Visitors often climbed up his hill to see him and toss a few coins at his feet and take pictures while he gathered them.

He puzzled out the name on the mailbox. *Elias Whately*. He'd try his luck with Elias Whately.

As he came up the driveway a dog bounded forth and started barking, high shrill notes that hurt his ears. The animal danced around and snapped with a rage that was half panic. None of the beasts from Earth could stand the sight and smell of him; they knew he was not of their world and a primitive terror rose in them. He remembered the pain when teeth nipped his rheumatic legs. Once he had killed a dog that bit him, a single unthinking swipe of his tail, and the owner had fired a shotgun at him. His scales had turned most of the charge, but some was still lodged deep in his flesh and bit him again when the days were cold.

"Please," he said to the dog. His bass rumbled in the warm still air and the barking grew more frantic. "Please, I will not harm, please do not bite."

"O-oh!"

The woman in the front yard let out a little scream and ran before him, up the steps and through the door to slam it in his face. Rugo sighed, feeling suddenly

tired. She was afraid. They were all afraid. They had called his folk trolls, which were something evil in their old myths. He remembered that his grandfather, before he died in a shelterless winter, had called them torrogs, which he said were pale bony things that ate the dead, and Rugo smiled with a wryness that was sour in his mouth.

But little use in trying here. He turned to go.

"You!"

He turned back to face the tall man who stood in the door. The man held a rifle, and his long face was clamped tight. Behind him peeked a red-headed boy, maybe thirteen years old, a cub with the same narrow eyes as his father.

"What's the idea of coming in here?" asked the man. His voice was like the grating of iron.

"Please, sir," said Rugo, "I am hungry. I thought if I could do some work, or if you had any scraps—"

"So now it's begging, eh?" demanded Whately. "Don't you know that's against the law? You could be put in jail. By heaven, you ought to be! Public nuisance, that's all you are."

"I only wanted work," said Rugo.

"So you come in and frighten my wife? You know there's nothing here for a savage to do. Can you run a tractor? Can you repair a generator? Can you even eat without slobbering it on the ground?" Whately spat. "You're a squatter on somebody else's land, and you know it. If I owned that property you'd be out on your worthless butt so fast you wouldn't know which end was up."

"Be glad you're alive! When I think of what you murdering slimy monsters did—Forty years! Forty years, crammed in stinking spaceships, cutting themselves off from Earth and all the human race, dying without seeing ground, fighting every foot of all the light-years, to get to Tau Ceti—and then you said the Earthmen couldn't stay! Then you came and burned their



homes and butchered women and children! The planet's well rid of you, all the scum of you, and it's a wonder somebody doesn't take a gun and clear off the last of the garbage." He half lifted his weapon.

It was no use explaining, thought Rugo. Maybe there really had been a misunderstanding, as his grandfather had claimed, maybe the old counselors had thought the first explorers were only asking if more like them could come and had not expected settlers when they gave permission—or maybe, realizing that the Strangers would be too strong, they had decided to break their word and fight to hold their planet.

But what use now? The Strangers had won the war, with guns and bombs and a plague virus that went like a scythe through the natives; they had hunted the few immunes down like animals, and now he was the last of his kind in all the world and it was too late to explain.

"Sic 'im, Shep!" cried the boy. "Sic 'im! Go get 'im!"

The dog barked in closer, rushing and retreating, trying to work its cowardice into rage.

"Shut up, Sam," said Whately to his son. Then to Rugo, "Get!"

"I will leave," said Rugo. He tried to stop the trembling that shuddered in him, the nerve-wrenching fear of what the gun could spit. He was not afraid to die, he thought sickly, he would welcome the darkness when it came—but his life was so deep-seated, he would live and live and live while the slugs tore into him. He might take hours to die.

"I will be on my way, sir," he said.

"No, you won't," snapped Whately. "I won't have you going down to the village and scaring little kids there. Back where you came from!"

"But, sir—please—"

"Get!" The gun pointed at him, he looked down the muzzle and turned and went out the gate. Whately waved him to the left, back down the road.

The dog charged in and sank its teeth in an ankle where the scales had fallen away. He screamed with the pain of it and began to run, slowly and heavily, weaving in his course. The boy Sam laughed and followed him.

"Nyaah, nyaah, nyaah, ugly ol' troll, crawl back down in yuhr dirty ol' hole!"

**A**FTER a while there were other children, come from the neighboring farms in that timeless blur of running and raw lungs and thudding heart and howling, thundering noise. They followed him, and their dogs barked, and the flung stones rattled off his sides with little swords where they struck.

"Nyaah, nyaah, nyaah, ugly ol' troll, crawl back down in yuhr dirty ol' hole!"

"Please," he whispered. "Please."

When he came to the old trail he hardly saw it. The road danced in a blinding flimmer of heat and dust, the world was tipping and whirling about him, and the clamor in his ears drowned out their shrilling. They danced around him, sure of their immunity, sure of the pain and the weakness and the loneliness that whimpered in his throat, and the dogs yammered and rushed in and nipped his tail and his swollen legs.

Presently he couldn't go on. The hillside was too steep, there was no will left to drive his muscles. He sat down, pulling in knees and tail, hiding his head in his arms, hardly aware in the hot, roaring, whirling blindness that they stoned him and pummeled him and screamed at him.

*Night and rain and the west wind crying in high trees, a cool wet softness of grass and the wavering little fire, the grave eyes of my father and the dear lost face of my mother— Out of the night and the rainy wind and the forest they hewed down, out of the years and the blurring memories and the shadowland of dreams, come to me, mother, come to me and take me in your arms and carry me home.*

After a while they grew tired of it and

went away, some turning back and some wandering higher up into the hills after berries. Rugo sat unmoving, buried in himself, letting a measure of strength and the awareness of his pain seep back.

He burned and pulsed, jagged bolts shot through his nerves, his throat was too dry for swallowing and the hunger was like a wild animal deep in his belly. And overhead the sun swam in a haze of heat, pouring it down over him, filling the air with an incandescence of arid light.

After still a longer time, he opened his eyes. The lids felt raw and sandy, vision wavered as if the heat-shimmer had entered his brain. There was a man who stood watching him.

Rugo shrank back, lifting a hand before his face. But the man stood quietly, puffing away on a battered old pipe. He was shabbily dressed and there was a rolled bundle on his shoulders.

"Had a pretty rough session there, didn't you, old-timer?" he asked. His voice was soft. "Here." He bent a lanky frame over the crouching native. "Here, you need a drink."

Rugo lifted the canteen to his lips and gulped till it was empty. The man looked him over. "You're not too banged up," he decided. "Just cuts and abrasions; you trolls always were a tough breed. I'll give you some aneurine, though."

He fished a tube of yellow salve out of one pocket and smeared it on the wounds. The hurt eased, faded to a warm tingle, and Rugo sighed.

"You are very kind, sir," he said un-  
surely.

"Nah. I wanted to see you anyway. How you feel now? Better?"

Rugo nodded, slowly, trying to stop the shivers which still ran in him. "I am well, sir," he said.

"Don't 'sir' me. Too many people'd laugh themselves sick to hear it. What was your trouble, anyway?"

"I—I wanted food, sir—pardon me. I

wanted food. But they—he—told me to go back. Then the dogs came, and the young ones—"

"Kids can be pretty gruesome little monsters at times, all right. Can you walk, old fella? I'd like to find some shade."

Rugo pulled himself to his feet. It was easier than he had thought it would be. "Please, if you will be so kind, I know a place with trees—"

The man swore, softly and imaginatively. "So that's what they've done. Not content with blotting out a whole race, they have to take the guts from the last one left. Look, you, I'm Manuel Jones, and you'll speak to me as one free bum to another or not at all. Now let's find your trees."

They went up the trail without speaking much, though the man whistled a dirty song to himself, and crossed the brook and came to the thicket. When Rugo lay down in the light-speckled shade it was as if he had been born again. He sighed and let his body relax, flowing into the ground, drawing of its old strength.

The human started a fire and opened some cans in his pack and threw their contents into a small kettle. Rugo watched hungrily, hoping he would give him a little, ashamed and angry with himself for the way his stomach rumbled. Manuel Jones squatted under a tree, shoved his hat off his forehead, and got his pipe going afresh.

Blue eyes in a weatherbeaten face watched Rugo with steadiness and no hate nor fear. "I've been looking forward to seeing you," he said. "I wanted to meet the last member of a race which could build the Temple of Otheii."

"What is that?" asked Rugo.

"You don't know?"

"No, sir—I mean, pardon me, no, Mr. Jones—"

"Manuel. And don't you forget it."

"No, I was born while the Strangers were hunting the last of us—Manuel. We were always fleeing. I was only a few years old when my mother was killed. I met the



last other Gunnur—member of my race—when I was only about twenty. That was almost two hundred years ago. Since then I have been the last.”

“God,” whispered Manuel. “God, what a race of free-wheeling devils we are!”

“You were stronger,” said Rugo. “And anyway it is very long ago now. Those who did it are dead. Some humans have been good to me. One of them saved my life; he got the others to let me live. And some of the rest have been kind.”

“Funny sort of kindness, I’d say.” Manuel shrugged. “But as you put it, Rugo, it’s too late now.”

He drew heavily on his pipe. “Still, you had a great civilization. It wasn’t technically minded like ours, it wasn’t human or fully understandable to humans, but it had its own greatness. Oh, it was a bloody crime to slaughter you, and we’ll have to answer for it some day.”

“I am old,” said Rugo. “I am too old to hate.”

“But not too old to be lonesome, eh?” Manuel’s smile was lopsided. He fell into silence, puffing blue clouds into the blaze of air.

Presently he went on, thoughtfully, “Of course, one can understand the humans. They were the poor and the disinherited of our land-hungry Earth, they came forty years over empty space with all their hopes, giving their lives to the ships so their children might land—and then your council forbade it. They *couldn’t* return, and man

never was too nice about his methods when need drove him. They were lonely and scared, and your hulking horrible appearance made it worse. So they fought. But they needn’t have been so thorough about it. That was sheer hellishness.”

“It does not matter,” said Rugo. “It was long ago.”

They sat for a while in silence, huddled under the shade against the white flame of sunlight, until the food was ready.

“Ah.” Manuel reached gratefully for his eating utensils. “It’s not too good, beans and stuff, and I haven’t an extra plate. Mind just reaching into the kettle?”

“I—I— It is not needful,” mumbled Rugo, suddenly shy again.

“The devil it isn’t! Help yourself, old-timer, plenty for all.”

The smell of food filled Rugo’s nostrils, he could feel his mouth going wet and his stomach screaming at him. And the Stranger really seemed to mean it. Slowly, he dipped his hands into the vessel and brought them out full and ate with the ungraceful manners of his people.

**A**FTERWARD they lay back, stretching and sighing and letting the faint breeze blow over them. There hadn’t been much for one of Rugo’s size, but he had emptied the kettle and was more full than he had been for longer than he could well recall.

“I am afraid this meal used all your supplies,” he said clumsily.

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"No matter," yawned Manuel. "I was damn sick of beans anyway. Meant to lift a chicken tonight."

"You are not from these parts," said Rugo. There was a thawing within him. Here was someone who seemed to expect nothing more than friendship. You could lie in the shade beside him and watch a lone shred of cloud drift over the hot blue sky and let every nerve and muscle go easy. You felt the fullness of your stomach, and you lolled on the grass, and idle words went from one to another, and that was all there was and it was enough.

"You are not a plain tramp," he added thoughtfully.

"Maybe not," said Manuel. "I taught school a good many years ago, in Cetusport. Got into a bit of trouble and had to hit the road and liked it well enough not to settle down anywhere since. Hobo, hunter, traveler to any place that sounds interesting—it's a big world and there's enough in it for a lifetime. I want to get to know this New Terra planet, Rugo. Not that I mean to write a book or any such nonsense. I just want to know it."

He sat up on one elbow. "That's why I came to see you," he said. "You're part of the old world, the last part of it except for empty ruins and a few torn pages in museums. But I have a notion that your race will always haunt us, that no matter how long man is here something of you will enter into him." There was a half mystical look on his lean face. He was not the dusty tramp now but something else which Rugo could not recognize.

"The planet was yours before we came," he said, "and it shaped you and you shaped it; and now the landscape which was yours will become part of us, and it'll change us in its own slow and subtle ways. I think that whenever a man camps out alone on New Terra, in the big hills where you hear the night talking up in the trees, I think he'll always remember something. There'll always be a shadow just beyond his fire,

a voice in the wind and in the rivers, something in the soil that will enter the bread he eats and the water he drinks, and that will be the lost race which was yours."

"It may be so," said Rugo unsurely. "But we are all gone now. Nothing of ours is left."

"Some day," said Manuel, "the last man is going to face your loneliness. We won't last forever either. Sooner or later age or enemies or our own stupidity or the darkening of the universe will come for us. I hope that the last man can endure life as bravely as you did."

"I was not brave," said Rugo. "I was often afraid. They hurt me, sometimes, and I ran."

"Brave in the way that counts," said Manuel.

They talked for a while longer, and then the human rose. "I've got to go, Rugo," he said. "If I'm going to stay here for a while, I'll have to go down to the village and get a job of some sort. May I come up again tomorrow and see you?"

Rugo got up with him and wrapped the dignity of a host about his nakedness. "I would be honored," he said gravely.

He stood watching the man go until he was lost to sight down the curve of the trail. Then he sighed a little. Manuel was good, yes, he was the first one in a hundred years who had not hated or feared him, or been overly polite and apologetic, but had simply traded words as one free being to another.

What had he said? "One free bum to another." Yes, Manuel was a good bum.

He would bring food tomorrow, Rugo knew, and this time there would be more said, the comradeship would be wholly easy and the eyes wholly frank. It pained him that he could offer nothing in return.

But wait, maybe he could. The farther hills were thick with berries, some must still be there even this late in the season. Birds and animals and humans couldn't have taken them all, and he knew how to



look. Yes, he could bring back a great many berries, that would go well with a meal.

It was a long trip, and his sinews protested at the thought. He grunted and set out, slowly. The sun was wheeling horizonward, but it would be a few hours yet till dark.

He went over the crest of the hill and down the other side. It was hot and quiet, the air shimmered around him, leaves hung limp on the few remaining trees. The summer-dried grass rustled harshly under his feet, rocks rolled aside and skittered down the long slope with a faint click. Beyond, the range stretched into a blue haze of distance. It was lonely up here, but he was used to that and liked it.

Berries—yes, a lot of them clustered around Thunder Falls, where there was always coolness and damp. To be sure, the other pickers knew that as well as he, but they didn't know all the little spots, the slanting rocks and the wet crannies and the sheltering overgrowths of brush. He could bring home enough for a good meal.

He wound down the hillside and up the next. More trees grew here. He was glad of the shade and moved a little faster. Maybe he should pull out of this district altogether. Maybe he would do better in a less thickly settled region, where there might be more people like Manuel. He needed humans, he was too old now to live off the country, but they might be easier to get along with on the frontier.

They weren't such a bad race, the Strangers. They had made war with all the fury that was in them, had wiped out a threat with unnecessary savagery; they still fought and cheated and oppressed each other; they were silly and cruel and they cut down the forests and dug up the earth and turned the rivers dry. But among them were a few like Manuel, and he wondered if his own people had boasted more of that sort than the Strangers did.

Presently he came out on the slope of the

highest hill in the region and started climbing it toward Thunder Falls. He could hear the distant roaring of a cataract, half lost in the pounding of his own blood as he fought his aging body slowly up the rocky slant, and in the dance of sunlight he stopped to breathe and tell himself that not far ahead were shadow and mist and a coolness of rushing waters. And when he was ready to come back, the night would be there to walk home with him.

The shouting falls drowned out the voices of the children, nor had he looked for them since he knew they were forbidden to visit this danger spot without adults along. When he topped the stony ridge and stood looking down into the gorge, he saw them just below and his heart stumbled in sickness.

The whole troop was there, with red-haired Sam Whately leading them in a berry hunt up and down the cragged rocks and along the pebbled beach. Rugo stood on the bluff above them, peering down through the fine cold spray and trying to tell his panting body to turn and run before they saw him. Then it was too late; they had spotted his dark form and were crowding closer, scrambling up the bluff with a wicked rain of laughter.

"Looka that!" He heard Sam's voice faintly through the roar and crash of the falls. "Looky who's here! Ol' Blackie!"

A stone cracked against his ribs. He half turned to go, knowing dully that he could not outrun them. Then he remembered that he had come to gather berries for Manuel Jones, who had called him brave, and a thought came.

He called out in a bass that trembled through the rocks, "Do not do that!"

"Yaah, listen what he says, ha-ha-ha!"

"Leave me alone," cried Rugo, "or I will tell your parents that you were here."

They stopped then, almost up to him, and for a moment only the yapping dogs spoke. Then Sam sneered at him. "Aw, who'd lissen to yuh, ol' troll?"

"I think they will believe me," said Rugo. "But if you do not believe it, try and find out."

They hovered for a moment, unsure, staring at each other. Then Sam said, "Okay, ol' tattletale, okay. But you let us be, see?"

"I will do that," said Rugo, and the hard held breath puffed out of him in a great sigh. He realized how painfully his heart had been fluttering, and weakness was watery in his legs.

THEY went sullenly back to their berry gathering, and Rugo scrambled down the bluff and took the opposite direction.

They called off the dogs too, and soon he was out of sight of them.

The gorge walls rose high and steep on either side of the falls. Here the river ran fast, green and boiling white, cold and loud as it sprang over the edge in a veil of rain-bowed mist. Its noise filled the air, rang between the crags and hooted in the water-hollowed caves. The vibrations of the toppling stream shivered unceasingly through the ground. It was cool and wet here, and there was always a wind blowing down the length of the ravine. The fall wasn't high, only about twenty feet, but the river thundered down it with brawling violence and below the cataract it was deep and fast and full of rocks and whirlpools.

Plants were scattered between the stones, small bushes and a few slender trees. Rugo found some big tsugi leaves and twisted them together into a good-sized bag as his mother had taught him, and started hunting. The berries grew on low, round-leafed bushes that clustered under rocks and taller plants, wherever they could find shelter, and it was something of an art to locate them easily. Rugo had had many decades of practice.

It was peaceful work. He felt his heart and lungs slowing, content and restfulness stole over him. So had he gone with his

mother, often and often in the time that was clearer to him than all the blurred years between, and it was as if she walked beside him now and showed him where to look and smiled when he turned over a bush and found the little blue spheres. He was gathering food for his friend, and that was good.

After some time, he grew aware that a couple of the children had left the main group and were following him, a small boy and girl tagging at a discreet distance and saying nothing. He turned and stared at them, wondering if they meant to attack him after all, and they looked shyly away.

"You sure find a lot of them, Mister Troll," said the boy at last, timidly.

"They grow here," grunted Rugo with unease.

"I'm sorry they was so mean to you," said the girl. "Me and Tommy wasn't there or we wouldn't of let them."

Rugo couldn't remember if they had been with the pack that morning or not. It didn't matter. They were only being friendly in the hope he would show them where to find the berries.

Still, no few of the Stranger cubs had liked him in the past, those who were too old to be frightened into screaming fits by his appearance and too young to be drilled into prejudice, and he had been fond of them in turn. And whatever the reason of these two, they were speaking nicely.

"My dad said the other day he thought he could get you to do some work for him," said the boy. "He'd pay you good."

"Who is your father?" asked Rugo uncertainly.

"He's Mr. Jim Stackman."

Yes, Stackman had never been anything but pleasant, in the somewhat strained and awkward manner of humans. They felt guilty for what their grandparents had done, as if that could change matters. But it was something. Most humans were pretty decent; their main fault was the way



they stood by when others of their race did evil, stood by and said nothing and felt embarrassed.

"Mr. Whateley won't let me go down there," said Rugo.

"Oh, him!" said the boy with elaborate scorn. "My dad'll take care of old Sourpuss Whately."

"I don't like Sam Whately neither," said the girl. "He's mean, like his old man."

"Why do you do as he says, then?" asked Rugo.

The boy looked uncomfortable. "He's bigger'n the rest of us," he muttered.

Yes, that was the way of humans, and it wasn't really their fault that the Manuel Joneses were so few among them. They suffered more for it than anyone else, probably.

"Here is a nice berry bush," said Rugo. "You can pick it if you want to."

He sat down on a mossy bank, watching them eat, thinking that maybe things had changed today. Maybe he wouldn't need to move away after all.

The girl came and sat down beside him. "Can you tell me a story, Mister Troll?" she asked.

"H'm?" Rugo was startled out of his reverie.

"My daddy says an old-timer like you must know lots of things," she said.

Why, yes, thought Rugo, he did know a good deal, but it wasn't the sort of tale you could give children. They didn't know

hunger and loneliness and shuddering winter cold, weakness and pain and the slow grinding out of hope, and he didn't want them ever to know it. But, well, he could remember a few things besides. His father had told him stories of what had once been, and—

*Your race will always haunt us, no matter how long man is here something of you will enter into him. . . . There'll always be a shadow just beyond the fire, a voice in the wind and in the rivers, something in the soil that will enter the bread he eats and the water he drinks, and that will be the lost race which was yours.*

"Why, yes," he said slowly. "I think so."

The boy came and sat beside the girl, and they watched him with large eyes. He leaned back against the bank and fumbled around in his mind.

"A LONG time ago," he said, "before people had come to New Terra, there were trolls like me living here. We built houses and farms, and we had our songs and our stories just like you do. So I can tell you a little bit about that, and maybe some day when you are grown up and have children of your own you can tell them."

"Sure," said the boy.

"Well," said Rugo, "there was once a troll king named Utorri who lived in the Western Dales, not far from the sea. He

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lived in a big castle with towers reaching up so they nearly scraped the stars, and the wind was always blowing around the towers and ringing the bells. Even when the trolls were asleep they could hear the shivering of the bells. And it was a rich castle, whose doors always stood open to any wayfarers, and each night there was a feast where all the great trolls met and music sounded and the heroes told of their wanderings—

"Hey, look!"

The children's heads turned, and Rugo's annoyed glance followed theirs. The sun was low now, its rays were long and slanting and touched the hair of Sam Whately with fire where he stood. He had climbed up on the highest crag above the falls and balanced swaying on the narrow perch, laughing. The laughter drifted down through the boom of waters, faint and clear in the evening.

"Gee, he shouldn't," said the little girl.

"I'm the king of the mountain!"

"Young fool," grumbled Rugo.

"I'm the king of the mountain!"

"Sam, come down—" The child's voice was almost lost in thunder.

He laughed again and crouched, feeling with his hands along the rough stone for a way back. Rugo stiffened, remembering how slippery the rocks were and how the river hungered.

The boy started down, and lost his hold and toppled.

Rugo had a glimpse of the red head as it rose over the foaming green. Then it was gone, snuffed like a torch as the river sucked it under.

Rugo started to his feet, yelling, remembering that even now he had the strength of many humans and that a man had called him brave. Some dim corner of his mind told him to wait, to stop and think, and he ran to the shore with the frantic knowledge that if he did consider the matter wisely he would never go in.

The water was cold around him, it sank

fangs of cold into his body and he cried out with the pain.

Sam's head appeared briefly at the foot of the cataract, whirling downstream. Rugo's feet lost bottom and he struck out, feeling the current grab him and yank him from shore.

Swimming, whipping downstream, he shook the water from his eyes and gasped and looked wildly around. Yes, there came Sam, a little above him, swimming with mindless reflex.

The slight body crashed against his shoulder. Almost, the river had its way, then he got a clutch on the arm and his legs and tail and free hand were working.

They whirled on down the stream and he was deaf and blind and the strength was spilling from him like blood from an open wound.

There was a rock ahead. Dimly he saw it through the cruel blaze of sunlight, a broad flat stone rearing above a foam of water. He flailed, striving for it, sobbing the wind into his empty lungs, and they hit with a shock that exploded in his bones.

Wildly he grabbed at the smooth surface, groping for a handhold. One arm lifted Sam Whately's feebly stirring body out, fairly tossed it on top of the rock, and then the river had him again.

The boy hadn't breathed too much water thought Rugo in his darkening brain. He could lie there till a flying-thing from the village picked him up. *Only—why did I save him? Why did I save him? He stoned me, and now I'll never be able to give Manuel those berries. I'll never finish the story of King Utorri and his heroes.*

The water was cool and green around him as he sank. He wondered if his mother would come for him.

A few miles farther down, the river flows broad and quiet between gentle banks. Trees grow there, and the last sunlight streams through their leaves to glisten on the surface. This is down in the valley, where the homes of man are built.





Conducted by Frederik Pohl

**THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS** by John Wyndham. Doubleday & Co., New York.

The Day of the Triffids is not tomorrow or a thousand years from now. It is today, a day that starts like any other day, with no special fuss or circumstances. Green flashes illuminate the night sky over London, where the story begins; when they have gone, only a handful of humanity retains the sight of their eyes. In a blind world, the few who can still see labor heroically to care for the helpless billions—until the Triffids come, walking plants with a deadly hatred for man, to threaten the blind and the sighted alike.

There is little in the plot of "*The Day of the Triffids*" that will be strange to science-fiction readers, but there is a good deal in the brilliance of its writing and the dexterous, impressive documentation of its theme that will delight them. It is telling no secrets to reveal that "John Wyndham" is the pen-name of John Beynon Harris, an English writer.

**RENAISSANCE** by Raymond F. Jones. Gnome Press, New York.

This is the far future; two planets, joined by a mysterious dimension-twisting

"gate" through space, hold what remains of humanity. A seeker named Ketan, exiled from his own world, battles against the massed forces of the other for his life and the safety of the girl he loves. He wins, of course—but not until you have read through 255 pages of entertaining and only mildly confusing adventure.

It is unlikely that anyone will confuse "*Renaissance*" with great literature. But taken at its own valuation—"gripping entertainment", says the dust wrapper—it's well worth reading and keeping.

**TIME AND AGAIN** by Clifford D. Simak. Simon & Schuster, New York.

It is the Eightieth Century, a time of scientific marvels and unbelievable progress where what would seem to us impossible is commonplace. But even the inhabitants of this miracled future are shocked when a long-missing investigator of the Department of Galactic Investigation returns from 61 Cygni—in a ship that has neither food nor water, neither air nor fuel.

Mr. Simak has contributed a great deal to the best of science-fiction stories, but very seldom has he written as powerfully and convincingly as in this exciting new book.

# HALF-PAST FEAR

By  
JOHN JAKES

*He was lost in time—a fugitive from the past, which would not have him alive—and the future, which refused to accept him dead. . . .*

HE CAME walking out of the city. Behind him rose the slender graceful towers, lost against a morning sky of intense eye-hurting blue-white. The scene, with the stranger walking, had for a moment the unreal appearance of a photograph taken when the sun made bubbles of reflection in the lens.

Mrs. Childs sat on the porch, holding tightly onto the arms of the rest chair. She knew he was coming toward her house. He had seen the sign in fluorescent letters above the front porch. *Room*. He had been walking, and searching for a place to stay, and now he was coming up the front walk, and she had an empty room. She wished that she could tear down the sign, hide it, anywhere. The desire burned through her without reason, but she sat on the porch and didn't move.

He came up on the porch and set his black leather suitcase down. "Pardon me," he said, "but do you have a room available?" His tone was polite, soft, but strangely accented.

"Yes," she said after a long pause, "yes, I do." The words gave her time to look at him, to see what reason there could be for her terrible fear.

He was rather short. His body was not fat, and yet it was not trim like her husband's. His was a kind of solid fatness. He had a round face and small blue eyes and a sunburnt mustache that drooped and gave him a rather sad expression.

His clothes disturbed her. He wore a black coat with a little round velvet collar. And the sun was so hot! It was almost as if he had seized the clothing out of an ancient refuse bin when he had had no time to choose his wardrobe properly.

"My name," he said, "is Vincent Deem. I just arrived in this city. I will need a place to stay for a time."

She got up, trying to control her fear. "Well, you can come in if you want to, and I'll show you the room."

They went upstairs, to the front, and she pointed out the small video set on the dresser, plus the health ray over the bed and the blue shielded glass in the windows. "The rent is thirty solars a month," she said at last.

"I'll take it," he said, smiling pleasantly. She didn't like the smile.

**"I packed my things and went into the time machine. . . ."**





Elvgren

"Do you want the money now?" he asked.

"Yes, if you please. That will include meals."

He unbuttoned his black coat and dug his hand into the pocket of his trousers. Hastily, he drew it out, as if he had just remembered something.

His face got very red. "I'm . . . I'm afraid I have nothing but large bills. I'll have to have one changed later today and pay you this evening, if that'll be all right."

"Yes, that will do."

She hurried from the room and left him making small unpacking noises behind the closed door. In the kitchen, she began to prepare lunch. Her hands were shaking. She glanced at the wall chron. David and Sari would be home in half an hour.

She poured some food concentrate into a self-warming container and set it on the metal top of the stove. A little of the fragrant liquid spilled over and burned her hand.

She stared down at the pink area on her skin, fascinated. For some reason, something intangible she had sensed, she did not want her husband David or her daughter Sari to ever set eyes on Mr. Deem.

**B**UT they came home to lunch, laughing together, David from the vitamin plant, Sari from school. They were much alike, with tanned faces and clear, happy smiles. Her anxiety was temporarily relieved.

David was dipping a spoon into the concentrate with obvious relish when she finally said, "We have a new boarder."

"Oh?" He popped the spoon into his mouth, smacking his lips loudly. Sari giggled.

"His name is Deem, Vincent Deem. He came this morning."

"What's his line of work?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Is he a salesman or something? Just passing through?"

"Maybe he's an ogre." Sari laughed, eyes flashing, "Like in the story you read me last night."

Mrs. Childs clanked her spoon loudly on the table. "Sari. Don't say things like that."

David looked at her, surprised at her strident tone. "Dear, is anything the matter?"

"I don't know, David. He's very nice, but for some reason, I can't explain it, he frightens me."

"No use getting frightened over nothing." He dipped another spoonful of concentrate.

"He should be here, for lunch," she said all at once. "I didn't hear him go out."

"It's nothing to get really worried about," David reassured her.

"I know it's silly, David, and I'm sorry, but he's . . . I don't know . . . strange. His clothes, for one thing. Small differences . . . in cut . . . they're not like ours."

"He speaks English?"

"Oh, yes. Again, that's strange. His accent. . . ."

"An ogre," Sari chortled. "A big, big wicked ogre. . . ."

David glared at her. "Young lady, your mother told you not to say that."

Sari looked down at her dish and became silent.

Mrs. Childs tried to laugh. It was not a very successful laugh. It was weak and half-hearted. She shook her head vaguely and rubbed her eyes. "I guess I'm tired. I'll lie down after lunch. I'll be all right."

At one, David went back to work and Sari went back to school. Mrs. Childs tried to rest, but she couldn't. She was nervous. The sun, even through the filtered glass, was irritating to her eyes. Mr. Deem hadn't returned. Finally, she took her shopping bag and walked out of the house toward the market. She needed some things from there anyway. Perhaps she had been in the house too long.

She spent an hour in the market, an



hour wandering through the aisles of chrome and color, and by the time she had picked out everything she wanted, the tenseness had gone out of her.

Julia, her favorite checking robot, greeted her cheerfully, its metallic eyes lighting up. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Childs," its metallic voice grated.

"Hello, Julia." Mrs. Childs fed the groceries into the opening provided. There was a hum of machinery, and the groceries slid out the other end, neatly boxed.

"One and two-thirds solars," Julia grated.

Mrs. Childs inserted two notes into the proper slot and the change rattled out through the return tube. As she picked up the box, Julia said, "There was a friend of yours in here about two hours ago."

She stopped. "Who?"

"Mr. Vincent Deem." Mrs. Childs could almost see the internal banks of memory files working. "He wanted to write a check and cash it, but we had no record of him in our files. He gave you as a reference. I hope that was all right with you."

"Yes, Julia, of course."

"He is very strange," the machine said. "Very strange indeed. He wished to know what year it was. I told him 2024 and he seemed happy and surprised."

Air caught and choked in her throat. She held on tightly to the box of groceries.

Julia said, "Nice to see you again, Mrs. Childs. Come in often." The electric eyes blinked and the metal voice said, "Next customer, please."

\* \* \*

The street was cold. The sun still shone brightly, but Mrs. Childs walked home feeling little hands of coldness all over her body. She went reluctantly, fearfully up the walk, opened the door and closed it. She listened.

She sensed that he was in the house.

There was a creaking from the front

room, as of a body being lifted from a chair. Footsteps thunked solidly on the floor. Mr. Deem appeared in the alcove, blinking his little blue eyes in the dim interior light and touching his sunburnt mustache. Mrs. Childs set down her groceries and began to take off her coat hastily, awkwardly.

"It certainly is a lovely day," Mr. Deem commented.

"Yes, very nice," Mrs. Childs replied emptily, wondering what could be wrong with the thing he had said to make her feel the way she did. And how did she feel? Standing there beside him, she groped for the word, found it in a maze of others. She didn't know if it expressed her relation to him, or his to her, or both. It was, horribly, right.

*Alien. . . .*

"I saw the park a few blocks away," Mr. Deem said, seating himself again. "All the children were out, playing and having fun. It was delightful."

She glanced nervously at the wall chron. "You must excuse me, but I have to make dinner. Sari will be home any moment now, and my husband comes at four."

"Sari?" His eyes were a bit wider, interested.

"My . . . my daughter. She goes to school."

And Mrs. Childs hurried into the kitchen and left Mr. Vincent Deem fiddling with the video set.

Preparing dinner was a terrible affair. She kept getting lost in mazes of carrot slices and potato peelings. Finally, she gave up and opened three large cartons of Complete-A-Meal. She was in no condition to do any actual cooking.

Sari banged into the house on schedule, said hello to Mr. Deem in a breezy tone, and went out to play.

David came home and kissed his wife, and then he and the new boarder sat in the front room discussing the current news. Mrs. Childs listened, trying to make noise in the kitchen as if she were busy. David

seemed to do all the talking. Mr. Deem never said much besides yes and no, generally agreeing or disagreeing according to David's tone of voice.

At dinner, Mr. Deem hardly said anything. Sari chattered away about school, and the boarder made requests for the salt or the pepper or the cream. He kept watching Sari, though, and it made Mrs. Childs nervous.

After dinner Sari went upstairs to her room to study. Mr. Deem was in the front room, still pottering with the video. David was helping his wife to carry dishes out to be washed.

She put her hand on his arm. "David. I want to go talk to him after we finish the dishes."

"All right. I was planning to anyway. I want him to feel at home."

"No, I don't mean talk like that. Find out things about him."

David frowned a bit reprovingly. "Are you still worried?"

"Yes, David, yes, I can't help it."

"Well, I'm not going to cross-examine him, but I will ask him some questions if you want me to." He laughed. "I feel like a spy. Let's get these dishes out of the way."

When they were settled nervously on the edges of their chairs, Mrs. Childs noticed with inward satisfaction that David was uneasy. He had caught it, too. The strange vocal inflections. The strange, somewhere-out-of-place clothes.

**M**R. DEEM stared at the video screen with his small blue eyes. A comedian was introducing a rising young starlet from the movie capital on Catalina Island.

"Tell me, uh, Deem," David said nervously, pulling a cigarette out of a tray and waiting for it to light itself, "what line of work are you in?"

"Insurance."

David nodded. "Um. Here?"

"No. In another city."

"Oh."

"Are you planning to be here permanently?" Mrs. Childs asked in a pointed voice.

"Yes, I believe I am," the large man replied. He paused and then said rather softly, "I had to leave that other city. I . . . I had some trouble."

*Now*, thought Mrs. Childs, *now, oh now*.

"I hope you don't mind me talking about it," Deem went on, "but a man has to talk to someone."

"Go right ahead," David said, looking significantly at his wife. She felt a bit ashamed, because she had thought that he would hide anything that was wrong in his past.

"A woman worked in my office," Deem said. "A very fine woman. I loved her very much." His voice now was warm and soothing, and not the least bit frightening. Mrs. Childs decided that he sounded . . . well . . . sincere.

"But the lady was married and had two small children. She realized she had a duty to the children, and we were trying to work something out when her husband got wind of it.

"There had been nothing between us, you understand, absolutely nothing but deep affection. He thought there was more. We had . . . words. I felt that I had better leave the city." He stared at the floor in a melancholy way. "It was very unpleasant."

David smiled warmly. "And so you came here to make a new start."

"Exactly," Vincent Deem said.

The tension was relieved. They talked for an hour or so more, about this and that. Again Mr. Deem did little more than say yes or no, as if he wasn't interested in the happenings of the world, or didn't know a thing about them, but then, Mrs. Childs thought, there were people like that. It was nothing to hold against a man.

Later that night, as she and David lay side by side in the cool darkness of their bed, she felt his hand fasten on hers.



"Mr. Deem certainly doesn't have what you might call a scarlet past," David said gently.

"No, he doesn't. I'm sorry, David. . . ."

"Don't be. It's better that we settled it."

"I worry too much, David."

"I know, I know. But he's harmless."

"Um." She nodded sleepily and touched his cheek. She loved her husband very much, and lying there in the cool dark, she was not afraid.

Next morning, she went busily about her housework, even humming a little. David and Sari were gone, and Mr. Deem had announced his intention to visit the various insurance companies and see about a position.

She knew, with an inner smile of delight, that she was saving his room until last. Carefully, she made his bed and dusted the dresser with the neat array of masculine toilet articles lined up on top of it.

Curiosity was a kind of small tickling inside of her. One by one, she opened the drawers in the dresser. Shorts, handkerchiefs, socks, white shirts. In the closet, two more suits and the black overcoat. On the floor, the suitcase.

Everything else was in order. She tapped the black suitcase with her foot. There was a dry rustling inside. She bent down and pulled the zipper back and looked into the bag.

Her hand came up tightly against her mouth. She held it there, pressing it against her teeth, hurting, looking at the things lying on the bottom of the black bag.

Three wilted red roses and a gun.

She knew what they were, from pictures. But . . . she couldn't think about it. The breath made loud windy whispers as it came out of her mouth. She ran downstairs to the bookcase and pulled out a volume of *The Historical Encyclopedia*. Several minutes later, she put it back, her hands trembling violently.

She went to the phone and called David.

It took them awhile to reach him at the

vitamin plant. When he finally came, he was irritable.

"Helen, for pete's sake, I'm busy. What is it now. . . ."

"David, I looked in his suitcase!"

"Whose?"

"Mr. Deem's. He's got things in it."

"Listen, Helen. . . ." David sighed in an exasperated fashion. "What exactly are you talking about?"

"The things in his bag. I've seen pictures of them. A gun."

"What?"

"Yes, that's what I said, a gun. And three flowers. Wilted. Three red roses."

There was silence from the other end of the connection, then a noise of swallowing.

"Helen. . . ."

"I looked it up in the encyclopedia, David," she breathed. "I looked up the list of all the things that were destroyed in the world during the Great War. I thought I remembered, but I wanted to be sure."

"It's right, Helen."

"I know, David—oh, I know." She was almost sobbing. She tried to get control of herself, and when she spoke, it was in a dry croaking whisper. "David, there haven't been any guns or flowers on the face of the Earth since 1963!"

**A** GAIN there was silence. And then came David's voice, harsh and strained. "I don't understand it. But I'll come home. Right away." The phone clicked down and she was alone in the house.

The front door closed.

Mr. Deem walked in, smiling.

*Stop it, her brain screamed. Get that look off your face. Don't let him know. Don't let him see that you know. Don't. . . .*

Mr. Deem stopped smiling.

"What is the trouble, Mrs. Childs?"

She tried to speak calmly. She tried to think of calm, ordinary words to say, but she cried out instead, "Where did you get

those things in your suitcase? Where did you get them?"

He shook his round head and his sun-burnt mustache seemed to droop even more. "I was afraid you might find them," he said sadly. "But I didn't know where else to put them. You would have found them any place."

"They don't have things like that on Earth any more," she whispered. "There haven't been things like that for sixty years."

"I know," he said. "I come from that time."

"You. . . ." Her hand caught at her throat.

"Yes, Mrs. Childs. Please come upstairs with me while I get the gun."

Dumbly she went ahead of him, too sick and frightened to even think about protesting. He went to the closet and got out the gun and the three dead roses. He pointed the gun at her. She noticed his eyes, intense now, the peaceful quality gone. She wanted to scream.

"Let's go downstairs," he said, pointing the gun at her stomach.

They sat in silence in the living room, Mr. Deem holding the gun on her with the roses cradled in his lap. Outside, the sun was warm, and the buildings of the city looked clean and tall and strong. The dim living room was suddenly very far away from the world outside.

"You were by the phone when I came in," Deem said at last. "I suppose you called your husband."

She nodded weakly, too sick to cry.

After a while Sari came home. She laughed first, and then she grew frightened, and ran to her mother, and Mr. Vincent Deem pointed the gun at both of them. It was the same when David came home. Mrs. Childs knew it would be. They were not people accustomed to violence. It was a strange and entirely unreal thing to them.

But Mr. Deem was real, and he had the gun pointed at all three of them now.

It was well past noon before he spoke again. Sari had her head cradled in her mother's lap and David sat on the couch.

"I must kill you," Mr. Deem said, as if he were announcing his intention to go to the movies. "You know about me. I've got to move on. They'll have a man after me."

"Where do you come from?" David said fiercely.

"From the year 1961."

"That's impossible. . . ."

"No. Check the list in the encyclopedia. On that list is a machine for time travel, at the Time Travel Institute. I worked there. The machine was destroyed in the war."

"Why did you come here?"

"To this house? Chance. . . ."

"I mean now, to this year?"

"There was a woman. Only I did not work in insurance. All of us worked at the Institute. She was a lovely woman, the only one who has ever loved me.

"We would take long walks, on Saturday, with her children. They all loved red roses. But I hated her husband! I wanted to marry her, but she said she didn't love me that much and that she was going to stay with him. He was a horrible man, a walking table of statistics. I hated her, then, too, and her children. One night when her husband was working late, she and the children came by to pick him up. I took this gun and killed them."

He shook his head like a drunken man, remembering. "That is very long ago, although it is only a few days, back there. She loves roses. I went out and bought six dozen roses and put them all around the bodies. The blood and the roses. . . ."

"And then I took the time machine. Trips had been made before, an hour, two, into the past. I set the mechanism for the future. I packed my clothes and the gun and the roses and went into the machine, and came into the city looking for a room, the very same city, sixty years later."

Deem rose quickly. A young man was



coming up the front walk. He rang the door bell.

"Answer it," Deem whispered. "Say nothing. Send him away."

Mrs. Childs walked shakily to the front door, opened it. The young man tipped his hat. She noticed the same strangeness about his clothes.

"I'd like to see Vincent Deem, please."

Mrs. Childs clutched the door frame.

"Who is it?" Deem shouted.

The young man had a gun in his hand. He pushed past Mrs. Childs into the living room.

"Steady, Deem," he said.

The big man seemed to lose his strength. The gun sagged. The roses lay on the floor by his feet. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I came through the machine. I've been here since yesterday, hunting you. I've checked everywhere. Finally, the market down the street gave me your address. I've come to take you back to stand trial."

"You can't make me go," Deem said calmly. "I know you can't. I'm here now."

The young man shook his head. "I checked the records here in the city. You were in an insane asylum until three years after the Great War. Then you tried to escape. You were killed. That means you went back."

"No," Deem shouted, "no, I'm here now. . . ."

"You've got to go back. Your death is already recorded."

Deem took a lunging step toward Mrs. Childs. The young man shouted. David grabbed Deem and struggled with him for a minute. Sari began to cry. Deem's gun went off.

And he fell on top of the roses and lay bleeding on them.

David took his wife in his arms.

The young man sent Sari upstairs.

"I don't understand it," David mumbled. "The death was recorded."

"Time is strange," the young man said clumsily. "Travel in time. Paradoxes. . . ."

"You'll be all right," David said to his wife, his arm around her.

"Twice dead, and the roses," she kept repeating, "twice dead, and the roses. . . ."

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# JOURNEY'S END

By WALTER KUBILIUS

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*Through chill space the ship plunged for  
a dozen lifetimes—on a journey which  
had no end!*

**A**N AGONY of pain sat upon Burnett's chest. How long it racked him he did not know, for consciousness was slow in coming. Every cell of his lungs cried for air. He breathed—and gasped chokingly.

*Water!*

"Look—he moves!" a faint voice cried from a measureless distance.

Burnett choked, flailed with his arms, turning, desperately trying to rise as he suddenly remembered where he was.

The preservative solution! That fool Ko-Tan had failed in adapting the energy transformer to the production of Zitalite—the liquid that preserved living organic matter forever. He, Burnett, was now doomed to die in the spaceship like all the others!

His tortured lungs gasped for air as his head emerged above the waterline. Weakly he placed his arm on the edge of the tank and collapsed, waiting for his beating heart to subside.

"Quick! Bring me the towel—he needs help," a voice said. Burnett heard light steps walk away and return.

"Here it is."

Strong arms lifted him from the tank and gently led him to a couch. His eyes

were still closed and felt heavy. Too much of the sediment must have been deposited upon them.

Burnett leaned back upon the couch and sighed in relief as someone washed and rubbed his aching muscles.

"Ah! That's good, Ko-Tan," he said—and then suddenly remembered there were two people in the room beside him, not one. "Fool!" he said sharply. "Who else is here? I thought I swore you to secrecy. There'll be the devil to pay if the others hear of this. Open my eyes!"

Deft fingers carefully brushed away the caked deposit. Burnett looked upward, blinking rapidly and accustoming himself to the light. So the preservation had failed, he thought. Well, there was nothing else to do but await the inevitable.

Sensing his thoughts, the seated figure next to him spoke.

"There will be a shock," he said. "Prepare."

Burnett faced him, but his eyes could not discern the features clearly even yet.

"I am not Ko-Tan," the man said.

"Then—then where is he?" Burnett said wonderingly. He looked at the man. He was

**Lita screamed and broke  
away. . . .**





short and extremely pale. His hairless head seemed to be of unusual size.

"My name is Milavo," he said. "This is my wife, Lita." A short and pale woman bowed low, said:

"I am honored, noble ancestor."

Burnett turned sharply to Milavo.

"How long has it been?" he snapped.

"The preservative solution was always in perfect condition," Milavo said. "There was no reason to awaken you before the time, so your ancient instructions were obeyed to the letter."

"How long?" Burnett demanded.

Milavo paused before answering. He looked into Burnett's eyes.

"Five thousand years."

"Liar!" Burnett shouted. "Stupid liar! In five thousand years the language would have changed—but you speak English. In five thousand years the very physical structure of the human race would change—"

He could not go on. He saw, all at once, that—Milavo and Lita *were* changed. Their albino color, tendril-like fingers and huge heads already set them apart from him.

"We learned your language from records. Our own has changed much." He exchanged a number of fluid but clipped sentences with his wife. Burnett could not understand them. "As to physical changes, you can see we are—different."

Confused, Burnett stood up and walked to the great circular window facing the void that he knew so well. In the distance a blazing sun shone fiercely. Almost below his feet was a round blue-brown planet, here and there dotted with cottonlike formations of clouds. A strange yearning shook him.

"Earth!" he said.

Milavo shook his head.

"The second planet of Proxima Centauri."

"I remember," said Burnett.

Instinctively he looked up into the heavens and his eyes sought the sun he had known.

It still shone, a small brilliant point in a field of cold darkness.

"Earth, Mars and all the planets?" he asked. "What of them?"

"Charred cinders," Milavo answered. "The sun became a nova shortly after you were placed in the preservative solution."

"Before," Burnett said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It happened before I was placed in the preservative. I saw the nova."

Burnett shuddered as he remembered. The spaceship *Victory* was far beyond the orbit of Pluto when the sun burst in an all-consuming flash. The outer layers of the sun were blown off with a speed that almost reached that of light. The gravitational effect of the collapsing core squeezed out waves of pure energy—electrons and ions, gamma rays, cosmic and ultraviolet rays grappled and burst through.

Nothing survived the first flash. All life was destroyed with a single mighty blow. Only the scarred but still flying *Victory*, far beyond Pluto's orbit, contained a handful of human lives. Twenty years were spent in searching the solar system for another spaceship that might miraculously have escaped the nova. None was found.

It was with a sinking heart that Burnett and the men and women of the crew realized that the *Victory* contained the last of the human race.

Then, with heart-breaking sadness, they turned their backs to the solar graveyard and headed toward Proxima Centauri, the nearest star.

Rising from his brief reverie, Burnett turned to Milavo. "The estimated time for the journey between the solar system and Centauri was four hundred years. How is it you claim five thousand years elapsed?"

Lita moved quietly to a single shelf on which lay a few dust-covered volumes.

"We have reconstructed the history of our ship," she said. "It may help you to catch up."

Burnett smiled.



"Thank you," he said, taking the volumes.

"We will leave you now," Milavo said. "We must make arrangements for landing on the Second Planet."

"Journey's end, eh?" Burnett mused as Milavo and Lita left him alone. He thought for a long while before opening the first book.

**T**HE years passed. The original crew that left Earth had long since dissolved into nothingness and their children's children took their place. The Earth's small, hot sun still rose and set, but only over a dead scarred world. In his preservative solution Burnett lived on.

Alone, of all the gigantic crew, he had no wife nor child. Ko-Tan devised the preservative means of keeping him in suspended animation until the *Victory* would reach Centauri, four hundred years thence.

One hundred years passed, and then another. The essence of Earth culture was contained in the ship. Though the individuals might die the race went on. This was the long voyage to a new home.

The lights were dimmed during the rest hours. Though for the past seventy years the *Victory* had not encountered a single formidable meteor stream, every portion of space was carefully watched. On this day Lisabeth, together with Jon, stood guard over the instrument panels.

"How silent it is!" she said. "I can almost hear my heart beating in the stillness."

Only a soft light played upon the gauges. The rest of the room was in darkness. They could watch the broad sweep of stars through the great curved windows that almost surrounded them.

"Somewhere out there is Centauri," she whispered—"the star we will never reach."

"Our descendants will," Jon said.

Lisabeth blushed. Jon reached for her hand.

"Promise," he said, "that when the next

council meeting comes you'll agree to be my mate."

Her eyes turned away. Neither of them saw the violent flickering of the panel. Their hearts were elsewhere.

"I—" she began to say, answering the pressure of his hand—but the words were never finished.

Faintly the *pit-pat* of meteorites striking the shell of the spaceship could be heard. One glance at the burning red gauge that marked the presence of foreign bodies told her all that was needed.

"Sound the alarm!" she cried.

It rang suddenly, sharply, breaking the stillness. Sleepy-eyed men poured into the corridors, carrying spacesuits on their shoulders. There was no panic. Each donned his protective garment, went to his appointed place. All doors were immediately sealed. If a meteor smashed through the walls they would have time—and air—to repair the damage.

The pounding upon the walls became louder and louder. Uneasily the men and women looked at each other. It was difficult to walk as the ship was buffeted right and left by the swarm of pelting stones. Lisabeth's calm face, shining through the globe of her spacesuit, reassured him. They would ride this out!

The floor beneath them plunged violently. The lights blinked and then suddenly died. The floor was weaving crazily under them as the motors sputtered, trying to break through a crushing weight. A thin line of stars, now visible upon the wall, told him that the ship had cracked. A second crash struck behind him, and the night enveloped him. . . .

When consciousness came back he dimly saw the great rent through the center of the ship. Around it lay the bodies of men whose spacesuits had been pierced by meteorites as they strove to repair the break. The control board had been smashed; the great library wrecked.

Sick at heart, he moved slowly toward

the rent and seized the metal welder from the grasp of one of the fallen men. He took a position and slowly began to work, extending the wall of the ship so it would reach the other side and close the great gap. The hall of meteorites still shot through, though the rent was becoming smaller and smaller.

Weakly he collapsed as, feeling a warm rush of blood upon his arm, he knew he was struck.

Slowly, before the final darkness would seize him, he made his way to the body of Lisabeth. He looked through the broken helmet and saw the stone-still lips, forever closed around the words, *I promise. . .*

But before the void closed in upon him he knew the rent had been repaired. The *Victory* would reach Centauri after all.

**T**WO thousand years later—  
The welts on his back burned deeply. The whips of the Prophet's slaves had dug sharp. A small trail of blood lay behind him as he crawled his way to the Sanctuary.

A slight noise froze him still. He paused, not daring to breathe, and listened. All was still in the heart of the great ship. As yet the body of the stupid guard had not been found.

The alarm was not given. There was still time.

Painfully he crawled on, conscious that his life's blood was slowly dripping away. What was it he had said on that eventful moment a few hours ago?

The Veil! Yes, that was it—the Veil. Defying the law that said no one but the Prophet could go past the Veil to see the Presence, he did go through and saw—the Presence!

For years—for centuries—the Prophets had terrorized the people with threats of death and punishment should their wishes be disobeyed. Always he had believed them. Always, that is, until he overheard the Prophet saying to one of his lesser priests,

"You know, the Ancients would not call us Prophets. They would call us engineers. A curious word, is it not?"

He thought and thought about that word until he determined to find out for himself what it meant. And that was why he went beyond the Veil to see—the Presence!

He laughed. The Presence. It was a monstrous hoax. The great god Engo Transfo was not a god at all. It was nothing but a great terrible machine!

True, it made marvelous things. It made air and food and metal and all the things the people needed, but nevertheless it was still a machine.

An engineer, then, was someone who could run the machine, the god which was called in the old days, an energy transformer. Why then, could he not be an engineer?

"There is no Presence!" he had told the people—and they beat him.

"It is only a machine. We could build another if we would study it!" And they whipped him and put him in prison, where the Prophets tortured him.

*Very well, then!* his delirious mind was saying. *Let the Prophets stop me now—if they can!*

He crawled past the black Veil that hid Engo Transfo in the Sanctuary. A sleeping guardsman did not feel the silken noose tighten around his neck until it was too late. He took the blade from the body, climbed the few steps that arched over the mass of tubes and wires. With one sweep he smashed a single glowing tube that gave life to the motors. One slash followed another and the crisscrossed wires became tangled shreds. A burbling tube broke through and purple gas spilled over the delicate gears and cams, smoke rising in angry billows.

Weakly he dropped the sword upon the delicate crystals that lay in the heart of the transformer. One blinding flash followed another in roaring succession.

Sudden silence. He crawled to the foot



of the machine, held to the Veil and, falling, dragged it down with him. The Veil was broken. The frightened people would see for themselves that the Presence was nothing but a machine. They would force the priests and prophets to fix the life-giving machine—and then teach them how to run it.

Then *all* would be engineers—just as even Saint Burnett, whose body lay sleeping, must have been an engineer in his time.

\* \* \*

Four thousand years after the nova—

“Father, what is outside?”

“Outside? Why, what do you mean?”

“The blackness there, with all the little white lights.”

“Nothing,” the older man said. “There’s nothing there but space and those lights which we call stars.”

For a moment the boy was satisfied. Then another question came from his lips.

“Father, who made everything?”

Startled, he could not answer immediately. “Why,” he stammered, “no one. It was always here.”

“McLain says that people made everything. He says that all this is not really our home, that we’re staying here only until we find another home.”

The elderly man was irritated. “If McLain is so smart,” he snapped, “ask him *why*. Isn’t he satisfied here?”

“Oh.”

The boy was disappointed and left. Always he had been given the same sort of answers, as if people didn’t really care. Only old McLain shared his curiosity about the *outside*.

“Read this book,” the frail old man said, giving him some faded scraps of paper. Most of it he couldn’t understand. Maybe when he was grown up and taught the secrets of the energy transformer he would understand, but not now. The book was all

about the *Victory*, how it was built and how it could be made to move. He did not read any of that for his attention was on the chapter that dealt with the door. It wasn’t an ordinary door, he found out; it was called an airlock. It was really two doors instead of one, and they opened to the outside.

Durnig the one rest period he determined to open the door—just once. Then he would close it.

He had memorized the number to turn and was surprised to find that the wheels moved easily and quickly. He heard a single snap—and pushed the door open.

He could see nothing. He pushed the door still wider. When the light fell over his shoulder he saw that it opened to a small room at whose end was the second door.

Quickly he made his way to the second door and pulled at the dials, slowly turning them. He heard the first click, the second—and then felt McLain’s bony hand upon his shoulder.

“Fool!” the old man’s voice grated in his ear. “Do you want to kill all of us! The frozen void is death!”

“I—I—the outside—” the boy whimpered, frightened.

“Never mind,” McLain said, becoming kinder and turning the boy away. “It is our fault for becoming so satisfied with our life here that we forget to explain the hair-breadth of life we occupy in death-dealing space. . . .”

**B**URNETT could read no longer. He closed the book and shuddered. Human life had hung in the balance on a thousand and one occasions, when only a single step was needed to destroy forever the last vestige of Earth’s life.

At last the terrible struggle was over. Proxima Centauri had been reached.

Milavo, Lita and another group of albino-white, large-headed humans came into his room.

"We have landed on the second planet," Milavo said. "Would you be the first to walk upon its soil? Perhaps it means something to you."

Burnett's heart began to hammer. Five thousand years ago he had seen the Earth go up in smoke. He had made a pledge then, to Ko-Tān.

"This ship, the *Victory*," he had said, "contains all that remains of the human race. Every empire and tradition ever spawned upon our mother planet lives in us from now on. We can never return, but we can find another planet. We can make another Earth. This is good-by. None of us will see Earth again. You will know only the solitude of space and the loneliness of the stars. You will grow old and die. I shall be the only one to set foot upon another planet. But I give you my word, Ko-Tan—that planet will be another Earth. I swear it!"

Remembering what he had said, in impressive silence Burnett walked down the plank to the soil of the second planet. Milavo, Lita and a few others followed. The great majority of the ship's crew remained, staring curiously out of the windows.

Burnett breathed deeply. The air was rich in oxygen but nevertheless quite suitable. Only a glance was needed to tell him that. Rich foliage was everywhere. The lower forms of animal life, somewhat different from Earth types, chattered in the forest. In the distance purple mountains broke the day, bringing early evening.

The planet was young. Earth must have been like this in the days of Eden.

He turned happily to Milavo and Lita.

"This will make a splendid home," he said. "I never dreamed there'd be such a luxurious planet circling Centauri. This is almost a replica of Earth. What a glorious civilization we can build here!"

"We must test the soil for radioactive metals," Burnett went on, "and set about to build more energy transformers. We will

certainly need many. Secondly, a group of us must minutely explore the planet for all possible traces of other intelligent life. Should we find any we must make our intentions clear and unmistakable. I do not think we will have any trouble, though. The planet seems to have been made just for us."

"You—you will stay?" Milavo said, as if not comprehending Burnett's plans at all.

"Why, of course we will stay!" Burnett said.

"No. No," Milavo said quickly. "You, not us."

Burnett looked quickly at him. "I didn't understand you," he said sharply.

"We will not stay here," Milavo said.

Amazed, Burnett could only stare at him silently.

"In heaven's name," he shouted, "why not? This planet is ideal, I tell you! You'll never find another one like it, no matter how much you search! This is journey's end, I tell you—it's like coming home again!"

Milavo looked about him. Lita clung to his arms. A strange bird screeched in a tree. Leaves rustled as the wind blew through them. The sky was brilliant red in the glory of a sunset.

Burnett broke the stillness.

"What is wrong?" he asked, though he began to suspect.

Lita clung closer to Milavo.

"It—it is horrible!" Milavo said.

**T**HE others, one by one, had quietly walked back to the ship.

"Yes, it's ugly. Monstrously ugly!" Lita said.

Burnett could not believe his ears. "This—" He gestured. "Ugly?"

A butterfly flew overhead and alighted on his shoulder.

Lita screamed, broke away and ran to the ship. Milavo's pale face was even whiter.



Even the startled flight of the butterfly did not ease him.

"Is this beauty?" he demanded. "I never dreamed such a hellish planet could exist! Look at the ground," he said. "Vermin! The air—filled with strange particles of loose matter that will clog our lungs and kill us. Microscopic germs everywhere. Listen, Burnett, your body has been brought up in such a revolting planet that it seems to be like nothing. But for five thousand years we have lived decently and sanely in a scientific environment which we ourselves made pure and clean. Do you think we'd give that up and live in the horrible impurity of this ugly planet? Never!"

Bewildered, Burnett could only gape at him. "But this is home," he said. "This is where we started out to go." Lamely, he stopped.

"The human race has changed," Milavo said. "We could never endure planetary life, and would not survive in such an environment. Our home is space. We build our environment in our ship. There we live; on a planet we would die. I must go back."

He turned and waited at the door. When Burnett did not follow, he entered and closed the lock. . . .

Burnett sat down on a small ledge. *Ugly. Monstrous. Revolting.* Those words flew back and forth in his brain. Milavo was right; the human race had changed. It had changed so much that that which was once thought to be an integral part of human nature, Earth love, turned out to be nothing.

Five thousand years in space, with all its hardships and experiences, had given the colony a common tradition, a common culture which was utterly alien to the planetary life of their ancestors.

What could Milavo know of the strange sensation that filled him as he clutched a handful of dirt and crushed it in his hand, thinking of the wheat, rye and fruits that it could yield? And what did he himself

know of the life which Milavo, Lita and all the other descendants of his friends experienced?

Once the fish had lost its gills in evolution, it could not go back to the water. The *Victory* would never come back to any Earth.

Milavo opened the door and called out, "Will you come with us?"

Burnett shook his head. Tears filled his eyes.

The great rocket shook and rumbled away.

He watched it leave, rising up into the darkness from whence it came.

When he was alone Burnett thought of Ko-Tan, his crew, and the promise he had made to start a new Earth.

He had failed.

Alone, the last of the human race, he would die.

The culture and civilization he had known would die with him.

But he looked up into the heavens, at the gigantic expanse of numberless stars, and suddenly knew that human life had not failed.

If Man had a destiny, it could still be fulfilled.

True, planetary life was over. But Milavo and Lita, and their children's children, faced another life. An earthbound people became a space-dwelling people. In the centuries to come they would discover ways and means of making other spaceships, and these ships would be filled with their children. Where there was one *Victory* in the skies, there would be two. Then four—six—a dozen.

The instinct of the race to survive and reproduce would never perish.

Millions of years would pass, and the void would be filled with cities occupied by the descendants of men and women who, finding the secret of atomic power, left the prisons of the planets forever.

Burnett looked up into the sky. The cosmic design was clear.

# WHEN EARTH IS OLD

*They emerged at last, three humans from a mist-covered past, onto an Earth that had no need of them . . . unless they could unwind mankind's final shroud. . . .*

By  
**RAYMOND Z. GALLUN**

## CHAPTER ONE

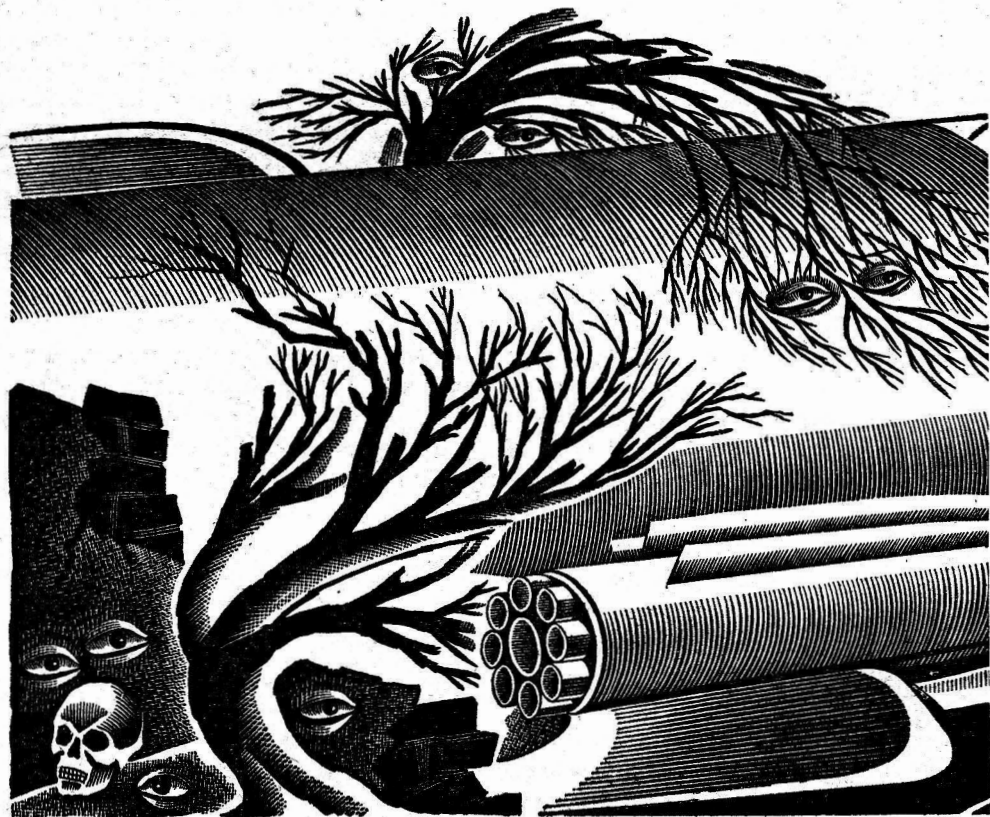
### Into the Future

**A**RNIE NOWICKI was a tough little guy of twenty-two. He was an orphan. Rudolph Nowicki was his uncle. Rudolph came out to Arnie's forty acres from the city on weekends. Together

they began building the vault, a hundred feet underground behind Arnie's shabby barn. Much concrete, steel, and aluminum went into its construction. The tube to the surface, which had been dug with a rented well-driller, was just large enough to permit the lowering of long leaden boxes, end-wise.

Sometimes they'd knock off from work to go fishing. And once they brought along Laura Knox, the only girl who had ever

**A germ-disease had done it—  
a mortal plague that did not  
reveal itself until too late. . . .**







loved Arnie. She was the new hired girl at the nearby Nevvins farm. She was a cute little brunette who could be as fierce as Arnie could, with an enemy, but sometimes gentler, even, than he could be with an injured pup. She said that she came from St. Louis, but to say that she came out of nowhere might have served just as well.

In the boat she said, "Uncle Rudy, you look like a musician, or a famous scientist."

"Oh, don't let my Van Dyke beard fool you," Rudolph chuckled, pulling a husky bullhead from the lake. "It's useful in hot weather. The sweat just drains down to the tip, and drips off harmlessly."

Rudolph Nowicki was a mild-mannered, imaginative little bachelor, different from the others of his rough-and-ready and sometimes shiftless clan. In his youth he had had to support younger brothers and sisters. So maybe he was haunted by a more studious might-have-been. It was even said that he had once been in love.

Arnie liked his uncle, and tolerated his peculiarities: "Aw—Uncle Rudy's no real scientist, Laury," he said. "In the city, he's a soft-drink manufacturer."

They all laughed.

Arnie was shy, ordinarily, and as dangerous to monkey with as a stray bear. About all that he'd ever been interested in, aside from his uncle, and now Laura, was scientific books, guns, planes, wandering in the woods, and tinkering with old cars. The world and he didn't get along so well together. But with these two, he was at home.

"Um-m-m," Laura commented. "If your Uncle Rudy isn't some kind of scientist, then what's all this I hear about the vault you're building, and about the formaldehyde, alcohol, salts, plastics, and other preservatives, which, from what I've heard, he keeps fooling with in your kitchen?"

Arnie's dark cheeks reddened with shame. During a weak moment, he'd done some blabbing in the village. "Yarns sure get around," he mumbled.

But his uncle only grinned mildly. "I never said that what we are doing is a secret," he remarked. "Tell Laura, Arnie."

"Okay," Arnie chuckled, relieved. "When he can forget the soft-drink business, Uncle Rudy likes to think about the past. The cavemen. The dinosaurs from sixty million years ago, even. Fossils. Mummies. Natural history. And about the far future. He thinks it would be kind of amusing if his own body, perfectly preserved after death, were dug up a few thousand years from now, and put into a museum, for the archeologists of those times to study, and for the people to stare at."

Arnie paused to snicker tolerantly. "Can't you just see the ticket on his showcase? *Famous body of unknown Twentieth Century business man, wearing suit of period.* It's his way of sort of reaching the future, since he can't build a time-machine. . . ."

Laura Knox' pretty features showed faint and good-humored distaste. "Oh, boy!" she said. "Gruesome pair of screwballs, aren't you?"

But Rudolph Nowicki's pleasant face remained as serene as the sunlit sky. His china-blue eyes twinkled, as at a joke on Father Time. Beyond his business, he was all whimsy. You couldn't think of him as being gruesome about anything, though his hobby was strange. But it was a thing to do and think about. It might have been said to blend his personality with the changing Earth, making his present more enjoyable. That was worth the few thousand dollars it cost. The result, if any, in the far future, wasn't so important.

Laura Knox, who was at heart part pagan nature-worshipper, sensed some of this. Perhaps she too saw trite visions of shining futuristic towers. "I'm sorry for having made that last crack, Uncle Rudy," she said.

He spread his palms, and winked.

Then she made some incautious statements. "The big ape who has been ped-



dling the story around isn't making it sound so reasonable," she said. "He talks about 'Dizzy Nowicki and his crazy uncle,' and says that you're both 'loony enough to be in the county asylum.'"

Arnie's sun-tanned fists bunched. His dark features began to look like a thundercloud. His good-natured air vanished. "Heck, Laury—don't insult the apes," he growled softly. "One of these days I'll fix Rob Gorson's wagon good. His, and all of his brothers!"

The Corsons lived on a prosperous dairy farm, unlike Arnie's small, poor property. Unlike most big fellows, Rob Corson was a childish bully and a sadist. He had a fine sense of humor—for mean practical jokes. His companions were all stooges. He kept away from guys who were too tough for him to lick. Though small, Arnie was just on the borderline, here. Moreover, he didn't fit into Rob's crowd. And Rob Corson was of the type that hates and fears anyone or anything different.

Arnie still bore the scars of the occasions during his lonely and savage childhood, when Rob, two years older than he, had beaten him up for fun. Since then there had been uneasy intervals of peace between them. But recently Rob Corson had been making passes at Laura. That she could tell him bluntly where to get off, didn't stop him. For Arnie that was like gasoline poured on dying coals. And this latest news from Laura was the straw that broke the camel's back.

For the remainder of the fishing excursion Arnie was sullen and thoughtful. That night he went to the village tavern. He came back with his face and knuckles battered. You can call that round even.

**D**URING succeeding weeks there were several more fistic bouts.

Then Rob shot Arnie's dog, and threw the carcass into Arnie's driveway. Laura had to do some stiff arguing to keep Arnie from going for his well-oiled de-

rifle that time. But the signs of inevitable disaster were already plain.

The payoff came five days later, on a sultry Wednesday evening in early September. The fight began in the parking lot of the Silver Basket Roadhouse, while the orchestra played sultry dance music. Laura couldn't prevent the battle.

"Nobody's dog can chase *my* cows," Rob Corson growled with a self-righteousness that was plainly a fake. "Especially not the mongrel mutt of a pint-sized nitwit named Dizzy No-wicky-yes-whacky!"

There, under the ancient stars, while the wind in the trees mixed ageless, primitive sounds with the primitive sounds of modern music, Arnie became a machine with a single savage purpose. For him, the pain of blows received became just a dull smear to be forgotten. And this time he won decisively.

Rob Corson went down, a great, dazed hulk, his weak brain filled with murder.

Laura dragged Arnie away, yelling at him, "Arnie! You darn fool! Want to land in jail? Here. . . Get in your jalopy. . . I'll drive. . ."

The old car took off swiftly enough, its headlamps boring into the darkness that shrouded the winding, woodland road. But within a minute, other, brighter headlamps blazed behind it, and rushed rapidly nearer. The big car came abreast of Arnie's jalopy, and then began to crowd. Laura Knox lost a little of her nerve. The wheel wobbled in her hands.

After that, for Arnie Nowicki, there were sensations that many have felt during their last seconds of life. . . Whirling, jolting, impossible motion—and a sort of dull surprise. Pain, that made him scream—with the odd impression that it was somebody else who was screaming. He remained conscious to the last, pinned under his vehicle, knowing that no more was his body able to live, seeing beside him Laura's head and shoulders in the beam of Corson's flashlight. Her skull was crushed, but her

dark hair curled softly over a cheek that looked, now, as round and innocent as a baby's.

Arnie Nowicki perhaps had been born to violence. And his last thoughts were things of black hatred. The leer of it froze, like something eternal, on his dead face.

Rob Corson was the only witness to what had happened. In the morning, as he spoke to the sheriff, a stupid awe at the deaths he had caused still paled his cheeks and made his thick lips sag.

"Sure, Nowicki and I had a fight," he said. "He was known to be a little loose in his nut. After the fight that Knox wench drove off with him like wild. If you drive when you're upset, you take chances. I was still sore, myself. I followed in my car. But when I caught up, they were already smashed against those trees. Dead. What could I do. . . ."

Within an hour Rob Corson was swaggering, feeling clever.

Need one mention grief on Rudolph Nowicki's part? But whimsey was mixed with it. For Laura Knox he was able to do the same as for Arnie, because she had no known relatives.

A few years passed, and Rudolph Nowicki was laid away in the vault, too, according to his own specifications.

**T**HE timestream flowed on, decades becoming centuries. Man erased the farms and woods, and built his transient towers, which loomed grandly for a thousand years. The biological knowledge of the builders was already sufficient to have enabled them to replace dead cells with living cells. But who among them was to worry about the insignificant mass of concrete, aluminum, steel, and lead, buried underground, even though their instruments could have located it easily?

For a while these builders flourished. Now, for a while, they were both strong and gentle. Until decadence and unreason took hold again. Their towers fell, or were

blasted down. Their interplanetary colonies were wiped out, and those few thousand individuals who had survived the holocaust at home, were swept into retrogression.

For ages, again, there were cavemen on the Earth. Wild animals hunted and were hunted. Glaciers came and went. How often was the cycle of rise and downfall repeated? Nature counted its eras carelessly. Erosion erased mountains; volcanic forces raised them again, to be washed down again.

Though lesser branches of the race continued to exist, men with great craniums and vast intellects developed slowly. By them the human mind and consciousness were duplicated mechanically, first as a complicated and cumbersome apparatus of metal and crystal, then with inevitable simplifications and improvements that tended toward the supermind whose physical self was a nodule of pure energy that could go anywhere in the universe, and play with nature as a minor divinity.

They could have built living creatures from inanimate material, to such form and mental quality as might suit themselves. But, as energy-forms, they left the Earth. And in the ground, in the remains of the vault, corroded now, and warped by the action of geologic forces, three bodies remained neglected, still waiting.

Meanwhile the old constellations had long since been changed by the gradual movements of the stars. But this was an insignificant matter. In all of the universe, nature had gone on experimenting, developing that which was old, and creating things that were new, just as, on Earth, it had created reptiles after fish, and mammals after reptiles.

A microscopic spore arrived on Earth about a billion years after Rudolph Nowicki was buried. It came, propelled by the pressure of light, and by the gravitational attraction of the sun and the Earth. And it came by design, which made certainty



of chance by multiplying the number of spores ejected into the upper atmosphere of another planet by explosive spore-pods, to countless trillions. Some billions of these were swept into space by the well-known pressure of solar light. The rest was only a matter of time—how much was of no importance. Sooner or later.

It was an exodus of survival from a planet that was then near dead. Mars. But the same sort of exodus had occurred at least twice before. From the moons of Saturn, and then from the satellites of Jupiter. It may be that it was on Saturn's moons that this life-form was spawned. If it was not on some planet of the nearer stars.

One spore on Earth was enough. It carried within its tiny self all that was needed for the rebuilding of a culture far older than that of man. It is significant, perhaps, that the shell of the spore contained a lead-salt, to shield the vital parts beneath it from the cosmic rays of the void, and the killing effect of the hard ultraviolet light of the sun, unscreened by an atmosphere. But that lead salt had not been painted on with a brush, nor stamped into the shell by a machine. Strange. . . .

The spore took root in the desert, on an already chilly and aging Earth, during the reign of the last fierce race of men, who had wiped out their too-gentle contemporaries, after the super-beings had left their home world to wander the universe.

The spore grew to a bulbous, cactiform thing. Plants of ordinary varieties have light-sensitive cells in their leaves. So, was it so unbelievable that, in this queer migrant, these had developed into eyes that could see? Or was it so odd that the thing's fine spines should be able to detect sounds? Was it so impossible that the fine fibres that function as a nervous system in other plants should have become, in this strange intruder, chains of oily nodules, which, all together, served the purpose of a brain?

No one has ever been able to say con-

clusively that keen intelligence must be solely the possession of the animal world. And, as a matter of fact, without intelligence, it is certain that the line to which this spore-being belonged, would long since have died out.

**I**T MATURED, and scattered countless new spores to the four winds. The number of the plants multiplied. For a while their hold on Earth was precarious, for they were not without menace in themselves, and so their presence provoked attack by all the ugly scientific weapons that the last, fierce men could bring against them.

The numbers of the spore-plants, and their wide dispersal over vast desolate regions, and their swift reproductive powers, were, at first, their only defense. But all the while their own special powers were working slowly, until they were able to win.

For they had a science of their own. One totally different from that of men in its main aspects, yet, of course, bound to the same realities by universal natural law. For instance, a molecule of water to a man, was still the same molecule to them. But their approach, their technique, had to be different. For, neither their capacities nor their disadvantages were the same as those of men.

Fire, the starting point of almost all human science, they knew about but could not use. They had no hands to build a furnace, to devise a test tube, or to construct machines of metal. They could not make rapid movements, and they were anchored to the ground by their roots.

But they were not helpless. They had developed senses unknown to humans. The most important of these was perhaps a tiny bit like the sense of touch. They could "feel" the fluids moving sluggishly through their own tissues. But they could "feel" much more. This sense functioned like the most delicate of instruments. The minutest

chemical or physical changes within their cells could not escape it. It enabled them to understand the working of their own vital processes completely, and in understanding that much, what basic principle of biological functioning could they miss? They wrote no books, but to "feel" these things was like reading many volumes of ultimate secrets, written with a vividness far beyond words. Even without the inherited race-memory that they possessed, their science was thus in no danger of being lost while they survived.

Their deductive powers were directly comparable to the human. They could theorize, calculate, prove and disprove. The mental pattern of an invention was arrived at in the same manner that it happens in the brain of a man. But the way they built the invention itself, was totally strange.

They had learned to will and direct and control the growth of their own tissues. The things that they made were thus parts of themselves. A water-conduit, to them, was a great hollow root that contracted with a slow pulsation. It might extend for a thousand miles across a desert, and be composed of fused parts of millions of individual plants.

A thin, fibrous cable of vegetable nerve-tissue, in the wall of such a root, served the purposes of telephone and telegraph, but much better; for the messages were not in clumsy words, but in thought, and in actual sensory impressions.

An electric battery was something not very dissimilar to the specialized tissues of the electric eels of eons before. And its primary usefulness to the plants was also similar—defense.

Possessing electricity, radio was also possible to them. Sparks could produce electromagnetic waves, which their slender spines could detect at great distances.

The invaders won against the last cruel humans; by ruthless cunning, tempered by logic, and even by justice. They won by their own powers—their understanding of

biology and disease. And for a few centuries they were at peace, free to enjoy life in whatever terms that meant most to them. From the human viewpoint there is much mystery, here. But speculation and the social exchange of ideas must certainly have been part of their living. Plus, perhaps, a placid vegetable contentment.

Then, from across space, too, came another kind of invading spark. It was also life of a sort. Maybe it had been spawned late in the history of the universe, for it was simple, almost crude. Very slowly, yet inexorably, it spread. It was radioactive—and deadly.

The contentment of the plants ended.

About this time, a root, groping down a few feet through the soil, found the twisted remains of Rudolph Nowicki's vault, which, after ages of erosion, and geologic shifting of the Earth's crust, had worked its way almost to the surface.

During months of growing, the roots' fine fibres groped, as with idle curiosity, over the leaden caskets, for the vault's broken walls no longer were a barrier. Steel and aluminum had combined with the soil, till there was no trace of free metal left. Concrete had turned to broken shards. Lead was far more resistant to corrosion; but after the passage of such gulfs of time, none of the caskets were any longer very sound.

The roots bored inward, touched clothing, drilled on through—into flesh still moist with fluid preservative. It was Arnie Nowicki's flesh that was first to be touched.

Senses beyond the human came into play. Excitement ensued. Here had been life. Here was a dead thing—but *perfectly kept, even to the brain-cells, which showed considerable intellectual capacity!* That was the important point. The creature had the form of an enemy of a few centuries ago—the enemy that was extinct, now, leaving, for the most part, nothing of its physical self but skeletons. Except for other, supremely rare cases of accidental or inten-



tional preservation—by drying, by freezing, or other means. Not only of individuals of the last fierce race, but of other races that had preceded it. But in each case there was still some deterioration of brain-structure—always—before this. Too bad that last race had not been studied more carefully. It was a neglect—an oversight. But did it matter, now, after this piece of good fortune?

Along fibrous nerve channels thousands of miles in extent, messages and discussions flashed. Hope rose. There were three bodies, not just one. And they were a little different from those of the enemy, being clearly of a far earlier race. Here could be skill, not fumbling idiocy. Yet, was it wise to ask aid from such similar shapes? Or was it better to compel than to ask? Foolish questions! In desperation, things were done by whatever means that was available.

Among the growths from across space, the forms from the forgotten Twentieth Century became the center of a concerted effort and interest, that was like war, and, in fact, *was* war.

The first root fibres to penetrate this ancient flesh, died, killed by the preservative. But other fibres grew into the leaden caskets, and through the eroded plastic. They wrapped themselves around the bodies, forming, for each, a kind of huge cocoon. Mile on mile of root fiber went into each of these, and became amalgamated, until a tough, fluid-proof shell was formed, woody on the outside, but soft as mucous membrane on its inner surface.

Water that was slightly acid was introduced into the cocoons, to dilute and wash away the preservative, that then was allowed to drain into the soil, past a little flap-valve that now opened in each woody shell. Many times this washing and purifying process was repeated, before the real work could begin.

*Here was where the skills and special aptitudes of these bizarre beings really*

*came into play. Certainly there was no task for which any intelligent entities in the universe were better suited than they to perform. Always they had built with living cells. Life was the basic principle behind all of their science. For unnumbered ages they had been acquainted with its ultimate mysteries.*

Each of the three human bodies became for them a kind of pattern. Their job was to replace old tissue with fresh tissue, cell for cell, in a minutely exact restoration, and to put life-forces in motion again. All this they had been doing before, with other, less perfectly preserved human forms from many eras. Perhaps thirty forms, altogether. But not with such hope as now.

The injuries that had caused death in two of the bodies, were not hard to repair, for it was easy to see how the parts had fitted together. The aging that had brought death to the third body could be counteracted simply by making its cells chemically like those of the younger bodies.

A fermentive heat was applied. Rich oxygen was dissolved in the warm fluids surrounding the human forms. So, in a way, the cocoons were like great eggs, incubating. It was all like a weird gestation toward rebirth. Did it matter that plants were plants, and that the creatures they sought to recreate belonged to the animal world? No, for the same life-principle applied to both. And the same chemicals were involved. Proteins, fats, and so forth.

How long did it all take? Maybe three years.

More was happening than just the rebirth of Rudolph Nowicki and his two companions. The plan could not end there.

And there were other problems. Maybe the ego of an individual is only a design stamped in his brain cells. To make them live again may thus be enough to recreate a personality. Or maybe the ego must be recalled from some central font of universal intelligence. But for us such matters still belong to the realm of theory.

## CHAPTER TWO

## The Awakening

ARNIE NOWICKI had no clear-cut moment of awakening. Rather, it was like slow emergence from a foggy nightmare. He must have been dimly conscious, and occasionally in violent motion, for hours before he really knew what he was doing.

His first emotions were hate and fury—carried over from his last seconds of life, a billion years before. Strange, that was—a final feeling held crystallized in death for so incalculable a time, only to start up again as if not even an instant had passed between.

Even in his dim semi-consciousness he could think the name, Rob Corson. Rage must have added strength to his muscles in accomplishing his first necessary task. He hardly realized that he felt half-drowned. He fought the confining shell around him, which had already begun to split, like a ripened pod. He broke it open, and the warm fluids in it spilled out.

With his face turned toward a small, white sun, he lay there in the shell for several minutes, panting and gasping. Then, as automatically as a worried caterpillar, he crawled out of it, impelled by a blurred idea of escape. He was too weak and exhausted to try to stand. Still, he kept crawling, across dry, rock-strewn ground, leaving a trail of moisture behind him, from the fluid in the wet tatters of clothing that still clung to his body.

He might have tried to creep entirely out of the weird landscapes; but something huge, quasihuman, and crude, pounced on him, and tried to hold him down. Its face, with its drooping lip, reminded him of someone; and so he fought it with his last strength. But his energies came to an end, and for a while his consciousness was even more murky. The monster, apparently satisfied that he could no longer move, lum-

bered to a little distance, and crouched down among great cactiform things to watch him.

Arnie's mind was full of jangled impressions.

Someone was lying near Arnie. Somebody familiar—and as confused as himself. They began to converse fuzzily, like drunks.

"That you, Arnie?"

"Yeah. . . . Hi, Uncle Rudy. . . . You look different—"

"Does it matter? Arnie, do you know how far we are from our own time? There aren't even any natural-born people left! Arnie, do you know how we were brought back to life, and why? Do you know, Arnie? Sorry . . . my fault . . . got you into this. . . ."

"Nuts, Uncle Rudy . . . not your fault. . . . Yeah—maybe I shouldn't know the answers to what you ask. But I do. Must have dreamed it all. Maybe *they* made me dream it. Seems like I was part of them, sort of, for a while. . . . Seems like I'm still part of them, and that they want to make us do something for them. Damned if I will! Hell with 'em. . . ."

Arnie still panted. His voice was a ragged growl. His brain was a little clearer, now. His words were an attempt to trace, as simply as he could, some of the unhuman memories that had been planted in his brain, during his last hours of intimate contact with those bizarre cacti, maybe by means of a direct sensory contact.

For a minute neither Rudolph nor Arnie said anything further. Arnie now understood most of what had happened. His hackles rose. It was hard even to grasp all of the incredible truth, much less adjust to it. He lay, now, looking around him, gathering in the mood of this eerie time and place. From everywhere came a low buzzing, as of a million cicadas.

Arnie looked at the cocoons of root-fibers. There were five altogether, but so far only three had been broken open. All of them lay half exposed above the dry soil.



Around three—two open and one still sealed—was the wreckage of the caskets, mingled with shards of concrete. So here was where the vault had been—in the pasture behind his barn.

He looked east, toward the shrunken but dazzling sun. There, a road should have been, flanked by scraggy maples and signboards and telephone poles. Down the road there should have been another farm.

"The Nevvinses must have moved," Arnie growled with bitter humor.

Toward east and west the cacti grew in an unbroken band, as far as the eye could reach.

To the south had been the village, with its standpipe and church steeples looming above the trees. There hadn't been a body of water larger than a frog pond in that direction for miles and miles. But now there was a desolate, rocky slope, going down to an expanse of deep blue ocean. It was easy to tell that the white rim on the beach was not surf, but mineral. Natron and salt, doubtless. Evidence of the advanced age of the Earth, where soluble minerals had been washing down into the shifting and now shrunken seas, since geology began.

Arnie turned his gaze northward. That was where the densest woods had been, dropping to the river flats. There were still woods, there, conforming, somewhat, to familiar standards, at least at a range of several miles. But growth was less dense, now. And instead of slanting down, the ground rose to a ragged range of hills, that showed huge outcroppings of white limestone.

One of the latter was mottled strangely with sooty black. It suggested disease. . . . And perhaps because of the information that had been put in his brain, Arnie felt that it was ominous.

Then his attention shifted to the clumps of orange wildflowers in the near distance, and then to the broken tower farther off. It was yellow, and it glistened in the sun-

shine like glazed ceramics. Around it, big birds wheeled. Evolution, and a billion years, had not made them unrecognizable.

"The old home don't look the same," Arnie muttered.

Rudolph Nowicki's mind was still on the cacti. "They're wonderful," he was saying thickly. "They even take care of their own irrigation. And they made *us*! And that monster over there—crudely, hastily—yet in our image, to keep us in line, just in case. But we have our duty to them. We're supposed to go west—to a deserted underground city of the last fierce men. There are machines, there. The cacti can't work machines. There's something that's got to be done, to stop deadly danger—"

Arnie looked up at his Uncle Rudy, whose eyes were very big and puzzled. "Shut up!" Arnie ordered softly.

The hypnotic buzzing got hold of him, lulled him, made him yearn to fall in line with what his uncle had just said. Against that, all of his natural independence revolted. He saw the cacti—bulbous, prickly masses of gray-green, with a few thick leaves, dotted with glittering eye-lenses that seemed tensely alert. Arnie knew with certainty that these things could be as savage as anything that had ever lived. Their devilish alienness clawed at his nerves.

From them that buzzing came, like a soothing chant of demons. But when you thought about it, it make your skin pucker. And now, into the sound, human words were injected, rhythmically: "West—go—west. . . ."

"Now I'm really bats—in a corny way," Arnie growled. "The damned cactuses even talk!"

"Oh—did I tell you, Arnie?" Rudolph said. "Laura must be here, too. I put her in the vault with you—then. She must be in a cocoon that's still closed—the one with the lead fragments around it."

Arnie's cold fury and bitterness increased. But now he had an idea.

"Junior over there looks as strong as a

span of mules, but I'll bet he's not as smart," he whispered to his uncle.

Before Rudolph could even reply, Arnie picked up a large jagged rock from beside him. Slowly he rose to his feet, grinned a challenge, and hissed to draw the monster's certain attention. It lumbered up, taking the bait more naively than a child. It was a creature of these clever entities of another science. But in the skills of physical action, a plant, or the animal creation of plants, could never match the practiced aptitudes of either man or beast.

When the monster was as close as he dared let it come, Arnie hurled the rock straight at its bulbous, bluish abdomen. His body was weary and weak, but his young muscles felt the terrible drive of need. As his adversary grunted and staggered, Arnie lunged, giving the grotesque travesty a mighty push. It toppled and fell. Wasting not a motion, Arnie recovered the same rock that he had thrown, and hammered the heavy skull with it until the monster stopped moving.

Then Arnie leaped toward the cocoons. Two were still closed. It was in the one with leaden fragments around it that Laura had to be. As if torn by some force from within, its root fibers had begun to split, making a longitudinal cleft.

With the rock Arnie hammered and pried at the cleft. Electricity from the defense organs of the cacti jolted him as he touched the long spines projecting from the gnarled roots to which the cocoons were attached. But he kept at his task savagely.

The buzzing grew shrill and protesting. Words were mixed with it, making a quick, angry beat: "West, west, west." He tried to hurry more, to be away from here before there were dangerous developments.

**H**E GOT the shell battered open at last. Clear fluid dripped from it, and its fleshlike inner surface was exposed, pulsing. Filaments finer than spiderweb were attached to it. It looked

like a vital organ under vivisection. Life, with all its intricate magic, can still be a little sickening.

Laura was there, damp, and at most only vaguely conscious, but alive. Her cheeks were pink. Now she stirred. Then she had a fit of coughing. In an hour she might have emerged naturally from the cocoon.

Arnie picked her up. He did not know that when he felt something tear, it was not her tattered clothing. He felt triumphant.

"Let's roll—fast!" he said to his uncle, who had only stood by, dazed by the sudden course of action he had taken.

Arnie started north toward the scattered forest and the hills. He ran tiredly with his burden, dodging past each spiny, blue-green bulk that loomed buzzing in his path. In a minute he was clear of the ribbon-like strip of ground on which the cacti grew.

"Where are we going, Arnie?" demanded Rudolph Nowicki, following in his wake.

"How should I know!" Arnie snapped back at him. "Any place except where we were. Could we let those what-cha-call-ums run us?"

His uncle didn't say anything, as they hurried on, moving now at a fast walk.

Arnie felt the lift of freedom. The angry droning of the cacti dimmed behind him. And he didn't have to fight that weird spell, that hypnotic sense of devotion to them any more. Hills and woods called to him as they call to a hunted bear in search of shelter.

The air was cool and brisk, and carried a tang of woodsmoke. But it was considerably thinner than what Arnie Nowicki was accustomed to—other evidence of the aging of the Earth. You tired quickly in such an atmosphere.

Within five minutes Rudolph said, "I'll take Laura for a while." And so, at intervals, they changed off, carrying her. But when they reached the first trees, they had to drop down to rest.



From close by, the trees lost their familiar aspect. Their trunks were gnarled, their leaves flinty and stiff. They were as different from the trees that Arnie knew, as such trees themselves were different from those of the Coal Period. They seemed conditioned to a climate of extreme severity.

The wildflowers were great devilish things, at once ugly and beautiful.

"We'd better not waste time," Arnie panted after a minute.

Laura had gone completely limp. As Arnie picked her up, he noticed the drying trickle of blood, running down her arm from beneath the remnant of a sleeve. He said nothing. There wasn't much that he could do. Maybe it would be all right. . . .

Great black birds had begun to wheel overhead, following them, marking their position to any nameless pursuer as surely as a column of smoke marks the position of a fire. Their melancholy cries, "*Caw—caw—caw*," identified their origin beyond doubt; but they made other sounds, too. Twitters and excited gurglings that suggested a spoken language. Sometimes individual birds would fly skittishly almost within arm's reach of the men, as if to draw their attention; and it was then that Arnie noticed that their craniums bulged above their white-lidded eyes.

And on the ground it seemed that another escort moved. From a clump of giant grass, with blades two inches wide, stiffer than wood, saw-toothed at the edges, and needle-sharp at the point, a little furry creature peered for a moment, squeaked shrilly, and then vanished, only to show up again a minute later, from under some coniferous bushes.

The animal resembled a prairie dog. And Arnie thought of food—meat—which might be a problem in this strange land. But something made him dubious. The animal's head was oddly large; its eyes were too big and wise. And now—what was it doing? It had crept out from under the bushes, and

it was sitting up on its rump. So far, so good—nothing out of order. But one small foreleg was extended, exactly as a pointing man extends his arm. The paw at the end of it was a tiny, pink, dirty hand, with long nails. The index finger showed direction beyond mistake—back the way the men had come. A vehement sequence of squeaks accompanied the gesture, as if the rodent's life depended on the men's obedience to his advice.

"Latter-day evolution, Arnie," Rudolph muttered. "Crows and prairie dogs that, at last, have developed real brains. I glimpsed what might have been a prairie dog town a little while ago, only there was smoke rising from the mounds, as if the inhabitants had learned the uses of fire, and had underground furnaces going."

Arnie Nowicki felt more lost on this changed Earth than ever. But he was a natural friend to small animals. "Whatsa matter—Smoky?" he said to the rodent. "You mean somebody's after us? Or do you mean that we should get the hell out of your territory? Or are you a stooge for those cactuses, too, and mean that we'd better go do what they want? Um-m—like hell we will. . . ."

Smoky twittered and was gone. But briefly. Time and again he reappeared, to repeat his vehement gesture. He was following persistently, under the cover of bushes and grass. He also had companions. But the white spot of fur to the right of his nose, always identified him.

**T**HE worst worry was about Laura. For a long time she was limp. Her color was ashen; her hands were cold. And that ominous slight trickle of blood from beneath her arm continued. But at last she stirred again; and to Arnie, who happened to be carrying her then, this seemed a heartening sign.

"You took her out of the shell of root fibers, Arnie," Rudolph said quietly. "Maybe it was necessary. But it shouldn't have

happened. The process wasn't quite finished—with her. . . ."

They stumbled along as, toward night, blue shadows lengthened. The cries and wheeling of the crows above, became more excited than ever. The squeaks of the rodents took on a plaintive, despairing note. At last the birds would follow no further. They hung back, milling, cawing. Distance muted their cries, till the woods seemed ominously quiet. Of the rodents, none still followed except Smoky. Now, some tense emotion emboldened him, so that he left the cover of the shrubbery, and kept close to the men, twittering, and pointing back toward the lowlands. Once he even tugged at Arnie's tattered trousers.

They came at last to trees that had no leaves at all. Beyond these, branches and trunks loomed stark and barkless, looking like bleached bones in the fading daylight.

Then, ahead, on the ground and on the weathered limestone outcroppings, they saw the black patches, ragged at the edges, suggestive of the charring of dry lawn over which fire has crept, making an irregular pattern. The black patches were slightly sunken below the surface level of rock and ground, heightening the effect of a slow, gnawing disease. What really happened, perhaps, was that matter collapsed inward upon itself, became denser, occupied less space.

"One fast look from close up," Arnie growled. "Then we'll beat it out of here. Stay back if you want to, Uncle Rudy."

But Rudolph Nowicki shook his head, though his cheeks were white with exhaustion. "I'll take a chance with you," he muttered. "We came this far—and we *should* know. If exposure is brief, it won't matter much, probably. This stuff is very slow—not violent like an A-bomb. The radiation must be far feebler, though in the end just as deadly."

Arnie lowered Laura's limp form to the ground. She still breathed, and the blood flow had stopped. His awful concern for

her found no reasonable answer. What to do? For the moment he had to lay the question aside.

Arnie and Rudolph advanced, and had their moment of inspection, crouched at the edge of a patch of blackened ground. There wasn't much to see. Neither man said anything.

The black stuff was like lustreless glass, but beneath its dark tone a glow was visible in the gathering dusk. A phosphorescence, or a fluorescence. And from that amorphous infirmity of atoms—of matter—heat radiated. The men felt it against their faces.

The thing that went on here was a process. That much could be said. Arnie and Rudolph could make their guesses about it, aided by the information which the cacti had planted in their brains. It attacked atomic structure, disturbed the balance of nuclei, and made them radioactive. It was self-perpetuating, like the infinitely faster chain-reaction of an A-bomb. But like fire, too, and life. And it was infectious—it could reproduce itself. The cacti, who in other locations had tested it with dying tendrils and roots, believed that it had come across space to Earth, in a tiny speck of infected matter.

Thus, it could be called life, too—of a simple, insensate variety, entirely different from the kind previously known on Earth. It lived, not by chemical energy, but by the slow release of atomic power. The claim that it *was* life could be based on the fact that it had not been previously known. It seemed, thus, to have developed, as all life must. But its radiations made it deadly to all other living things. It was spawn from the depths of this latter-day universe.

Rudolph and Arnie Nowicki retreated from it, their hackles rising, after only a moment. Arnie picked up Laura, again, and they started back toward the tower. The men still didn't speak. Only Smoky showed his relief by trilling happily.

The tower's interior reeked of guano, and



the dried, carrion remains of meals which the crows had dropped. Rudolph nodded toward some spreading bushes as better shelter. Tenderly, Arnie covered Laura with stiff dry leaves, since nothing else was available. Then, with a kick, he broke off a blade of grass almost a yard long, stiffer than oak, and sharper than a sword. By pounding the wide torn end of it with a rock, he shaped a crude hilt. It was a devilish weapon.

The men looked down at Laura in helpless pain.

Rudolph did not really lie down. He just folded slowly at the knees, as his exhausted body gave up, and dropped over on his back. Within ten seconds he was snoring.

Arnie managed to ease himself down more conventionally. A monster was looking for them, and could not be far off. If he'd only made sure of its death when he had the chance! He wanted desperately to keep awake. But it was hopeless.

"Smoky," he muttered thickly. "You're fresh as a daisy. Stick around. Warn me if necessary, eh?" His sword was beside him.

One impression he received before sleep conquered him. Of movement, and then of a feminine thing peering from the partial shelter of bushes. She was scrawny, scarred, scabby, but apparently young. Her hair was vaguely blond, in spite of dirt and burrs. Her tatters of clothing were adorned with golden ornaments the design of which resembled the designs decorating the porcelain tower. Her features were not bad, but her great, pale eyes held at once the confusions of imbecility, and a great loneliness and longing. She made a twittering, musical sound, and then was gone.

Arnie's sleep-clogged mind, aided by transplanted memory from the cacti, identified her as one of the few persons derived from preserved corpses from the past, found underground by the roots of the cacti, and recreated, in the hope that she

could help them with their problem. He did not know that she had been a great lady of her time, killed in an accident. But preservation of her brain tissue in her tomb had been imperfect. So her mind was dim.

Seeing her at the edge of slumber, made the reality of it like a dream. And his later wakeful moments were like nightmare fragments of delirium, too. It was true that he was sick from exhaustion.

Loss of solar heat in the thin atmosphere after sunset, was quick. So even this summer night had to be bitterly cold.

He awoke once to see the huge white moon, ugly because it was nearer to the Earth than once, shining down on white frost. Was it true that a warming fire burned near him, or that he had been covered with prickly leaves? Arnie saw small, furry shapes, silhouetted against the blaze, as they dragged dry sticks to feed it.

Rudolph still snored under another pile of leaves. Arnie crept over to the third pile. Laura was nearest to the fire, but her small hands were icy. Arnie tried rubbing them. He could barely find her pulse. Inside him a terrible struggle began, as an idea, born of desperation, occurred to him.

Meanwhile his knees bumped against a little pile of hard-shelled fruit. More charity from Smoky and his bunch. Arnie peeled a brown globe, tasted its agreeably acid tang, and then squeezed juice onto the girl's dry lips, while the prairie-dog chieftain hovered near.

"Smoky," Arnie muttered. "You're a good fella. But I'll bet you've got a bigger reason to try to keep us alive. We're your great hope of survival, too, aren't we?"

He began thinking how game Laura was, generally—no weak sister—not in her heart. It was his fault, partly, that she was injured. A vast lump gathered in his throat. He tried to keep on rubbing her hands, but weariness conquered him again, and he slept.

Thus he missed an incident. But Rudolph did not. Small calloused fingers

touched his now youthful cheek in a caress whose tenderness was almost savage. Rudolph awoke and saw that pathetic girl. He muttered in revulsion and fright, and she went away. As Arnie had known, he knew what she was. But for Rudolph, too, her cry of affection-starved loneliness became like part of a dream, and he slept again. . . .

Later, Arnie was awakened by the thrashing sounds of a great bulk's unwary approach through the undergrowth. He grasped his sword. Dread and fury drove his fuzzy mind. He went into the shadows. He planned cunningly. He waited for that gigantic, crookedly made human travesty to lunge at him clumsily. Again he had the advantage of a lithe, active man. . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Alien Ship

ON HIS third awakening in the frosty dawn, he was not sure that the combat hadn't been a nightmare. But, wandering stiff and sore out of camp, he found the ugly corpse with its abdomen ripped open. The grass-blade sword still was buried in its heart.

Arnie Nowicki felt the sheepishness of a too-easy victory.

He'd already tried again to rub warmth back into Laura Knox' hands. He could find no pulse, no sign of breathing. Laura, whom he loved, was either dead or dying.

Lost in this strange land that had once been his familiar haunt, he had just one hope to save her. To make use of it, he had to stop being Arnie Nowicki, the misfit, the fierce individualist, who bowed to no one. He had to more than sell his soul to the devil. To the cacti. To alien vegetable entities with a marvelous science that ran on another track from the human. Whether they were entirely cruel or not did not enter into the question. That they were the only possible source of help was the one important fact.

Arnie's yielding was shot through and through with sullen fury. But he was maturing. Maybe he even achieved a certain dignity.

Limping back to camp, he shook his uncle to wakefulness. Both men were in a bad way. Sword-grass gashes had swollen over night. Rudolph turned his bleary, anxious gaze toward Laura.

"Arnie," he croaked. "If she died, and if her brain began to deteriorate, even the cacti probably could not make her as she was."

"All right," Arnie snapped. "We're going back!"

Listlessly the men ate fruit brought by Smoky's people. Then they started their return, carrying Laura. Long before noon, pain, and continued hardship so soon after the ordeal of rebirth, blurred their minds, until a fog seemed to hang between them and reality.

"We'll never make it," Rudolph said.

It was then that a monster, like the one that Arnie had killed, loomed in their path. Another cocoon had evidently opened.

Arnie's impulse was to fight the huge thing—even though he had neither the strength nor the right, now that he had yielded. He controlled the urge. But taking no chances, the monster struck with a great, crooked hand. Then it struck again. As Rudolph went down, he heard a wail of anguish at his hurt from nearby.

The imbecile girl had followed them, under cover.

Unconscious, the two Nowickis were carried back the way they had come, to the ribbonlike strip of land where the cacti grew. After a brief interval, they were borne west a few miles, to a deserted underground metropolis of the last men. In one of the chambers near the surface, they lay for a long time, under blankets which Smoky and the monster found in the city's supply rooms. The unconsciousness of injury and exhaustion changed to normal sleep.

Arnie was aroused by Rudolph. "We're here, Arnie—where we're supposed to work our human scientific magic," he said.

Around them gleamed metal walls. The crystal tubes attached to the ceiling were probably meant to supply light, but they gave none, now. Still there was illumination—a soft, greenish glow, easy on the eyes, and adequate. It came from objects that resembled in shape and texture the seed-pods of poppies, though they were a foot in diameter.

It was hard to realize, at first, that they grew on thick, fuzzy stems, or that the stems projected from a woody mass that had forced its way through a seam in the metal wall. The plating had bulged and spread wide open, there, under the slow pressure of plant-growth. The exploring roots of the cacti had intruded into this chamber, and they had even brought their own cold light. The device that produced it was another invention of theirs, grown to conform to their pre-planned specifications. Seeking a parallel in nature, one remembered the light-giving organs of fire-flies, that depend on the slow, almost heat-less combustion of a special oil.

Arnie viewed this minor achievement of the cacti without much surprise. There was more to see in this great workshop. From the woody root mass, eye-lenses glinted, watching the men intently. And tendrils extended across the floor, to grope at what was obviously an air or spacecraft of some kind, thirty feet long, and fitted with stubby wings, and with jet tubes for propulsion.

The door of the ship's cabin was ajar, and into the interior the tendrils had grown like vines, to grope at the controls. Likewise, other tendrils had penetrated the jet vents, and a scraggy bundle of them was draped, like Gorgon hair, over the cylindrical device that was mounted on the craft's prow.

"When it comes to man-made machines, they're helpless," Rudolph commented. It

was easy to see that this was true. The tendrils of the cacti could not move fast enough to guide any sort of vehicle, and probably lacked tactile dexterity. Metal was mostly out of their line. Human inventions seemed as much beyond their scope as their inventions would surely be to a man. Here, they had tried fruitlessly to use the devices left by their late enemies.

Several skeletons of the latter were scattered about the workshop floor. These last men had been of slight build. Momentarily the Nowickis probed the memory of their extinction, that had been impressed into their brains. A germ-disease had done it—a deadly plague that did not reveal itself until the mortal stage had been reached. By then, the whole race had contracted it.

"The cacti created the germs of that disease," Rudolph mused. "The first of those germs were cells of their own substance. Secretly, they were able to infect one man through a hollow thorn. . ."

Arnie shrugged. Those men had tried to destroy the cacti first.

**B**ESIDE what looked like a lathe, crouched the monster that had brought the Nowickis here. And peering from nearby was Smoky. While, from a corner, the blond girl pointed to herself and said "Doy." She kept her cloudy eyes fixed on Rudolph in a dumb worship that was pathetic and repellent. But Laura Knox was not present.

"She's probably somewhere else, safe," Arnie said hopefully.

In a pallid, pulpy leaf, sprouting from the root mass that protruded through the wall, a voice-tympanum buzzed scratchily:

*"Man-made machines . . . human science. Work, work, work. . ."*

Arnie and Rudolph exchanged glances, and then looked at the ship at the center of the room. True, it was a human creation. But Arnie, hit by his own inadequacy before it, was no longer so proud of being a man. He had never even flown a plane.



"We've got to try to fly it," Rudolph answered. "For Laura's sake."

So Arnie turned toward those glittering eye-lenses. "All right," he growled. "I guess you've learned some of our language from our minds. And we know that you want us to use the science and the weapons that the people of this city had, to get rid of the black radioactive blight that we saw up in the hills. The stuff that, in time, can kill everything else on Earth. Okay—we'll take on the job. In return, we expect to be treated right. There was also a girl. She's missing, now. We expect her to be returned to us. If she, or any of us is harmed, by Glory, I'll get even! I'll use the gadgets here for another purpose. So—no tricks. No hypnotism or anything. Understand?"

The eye-lenses seemed to regard Arnie calculatingly, like the eyes of some ruthless and clever gambler who could never be trusted. There was a momentary pause. Then the voice-tympanum buzzed loudly, gleefully.

"Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . . *Work . . . work . . . work . . .*"

The Nowickis shrugged grimly. They could only take a chance.

Smoky chirped, pointing to a pile of articles which the monster and he must have scrounged from the same supply-source from which came the blankets. There was clothing of a metallic sheen, but soft and warm to the touch. And there were transparent jars of fruits and vegetables, and what looked like meat, though discoverable relation to any animal part was missing—hinting that it was synthetic.

Arnie found the means to chuckle. "If evolution has made all creatures smart like you, Smoky," he said, "only a cannibal could eat them."

They ate, and found the centuries-old fare palatable. They thought of plague infection—but the preserving method would surely have sterilized the food. And the germs of that fatal disease would certainly

have died out in clothing after hundreds of years.

Arnie's new costume was tight and ill-fitting. But he had never been a snappy dresser, anyway.

Rudolph and Arnie fell to their task. Gently, they tugged the tendrils away from the craft that gleamed at the center of the floor, to clear it for inspection. Some of those vegetable tentacles were torn in the process—without showing a pain-reaction.

Probably the Nowickis could have spent fifty years trying to understand the advanced and deceptively simple devices which they now examined, without learning their deeper secrets. Still, broad points of function became clear very soon. Propulsion was plainly nuclear.

Inside each jet-vent was the tip of a thick wire, which, in shadow, emitted a faint glow that hinted that the metal of it was radioactive. The wire tips looked burned off. And all around the lips of the jet-vents were little greyish prongs, pointing at these burned ends. Probably it was from those prongs that slow neutrons were hurled against the wire tips, causing them to "burn down" slowly as their atoms were split, giving, not the terrible violence of an A-bomb, but a steady, powerful thrust.

For each jet, wire was wound on a drum, which a worm gear could turn slowly. Thus, as each wire's tip was disintegrated and shortened, more could be pushed automatically into the jet-chamber through a small hole.

The internal structure of the cylinder, or weapon, mounted on the ship's prow, was similar on a lesser scale, except for the addition of curious radiation filters.

"It seems that I remember, here, something that the cacti put in my head," Rudolph remarked. "They understand atomic structure, and what must be done to destroy the black blight of matter. They know, too, that this cylinder is the answer. They lack only a practical approach to apparatus of metal. The filters in the

cylinder enable it to produce, in pure form, a specialized radiation, deadly to Earth-life, but deadly to the blight, too—the cacti hope—because the blight, basically, is an unbalance in the nuclei of atoms, and because the radiation counteracts this unbalance, bringing atoms back to their normal, unradioactive state. At least so I see it, Arnie.”

Arnie’s aptitude lay in figuring out the weapon’s and the ship’s controls. He had looked harassed for a while. But now he grinned almost with optimism.

“What we missed before,” he said, “is that, in advanced mechanics, controls are *simplified* and made more foolproof, instead of more complicated! This ship has just a throttle, steering bar, balance lever, and—I think—hidden safety devices. So maybe we really can fly this thing, even though it stumps the cactuses. You know what it must have been that stopped them cold? You almost feel sorry for them—they’re so smart, and yet so dumb! A key locks the whole works—like in a car! And it was hangin’ here all the time, under the dash. Holy cats!”

After a moment, Arnie continued, “The tube weapon seems to be moved and fired by these two levers. So, if we can find oil for the small gadgets, and get that big exit-hatch open—”

He pointed along the twin rails that slanted up, ramplike, from under the craft’s keel, to meet the great door in the ceiling. There were crank-wheels by which the door could be opened manually, when power failed. The rust-proof metal gleamed bright and new.

“Okay, Arnie, let’s try the hatch first,” Rudolph growled.

Even with the mechanical advantage of a gear system, the accumulated debris of centuries on top of the door made the job a struggle. But at last the hatch slanted upward on its hinges, letting late afternoon sunshine from the open sky blaze into the workshop.

“Now show us the stores-section, Smoky,” Arnie urged. He pointed to the other things that the rodent chief had brought, and then to the shadowy archway which led from the room.

The monster tagged along, as did the dull-eyed girl, who now had fumblingly put on new garments, over her tatters and golden ornaments. So the two men had their first glimpses of the buried city. Here and there, lamps, which perhaps depended on radioactive fluorescence, still burned; and in other places, where the roots of the cacti had penetrated, there was the glow of light-giving pods.

Dust and silence were thick along the arched avenues. Skeletons were everywhere. Machines and the great spaceships were silent. In an hour the men came back from the supply chambers, with a transparent container which bore strange writing. But they had opened it to verify its contents.

Soon the Nowickis strapped themselves to seats in the ship’s cabin. The monster was too stupid to know that, if all went well, they would be leaving him behind in a moment. Smoky hung back, chirruping nervously. He had his own kind of courage; but if there were legends among his people about machines that flew, he still wanted no part of such inventions.

But as if dimly remembering aircraft from her own era, the nameless girl stumbled aboard puzzledly, twittered some liquid syllables in a voice that was the one beautiful thing about her, and tried, fumblingly, to strap herself in place. Rudolph, moved by pity that was part of his gentle nature, turned to help. The answering glow in her eyes was doglike. Dim of wit, drooling, her hair matted with burrs, it was true that she was more animal than human.

**N**OW, blue flame sputtered from the stern tubes as Arnie eased the throttle down. After a minute he opened it wide. There was a soft roar.

Luckily, their craft was aimed skyward, where there was nothing to hit. Arnie returned the throttle to the midpoint of its quadrant. The ship leveled. It was no surprise to discover that, except for choice of altitude and compass-point, this refined machine could fly itself.

"So far, so good," Rudolph breathed, relieved.

Arnie headed north, and a little east, toward the range of hills, and those black blotches that they had seen. In a minute they covered the distance that had cost them so much time and hardship on foot. Even at their considerable altitude, the sun was setting. On the ground, dusk was closing in. So they saw both the blotches and the faint, ominous glow which they emitted.

Arnie pushed the balance lever forward, and went into a steep glide. Rudolph held the firing and directing controls of the weapon on the bow. From a mile distance, he began using it. The beam that shot forward looked only like a searchlight beam, turning the faint haze in the thin air bluish and luminous. But where it touched the black-blighted rocks, there was a red shine of heat, instantly.

Arnie rose, and then glided down again, while Rudolph continued to use the weapon, spraying all of the infected ground and rocks with its rays.

"I'm sure we've covered every square millimeter of blight in this area," Rudolph said at last. "Now let's wait to see what happens."

So they cruised around the sky for a while, and as the hours passed, they found and destroyed nine more foci of the blight.

"What'll we do with the girl?" Arnie asked.

"What'll we do with anything?" Rudy chuckled worriedly. "We're as lost in this latter-day Earth as she. How will we ever fit in? We're just two—three, if we can find Laura. The only competent humans in a whole world—in this era. We've accom-

plished something for the cacti. We were used by them. But how can we trust them now—or they, us? We're too different from them. And they warred with humans, once. They might have lost. So, how can they take a chance on us, even if they have an improbable sympathy?"

Everything visible seemed to bear out this line of reasoning. Beneath them, under a fantastic moon, the wilderness rolled, mile after mile. There were the ribbonlike stretches of ground, geometric as the canals of Mars, where the cacti grew. There were hills, expanses of weird forest, open deserts, and dying seas. The moonlight seemed to sprinkle everything with the dust of tarnished silver. Gleaming metal domes revealed the positions of subterranean metropolises, built by the last men whom the cacti had wiped out with disease. But the light from those domes was only reflected moonlight.

The cities of the kindlier people who had flourished earlier where even more desolate. Broken porcelain towers loomed over the ruins of shops, market-places, and laboratories. Everything was shadow-haunted quiet, of which Doy's inarticulate cry—a wail, really—seemed to express the loss, in the timestream, of all reason to live. And for her the gulf of eons was not nearly so great as for the Nowickis. It was a billion years back to their era! Even the star constellations were unrecognizable, now.

Occasionally, red glimmers of fire were visible beneath the ship, no doubt marking the colonies of rodents, that, like other native animals of the Earth, had advanced by evolution to the mental level of primitive men.

Or could one of those fires mark the sad encampment of some dim-brained human, rebuilt by the cacti from a corpse, imperfectly preserved for ages by desert dryness, entombment, the accident of a specimen tank's remaining intact in the ruins of some ancient medical laboratory—or some other



unusual condition? About thirty such humans, there had been—plucked from many periods of history, all probably much more recent than that of the Nowickis. The vegetable entities had hoped for their help; but they had proved useless. Now they were discarded anachronisms—lost souls, scarcely able to take care of themselves. But Arnie wondered if his uncle's and his own position was much better.

"A guy feels like going off into space—almost," he grumbled. "To try to find some real people...."

\* \* \*

Shortly after sunup, they arrived over the great open hatch, from which they had flown their ship on the previous evening. It tried, now, to descend, guided by some homing mechanism. But Arnie grabbed its manual controls, and forced it on, at low altitude, until Rudolph spotted the cocoons. They came down roughly, retrackable landing-wheels jolting over stony ground.

They had had to come back here, to try to find Laura. There was no other course. It was the tether that the cacti had on them. How much alien and unfathomable thinking was behind all that? And how much danger of a trap, set by entities that perhaps could not afford to let intelligent humans go permanently free? Yes, the Nowickis were suspicious. But helpless fatalism had fallen over them. There was no place to go. They hardly cared what happened.

Rudolph took Doy's grimy hand to show compassion, as they hurried toward where the now drying cocoons were. Her obvious devotion to him strengthened the natural tie of pity. He had to be kind to the poor thing. Rudolph Nowicki was like that.

And they found Laura Knox. She was standing by the cocoon that had been hers. Her eyes glowed with relief from terror, at sight of Arnie. And she threw her arms around him.

"Oh, Arnie—and Rudy!" she stammered. "The monster must have been the one to put me back into the cocoon. I was made well again! But—I can't get loose...."

"They kept the bargain," Arnie gasped unbelievably. Feverishly, he started to tear with his fingers at the stout tendrils of the cacti, wrapped around her body. Rudolph moved to help.

Perhaps to give the Nowickis a moment of belief in their good intentions, was part of the disarming strategy conceived by the cacti. For now other of their tendrils groped slowly for the two men from behind. Hollow thorns dug deep into the legs of both, almost simultaneously. Numbness spread swiftly, as an effect of either a drug or poison. Arnie and Rudolph fell to the ground, hearing at the same instant an anguished scream from poor Doy, and a twittered and excited protest from Smoky, who was somewhere near.

Maybe Arnie Nowicki did not fully lose consciousness, then. But he might have been out for hours, or even weeks. For this was the beginning of a bitter, dreamlike existence, spotty and broken. An all but completely hopeless, with death looming at the end. Of what value was restored life and vigor, here? Sometimes Arnie was vaguely aware; sometimes he was drugged, or asleep. Sometimes it was frigid night—or warm day. More tendrils grew around his companions and himself. It was like warm clothing, anyway. And maybe the fibres that bored into their flesh nourished them intravenously. Doy was completely enwrapped—entombed in those ghoulish tendrils. Arnie's, Rudolph's, and Laura's faces were left exposed.

Sometimes Arnie heard Laura talk, plaintively, whimsically, "I'll bet the Earth would be a pleasant place for human people to live, for another billion years, Arnie. If we could only escape! We could go to the hills—maybe build a stout log house. Have a garden. Maybe ordain Rudy a

justice of the peace. Get married. Have children...."

There was even a trace of humor somewhere, here. But mostly there was bitter, hopeless fury. "Yeah, Laury," Arnie would croon; and then he would lunge savagely against the tendrils around him. But he could not budge them a hair's breadth.

Around him were the glittering eye-lenses of the cacti; and their buzzing was in his ears—though, in their physical clutch, there seemed no reason to enslave his mind with hypnotism. He was helpless without that. Still, they must be studying him, reading his thoughts, with fine, hairlike tendrils that bored deep into his flesh—painlessly, as if their needlelike tips carried an anesthetic.

The same terrible things were happening to Rudolph. And to Laura, whom Arnie loved. Rudolph spoke often, theorizing, explaining:

"The cacti are finished with us—we are of no more use to them. But they must be making a record of what we are—for future reference—before they destroy us. They fought men before. Humans are too strange, too powerful, too different. And the cacti are too coldly practical to take a chance. But we're like bugs to be studied...."

A weird rapport of mentalities was going on, again. Arnie caught the echoes of vegetable thoughts and memories and mistrust and questioning. And all that he had to fight back with, against the cacti, were thoughts and emotions of his own.

Fury. Hatred, based on wrong. Savage defiance. And then that bitter, eternal question, which he often voiced aloud, "*Dammit! Why can't two intelligent forms of life ever live together in harmony, and trust each other? Lesser creatures do. Ants and aphids. Bees and flowering plants. Why, when intelligence comes, is it always so difficult? Even among creatures as similar as different races of men? Why? Why? There's even a scientific word for*

*this kind of cooperation. Symbiosis...."*

Behind Arnie's thoughts and words was bitter contempt at stupidity. Even, now, at his own human stupidity, for he was maturing. Maybe it even went way back to his memory of Rob Corson, his old enemy. Disgust went through him, aching. Disgust at his weird captors; but disgust, too, at so much bullheadedness and misunderstanding, throughout human history.

Rudolph's and Laura's thoughts soon began to follow his lead, throwing that same challenge and defiance. And often Arnie would add certain arguments, speaking aloud, "What would your damn cacti do, if the blight wasn't completely stamped out—if it came back? And—reading our every thought—you must know that we are sincere. At least, we're trying to be—and I hope we are! Thought-exchange makes insincerity impossible...."

So the refrain of Arnie Nowicki's and his companions' thinking went on—through blurred days and weeks. Darkness and daylight passed around them. Rain, wind, heat, and cold. But now the cacti gave back no answering thought.

**T**HINGS happened. Obeying some hypnotic order from the beings who had recreated them, witless humans from many eras, and in the tatters of many styles of costume, began to arrive—some of them having doubtless journeyed thousands of miles on foot, from the places where the root-cocoons from which they had been reborn had been. At last there were a dozen of these poor, filthy, empty-eyed creatures—all of them tethered by enveloping tendrils. Probably it was for their execution. Even they could move fast and handle weapons. Even they were dangerous. That they mewled piteously didn't matter....

Arnie Nowicki was about ready to give up. The faint dream that Laura had awakened in him—of going to the nearby underground city for supplies and tools,

and of building a house, and of struggling to attain something with meaning, grew progressively fainter. Fitful periods of consciousness were alternated with what seemed drugged slumber. Death, he suspected, would soon be dealt out. For Rudolph, Laura, himself, and the others.

That was one reason why a certain awakening was so strange—he was past being much frightened by anything. A morning sun was shining. Smoky twittered as in fear or startlement. Laura was shouting, "Arnie! Rudy! Look!" There were even some inarticulate cries from several of those sorry humans from other dead eras—those who had not yet been completely encased in tendrils.

Two yards away stood a girl—blond, beautiful, still in her incongruously mixed costume, a stranger, and yet not a stranger. Maybe implanted memory helped Arnie to understand how the implications of this could be. The wonderful and yet logical skills of the cacti, who worked with the forces of life to rebuild the dead. And the present miracle was a less sweeping thing, but of the same order.

"Doy!" Arnie exclaimed. "It's Doy! The cacti put her into a cocoon—to rebuild her brain—patterning what had been missing before through faulty preservation, after our brains, which were complete!"

It was true. It had to be. Doy's pale eyes, though puzzled, showed the unmistakable spark of intelligence. And it made her beautiful! And it must have been the fluids inside the nearby cocoon that had washed her clean.

Her proud gaze was drawn quickly to Rudolph's. Tenderness, and a groping wonder where in both of their faces. "Doy!" he said.

"Yes—Doy," she answered. "My name. Daughter of Ey-leu, the—what do you say—sculptor. . . . Yes, I have some English words . . . which they . . . put in my head. Asleep, they have told me. Words from your heads. A little of me is all of you—

but I am mostly myself. It is strange . . . and so much time has gone. And I am very scared. . . ."

Arnie could see it now. She was trembling. It was only natural.

Rudolph seemed to go wild in the binding tendrils that held him. He struggled, and this time his bonds gave easily, and he was free. He rushed to Doy. . . .

In another moment Arnie and Laura were free, too, and in each other's arms. "But we still don't know what all these sudden wonderful developments are all about, Arnie!" Laura exclaimed.

As if in answer there was a prolonged buzzing from the cacti. Then a voice tympanum spoke in dry, almost scolding tones, and in better English than ever before. Some of the cacti had evidently troubled to learn it better from the human minds.

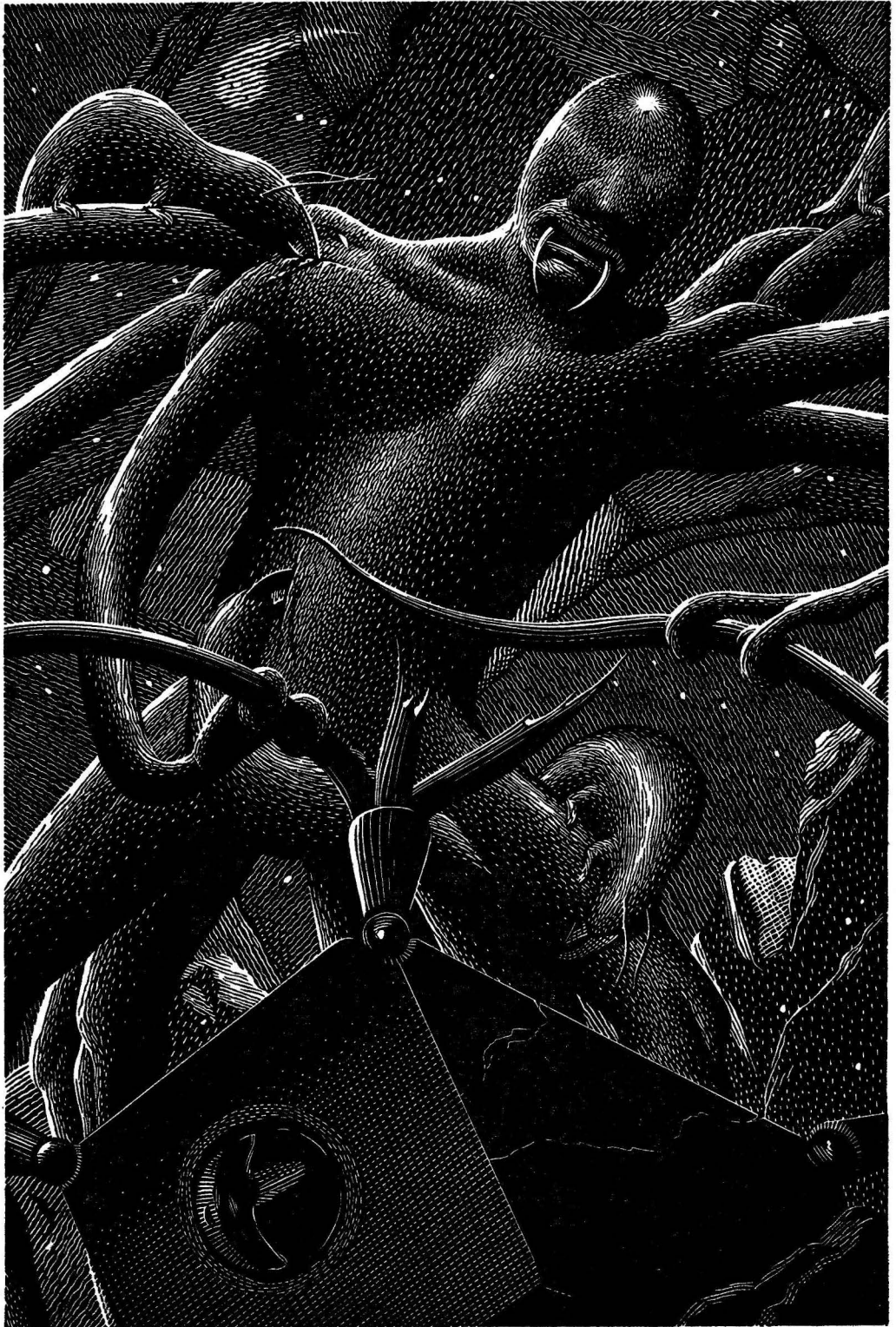
"You humans have argued with us, by your thought-waves, which showed that you were sincere. Good! Do you not think that we too have dreamed of the old ideal of different peoples living together in harmony, helpfulness, and generosity? But you know that we are aware of the dangers that attend such a faith. One can be tricked easily. Shall that knowledge destroy faith, again? If not, then there must be responsibility—on the part of both peoples. There is room enough on Earth for many humans, and for us. We have studied you, again. We, too, have been at fault, often. But we believe in ourselves—and in you, and your children. We take our chances. We will make over the brains of these other men and women from the past, as we made over the brain of the woman, Doy. We shall all make our gamble. Therefore, go! Build your houses! The others soon will follow."

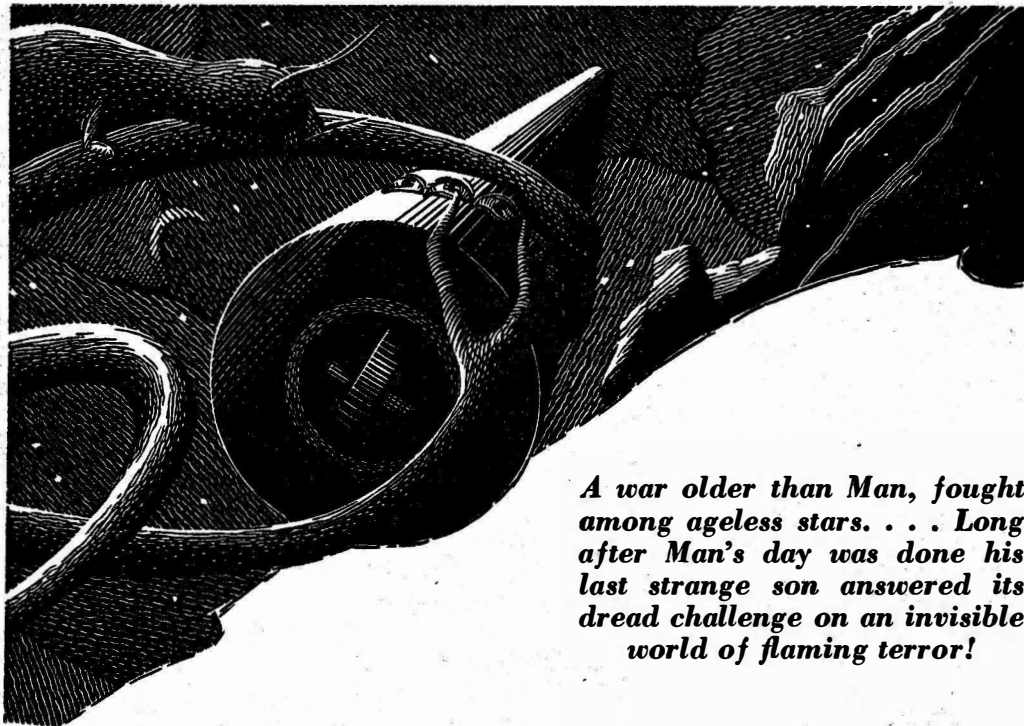
Was there humility in the scratchy voice of the weird plant-spokesman? Was there a little bitterness? But was there hope?

Arnie's throat tightened. He, too, felt humble. His sense of responsibility was

*(Continued on page 113)*







*A war older than Man, fought  
among ageless stars. . . . Long  
after Man's day was done his  
last strange son answered its  
dread challenge on an invisible  
world of flaming terror!*

# THE STAR KILLERS

By NEIL R. JONES

## CHAPTER ONE

### Revelation of the Comet

PROFESSOR JAMESON looked out through the observation port of the spaceship to where the great band of color trailed across the sky in sapphire glory. The head of the comet, a nucleus of scintillating blue, seemed almost to radiate a lifelike quality all its own, or so it seemed to the machine men of Zor, while the great long tail, through which the far off stars shone pale and subdued, spread thin and nebulous.

Had anyone told the professor forty mil-

lion years ago during his normal lifetime on earth that at this far flung era he would find himself an undying brain in a metal body, he would have pronounced the idea even madder than his own inspiration of indefinite preservation of his own body by having it shot off into space in a funeral rocket to become a satellite of the earth. Yet, there he stood doing exactly that, watching the comet through a set of mechanical eyes circling the base of his metal-coned head.

He could thank his four-legged mechanical brethren, among whom he was known as 21MM392, for that. They had found his rocket satellite in the shadow of a dead and almost airless earth forty million years after the professor's death, and they had recalled his brain to life, transposing it to the coned head of a metal-cubed body.

**"We cannot stand much more  
of this treatment," warned  
9V-474. . . .**

Raising one of his six metal tentacles, 6W-438 pointed to the great comet stretching off into space more than a half million miles. "We have been up near the head, and on all sides of it by virtue of our superior speed. Why not fly through it?"

744U-21, who with Professor Jameson, headed this later expedition, expressed negation. "We don't know enough about it. The long tail is of a gaseous nature. That we do know. What we do not exactly know is whether its effects on metal might, or might not, be harmful. 168P-75 reports an element in the comet which he believes would corrode the alloy of which we are made. Its effect on the spaceship would be much the same, even though the metallic composition varies somewhat from that of our own bodies."

"There is nothing especially worth learning by passing through the tail of the comet," the professor pointed out. "What interests us is watching the comet pass through the planetary system which lies in its path. As 65G-849 has told us, there will be no collision with any of the worlds. They are too few and strung out too far, yet their presence is bound to have an effect on the comet even though it may only result in a change of direction. The green sun itself being the largest body of the system, will probably exert the most change and might even bend the course of the comet a hundred and eighty degrees so that it would eventually return this way."

Already the metal Zoromes who had once been flesh and blood creatures back on their own planet Zor in a far distant corner of the universe, had taken as much scientific data as possible, short of entering the long gaseous tail. The nucleus was solid, like a small world careening through space. That it carried or sustained any life they seriously doubted, even though they had occasionally found strange life under even stranger conditions during their travels from system to system, world to world, on their eternal exploration for the unusual.

Patiently, they followed the comet in among the system of worlds, as the great green star grew brighter and larger, eventually becoming a dazzling emerald sun. It was the scientific instruments of 168P-75 which first recorded the erratic behavior of the sapphire comet before it caught the machine men. 168P-75 was plainly puzzled.

"The comet is deviating from its straight path," he announced.

744U-21 had a suggestion. "One of the planets, or even the sun, may be causing a gravitational attraction."

168P-75 expressed negation. "None of them is close enough."

"The deviation is caused either by an outside attraction or else by an inner force," 65G-849 offered. "Something on the comet may be causing the change of direction."

"There is no planet or cosmic body close enough to the comet's nucleus to bend its course," said 168P-75 simply. "In fact, the comet's position at the present is close to the center of a gulf lying between the orbits of the two outer worlds. Our observation has proved that the green sun has only three planets, and the comet will pass so far from any of them that their effects will be negligible. On the other hand, we expect the comet will come close enough to the green sun to be influenced by its attraction, and we shall see the comet change its course."

"Just as it is doing now," said Professor Jameson.

The speed of their spaceship became multiplied as they raced toward the head of the comet to discover, if they could, the reason for its strange antics.

"Slow down!" 168P-75 warned 20R-654, the pilot. "There's something out there—something big we can't see, except on the proximity detectors! Its bulk and gravitational attraction is like that of a world—but it can't be!"

They slowed down, eventually to a standstill. 168P-75 was all excitement. "We have never come across an invisible world



in our travels, have we?" he asked the professor and 744U-21. "Look at the instruments! It is the only answer!"

"How close are we to it?" 744U-21 asked. He stared ahead at the inky blackness of space studded with star points where such a world would be if 168P-75 was right. Yet the brilliant scattering of stars belied such a statement.

"I'm not too sure," was 168P-75's surprising answer. "I think I know, but this is entirely too new to me. If I am right, we are no more than a few thousand of 21M-M392's miles from it, and are well inside its strongest field of attraction. 20R-654 is already estimating the drift, or fall, of the spaceship."

Once 20R-654 had gained this knowledge, their fall was stopped and a counter-push of rocket exhaust maintained.

"How large is the planet?" the professor asked.

168P-75 admitted he could only guess. "I can come very close in telling you the approximate weight and amount of gravitational attraction," he said, "but I can't measure anything I can't see. If the planetary density should be light, then we might have a gigantic world in our path. On the other hand, if the density is great, the planet might be of lesser proportions."

"We shall soon find out what it is like to land upon an invisible world," Professor Jameson promised.

**T**HE spaceship of the Zoromes edged closer to the invisible world around which the sapphire comet, a brilliant spectacle in the empty void, had bent its path. Their approach was slow and cautious. Trusting not entirely to their proximity detectors on this strange world, the machine men constantly bombarded the invisible world's surface with flash locaters and saw the contact explosions burst into brilliance apparently in empty space.

At last, after a cautious approach, the spaceship bumped to a stop against some-

thing. Several machine men stepped outside and experienced an eerie sensation. To all outward manifestations, they were walking in space, yet they felt firm ground beneath their feet. They walked a short distance from the spaceship. Beneath them and far away lay the distant stars of the universe. It was like walking in a dream.

"Come back and go forth again better equipped!" 744U-21 warned them. "Suppose you should step off a steep cliff and smash your heads?"

The second venture saw a score of the Zoromes start out in pairs with detectors. Several wore mechanical wings. 8L-404 accompanied the professor. He waved his tentacles experimentally.

"An atmosphere!" he exclaimed.

"And vegetation," the professor added, as he felt a brushlike growth underfoot.

"All invisible! How can it be possible?"

"That we hope to learn before we quit this world."

"That comet tail out there in space is more real than this solid world we stand upon," said 8L-404. "At this rate, will the comet pass on out of the system?"

"It is making a forty-five degree turn which will take it away from the attraction of the green sun. It will pass out of the system in the direction it is now taking."

Communications from the other parties were strangely weak, and they soon lost contact with them while still a comparatively short distance away. They did learn that 777Y-46 and 47X-09 had blundered into a forest and were feeling their way out like blind creatures. 119M-5 and 92ZQ153 had felt something like an animal brushing against their metal legs.

Later, the professor and 8L-404 had a similar experience. Professor Jameson felt a rasping, grating vibration, like teeth, against his legs. He reached down with his tentacles and touched a small animal as it darted against him once more in a vicious attack. There were more than one of them, he found. A strong tug at one of his ten-

tacles pulled him off his feet, and he felt the strong little creatures swarm over him. 8L-404 was fighting them off. The professor could see him thrashing about, apparently in free space. It didn't seem real, yet the rasping, grating and tugging sensations were no dream.

The professor tried to rise to his feet but was bowled over again. Not until then did he use the heat ray he had built into a fore tentacle. A wave of this about him soon freed both him and 8L-404 of their assailants. The little creatures were gone as quickly as they had come. And now the professor realized he had heard the sounds of these little animals' teeth on his body through contact and vibration yet had heard no outward sounds. One could neither see nor hear anything on this invisible world.

Professor Jameson also realized something else. The invisible world also presented a telepathic barrier. Distances of communication between the machine men were surprisingly short. Always before, the Zoromes had been able to probe into the mental capacities, either high or low, of various forms of life they discovered. During the struggle, the professor had instinctively groped for some mental connection to gauge the intentions and propensities of his assailants, but the reception had been as empty as the space about them seemed to be, and mental intercourse with life on this world was as far away as the starry firmament. But it was 8L-404 who brought to the professor's attention other strange phenomena on this world of incredible unreality.

"21MM392—what is happening to you? You are becoming dim, or I cannot see as well as I did. Which?"

Professor Jameson regarded him intently. 8L-404 was not as clearly defined as he should have been—had been, in fact. He looked about him quickly from his circle of eyes. Was it due to a strange lighting effect from the sapphire comet overhead, or was

it from the green sun imperturbably shining straight through its invisible planet? His thoughts were picked up by 8L-404, and he caught the faint reply of the fading machine man.

"Neither. It is a magnetic influence from this world we are on. It makes everything invisible eventually. I can feel it."

The professor, too, now that his fellow Zorome had brought it to this attention, noticed the change. 8L-404 was growing dimmer.

"We had better return to the spaceship before we lose sight of each other," the professor advised. "No telling what may happen next."

They hurried back in the direction of the spaceship which apparently lay by itself out in space. They returned more swiftly than they had left, and as a result stumbled and fell often or else ran into vegetation in which they became entangled and from which they assisted each other. The professor saw that 8L-404's legs had almost disappeared from sight. Evidently, the spreading invisibility worked upward from contact with the planet. Of all his metal features, 8L-404's coned head stood out sharpest. After that, his body faded out until through a lower portion of it the professor was able dimly to view the far off stars.

They were halfway to the spaceship when they noticed something else. The lower section of the spaceship, where it touched the ground, was becoming invisible. If they stayed long enough, there would be nothing visible, nothing left in sight except the green sun, the sapphire comet and the distant stars.

They stumbled onward, staggering over unseen obstacles. The professor could hardly see 8L-404. The machine man's thought waves were very weak, too. Professor Jameson could no longer see his own tentacles. They had become invisible. Finally, he saw only the dim, wraithlike head of 8L-404. Soon, 8L-404 had disappeared

completely. They were almost to the ship.

"8L-404!" the professor radiated strongly. "Are you all right?"

There was no reply. Professor Jameson waved his invisible tentacles about him, yet seemingly touched nothing. Invisibility meant loss of mental communication. He stumbled along by himself and gained the spaceship.

As he entered, 27E-24 did not see him, and their collision was violent. He radiated a message, but 27E-24 did not hear him. Instead, the machine man quickly ran his tentacles over the professor's body and led him to an upper compartment. The professor felt himself lightly jostled, and he reached out and felt other machine men invisible like himself. Others had returned in a like condition.

He saw 27E-24 return several times, and each time he gathered that it heralded the return of another invisible machine man. The first intimation he had that there might be a way out of this condition of silence and nothingness was a shadowy suggestion of two metal heads near him. It struck him suddenly that these two Zoromes had returned to the spaceship earlier than himself and were coming out of their strange condition.

A faint current of mental radiation finally stirred through his brain. Professor Jameson knew that his own body had commenced losing its invisibility. The thoughts were not those of his slowly materializing metal brethren about him but came from others aboard the spaceship. From them, he learned that eight of the machine men had not returned. They would wait a little longer for them and then would rise off this world. The lower half of the spaceship had become invisible. As the returned Zoromes were slowly shedding this remarkable phenomenon they had acquired on contact with the planet, it was assumed that once out in space the lower half of the ship would gradually become visible once again. They would return and find the eight Zoromes,

somehow. Later, as his companions in the upper chamber became clearer of outline and commenced to solidify, the professor caught their mental radiations and knew they could understand him. With variations, their experiences had been much like his own. And 8L-404 was not among the eight who had not returned. He had also reached the spaceship.

20R-654 guided the ship off the invisible world. Meanwhile, the semivisible machine men once more became entirely opaque to the eye and were free to move about the ship without being run into by their companions.

"How are we going to find the others?" Professor Jameson asked 744U-21, waving a tentacle in the direction of the invisible world. "It would be much easier finding the eight missing ones in stygian darkness than where they are now. We cannot see them. We cannot catch their radiations or detect them by any other means, and they are not aware of us. If we could counteract the effect of the invisible world on us, they could at least see us, as well as see the ship, but they cannot see where they are going. They may be wrecked, even dead. We do not know what has happened to them."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Strange Allies

**A** COUNCIL was held with all those who had been on the invisible world and had returned. Several told of encountering the little animals and being attacked by them.

"Our comrades could not have suffered harm from those," 12W-62 scoffed. "I picked up one of them and threw it."

"Whatever it was that knocked me over seemed bigger than the creatures you describe," said 60M-64. "I was with 19K-59, and he is still missing."

It was 20R-654 who came forward with an important discovery regarding the in-



visible planet, and from it 65G-849 advanced a solution for finding their way on the strange world.

"When the lower section of the spaceship turned gradually invisible, I noticed that several areas near me remained small islands of visibility," the pilot told them. "I called 65G-849, who investigated."

"I discovered the cause of these islands of visibility to be due to a resistance on the part of a certain metal we used in repairing our ship several systems back," 65G-849 took up the story. "The invisibility is due to an odd combination of magnetism and certain elements on this planet. The metal we used in repair of the spaceship is not only proof against the invisibility of this world but it somehow upsets the balance of magnetic invisibility within a prescribed area around it."

"Prescribed by what?" 744U-21 asked. "By the amount of this kind of metal. A larger piece will spread a larger area of visibility than a small piece."

"And we can carry this with us like a torch?" queried 6W-438.

"Better than that," 65G-849 returned. "We can plate our bodies with it and travel in our own area of visibility. It will move with us."

"Do we have much of this metal?"

"Luckily, we do not have to dismantle or replace any mechanism of the spaceship in order to use this supply of metal we have," 47X-09 spoke up. "I was on most of the repair jobs we have done to the ship. There is a large section of this metal used in making a partition among the storage rooms in the upper hull."

Quickly, the Zoromes set to work removing the partition. They landed again on the invisible world and tried the theories of 65G-849 by taking chunks of the metal from the far off world they had visited and testing it.

"It works!" exclaimed 12W-62 who was first off the ship.

Fascinated, the others watched as the

machine man and an area of fifty feet radius in every direction became visible. And the Zorome carried it with him as he walked. They saw soil, sward, stones, rock, and then odd appearing vegetation into which the machine man picked his way, unlike their previous blind sorties. And then the others were out upon the strange planet, making their own discoveries. Peculiar relations governed the various areas of visibility. Inside his own area, a machine man could not easily detect or see into another area, unless both areas overlapped.

The other area, if not too far distant, appeared as a gray blot against the stars. Unless the visible areas overlapped, mental communication was as difficult as before. The explorations were brief and close to the ship. They saw none of the forms of life they had encountered on their first venture. Eight Zoromes had already disappeared, and they were taking no chances unprepared.

Once more, the bottom of the spaceship faded out and became invisible. 20R-654 did not trust the phenomena too far and took the ship aloft while the sixteen machine men selected to search for their lost companions received their plating which was applied to their metal cubed bodies. Importance of the passing comet became relegated to the background as the machine men set out to look for their lost companions on the strange world. 168P-75 did remark that the wide tail of the comet might brush the planet in passing, as the cosmic traveler appeared to be sideslipping slightly in the direction of the invisible world.

Once fully plated, the sixteen Zoromes became more or less walking islands of visibility on an invisible world, each island fully a hundred feet or more across. They found that by keeping a hundred feet apart, they were able to just overlap their areas and reveal a large visible field. Those in the spaceship riding overhead scanned the field of visibility below. The machine men explored in this manner for a long time be-

fore they saw the little animals which had first attacked them.

A pack of these fierce little inhabitants rushed into the area of visibility and launched themselves fearlessly at the metal legs. Several of the Zoromes knocked them over with charges from their force guns. So quick were their movements that the machine men were at first unable to see exactly what they were, but when they held doggedly to the machine men, the latter were able to accurately appraise them.

The little creatures were no more than two feet long, were built low to the ground and traveled swiftly on six short pairs of legs. Instead of jaws, they were equipped with scissor bills. Later, the Zoromes found that the mouths of the little animals were located on the under side of the head beneath the scissor bill. Again and again the Scissor-Bills attacked the Zoromes, getting new holds, exerting leverage with no results other than damaging or dulling their bills. Finally, they desisted in confusion and bewilderment. The machine men gathered the last impression a bit hazily from the limited mentality of the little animals. Professor Jameson found it difficult to impress their weak, one-track mentalities with the fact that they could not hurt the machine men but would only damage their bills by trying. Meanwhile, the Zoromes examined the dead Scissor-Bills killed by the force guns. They made an important discovery.

"These creatures have no eyes!"

"How did they see to attack us?"

Several of the Zoromes guessed the answer, which later proved itself. They had found this condition several times previously in their travels.

"It is a kind of radar," said 6W-438. "Almost as good as eyes. Better than eyes in the dark. The world as they feel it is more real to them than what they would see with optical senses. Here on this planet, they would see nothing but the sun and the stars."

"And the comet," added 12W-62.

THE machine men paired off in eight different directions like the spokes of a wheel. Reaching an approximate perimeter of thirty miles, according to the professor's reckoning, they were to return to the hub of their starting point after following a right angle turn bringing them back over new ground. On this last landing of the spaceship, they confirmed what they had suspected the time before that. The position of the sun was constant. The planet did not rotate.

Professor Jameson found himself with 948D-21. Several of the Scissor-Bills followed them. No longer were they fierce and aggressive but tagged along like tame pets, their minds reflecting an odd mixture of curiosity, awe and a strange sense of fellowship. More of the creatures joined the group, while others dropped out through indifference or interest in other pursuits such as improvement of their diet over the short, grassy plants they were in the habit of eating. They industriously clipped this off with their scissorlike bills before eating it. But no matter how many, or how recent, the arrivals were, the docile attitude was maintained towards the machine men.

This surprised the two Zoromes who expected more attacks. If understanding between the Zoromes and the Scissor-Bills was difficult, it was somehow very highly perfected among the little creatures themselves. At times, there were nearly a score of the animals accompanying the machine men, wandering in and out of the combined area of visibility. With the use of directional instruments, the two Zoromes held to a straight course, resisting the temptation of more open country to either side, a factor which often contributed to the wandering vagaries of the Scissor-Bills. They found rough going the farther they went, the terrain growing rocky. Yet no sign did they find of the missing machine men.

During a pause, Professor Jameson contemplated the sapphire comet spread across the sky. They would never have found the

invisible world had it not been for that. They would never have lost eight machine men. Neither the professor nor 948D-21 paid particular attention to a sudden agitation among the Scissor-Bills, although the professor had plenty of time to reflect on it afterward.

He caught sight of a series of blurred figures entering the area of visibility and bearing down on them like cannon balls. Then he was violently bowled over and became the center of a twisting hurricane of bodies. Several times, his surprised senses were aware of the metal body of 948D-21 smashing against his own. The Scissor-Bills were mixed up in the mêlée. A few times he was aware of them dashing about in a blur of speed which seemed to characterize life on the invisible world. Whatever was attacking them was large, tremendously strong and quick. He felt a tentacle yanked from his body, then another. Suspecting that 948D-21 had lost his force gun in the attack, Professor Jameson cut loose with his built-in heat ray. He was mentally conscious of great anguish about him, and felt all his remaining tentacles including the one with the heat ray torn from his metal cube.

Then suddenly, he was alone—except for a few dead Scissor-Bills. He realized, somehow, that the valiant little creatures had fought for him and for 948D-21. Whatever had attacked them had taken 948D-21 with them. He saw parts of his own tentacles as well as those of the other machine man lying on the ground. The professor staggered to his feet. He could walk, but he was otherwise helpless. He had no upper appendages. He searched the vicinity in ever increasing spirals, but he found no trace of 948D-21 or the things which had attacked.

He was engaged in this futile search when a group of the Scissor-Bills returned. Their sharp bills were stained with a viscous fluid which Professor Jameson guessed was blood from the huge creatures they had

fought. The little animals showed great agitation as part of their dull hides glittered oddly from excitement. Professor Jameson probed the limited intelligence of the Scissor-Bills for a picture or idea of what the huge assassins looked like, but he was baffled. The best he could gather was what had lain in the minds of the Scissor-Bills from birth and was constantly reiterated.

The big ones were their hereditary enemies. Yet they did not seem to fear them, even though several had died in the recent combat. None of the big things had been killed. At least, the professor had found none. The attack had been swift, and the area of visibility had been so limited that the professor had neither seen them come nor go.

The Scissor-Bills continued to act strangely. They gathered about him in a circle, raising their sightless heads intently. He gathered from them the vague idea that they wanted him to do something. They had something definite in mind. When they lined up and started to walk slowly out of the area of visibility, he knew they wanted him to follow them. It was odd, watching them walk off the edge of visibility into nothingness, with only the glittering heavens for background. He followed, keeping them in sight. The path led upward until finally they seemed to pass over a divide, and the direction led steadily downward.

They passed weird rock formations which the professor took to be of volcanic origin. The leading Scissor-Bills stopped suddenly, grouped around an object on the ground. The machine man found what they were examining. It was a metal tentacle. He identified it as one belonging to 948D-21. The attacking monsters had come this way, and 948D-21, or what was left of him, had been a prisoner. The Scissor-Bills knew that much, and it was why they were bringing the professor.

From the way they behaved, Professor Jameson knew that his little allies were a



great many times swifter than he was and were patiently holding themselves down to his gait. He saw several of them disappear from time to time and afterward return. He knew they had gone swiftly forward to the end of the journey and returned. The machine man followed on behind the little creatures. Always, a few of them were running on ahead and returning. He gathered from their manner that journey's end was not too far now.

The continual downward trend curved quickly upward again, very steeply. It was not long before the machine man recognized the incline as a part of a volcanic cone, either extinct or dormant. Looking beyond the area of visibility, it seemed to Professor Jameson that they were climbing up a stairway to the stars, that eventually he would thrust his coned head into the great fanned tail of the sapphire comet glowing above them.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Cairn of Stones

**H**IS thoughts returned to the current situation. They were climbing to danger, danger beyond the limited field of his vision, danger which might strike swiftly any time. Alone and without tentacles, with no defense at all, he was committed by indiscretion to follow these strange creatures to what might possibly be his last adventure. He had already seen what the monsters they were trailing were capable of doing.

He felt misgivings. Would either 744U-21 or 6W-438 have countenanced or counseled such an unwise move under the difficulties and disadvantages imposed upon him? There was still time to turn back. These stupid Scissor-Bills were capable of no plan of action. They would fight, it was true, slashing and jabbing at the gargantuan abductors of 948D-21 with their formidable bills, and some of them would die

in spite of their probable superiority in fleetness and dexterity, but to what end?

Yet, despite his own fears and doubts, Professor Jameson doggedly kept on. They climbed almost straight up several times. Without tentacles, the machine man experienced difficulty in holding onto the steep escarpment and had several close calls. Beyond the circle of his surrounding visibility, he had no idea of what lay ahead. He could gain nothing comprehensible from the brains of the Scissor-Bills.

With these gloomy thoughts in mind, the machine man suddenly found them all climbing over a sharp crest and down a steep and well worn trail. They came upon another tentacle. It was neither 948D-21's appendage nor his own. One or more of the eight missing Zoromes had come, or had been brought, this way. The further discovery of a badly damaged leg twisted from a machine man not only clinched the belief but gave the professor disquieting reflections on what might have happened to the heads of those who had come this way.

Meanwhile, the Scissor-Bills led him into a cave. They were there a long time, it seemed to the professor. Occasionally, one of the little creatures left the cave and returned again. There was an object in their waiting. The machine man gathered vaguely that it had to do with the habits of these monsters they had been trailing. When the vigil finally ended, the Scissor-Bills filed out of the cave. Impatient for action, Professor Jameson followed.

They passed more cave mouths, descending what the machine man recognized as the interior of the extinct volcanic cone. Rock formations had finally convinced him of the volcanic cone's extinct character. He recollected in the far past of his earthly life the story of the blind men examining the elephant. He was much like them in these present circumstances, seeing and examining but a small area at once. Cave mouths yawned on all sides. The professor wondered if the large monsters which had at-

tacked them lived here. If so, where were they? And why was it safe for the Scissor-Bills to lead him deeply into their lair? The professor suspected that he was in a dangerous spot.

While he mulled on these possibilities and probabilities, the Scissor-Bills led him into the largest cave mouth he had yet seen. It grew dark inside, and he put on his body lights. As they advanced further into the cavern, the professor saw that it divided into two branches. The one which the Scissor-Bills took gradually narrowed. They led him to where his area of visibility revealed a towering pile of gigantic boulders reaching almost to the high ceiling. Professor Jameson realized that on his planet Earth the smallest of the great stones would have weighed several tons. While he contemplated this thought, he realized with a sudden start of surprise that his area of visibility had suddenly grown larger. It was more the way it had been when 948D-21 had combined his field of visibility with the professor's. Association of thought led to inspiration and mental exclamation.

"948D-21!"

The answer came to him out of the great cairn of stones. "21MM392—you have come!"

"But alone," the professor told him. "The little Scissor-Bills led me here. I cannot do much, now that I have come. All my tentacles were torn from me."

"I know," radiated 948D-21. "Even as we. You cannot get us out of here alone."

"Us!"

Not until then had the professor realized the rest of the missing Zoromes were imprisoned in the pile of stones. They had been listening. Now, they greeted him. The story had been the same in every case. Attacked with incredible speed and their metal limbs torn or twisted from them.

"After we were brought here, they caught 53S-7 trying to crawl away on damaged legs," 19K-59 told the professor. "They killed him by dropping a huge rock

on his head. Since then, we have been pinned down beneath the pile of stones you are looking at."

"What do these monsters look like?" Professor Jameson asked.

At last, he received clearly a mental image of what the eight captives called the Ovoids. Their strong, burly bodies were vertically oval in shape. Six jointed legs upheld the oval body while as many jointed arms terminated in snaky tendrils capable of wrapping themselves around objects with a strong death grip. Like the Scissor-Bills, they had no eyes, only that peculiar radar of their own for distinguishing the proximity, shape and nature of things around them. They were tremendously strong, but as was the usual case, possessed of a stupid intelligence. They were mentally superior to the Scissor-Bills, however, and of a sly and brutally cunning nature.

"I must get back to the ship and tell them where you are," the professor told his companions. "How the Scissor-Bills ever brought me here without the Ovoids discovering it, only the Scissor-Bills know."

"The Ovoids have a sleeping period," 240Z-42 informed him. "It must be one of them now, for we have not seen them for some time."

Professor Jameson also learned how his buried comrades had succumbed to the Ovoids in a brief, whirlwind attack. Then his attention was suddenly drawn to several of the Scissor-Bills running about him in an excited frenzy. He half guessed, half divined from their weak mentality that the Ovoids were returning to the cavern. The professor quickly radiated the information to the imprisoned Zoromes. There was only one direction he could take, and that might end in a blind tunnel.

He started running, the thoughts of his metal comrades urging him to flee, to escape the place and reach the spaceship. A Scissor-Bill scurrying on ahead of him encouraged the professor. He suspected that

the small guide had a motive in his simple little mind. Even a scared rabbit, the professor remembered, always ran for the best cover. His hopes were blasted as he saw how quickly the cavern ended in a blank wall.

"I am trapped!" he called back to his companions. Their fields of visibility still overlapped.

He saw the Scissor-Bill scurry around rapidly, then disappear. For a moment, he was unable to understand where the quick little animal had gone. Then he saw it sticking its head and long bill from an aperture near the floor. It was large enough for him to push himself into lying down, and he fell flat on his cubed body, pushing vigorously with his metal feet. He sorely missed his strong, metal tentacles, but by dint of frantic threshing of his metal feet against the cavern floor, he managed to get his square, awkward body through the opening and out of reach of the Ovoids.

"The Ovoids are here!" 119M-5 radiated. "The Scissor-Bills have been harassing and holding them up! We can read it from the mental agitation of the Ovoids!"

**P**ROFESSOR JAMESON discovered that he had crawled into an old blowhole of the volcano. He turned back to the opening so that he might watch the Ovoids, holding himself at an angle permitting one of his body lights to illuminate the great cairn of boulders beneath which the eight machine men lay partly dismantled and helpless. He witnessed a weird sight as more than a dozen darting and retreating Scissor-Bills slowed the advance of the Ovoids. The mighty creatures, although amazingly quick themselves, were too slow to seize or kick their smaller tormenters who raised havoc with their legs and sometimes the lower parts of their bodies with their sharp bills, drawing blood each time.

The professor, fascinated by the strange combat, saw one of the Ovoids finally catch a Scissor-Bill with one of his supple tendrils

and quickly squeeze the life from it. But not until the savage little creature had half severed the offending appendage with lightning snaps of his bill. The main offense of the Ovoids was to kick lustily at the little pests and keep advancing. Rarely did one of their several legs connect, but it temporarily put the Scissor-Bills in retreat. Several Ovoids picked up rocks and hurled them, but the Scissor-Bills were too quick.

Professor Jameson caught a vague impression from the minds of the great brutes of a repugnance of the Scissor-Bills. The Ovoids hated them for some other reason besides the heckling annoyance of being subjected to minor wounds and discomforts. It was not exactly fear, yet the Ovoids would just as well have not encountered the little creatures had it been up to them. The machine man attributed it temporarily to superstition, yet the mental reaction was not exactly like that.

Their mission accomplished, the little creatures suddenly scattered in various directions, and the Ovoids made no effort to pursue them. Instead, the huge monsters advanced straight for the opening into which the professor had taken protection. There was no concealing one's self from them. The machine man's metal body stood out in their consciousness like a bright light. He drew back from the opening and wriggled backward along the blowhole. A long arm reached in gropingly, the tendrils stretching eagerly for contact with him. The professor missed his heat ray in a fore tentacle. Vainly, several of the creatures took turns trying to reach him. Reluctantly, they gave it up.

"They have gone," the professor told his comrades of the stone pile.

"But you cannot leave the cave," 41C-98 warned him. "Rest certain that it is being watched. They would pounce on you immediately."

"744U-21 and the others aboard the spaceship should eventually find a way of getting us out of here," Professor Jameson



assured them. "Constant search should finally locate our areas of visibility."

"How far away can they see them?" 19K-59 argued. "We are far below the normal level of the invisible world. Such tiny, blurred spots, especially down here, will take a long time for them to find. Meanwhile, what about these Ovoids? 53S-7 is dead, and more of us are likely to be so if we do not get away. Even now, we can gather that the Ovoids are only holding us prisoners temporarily. They have been stupidly trying to figure us out and what to do with us.

"They realize in a vague way that we are alive—at least, some of them are aware of it, and they are of a mind to do away with us. Others among them want to keep us. With primitive types like the Ovoids, the reaction is eventually bound to swing to destruction. What they cannot understand, they will destroy. You are the only one not held prisoner, and you have all your legs in good condition. We must figure a way of escape for you."

"First, I must find out where this blowhole goes to," the professor told them, pushing his way farther back into the tunnel after laboriously swinging himself around in the comparatively narrow space.

Much to his satisfaction, he discovered that the blowhole grew larger. He was able first to climb to his knees and move along haltingly; then finally stand. His progress became more rapid as he passed out of the visibility overlap from the metal bodies of his comrades. The arrival of several Scissor-Bills startled him, but he was glad of their return.

The blowhole became larger as he edged farther along it. About the time he commenced growing hopeful of finding an escape in this direction, the passage came to an abrupt end. If there had been a continuous vent to the surface, it was now no more. At the base of the tunnel's end lay a dark, liquid pool. The machine men had found no bodies of water in their limited

explorations, yet knew that there must be water on the planet, or a similar medium, to make vegetation grow. Yet this liquid was not what the professor expected to find. It was fairly dense and probably heavier than water, he found by dipping a foot into it.

Professor Jameson paused and looked beyond his area of visibility and into space at the far off stars. At times, it seemed unreal, impossible, this imprisonment and the threat of the Ovoids. It was like a bad dream: Without his bounded limits of visibility, he would have felt helpless indeed, little more than a blind, helpless machine man feeling his way. It would have been even worse than being in the dark. He looked down at the pool again, coming to startled attention at what he saw—or, rather, what he failed to see.

The metal foot he had thrust experimentally into the pool, was gone. The liquid had dissolved it. Involuntarily, he put the weight of his cubed body on that leg. It held him. The instinctive impulse to feel of his foot with his tentacles was a futile gesture. He had no tentacles. He rubbed another foot against it, or where it should have been. Metal scraped against metal. It was there, but he could not see it, not even with the help of the area of visibility about him on this invisible world.

He thrust another leg into the pool, this one deeper than the first. He left it there momentarily, then withdrew it. That, too, had become invisible. He puzzled, pondered the situation. There was only one solution, it would seem. This pool of liquid represented an isolated concentration of the magnetic quality which made almost everything coming in contact with this strange planet invisible. He reflected ruefully that were it not for the fact that the Ovoids possessed other means than visual of detecting him, he might walk straight past them, or among them, to escape.

He carried his experiments still further. He walked slowly into the pool with the in-

tention of subjecting his cubed body to the invisible effects of the strange element. What happened was over so quickly the machine man could only consider the cause of it afterward. The sloping bottom of the pool was slippery, for one thing. There were loose rocks on the bottom, and somehow he lost his balance. The result was complete submergence and thrashing around as the professor scrambled out as quickly as he could climb the slippery bottom.

He stood dazed and apprehensive as the liquid trickled down and off him. He had not meant to venture in over his head. For one thing, he feared for his mechanical vision. But he could see, and he felt relieved. There had been no chemical struggle. He looked down. He was completely invisible. The metal from another world which he carried on his body still spread its little island of visibility, but even its outer surface reflected nothingness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Fight in the Cavern

HE WALKED away from the pool toward the narrow end of the blow-hole he was in. He wanted to overlap his visibility with that of his fellow captives and tell them of the new phenomenon. Several of the little Scissor-Bills came scuttling up the tunnel full of excitement. They did not stop when they reached him. One hurried on past, while two more bumped violently against his legs. The others stopped abruptly behind these two. Quickly, the thought came to the professor that they had not "seen him," had not felt him with their radar. Not only did the confused state of mind of the two which had run into him confirm this, but they were also groping at the machine man's feet and metal legs. With their strange sense of communication, the Scissor-Bills spread the idea to the rest of the small creatures who accepted it—and remembered it.

This discovery, however, thrilled Professor Jameson with its possibilities. If the Scissor-Bills could no longer detect him, then neither could the Ovoids. Boldly, he flung himself down into the narrow passage along which he pushed himself to the opening into the cavern. He overlapped the visibility of his captive companions, anxious to announce his discovery and that he was escaping.

He looked for the pile of stones, but instead a different scene replaced the old as the two areas of visibility overlapped. The pile of boulders lay scattered about the cavern.

The dismembered Zoromes now also lay scattered about, while the Ovoids moved among them. Unafraid, the professor pushed through the opening and into the cavern.

Unseen by the Zoromes, and negative to the Ovoids' powers of detection, the machine man stood among them. A few of the Scissor-Bills roamed about the cavern, but aside from an occasional wary eye cast their way by the Ovoids, the latter did not bother with them.

"I am here in the cavern, now," he told his surprised comrades. "You cannot see me, and these brutes can no longer tell that I am here. How, I can explain to you later. Right now, I want to know what they are doing before I escape and get contact with 744U-21 on the spaceship."

"They came a little while ago and pulled the rocks from us," 948D-21 explained. "It is in their dull minds to find out more about us by taking us apart."

948D-21 was only a head. Several of the Zoromes were head and bodies with a few damaged appendages still dangling. All of them were physically helpless. One of the great brutes picked up what was left of 4F-686 by a leg and swung him forcibly against a big boulder, one of those in the original cairn under which the trapped Zoromes had lain. A corner of his cubed body was flattened by the blow. Had the

rusty swing fallen short of its mark, it would have been the machine man's head instead of his body.

"We cannot stand much of this treatment," warned 9V-474, "else we shall eventually go the way of 4F-67."

The Ovoid again lifted the remains of 4F-686, to beat it against the rock, when something blunt struck him from behind and caused him to drop the machine man. The Ovoid turned in bewilderment as an obtuse cut on his back bearing the indentation of a cube started bleeding. He picked up a piece of rock and hurled it at a nearby Scissor-Bill which managed to be several jumps ahead of where it struck.

Professor Jameson next tripped another of the great brutes attempting to batter one of the heads with a rough pointed stone he held. He had already smashed the apex eye of the coned head. The great creature grumbled complainingly to a nearby fellow Ovoid on his awkwardness.

The professor watched alertly as the Ovoids industriously went to work dismantling what was left of the machine men, pulling off the remaining legs and tentacles with their prodigious strength, and trying vainly to separate the heads from the bodies. It was possible damage to the heads the professor guarded against. He remembered quickly that the machine men had pronounced the Ovoids somewhat more receptive to their mental radiations. He instilled the idea into the head of a nearby Ovoid to give a certain twist to the coned head. The brute did so, unaware that it was other than his own inspiration, and the head of 5ZQ35 came off easily. The brute exhibited his prowess to another straining fellow Ovoid, and soon all eight of the heads were removed.

"It is well that they do not batter our heads to get them off," said 240Z-42, "but hurry for help, 21MM392, or you may be too late to save any of us. Without tentacles, or a weapon of any kind, you cannot continually protect us."

"I have a better plan," the professor told the eight Zoromes.

He walked over to the head of 240Z-42. He wished he had at least one tentacle. That would have helped. With one metal foot which the professor could not see, he slid the head upon another invisible foot so that it balanced on its flat underside. Then he took a slow, cautious step in the direction of the blowhole. He saw the head totter, but he kept its balance.

In slow, easy stages, he carried it in this manner over to the hole in the wall, where he lifted it inside and let it fall with a dull clatter. The Ovoids were making too much noise with the remains of the mechanical bodies to hear it. The professor had moved slowly to avoid catching the attention of the monsters, also to avoid dropping the coned head and letting it roll about in a small circle.

He returned and took stock of the situation. The Ovoids were busy tinkering with different parts of the machine men. None of the remaining six heads were in current danger. The professor next selected the coned head of 19K-59. It lay beside one of the Ovoids. The huge beast was busy trying in vain to tear the cube open where the head had fastened on to it. Carefully, standing so close to the great brute that it might have reached out and seized him, the invisible machine man slid the head of 19K-59 upon one of his feet. Then he took a step with it. The beast was too engrossed and fascinated with the mysteries of the metal cube which defied him, to notice.

"So far, so good," 19K-59 congratulated him.

Professor Jameson took another step, then still another. He had just about considered himself safe when he detected a flash of movement behind him. The warning from the head of 19K-59 came too late. The Ovoid moved quickly. He had missed the head lying beside him, and turning around had caught sight of it moving off, apparently all by its own volition.



But the huge brute had seen nothing between himself and the moving head and had struck the invisible machine man chasing after it. In plunging to the floor, the professor's foot flew upward and sent the head of 19K-59 sailing across the cavern. Eager to escape discovery, the professor rolled and quickly pushed himself out of the path of the staggering and bewildered Ovoid. He looked for 19K-59 but could not see his head.

"I am in the blowhole where you would have carried me," 19K-59 replied, to his mental confusion.

**A**S THE professor drew back against the wall out of reach of the stumbling Ovoid, his memory flashed back to his earthly life when as a young man he had played football. It had been a lucky kick for which he could partly thank the Ovoid. The gigantic brute was trying to puzzle out what had happened, but mostly he was hunting for the head he had started out to pursue.

The professor still had six more heads to wrest from the Ovoids. He did not want the Ovoids to suspect where they had been taken. He returned to the little tunnel and slid inside it. The heads of 240Z-42 and 19K-59 were just inside, and he pushed them along ahead of him to the pool of liquid. Here he kicked them into the pool; then waded in and kicked them out again.

"We follow you," 19K-59 told him, "but how are you going to get us out of here? You cannot carry us on your feet, certainly."

"I still have six of you to take from the Ovoids out there," Professor Jameson told them. "If I could get the rest in here and make them all invisible, at least you would be safe while I went for help."

"That will be difficult," ruminated 240Z-42, "now that they are suspicious."

"I know it, but if I can get the Scissor-Bills here in enough force and stir them up to a fight, I think I can manage it."

Professor Jameson sent a call to his small but savage allies who had led him there. It was hard to implant an idea upon their brains. The little creatures had their own ideas. But once they seized upon an idea, they never forgot it, and it was amazing how common knowledge it became among them both near and far. Several of them came and were not surprised when the invisible machine man touched them and made his presence known and also steered them against the heads of 240Z-42 and 19K-59 to familiarize them with their reduced conditions.

For a few moments, the Scissor-Bills exhibited interest and curiosity, then took the situation for granted. The professor acquainted the five Zoromes now being examined by the Ovoids with his strategy, and they all joined with the three in the blowhole with a concentration of unified ideas upon the stunted alien intelligence of the Scissor-Bills.

"If they were only as receptive as the minds of the Ovoids, it would be easier," 5ZQ35 remarked. "Their brains are as different from the Ovoids' as ours are, yet they know less than the Ovoids."

At first, the little creatures were unaware that anything was required of them. They had felt the mental agitation of the machine men and had come. They still felt it and wondered vaguely. That was all. Still more of them came, however. Their agitation increased as the eight Zoromes maintained a unified mental assault upon their limited understanding. More than a score of the Scissor-Bills milled about the interior of the cavern, entering, leaving, then re-entering the blowhole, curious over the machine men they had not known were there until they touched them. The Ovoids regarded their passing with distrust, dislike and a frank avoidance of them when they came too close. The desire of the machine men finally broke the barrier of weak intelligence when a later arrival entered the blowhole.

"Attack the Ovoids while we save the six machine men they still hold!"

This fact, sinking into the little brain of one Scissor-Bill, had its telegraphic effect on the others. The Ovoids found themselves suddenly attacked by the slashing, darting little creatures they hated. Heads, cubes and appendages of the machine men were momentarily forgotten as the Ovoids kicked vainly and threw rocks at the malign tormenters. Neither side inflicted casualties other than the wounds and discomfort suffered by the Ovoids. Meanwhile, Professor Jameson was busy kicking the six heads in the direction of the blowhole. He was not so lucky nor accurate as in the case of 19K-59, and the heads rattled off the wall near the blowhole. As the conflict went on behind him, Professor Jameson kicked and pushed his comrades' heads into the refuge.

He was busy disposing of the last one when something seized him from behind in a tight grip. It was one of the Ovoids holding him with one of its snakelike tendrils. The professor kicked at the great beast which evidently had stumbled against him blindly, recognizing him for what he was by his metal contours. In doing so, the monster momentarily laid himself open to attack by the Scissor-Bills. Several made a dash for him at once, and Professor Jameson felt him shudder violently in revulsion as well as jerking because of the pain. There was no mistaking the great creature's reactions. For some reason, it loathed the little animals it was forced to fight.

The machine man took advantage of the Ovoid's distraction to suddenly wrench himself free. Kicking lustily at his tormenters, the monster darted quickly at the professor, who ducked sideways to escape from him. The Ovoid turned with him unerringly, and the professor had cause to doubt his invisibility. He fell quickly and let the beast fall full length over him. The professor made a scramble for the nearby blowhole and never did realize if the Ovoid

made for him or not. He felt sudden alarm at not finding the six heads he had pushed or kicked into the opening, but the mental voices up ahead reassured him.

"We are all here, 21MM392."

"How did you manage to get so far?"

"The Scissor-Bills carried us."

"It was their own idea."

"I had an encounter with one of the Ovoids," the professor told them as he rose to his feet and walked upright among the scattering of heads. "I could swear that he knew I was there."

"Little wonder," 41C-98 told him. "Your superinvisibility is wearing thin."

"You are becoming visible," said 5ZQ35, "even though little more than a shadow."

"The Ovoids are aware that we are in here," said 119M-5. "I can feel it, and they are persistent and strong enough to eventually break down the rock opening and reach us if they wanted us badly enough."

"This invisibility of the pool is only a temporary affair, if I am visible again," the professor told them.

He entered the pool again and came out.

"Now we cannot see you," he was told in mental chorus.

"We must all leave here," the professor advised them, "while this condition lasts."

"How will you transport eight heads?" 9V-474 asked him. "It would be difficult enough with a full set of tentacles. You have none."

"You have forgotten the little Scissor-Bills," the professor reminded them. "Several of them carried you away from the danger point of the blowhole where the Ovoids might have reached in and seized you had they realized you were there. We shall all have a dip in the pool before we leave here."

"But we six who were carried already were visible to the Scissor-Bills," 41C-98 pointed out. "How can they see to carry us?"

"They are already acquainted with the

condition of 19K-59 and 240Z-42, not to mention myself," Professor Jameson pointed out. "And what one of them knows, they all seem to know. Why, I cannot say, but it has been proven so."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Death of a Zorome

THE strife between the Scissor-Bills and their huge opponents had quieted down now that the machine men were no longer agitating the smaller species, and because the Scissor-Bills had no definite objective in mind. Like many of these skirmishes the Scissor-Bills had with the great brutes, the fighting became desultory and tapered off into more or less of a truce. Drawn by the attraction of the eight Zoromes, most of the Scissor-Bills entered the blowhole.

Professor Jameson lost no time indoctrinating the Scissor-Bills with the idea that they were to carry the eight heads back the way they had come in guiding the professor into the caves of the inner crater. The Scissor-Bills demonstrated their understanding by picking up the Zoromes. They would have started out this way, but the professor stopped them until all the heads had been submerged in the pool.

The heads of 19K-59 and 240Z-42 were given fresh baths in the potent fluid, and last of all the professor immersed himself. Only then did they start out. The Ovoids did not molest the Scissor-Bills other than to watch them narrowly in case they attacked, seeming content to be quit of the pests. They remained unaware that the heads of the strange machines they were now hunting were being carried on the backs of the Scissor-Bills. If they noticed one set of appendages of the little creatures turned upward as if holding something, they were too stupid to give it any significance.

Out of the great cavern and into the

open, the Scissor-Bills carried the eight heads. There were several times that number of Scissor-Bills. Professor Jameson brought up the rear until they were quit of the cavern. There were several delays on the way up to the crater's lip when the Scissor-Bills occasionally lost a grip on their odd burdens and a machine man's head rolled away from them.

They were difficult to find again in their super-invisible state, especially on one occasion when the head of 9V-474 rolled a long way down the slope, taking a sidewise bounce. Had it not been for the professor on his metal legs, patiently tracing 9V-474's mental direction after finally catching him in his area of visibility, he would never have been found until his invisibility had worn off, and by that time the Ovoids would have found him. The eight heads had no areas of visibility. These had been left behind with the plating on their abandoned cubed bodies in the cavern. Several of the Ovoids passed the file of Scissor-Bills at a distance and looked at them curiously, especially as they were proceeding so *slowly*—in contrast to their usual darting speed.

Passing the lip of the crater, the trend from then on was downward, and they had a long way to go. Unburdened Scissor-Bills went ahead, the professor following as swiftly as he dared in view of the precipitous character of the trail they followed and the fact that he was able to see only fifty feet ahead of him. Beyond his area of visibility, a strange mist lay between him and the stars. This puzzled the machine man momentarily.

"Something about that liquid we immersed ourselves in," 5ZQ35 suggested. "It has made a film against our mechanical eyes."

"You are wrong," 41C-98 corrected him. "You have forgotten the comet. This is the wide tail brushing the planet in its passing."

Far away, they could see the bright sapphire head of the cosmic traveler. The



comet was now almost past the invisible world.

What Professor Jameson feared, and the reason for his haste, eventually materialized. They were no more than halfway down the side of the big crater when he commenced noticing what he had feared to see. Faint outlines of the coned heads were visible above the Scissor-Bills carrying them. As long as they met none of the Ovoids, all would be well. The professor repented his haste in leaving the blowhole before ascertaining the sleeping period of the Ovoids as the Scissor-Bills had instinctively done before bringing him up the crater, but he had no way of finding out, and their position in the cavern had become dangerous.

Mental agitation among the Scissor-Bills, for which the professor had attuned himself, apprised him that Ovoids were not far off. They were coming from behind. The professor set a faster pace, noticing that his legs and body were becoming semi-visible. Only from memory did he know that they still had a long way to go. He could grasp no definite scale of distances from the brains of the Scissor-Bills. The Ovoids were swiftly overtaking them. Professor Jameson sensed tragedy.

Looking backward through his rear semicircle of eyes, he was aware of a surprising new phenomenon. He could see the approaching Ovoids beyond his area of visibility. They seemed like figments of a disordered imagination seen in a fog. Then he realized the answer. The tail of the comet. Its density was increasing as the planet's gravity attracted the gases. He also noticed a faint outline of the mountainside they were descending, and because of this he was able to increase his speed.

But he realized they would soon be overtaken. The Ovoids would fight savagely to reclaim their metal prizes, their dislike of the Scissor-Bills notwithstanding. The Scissor-Bills, burdened as they were, could not outrun the great brutes.

It was instinct and a knowledge of their own world and of their huge, hereditary enemies which prompted the Scissor-Bills to act upon their own initiative. Several had gone on ahead, and now the others carrying their heads swerved suddenly over a precariously steep trail of flat rock to which their feet clung but which gave no purchase to the metal feet of the machine man.

He saw his little allies disappear hurriedly beyond his area of visibility as his feet grated and slid down the steep flat surface. He found himself in the air, suspended sickeningly for a moment, yet he knew he was falling. It seemed a small eternity, yet it could not have been very long, for he crashed to a sudden stop on a ledge, his legs bent beneath him in a tangle of wreckage. Almost immediately, he saw the Scissor-Bills coming down a zig-zag trail and onto the precipice where he lay. He had reached this haven ahead of them through a straight drop. He wondered vaguely if the little creatures had anticipated this. More likely, they had forgotten, or had not realized, that he could not maintain a foothold. Yet, they had come this way because they knew their enemies could not follow. It was the instinct of even the lowest forms of life on any world.

Professor Jameson was now as helpless as any of his eight comrades. The little creatures set down their metal burdens and rested. They seemed tired and breathed heavily.

"The gases are becoming thicker," 41C-98 remarked. "I cannot see things as plainly as I did."

"It cannot be getting chunky," 19K-59 added, "yet I swear I can see large pieces, not falling but floating in the air."

"Spots in front of our eyes," 60M-64 corrected him. "It is the same with me."

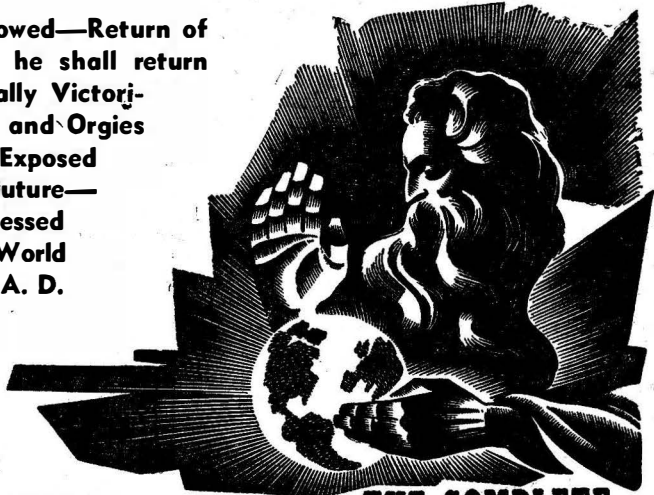
The remaining Zoromes complained of this, while their companions, who had no-

*(Continued on page 108)*

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(Continued from page 106)

ticed it first, told of the spots becoming larger.

"Remember what 168P-75 told us about not venturing through the tail of the comet?" Professor Jameson recalled. "He said it would damage metal."

"That is what it is doing now!" 240Z-42 exclaimed. "It is corroding our mechanical eyes, too! Soon we shall not be able to see!"

**E**ACH ONE knew what he meant. The gases of the sapphire comet might corrode their heads so badly as to reach their organic brains. While they pondered this likelihood, a boulder and several smaller rocks suddenly struck the broad ledge on which they lay.

"The Ovoids are taking pot shots at us from above," said 119M-5.

It was true. With their failing sight, the nine Zoromes saw more of the rocks strike perilously close to them and to the Scissor-Bills. Oddly enough, the little creatures did not seem to sense the peril. Except for their labored breathing, they lay quite still.

"The comet gases," 9V-474 commented. "The Scissor-Bills are affected by them."

This was 9V-474's last communication. With their failing sight, now almost covered by the growing spots of corrosion from the tail of the sapphire comet, the rest of the machine men saw a great boulder smash his head flat before it cracked into two pieces and rolled over the cliff. Two of the Scissor-Bills were also killed in this fusillade from above. There were no protests from the others.

The professor suspected that they were all dying. He wondered vaguely, as darkness crept over his sight, about the Ovoids. He still heard the thud of rocks about him. The surviving Zoromes kept up a rapid tally among themselves as their sight failed them, wondering which one of them would be next, and if the Ovoids would die with

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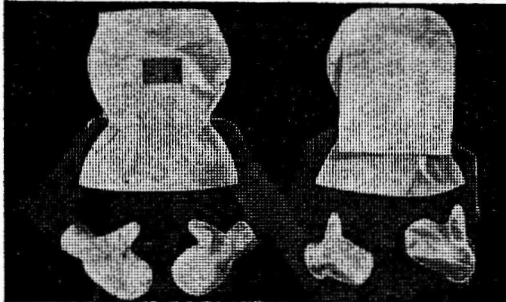
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the Scissor-Bills. There were close misses, and 41C-98 was struck a thin, glancing blow on the lower edge of his coned head which sent it clattering against the head of 5ZQ35, where it turned the other over on its side before stopping.

At this point, eight of them still survived, when a stone crashed upon the head of Professor Jameson, sending him into oblivion.

Somewhere, Professor Jameson came to the realization that he had turned down the offer of 25X-987 to come with the machine men on their never ending adventures from world to world. He had jumped to his death in order to seek out his long gone species of forty million years past on a timeless plane of existence. He had leaped headfirst on an unfamiliar Earth forty million years beyond his time. An intense feeling of loneliness had held him in its melancholy grasp, had made him jump. Yet, 25X-987 was calling him back. How could this be?

"21MM392! 21MM392!"

25X-987 was more urgent, becoming more persistent. The professor answered: "25X-987—what do you want of me?"

"This is 6W-438," the professor was told. "25X-987 died a long time ago on the planet of the double sun. Remember? You and I, 744U-21, 20R-654, 29G-75 and others survived the influence of the Emkls in the blue dimension. You have had a close call on the invisible world."

Dawning consciousness and the train of chronological thought set up by 6W-438 started the professor's mind functioning more clearly. But that awful blackness he was in, and that feeling of nonexistence and helplessness. He could not see. He had no feeling. He had no perception of sound, nothing to motivate. He seemed to be only a thought in space among the swirling thoughts of the other machine men.

"You are little more than a thought right now," 744U-21 told him, grasping his be-

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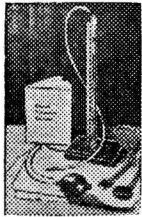
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**SUPER SCIENCE STORIES**

wilderment. "Quite a few things happened to you and the others back on the invisible world, thanks to the sapphire comet and the Ovoids. The gases of the comet rapidly oxidized all metal surfaces of your head. The Ovoids died, but they were larger and harder to kill than the smaller and weaker Scissor-Bills."

"Which of us did die?"

"Only 9V-474. Of course, 53S-7 died before that, but you knew about it. All eight of you are getting new metal heads."

"We looked for the various search parties and found all of them except yours. The Ovoids attacked a few other machine men but were killed. We suspected they were holding the rest of you somewhere. We finally discovered you when the comet tail gases coated a quarter of the invisible world with semivisibility. You see, wherever there was an outcropping of metal, the tail gases oxidized it and gave it a visible crust."

Later on, his brain replaced in a new head, and fully equipped with cubed body, metal legs and six tentacles, Professor Jameson looked from the spaceship to where the invisible world, no longer entirely invisible, hung in space on its orbit.

"Only the life on a quarter of the planet's surface was snuffed out," 168P-75 told him. "Life will return there once the comet's gases become dissipated."

"The Scissor-Bills and the Ovoids will go on having occasional brawls," 41C-98 reminded him.

"By the way," 6W-438 informed them, "we found out why the Ovoids dislike the Scissor-Bills and avoid them if they can. The Scissor-Bills are radioactive to the extent that they set up an unpleasant vibration in the bodies of the Ovoids in proportion to the distance they happen to be from them. It also accounts for the fact that the little creatures maintain a common bond of understanding at remarkable distances from one another."

## MISSIVES AND MISSILES

(Continued from page 14)

Dear Editor:

I want to discuss the scientific foundation of your lead novel in the Nov. issue, **FLIGHT TO FOREVER** by Poul Anderson, in which he bases the safe return of his hero on the repetition of time in cycles with the formation of a new universe at the start of each cycle. Supposedly he bases this on the law of causation which, in brief, states that what occurs at any instant does not depend on human volitions or a fluke of chance but follows inevitably from the state of things at the preceding instant which, in turn, follows inevitably a series of preceding instants and so on, et cetera; and that conversely the whole history of the world is predetermined from the very first instant of its birth, and it follows that if the end Mr. Anderson foresees came to pass, the universe, all energy converging on one point, would make a gay 4th of July somewhere in space from which all the atoms (retaining their initial velocity) would reform the same universe and another identical cycle of existence would begin.

Mr. A's hero in the time machine would catch the second act—but would it be the last act? If this state of affairs was possible then poor Martin Saunders' troubles are just beginning. Arriving a little early after his time-jault, he would find his companion, Sam, still alive and they would soon have to disembark in the old time-machine to go through the whole thing over again—either that or he'd have a "double" engaged to his girl.

Either way he's in a helluva rut. But how could he return to an identical earth anyway if he hadn't been part of it until his arrival? It wouldn't have been identical—his absence would have changed the whole sequence of events.

But is even this theory probable (disregarding the time-machine)? I say no. No cycles (not identical ones, anyhow). Possible, of course, but not probable.

Early in the century, the "quantum theory" was evolved—based in part on Plank's theory that time moves in jerks. Now this "quantum theory" (look it up if you can't remember, it's pretty long) forms one of the great dominating principles of physics, and Einstein says that this theory appears to dethrone the law of causation from the position of guiding the course of the world. The old science had staunchly proclaimed that, in time, State A was inevitably succeeded by State B—in other words, only one succeeding state was possible and it was inevitable. But now, the new science can only deal in probabilities and can only say that State A may be followed by State B, C or D or by innumerable other states. This is decided by an unknown factor which we are accustomed to call fate.

An example will clarify this indefinite aspect of the cause-effect question.

It is known that atoms of radioactive ma-

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## SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

terial (radium) disintegrate into atoms of lead and helium with the mere passage of time. Now, say we have a room containing 2000 atoms of radium. The rate of diminution will *likely* be one atom per year; that is the *probabilities* are in favor of one and only one of the 2000 atoms breaking up within the next year. But the law which governs the rate of disintegration is very remarkable. It decreases in the same way as the numbers of a battalion of soldiers who are exposed to absolutely random undirected fire. Old age appears to mean nothing to the individual radium atom, in fact no physical factor seems to dent the atom for if blows or heat would disintegrate one, it could disintegrate the other 1,999. No one knows how or why the atom is selected. It was thought that the discovery of cosmic rays cleared this point up but when radioactive material was taken down a coal mine, shielded from cosmic rays, the rate of disintegration remained unaltered.

We can form a picture of this law by comparing a radium atom to a party of card players who agree to break up as soon as a hand is dealt in which each player is dealt one complete suit. A room containing millions of such players may be taken to represent a mass of radioactive material. Now then, when the cards are shuffled, with each deal the number of parties will decrease according to the exact law of radioactive decay and will be constant as with the atoms of radium, *but*, if the cards are taken up *without* shuffling, then each deal follows inevitably from the one preceding and we have an example of how the old law of causation works.

There are many similar phenomena of nature which present far greater difficulties and which cannot be included in any consistent scheme unless a new conception or new unknown factor is introduced somewhere.

At any rate, the concept of strict causation finds no place in the picture of the universe which these new complexities present to us. Or else, maybe, this shuffler is a definite God or gods.

When we speak of probabilities in life, we usually show our knowledge to be incomplete. We say it will probably rain tomorrow, while the weatherman, with his instruments, can say with confidence that it *will* rain. In the same way the appeal of modern science to probabilities may merely hide its ignorance of the true mechanism of nature.

Yours sincerely,  
William Clare,  
806 Mill St.,  
Nelson, B. C., Canada.

That's all for now, gang. Let's keep your letters and story ratings coming—they help us give you your magazine more than you'll ever know.

The Editors

## WHEN EARTH IS OLD

(Continued from page 87)

tinged with a vague guilt. In this weird Earth he had matured completely. And he was very earnest. So were Laura and Rudy and Doy. They looked at the eye-lenses of the cacti.

"Thanks," they breathed, almost in unison. The world was still far from perfect. Nothing was sure. But they had their chance to struggle for a future and an ideal for themselves and their descendants.

They all moved toward the now dusty ship, which had stood so long in the open. But little Smoky, the prairie dog chieftain, ran, twittering, ahead, and was in its cabin before anyone else. He had been afraid to fly before. But even he must have sensed, now, the need to keep abreast of newness.

The monster stood near—the grotesque, inhuman thing. Holding Arnie's arm, Laura beckoned to him. "We can take Pretty Boy along—to haul logs," she laughed.

As Rudy helped Doy into the ship, he said, "Arnie, I guess we'll both have to become peace justices. What man can perform his own wedding?"

As they soared away toward the underground city to get tools, Doy sang a little song from the era of the porcelain towers.

Arnie felt truly wonderful. This strange Earth looked very beautiful to him, now. The misfit violence was out of him; his purposes were clear, and he was finding himself in this weird land. He had always loved the wilderness, and the animals in it. He had the primitive streak that the trail-blazer needs.

He could have kicked his old enemy, Bob Corson, to express pure joy. Then he felt sheepish. Why be sore at a fool so long dead?

A billion years. So long ago had Corson committed his stupidities, that it seemed that all but the biggest events of that period must by now have been literally worn from the fabric of time. . . .

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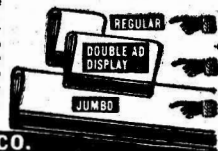
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-Continued from Back Cover

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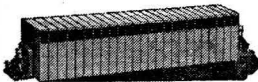
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