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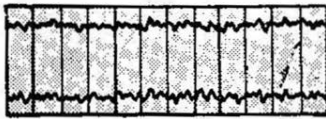


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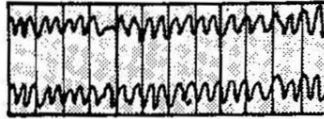
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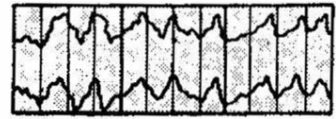
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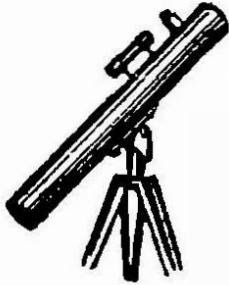
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Volume 9

JULY, 1958

Number 1

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TO OUR READERS This magazine has been **STREAMLINED** for your convenience. It contains the *same number of pages and words as before*, but you will find it easier to read and handle, due to the thinner paper. We would like to hear from you about this move: do you approve? Please drop us a card or a letter. Thank you. *The Editors*

AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

★ MACK RICHARDS' story, "The Moon — Good Night!", which we found as delightful to read as the author did to write, makes the perfect occasion for mentioning that any similarities between characters in this magazine and real persons in the real world is unintended, and entirely coincidental! The Russians may not believe this, but we hope our readers will! This comes up, because in Mr. Richards' original draft, the central character was called "Kerensky". We said "no" to this, because the famous Kerensky is still alive. "Pick some other Russian name," we suggested, "say — oh, there's Menshikov, who was a Prince under Peter the Great, and a boon companion of the Czar." Then, after the mss. had been set up...

★

★

ROBERT RANDALL'S plight is not an uncommon one at all. When two authors collaborate, it's either an instance of one supplying the plot and outline and general ideas, and the other doing all the writing — or each takes a hand, dividing the story more or less evenly, and each doing particular sections. Then comes the task of collation and the achievement of a uniform style. The more successful this is, the less likely either author is to be sure, when all is said and done, which was his own, personal contribution at any given point.

★

★

★



Novelet of
Tomorrow



UNDERGROUND FRONT

by Leroy B. Haugsraud
& Dale R. Smith

illustration by MURPHY

“Ethicon is not officially a part of the government, Captain Valier — it is a sort of protective association licensed by the government. But you’ll still be a soldier there, and you’ll still be taking risks. Only you don’t rate any medals — not even an obit — if you’re killed. And you’re expected to snoop into the private lives of everybody!”

A MECHANICAL voice intoned. “*Zero Minus Forty-Five Seconds.*”

A pause, then...

“*Zero Minus Thirty Seconds.*” Two men in a quarter-mile deep room tensed to attention before console desks where miles of cable and microwave channel converged to

light view screens with actual scenes and impulse patterns.

“*Zero Minus Ten Seconds.*”

Tech Captain John Valier raised his head a trifle to watch the scene above ground on the 3-D color screen. He moved his hand and a deserted ravine outside Melbourne began to crawl with activity.



alier was outdistancing his companions, and sound military tactics as well. He realized this when a bullet struck the calf of his leg.

Multi-finned rockets appeared from hiding as a score of trap door slabs in the ground flipped open. Mobile launching cradles began to raise antennae studded rocket noses skyward.

"*Five.*" The shimmer of heat waves chased a wavering pattern of pale blue across the TV screen and the rockets lay quiescent for a moment, as if gathering strength for a sudden leap.

"Trackers on," said the burly sergeant at the other console. Capt. Valier muttered a confirmatory, "Check," hands poised over the half dozen bars of amber light that constituted his main controls. The left hand descended briefly. Micro-seconds later, and hundreds of miles away, relays and mercury switches snapped into action. Five groups of diversionary rockets roared into the clouds along precalculated orbits, all converging on one target area.

"*Four.*" John Valier's little finger on his right hand itched slightly, but the impulse died in the medulla oblongata without gaining recognition. The sergeant scratched absently at the tiny audio pickup embedded in his ear, eyes never wavering from the static pips quivering near the center of his radarscopes.

"*Three.*" Two small groups of primary rockets lay poised and locked at precise angles in their launching cradles.

"*Two.*" An impossible note

of excitement seemed to edge the metallic voice.

"*One.*" The little finger itched again; it would soon gain recognition.

"*Fire,*" instructed the mechanical voice. Capt. Valier's right hand darted across the amber bars of light; remote rockets quivered in their launching cradles as they sprouted diamond-patterned tails of fire. The rockets hesitated, and then began to slide upward on guide rails. Control cables became taut, snapped free, and the missiles shot out of range of the view screens. The TV pickup above ground danced in sympathetic response to the ground tremor as those ravening exhausts funneled into a complex system of dispersal vents honeycombing the launching area. It was a highly necessary adjustment to the hot war in Australia, for the rocket sites would soon be neutralized if any scorched earth became evident to a reconnaissance missile.

CAPT. VALIER swung away from his controls; their functions, for the moment, were over. He leaned over the sergeant's shoulder to concentrate on the little rods of light in the hemisphere scope. As they watched, the compact formation of rockets suddenly swerved madly and split into groups. One group of five swung off on a gradual rising curve, combined with an erra-

tic fish-tailing in all three dimensions. Another mass of rockets—quite as suddenly—began a carefully calculated evasive flight, some swooping almost straight up, others assuming a low-level straight flight with an extra surge of power that put them far in the lead. And other scopes, to right and left, tracked the similar antics of other groups.

"A lovely random pattern," the sergeant said smugly. "Think the Azee's will get to 'em this time?"

"They haven't missed so far." Valier shrugged. The plot patterns used during the last three days of intensive firing had been, for the most part, his brainchild; and the Asiatics had been potting his missiles out of the blue with disheartening accuracy. They continued to study the scope with eyes burning from the effort not to blink and thus miss anything.

They did not miss anything. The sergeant stiffened and swore softly. The beautiful little bouncing rods of light flickered and were not.

JOHN VALIER straightened up, lips clamped somewhat tighter than usual; the easy cuss words of the lower ranks were not for him. He felt his neck cords tighten and tried not to be aware of the hot flush of rage that crept along them.

"But their computers can't

be that good," the sergeant moaned.

Valier drew a deep breath. He crossed the small room with deliberate steps, sat down, and proceeded to light a cigaret at the wrong end. After the usual gasping sputter, he flung it to the floor, stamping on it as if crushing a deadly snake.

"For fifty years, my dear Sergeant Gilligan, Uncle Sugar's army has gone along on the happy, fatheaded assumption that nobody else's army but our boys in blue can make anything, do anything, or be anything quite as good or smart as they..." He stopped, aware that his voice was rising to a bellow. He lit another smoke, this time correctly.

"As I was saying," he continued with great calmness, "we do not have a monopoly on brains or ability. The Azee's have probably spent twice as much money, effort and "blood, sweat and tears," to quote the great Bevan "

"Churchill," said Gilligan timidly.

Valier glared. "Churchill then, you microfilm worm! Now then, if—and a big if—if we had anything like that big colloid memory analyzer they've got back in Central in the States, in a compact form suitable for use at the various emplacements..."

THE AUDIOPHONE beeped and a chubby, dark face grinned from the small screen. "Johnny? Amble up

here on the double. Briefing at eleven-hundred in Colonel Swenson's little sweat box." The insignia of an administrative major gleamed on the screen.

Valier grinned back at the smiling image. "O.K., Billy . . . I mean yes, sir, Major Martinez, you louse, sir."

As the image clicked off, Valier sighed and ground out his cigaret. "I guess that's it for the time being. Hold the fort until Lt. Leslie and his aide get down here, Gilligan." He stood up, tugged at his jacket in a hopeless effort to rid it of several midsection creases, and walked to the sealed port that was the one entrance to the room.

As the massive cylinder-door swung open he paused and said, "Ah...what I just said a couple of moments ago was off the record, you know. I was just clearing my jets a little..."

"Of course, sir." Gilligan was properly reassuring. "I don't recall a thing."

Just before the port closed, Valier caught a glimpse of the sergeant with his feet already on the desk. He grinned wryly. Gilligan knew that he had ten minutes before the very proper Leslie would arrive. Valier shrugged and the opening lines of the Tech Man's unofficial liturgy came to mind:

"Ours not to reason why...
Just compute and let 'em
fly."

Colonel Agnew E. Swenson's "sweat box" was up from the control room only in a relative sense. Expendability of officers was in a direct ratio to their placement underground, and a colonel rated a fairly low level. So Valier rode a little one-man capsule elevator only fifty feet and stepped out into another cramped and steel-lined tunnel. There were three entry ports and he walked to the one nearest the shaft.

COLONEL SWENSON, a short, graying man, looked up from the toy-sized desk crowded between microfile cabinets. Acutely aware of his size, he preferred sitting whenever possible. He made up for his size with a bull-like voice; but the men who had worked under him long enough had discovered a kindly disposition and a rigid sense of fairness, underneath the tough hide.

Billy Martinez was in one of the other chairs in the room and he flashed his quick grin as Valier entered. Valier wondered at his presence. Something more than the standard chewing-out was due.

"Sit down, Johnny," said Colonel Swenson. Valier decided this was to be an informal raking. He dropped into the remaining chair, accepted a cigaret, and chose to take the offensive with: "If it's about that last pattern

the Azees clobbered, Sir, I'd like..."

The Colonel wagged a silencing hand at him. "No use crying over spilled rocket fuel. We both know the best was done with what we had."

"Of course, if we had that colloid analyzer here," Martinez said in a lazy, bland voice. Captain Valier felt his neck go red for the second time in an hour. Damn Martinez and his snooping, and damn John Valier for forgetting that separate monitor pickups do not always have a red telltale to show when they are on. He shuddered internally, wondering if Swenson could have been listening to the blabbing he had poured on Sergeant Gilligan. Martinez winked and made a surreptitious thumb and forefinger sign that made Valier relax.

Swenson had been scrabbling around in the papers on his desk. He looked up, his small eyes swiveling back and forth between the two men. "No, this is another matter and it concerns the two of you."

HE HANDED over a paper to Valier. "These orders just came in for the transfer to the States and reassignment of duties of one, Captain John Valier and one, Major William Martinez, etcetera and so forth." He paused and looked at Martinez sardonically.

"I'm sure *one* of you will

be real happy. Can't say I am. Good missile techs aren't a dime a dozen around here."

Martinez flushed at the barb, while Valier thumbed the paper and looked somewhat foggily at the Colonel.

Swenson shrugged, "All I know is what's on the paper, boys."

"When do we leave?" Valier asked. Already he had a feeling of being at loose ends and the sensation disturbed his methodical mind.

"Right there on the paper. Effective immediately." Swenson stuck out his hand and shook briefly with the two. "Sorry there wasn't more advance notice. I suggest you brief Leslie on any tag ends of pattern work that might miss cancellation. This will give little Lord Fauntleroy the chance to do his stuff that he's always been yelping for."

Martinez, already at the port, turned, "I'd better get my desk cleaned up and turn over anything to Captain Basset in my section, Sir. I believe there's an express rocket out of here in two hours."

Swenson nodded. "Personnel has reserved two spaces already. Be sure to check out with IC." Martinez nodded, saluted formally and closed the port behind him with: "See you at the main port, Johnny."

VALIER, still reluctant to accept the radical change

in his work, walked slowly to the door.

"Oh, just a moment, John." The Colonel looked up and smiled briefly. "There were just a couple of bits of information that might help. This is just for you, I might add." His voice lowered to a confidential tone. "A little bird informed me that U.N.U. is formally inaugurating its three year course in PEGS, Practical Ethics in Government Service, and they're looking for an instructor with the technical background for a class on coordination control in a space flight program."

Valier was startled. "I'm no space lawyer!"

Swenson ignored the interruption. "The other matter..." He looked at the door to make sure it was closed. His voice was very low. "You're slated for Ethicon."

"Me? For the love of Mike! I mean..."

"Orders." The Colonel rubbed the back of his neck. "A little higher level that's all."

Valier hesitated and went back to his chair. He knew something of Ethicon, most of it vague except for one or two facts. The group was sponsored by PEGS and functioned as a sort of inner secret service. He had also heard that any individual of that select group was a combination of Superman and Einstein.

Swenson grinned at him as if reading his mind. "Relax, John, I'd better give you some facts. In the first place, Ethicon is not officially a part of the government—yet."

"Well, if it's not a part of the gov..."

"Hold on. I said *officially*. At present, Ethicon members belong to a protective association licensed by the government. Ever hear of the Pinkertons?"

"Mmm—sort of an ancient private detective agency, I think."

"Ancient, maybe, but they're still very much alive and kicking. In fact, we get some of our..." Swenson broke off and changed his sentence abruptly. "Well, anyway it's a funny set-up. Sort of an illegitimate offspring. Papa, meaning the government, can't give Ethicon the official family name and blessing, but he loves him just the same."

"I'm still sort of mixed up," Valier said slowly. "But there's something you started to say and didn't finish."

"Well?"

"About the Pinkertons. About getting some of our—and then you stopped."

"Go ahead, Mr. District Attorney."

VALIER flushed but plugged on. "Sounds like your Ethiconers are being recruited from one, or maybe

more, groups of professional cops."

Swenson pressed his fingertips together and smiled at the ceiling.

"Also, that 'we get' phrasing. Are you a member of Ethicon?"

"Bullseye, Mr. Detective. Now that you've added one and one try two and two and see what you get."

Valier swallowed his resentment. "What two and two?"

"Item," Swenson ticked off one stubby forefinger. "You're going to U.N.U. after Ethicon gets through with you. Item. Professor Brigdon, president of the university is one of the most important individuals in the PEGS organization. Item. We know of your athletic record in school and also your hitch with the Rangers and the army pistol team..."

"Item," interrupted Valier sourly. "Several assassination attempts have been made on PEGS leaders, so far unsuccessfully." He stood up. "I read the news sometimes, Sir."

"How's your addition?"

"I've just been promoted to bodyguard and..." he hesitated.

"Go on; this is off the record and outside of rank."

"Well, I don't much care for it!"

"What's bothering?"

"For one thing, I'm still regular army?"

SWENSON stood up behind his tiny desk and suddenly his short wiry body loomed impressive. The easy smile was gone. "Captain Valier."

Valier stiffened. "Yes, Sir."

"I'm still regular army; you're still regular army. Beyond that I will not explain. It's up to you to reconcile the facts as you've heard them. I rather think you will in due time. Right now, as a regular army officer, you will accept authorized orders without any further reservations. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"One more order. Everything we have discussed here is to be kept absolutely to yourself. Do not talk about this to anyone, not even another Ethiconer. Most especially your—ah—friend, Major Martinez. Clear?"

Valier nodded stiffly. "Yes, Sir."

"That's all."

Valier hesitated, then saluted and stepped to the exit. His hand was on the servo button when he heard Swenson harumph behind him. He turned. "Sir?"

The Colonel edged out from behind the small desk and stuck out a hand. "Oh, hell. Good luck, Johnny."

II

VALIER chewed at a cigar and wondered for the tenth time what had been in the radiogram Martinez received. The

rocket liner to Washington had already started its long slant into its homing base when the message had been delivered to his seatmate.

Martinez had reacted to the pretty stewardess in typical fashion: "Hi ya, honey. Fan mail already?"

The girl smiled as did all women who came in contact with the Major. His flashing grin faded quickly, however, as he read the flimsy sheet and, with a grunt, tucked it carefully into an inside jacket pocket.

"Bad news from home?" Valier asked.

"Nope." And that was that.

Conversation had somehow petered out before that occurrence, and Valier decided he was not going to force any more. The last few months seemed to have driven a slight wedge between the one-time classmates. Although Martinez had made no secret of his application for the new government-sponsored PEGS position, Valier felt a vague puzzlement. For a man going into a new field, Martinez had shown a singular lack of enthusiasm. During the three-hour rocket ride from Australia, they had discussed the matter; and for the first time, Valier had found Martinez's docile agreement with his championship of PEGS irritating. Many times in the past he had been put on his mettle to counter Martinez's sarcastic attacks on the PEGS program

that was just then shaping up. He reflected that, in spite of his school and army association, he really knew very little concerning Bill Martinez.

The son of an impoverished Argentine planter and a former Italian Grand Opera singer, Martinez had come to Army Tech. He swept brilliantly through all classes and then, for no apparent reason, decided upon an administrative career within the army. His plodding roommate, John Valier, had never been given a solid reason for the decision. At the time, he put it down to the erratic temperament that Martinez had shown on a number of occasions. Regarding his past life, Martinez had been very reticent, but Valier had liked him for what he was—a brilliant and always charming person, who always got what he reached for.

"Fasten seat belts please," announced the intercom.

"WELL, HERE we are," said Valier inanely as he notched the nylon web around his waist.

"Think I've got a few friends meeting me," Martinez responded. "One in particular—Senator Dan Garrison—I'd like you to meet."

"Why?"

"Well, he's a pretty big bug around Washington; a 'howdy' from Dan is a pretty good leg up for any young and ambitious soldier boy like you or me."

"Speak for yourself," Valier grunted. He was feeling vaguely peeved at Martinez, anyway. "I don't need any politico's hand on my back to shove me along."

"Oh, cap your jets, son. There are a couple of real high-G ladies in the party too. One in particular I may see a lot of at old U.N.U."

"You mean she's going to school there?"

"Not exactly." Martinez flipped his cigaret in the ash chute. "Dan—the man I want you to meet—wangled her a job as private sec to Professor Brigdon, no less. See what I mean by influence?"

Valier was troubled by this bit of information, although he couldn't tell exactly why. The fact that an influential politician could call the shots on the U.N.U. president's staff was somehow disturbing.

As the plane swept into the landing field the muffled roar of braking rockets put an end to further conversation.

UPON DISEMBARKING, Martinez strode quickly toward a small group of men and women at the edge of the ramp. Then the usual flurry of hand-pumping and, "How've you been, you old son.." and "Darling, you're so thin and tired looking." And then Martinez was impartially kissing three very handsome women.

"Johnny," called Martinez, his arms still locked around

the accommodating waists of two of the girls. "Come on over and meet the gang."

Valier relaxed his self-conscious grip on his flight bag and found himself in a fascinated trance as he stared into a pair of snapping black eyes, not much below the level of his own. He felt a firm handclasp, and a mellow voice said, "I'm Anne Prochek, Captain Valier. This is a typical Martinez introduction." She nodded disparagingly at Martinez, who was already several steps away, talking with a chubby little man in a linen suit. "Come on. I'll do the honors."

Valier—never good at remembering names—could not, a half hour later, have recalled the various people he met. But he did not forget Dan Garrison. The little man had the same compelling personality as Martinez, intensified by an egocentric nature that showed through his genial greeting. Valier felt, during the brief handclasp, that his whole personality had been scanned, assessed and put in its proper place in a huge file.

"Glad to know you, Captain. I'm so used to a first handle that I look around when anyone says 'Senator'." The man had an irresistible charm that was hard to fend—especially to Valier, who was on first name terms with people only after a considerable acquaintance.

"I've got a little group com-

ing out to my place for the weekend, John," Garrison continued. "I'd like to have you along if you can make it." He named a fashionable suburban area not far from the Great Lakes area. "Billy knows the way; he can pick you up whenever you're through for the day."

Valier felt a soft clasp on his arm and turned. "We would like you to come also," said Anne Prochek, who had come up to stand very close to him.

"Well," Valier felt at a loss. "I hardly know just when I'm going to be free." He was thinking about something he'd heard about Garrison, which was probably at the bottom of his putting off the invitation. Garrison was the big wheel behind a certain newspaper publisher. Said publisher was noted for the snide and derogatory editorials featured from time to time in his press against the PEGS movement. Valier decided he didn't care a great deal for Garrison.

The Senator was quick to sense that he may have been rushing things. He had assessed the deep stubbornness in Valier and he knew when to stop. "Whenever you're free, John, the invitation still stands."

MARTINEZ turned to say: "I see Anne has you in tow already, Johnny."

Anne Prochek pouted. "Can't you get him to come

along, Billy? I'd like to have someone in the crowd who knows what's going on in the world, outside of the city of Washington."

"Won't I do, dear lady?" asked Martinez.

Anne Prochek shot a swift, oblique glance at Martinez. "You, I've already heard."

Valier laughed with the rest at Martinez's mock crestfallen look, then decided to take the initiative. "Really, Sir," to Dan Garrison, "and you, Miss Prochek, I would be delighted to join you if I'm free to do so. But I just arrived and have a routine check-in and report to make and I don't like to accept invitations unless I can fulfill them." He grabbed up his flight bag and added, "I'll get in touch with you later, through Major Martinez."

Valier had a feeling things were moving a little faster than he could follow. Not by nature an overly-suspicious sort, he sensed that he was being rushed more than was consistent with a casual introduction. Besides, he had a hunch that it would not be too easy to get away from Anne Prochek. Not that he wanted to very much; no, indeed! That was a high-flying dish if he had ever seen one.

He nodded to Martinez, "See you later." And, "Nice to have met you, Sir" to Garrison. To Anne, "Please excuse my pushing off like this." He held her hand a

moment longer than was necessary. "I'll see you soon." The last was a statement, not a question.

"SOON" WAS an optimistic error Valier decided, two weeks later. From the time he had checked in at the Pentagon he had been given enough time to himself for a bare minimum of sleep, hurried meals and a change to civies, temporarily.

The complex machine that was called Headquarters had picked him up impersonally and shunted him through a series of offices presided over by podgy non-coms; slim, carefully-tailored captains; fat colonels; and even generals who talked indistinctly through massive cigars. He had been questioned politely, wrung dry of front-line information by less cordial CI majors; admonished and brought up-to-date on spit, polish and military courtesy—as should all crude front-liners; had the naive spots knocked off his innate good nature, and finally been given two-hundred dollars for which he was supposed to buy himself a complete civilian wardrobe.

The last thing they had done was to ship him off to what was apparently an abandoned training camp for seeing-eye dogs. His bargain-counter civies were hanging from the peg where he had put them a week before; he now wore battle fatigues, a

little tight at first, but a comfortable fit after the fourteen hour per day physical workout he had been getting.

At the end of a particularly gruelling day, Valier turned to his roommate—a sardonic Neapolitan from Boston—to ask: "Pete, just what the hell gives here anyway? Nobody says anything. I'm put through a mill that would kill a marine fresh from boot, and you and the rest of the guys apparently have lockjaw for all the talk I hear..."

PETE GAZZI—nominally a captain in the Engineers—grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "Johnny, what was the last thing Colonel Sellers told you when you left his office?"

"Why, near as I can remember, something about a training program working on two levels."

"Yeah? Go on."

"Well, he said a good Ethiconer doesn't go around asking questions like a lost ten-year-old. He's trained to snoop and what's more he's supposed to snoop..." Valier managed a wry grin. "I'm beginning to get it."

"Catch, now?" said Pete Gazzi. "The rest of us have been here a week longer than you. We've been in training, and snooping is something you learn by doing."

Valier gave in to a rising irritation. "My aching butt, Am I supposed to go sniffing

around like a 3D cartoon commie..."

"Just that, my boy."

"I still don't get all of it. We're all in this together, aren't we?"

"Why don't you try and find out?" Gazzi taunted.

"You mean any information about this job I've got to dig out myself?" A sense of unreality began to descend on Valier. He wondered again how he had become involved in whatever he was in.

"Correct, my boy." Gazzi peered through a haze of cigar smoke. "For instance, I've got a few facts about you."

VALIER settled back, outwardly relaxed but with full attention concentrated on a suddenly very interesting Gazzi.

"You dislike the following: grand opera, pipes and cat-sup." Gazzi was ticking them off on hairy fingers. "You're also scared of women, and you've slept alone ever since you graduated from Army Tech in '87." He studied the ceiling carefully in recapitulation. "However, you are now carrying a heavy fuel load for someone with the initials A. P."

Valier turned a sudden remark into a hollow cough.

"Beg pardon?" Gazzi arched a polite eyebrow.

"Go on, you night crawler!"

"Well, to leave that last fascinating item alone, for the moment—you're a cru-

sader, a sort of fanatic for efficient and honest government. But aren't we all? You've worked like a dog to become a missile expert, and you're going to work like two dogs for Ethicon at dear old U.N.U...."

Valier's chair went back with a thump as he bounced to his feet. "That's classified stuff, you little meatball!" He strode menacingly over to tower above the seated Gazzi.

"Relax, Johnny. I know more Judo than you; and if you don't want to wind up sitting on your kneecaps, forget the rough stuff."

"You've got no business prying into personal "

"The hell you say!" Gazzi straightened up, his face stern. "That's exactly what it is—my business. Your business is strictly public property around here; it's just a part of the training program. Do you think you're the only one in this sand heap who's had his history dug into? We've all got the goods on each other. Hell, every guy in this camp knows everything from the middle initial of every babe I've ever made a pass at to why grandpa left the old country in such a hurry. You haven't heard the half of it."

VALIER returned reluctantly to his chair, righted it and sat down carefully. "I still don't see why such details are necessary."

"Then you're dumber than

you look," Gazzi snapped impatiently. "Now see here, Johnny," he leaned forward and the intent sternness on his face suddenly made him seem a formidable man. "This undercover business is for real. People get killed just as dead in this game as in a shooting war; only thing is, you don't rate any medal—not even an obit. We've got to know about and fully trust one another."

Gazzi crawled into his bunk. He had finished. As they looked at each other, the solemn expressions were soon replaced by warm smiles. Valier dropped to his bunk and the lights dimmed, right on schedule.

The next week Valier tried some self-education. He prodded, probed and dug until he possessed bits of information, the sum of which he wasn't completely at ease with. He was being trained to operate primarily as an undercover agent for Ethicon. It was felt that a crisis was due and so the number of agents was being doubled. There were also other semi-secret organizations—and here the information was extremely nebulous—that were interested in the success of PEGS and could be counted on for emergency assistance. But Valier still didn't feel at ease in his spy role.

The last six days of his special training course were strictly non-physical. He was pushed, pulled and goaded

through an exhausting mental routine. He read, listened, wrote and recited on subjects clearly of great value to a secret agent, and on subjects clearly of interest to no one. But he didn't have the time to question the why of minor facets of his education. It was clear that he was being groomed to advance the ideals of Ethicon in general, and Practical Ethics in Government Service in particular.

Graduation exercises consisted of a private glass-filling session with Major Michaels, the camp commander, and verbal confirmation of his U.N.U. assignment.

III

AFTER THREE weeks at United Nations University, Valier found the routine not too much different from that of the army. There was the same kind of red tape, he decided, only a little smoother application of same. He'd had a couple of luncheon meetings with Martinez, but they seemed to be drifting apart from the previous battlefront comradeship. Martinez had not been too specific about his teaching program, although Valier gathered that he was heading up a course in administrative technic patterned after the military echelon command.

Valier had also had one date with Anne Prochek which had been vaguely unsatisfactory; hard to classify,

just a feeling of being tagged and put on a reserve list for future reference. At the thought he tightened his jaw in resentment. No pushbutton secretary was going to have him dangling on the end of her zipper tab.

"What's the matter, Captain?" a low voice broke in on his gloomy reflections. "Somebody put glass in your bubblegum?"

He looked unsmiling into Sue Brigdon's gray eyes. She was tall enough to match his five-ten. Not a bad figure, but maybe a trifle too muscular for his fancy. What was it about Sue that made him feel vaguely hostile every time they met? Anyhow, the feeling seemed to be mutual. He got on her nerves also, judging by the number of needles she threw into him.

"Nope," he answered. "Just reflecting on the general ornerness of women." Now that was a real sweet opening remark to make. What was the matter with him anyway? He'd never intended to say that.

SUE STIFFENED a little. "Well, it's the general calibre of men that make them that way," she snapped. "Anyhow, I didn't stop to swap compliments with you, Captain Valier. Dad's been expecting you about the arrangements for the trip to the dedication field."

"Oh—well, I was just on

my way as a matter of fact. Is he in his office now?"

Sue nodded. "I'll walk over with you, if you think you can stand my ornery company."

Valier grinned. "Sorry. That was an idiotic thing to say. Anyway, present company is excepted." Her smile in return was less frosty than he had expected.

"That's right handsome of you, Captain, seeing that we're going to be together on this trip, and..."

"Are you going?"

"And why not? After all, I've been with Dad on a lot of his trips. In fact, I've been of some help to him."

"Yeah, I know, but..."

Valier mentally scratched his head. After all there was no real reason why Sue should not be with her father. The only fly in the ointment was that she did not have the slightest idea of all the deadly undercurrents of intrigue that surrounded her father and his work. Or did she?

He tried another tack. "Well, I thought Miss Prochek was going along as part of her job. She's his secretary, and..."

Sue's eyes were a glacial blue and her usually attractive mouth set in a tight line as she stopped in her tracks and swung to him. "My assistance to Dad, Captain, is outside the usual function of a paid secretary. In any event, I'm sure that my presence will not interfere in any way

with your perogatives with Miss Prochek." Her cheeks flushed and her thin blouse was disturbed by heaving breasts. "On second thought, I don't feel that my continued presence is necessary at the moment. You and Dad will no doubt make all necessary arrangements and the admirable Miss Prochek can arrange the minor details. I'll see you at the airport."

SHE MARCHED stiffly away. Valier looked after her, his mouth slightly opened in stunned surprise. Whew! Seemed like everybody and their cousin knew about the small torch he was carrying for Prochek. This was going to be a lovely trip. For the life of him he couldn't figure what made Sue so all-fired mad. Well, mind your trim and yaw, he told himself. And, just as a starter, he decided that, beginning tomorrow morning, at the airport, he'd commence cooling off on Anne Prochek. The next morning was more like a day in fall rather than the middle of July. Gray clouds were threatening rain as Valier boarded the jetliner specially chartered for the trip. The overcast set the tempo for the little party and there was hardly any conversation as they settled for the takeoff.

As soon as they were airborne, Brigdon, a wiry and balding man of sixty, tipped Valier a signal and then

turned to address Anne Prochek and Sue: "We've got a little dull data to go over. Please excuse us for a few minutes."

Brigdon led Valier well to the back of the cabin and produced a small flask of brandy. Valier downed his drink and waited.

Brigdon shuffled some papers he had taken from his zipcase. He handed Valier three clippings. They were almost identical in context; editorials, from the makeup, written with virulence, attacking the PEGS program and Brigdon.

"One of these is taken from Garrison's sheet," remarked Brigdon. He studied his glass of brandy. "That I can understand. But those other two are from papers which, up to this time, have been neutral to our program."

"Big outfits?"

Brigdon shrugged and named two metropolitan dailies within the top ten in circulation.

"Looks as if our friend Garrison is spreading out."

BRIGDON smiled wryly and squinted down the aisle. Anne Prochek was staring out of a window and Sue was deep in a book. He almost whispered, "I had a call from him, last night."

"What about?"

"Oh—he was very smooth and indirect. But in a nice round about way he told me

to pull in my horns. Nothing to pin down."

Valier frowned. "No definite threats?"

"No, just some pointed hints—stuff about a strong minority in the congress, et cetera, the need for a cautious appraisal of the dangers attendant to any revolutionary change in..." He broke off and sipped at his drink. "John, I can't do too much talking, even here. Never know just what pickups might be rigged. But, I can tell you this: I'm going to name a few people, dates and places, and no changes are going to be made in my original plans." His mouth set firmly in a startling resemblance to Sue's.

Valier felt a slight congealing chill at the back of his neck. "Look here, Sir, maybe you had better postpone this—ah, this revelation until we can run down a little more information on Garrison."

Brigdon shook his head. "No, John; things are coming to a head. We're closer than you think to really coming out in the open. I've got all the evidence in a very safe place. Only one other person knows where and I'm not going to tell even you."

"Look," Valier pleaded, "at least give me time to set up a cordon of our men around the speakers platform."

"**T**HAT MIGHT be all right," said Professor Brigdon, "although I doubt if

any attempt will be made there. I was expecting some move to be made before we arrive. That's why the FBI pilots are in charge of this ship. I've already arranged for an escort and a guard at the landing area. We'll have plenty of company on the way to the actual ceremonies. And as soon as I finish my speech, we'll return to the plane and take off immediately."

"You seem to have covered everything," Valier admitted.

Brigdon zipped the papers back into his case. His eyes had a twinkle in them as he looked at Valier. "You know, John, before I was a college president I did a lot of traveling in some pretty rough places. Which is by way of saying: one can still be practical and a professor at the same time."

Valier laughed. "O. K., Sir; I'll try not to be an obvious nursemaid."

Brigdon glanced out of the window. "We're almost there. Better join the ladies."

Valier snapped his seat belt and reflected moodily that Brigdon did not know all the answers. There was one obvious point that he had seemed to have missed. Someone quite close to Brigdon was evidently working for the other side. The University began to look more and more like the center of things—the center of a big blow-off.

Man had pushed himself

far up the scale during the last twenty years. Science, a sleeping giant during the first part of the twentieth century, had at last bestirred itself and—like the famous mousetraps and ping-pong balls—pyramided inventions, and refinements of those inventions, at a bewildering rate of speed. The economic and technological prophets, many of whom had expressed pessimistic forebodings about man's material accomplishments at the expense of cultural morality, were still in business at the same old stands. They had some justification on their side, beyond doubt.

VALIER, reflecting on the thousands of people in the roped off area in front of the speakers stand, thought gloomily about some of those prophecies. Today, in the next hour, man either faced up to his new technology or went down on his collective pants from the revelations that Brigdon had hinted he was going to make. And Valier was suffering from that itchy feeling in his midsection that was a hint of disruptive things to come.

From his seat among the minor and privileged characters on the platform he could just make out the bald head of Brigdon next to Lessing, the UN Secretary. Valier whispered to Sue, who was seated next to him: "Some sort of hanky-pank about

these seats, if you ask me. I thought we were to be seated right behind your father..."

Sue smiled too sweetly. "What makes you think we're so important that we rate seats, up with the elect?" She didn't trouble to keep her voice low. Valier flushed as he saw a quick grin on the face of the science editor of the *Times*, who was seated on their right.

"Well," he persisted, "Anne—Miss Prochek told me on the plane about our arrangements, and at the last minute we get shoved over here..."

"Speaking of your Miss Prochek," Sue interrupted, "just where did she slide off to?"

Valier looked around to his left. The chair was vacant. "Why, she was here a moment ago. What the devil..."

"Shh," Sue nudged him. "Senator Butterworth is being introduced, and besides, you're not listed as one of the speakers."

VALIER'S flush was the red of complete resentment. He felt a strong urge to haul off and boot this irritating female clear across the speakers stand. But he swallowed his rage and forced himself to look beyond the platform to the standees below. His practised eye picked out the casual alertness of the secret service men who were seeded among the spectators and he felt a further warmth of reassurance as he spotted

the familiar face of Pete Gazzi. He let his eyes slide past casually without a break of recognition. Good—there were Major Michaels and the lank form of Eli Hendricks. His twin brother, Lon, was sure to be somewhere near, too. Fine—half of the training camp personnel must be somewhere around, but his insides still itched.

A spatter of applause brought his attention back to the platform. Senator Butterworth was a perfect characterization of the oldtime politician. Portly, his abundant mass of white hair carefully groomed to a sweptback grandeur, he wore his civilian coverall with the air of an old frockcoated lawmaker of the ancient thirties. His speech even had the fulsome rounded form of a bygone era of sonorous orators. Underneath, however, he was as tough and flexible-minded as any of his younger colleagues. PEGS had no better friend in congress, and Valier felt a grateful comfort that the old boy was on their side.

Half listening, he began to wonder at the continued absence of Anne Prochek. Thinking back, he remembered that she had seated herself with Sue and himself when they had first arrived. Vaguely, too, he recalled a someone who had come up with a murmured message for Anne. He had not been paying too much attention, as part of his new coolness poli-

cy toward her. Now he wondered if he had offended her. Damn, he seemed to have a talent for offending good-looking women; he resolved to retire within his shell when he got back to the U.N.U. campus. And this iceberg of a Sue Brigdon was no prize either.

HE STOLE a side glance at her, but Sue was apparently quite interested in Butterworth's closing remarks. During the applause that followed, Valier started to get up from his chair, with the intention of sliding out quietly and looking for Anne Prochek, but felt a restraining handclasp on his arm. Sue was looking at him with questioning irritation in her gray eyes. "Where are you going?"

He restrained an impulse to shake off her hand. "I'm getting uneasy over Miss Prochek's absence," he whispered, his eyes on Lessing who was at the speaker's pedestal. "Thought I'd look around and maybe ask some of the guards if they'd spotted where she was going."

A stir on the edge of the crowd caught his eye and he was sure that he saw Anne Prochek's face in the shifting mass of spectators. Her face was unnaturally white, and her dark eyes wide and glowing. Then she was gone.

"What the devil!" Valier rose swiftly and edged toward the back of the platform. He was down the four

steps that led to ground level when he noticed that Sue Brigdon was close behind.

"John, wait a second. Dad's going to speak now." Her voice was urgent.

"Come on." Valier jerked his head toward the front of the stand. "We'll go around to the front. We can catch it just as well there." He hesitated, and then said: "Something's wrong. I just saw that girl in the crowd out front and she looked scared as hell."

As they rounded the corner of the platform the entire structure seemed to lurch at them. They felt, rather than heard, the slapping impact of the explosion that enveloped the slight form of Professor Brigdon in a sheet of white flame; a flame that seemed to leap out from the speaker's podium!

IN THE ETERNAL second of silence that followed Valier heard, through the red haze inside his head, the crackle of broken wood and the shriek of twisted magnaloy girders as the front of the stand collapsed slowly to the ground. He raised himself on hands and knees as a collective moan of terror and pain rose from the massed people. They surged away from the point of disaster like a wave of fluid matter, leaving a few figures on the ground who, like Valier and Sue Brigdon, were hunched groggily on all fours.

Then the screaming began. Valier was aware of Sue pawing at his shoulder. Her face was blotched a mottled red and her gray eyes were glassy with shock.

"Dad—Dad—Dad," she whispered, hands scrabbling weakly. She lurched to her feet but Valier grabbed her before she could get away.

IV

THE MAJOR part of the plane trip back to the University was made in silence. Sue Brigdon sat alone in a forward seat. Anne Prochek had made several fumbling attempts at comforting, and an offer of company but had been quietly rebuffed. She now sat just behind Sue.

Valier sat several seats further back, apparently going over the papers in Professor Brigdon's briefcase that he had managed to snatch up in the confusion following the explosion. In reality, he was thinking of the eternally quiet passenger whose mangled form was their only item of cargo.

A jet missile carrier rode high above them in a belated gesture of protection.

A preliminary shuffling of the papers had revealed nothing that had any bearing on the naming of names Brigdon had promised on the trip going down. Valier zipped the case shut and closed his eyes. What a mess! He was

a bodyguard? He was more convinced than ever that this spy stuff wasn't really for him. But he was curious about Anne Prochek. That girl had been frightened of something before the blast. Afterward, when order had been restored, she had re-joined them, relatively calm considering the circumstances, but offering no explanation for her absence from the platform.

But Valier didn't want to think anymore about Anne Prochek. He picked up a thermos from the service alcove and went forward to join Sue Brigdon. She made no acknowledgement of his company beyond an automatic hitching over to make room for him.

"Better have a little coffee, Sue." He poured and she sipped at the plastic container with a pale smile of thanks.

"Feeling all right?" he asked.

"Oh, sure." Her shrug was a bitter dismissal of any of her physical hurts. "A few bruises, that's all. How about you?"

"The same." He joined her in the coffee drinking. Behind them, Anne Prochek stirred restlessly, as if hinting for an invitation. Valier ignored her. His vague distrust of the Prochek woman was hardening into dislike. Her half-hearted attempts at any womanly sympathy, and a lack of any real emotional disturbance over the death of

her employer—plus her unexplained disappearance from the stand, just prior to the explosion—had definitely put her on Valier's list of people to think about. His studied ignoring of her on the trip was deliberate; he had a hunch that she was the sort to make some gesture that might give him a clue.

BACK AT U.N.U., as the days slipped by, Valier had an opportunity to assess the situation and his own position in it. Admittedly, he had accomplished nothing beyond gaining a few hints to strengthen his suspicions of Anne Prochek. He had even failed on his primary task: that of protecting Professor Brigdon against the assassins.

In his own apartment one night, he felt too low to even glance at the work piled on his desk. To hell with quarterly term reports and student seminars. His instructorship at U.N.U. was only a faked position anyway and he was bound to be yanked from his post now that the man he was supposed to protect was quite dead. It also seemed like a good time to resign from Ethicon—if that was possible.

When the phone interrupted his session of self-pity he growled a vapid "Hullo."

"Huh?" The voice at the other end was thickly alcoholic. "I wan'na shpeak to m'ole frien' Petey."

Valier felt his pulse quick-

en. "Sorry, Mister, there's no Petey here."

"'Scuse me, frien'. Must'a had the wrong number, I uh.. " Of course. Gazzi. Now what was the next response? Oh yes, he had it.

"What number were you calling?"

"Sorry, frien', had it writ down here in m' little ole book—yeah, here she is." A foolish chuckle. "Ferndale 6-9000. Isn't this Petey?"

"Nope. Wrong number. This is 6-3000."

"Cripes—sorry, frien'—damn bar lights anyway! Got m' finger in th' wrong hole again."

VALIER cut him off with the proper show of indignation. He looked grimly at the little instrument. Probably bugged to the hilt if Gazzi took such elaborate code precautions. Quite likely it would record any conversation in the room even when not in outward use. He was sure, however, that nothing had ever been said in his room that could have given away his real identity—since he was not given to thinking out loud. Not yet, anyway.

The real meaning of the conversation directed Valier to meet Gazzi at the campus town's only bar at nine o'clock. It was just ten minutes of the hour. He thought a moment and then, for the benefit of any listening tappers, slapped at his shirt

pockets and muttered, "Damn, no cigarets."

At the drugstore he bought two packs and thumbed listlessly through the magazine rack. There was no one else in the place except the sleepy-looking pharmacist. Valier started out the door and then turned to ask, "Say, Mister, any place open where I could get a pint?" He winked elaborately. "Strictly medicinal purposes, you know."

The man grinned at the stale bromide. "All the regulars close at eight, but you might try Grogan's. Tell him I sent yuh."

A man in blue denims, who had been just outside the entrance, pushed past Valier without a glance and walked to the tobacco counter. Valier sauntered out with a: "Thanks, Mister," and ambled casually in the direction of Grogan's, two blocks away. He stopped after a block to light a cigaret, having a little intentional trouble with his lighter. A glance in its mirrored surface showed an indistinct figure behind him. He had picked up a tail. Probably just a general carelessness on the part of his unknown opponents, but disturbing just the same. He wondered who could have put the finger on him to the extent that he was important enough to rate constant surveillance.

No time for speculation

now. He had to shake any interested observers.

INSIDE the crowded bar-room he paused long enough for a quick look. Gazzi was not in sight, either at the bar or in the booths lining one wall. Valier made his wants known to the bartender who obliged with a pint of bourbon. "Sure, Mac; but not on the premises." And then added with a beetle-browed stare: "No setups, see?"

Valier assured him that he had no desire to cut in on legitimate business and asked for a drink of the most expensive bourbon. This gave him a certain social stature and also the opportunity to look for Pete Gazzi again. Not yet in sight. He ordered another of the thirty year old whiskey and was well into it when he saw Gazzi ambling uncertainly, but with the assurance of an old habitue, toward the men's room. At the same time he saw blue workpants come strolling through the front door.

Valier finished the rest of his drink and worked his way quickly through the crowd to the restroom. Inside the tiny room he had his first luck of the evening. Gazzi was at a washbowl. He flicked a quick glance, shook his head just a little and turned the faucets on full. Valier did the same at the bowl alongside and the resultant roar of water provided an effective cover for muttered conversation.

"Anyone on you?" Gazzi asked in a low monotone. He was staring fixedly at the mirror and scrubbing energetically.

"Fellow, blue denims, sport shirt open at neck, stocky, sandy hair."

"Where is he now?"

VALIER lathered his hands briskly, eyes absorbed on the bowl. "Came in just before I walked in here. Probably hanging over the bar waiting."

"O.K. We'll take care of him. Work your way out of here, easy like, turn right outside, get to corner and turn right again. I have a three wheeler parked, license x14b3, black. Get behind the wheel, keys on floor, have her ready to roll when I get there."

"Got it. Now?" Valier was drying his hands under a blast of hot air.

"Git!"

Valier got, just as the door opened to admit a drunken youth lurching for the compartment toilets.

Easing out into the bar-room Valier made it almost to the front door before the voice became heard over the general babble. He took a quick look before going out. Blue denims was backed up against the bar by a pot-stomached little man who was demanding from him and the world at large: "Wh'ol'ah gonna pay for my drink, tha'sh what I'd like t' know? Knocking a good drink out'a m'

hands—some guys think because they're..."

The closing door cut off the sound and Valier walked toward the end of the block, a broad grin on his face. The resources of Ethicon cropped up in the most unexpected places.

Valier was behind the wheel of the small vehicle, the turbine murmuring gently, when Gazzi slid in beside him.

"Take her out on Highway 12, just cruising. We've got a little talk to do."

"I've been expecting it. Guess I'm washed up on this job, Pete." Valier looked straight ahead at the endless ribbon of highway sliding beneath them.

"Nope. We've had a real setback, I know you are feeling bad because Brigdon got bumped. That's bad and we lost a lot. But put it behind you as much as you can."

"I failed on my job, which was to protect him."

"Forget it, I tell you. No one's blaming you, John; that assassination was set up real slick."

"Just the same..."

GAZZI PUT a compassionate hand on Valier's arm for a moment. "Wouldn't you like to get a crack at the rats that did it?"

Valier's clenched jaw was answer enough.

"All right, then listen. We've got a few things out of this mess to go on. First of

all, who among that bunch doesn't stack up right? Any suspicions, hunches and so forth?"

"Well, Anne Prochek, for one. I'm beginning to dislike that woman a lot. She was supposed to be on that stand when Brigdon was to speak. Then she slid out and Sue—Miss Brigdon—came after me..."

"I noticed that," Gazzi said. "Go on."

"All the way back on the plane she didn't react the way any decent woman would. Dammit, I can't put it in words, but you'd think she would show a little more understanding, or be more..."

"In other words," said Gazzi with restrained violence, "she showed up a little as the cold-blooded little bitch she really is!"

Valier was startled at his vehemence. "Sounds like you know something I don't."

"We'll get to that. But another thing," he veered off on a completely different tack, "there's one other in our not so pretty picture. See anything of your ex-buddy Martinez these days?"

VALIER put the car in a looping curve and tried to figure what that query meant. True, Martinez and he had not been together much since they had arrived at U.N.U. Their offices and quarters were widely separated. U.N.U. was a big place. Of

course they really hadn't tried too hard, either.

"What do you mean?" Valier asked.

"Well, for one thing he's been keeping pretty steady company with La Prochek."

"So? Nothing sinister about that is there? After all, they've known each other before. Seems to me they were on a pretty friendly basis when we arrived from Australia."

"Sure they were, and still are. Point is, he's been dropping out of sight now and then and nobody, including our bunch, can seem to find out where he's been."

"Aw, you're off base there. Martinez always was a boy with the ladies. Thinks he has to live up to his Latin background or something. He probably has a few nice dishes stacked away in cupboards built for two."

"No, it's not that. We've got a good idea where his little black book addresses are. And another thing, he's been seen on a number of weekends at Pleasure Island. With, guess who?"

"Prochek?"

"Right. And here's the fast pitch. From there is where he drops out of sight. He never comes back to the mainland—openly. And yet a couple of days later he's back here."

Valier thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Funny, all right. But I can't seem to see Martinez as any menace

except to a happy marriage. He's never impressed me as being a deep enough thinker, or fanatic enough, to belong to a bunch of reactionary killers."

"Boy, have you got a lot to learn about people!"

"All right, so I'm stupid. But I'm not dumb enough to think this little joyride we're having is just for the fresh air. What do you want me to do?"

"O.K." Gazzi settled back. "First, turn around at the next bypass and head back to town. We don't want your little guardian angels missing you for too long."

FIRST THING is this: start seeing a little more of Martinez. Butter him up. Old friends shouldn't drift apart and all that stuff, you know. Hint around that you'd like to go on a real tear sometime..."

"I'm not much on that binge business and Martinez knows it."

"That's your problem; you can work it out. Make him think you've had a letdown about this Brigdon murder, and that you're disillusioned about things in general."

"That won't be too hard."

"And another thing—better smooth down Anne Prochek. She might be getting a real big dislike for you, too. You haven't been exactly friendly toward her lately."

"Why in hell should I cozy up to that tabby?"

"Because she and Martinez are usually together on these Island trips and you're going along to see the sights."

"Oh, fine! Two men and a dame out on the town."

"Two men and two dames, you mean."

Valier shot an incredulous look at Gazzi's bland visage. "Who in the devil could I drag on a trip like that? I don't know..."

"What's the matter with Sue Brigdon? She's a pretty nice-looking girl, or haven't you noticed?"

VALIER almost let go of the wheel in his vast exasperation. "Pete, you're out of your mind! Now wait a minute and let me get a few things off my chest that you just don't seem to know about. First," he held up a finger, "Sue Brigdon doesn't care for Martinez. He tried his technique on her when I introduced them the first time we came out here. She froze up on him like an iceberg. Incidentally, that's just what she is anyway—an iceberg."

"Tried some of your own technique?" Gazzi asked.

"Nuts to you. Anyway, I don't think she's exactly pining away for me. And for sure she wouldn't go out on any social hop in which Prochek was included, not to mention Martinez.

"Second, her father was just brutally assassinated almost before her eyes. Do you

think any decent girl is going to feel like making a joint jump just after such a burying detail?

"Third, I don't feel like involving an innocent bystander in what might turn out to be a dangerous assignment. I can take care of myself, but I don't want to have a helpless girl along to protect, too."

Gazzi stirred restively. "Get that hand back on the wheel, Johnny, and keep your eyes on the road. You're a helluva driver."

"Now," Gazzi continued, "let's see if I can answer your objections. First of all, no woman really dislikes a good-looking man who makes a mild pass at her. She might not want to reciprocate, but you can't show me a dame who isn't at least flattered—even if she does put on the freeze act."

"Speaking from experience, I suppose."

"I've been around too, Johnny. Second, she's a normal, healthy girl, and it just might be that an evening out would be good therapy. After all, she can't stay in mourning the rest of her life and she's smart enough to rationalize her situation and come to the same conclusion you just did."

"Me? What conclusion?"

"You just said it. Disillusionment and a sort of to-hell-with-the-whole-thing feeling—get out and see some of the sights. From what I hear,

she's been keeping her nose pretty close to the desk settling her father's affairs and stuff like that."

THEY WERE getting close to town and Valier slowed automatically, frowning as his disturbed thoughts.

"Why would she go out with me?"

Gazzi sighed. "Look, fella, you've been closer to her than anyone else these last weeks. Maybe you feel you don't rate with her, but you might be surprised at how much of an impact you've been on her life."

That might be true, Valier reflected. He had been seeing a lot of Sue during the hectic weeks following the disaster. He had been with her through all the grilling that the Federal Police had instigated for all witnesses of the explosion. He had also been more or less involved in some general questions relative to settling the estate and, looking back, it seemed that Sue had taken it for granted that he should be there to help.

"Stop a few blocks from your place," said Gazzi.

"Check."

The small car snaked quietly into the almost deserted side streets near the University.

"You still haven't given me a good reason for involving Sue in what might be a dangerous trip."

"Better pull over here," said Gazzi. They stopped in

the shadow of a large apartment building not far from Valier's quarters.

"LOOK, JOHNNY, you said Sue Brigdon was an iceberg. Ever stop to think about icebergs?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"An iceberg is pretty impressive but there's a lot more to it than you see on the surface."

"Very pretty figure of speech, Mister Gazzi. So what?"

"Just this: I happen to know that Sue Brigdon has a lot more jets than just a single seater. Don't worry about playing nursemaid for her; she's got a lot of what it takes, plus some potent connections. Now get going; we can't stay here all night. You've got a lot of things to do and time's a'wastin'. See you around."

Valier stepped to the curb and the turbine whirred on a higher note as the red tail lights moved up the street and out of sight. He jammed his hands in his coat pockets and felt a large flat object. Only then did he recall the pint of whiskey. He walked toward his apartment in some anticipation. He could really use that pint. This was definitely one of those times.

V

THE CAMPAIGN to get on a friendly basis with Martinez was not

difficult. Valier made it a point to find out something of his former associate's everyday habits. And then, not too regularly as to be obvious, he ate at a cafe where Martinez dropped in. After bumping into him by seeming accident several times, it became rather a natural thing for the two to have luncheon dates. Their talk was casual, and they began to resume at least a semblance of the former camaraderie of school days and service in Australia.

Anne Prochek was a tougher proposition. After Brigdon's death she was kept on—for at least a temporary interval—by the appointed mediocrity who attempted to fill Professor Brigdon's place. Evidently, the power politics responsible for Anne Prochek's appointment in the first place was still potent. Valier invented several excuses concerning minor appropriations for his department just so he could visit the president's office. Anne was calmly impersonal and he was temporarily baffled in his attempts to get on a more cordial basis. Physically she seemed tense and thinner, and Valier had some misgivings about his suspicions of her. There might be a possibility that her disappearance from the stand at the time of the explosion was just an accident. As for Gazzi's remarks about her keeping company with Martinez on Pleasure Island jaunts—well, after all,

there was nothing wrong in two young people liking each other and doing things together. So he rationalized, and it helped to make his efforts a little more genuine.

His chance came one evening and provided the unexpected pleasure of being a johnny-on-the-spot hero. He came out of the drugstore after picking up some cigarets and decided to stroll down toward Grogan's, have a quick one and see if Gazzi might be on the premises. Since their first meeting, this had been regular routine as Valier's phone was considered a poor risk.

VALIER turned from the bar after the first sip of his drink and was startled to see Anne Prochek in one of the booths. She was backed up against a wall partition, trying to avoid the advances of a burly individual whose intake of alcohol had given him an urgent biologic drive. Valier assessed the situation and at the same instant Anne's eyes found his and he could read the appeal as strong as a spoken word. Without hesitation, he grabbed up his drink and sauntered over, elbowed the tough out of the way and dropped into the seat.

"Sorry I was late, Anne; got held up at the last moment." He paid no attention to Muscles, whose slow reflexes had not caught up with the change in the situation.

Finally Muscles came out of his trance, forehead corrugated in anger, and he bent forward truculently.

"Just who asked you t' butt in, punk?" A large paw crumpled the lapel on Valier's jacket.

Valier casually tossed good bonded whiskey into the face above him. Muscles released his grip, took a step backward, gasped and wiped his streaming eyes. A stiff jab to the stomach doubled him up and before he could straighten up Valier had stepped out of the booth, firmly grasped two large ears and brought a knee up to the point of Muscles' chin. At this point Large and Ugly lost all interest in the proceedings.

"Too bad he has a glass chin," observed Valier in the direction of the bartender.

"You two had better blow outa here," said the bartender. "I'll take over. Don't want any troopers coming in."

Valier hesitated. "Sure there won't be any trouble about this?"

"Nope. Jake here has had his evening workout, only this time he was tagged." The bartender had a sadistic chuckle. "Very pretty, Mister, very pretty. Now beat it."

OUTSIDE they walked a dozen steps in silence.

"Feeling all right, Anne?"

"Oh, I'm fine," she shrugged. "But I guess I owe you some thanks, Mr. Valier."

"Mr. Valier?"

"Uh, thanks, Johnny." Her smile was more genuine than it had been on previous occasions. "You know, I never suspected you could move so fast. You are a lot more—well, I..."

"Deceptive?"

"Formidable is more like it." Her face sobered as if at the thought.

"It's none of my business, and you're welcome to push my nose back where it should be, but I'm curious. . ."

"Well, I guess I got stood up. I was supposed to meet Bill Martinez back there ten minutes ago." She shrugged again. "I can't imagine what kept him. Mind waiting around here a few minutes?" He should be along."

Valier turned to look back at the bar entrance and just then Martinez came out and spotted them. He strode in their direction rapidly.

"Some sort of a blowoff back there. Hi, Anne. Sorry I'm late. Thought that was you, Johnny. Where did..."

"Well, he didn't pick me up," said Anne Prochek a trifle grimly. "I snagged *him* and a good thing for me, too." She gave Martinez a resume with some added touches.

"That was a real nice job, Johnny. How I mean—Well, I know you'll take a drink and all that, but..."

VALIER saw an opportunity to lay some groundwork. "Fact is, I've slipped into bad habits." He grinned

a little crookedly. "Getting restless and bored, I guess."

"A drink does help."

"So I've found."

"Well, why don't you two come on up to my place. The least I can do is buy a drink."

"That's mighty tempting." Valier tried to make it sound casual. "But I don't want to butt in on a date."

"You've already butted in and I'm very grateful," Anne said as she took his arm. "Come on; you've earned it."

Martinez's place consisted of a very nice four-room apartment with evidences of lavish living. "Right snug little hole," Valier commented dryly.

"I try to make myself comfortable, Johnny. Bourbon and soda, I believe?"

"Fine."

Valier relaxed in an antique chrome and leather chair, took a deep swallow and sighed with genuine satisfaction.

"You know, Johnny, what you need is a good old-fashioned binge."

"Maybe," admitted Valier. "Trouble is, I'm one of those guys that never knows how to start one gracefully." He took another swallow but did not miss a covert glance between the other two.

"Look, fella," Martinez said, "why don't you come along with Anne and me this weekend? Do you a world of good."

"Come along where?"

"Pleasure Island. You must have heard of it."

VALIER looked searchingly at the ice cubes in his glass. "Oh, I've heard of it all right. It's just that I never wanted to make the effort alone."

"Come on, live it up a bit, Mister."

Anne Prochek spoke up: "What he means, Billy, he'd be odd man." And Valier nodded; this was perfect.

"Well, ask a girl, dammit. I've got some good candidates if you'd like me to set it up for you."

"You know me, Bill. My feet get all tangled up with a strange gal."

"Don't you know anyone?"

Valier took another sip. "I might get up enough nerve to ask Sue Brigdon, but she's..."

"Rather a cool prospect isn't she, John?" drawled Anne. "Not that I'd object if she wanted to go, you understand, but after her father's death, so recent and all, she might not want to celebrate exactly."

"Now there you're wrong," Martinez broke in. "Maybe she needs a change of scene. Do her good. Why don't you ask her?"

Valier concealed his exultation under an outward show of reluctance. "Can't do any harm; I'll try it. You folks sure you want us to butt in on your plans?"

"You're not butting in,

Johnny," Martinez smiled. "Couldn't think of anyone I'd rather have along. Right, Anne?"

"Of course, we'd be delighted to have you—both."

And again that covert glance between the two.

VI

FIFTY YEARS before, Pleasure Island had been a sleepy little resort of not more than a dozen one-story buildings. A casual summer tourist trade was the only disturbance. But, during the years that followed, several dubious characters, with much more money and influence than morals, had moved in and a glittering transition began.

In the present era, the town was still there—submerged in a welter of bars, gambling houses and gaudy hotels, with a duly-appointed set of figure heads labeled as mayor, police chief, etc. The area enjoyed a political immunity that baffled the several states adjoining the lake. The real rulers of Pleasure Island were not generally known, but that they were all-powerful was clearly evident. The federal police were still at an impasse, and lacked any specific motive to move in and clean house. Meanwhile, it became fashionable—and tinged with a delightful spice of danger—for a dizzy segment of society and they flocked in. The set-up had a

counterpart in ancient history; Las Vegas, now just another ghost town.

Valier glanced down at Sue Brigdon, who was attached to his arm firmly, and smiled. "Well, what do you think?"

Sue Brigdon looked around. Anne Prochek and Martinez were several paces ahead on the sidewalk which crept along an almost unbroken facade of plush bars and gambling houses. "It's rather over-powering," Sue said, and clasped Valier's arm a bit tighter.

Thousands of people swarmed in and out of the buildings and a subdued roar of voices and laughter made ordinary conversation almost inaudible. The cold blue of evening was dispelled by the glare of countless neon signs and as a continuous parade of ornate establishments moved past the blasts of music which spewed forth had an *almost* physical impact.

"Look, Sue, I sure hope I did the right thing in asking you to come along," Valier began.

SUE BRIGDON interrupted with a warm smile, "Quit worrying, John. I wanted to come. I'm finding it very fascinating. It's just, oh, so different. It takes a little time to get accustomed..."

"Hey, you people," Martinez broke in. He and Anne had edged back to where they were standing. "I've got a

particular spot I want to take you. It's up ahead a couple of doors. Get ready to hop off."

They glided on for another hundred feet.

"Here we go, the *Rose Palace*." Martinez hustled them off the slidewalk and through a glassed archway. They had time to note the richly-flowered pattern worked into the glass. Then they were walking down a short hallway that was a living bower of roses of every variety.

Suddenly, a vast room opened before them. It was a lush garden area with carpeting that had all the texture of living grass. Trees, bushes and flowering shrubs were arranged with geometric precision, forming aisles down which waitresses hurried carrying trays of drinks and food. In the center of the room a fountain threw sparkling spray that broke up into rainbows of mist under a small artificial sun high up in the dome. Around the room were small, almost private, alcoves with living foliage forming their enclosures.

Martinez smiled at their astonished stares and turned as the headwaiter came up. "A table for four, Jerry, in the usual spot."

As they were seated Valier remarked feebly, "Some dump." His voice was remote—he was more than slightly awed.

Anne Prochek turned to

Sue. "This is one of the less pretentious places, but Billy and I thought it might do for a starter." She said it too sweetly.

"It's quite overpowering," said Sue Brigdon. She looked vaguely troubled but smiled determinedly.

MARTINEZ scowled and seemed about to say something when a waitress arrived to take their order. Valier took one look, reddened, and fixed his eyes on a menu. The waitress was young, attractive, and almost nude. Her costume consisted of four medium-sized roses, placed at strategic spots, linked by wisps of some chiffon-like material.

Martinez gave their orders for drinks. The waitress acknowledged the order with business-like efficiency and then hurried away, unconcerned with the effect her near nudity had produced.

Sue Brigdon broke the silence. "Do they all...ah, dress like that?" Her voice had a slight raw edge.

"They have rather less in some of the other places," Martinez replied with a grin.

"I suppose one shouldn't be too shocked." Valier tried to be offhand. "After all, the bathing beaches..." He broke off and tried to sneak a side glance at Sue. only to find that she was also eyeing him. They both colored again and looked away.

"Oh, relax, you two." Anne

Prochek giggled and began offering cigarets around the table.

The drinks were soon brought by their unclothed Hebe. After they had clinked glasses to Martinez's 'cheers', the embarrassed tension began to crack. Two drinks later, Valier was able to look with casual appreciation at their shapely server as he ordered the fourth round. Anne and Sue were deep in an animated chatter about the latest antics of the female head of the anthropology department at U.N.U., while Valier and Martinez began to reminisce about their undergraduate days at Army Tech.

WHEN THE fourth round arrived Anne Prochek broke off and remarked to no one in particular: "I'm getting hungry."

Martinez glanced at his watch. "Just about this time she always gets hungry. How about you, Sue? Johnny?"

"I'm feeling a few empty spots," Sue replied.

Valier nodded. "Me, too."

"There's the *Silver Rocket* around the corner, or *Club Casino*," said Martinez.

"How about this place?" inquired Valier. "Don't they serve good meals?"

"Oh, quite good," Martinez said. "Just thought you folks might like a change of scene."

Sue Brigdon laughed delightfully. "I think Johnny likes the service here." And

they all laughed at Valier's sheepish denial.

"As a matter of fact, the food is excellent here," said Anne. "We can drop in on some of the other places after dinner and see the sights." And with that issue settled, the girls began to make collecting motions.

"Come on, Sue, powder room down to the right," Anne announced.

As the two men settled back in their chairs again Martinez clinked the ice in his glass. "Quite a nice kid when you get to know her."

"Yeah, she sure is. Seems like a different person tonight." Valier sighed. The alcohol was warming him, and he was thinking it would be mighty pleasant to be alone with Sue Brigdon for a little while.

"This outing was a pretty good prescription, eh, Johnny?" Martinez's voice was gently insinuating. "Seems to have gotten over her troubles a little bit, doesn't she?"

VALIER withdrew far enough from his dream to answer: "Oh, some, but she's still set on calling in the..." Abruptly he broke off to silently curse his liquor-loosened tongue.

"On doing *what*?" Martinez leaned over the table.

"Oh, nothing much," Valier replied lamely. But now he had to say something. "Seems to think that the Feds missed

a couple of leads that she thought were important."

"Well, I hope they find out who did it," said Martinez firmly.

"Oh, hell, Bill, let's not talk about it now. I think Sue wants to forget it for tonight, and I mark my ballot likewise." And Valier swiveled his head in a wide arc.

"That's the stuff. Looking for something, or someone?"

"Yeah, where's the can?"

Martinez laughed. "Closest one is just down the aisle to your left. Can't miss it."

"Coming along?"

"No, I'll hold the fort 'till the girls get back."

"O.K., back in a flash."

As he strolled toward the men's room Valier reflected that he'd better keep a strict guard on his tongue. After all, he was there to get a line on Martinez and Prochek—not the other way around. As a detective, he'd make a good rocket tech.

The green-tiled and chrome washroom was deserted when he entered but a moment later a stocky man, evidently feeling no pain, lurched through the door. He grunted something at Valier and began splashing sketchily in one of the washbasins. Valier finished drying his hands under a combination air jet and UV tube and turned to leave. The stocky individual also decided to effect an exit at the same moment and the two collided in the doorway.

"Who ya pushin'?" de-

manded the stocky man. He was drying his hands on a rumpled handkerchief.

"Sorry, friend, my fault," Valier said and bowed. "After you." He turned his back to the door. A blow behind his left ear caused his legs to buckle. Through a foggy pain that seemed to paralyze his voice and volition he was conscious only of being hustled solicitously through the doorway and out to the street. Dimly he heard someone say, "M' friend got kinda sick and we're gettin' him out inta th' air."

A black three-wheeler stood at the curb, its turbine throbbing. Valier tried desperately to turn his head, and partly succeeded. He thought he saw, just for a moment, Sue Brigdon's white face and the uncertain wavering outline of her body running from the entrance toward him. Then he slid down a long chute into velvet blackness.

VII

VALIER had the feeling of being caught up in the gory death throes of a thriller. Enter the fiendish mastermind at last. It was all so pat, he couldn't repress a slightly hysterical chuckle.

The placid-looking nondescript in a technician's smock looked up at Valier from his encephelograph in disapproval. Then he ripped the taped

electrodes from Valier's skull with a casual cruelty that was worse than the pain the act caused. Valier grunted and surged against the straps that held him to the floor-bolted chair.

"Feeling amused, Mister?" The tech lifted a communicator from its cradle, dull black eyes still on his victim. Without further preamble he spoke: "Tell the boss I've got some readings."

The transmitter squeaked tinnily.

"No. Could use hyponarc and get some information, but..." his face shifted to negative. "Uh—pain threshold's too low, could get messy." He paused. "Yeah, O.K., if she wants me. I'll hang on."

He dangled the instrument, watching Valier with all the verve of a flycatcher toad ruminating on its next meal.

The transmitter squeaked again and the tech lifted it to his ear. "Yes, Mam, I understand you wanted me to get started with the hyponarc." He listened intently. "But look, Miss Prochek, I..." he stopped as if he had bitten off a chunk of tongue. His pallid face turned visibly red.

The instrument squawked venomously in the sudden silence. Valier distinctly heard the words, "...imbecilic nitwit...no names," and a small furious voice clicked off.

A SENSE of accomplishment washed over Valier.

All along he had tried to evaluate a foreboding that Anne Prochek was a phony. Just the same, it was a shock to realize that a generally-pleasant and attractive woman was a wheel in this group. She must have known all about Professor Brigdon's assassination right down to the exact moment the explosive was to be triggered. This, for sure, meant he would never be allowed to live after he had been pumped of all useful knowledge.

With compressed lips the tech turned to a wall cabinet and pulled out a hypodermic and a bottle full of pink liquid. He filled the syringe and, with almost the same motion, jabbed it into the upper muscle of Valier's left arm. Then he looked at his wrist watch, leaned back against the table with arms crossed and assumed a stolid vigil of his victim's face. Only a tooth-clenched lower lip betrayed his inner agitation.

The door soon opened to a jet-propelled fury that had small resemblance to the Anne Prochek Valier had known before. Her face was a white mask but she wasted no further time in abuse of the tech. "Hasn't he gone under yet?"

"N-no, it takes about five minutes after injection. Look, I didn't mean to spill your name..."

"Shut up!" she fairly spit the words. "That's done with."

He's not going any further anyway."

"You," Anne Prochek continued and swung toward Valier. "You can do it the easy way. If you have any big heroic ideas, forget them. There are many ways to get information, many of them highly unpleasant."

VALIER wanted to stall for time, but he couldn't find any good reason to. "What's the big idea? I'm slugged, kidnapped and wake up on this horror movie set with this jerk playing the part of a mad scientist. Poor casting, too, if you're interested."

"Shut up!" Anne turned away from Valier and addressed the tech: "How long now?"

"Two minutes, more or less."

"We haven't got all night. There's a bunch of helios quartering the area and that looks like trouble."

Valier kept his face impassive, but a sudden hope surged within him. There might be every reason to stall for time now. If the biology boys back at the training camp were right his neutralization shots should counteract the hyponarc he had been filled with.

Almost as if she had read his thoughts Anne Prochek said, "I don't know. He might be tougher than he looks. I've heard of preconditioning against this stuff. Hmm,

might be. I guess we'll pile it on and make sure." She opened the door and called, "All right, bring that little dope in here."

Sue Brigdon was pushed roughly into the room by a character with all the lesser attributes of the gorilla tribe. She was shoved into another chair similar to the one Valier occupied.

"Sue!" Valier could barely speak.

Sue Brigdon was strapped down with almost frantic speed.

"Now then," Anne Prochek's voice was level and dispassionate. "We want names, places and any information or plans that your little group of kiddie cops have made, and we want you to start talking fast." She looked at the tech. "Time?"

"Should be."

"All right, start talking. First, you're a member of the Ethiconers; we know that. Who's your boss?"

VALIER fought down a momentary panic and faint drowsiness. Was the drug working after all?

"Never heard of them. By what right are you kidnapping and assaulting a helpless girl and keeping us prisoners here? You can't get away with it?"

Anne Prochek looked at him in disgust. "Wake up, Mister. You're not getting anyplace with that line! Answer me or we start working

on your girl friend's anatomy. It's up to you, Johnny boy."

Gorilla puss responded to a silent cue. He produced a septic knife, grinned toothily, and placed one of his big hands on Sue Brigdon's head.

Valier felt the sweat bead up in his armpits. He was sure that the narcosync was not going to work, but he had no defense against the torture that Sue Brigdon was about to undergo. Almost as if she sensed what was going on in his mind, Sue strained her head sideways to look at him. Was that a wink? He couldn't be sure but his every instinct told him to stall, lie, admit half-truths. He remembered Prochek's remark about the helios in the neighborhood. Maybe he could string this out. Time, time!

"Uh, I'm not a member, but I've heard...say, get that ape away from her right now or I'm not giving out any information."

ANNE PROCHEK'S eyes glittered and she motioned her thug away with a preemptory toss of her head. "Keep talking."

"Well, I was approached by this Air Force major..."

"Name?"

"Michaels," he yielded reluctantly. After all, Mike was pretty well known, and a small truth might make a big lie go over better.

"That checks. Go on."

Valier was sweating at full speed. The cold beads were

trickling down his sides to stop where his trouser tops tightened about his waist. How much did this infernal woman know? "There's Pete somebody. I'm not sure about his last name."

"Where is your headquarters?"

"Honest, I'm not sure..."

Anne Prochek looked significantly at her thug.

Valier stuttered, "Hold on now, I—I *think* it's near the U.N.U. campus, but I had to get in a car blindfolded one night to go there. They don't seem to trust new guys until they're indoctrinated. But the place looked like any ordinary home on the inside..." He sweated on, almost babbling, spinning out a detailed description that was as coherent a mixture of lies and semi-facts as he could bring to mind.

IN THE HALL outside, a murmur of voices and rapidly scuffing footsteps rose to an intruding pitch. Valier stopped momentarily while Anne Prochek turned away. The door opened and gorilla puss's twin thrust his repellent countenance around the edge.

"Boss? Mr. Martinez says we gotta jet outa here. Those helios are all over the place..." and he jerked out of sight as if on the end of a huge elastic band. Then Martinez stood in the doorway, a long-snouted auto pistol in his hand.

"Let's blow, Anne. They've managed to get a line to this place. How, I don't know." His eyes rested momentarily on Sue Brigdon. "I could make a good guess though."

"What about these two? We can't take them with us."

"Why, I suppose we'll have to—what's that archaic word? Oh yes, liquidate any witnesses before we leave." Martinez hefted the pistol negligently. "Get going, Anne. Wait for me at the car. It's just inside the tunnel entrance."

At the door Anne Prochek paused to say: "Make it fast then." As if to punctuate her remark the high, rising whine of helio rotors was heard.

"I'm going to be a little sporting about this, Sue and Johnny." Martinez motioned to the white-faced tech. "Unstrap them. I don't like to shoot sitting game."

As they were loosened, Martinez waved them over against the wall next to the enameled bench which held the encephalograph. The tech sidled toward Martinez who was still in the doorway. The auto pistol was coming up slowly to level when the suddenly-intensified whir of helio rotors seemed to concentrate just outside the room's one frosted window.

Glass abruptly cascaded inward with a musical crash and a small black sphere bounced on the floor and rolled almost to Martinez's feet.

FOR A MOMENT, all motion seemed immobilized, except for Sue Brigdon who pounced like a cat on Valier with a rolling football block which sent both of them solidly to the floor.

"Eyes closed tight, bury your face," she hissed in his ear.

Valier obeyed numbly and a split second later the room was bathed in raw, intolerable light that washed through even to their shielded vision.

"O.K., all over! Let's take 'em." Sue Brigdon rolled over and onto her feet with the speed of a professional wrestler. Valier arose much more slowly, shaken and still partially dazed. But there was no need to hurry. Both Martinez and the tech were on their knees, hands making clumsy wiping motions at streaming, tight-shut eyes. The tech was making little bleating noises in his throat but Martinez was whispering a stream of obscenities that ended when Valier kicked him savagely in the ribs and scooped up the discarded auto pistol.

The tech had somehow oriented himself enough to make a wavering attempt at the door. Valier clipped him neatly behind the ear with the barrel of the pistol, then poked a cautious head into the corridor. No one was in sight.

As Valier turned back into the room he saw Sue talking urgently into her wristwatch. "What the devil? Are you all

right, Sue?" She waved him aside impatiently, and continued a business-like stream of directives: "Looks like we missed one of the top dogs, that Prochek woman. Scout around. Look for some sort of concealed tunnel. She might come busting out in a ground car." She paused and nodded. "Yes, that's right. We're on the second floor. That flash bomb worked beautifully. But take it easy, it looks like the rest of the bunch got out. We have Martinez and a stooge tech." She paused again. "O.K., we'll see you in a moment. Out."

Valier was still staring "Is that one of the new transceivers? How did... how do you—say, what really goes on?"

SUE BRIGDON produced a slightly superior smirk. "Let's sit down, shall we? The girls will be here in a minute." She shuddered slightly. "But not in those damn chairs, and keep an eye on our friends here—not that I think they've got any trouble left in them for awhile, but just in case." She puffed a cigaret into life and offered one to Valier.

"All right," he demanded, "let's take it from the beginning. Last time I saw you was in that gilt-edged dump on Pleasure Island. Someone laid me out in that phony scuffle and next thing I wake up in this chamber of horrors with that tech making like a wigpicker."

Sue Brigdon squinted at him through a cloud of smoke. "For quite some time," she began slowly, "there have been several different groups involved in a sort of behind-the-scene power struggle in the government. Your outfit is one. I belong to another."

"What do you know of my outfit, as you call it?" Valier stamped out his cigaret.

She paid no attention to the interruption. "For the last six years, my group has been outwardly lobbying for trained personnel in government. We've also been developing our own undercover agents to get a line on such characters as Prochek and Martinez here." She pointed a trim foot at Martinez, who still seemed disinterested in all external proceedings. "We have a hard core of—and it probably sounds melodramatic—vigilantes. Most of them are girls who are athletes and come from families that are rather well off. And they make a very excellent emergency striking power."

Valier opened his mouth but she hurried on. "Oh, I know what you're thinking. But we're pretty legal, or sort of extra-legal anyway. There's a liaison between our directors and the Ethiconers. Or didn't they tell you that?"

VALIER grunted sourly. Major Michaels' hint came to mind. He suspected, how-

ever, there was a lot more he didn't know.

"There's some pretty fair scientific brains in our bunch, mere women though we be. This," she indicated the minute transmitter on her wrist, "and this," she dug vigorously in her right ear and fished out a tiny button for inspection. "Damn thing itches." She replaced it. "I've got several extra power packs concealed on me," she flushed faintly, "and never mind where, Mr. Valier."

Valier grinned. "Strikes me I haven't thanked you yet for saving my hide." He was suddenly serious. "Sue, will you please forgive me for being a bigheaded stuck-up know-it-all? I just didn't figure on anyone else outside my own group." he stopped and gulped down some more pride.

"Oh, I don't think you're such a know-it-all," Sue murmured archly, but her smile was warm enough to offset the words. "It might help your morale to know that Pete Gazzi works very closely with my group. You know him."

"Sure, but after this it's probably back to the missile plotting board for me."

"Don't say that." Sue's tone was delightfully warm. "You were right on top of breaking a lot of this stuff. You can't foresee..."

She stopped in mid-sentence as a trim blonde, dressed in casual shorts, en-

tered the room. The blonde was incongruously cradling a stubby riot gun in her bare arms.

"Everything all right, Sue honey?"

Sue smiled, flew to the other girl and began hugging her energetically. "Oh, Cora dear, you don't know how glad I was to hear that helio and see that heavenly flasher come in through that glass." Abruptly her poise collapsed and she began to sniffle a bit.

VALIER was moving protectively toward them but Cora shook her head and he moved aside feeling rather helpless. Nevertheless, he felt better realizing that the recently revealed superwoman could break down even a little bit. It somehow made Sue Brigdon a lot more approachable and—well, damn it—loveable. His speculations were broken off as a familiar face poked through the doorway.

"Pete Gazzi! Am I glad to see you!"

"Hi, Johnny." Gazzi was elaborately casual. "Well, you were on the right spot as usual. Almost over your ears, too."

"Never mind that," Valier said. "We've lost Prochek."

"Yeah, sure." Gazzi turned to watch several attractive young ladies who were snapping light cuffs and leg chains on Martínez and the tech. The groggy pair were hustled through the door as

fast as the short leg chains would permit.

"Well, the federal boys can take care of them now. That Martinez was a sort of buddy of yours wasn't he?" Gazzi turned to face Valier, smiling broadly. "That's a joke, son." And he began to bustle efficiently about the small room.

Sue Brigdon had recovered from her emotional binge and was busy with compact and lipstick. The room had become crowded with a number of girls, who were beginning a systematic inventory of its contents. Gazzi and Valier moved out into the hall to get out of the way.

"Look here, Pete," Valier began, "we're not at the end of this bunch of assassins yet. How about Anne Prochek? Aren't we going to..."

"Relax, we've had a radar tail and a helio on her since she left here."

"You mean..."

"Sure. We let her make the break. She probably figures she got away clean."

VALIER nodded, beginning to understand. Martinez, while an important figure in the gang, was certainly not the only one. And Anne Prochek seemed important enough to probably know who the top bosses were. He turned exultantly to Gazzi.

"Maybe we can get a line on the top cookie."

Gazzi nodded soberly. "We've already rounded up a lot of smaller groups and

most of the local leaders. This wasn't the only operation this evening. We had to spread ourselves pretty thin, and that's why Sue's group was called in on this deal. We don't plan to stop here but keep right on climbing until we reach the top."

Cora, who seemed to be the leader of the feminine rescue force, called: "Mr. Gazzi, we've heard from the spotter helio. The car was abandoned in a suburb of Franklin. They had an alert out there ahead of time, figuring she was heading in that direction."

"Man, she's really making tracks! Hope those ground tails got on her."

Cora's smile was impish. "We're way ahead of you. We've got three and...hold on a moment." She ducked back inside the room.

Valier and Gazzi followed. They found Sue Brigdon hunched over a tiny communicator. She held up a hand to forestall their questions and continued to speak into the minute transmitter.

"All right, Jane, you're coming in fine... Where?... Are you sure?" Sue turned to the silent group about her. "Prochek doubled back. She just checked out in a fast three-wheeler." Sue returned suddenly to her distant operative. "Yes, Jane... O.K., hold on." She flipped a toggle switch. "Check points, attention! North highway 17, Mercedes, watch for a three-wheeler, dove gray, blue

stripe, number 4Y17-002 occupant one woman," and continued with a quick sketch of Anne Prochek's appearance.

SUE MOVED another toggle. "Helio number 1, Ollie, barrel over high. Get a radar lock when Mercedes gives you the wiggle.

"Anybody got a smoke?" Sue asked of the room at large but looked at Valier. He handed her a cigaret in fascinated silence. Outside a helio motor snorted into life.

Sue looked up. "Cora, hold out a helio for me, please?"

"Don't you think you've had enough excitement for once, honey?"

"Not me," Sue's jaw clenched tightly. "I'm going to get in on the final curtain for that harpy."

"I'm with you," said Valier.

"That egg beater. better hold three," Gazzi drawled.

Cora threw up her hands. "All right, all right. I'm just the taxi starter here." She called to one of the girls and gave orders to have a helio ready for "two nitwits and their nurse." The transmitter murmured and Sue was intent again.

"Right, Ollie, don't get too close. We're coming up with the heavy stuff. We'll keep in touch all the way." She snapped off. "Ollie's picked her up and she's headed for Westshire, that swank section. She turned off 17 onto a local road. Let's go."

VIII

THE HELIO carrying Sue Brigdon, Valier and Gazzi lead a compact group of similar craft over a checkered countryside.

"Looks like everybody but the Marines are in on the act," Valier observed.

"Yeah," said Gazzi, "most of our boys, plus the FBI, plus the Federal Air Police. Quite an armada."

"What are we going after, the Azee army?" Valier was feeling neglected. So far, he had been more of a foil than a hero and he seemed to be going along as a necessary evil; something that couldn't be politely dumped and left behind. But then Sue Brigdon turned and smiled at him. After that he felt much better.

They were almost in visual contact with Ollie, up higher in her waiting circle. The speaker made tinny sounds: "She's turned into a side road...looks like one of those posh country estates...several buildings. Yep. Come a running!"

Gazzi had been examining the area minutely. "This," he announced, "is the regal estate of everybody's friend. Your friend and mine, the friend of every voter in all the fifty-one states. Dan Garrison is the name."

THE HELIOS were sifting down from every quarter. Sue was determined to be in

the forefront and she dropped the 'copter like a stone, slanting down to the broad green of the lawn in front of the big house. At the last moment the giant rotors beat furiously and the ship settled with a resounding thump. All around helios were coming in for landings as Valier, Sue and Gazzi raced for the entrance of the mansion.

Valier discovered that he had the edge on speed over his companions and was a good five yards in front, outdistancing elementary battle tactics and common sense as well. Those qualifications for staying alive were suddenly brought to mind. A sudden stinging pain in the calf of his left leg made him stumble and he became aware of the ominous whispers in the air that were bullets. Reflexes took over and he dropped to the ground with a yell at Sue and Gazzi. But they were already down and squirming for cover.

A quick look showed Valier his wound to be a trivial gash, and he had a remorseful surge of concern for Sue. She seemed to be unhurt, as was Gazzi. Both had managed to find cover behind two large oaks, providently rooted a few yards from the front of the huge house. Valier edged over to join them.

Other forces had landed and deployed. A gas howitzer opened up with mournful booms. Half a dozen windows tinkled into ruin and gray-

brown clouds of non-lethal vesicant billowed from the openings. Fire from the house slackened a few spasmodic bursts, then ceased as a short string of men, coughing furiously, tumbled out of the suddenly opened door with their hands high.

BEHIND THEM, Valier heard Cora's voice: "Wait for your respirators, you nitwits." She came up in a zigzagging scurry with three extra masks.

"Thanks, Cora." Valier managed a sheepish grin. "I guess you're really the nursemaid for this bunch." They huddled behind the broad tree trunk, put on the masks and made sure, at Cora's insistence, that the valves and lightweight tanks were functioning properly.

"Now listen, little chums," Cora asserted her leadership, "let's not make anymore dumb frontal assaults like the one you just pulled. We've got lots of help. In fact, the professionals at this sort of thing are handling operations just now."

Small groups of well scattered men converged from the three visible sides, scuttled across the open stretches and dropped close against the walls of the house. Before any of the remaining defenders could concentrate their fire on these, the gas guns had riddled almost every window.

Meanwhile, the small group

of half-strangled captives were being led to the far edge of the lawn. Valier and Gazzi looked them over sharply but they were all strangers; a nondescript collection of thugs.

"All six-bit bums," Gazzi pronounced disgustedly.

"That means the top boys are still in there..." Valier began.

"Or that they weren't there in the first place," said Sue.

"Well, we know for sure that Anne Prochek went in."

"What do we do now?" asked Gazzi. "Sit here and make like we bought a ticket to the show?"

"Patience, children," Cora said sweetly.

The invasion forces were beginning to slip in through gaping windows. A careful sortie suddenly dashed through the front entrance and disappeared. Muffled booming sounds indicated there was still some opposition, but a tense quiet soon set in.

"To hell with this," Valier announced stiffly. "I'm going in. I owe somebody a few lumps for what's been happening to me."

Sue and Gazzi were alongside of him as he made a limping sprint for the open doorway.

"Discipline's all shot in this outfit," said Cora. "Wait for baby."

THE ONCE-GRACIOUS gilded front hall was a

shambles, obscured by the muddy haze of gas. A brown-clad trooper regarded them owlshly through his mask.

"Watch out, there's still a little party going on out back." He moved closer for a better look. "Couple of them girl shock troopers, hey?" He shook his head with a what's-this-world-coming-to expression.

"Never mind, you ticket writer," Cora said tartly. "I'll bet this is all new stuff to you. I'm in command of this particular bunch of troopers, and if you want ID I'll show it. Now tell me, do they have any prisoners, and where are they?"

"Yes, Mam," the trooper said doubtfully. "There's a broad—uh, a gal upstairs but she's pretty badly shot up, and..."

They didn't wait for the rest of it. Sue was already heading up the stairs.

The woman on the tumbled bed was a pallid ghost of the once vital Anne Prochek. An Air Police captain was standing over her and had evidently been taking down some information. He looked up from his notebook inquiringly.

"Oh, hi, Cora."

"How bad?" Sue asked.

"Uh, I'm not a doctor, but it looks like she's had it. The captain moved between Sue and the bed. "No, don't look; it's not pretty. She stopped a gas grenade with her middle."

VALIER felt an irrational pity for the crumpled girl. Sue moved closer to him and almost unconsciously his arm went around her waist.

Pete Gazzi took up the slack. "Did she give any information, Captain?"

"Some. Not too coherent, but enough to pin the label on Garrison and a couple of others—fellow name of Wexel and another named Martinez."

"Him, we've got on ice," said Cora. "Along with some of the small fry."

"Do you have a doctor in this outfit, Captain?" Valier asked. "Somehow I feel we should..."

"The medical helio has been notified."

As if on cue, a slim man with the caduceus emblem on his uniform entered the room. He nodded briefly and motioned the others to wait in the hall. He was out in less than a minute.

"I can't do anything, and there's no point in moving her."

"How long?" Gazzi asked.

"Just a matter of minutes. You can go in."

Anne Prochek seemed smaller than ever and her face was just another patch of white against the linen of the bed. Then suddenly her eyes were open, enormous and calm, and she was looking straight at Valier.

"Did...did they get him? Did they get Dan?" Her voice was the barest whisper.

Valier felt his throat tighten and he spoke with some difficulty. "No, Anne, not that I know of." He looked inquiringly at the air police captain who shook his head. "No, Anne, not yet."

"They never will..." A spasm of pain stopped the hoarse whisper. Her eyes hardened and she forced out: "My Danny's just one jump ahead of any of you fumbblers."

Suddenly they recognized the relationship between Anne Prochek and Dan Garrison.

THE POLICE CAPTAIN bustled forward, his notebook much in evidence. "Where is he," he demanded. "If you have any knowledge of his hiding place you'd better start talking..." Gazzi nudged him aside.

"Save it, Captain; she'd never spill."

Footsteps clattered urgently in the hall, and then a wizened sergeant stood in the doorway. "Sorry, Captain, but Lieutenant Hake says it's most urgent." The captain stepped into the hall, and the receding mumble of tones came, "and the only place left is that concrete outbuilding back of the house.."

Anne Prochek had her eyes closed again, her breathing so shallow it was hard to discern any motion. The doctor laid a finger on her wrist and shook his head slightly.

Pete Gazzi wandered over to the window which had miraculously escaped the mortar fire. He peered out. "Seems to be something going on out back."

A group of troopers were closing in slowly around a small concrete block building. There were no windows in the structure and no outward signs of occupancy.

Suddenly the flat roof buckled in the middle and the two halves flew apart explosively. Then a continuous bellowing roar was everywhere and, riding an ever heightening pillar of fire, a black barrel-shaped aircraft whooshed out of the block-house like a jack-in-the-box.

"A jet-jumper," yelled Gazzi, his voice thinned to nothing by the din. In three seconds the craft was beyond their confined range of vision and the racket diminished to a final thunderclap. Another sound came from behind them; a thin, wild and triumphant voice that wheezed and fought a destroyed body. Anne Prochek was trying to raise up on the bed.

"Go, go, Darling. Don't let them—don't ever let them . . ." Voice and life left her simultaneously. She fell back slowly, almost gracefully, and the final huddle seemed incredibly small. The doctor drew the sheet over her face and methodically began to fill in a report form.

Gazzi was down the stairs, yelling for the air police cap-

tain. "Hey! Captain Porter! That was Dan Garrison in that ship."

Sue and Valier followed more slowly.

A TEMPORARY command post had been established on the terrace at the rear of Garrison's mansion. A tech corporal was speaking quietly into a field transmitter and watching a glowing screen. Captain Porter nodded to Sue and Valier as they came out of the house. "We were pretty sure that Garrison was holed up somewhere around here, and we've been expecting some kind of a break like this." He gestured to the screen where a tiny midge danced and weaved as it was held stubbornly in the pickup of some distant aircraft.

"He's really traveling, but so are some of the boys that we have out there. I don't think he's going to make it as easy as he. . ." He broke off and they all bunched closely around the screen.

The streaming dot that was Garrison became larger as the transmitting craft began to overtake it. A matter-of-fact voice came over the audio: " . . . he's out over the water now. Seems to have poured on all the kick he can. But that bucket was obsolete way yesterday. Hup! Here they are, ten o'clock high."

"The intercontinental strat-jets. We had them on standby just in case," explained Captain Porter.

The climax came with almost the same matter-of-fact detachment as displayed by the narrator's voice high over the vast millpond of Lake Michigan. Three slender needles dipped in large and lazy-looking arcs that served to bring them to the bottom of a curve that was right over Garrison's ship. For just a breath they seemed to hang there and then, still together, swung upward as if completing a gigantic stitch. One moment the fugitive ship was there, boring straight forward. The next moment a soundless sparkle of bril-

liance blinked on and off, to be replaced by a sluggishly climbing mushroom of dull smoke. Nothing came out of it.

Sue turned away, an overpowering weariness pulling at her trim body. Behind her she heard Captain Porter sigh, "Well, that's it."

A strong and welcome arm circled Sue's waist and she leaned gratefully into its understanding support.

"Let's go home, darling," said John Valier.



★ Next Time Around ★

The story of a rebel against the order of things in the future is a familiar one, but there's no end of possible angles upon it — new departures which give a different meaning to it — and Carl Knox has done just this in "The Four", with his tale of a rebel who *wanted* to be caught and punished. Kelly Freas has painted a fascinating cover for this yarn.

We get the secret of the Safq, too, this time, as L. Sprague de Camp brings the "Tower of Zanid" to a delightful and satisfactory conclusion — though, needless to say, certain characters are neither delighted nor satisfied. But this tale kept us on the edge of our seats even in the second reading, when we knew all.



the moon - good night!

by Mack Richards

Who'd have ever thought that Manned Satellite Number One could have been doomed half a century before it was built?

COMRADE MENSHIKOV was not really a Communist—not even of the modern school. Much as he might try to pretend that he was, nobody believed him. Nobody. Not even the United States Government.

Just how Menshikov became a high official in the government of the U. S. S. R. is incredible until we look into his background—then it is merely fantastic.

As a student attracted to the revolutionary movement, he managed to be such a complete non-entity that he never enjoyed arrest by the Czar's non-entirely-inefficient police. He studied, he attended meetings and listened, and now and then he would put in a word which drew brief nods as the others continued their intellectual explorations of Marx, Engles, and Plekhanov. Menshikov didn't seem to mind being ignored—he was more than willing to learn from the discourse of his betters.

In 1904, he discovered the new publication, smuggled into Russia, that came from the hand of a comrade named Lenin. Menshikov read and re-read each copy of *Vpered* until he could repeat the entire issue by heart. Then he started to memorize the great man's other works. At this point, his comrades began to find some use for him, and Pyotr Ivanovitch Menshikov had found a hero.

IN 1905, he took a small part in revolutionary action, as a result of which only flight to Finland saved him. And there he met the great Vladimir Ilyitch.

Lenin, may it be said, found that this human precursor of the tape recorder had his points. Comrade Menshikov had the right attitude of respect, without being servile—even though he rarely offered any opinion of his own. However, the young man's ability to quote the exact phrase at the right time was gratifying to say the least. This was the situation one evening, when, in the presence of more important comrades, Vladimir Ilyitch discussed the shortcomings of Plekhanov, who had written disapproval of the workers' taking up arms.

When one comrade defended the former mentor of Russian social revolution, Comrade Menshikov spoke up in the brief interval while Lenin was drawing breath for an oration. "Comrade Plekhanov talks like an imbecile," he said tentatively, "he..."

That was as far as Menshikov got. Vladimir Ilyitch Ulyanov leaped to his feet, a smile on his plain face, and wagged his finger under the younger revolutionary's nose. "You're entirely right, Pyotr Ivanovitch!" he began.

Comrade Menshikov leaned back in his chair in a glow of sheer delight and listened to his hero explain in detail,

every word of which was indelibly engraved on Menshikov's grey matter.

This, be it noted, might have had little effect upon history, even though Menshikov was a changed man when he bade his hero good night. No, it was some weeks later, when Lenin was expounding on state and revolution that it happened. The question was whether the proletariat could manipulate the existing governmental apparatus for the people's needs when they took power. Lenin posed the question and paused momentarily.

AND AT this moment, history quivered in the balance, as it were. Not that Menshikov's reply affected Lenin's answer to the question—the forthcoming ruler of Bolshevik Russia had the answer ready before he asked the question. But it was here that Menshikov leaned forward excitedly and said, "No! No! Blow it up and make the way for the new order of things!"

Again that wonderful smile wreathed his hero's face; again the finger wagged under his nose. "You are absolutely right Comrade Menshikov!" The great man placed his left hand affectionately on Menshikov's shoulder, and with the famous index finger of his right hand skyward, delivered what would soon become the offi-

cial and sacrosanct views of state and revolution.

A pity we do not know the exact date, the hour, the minute—that no photographers were present. For it was this moment that Manned Satellite One was doomed, over half a century before it was built.

Tovarisch Menshikov called himself a communist, but from this moment he was a fire-breathing anarchist of the old school. His one idea was: Blow it up and make way for the new order of things!

That, of course, is neither pure Democracy nor pure Communism of the Marx, Lenin, Stalin, or Krushev variety. And that is why the United States Government couldn't hold anything against the Soviet Government except a charge of pure stupidity. Because any fool could see that the Soviet Government couldn't have profited by what happened to the Satellite.

RETURNING to Russia before 1917, Menshikov—no longer a nonentity—was considered important enough for the Czar's police to ship off to Siberia. That he knew Stalin briefly is indicated by events; but why he elected to stay on in exile, studying and writing, remains obscure. Records show that his effusions amused the dictator enough for Stalin to see to it that Comrade Menshikov was

well cared for—but not ostentatiously. For all his defects, Stalin could appraise a man correctly at times.

It is noted that Comrade Stalin would bring up the name of this obscure exile at odd moments, usually to make a sarcastic jibe at his colleagues. "Iron Pants" Molotov took such things stiffly. Malenkov responded with the right sort of quivers. Kallinin bowed and smiled, as if with secret appreciation. But even Nikita Krushev had better sense than to voice the question that was like a chronic itch: *Who is Comrade Menshikov?* None of his writings had been published, nor had he made speeches or received any notice in the press. Beria suggested to Vishinsky, one day, that perhaps this Comrade Menshikov was a private joke of Stalin's—a sort of soviet Lieutenant Kije.

Came the time, many shifts of power later, when Pyotr Ivanovitch Menshikov put aside his studies of theory and languages, got up one day and simply returned from exile—thus proving to the flabbergasted politburo that he actually existed. He could not have chosen a more propitious moment for his comeback—the last Old Bolshevik showed up just when the party line shifted to great verbal attention to the virtues and glory and superhuman wisdom of Lenin and Stalin. This was considered necessary, in order to conceal the

fact that hardly anything was left of Communism and the practice of socialism in Russia, outside of phrases and slogans.

Obviously, some sort of "safe" assignment had to be found for the old fire-breather. Comrade Menshikov insisted loudly that, whatever it was, it ought to be blown up. In addition, he punctuated every speech with... "and Vladimir Ilyitch waggled his finger under my nose—ah, could you have but seen his wonderful smile, comrades..." (pause for a wipe of the eye, or a brief blowing of the nose) "...and he said, 'You are absolutely right, Comrade Menshikov.' Then he put his hand on my shoulder..."

There was a limit even to Russian patience. The politburo pondered, momentarily considered a new purge trial with Comrade Menshikov as star, then shook their collective heads. No, that would not do now. What left? Ah! Their eyes turned spaceward, and all began nodding as the comrade secretary suggested.

MANNED Satellite One was a joint project of the Soviets and the Western Powers. It wasn't started as such, of course, but it became a joint project because of necessity. The first two manned satellites were sent up at almost exactly the same time, and both sides claimed

priority. And both satellites, having been sent up in haste, were still full of bugs. The Soviet satellite developed an air leak. The American satellite blew out its heating unit. That left one man up there who had plenty of heat, but no air, and another man who had enough air to breathe, but was subject to the heat loss during the time the satellite was in the shadow of the Earth.

Which one would have survived the longer is a moot question. The problem was solved by having both men adjust the orbits until they were within a few hundred yards of each other and then, by some careful maneuvering with gas jets, getting the two close enough so that they could be, to all intents and purposes, joined into one satellite. Thus began Manned Satellite One.

From the nucleus thus constructed was eventually evolved the beautiful, wheel-shaped satellite so familiar to those who had predicted the satellite for nearly forty years. It was manned and paid for by Russians and Americans—with a few Englishmen, Chinese, Frenchmen, Yugoslavians, and such, thrown in for good measure—and, possibly, good will.

The commander, jointly chosen, was a Swede named Hansen, and the official language spoken was, by common consent, English—since few Americans had taken the

trouble to learn Russian, while the Russians had taken great pains to learn English.

Oddly enough, they all got along fine. There is something about the military mind that permits men of diametrically opposed political convictions to live together in harmony, provided they feel that both their lives are both threatened by the diplomats of their respective countries.

As someone once said: *Diplomacy, sir, is a disease that soldiers die of!*

AND SO we proceed to the case of Comrade Menshikov.

He was not exactly welcomed aboard Manned Satellite One. The military men who manned it knew perfectly well why he had been sent there. Obviously his triumphal tour of the U. S. S. R., accompanied by innumerable speeches written and delivered by others—to frantic applause—while the old fire-breather thundered into a dead microphone (“You are absolutely right, Comrade Menshikov!”), couldn’t go on indefinitely. Yet, something noteworthy, some signal honor had to be given to this last of the Old Bolsheviks who, despite his advanced age showed no signs of feebleness. No question about it—a popular hero had to be given an important position at least, a position that sounded important.

And, what, perhaps thought

soviet minds, could be both a greater honor—also meaningless, and conducive to getting a nuisance out of their hair—than sending Menshikov up to Manned Satellite One?

So when the spaceship *Lenin* landed—the term “landed” is of course, a relative term—when the *Lenin* landed on the platform of the central hub of MS-1 to discharge Pyotr Ivanovitch Menshikov, newly-appointed Commissar of Interstellar Affairs, the commander of MS-1 was there to greet him.

Commander Hansen stood stiffly at semi-attention, as a military man must in the presence of civilian superiors, and said: “Welcome to Manned Satellite One, Commissar Menshikov.”

Menshikov’s reply was in Russian, which Commander Hansen either did not understand or pretended not to. He merely smiled politely and said: “Ay’m very sorry, Commissar, but ve speak English here. Ay do not understand Russian.”

To which Menshikov replied, in perfect English: “Obviously you do not speak English here. But, on the presumption that you can understand it, I will henceforth use that decadent, Capitalistic tongue.”

Hansen merely smiled again and led the Commissar inside.

MENSHIKOV was a smallish, wizened, browned

and incredibly ancient man, even though he could have passed for a vigorous seventy. His real age was uncertain, but legend had already begun to fill in the blank spots in his career. . . . He hadn't spent all this time in Siberia, he'd been present when the Czar and the Royal family were executed. . . . He'd almost saved Comrade Lenin from Fanya Kaplan's bullet—it was Comrade Menshikov's quick action that threw off the girl's aim. . . . He'd infiltrated the Trotskyies and was in grave danger of being condemned with them, being saved by the fact that Trotsky denounced him as a Stalinist. . . .

At any rate, Menshikov left no doubt about his feelings when he returned to glory—namely, that Soviet Communism must be guided by the principles of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. He thundered this out on every possible occasion—and a few impossible ones—as he displayed the shoulder upon which Vladimir Ilyitch's hand had rested.

Menshikov stepped inside the main airlock of MS-1, unscrewed his spacesuit helmet, took a breath, and made a face.

"What's the matter, Commissar?" Commander Hansen asked politely. He had been chosen because he was a diplomat—of the military, not the Foreign Office type.

"The air," said Menshikov, screwing up his face even

more. "It is not the honest air of the beautiful soil of Mother Russia. It stinks like an American spaceship."

Hansen did not point out that the *Lenin* could hardly be called an American spaceship. He merely said: "It is, perhaps, a little stuffy?"

Menshikov sniffed through his lean, aged nose. "Stuffy? No! The place stinks of neon!"

"Oh," said Hansen. "Yah. The neon."

WHAT ELSE could the Commander have said? Neon is one of the inert gases, and is even more odorless than ordinary air. Neon has no smell whatsoever. None. At all.

Menshikov sniffed again, a look of utter disgust on his face. "Pfaugh Pah! Can you tell me, Commander, why it should be necessary to pollute honest oxygen with this—this American innovation?"

The question was purely rhetorical, but Hansen, who was helping Menshikov take off his spacesuit, chose to take it literally.

"Vell," he said, "dere's a reason. Ordinary air is about eighty percent nitrogen, and almost twenty percent oxygen. But nitrogen has a nasty habit of dissolving in the blood, and if the pressure is suddenly reduced, it comes out of solution. It makes bubbles in the blood, like the bubbles when you open a bottle of champagne."

"Da," said Menshikov grumpily, as he pulled off a magnetized space boot.

Hansen, tugging at his own boots, took the affirmative word as a sign to continue. "Vhen dese bubbles form, dey can kill a man," he said. "It's called, in English, 'de bends'. It vas very early found out that the inert gases do not so act. Vhen helium is substituted for nitrogen, it is possible to take a much greater drop in pressure because helium does not dissolve so readily in the blood. You see?"

"Da," growled Menshikov, pulling off the other boot.

"**V**ELL, HELIUM helps to prevent de bends vhen de pressure is dropped, but its molecular veight is too low. De veight of helium is Atomic Veight Four, you see, but nitrogen has a molecular veight of twenty-eight. Nitrogen molecules are composed of two nitrogen atoms of Atomic Veight Fourteen."

"'English is spoken here'," Menshikov muttered sarcastically under his breath as he unzipped his spacesuit.

"Since helium is so light," Hansen continued blithely, "it is not so good a substitute for nitrogen. In an atmosphere of helium and oxygen, a man's voice, for instance, becomes very squeaky—very unpleasant. But it vas found that neon, vvhich has a molecular veight of twenty—about seventy percent of de veight of nitrogen—is a good sub-

stitute. If de pressure goes off, bends are not so likely to result.

"De idea was put forth by an engineer named Boris Vladimir Polovtzi, a very brilliant man."

For the first time, Commissar Menshikov brightened—at the name, "Vladimir", in fact.

"Ah," he said, "so the brilliant idea of substituting neon for nitrogen in the atmosphere was discovered by a Russian? I did not know that." He sniffed again, this time with appreciation. "What a wonderful idea! I presume it has saved many lives, eh? Only in Russia could such an idea have originated!"

Hansen smiled apologetically. "It vas not discovered in Russia, Commissar. Polovtzi vas an American, the son of a Russian nobleman who vas exiled during the Revolution."

Menshikov's face darkened. He snorted, and muttered, "Stinking American neon."

DURING the next several weeks, Menshikov prowled around the station, making snide remarks in between speeches. He got along with no one, particularly the Russians. To the British and Americans aboard MS-1, he praised Russia to the skies—and even above the skies. But to the Russians, he continually let drop reminders that the Soviet Government was

not living up to its rightful commitment to the spirit of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.

"Marx says: Go forth and teach all nations!" he proclaimed once. "And we are no longer doing that! We have failed in our teaching and propagandizing commitment!"

The well-educated Russian technicians didn't bother to point out to him that he was quoting from the wrong book. They just nodded politely and snickered behind their hands. After all, it is not polite to tell a Commissar that he is an ignoramus—even if he can speak perfect English.

And besides, since he made his comments in Russian, no one was obliged to pay any attention, anyhow.

IT WAS three weeks after Menshikov came aboard—three weeks almost to the hour—that the explosion hit MS-1. It ripped through one edge of the doughnut-shaped wheel and tore more than half of it away. Observers on Earth said that when the pieces hit the atmosphere, they made quite spectacular fireballs, but that was not, of course, of any interest to the inhabitants of Manned Satellite One.

The satellite was partially thrown off orbit—not far, but far enough to make it fail to register on the Earth-based radar stations that were tracking the satellite. Unfortunately, the section torn out

was the control section for the radio and television contacts that MS-1 had with Earth. And, even more unfortunately, the hole in the rim of the doughnut seriously weakened the whole wheel.

The emergency alarm rang throughout the satellite. Commissar Menshikov, exerting his political prerogative, scuttled straight toward the nearest intercom and asked imperiously for Commander Hansen. He didn't get Hansen right away, because his demand was in Russian, and the intercom operator—a Frenchman named du Bois—couldn't understand a word of it, and was too excited himself to ask for a translation. If Comrade Menshikov hadn't recovered himself and began to bellow in English, he might never have reached the Commander. As it was, he finally got Hansen on the line.

HANSEN, equally excited, answered in Swedish before he realized that he was being addressed in English. Then he said: "Vhat the devil do *you* want?"

"I want to know what the devil the Americans have done to us!" Menshikov squalled.

"The Americans have done nothing."

"I don't doubt it!" Menshikov shouted. "They never do anything at the proper time! What is happening?"

"Get someone else to tell

you!" Hansen roared. "Ay'm busy! And meanwhile get yourself into a spacesuit! De satellite is going to pieces!"

Comrade Commissar Menshikov glared at the dead intercom, slammed it down, and shouted to a nearby Russian technician.

"What is happening? In the name of God, what's going on?"

The technician blinked at hearing a good atheist invoke the name of the deity, but he answered dutifully. "The wheel is coming apart, Comrade Commissar. We are spinning on our axis at such a rate as to give us a feeling of gravity here at the rim of the wheel. But now the rim has broken, and the centrifugal force is pulling us apart."

Then the technician ran off before Menshikov could reply.

Commissar Menshikov was never one to let grass grow under his feet. Even though grass couldn't possibly grow on a space station, he didn't take any chances. He climbed into his spacesuit as soon as he could reach it. Nearby was an American Air Force captain scrambling into his own suit. Smothering his prejudices, Menshikov asked: "What will happen? Will we die?"

"Maybe," said the captain. "We..."

AT THAT point, the rotating wheel gave a sickening lurch which threw Men-

shikov against the wall with some force. His old bones shook, but did not break. He pushed himself upright as the American captain went on.

"...we may get out of this if a ship is sent up immediately. But we've lost all contact with Earth, and they don't even know where we are. Even if we get out in our spacesuits, it isn't likely that we'll ever get picked up in time."

"Why not?" Menshikov snapped. "We have radios in our suits, do we not?"

"Oh, sure," agreed the captain. "But if we have to abandon this wheel, we'll be thrown in every which direction by the centrifugal force of the rotation. The ship would have to start from Earth right now to get us before we drift so far apart that we lose contact."

"Right now? Immediately?" Menshikov asked, horrified.

"That's right," said the captain, calmly zipping up the airtight seal on his spacesuit. "But the communications center was knocked out by that mysterious explosion! Earth doesn't even know we're in trouble."

Commissar Menshikov in a bright blue funk, lapsed again into his native Russian. What he said would not be printable in the Cyrillic alphabet—and, of course, it meant the same thing in English. Another lurching came, and

Menshikov grew even more unintelligible.

"Sa-a-ay," said the captain, as he screwed his suit helmet into place, "where you from?"

"I am a Georgian," said Menshikov, his native pride momentarily overcoming his fear.

"Well, now, ain't that a coincidence!" said the captain. "Me, too! Anywhere near Atlanta?"

AT THAT moment, the wheel jerked again as another main brace gave near the hub, and Menshikov was spared the ordeal of having to argue with the captain.

At the same time, the public address system blared out an urgent message: "Attention, all hands! Em Ess One is going to pieces! As you may have noticed, we're losing air rapidly as the hull breaks up! Get into your suits as quickly as possible, and get to Section Nine. Repeat: Get into spacesuits, and get to Section Nine."

The message was repeated in Russian, then in French and German, just to make sure everyone understood it. By that time, Commissar Menshikov was nearing Section Nine. But he was by far too late, as was nearly everyone else aboard MS-1. The rim began to crack away from the hub. With a horrible rending roar, the floor beneath Menshikov's feet split wide open, and he fell down into empty space.

"Down," of course, meant "away from the hub of the wheel". Commissar Menshikov was not falling toward Earth—he was simply being hurled away from the satellite by the centrifugal force of the rotating wheel. But to him, it felt as though he were falling, and a fall of several thousand miles did nothing to stabilize his equilibrium.

As he spun dizzily, head over heels, away from the station, he noticed several other spacesuited figures being catapulted away from the wreck of the station.

But it was not the falling bodies that attracted his attention, it was the flame.

The wreck of Manned Satellite One was afire! It blazed with an orange-red flame that spurted out of it and seemed to fill the sky with glowing color. As he turned over, Menshikov could see the brilliant sun glowing to one side, and the bright moon off to the other side. And between them was the flame-glowing hulk of the MS-1.

Comrade Commissar Menshikov was an old man. The terrible feeling of falling, combined with the dizziness brought on by the constantly changing view—sun, space station, moon, fire,—was too much for him. The blackness of space seemed to engulf him permanently before he fainted.

But his last conscious thought was: "How can a

thing burn in space, without oxygen?"

HE DIDN'T get his answer until he came to.

"Hey! Wake up! You're all right! Come out of it!"

Menshikov didn't feel like obeying the voice, but once he realized the inescapable logic of it, he opened his eyes,

"I'm awake," he said.

"Huh?" said the American officer who was bending over him.

Menshikov realized that he had spoken in Russian, so he repeated the phrase in English.

"Are you all right?" asked the American.

Menshikov squinted at the golden oak leaves on the officer's uniform and said: "I'm fine, thank you, Major. Where am I?"

"This is the spaceship *Truman*. We took off as soon as we saw that the MS-1 was in trouble. Are you Commissar Pyotr Ivanovitch Menshikov?"

"I am," Menshikov replied proudly.

"Then you're under arrest," said the major mildly.

"You have no right to arrest me!" Menshikov shouted. "I am a . . ."

"You are a Soviet citizen and therefore you are under arrest!" bellowed another voice.

MENSHIKOV turned his head in the space helmet

and saw a tall, Oriental-looking man in the uniform of a General of the Red Army standing on the other side of him. The General was speaking in Russian.

"Oh. Ah," said Commissar Menshikov blankly.

"Stupid old man!" snapped the General. "Why did you plant the bomb in the communications room of the MS-1?"

"You know, then?" Menshikov asked weakly.

The Russian general looked at the American major. "May I apologize," he said in English, "for the utter stupidity of *Tovarisch* Menshikov?"

"Sure," said the major. "Apology accepted, General."

The general glowered at Menshikov. "You may confess," he said coldly.

COMMISSAR MENSHIKOV sighed softly. He was an old man, and life did not mean much to him any more. Life really hadn't ever equalled that wonderful moment in Finland, when Vladimir Ilyitch—no, not even in October of 1917, reports of which he read when the news reached Siberia. Oh, well. . .

"We have already arrested the others," said the general.

"If you have," said Menshikov, "then I need not mention their names. All I will confess to is putting a bomb in the radio room of the satellite." Then he blushed softly. "I did not know it

would wreck the whole satellite.”

The general looked at the American major again. “This, Major, is the typical counter-revolutionary. He makes bombs, but he knows nothing about them.” He sighed. “He is an anarchist.”

At that, Menshikov blew up. He sat up straight in the bunk and shouted: “I am not an anarchist! I believe the principles of the great Third International! Vladimir Ilyitch said I was right—he put his hand on my shoulder—and you, Comrade General, are a stinking little Bourgeois!”

The general shook his head sadly. “The Soviet Union has changed, but Comrade Menshikov hasn’t. Very sad.”

Menshikov said something in Russian that even made the general blush.

“**YOU ARE** accused,” said the Judge, “of being an anarchist and a warmonger. How do you plead?”

Ex-Commissar Menshikov stood up, his aged bones creaking under the effort. “Not guilty,” he said. “I was furthering the cause. Vladimir Ilyitch..” (The court winced.) Menshikov concluded with, “I wish I’d died in the wreck.”

The Judge looked at the Assistant Judge, who looked back. Then the Judge looked at Menshikov. “I think there is no more reason to prolong this trial. You are fined fif-

teen thousand rubles, and are henceforth forbidden to hold any elective or appointive or Party office in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Guilty on both counts.”

Menshikov stood up, quivering. “Is that *all*? I, who have blown up and demolished and burned a space station, and caused the death of hundreds—am I to be fined and released?”

The Judge looked astonished. “Comrade Accused,” he said, “you killed no one. As soon as the Americans saw the flare, they sent up a ship to rescue everyone. And how, may I ask, could you have *burned* a satellite?”

“I saw the flames,” Menshikov maintained stoutly.

“Flames? There were no flames. What you saw was the neon in the satellite’s atmosphere. Ionized by the radiation from the sun, it glowed like a neon sign in the sky. It was like a great, red-orange comet. That’s how the Americans knew something had happened. The space station was over North America at the time, and they saw that great red comet in the sky. So they sent up a ship in time to rescue everyone. You committed no murder.”

MENSHIKOV shook his head sadly. “I am a failure. I have let Vladimir Ilyitch down. We had planned to demolish the radio communications and take over the

whole satellite in the name of the Revolution.”

“That confirms my decision of ‘guilty’ on the charge of warmongering,” the Judge whispered in an aside to the Assistant Judge.

“Indeed,” agreed the Assistant Judge.

“But even in my failure,” Menshikov shouted, “I have at least put an eternal symbol in the sky for the workers to see. Da! Perhaps Vladimir Ilyitch will be proud of me after all!”

“Oh? How is that?” the Judge asked.

“If what you say is true, when the ring of ionized neon

must still be circling the Earth. Am I right?”

The Judge nodded. “The Earth is now surrounded by a ring of glowing, ionized neon, but it will not last long because of solar radiation and terrestrial gravitation.” Menshikov’s shoulders sagged. The Judge looked at him with a mixture of sympathy and curiosity. “But tell me,” he asked, “how is this ring of neon a symbol of your cause?”

Pyotr Ivanovitch Menshikov drew himself up to his full height. “Why, are you blind—can’t you see? It’s red, isn’t it?”

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by GORDON R. DICKSON

The TECOATEPETL (TEAKETTLE, to her friends) was what the aliens wanted. They cared nothing about her crew or cargo. And Jed Alant knew that if he did his duty, there'd be nothing left for him...

"WHAT'S UP?" asked Barney Do-house, the engineer, coming through the hatch and swinging up the three metal steps of the ladder to the control room. Both Jed Alant (the captain), and the young mate Tommy Ris were standing in front of the vision screen.

"We're being followed, Barney," said Jed, without turning around. "Come here and take a look."

The heavy old engineer swung himself forward to stand between the stocky, grizzled captain and the slim young mate. The screen was set on a hundred and eighty degrees rear—which meant it was viewing the segment of space directly behind them. Barney squinted at it. An untrained eye would have seen nothing among the multitude of star points that filled it like an infinite number of gleaming drops from the spatter-brush of an artist; but the engineer, watching closely, made out in the lower left corner of the screen a tiny dark shape that occulted point after glowing point in its progress toward the center of the screen.

The point seemed to crawl with snail-like slowness, but Barney frowned. "Coming up fast, isn't he? Who do you suppose he is?"

"There's no scheduled craft on that course," said Tommy Ris, his blue eyes serious un-

der the carefully combed forelock of his brown hair.

"Uh," grunted Barney. "Think it's Pellies?"

"I'm afraid so." Jed sighed. "And us with passengers."

THE THREE men fell silent, gazing at the screen. It was a reflection on their years of experience in the void that they thought of the passengers rather than themselves. Your true spaceman is a fatalist out of necessity, and as a natural result of having his nose constantly rubbed in the fact that—cosmically speaking—he is not the least bit important. With passengers, as they all three knew, the case was different. Passengers, by and large, are planet-dwellers, comfortably self-convinced of the necessity for their own survival and liable to kick and fuss when the man with the scythe comes along.

The *Tecoatepetl*—*Teakettle* to her friends and crew—had no business carrying passengers in the first place. She had been constructed originally to carry vital drugs and physiological necessities to the pioneer worlds, as soon as they were opened for self-supporting colonists. When the first belt of extra-solar worlds had been supplied, she was already a little outdated. Her atomic power plant and her separate drive section—like one end of a huge dumbbell—balanced the control and payload section at the

other end of a connecting section like a long tube. Powerful, but not too pretty, she was useful, but not so efficient, by the time sixty years had passed and the hair of her captain and engineer had greyed. As a result she had been downgraded to the carrying of occasional passenger loads—according to the standards of interstellar transportation, where human life is usually slightly less important than cargoes of key materials for worlds who lack them.

OLD SPACESHIPS never die until something kills them, the demand for anything that will travel between the stars fantastically outweighing the available carrying space. An operating spaceship is worth its weight in—spaceships. To human as well as alien; which was why the non-human ship from the Pleiades was swiftly overhauling them. Neither humans nor cargo could hold any possible interest for the insectivorous humanoids; but the ship itself was a prize.

"We're five hours from Arcturus Base," said Tommy, "and headed for it at this velocity he can't turn us. Wonder how he figures on getting us past our warships there without being shot up."

"Ask him," said Barney, showing his teeth in a grin.

"You mean—talk to him?" Tommy looked at the captain for permission.

"Why not?" said Jed. "No, wait; I'll do it. Key me in, Tommy."

The younger man seated himself at the transmission board and set himself to locating the distantly-approaching ship with a directional beam. Fifteen minutes later, a green light began to glow and wink like a cat's eye in front of him; and he grunted with satisfaction.

"All yours," he said to Jed. The captain moved over to stand in front of the screen as Tommy turned a dial and the stars faded to give an oddly off-key picture of a red-lighted control room. A tall, supple-looking member of the race inhabiting the Pleiades stars his short trunk-snout looking like a comic nose stuck in the middle of his elongated face, looked back at him.

"You speak human?" asked Jed.

"I speak it," answered the other. The voice strongly resembled a human's except for a curious ringing quality, like a gong being struck in echo to the vowels. "You don't speak mine?"

"I haven't got the range," replied Jed. They stood looking at each other with curiosity, but without emotion, like professional antagonists.

"SO," SAID the Pellie. "It takes a trained voice, you." he was referring to the tonal changes in the language of his race, which covers

several octaves, even for the expression of simple ideas. "Why you have called?"

"We were wondering," said Jed, "how you thought you could take our ship and carry it through the warfleet we're due to pass in five hours."

"You stay in ship, you," answered the other, "when we pass by fleet we let you leave ship by small boat."

"I bet," said Jed.

The Pleiadan did not shrug, but the tone of his voice conveyed the sense of it. "Your choice, you."

"I'll make you a deal," said Jed. "Let us out into the life-boats now. None of us can turn at this velocity, so we'll all ride together up as far as the base. Once our small boats are safe under the guns of the fleet, you can chase the ship here and take it over without any trouble."

"Only-one person you leave on ship blows it up," said the Pleiadan. "No. You stay. Say nothing to fleetships. We stay close in for one pip on screen Arcturus. After we pass, we let you go. You trust us."

"WELL," said Jed. "You can't blame a man for trying." He waved to the Pellie, who repeated the gesture and cut the connection. "That's that," Jed went on, turning back to the other two humans, as Tommy thoughtfully returned the star-picture to the screen. The oc-

culting shape that was the ship they had just been talking to was looming quite large now, indicating its closeness.

"D'you think there's any chance of him doing what he says?" Barney asked the Captain.

"No reason to, and plenty of reason not to," replied Jed. "That way he keeps the two lifeboats with the ship—they're valuable in their own right." This was true, as all three men knew. A lifeboat was nothing less than a spaceship in miniature—as long as you kept it away from large planetary bodies, whose gravity were to much for the simple, one-way-thrust engines.

"I suppose the passengers will have to be told," broke in Tommy. "They'll be seeing it on the lounge screen sooner or later. What do you say, Jed?"

"Let's not borrow trouble until we have to," frowned the captain. They were all thinking the same thing, imagining the passenger's reactions to an announcement of the true facts of the situation. Hysteria is a nasty thing for a man to witness just before his own death.

"I wish there was something the fleet could do," said Tommy a trifle wistfully. He knew the hopelessness of the situation as well as the two older men; but the youngness of him protested at such and early end to his life.

"If we blew ourselves up,

they'd get *him*, eh, Jed?" said Barney.

"No doubt of it," said the captain. "But I can't with these passengers. If it was us..."

THERE WAS the sudden suck of air, and the muted slam of the opening and closing of the bulkhead door between the control section and the passengers lounge above. Leni Hargen, the chief steward swung down the ladder, agile in spite of his ninety years, his small, wiry figure topped by a face like an ancient monkey's. He joined the circle.

"Got company have we, Jed?" he asked, his sharp voice echoing off the metal, equipment-jammed walls.

"A Pellie," Jed nodded. "The pay-load excited?"

"So-so," replied Leni. "It hasn't struck home yet. First thing they think of when they see another ship is that it's human, of course. 'Damned clever, these aliens, but you don't mean to say they can really do what we do'—that sort of attitude. No, they think it's human. And they want to know who their traveling companions are; sent me up to ask."

"I'll go talk to them," said Jed.

"Why talk?" said Leni. Living closest of them all to the passengers, he had the most contempt for them. "Won't do no good. Wait till the long-nose gets close, then

touch off the fuel, and let everybody die happy."

Barney swore. "He's right, Jed. We don't have a prayer, none of us. And I want to go when the old girl goes."

HE WAS talking about the *Teakettle*, and the captain winced. With the exception of Tommy and the assistant steward, the ship had been their life for over half a century. It was unthinkable to imagine an existence without her. The thought of Tommy made him glance at the young mate. "What d'you say, son?"

"I..." Tommy hesitated. Life was desperately important to him and at the same time he was afraid of sounding like a coward. "I'd like to wait," he said at last, shamefacedly.

"I'm glad to hear it," replied Jed, decisively. "Because that's what we're going to do. I know what you think of your charges, Leni; but so far as I'm concerned, human life rates over any ship—including this one. And as long as there's one wild chance to take, I've got to take it."

"What chance?" said Leni. "They promise to turn us loose?"

Jed nodded. "They did. And I'm going to have to go on the assumption that they will."

"They will like..."

"Steward!" said Jed; and Leni shut his mouth. "I'll go out and talk to the passen-

gers. The rest of you wait here."

He turned and went up the ladder toward the lounge door in the face of their silence.

The hydraulically-operated door whooshed away from its air seal as he turned the handle, and sucked back into position after he had stepped through. He stood on the upper level of the lounge, looking down its length at the gay swirl of colorfully dressed passengers. For a moment he stood unnoticed, seeing the lounge as it had been in the days when it was the main hold and he was younger. Then "Oh, there's the captain!" cried someone; and they flocked around him, chattering questions. He held up his hand for silence.

"I have a very serious announcement to make," he said. "The ship you see pulling up on us is not human but Pleiadan. They are not particularly interested in humans, but they want this ship. So after we pass Arcturus Station, we may have to take to the lifeboats and abandon the ship to them—unless some other means of dealing with the situation occurs."

HE STOPPED and waited, bracing himself for what he knew would follow:—first the stunned silence; then the buzz of horrified talk amongst themselves; and finally the returning to him of

their attention and their questions.

"Are you sure, Captain?"

"Look for yourself," Jed waved a hand at the screen at the far end of the lounge on which the ship was now quite noticeable. "And I've talked to their captain."

"What did he say?" they cried, a dozen voices at once.

"He gave me the terms I just passed on to you," said Jed.

A silence fell on them. Looking down into their faces, Jed read their expressions clearly. This threat was too fantastic; there must be someone who had blundered. The spaceship company? The captain?

They looked back up at him, and questions came fast.

"Why don't we speed up and run away from them?"

Patiently Jed explained that maximum acceleration for humans was no more than the maximum acceleration for Pellies; and that the "speed" of a ship depended on the length of time it had been undergoing acceleration.

"Can't we dodge them?"

A little cruelly, Jed described what even a fraction of a degree of sudden alteration of course would do to the people within the ship at this present velocity.

"The warships!" someone was clamoring, an elderly, professional looking man. "You can call them, Captain!"

"If they came to meet us,"

said Jed, "we'd pass at such relatively high velocities that they could do us no good. We can only continue on our present course, decelerating as we normally would, and hope to get safely away from the ship after we pass Arc-turus station."

THE MOOD of the crowd in the lounge began to change. Stark fear began to creep in, and an ugly note ran through it.

"It's up to you," said one woman, her face whitened and sharply harsh with unaccustomed desperation. "You do something!"

"Rest assured," Jed answered her, speaking to them all. "Whatever I and the crew can do, will be done. Meanwhile..." he caught the eye of Eli Pellew, the young assistant steward, standing at the back of the room. "The bar will be closed; and I'll expect all of you to remain as quiet as possible. Pellew, come up forward when you've closed the bar. That's all ladies and gentlemen."

He turned and went back through the door, the babble of voices behind him shut off suddenly by its closing. He re-descended the ladder to find the mate, engineer and steward in deep discussion, which broke off as he came in.

"What's this?" he said cheerfully. "Mutiny?"

"Council of war," said

Barney. "It's your decision, but we thought..."

"Go ahead," said Jed. Sixty years of experience had taught him when to stand on his rights as captain, and when to fit in as one of the group.

"We've been talking a few things over," said Barney, "proceeding on the assumption—which most of us figure is a downright fact—that the Pellie hasn't any intention of letting us go, anyway."

"Go on."

"**WELL,**" said Barney. Almost exactly Jed's age and almost his equal in rank, the engineer slipped easily into the position of spokesman for the rest of the crew. "Following that line of thought, the conclusion is we've got nothing to lose. So to start out with, why not notify the Arcturus Base ships, anyway?"

"Because he just *might* keep that promise," said Jed. Behind them, the lounge door swished and banged. Pellew came down the steps, his collar and stewards jacket somewhat messed up.

"They're steaming up in there," he announced.

"Better go back and dog that door shut then," said Jed.

"I already did," replied Eli, his round young face under its blond hair rosy with excitement. "I locked the connecting door to the galley, too. They're shut in."

"Good job," approved Jed. "Hope it doesn't lead to panic, though. I may have to talk to them again. You were saying, Barney..."

"The point is," said the engineer, taking up his argument again, "we're like a walnut in its shell with the difference that they want the shell, not the meat inside it. The way to take a ship like this is with a boarding party cutting its way through the main lock. Bloody, but the least damaging to the ship, itself. They won't want to fire on us; and if they try to put a boarding party aboard between here and Arcturus Base, we'll certainly message ahead and the warships'll have no reason for not opening fire on them. *But* if we simply message ahead and stay put, they'll just have to ride along and hope to use us for hostages when we reach the Base area."

"Sensible," said Jed, "provided they really don't mean to let us get away afterward."

"You know they don't, Jed," protested the engineer. "When did they ever let crew or passengers get away? It's not in their psychology—I think."

"They like to tidy up afterwards, that's true," said Jed. He thought for a minute. "All right; we'll call. *Then* what do you suggest?"

THERE WAS a moment's uncomfortable silence.

"At least we know *he* won't

get away then," said old Leni. "The warships'll follow and take care of him."

Jed smiled a little sadly. "I thought as much." He glanced at Tommy. "Well, make a message off. How long should it take to reach the Base?"

"About ten minutes."

"All right," Jed nodded. "Let me know if you rouse any reaction from our friend behind us." He looked at the stewards. "You two keep an eye on the passengers; Barney, come along with me."

They had been shipmates and friends for a long time. Barney turned and followed without a word as the captain took the three steps of the down ladder to the bulkhead door leading under the passenger quarters; and led the way through.

They stepped into a narrow passageway that was all metal, except for the rubbery plastic matting underfoot; the door sucked to behind them. Like all sections of the ship sealed by the heavy doors, it was soundproof to all other sections. But the light overhead was merely an occasional glimmer from spaced tubes; and the passageway itself was so narrow that there was barely room for two men to stand breast-to-breast and talk.

JED, THEREFORE, did not talk here. Instead he led the way back down the ship, ducking at the middle where

the lifeboat blisters—one on each side of the ship—bulged down into the passage; and up three more steps at the far end. Here another door waited to be passed; when they had gone through it, they found themselves in the central tube that ran connected the payload section of the ship with the drive section where the atomics were located.

This passage was wider, being the full size of the tube, and its circular shape apparent to the eye. Two and a half meters in diameter was the tube, but its walls were relatively thin and uninsulated—except for a radiation protective coating between the two skins of metal that made the tube. In spite of the ship's heating system, the "cold of space" seemed to seep through. Jed led the way to the midpoint of the tube where two small vision screens were set, one on each side of the tube. These relayed the picture—seen by antennae arms that extended like two huge knitting needles jutting out on each side of the ship beyond the screens—and looked back to scan each its own side of the space-going vessel. The trouble-shooting screens. Jed gestured at them, to the identical dumbbell shape imaged on each.

"What do you see, Barney?"

The engineer looked at the screens and back at his cap-

tain, puzzled. "The ship," he said at last. "Why, what do you see?"

"A fifty-fifty chance."

AT THAT moment, there was a sudden shock that shook the vessel from end to end and sent the two men staggering. Recovering first, the captain took two quick steps back to the screen. On the rear left could now be seen, beyond the bulge of the drive section, the distant forward half of the Pleiadan ship. On the drive section itself, was a black hole with outcurling ragged metal edges—was the mark of a hit by an explosive shell in space.

"So they don't want to fire on us," said Jed, turning to Barney grimly.

The engineer looked shaken. "The message to Arcturus Base must have made him mad." Suddenly he turned and began plunging back down the tunnel. "I've got to find out what damage they did!" he shouted back.

Jed nodded; turning on his heel, he hurried back toward the control room. He came up the ladder to find the young first mate and Leni facing each other. Tommy was white, but the eyes of the wizened little steward glowed black with rage.

"Ram them!" shouted the small man, spinning on Jed as he came up the three steps of the ladder in one jump.

"Leni," said Jed, coldly. "You're under arrest; get to

your quarters and stay there."

The steward hesitated, his old face twisted and violent. Suddenly, the expression of his features twisted and broke, leaving him looking simply ancient and pathetic. He choked on a sob and turned away, stumbling blindly toward the door on the level of the cabin floor, between the two stairways, that led to the captains and crew quarters under the upper level of the passenger lounge.

"Go with him," Jed instructed Eli Pellew, who was still at his station by the intercom screen, watching proceedings among the passengers. "Wait a second," he added, as the young second steward turned to go. "How've they been in there?"

"Noisy, but quiet now," answered the boy. "That shot we took seems to have quieted them. They're praying, some of them."

JED NODDED, and Eli dived through the door leading back to crew's quarters. The captain turned back to Tommy. "Have you touched anything since we were fired on?"

"No sir," said Tommy. "I had my hands full, keeping Leni off the controls. But we're tumbling end-over-end."

"Good. We won't touch anything. Make him wonder whether he did us any vital damage, or not. Any answer from Arcturus?"

"Just before you came back," answered the mate. "They acknowledged and said they were standing by to receive or follow us."

"Also good. I've got a gamble in mind; but it's among the three of us—you, Barney, and me; and he's back looking at the drive section. There's nothing more to be done here. I don't want to answer the Pellie if he calls us, anyway; keep him guessing. Come on with me back and we'll talk with Barney."

A curious look in the younger man's eyes warned Jed he was talking with an unusual excitement. Mentally reproving himself, he turned on his heel and led the way back down below the passenger section and through the full length of the tube back to the drive section. They stepped through a further door into one vast chamber honeycombed with equipment and to be traversed only by a network of ladders and catwalks.

"Barney!" Jed yelled.

"Yo!" came a distant answer and shortly the engineer came into view whisking his heavy old bulk up and down ladders with the agility of long practise. He came forward at a level about two meters over their head and dropped hand over hand down a ladder to stand at last in front of them.

"**H**OW WAS it?" asked the captain.

"Not bad, thank the Lord," said Barney, wiping his face. There was a black smudge of resealing material on his forehead. "It was back of the fuel bins and the whole section sealed off automatically."

"Barney..." said Jed.

"Yes?" The engineer had found a cleaner-cloth in his pocket and was scrubbing at the black gunk below his receded hairline.

"You remember we were looking at the ship and I said I thought I saw a fifty-fifty chance?"

"That's right." The hand holding the cloth dropped suddenly to Barney's side and he looked at his captain with alert interest.

"Well, tell me something," said Jed. "We haven't used power since before the Pellie showed up. That means the tubes have all been closed, haven't they?"

"Of course," said the engineer, indignantly. "They're always closed immediately after firing; you know that."

"And with the tubes closed, our back end looks just like our front, doesn't it?"

"Why, sure," said Barney, "but I still don't see what good that does us."

"When we're all in one piece, it doesn't," replied Jed. "But suppose, just as we hit the Arcturus Base area, we break in the middle of the connecting tube and our two halves go in opposite directions? What's the Pellie to do then? He can run down one

section only at the cost of getting separated from the other; and by that time the warships'll be up. So if we cut the ship in half, it gives us an even chance of being the section he doesn't chase."

HIS WORDS left the two other men in a stunned silence for several seconds. Tommy was the first to recover. His eyes lit up at the possibility and he wheeled on the engineer. "That's terrific—isn't it Barney? We can fool him! Isn't that a fine idea?"

To the younger man's surprise, the engineer did not take fire from his enthusiasm. In fact, he pursed his heavy lips, doubtfully. "I don't know," he said slowly. "We'd have to think it over."

Jed was watching his old friend and shipmate with hard, bright eyes. "All right, cut it out, Barney."

The engineer raised innocent, wondering eyes to the captain. "Cut it out?" he echoed. "I don't know what you mean, Jed."

"You know damn well what I mean," said Jed. "I already had to put Leni under arrest in his quarters, with Eli as guard over him, because of the same attitude you're taking. She's a fine old ship, Barney and I love her, too—more than anything else I can think of. But get this straight. The passenger's lives come first and ours too.

Then the *Teakettle*. Is that clear?"

The last three words came out like the crack of a whip. Barney dropped his head, and Tommy was astonished to see the glint of tears in the old man's eyes. "I don't know what I'll do without her," he mumbled.

"Nor I," answered Jed, more gently now. "But what must be, must, Barney. We can't become selfish because our remaining years are short. Now...how are we going to cut the tube?"

"Explosive?" suggested Tommy. "Have we got any?"

"Not a gram," said Jed, grimly.

Barney spoke up. "There's cutting torches back in the drive section."

JED BIT his lower lip. "I don't like that notion too well," he said, slowly. "It means we'd have to work in suits, because we'd lose air from the tube with the first hole made. And then, they'd see us busy at it and have time to think of some counter-move."

"The metal's thin," said Tommy. "If we pried off the inside plates with a crowbar, and chiseled out the insulation, a metal saw should do the work."

"Fine," said Barney. "Only we don't have a metal saw."

"I thought every drive section had metal saws among its tools," Tommy said.

"Do you think I carry a machine shop? Torches were all I ever needed."

The old man was still upset. Jed, who had been thinking, spoke up. "We've got signal flares, haven't we, Tom?"

"Yes sir," answered Tommy. The emergency equipment was his responsibility.

"Isn't the powder in them hot enough to melt through the outer skin of the tube here?"

"By God, yes," said Tommy. "It's got a thermite base; this stuff'd boil like water."

"Then that's it," said Jed. "Go bring us as much as you've got." Tommy started off at a run down the tube.

Jed turned to the engineer, who was leaning, his face sagging, against the curve of the wall. "Don't take it so hard, you old idiot!" he said, in a fierce, soft voice. "Chances are the Pellie'll give up when he sees us split. Then it's just a matter of running the two halves down and sticking them together again."

Barney pushed himself away from the wall and shook his head. "We'll kill her; you know we will. We'll kill her." And he turned and moved heavily off in the direction of the drive section, passing through the door and leaving Jed alone.

THE YOUNG mate seemed to take a long time returning and Jed had the chance to feel his age and the loneliness

that was to come; before the payload—section door opened and Tommy backed through, pushing his way with his shoulders, his arms loaded down with the long metal tubes of the flares.

"Stack them here," said Jed, taking charge. "Now, how are we going to stick the powder to the wall?"

".. Thought of everything," grunted Tommy. He settled his armload on the floor, and, reaching around behind him, unhooked two short crowbars from his belt. His bulging pockets produced several bottles of the pitch-like emergency sealer. "We pry off the inner skin, gouge out insulation to the outer skin, and seal the powder in with gunk."

"Good boy," approved Jed.

They set to work, captain and mate together. In the narrow space of the tube, back-to-back, they grunted and pried until a half-meter width of the inner metal panneling had been removed. Then the sharp points of the crowbars came into action; they chipped and pounded at the heavy, brittle insulation until metal showed through beyond. A fine, searing dust rose from the fragmented insulation and hung in the passage. They coughed and choked but worked on.

"All done," said Tommy, finally. "Except for the control cables." He was referring to the thick metal conduits

running between the control room and the drive section.

"Leave them—they'll burn, too," wheezed Jed. "Now help me with the powder."

STEP BY step they drew their circle around the tube; white, innocent-looking powder, held in by sticky blackness. Finally, they were done.

"Fuse?" said Jed.

"Here." Tommy pulled a coil of shining, slim wire from within his tunic. It was regulation electrical contact cable, spliced and fitted with an explosive cap. Jed took the end and wedged it into the gunk, pushing it through to the powder beneath. Then they moved back, paying it out as they went, along the tube, through the door, up the under passage and into the control room.

The two men collapsed on to seats before the equipment boards.

"Whew!" said Tommy, after a few moments. "That was a job!"

Jed nodded. He was feeling his age, and there was a sharp pain in his chest. After he had rested a few more minutes, he got up and began checking their position.

They were close to Arcturus Base Area, that imaginary globe of space which enclosed the waiting warfleet, whose duty is to guard the Arcturian planets. Jed set his viewer up to maximum range and probed the empty distances

ahead. There was nothing on it, but the armed ships which might rescue them could not be too far away.

"I'll give them another fifteen minutes; then we'll split," said Jed, glancing at the younger man. Suddenly he was aware of the emptiness of the control room. "By heaven, Barney's still back in the drive section. Get him up front here!"

TOMMY dived for the down stairs; and vanished through the door. Jed grimaced and glanced at the clock. He reached out to call ahead to the armed vessels, then remembered the shot that had been fired at them on the previous occasion and took his hand away. He checked the scanner.

There were a couple of pips tiny in the distance, too far to show on the screen.

The waiting seemed interminable. Finally Tommy reappeared, almost literally herding the old engineer before him.

"We aren't going to waste any more time," said Jed. "Take seats and strap yourself in." He leaned over and keyed in the intercom to the passenger lounge.

"Attention," he said. The view on the screen faded from the stars to the lounge's interior. Weary, hopeless and frightened people looked up at him without much reaction. "Will you please take seats and fasten yourself in them.

We are about to attempt evasive action."

"What for?" said a tall man, standing greyfaced toward the back of the room. "You said before it was no use."

"We're almost up to the Arcturus Base Fleet," answered Jed. "It may do some good now. Will you strap yourself in, please?"

"Why should we strap ourselves in?" cried a little man who had been sitting with his head in his hands. He now raised it, his deep eyes wild. "Why did you lock the doors? What..."

"*Strap yourselves in! That's an order!*" thundered Jed suddenly, tried beyond all patience.

Stunned by the volume of the intercom amplifier, the passengers fell into their seats without further protest, stumbling over each other in their haste. Safety belts snapped; and when Jed could tell by looking at the screen that all were secured, he switched back to an outside view.

AHEAD, THE warships of the Base were being rapidly overhauled in spite of the fact that they were building up velocity in the same direction as the *Teakettle* and the Pleiadan at maximum bearable acceleration. The alien ship itself was hanging in close and directly behind the *Teakettle*, so that they too would show as long as

possible as a single pip on the warship's screens. Now was the time to do whatever could be done.

Jed turned and threw a quick glance about the control room. Leni and young Eli Pellew had come out of the crew quarters and were strapped in side by side, in the observer seats. Tommy must have warned them. The young mate himself was strapped into the acceleration chair before the auxiliary screen; and on Jed's other side to his right, Barney sat belted to the chair before the direct drive controls. This was his proper post; and although there was nothing now for him to do there, Jed thought he understood the impulse that had pushed the old man to his accustomed place. Jed reached for the contact switch and lifted it. The cable trailed away from him on the floor, silver to the bottom of the door and disappeared beneath it.

Jed glanced once more about the control room. Tommy's face, to his left, was tense on the screen, watching the growing shapes of the warship, pale—but not so pale as the face of Eli Pellew behind him, who seemed drugged with shock. Beside Eli's young face, Leni's eyes glared up at him, black and bitter. On his right, Barney sat slumped before his board, his fingers resting laxly upon the controls, his face unreadable.

He seemed chained and bound to inertness by the depression within him. But as Jed turned his way and closed his fingers about the switch, from the corner of his eyes, he seemed to see the fingers of the old man flicker, once.

And almost in the same heartbeat, closed his own fingers, closing the switch.

THE SHIP bucked once like an insane thing; as the superheated air in the tube exploded outward through the vaporized metal of the outer skin. The stars spun like a pinwheel on the screen; and into view swam the full length of the Pleiadan and the tumbling other half of the *Teakettle*. Fingers working on the direction finders, flickering but working on the self-contained emergency power stored in the controlroom itself, Jed kept the two images on the screen together.

As the warships swelled on the screen, the nose of the Pellie ship swung first in this direction, then in that, sniffing after the two fragments of what had been the *Teakettle*, like a hunting terrier after two scuttling mice. The warships were growing fast, and for the alien, death was certain. It fired once at the drive section; then, ominously, its nose swung toward the payload half. Nose-on on the screen it stood before them.

"Sweetheart..." whispered Barney. And at that moment, from the tattered half-tube attached to the fleeting drive section shot a sudden, long spurt of yellow flame, hurtling it further and faster...

...And the alien swung to follow it. For the first time, from its tubes came a flare of power—not a change of direction, but an additional thrust forward that, though diverging brought it up level and close to the burning tube and ball.

And its guns began to pound the fleeing drive section.

BEHIND Jed, Leni sobbed once. And Jed, looking over at Barney, saw the heavy old man press back in his seat, eyes wide, but with an incomprehensible wildness on his face.

The warships were closing up now. Ranging shells from their heavy guns began to search out the alien. But before they could strike home; Barney shouted like a berserker, his old voice cracking. The drive section opened up like a flower into a brilliant, pure white blossom of flame whose lightest touch was extinction. And the alien ship flared like a burnt moth.

In the silence of the control room they sat and watched it burn. And when the fire had died; and the warships were far behind, but coming up fast now, Jed turned to the engineer.

"Thanks, Barney," he said.

"Thank her," said Barney emptily. "All I did was to pull the damping rods."

They looked at each other across the little distance and the useless controls between;

two old men understanding each other.

Jed turned away and flicked on the intercom. "Attention all passengers," he said. "You may unstrap now."



The Reckoning



Generally, articles aren't included in the ratings; but if you would like to include them in your ballot, don't hesitate. I'll make provision for them in the future.

The March fiction came out thus:

1. Far From Somewhere (Garrett)	1.63
2. Time For Delusion (Franson)	2.10
3. Robot's Gambit (Wilson)	3.30
4. Fluorocarbons Are Here To Stay (Westlake)	3.80
5. The Winning Hand (Moeller)	4.30
6. Paradox Lost (Howell)	5.20
7. The Jolly Boys (Maneikis)	5.40

Now on sale at all stands

A new author, T. H. Mathieu, leads off the June FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION with a novelet entitled "*Cargo: Death!*" You may recall hearing that a pair of rabbits once got loose in Australia — and nearly wrecked a continent! In this tale, we have a mouse-like creature which is far more dangerous. After all, rabbits don't bite people as a rule — and even when they do, it's usually just a matter of a wound to be treated against infection. But the bite of this creature was fatal in twenty seconds!

David Gordon is back with a yarn innocuously entitled, "Intelligence Quotient", for which Emsh has painted a striking cover. It's a striking and amusing tale, too . . .

*Look for
the June*

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

Third
of
Four
Parts



the tower of zanid

by L. Sprague de Camp

illustrated by FREAS

As war approached, Anthony Fallon wondered if he'd be killed as a result of some of the information he'd given the enemy. Meanwhile, he had to lead Dr. Fredro safely through the maze inside the Safq, and find a way out for them, with the secret of this sinister edifice!

Synopsis

DR. JULIAN FREDRO, a Polish archeologist, arrives on Krishna in 2168 to investigate the Safq, (a mysterious monumental building, shaped like a spiral shell), in Zanid, the capital of Balhib. **ANTHONY FALLON**, an English adventurer living in Zanid with a jagain (legal mis-

tress) named **GAZI**, spies for **QAIS** of Babaal, an agent of **GHUUR** of Uriiq, the Kamuran (Khan) of Qaath, the steppe-land west of Balhib. **PERCY MJIPA**, an African serving as Terran consul in Zanid, has learned of Fallon's occupation, and uses this knowledge to force Fallon to agree to help Dr. Fredro enter the Safq, which is con-



Fallon and Fredro wondered what part this captive forest girl would be playing...

trolled by the sinister cult of Yesht. Mjipa wishes Fallon to investigate the disappearance of three Earthmen in Balhib, all having vanished during the last three years.

Fallon belongs to the Juru Company of the Civic Guard of Zanid, which includes many non-Krishnans. From CAPTAIN KORDAQ of the regular army, the (commanding officer of the Juru Company), Fallon hears that Ghuur is about to attack Balhib and annex it to his great and growing empire. In the course of a night's patrol, Fallon breaks up a duel and makes a preliminary reconnaissance of the Safq. Kordaq asks to renew his old acquaintance with Gazi, with whom he was once in love.

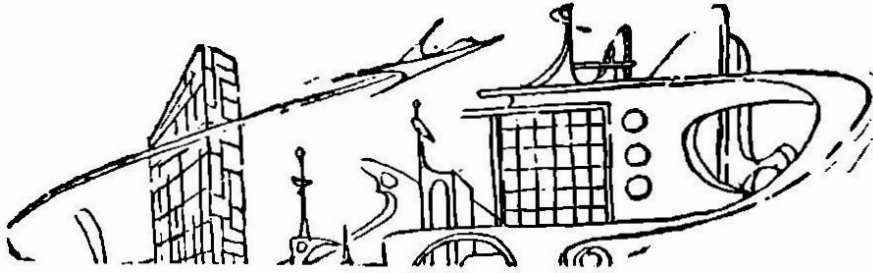
Fallon has already declined a request from Qais that he look into the Safq. Now, seeing that he must do so anyway, he drives a bargain with the agent, hoping to get enough money to win back the throne of Zamba, which he briefly occupied. Qais writes a 2500-kard draft to Fallon on the banker KASTAMBANG, with whom he secretly does business. This draft is cut into three parts, one each being kept by Qais, Fallon, and Kastambang until the information is furnished to Qais. The banker invites Fallon to a party, at which he will introduce him to a renegade priest of Yesht who can give Fallon the ritual of

the Yeshtite services.

Fallon testifies at the trial of the duellists. GIREJ, one of the duellists, thanks Fallon for saving his life, and vows everlasting gratitude.

Fallon, with an advance of a hundred karda, buys Gazi new clothes for the party. In the shop he meets Fredro, who goes with him to the public bath. This is held in the open by spraying water from shower-heads mounted on a water-wagon on a crowd of Zaniduma. Fallon sees WELCOME WAGNER, a fanatical American Ecumenical-Monothelist missionary, haranguing the crowd on the sinfulness of public exposure. Fredro starts to photograph the Zaniduma, brushing aside Fallon's warning that they believe that to be photographed naked deprives one of one's soul.

By their tactless actions, the missionary and the archeologist stir the crowd to fury. Fallon rescues Wagner, Fredro, and Gazi from the riot by commandeering the water-wagon and driving it off. Next day he is summoned by Mjipa, who explains to him what he had not realized—that Fallon alone was invited to Kastambang's party, Gazi not being of high enough class. To avoid a row with Gazi, Fallon concocts an elaborate scheme. He explains his blunder to Kordaq and gives him two tickets to a play, with instructions to



call early in the evening. After dinner, Fallon pretends to fall sick. When Kordaq arrives, Fallon urges Gazi to go with the captain to the play.

When they have left, Fallon goes to Kastambang's house alone. The banker introduces him to the renegade Yeshtite, both being cloaked and masked to prevent recognition. Then Fallon attends the fight staged between two large Krishnan carnivores, a yeki and a dragon-like shan. He sits near LIYARA the brass-founder, the backer of the secret opposition to the mad King Kir, and recognizes Liyara's voice as that of the ex-Yeshtite priest. During the fight, Liyara pushes Fallon over the barrier so that he falls into the arena. He finds himself facing the yeki, which has killed the shan. Kastambang throws Fallon a sword, with which he drives the yeki back into its tunnel.

The Zaniduma collect a purse to reward Fallon for his bravery, but he gets drunk and gambles the money away. When he gets home late he finds no Gazi.

VI

ANTHONY FALLON awakened stiff and uncomfortable, with a vile taste in his mouth. His neck felt as if it had acquired a permanent kink from last night's fall. Gradually, as he pulled himself together, he realized that he had slept in his clothes. He remembered dimly coming in drunk, finding Gazi not yet returned...

Where was the wench now?

He sat up, glaring. No Gazi. He called. No answer.

Fallon sat on the edge of the bed for a few seconds, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and jerking his head this way and that to exercise his wrenched neck. Then he got up and searched the house. Still no Gazi. Not only was she gone; she had taken her clothes and minor possessions with her.

Perhaps she had met with accident or foul play. Perhaps she had come in, failed to find Fallon and, in a rage gone off with Kordaq. He would look into the matter as soon as he had fed himself.

He did not intend to force issues on an empty stomach.

As he prepared breakfast with shaking hands, his mind wandered over the various possibilities. She might be all right, but not have gone home with Kordaq after all; so it wouldn't do to skewer the fellow at first sight, without giving him a chance to explain.

FALLON might have reflected that, after all, Gazi was not his wife; in Balhib, women were free to change their jagains whenever they pleased, somewhat like the system in force among the ruling caste in Mikardand. But just now, the mere thought that Gazi might have deserted him for Kordaq roused such rage at the wound to his amour-propre—a more poignant emotion with him than his affection for her—as to sweep all other considerations aside.

He choked down a cold breakfast, pulled on his boots, hitched up his sword and, without bothering to shave, set out for the barracks at the east side of the town. The sun had been up less than a Krishnan hour, and the breeze was beginning to make the dust-whirls dance.

A half-hour's ride on the aya-drawn bus brought him to the barracks, where a surly soldier at the reception-desk gave him the address of

Kordaq's suite of rooms. Another half-hour brought his search to a close.

The apartment-house which Kordaq lived in stood at the northern end of the Kharju, where the shops and banks of that district gave way to the middle-class residences of the Zardu to the north. This particular house backed up against the old city wall, which had been partly demolished and turned into a thoroughfare. The growth of the city northward had made it necessary to build a new wall beyond the old, to encompass the new district.

Fallon read the names of the tenants on the plaque affixed to the wall beside the door, and stamped up the stairs to the third floor. He made sure of the right door and struck the gong beside it.

WHEN THERE was no response he struck it again, harder, and finally knocked on the door, which the Balhibuma seldom did. At length he heard movement inside, and the door opened to reveal an extremely sleepy and confused-looking Kordaq. His green hair was awry; a blanket protected his bony shoulders against the early-morning chill, and he carried a naked sword in his hand. It was normal for a Krishnan thus to answer a knock at so untoward an hour, for Fallon might as well have been a robber.

Kordaq asked, "What in the name of Hoi's green eyes—oh, 'tis Master Antane! what brings you hither to shatter my slumber, sir? Some gross emergency dire, I trust?"

"Where's Gazi?" said Fallon, his hand straying behind him towards his own hilt. He knew the Krishnan trick of drawing a sword behind one's one body, which sometimes helped to surprise an antagonist.

Kordaq blinked some more sleep out of his eyes. "Why," he replied innocently, "having done me the honor to take me as her new jagain—in consequence of your folly of yester-eve, whereby, despite all I could do, your deception of her revealed itself—the girl's in my bed. Where else?"

"You...you mean you admit..."

"Admit what? I'm telling you straight. 'Tis true we should have left a note for you, informing you of the new arrangement; but in the excitement of discovering our mutual passion, we forgot. Now get you hence, good my sir, and let me resume my disjoined doze. Next time, I pray, call upon a night-working man at some more seemly hour."

Fallon choked with rage. "You think you can walk off with my woman, and then tell me to go away and let you sleep?"

"What ails you, Earthman? This is not barbarous Qaath, where women are property. Gazi may make her bed where and with whom she likes. Now get out, ere I teach you a lesson in manners—a science whereof your brusque breed from beyond the stars, for all their wisdom, appear to know as little as an unhatched babe."

"Oh, yes?" snarled Fallon. "I'll teach you a manner!"

He stepped back, whipped out his sword in the behind-the-back draw, and bored in.

STILL SOMEWHAT fogged with sleep, Kordaq hesitated for a fraction of a second before deciding whether to meet the attack or to slam the door shut; thus, Fallon's blade was lunging towards his chest before he moved. By a hasty parry, combined with a backwards leap, he barely saved himself from being spitted.

In so doing, however, he relinquished control over the door; Fallon plunged through and kicked the door shut behind him.

"Madman!" said Kordaq, whipping off his blanket and whirling it around his right arm for a shield. "Your imminent doom's upon your own head. Have at you, base swasher!" And he rushed in his turn.

Tick-zing-clang went the heavy blades. Fallon beat off the attack, but his ripostes

and counters were stopped with ease by Kordaq, either with his blade or with his blanketed arm. Fallon was too full of the urge to kill to notice what an odd spectacle his opponent made, nude but for the sword and the blanket.

"Antane!" cried Gazi's voice from the doorway to the bed chamber.

Fallon and Kordaq both let their eyes stray for a fleeting instant towards the door, in which Gazi stood with her hands pressed to her cheeks. But instantly each brought back his attention to his opponent before the other could take advantage of the distraction.

Tsing-click-swish!

THE FIGHTERS circled, warier now. Fallon knew from the first few passages that they were well matched. While he was heavier and (being an Earthman) basically stronger, Kordaq was younger and had the longer reach. Kordaq's blanket offset Fallon's superior fencing-technique.

Tick-tick-clang!

Fallon knocked over a small table and kicked it out of the way.

Swish-chunk!

Kordaq feinted, then aimed a vicious cut at Fallon's head. Fallon ducked; the slash sheared through the bronze stem of the floor-lamp and sent its decapitated top

bouncing across the floor, while the remainder of the standard toppled over with a crash.

Clang-dzing!

Round and round they went. Once when Fallon found himself facing Gazi in the doorway, he took the occasion to shout, "I say, Gazi, either get dressed or go away! You're distracting us!"

She paid no attention, and the duel continued. By a sudden flurry of thrusts and lunges Kordaq backed Fallon against a wall. A final lunge would have nailed him to the wall, but Fallon jumped aside and Kordaq's point pierced the room's one picture, a cheap copy of Ma'shir's well-known painting *Dawn Over Majbar*. While Kordaq's blade was stuck in the plaster, Fallon gave a quick forward cut at his foe, who caught the blow on his blanket, jerked out his sword, and faced his opponent again.

Tink-swish!

Fallon threw another cut at Kordaq, who parried slantwise so that Fallon's blade bit into one leg of the little overturned table.

FALLON felt his blood pound in his ears. Sweat stung his eyes and the room swam before him. He moved slowly, it seemed to him as if wading through tar. But Kordaq, he could see was getting just as tired.

Tick-clank!

The fight went on and on until both fighters were so exhausted that they could do little more than stand on guard, glaring at one another. Every ten seconds or so one or the other would summon up energy to make a feint or a lunge, which the other's unpierceable defense always stopped.

Ding-zang!

Fallon grated, "We're too—damned even!"

Gazi's voice spoke up from the doorway. "What ails you is that you're both cowards at liver, fearing to close each upon the other."

Kordaq shouted in a strangled voice, "Madam, would you like to trade places with me—to see how easy this is?"

"You are ridiculous," said Gazi. "I thought one or the other would be slain, so that my problem should be solved by choosing the survivor. But if you'll merely caper and mow all day."

Fallon panted, "Kordaq, I think—she's urging us on—so she can enjoy—the sight of gore—at our expense."

"M e t h i n k s—you speak sooth—Master Antane."

They puffed for a few seconds more, like a pair of idling steam-locomotives. Then Fallon said, "Well, how about calling it off? It doesn't look—as if either of us—could best the other in a fair fight."

"You started it, sir, but if you wish to terminate it, I—

as a reasonable man—will gladly entertain the proposal."

"So moved."

FALLON stepped back and half-sheathed his sword, watching Kordaq against any treacherous attack. Kordaq stepped into the alcove inside the door and sheathed his sword in the empty scabbard that hung from one of the coat-hooks. He looked at Fallon to be sure that the latter's blade was all the way in and his hand was off the hilt before he released his own hilt. Then he carried sword and scabbard towards the bedroom.

Before he reached the entrance, Gazi turned her back and preceded him into the bedchamber. Fallon fell into a chair. From the bedroom came sounds of bitter recrimination. Then Gazi reappeared in shawl, skirt, and sandals, lugging a cloth bag containing her gear. Behind her came Kordaq, also clad and buckling on his scabbard.

"Men," said Gazi, "whether Krishnan or Terran, are the most sorry, loathly, despicable, fribbling creatures in the animal kingdom. Seek not to find me, either of you, for I'm through with you both. Farewell and good riddance!"

She slammed the door behind her. Kordaq laughed and dropped into another chair, sprawling exhaustedly.

"That was my hardest bat-

tle since I fought the Jungava at Tajrosh," he said. "I wonder what raised up yon moomish wench's ire so? She boiled up like a summer thunder-shower over Qe'ba's crags."

Fallon shrugged. "Sometimes I doubt if I understand females either."

"Have you breakfasted?"

"Yes."

"Ha, that explains your success. Had I fought upon a stomach full, 'twould have been another story. Come into the kitchen whilst I scramble a deye egg."

FALLON grunted and got to his feet. He found Kordaq assembling comestibles from the shelves of the kitchen, including a big jug of fat-wine.

"'Tis a trifle early in the day to start on kvad," said the captain, "but fighting's a thirsty game, and a drop of this to replace that which we've sweated forth will harm us not."

Several mugs of wine later, Fallon, feeling mellow, said, "Kordaq old fellow, I can't tell you how glad I am you didn't get hurt. You're my idea of what a man should be."

"Forsooth, friend Antane, my sentiments towards you exactly. I'd rate you even with my dearest friends of my own species, than which I know of no more liver-felt compliment."

"Let's drink to friendship."

"Hail friendship!" cried Kordaq, raising his mug.

"To stand or fall together!" said Fallon.

Kordaq, having drunk, set down his mug and looked sharply at Fallon. "Speaking of which, my good bawcock, as you seem—when not inflamed by barbarous jealousy—to be a wight of sense and discretion, and serve under me in the Guard, I feel I should cast a hint of warning in your direction, to do with as you will."

"What's this?"

"THE NEWS is that the barbarian conqueror, Ghuur of Qaath, marches at last. Word arrived by bijar-post yester-eve shortly ere I left the barracks to visit your house. He had not then yet crossed the frontier, but news of that impious introduction may have come by now."

"I suppose that means that the Guard...?"

"You divine my very thought, sir. Get your affairs in order, as you may be called out any day. And now I must forsake this delightful congress to report to the barracks, to spend the day, no doubt, composing commands and filling forms. Another horrid institution! Would I'd been born some centuries back, when the art of writing was so rare that soldiers carried all they needed to know in their heads."

"Who'll guard the city if the whole Civic Guard's called out?"

"They'll not all be summoned. The probationaries, the incapacitated, and the retired members shall remain to fill the duties of those who leave. We captains of the watch-companies do struggle with the minister, who wishes to keep hale and blooming guardsmen for special watch-duty in..."

"In the Safq?" said Fallon as Kordaq hesitated.

The captain belched. "I'd not so state, save that you seem apprised of this circumstance already. How heard you?"

"Oh, you know. Rumors. But what's in the thing?"

"That I truly may not divulge. I'll say this: that this ancient pile harbors something so new and deadly as to make the arching shafts of Ghuur's bowmen seem as harmless as a vernal shower."

Fallon said, "The Yeshtites have certainly done an amazing job of keeping the interior of the Safq secret. I don't know of a single plan of the place in circulation."

KORDAQ smiled and wiggled one antenna in the Krishnan equivalent of a wink. "Not so secret as they like to think. This mystery has leaked a bit at the seams, as such mummeries are wont to do."

"You mean somebody outside the cult does know?"

"Aye, sir. Or at least we have more of a suspicion than Qarar had of the Dour of 'Ishk." Kordaq drank down another mug of falat-wine.

"Who's 'we'?"

"A learned fraternity whereto I belong, yclept the Mejraf Janjira. Hast heard of us?"

"The Neophilosophical Society," murmured Fallon. "I know a little about their tenets. You mean that you..." Fallon checked himself in time to keep from saying that he deemed these tenets an egregious example of interstellar damnfoolishness.

Kordaq, however, caught the scorn in the closing words and looked severely at Fallon. "There are those who condemn our principles unheard, proving thereby their ignorance in rejecting wisdom without making fair trial thereof, as did foolish King Gedik in the myth. Now, I'll explain them in three words, as best I can in my poor tongue-tied fashion; and if you're interested I can refer you to others more adept in exposition than I. Hast heard of Pyatsmif?"

"Of *what*?"

"Pyatsmif. That proves the ignorance of Earthmen, who have not heard of some of their planet's greatest men."

"You mean that's an Earthman?" Fallon had never heard of Charles Piazza

Smith, the eccentric Scottish nineteenth-century astronomer who founded the pseudo-scientific cult of pyramidology; but even if he had, it is doubtful whether he would have recognized the name as Kordaq pronounced it.

“WELL,” SAID the captain, “this Pyatsmif was the first to realize that a great and ancient monument upon your planet’s face—ancient, that is, as upstart Terrans reckon age—was more than it seemed; that truly it incorporated in its moldering structure clues to the wisdom of ages and the secrets of the universe..”

For the next half-hour Fallon squirmed while Kordaq lectured him on the tenets of the cult. He did not dare to break off the audience, because he thought that Kordaq might have some useful information in addition to this bilge.

At the end of that time, however, the falat-wine was having a definite effect upon the captain’s discourse, causing him to ramble and to lose the thread of his argument.

He finally got himself so confused that he broke off: “...nay, good Antane, I’m a simple tashiturn soldier, no ph’los’pher. Had I the eloquence of...of ”

He broke off, staring blankly into space. Fallon said, “And you’ve got a plan of the Safq?”

Kordaq looked fuzzily sly.

“Sh-said I so? Methinks I did not. But that such a plan exists I’ll not deny.”

“Interesting if true.”

“Doubt you my word, sirrah? I am who I am...”

“Now, now. I’ll believe your plan when I see it. There’s no law against that, is there?”

“No law against...” Kordaq puzzled over this problem for a while, then shook his head as if to clear it. “As stubborn as a bishtar and as slippery as a fondaq, such is my copemate Antane. Very well, I’ll *show* you this plan, or a copy true thereof. Then will you believe?”

“Oh, ah, yes, I suppose so.”

KORDAQ, swaying, went into the living-room. Fallon heard the sound of drawers opening and closing, and the captain came back with a piece of Krishnan paper in his hand. “Here then!” he said, and spread it out upon the table.

Fallon saw that it bore a rough diagram of the ground-floor plan of the Safq, which he could recognize by its curiously curved outline. The drawing was not very clear because it had been made with a Krishnan lead-pencil. This meant that it had a “lead” of real metallic lead, not of graphite, a comparatively rare mineral on this planet.

Fallon pointed to the largest room shown in the plan, just inside the only doorway.

"That, I suppose, is the main temple or chapel?"

"Truly I know not, for I've never been inside to see. But your hypothesis seems to accord with the divine faculty of reason, good sir."

The rest of the plan showed a maze of rooms and corridors, which meant little unless one knew the purposes of each part or had visited the site. Fallon stared at the plan with all his might, trying to photograph it on his brain. "Where did this come from?"

"Oh, ha, 'twas a frolicksome tale. A member of our learned brotherhood by inadvertence got into the secret annex of the royal library, where the public's not allowed, and came upon a whole file of such plans, showing all the important buildings in Balhib. He said nought at the time, but as soon as he was out of this hole he drew a copy from memory, of which this is yet another copy."

The captain put the paper away, saying: "And now if you'll excuse me, dear comrade, I must to toil. Qarar's blood! I've drunk too much of that belly-wash and must needs walk to work to sober up. Lord Chindor would take it amiss, did I enter the barracks staggering like a drunken Osirian and falling over the furniture. Wilt walk with me?"

"Gladly," said Fallon, and followed Kordaq out.

"WHAT IS?" asked Dr. Julian Fredro.

Anthony Fallon explained. "Everything's ready for our invasion of the Safq. I've even got a plan of the ground floor. Here!"

He showed Fredro the plan that he had drawn from memory, as soon as he had bidden farewell to Kordaq and had acquired a pencil and a pad of paper at a shop in the Kharju.

"Good, good," said Fredro. "When is this to be?"

"Tomorrow night. But you'll have to come with me now to order your costume."

Fredro looked doubtful. "I am writing important report for *Przegląd Archeologiczny*..."

Fallon held up a hand. "That'll wait; this won't. It'll take my tailor the rest of the day to make the robes; and besides, tomorrow night is the only Full Mass of Yesht for three ten-nights. Something to do with astrological conjunctions. And the Full mass is the only one where they have such a crowd of priests that we could slip in among them unnoticed. So if you wish to go ahead with this daffy scheme, it'll have to be tomorrow night."

"Oh, very well. Wait till I get coat."

THEY LEFT the 'Avrud Terrao, or Terran Hotel, and walked to the shop of

Ve'qir the Exclusive. Fallon got Ve'qir aside and asked, "You're a Bakhite, aren't you?"

"Aye, Master Antane. Wherefore ask you?"

"I wanted to be sure you wouldn't have religious objections to filling my order."

"By Qarar's club, sir, 'tis an ominous note you sound! What order's this?"

"Two robes of priests of Yesht, third grade."

"Why, have you gentles been admitted to the priesthood of that cult?"

"No, but we want them anyway."

"Oh, sir! Should it become known, I have many customers among the Yeshtites."

"It shan't become known. But you'll have to make them with your own little hands, and we have to have them right away, too."

The coutourier grumped and fussed and squirmed, but Fallon finally talked him round. He could talk almost anybody round; when he failed, it was not from lack of persuasive ability but due to weaknesses of character.

MOST OF the morning was spent in the back room of the shop being measured and fitted. This proved not too difficult, as the loose tentlike robes which the cult of Yesht decreed for its priesthood had to fit only approximately. Ve'qir promised the garments by the fol-

lowing noon, so Fallon and Fredro separated, the latter to return to the 'Avrud Terrao to resume work on his article.

Fallon said in parting, "You'll have to get rid of those whiskers too, old man."

"Shave my little beard? Never! Have worn this beard on five different planets! I have right to wear..."

Fallon shrugged. "Suit yourself, but you can't pass as a Krishnan then. They've got hardly any hair on their faces."

Fredro grumpily gave in, and they agreed to meet the following morning, pick up the robes, and go to Fallon's house to rehearse the ritual.

Fallon went thoughtfully back to the Juru, bought himself lunch at Savaich's Tavern, and returned home. As he neared his house he observed a little wooden arrow hanging by a string from the door-knob.

With a grunt of displeasure, Fallon lifted the object off its support. This meant that there would be a meeting of all members of the Juru Company at the armory that evening. No doubt this meeting was connected with the rising peril of Qaath.

Fallon entered the house and started to call Gazi, to tell her that he would be out again that evening; then he checked himself. He would miss her for a while, though her absence would not be

without compensations. He could now sprawl out over the whole bed if he wished. The cost of eating out at Sa-vaich's would be more than feeding the two of them at home had been. And he could lie down for a long nap—as he meant to do right now—without having her make trenchant remarks about his not having a regular job like other men.

CAPTAIN KORDAQ faced the assembled Juru Company—two hundred and seventeen organisms, about half Krishnans and the rest Earthmen, Thothians, Osirians, and so on.

He cleared his throat and said, "You've no doubt heard the rumors that have been buzzing around the Qaathian question like chidebs about a ripe cadaver, and have surmised that you've been called hither on that account. I'll not deceive you; you have. And though I'm but a rude and taciturn soldier, I'll essay to set before you in three words the causes thereof.

"As you all know—and as some of you recall from personal and painsome experience—'twas but seven years ago that the Kamuran of Qaath (may Dupulan bury him in filth) smote us at Taj-rosh and scattered our warriors to the winds. This battle bereft us of mastery of the Pandrate of Jo'ol, which theretofore had stood as a

buffer 'twixt us and the wild men of the steppes. Ghuur's mounted archers swarmed all over that land like a plague of zi'dams, and Ghuur himself received the homage of the Pandr of Jo'ol, who in sooth could do little else. Since then Jo'ol has remained independent in name, but its Pandr looks to Ghuur of Uri-iq for protection 'stead of to our own government."

"If we had a king in his right mind..." somebody said from the back, but the interrupter was quickly shushed.

"THERE SHALL be no disrespect for the royal house," said Kordaq sternly. "While I, too, am aware of his Altitude's tragic indisposition, yet the monarchy—and not the man—is what we owe allegiance to. To continue: Since then, mighty Ghuur has spread his pestilent power far and wide, subduing Dhaukia and Suria and adding them to his ever-growing empire. His cavalry have borne their victorious arms to the stony Madhiq Mountains, to the marshes of Lake Khaast, and even to the unknown lands of Ghobbejd and Yeramis—hitherto little more to us than names on the edge of the map, tenanted by headless men and polymorphic monsters.

"Why, you may well ask, did he not smite Balhib before sending his banner into such distant territories? Because, though we may have

degenerated from our greatest days, we're still a martial race, tempered like steel betwixt the hammer of the Jungava and the anvil of the other Varasto nations, to whom we've served these many centuries as a shield against the inroads of the steppe-folk. And though Ghuur vanquished us at Taj-rosh, he was so mauled in the doing that he lacked force to push across the border into Balhib proper. As far as eye could reach the plain was littered with fallen Balhibuma and Jungava, locked in the embrace of mortal strife.

"Now, having brought under his despotic control an empire greater than that of Kalwm at its apex, and bound many nations to his chariot, the barbarian has at last collected force enough to try hand-strokes with us again. His armies have swept into unresisting Jo'ol. Any hour we may hear that they have crossed our border. Scouts report that they are as grains of sand for multitude; that their shafts blacken the sun and their soldiery drink the rivers dry. Besides the dreaded mounted archery of Qaath, there are footmen from Suria, dragoons from Dhaukia, longbowmen from Madhiq, and man of far fantastic tribes in sunset lands never heard of among the Varastuma. And rumors speak of novel instruments of war, ne'er before seen upon this planet.

"DO I TELL you this to affright you? Nay. For we, too, have our strength. I need not recite to you the past glories of Balhibo arms—the siege of Marinjid, the battle of Jeshang, the retreat of the Qinqasr Regiment from Gherra. You learned them in school.

"But besides our own strong left arms we have something new. 'Tis a weapon of such fell puissance that a herd of wild bishtars could not stand before it! Just what it is I may not tell you yet, but you shall learn soon enough. Hold yourselves in instant readiness for a special drill to master this weapon. If all goes well 'twill be ready by Fiveday's drill—three days hence. Prepare yourselves for stirring action!

"Now I take up another matter, my chicks. The Juru Company's notorious in Zanid's guard for lack of uniform; wherefor you're not totally to be blamed. For by your weird diversity of form you defeat—albeit unwillingly—the very purpose of a uniform. However, some measure must be taken, lest you find yourselves upon the field of furious battle without means of telling friend from foe, and so be swallowed in confusion and swept into ill-deserved oblivion by your own side's ignorant arms, as happened to Sir Zidzuresh in the legend.

“I’VE SEARCHED the arsenal and found this pile of ancient helms. From their style, they seem to date from the reign of Ormiye the Stutterer. ’Tis true they’re badly scarred by the subtle demon of rust, albeit the armorers have ground and scoured them to oust the worst corrosion. But at least they’re all of a pattern, and in want of other means of identification they’ll distinguish the heroes of the Juru as well as protect your skulls.

“In addition, the proper uniform of the Juru Company—as well you know—comprises a red jacket with one white band sewn to the right sleeve, and not these trifling brassards you wear on patrol. Therefore if any of you has aught in his closet that could serve this vital turn, let him bring it forth. Its cut matters little, so that it be red. If you have, let’s say, a coat of white or buff, take it to the dyer’s for scarlet recoloration. And, your jackets having been so vividly incarnadined, set your sisters and jagainis to sewing white bands upon the sleeves. No petty foppery is this; your lives may hang upon your diligence in giving substance to this command!

“One more matter, also a thing of weight and moment. It’s come to the government’s keen and multitudinous ears that agents of the accursed Ghuur do slink like spooks about our sacred city, spying,

and that even some Balhibuma—besmirching the virtues of their forebears by their shame—hold traffic with these spies. Guard, then, your tongues, and watch lest any fellow-citizen display unwonted curiosity in manners of no just concern to him! If we catch one of these rascals in his slimy turpitudes, his fate shall make the historian’s pen to shake and the reader thereof to shudder in generations to come!

“Now form a line for the fitting and distribution of these antique scences, and may you wear them like the heroes stout who bore them in the great days of yore!”

As he lined up to get his helmet, Fallon reflected that Kordaq had not been very discreet himself that morning. It also occurred to him what a fine joke it would be if he, Anthony Fallon, were killed because of some of the information that he had sold to the opposing side. He who tried to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds got into odd predicaments.

On the other hand if he did not purvey to Qais the news which that unsavory character wished, he would not get the sum that Kastambang was holding for him, and might never recover his kingdom. And that was far more important to him than the outcome of the impending war between Qaath and Balhib.

FALLON was lured into Savaich's on his way home, and spent hours there talking and drinking with his cronies. Therefore he again slept late the following morning and hastened to cross the city to pick up Fredro at the Terraos.

It seemed to him that a subtle excitement ran through the city. On the omnibus, besides the common remarks by the passengers about their personal ills and coups, the pointless anecdotes, and the jokes with the peculiar Krishnan twist that made them seem unfunny to Fallon's ears, he caught snatches of conversation about the new events:

"...aye, sir, 'tis said the Jungava have a force of bishtars, twice the size of ours, which can be driven in wild stampede through the lines of their foes..." "Methinks our generals are fools, to send our boys off to the distant prairies to fight. 'Twere better to wait until the foe's here, and meet them upon our own ground..." "All this stir and armament is but a provocation to Ghuur of Uriiq. Did we but remain tranquil, sir, he'd never bethink himself of us..." "Nay, 'tis a weak and degenerate age, sir. In our grandsires' time we'd have spat in the barbarian's face..."

FALLON found the archeologist typing on his little

portable an article in his native language, which, as Fallon glanced over his shoulder, seemed to consist mainly of z's, j's, and w's. Fredro's chin and lip were still adorned with the mustache and goatee, which he said that he had simply forgotten to remove.

Fallon nagged his man until the latter came out of his fog, and they walked to the shop of Ve'qir the Exclusive. After an hour's wait they set out, with their robes in a bundle under Fredro's arm, for Fallon's home. The omnibus was clopping past Zanid's main park, south of the House of Judgment between the Gabanj and the Bacha, when Fredro gripped Fallon's arm and pointed.

"Look!" he cried. "Is zoological garden!"

"Well?" said Fallon. "I know it."

"But I do not! Have not seen! Let us get off, yes? We can look at animals and have the lunch there."

Without waiting for Fallon to argue, the Pole leaped up from his seat and plunged down the stairs to the rear of the vehicle. Fallon dubiously followed. While he did not like the loss of time that the visit would entail, he was not averse to eating in the park's excellent restaurant.

Presently they were wandering past cages containing yekis, shaihans, karouns, bishtars, and other denizens

of the Krishnan wilds. Fredro asked, "What is crowd? Must be a something unusual."

A mass of Krishnans had collected in front of a cage. In the noon heat most of them had discarded shawls and tunics and were nude but for loincloths or skirts and foot gear. The Earthmen walked towards them. They could not see what was in the cage for the mass of people, but over the heads of these an extra-large sign was fastened to the bars. Fallon, with effort, translated:

BLAK BER; URSO NEGRO

Habitat: Yunaisteits,
Nortamerika, Terra

"Oh," said Fallon. "I remember *him*. I wrote the story in the *Rashm* when he arrived as a cub. He's Kir's pride and joy. Kir wanted to bring an elephant from Earth, but the freight on even a baby elephant was too much for the treasury."

"But what is?"

"An American black bear. If you want to elbow your way through this crowd to look at one fat, sleepy, and perfectly ordinary bear..."

"I see, I see. Let us look at the other things."

They were hanging over the edge of the avval tank, and watching the ten-meter crocodile-snakes swimming back and forth in it—one end of a given avval would be

swimming back while the other was swimming forth—when a skirling sound made itself evident.

Fallon looked around and said, "Oy! Watch out; here comes the king! Damn, I should have remembered he comes here almost daily to feed the animals."

Fredro paid no attention, being absorbed in extracting from his right eye a speck of dust that the wind had wafted into it. He muttered something about "dusty city."

THE SOUND of the royal pipers and drummer grew louder, and presently the whole procession swung into sight around a bend in one of the paths. First came the three pipers and the drummer. The pipers blew on instruments something like Scottish bagpipes but more complicated; the drummer beat a pair of copper kettle-drums. After them came six tall guards in gilded cuirasses, two with ivory-inlaid crossbows over their shoulders, two with halberds, and two with great two-handed swords.

In the midst of them walked a very tall Krishnan of advanced years, helping himself along with a jewelled walking-stick. He was dressed in garments of considerable magnificence, but put on all awry. His stocking-cap turban was loosely wound; his gold-embroidered

jacket had the laces tangled; and his boots did not match. Behind the guards trailed a half-dozen miscellaneous civilians, their clothes rippling in the breeze.

The crowd of Krishnans around the bear-cage had dispersed at the first sound of the pipes. Now there were only a few Krishnans in sight, and these were sinking to one knee.

Fallon yanked Fredro's arm. "Kneel down, you damned fool!"

"What?" said Fredro, looking at Fallon out of a red and watery eye from which he had at last dislodged the foreign particle. "Me kneel? You crazy? I am citizen of P-Polish Republic, good as anybody else..."

Fallon half drew his rapier. "You kneel, old boy, or I'll bloody well let some of the stuffing out of you!"

GRUMBLING, Fredro complied. But, as the band went past, the tall, eccentrically-clad Krishnan said something sharp. The procession halted. King Kir was staring fixedly at the face of Dr. Julian Fredro, who imperturbably returned the stare.

"So!" cried the king at last. "'Tis the cursed Shurgez, come back to mock me! And wearing my stolen beard, I'll be bound! I'll trounce the pugging pajock in seemly style!"

Instantly the gaggle of trailing civilians began to close in around the king, all chattering soothing statements at once. Kir, paying them no heed, grasped his staff in both hands and tugged. It transpired that this was no mere walking-stick but a sword-cane. Out came the sword, and the Dour of Balhib rushed at Fredro, point first.

"Run!" yelled Fallon, doing so without waiting to see if Fredro had the sense to follow.

At the first bend in the path, Fallon risked a glance to the rear. Fredro was several paces behind him. After him came Kir; and after the king came pipers, drummer, guards, and keepers strung out along the path and all shouting advice to each other as to how to subdue the mad monarch without committing lese majeste.

Fallon ran on. He had been to the zoo only twice during his stay in Zanid and so did not know the ground plan well. Hence when he came to an intersection, and the path ahead seemed to lead between two cages, he kept right on going.

TOO LATE, he realized that this was a service-path leading to a locked door in each of the flanking cages; beyond that point, the path ceased. The ground sloped sharply up to a rocky crag that formed the back of both

inclosures. One could climb up this slope a few meters only before it became too steep for further ascent. At the topmost point that could be reached, the bars of qongwood that formed the cage stood only about two meters high, as the slope of the rock inside the cage at this point was too steep for the inmates of the cage to scale.

Fallon looked back. Despite his age, Fredro was still close behind him, though alarmingly red of face. King Kir was just galloping into the service-way with gleaming blade. There was no way to go but up the slope.

Up Fallon went until he was using his hands. Where a hint of a ledge provided a toe-hold he looked down. Fredro was right below him, and the king was just starting to climb, while the royal retinue ran after and a horde of shouting spectators converged from all quarters. Fallon could of course have drawn his own sword and beaten off the king's attack; but had he done so, the guards—seeing him in combat with their demented lord—would have plugged him on general principles.

The only way out seemed at this point to be over the fence and into one of the cages. Fallon had not had time to read the signs on the fronts of the cages, and from where he now stood he could see only the backs of these signs. The right-hand cage

held a pair of gerkas, medium-sized carnivores related to the larger yeki. These might well prove dangerous if their cage were invaded by strangers. Whatever was in the left-hand cage, it was at the moment withdrawn into its cave at the back.

FALLON grasped the tops of the bars on the left and heaved himself up. Though he was getting on in years, the less-than-Terran gravity, plus the fear of death, enabled him to hoist himself to the top of the fence, which he straddled. He held out a hand to the panting Fredro who, he noticed, still clutched the bundle containing the priestly robes. Fredro passed this bundle to Fallon, who dropped it on the inside of the fence. The bundle struck the nearly level rock at the base of the fence, then tipped over the edge and slid down the smooth slope until it stopped at a ledge.

With Fallon's help, Fredro also hauled himself to the top, then dropped down inside just as King Kir appeared outside the bars. Clutching a cage-bar to keep himself from slipping, the Dour thrust his sword between the bars.

As the blade flicked out, the two Earthmen slid off down the slope as the bundle had done, stopping on the same ledge. Here Fredro collapsed in a heap from exhaustion.

Behind them rose the yell of the mad monarch: "Come back, ye thievish slabberers, and receive your just guerdon!"

The retinue, having sorted itself out from the mere spectators, was climbing up after their king. As Fallon watched, they surrounded Kir, soothing and flattering, until presently the whole crowd was climbing back down the slope and walking out from between the two cages. The guards shooed the curious out of the way and the royal party set off, the pipers tootling again and the king completely surrounded by keepers.

"Now if we can only get out..." said Fallon, looking around for a path.

THE ROCK was too steep and slippery to climb up the way they had come down; but at one end, the ledge ran into a mass of irregular rock that provided means of descent to a point from which it should be an easy jump to the floor of the enclosure.

A little knot of park officials had collected at the front of the cage, and seemed to be arguing the proper method of disposing of their unintended captives, gesticulating at one another with Latin verve. Around and behind them the crowd of spectators had closed in again following the passage of the king.

Fredro, having gotten his

wind back and recovered from his unwonted exertions, rose, picked up the bundle, and started along the ledge, saying, "Not good—not good if this was found, yes?" He panted some more. Then: "What—ah—what does 'shurgez' mean, Mr. Fallon? The king shouted it at me again and again."

"Shurgez was a knight from Mikardand who cut off Kir's beard, so our balmy king has been sensitive on the subject ever since. It never occurred to me that that little goatee of yours would set him off—I say, look who's here!"

A thunderous snarl made both men recoil back against the rock. Out from the cave at the back of the cage, its six lizardy legs moving like clockwork, came the biggest shan that Fallon had ever seen, aroused, no doubt, by the noise of recent events. The fanged green-and-buff head swung about on the long neck. The saucer eyes picked out Fallon and Fredro on their ledge.

Fredro cried, "Why did you not pick safer cage?"

"How in Qondyor's name was I to know? If you'd shaved your beard as I told you..."

"He can reach up! What do now?"

"Prepare to die like a man, I suppose," said Fallon, drawing his sword. Though frightened himself he had no intention of showing it before this learned ass.

"But I have no weapon!"
"Unfortunate, what?"

THE KRISHNANS in front of the cage yelled and screamed, though whether they were trying to distract the shan or were cheering it on the assault Fallon could not tell. As for the shan, it ambled around to the section of the inclosure where the Earthmen were trapped and reared up against the rock so that its head came on a level with the men.

Fallon stood, his rapier before him, ready to thrust as far as his limited footing allowed. The park keepers in front were shouting something at him, but he did not dare to take his eyes from the carnivore.

The jaws gaped and closed in. Fallon thrust at them. The shan clomped shut on the blade and, with a quick sideways jerk, of its head tore the weapon from Fallon's hand and sent it spinning across the inclosure. The beast gave a terrific snarl. As it opened its jaws again, Fallon saw that the blade had wounded it slightly. Brown blood drooled from its lower jaw.

The monster drew back its head and gaped for a final lunge—and then a bucketful of liquid fell upon Fallon from above. As he blinked and sputtered, he heard Fredro beside him getting the same treatment, and became aware of a horrid stench, like

that of the sheep-dip used on a Canadian ranch which he had once visited in the course of his career as a World-Federation police constable.

The shan, after jerking back its head in surprise, now thrust it forward again, gave a sniff, and dropped back down on all sixes with a disgusted snort. Then it walked back into its cave.

FALLON looked around. Behind and above him a couple of zoo keepers were holding a ladder against the outside of the fence at the point where Fallon and Fredro had scaled it. A third Krishnan had climbed the ladder and emptied the buckets of liquid upon the Earthmen below him. He was now handing the second bucket to one of his mates preparatory to climbing back down the ladder.

Another Krishnan, lower down the slope, called through the bars, "Hasten down, my masters, and we'll let ye out the gate. The smell will hold yon shan."

"What is the stuff?" asked Fallon scrambling down the rocks.

"Aliyab-juice. The beast loathes the stench thereof, wherefore we sprinkle a trace of it upon our garments when we wish to enter its cage."

Fallon picked up his sword and hurried out the gate, which the keepers opened. He neither knew nor cared what aliyab-juice was, but he did

think that his rescuers might have been a little less generous in their application of it. Fredro's bundle was soaked, and the Krishnan paper, which had little water-resistance, had begun to disintegrate.

A COUPLE of the keepers closed in, hinting that a tip would be welcome as a reward for the rescue. Fallon, somewhat irked, felt like telling them to go to Hishbak, and that he was thinking of suing the city for letting him be chased into the cage in the first place. But that would be a foolish bluff, as Balhib had not yet attained that degree of civilization where a government allows a citizen to sue it. And they *had* saved his life.

"These blokes want some money," he said to Fredro. "Shall we make up a purse for them to divide?"

"I take care of this," said Fredro. "You are working for me, so I am responsible. Is matter of Polish honor."

He handed Fallon a whole fistful of gold pieces, telling him to give them to the head keeper to be divided evenly among those who took part in the rescue. Fallon, only too willing to allow the honor of the Polish Republic to meet the cost of rescue, did so. Then he said to Fredro, "Come along. We shall have to work hard to get all this stuff memorized."

Behind them, a furious dis-

pute broke out among the keepers over the division of the money. The Earthmen boarded another omnibus and squeezed into the first seats they found.

For a while, the vehicle clattered westward along the northern part of the Bacha. Fredro, peering out the left side at the temples, bounced in his seat with excitement. Presently Fallon noticed that several seats around both Fredro and himself had become vacant. He moved over to where Fredro sat.

A CROSS the aisle, a gaudily-dressed Zanidu with a sword at his hip was sprinkling perfume on a handkerchief, which he then held to his nose, glaring at Fallon and Fredro over this improvised respirator. Another craned his neck to look back at the two Earthmen in a marked manner through a lorgnette. And finally a small spectacled fellow got up and spoke to the conductor.

The latter came forward, sniffed, and said to Fallon, "You must get off, Earthmen."

"Why?" said Fallon.

"Because you're making this omnibus untenable by your foul effluvium."

"What he say?" said Fredro, for the conductor had spoken too fast in the city dialect for the archeologist to follow.

"He says we're stinking up his bus and have to get off."

Fredro puffed. "Tell him I am Polish citizen! I am good as him, and I don't get off for..."

"Oh, for Qarar's sake stow it! Come along; we won't fight these beggars over your precious Polish citizenship." Fallon rose and held out a hand to the conductor, palm up.

"Wherefore?" said the conductor.

"You will kindly return our fares, my good man," said Fallon.

"But you have already come at least ten 'blocks..."

"*Fastuk!*" shouted Fallon in a burst of rage. "I've had all the imposition from the city of Zanid today that I can put up with! Now will you..."

The conductor shrank back at this outburst and hastily handed over the money. Fallon marched to the rear with Fredro grumbling after. They finished their journey in a khizun.

WHEN THEY entered Fallon's house and disposed of their burdens, Fredro asked: "Where is your—ah—how do you say—jagaini?"

"Away visiting," said Fallon brusquely, not caring to air his domestic upheavals at this stage.

"Most attractive female, even by Terran standards," said Fredro. "Maybe I have been on Krishna so long that greeny coloring looks natural.

But she had much charm. I am sorry not to see her again."

"I'll tell her," said Fallon, finding this an uncomfortable conversation. "Let's lay out these robes and our clothes, and hope that most of the stench will disappear by the time we have to put them on again."

Fredro, unfolding the robes, sighed. "I have been widower thirty-four years. Have many descendants—children, grandchildren, and so on for six generation."

"I envy you, Dr. Fredro," said Fallon sincerely. For he had reached an age when a man who has—from egocentricity or absorption in other matters—avoided begetting children, begins belatedly to regret his self-imposed sterility. Not that Fallon would have taken advantage of an opportunity to rectify the omission.

Fredro continued, "But no woman. Mr. Fallon, tell me, how does a Earthman go about getting the jagaini in Balhib?"

Fallon glanced at his companion with a sardonic little smile. "The same way you get a woman on Earth, for a wife or otherwise. You ask."

"I see. You understand. I only wish information as scientific datum."

"At your age you might, at that."

THEY SPENT the rest of the day rehearsing the

ritual and practicing the gliding walk of the Yeshtite priest. For the third meal of the Krishnan day they went out to Savaich's.

Then they returned to Fallon's house. Fallon had been thinking of how to approach their problem. Finally he personally shaved off Fredro's whiskers, despite the latter's protests. Fredro then went into a spell of childish sulks that lasted for most of an hour. A light dabbing of green face-powder gave their skins the correct chartreuse tinge. They gave their hair a green wash and glued to their heads the artificial ears and antennae that Mjipa had furnished.

Lastly they both donned the purple-black sacerdotal robes over their regular clothes. They left the hoods hanging down and hitched the skirts up to knee-length through the belt-cords. Then over these they put on each a Zanido rain-cloak—Fallon his new one and Fredro the old patched one that Fallon had been meaning to get rid of.

At last they set out for the Safq afoot. And soon the great enigmatic conical structure came into view against the darkening sky.

VII

FALLON asked, "Are you sure you want to go ahead with this? It's not too late to back out, you know."

Fredro snorted. "Of course am sure. How—how many ways in?"

"Only one as far as I know. There might be a tunnel over to the chapel, but that wouldn't do us any good. Now remember, we shall first walk past, to see in as far as we can. I think they have a desk beside the entrance, where one has to identify oneself. But these robes ought to get us in. We watch until nobody's looking, then nip around behind the bulletin-board and shed these rain-cloaks."

"I know, I know," said Fredro impatiently.

"Anybody'd think you were in a hurry to have your throat cut."

"When I think of secrets inside, waiting for me to discover them, I do not care."

Fallon snorted, giving Fredro the withering look that he reserved for foolhardy idealists.

Fredro continued, "You think I am damn fool, yes? Well, Mr. Consul Mjipa told me about you. Said you were just like that about getting back that place you were king of. Depenós on whose horse is gored, eh?"

Fallon privately admitted that there was justice in this comparison. But, as they were now entering the park surrounding the Safq, he did not have time to pursue that line of thought.

Fredro continued in a lower tone, "Krishna is archeol-

ogist's paradise. Its ruins and relics representing at least thirty or forty thousand Ter-ran years of history—eight or ten times as long as re-corded history on Earth—but all mixed up, with huge lacu-nae, and never properly studied by Krishnans them-selves. With a little effort and courage, man can be a Schliemann, a Champollion, and a Carnarvon all at same time..."

"Hush, we're getting close."

THE MAIN entrance to the Safq was lit by fires, fluttering in the breeze from the steppes, in a pair of cressets flanking the great doors. These doors now stood open. There was a coming and going of Krishnans, both priests and laymen, in and out of these doors. Voices murmured and purple-black robes flapped in the wind.

As Fallon and Fredro neared the entrance, the former could see over the heads of the Krishnans into the interior, lit by the light of many candles and oil-lamps. At intervals, the crowd would thin; and then Fallon could glimpse the desk at which sat the priest checking the register of those who entered.

Since the introduction of photography to Krishna, the priests of Yesht had taken to issuing to their trusted fol-lowers identification badges bearing small photographs of the wearers. Fifteen to twen-

ty ingoing laymen stood in line, from the desk out through the doors and down the three stone steps to the street-level.

Fallon strolled up close to the portal, watching and lis-tening. He was relieved to see that, as he had hoped, priests pushed through the traffic-jam in the portal without bothering to identify them-selves to the one at the desk. Evidently for a layman to wear the costume of such a priest was such an unheard-of thing that no precautions had been taken against it.

NOBODY heeded Fallon and his companion as they sauntered over to the bulletin-board and pretended to read it. A minute later, they popped out from behind the board, to all appeared third-grade priests of Yesht. The rain-cloaks lay rolled up on the paving in the shadow behind the board. The hoods of the robes shadowed their faces.

Fallon, heart pounding, strode towards the entrance. Laymen deferentially sidled out of his way so that he did not actually have to push through the crowd. Fredro followed so closely that he trod on Fallon's well-scuffed heels.

Through the scarred bronze valves of the great door they passed.

Ahead of them a partition-wall jutted out from the left, leaving only a narrow space

between itself and the door-keeper's desk on the right. On the left stood a couple of men in the armor of Civic Guards, leaning on halberds and scanning the faces of passers-by. A priest fluttered just ahead of Fallon, who heard him mutter something that sounded something like "*rukhval*" as he passed between the watchers on the left and the identification desk on the right.

Fallon lowered his head, hesitating before the plunge. Somewhere a bell tinkled. A whisper of movement ran through the crowd at the entrance. Fallon guessed that the bell meant to hurry up for the service.

He stepped forward, muttering "*Rukhval!*", and feeling for the rapier-hilt under his robe.

The priest at the desk did not look up as Fallon and Fredro went past, being engrossed in a low-voiced colloquy with a layman. Fallon did not dare to look at the guards, lest even in the certain light they discern his Terran features. His heart stopped as a growl came from one of them: "*So'i! So'i hao!*"

SO PARALYZED was Fallon's brain with fear that it took a second to realize that the fellow was merely urging somebody to hurry up. Whether he was speaking to Fallon and Fredro, or to the priest and layman at the desk, Fallon did not wait to find

out, but plunged on. Other priests crowded after the Earthmen.

Fallon let himself be carried along in the current. As he passed into the Safq he became aware of the curious sound that he had noticed when he had inspected the structure four nights before. It sounded more loudly inside than outside, but it also turned out to be a more complicated and more enigmatic noise than he had thought. Not only was there the deep rhythmic banging that he had noted before, but lighter and more rapid sounds as of hammering, plus grating noises as of filing or grinding. Somebody, thought Fallon, must be making or building something. At least he was sure that the sound did not represent any sort of musical instrument.

The spate of Krishnans swept across the rear of the cella of the temple of Yesht that formed part of, or had been built into, the Safq, and that appeared as the large room in Kordaq's plan. Peering cautiously out from under the edge of his cowl to the left, Fallon could see the backs of the pews, three great blocks of them, about half filled. Beyond, as he passed behind the aisles dividing the pews, he glimpsed the railing that separated the congregation from the hierarchy. To the left of center rose the pulpit, a cylindrical structure of gleaming silver.

At the rear of the center stood something black and uncertainly shaped. This would be the great statue of Yesht that Panjaku of Ghulinde, himself a Yeshtite, according to a story in the *Rashm*, had come to Zanid to make.

THE LAMPLIGHT glimmered on the gilding of the decorations and sparkled on the semi-precious stones set in the mosaics that ran around the upper parts of the walls. Fallon could not see these mosaics clearly from where he was, but he had an impression of a series of tableaux illustrating scenes from the myths of Yesht—a mythos notable even among the fanciful Krishnans for grotesquerie.

The stream of Krishnans coming in through the entrance sorted itself out in this space behind the rear-most pews. The laymen trickled forward into the aisles between the pews to find their places, while the priests, much fewer in number, pressed forward into another doorway straight ahead.

According to Liyara's instructions, Fallon surmised that through this door he would find a robing-room where the priests put on the over-vestments which they wore during the service. The lower grades, including the third, did not change their regular robes for this purpose. Only the highest grades,

from the fifth up, donned complete special regalia.

With a glance back to make sure that Fredro was still following, Fallon plunged ahead through this door. But when he had passed through, he did not find himself in at all the sort of place that he expected from the nondescript little square that corresponded to this room on Kordaq's plan.

He was in a medium-sized room, poorly lit, with another door straight ahead, through which the priests ahead of him were hastening. And then the clink of a chain made him turn his head to the left. What he saw made him recoil so sharply as to step on the toe of the following Fredro, who squeaked.

CHAINED to the far wall of the room, but with plenty of slack to allow it to reach all parts of the chamber with its snaky neck, was a shan. While not so large as the ones that Fallon had seen in Kastambang's arena and the zoo, it was quite large enough to eat a man in a few mouthfuls.

At the moment the creature's head lay upon the forward pair of its six clawed feet. Its big eyes steadily regarded Fallon and his companion, not two meters away. One lunge would have caught either of them.

With a stifled gasp, Fallon pulled himself together and pressed forward, hoping that

none of the Krishnans had observed his gaffe. He remembered the shower of aliyab-juice that he and Fredro had received earlier at the zoo. No doubt the shan would refrain from attacking them for this, if for no other reason. Could it be that all the priests sprinkled the stuff on their robes, so that any non-stinking intruders—disguised as Fallon and Fredro—would be gobbled by the shan? Fallon could not tell whether the genuine priests smelled of aliyab because his own nostrils were now so saturated with the smell that he had become habituated to it. But if this was true, their impromptu bath at the zoo had been a piece of wonderful luck.

The shan's eyes followed them, but the beast did not raise its head from its paws. Fallon hurried through the next door.

AHEAD, THE corridor extended in a long gentle curve following the outer wall of the building. There were no windows; and although jadeite is translucent in thin sections, the outer walls were much too thick to admit any outside light. Instead, lamps were fastened at intervals to wall-brackets. The left side of the corridor was formed by another wall pierced by frequent doorways. Around the curve, where the bulge of the inner wall blocked more distant

vistas, Fallon knew from the plan that there should be a flight of stairs leading up and another one down.

To the immediate left, there branched off a large hallway or elongated chamber crowded with priests shuffling about before a long counter, on which were piled the outer vestments. The priests were picking these up, donning them, and straightening them before a series of mirrors affixed to the opposite wall. Though there was a murmur of talk, Fallon noticed that the priests were unusually quiet for a crowd of Krishnans.

Having been briefed by Liyara, Fallon walked—with an air of confidence that he did not feel—down the counter until he came to a pile of the red capes which distinguished third-degree priests of Yesht. He picked up two, handed one to Fredro, and put on the other before one of the mirrors.

No sooner had he done so when a bell jangled twice. With last-minute scurrying and primping, the priests formed a double file along the side of the hall where the mirrors were hung. Fallon dragged Fredro, still fumbling with the tie-strings of his cape, into the first vacant space that he spotted in the double line of priests of the third class. These followed those of the fourth class, who wore blue capes, and preceded those of the second, who

wore yellow. Fortunately there did not seem to be any fixed order in which those of a given class took their places.

FALLON and Fredro stood side by side, heads bowed to keep their faces hidden, when the bell rang three times. There was a shuffle of feet. Out of the corner of his eye, Fallon saw a heterogeneous group of Krishnans hurry by. One carried, swung from a chain, a thurible whence poured a cloud of fragrant smoke, the fragrance cutting through the pervasive aliyab-stench and the strong Krishnan body-odor. There was one with a kind of harp and another with a small copper gong. There were several laden with gold-lace and jewels, carrying ornate staves with symbols of the cult on top.

And Fallon could not repress a start as a couple passed towing between them, by a metal collar to which chains were linked fore and aft, a naked female Krishnan with her wrists bound behind her back.

Though the light was uncertain, and Fredro did not get a good look, he thought that the female was one of the small pale-skinned, short-tailed primitives from the great forest belt east of Katai-Jhogorai, beyond the Triple Seas. The westerly Krishnans had but a meager knowledge of these regions,

save that the forest folk had long furnished the Varasto nations with most of their slaves. Under Terran influence, a few of the nations of the Triple Seas had outlawed slavery—Katai-Jhogorai and Saruskand, for instance. And in the others, while still legal, it had never been practiced on the huge scale of some earlier Terran civilizations—not because of humane scruples on the part of the Krishnans, but because most Krishnans were too proud, stubborn, and truculent to make good slaves. They were too likely to murder their masters, even at the cost of their own lives.

NOR WERE the long-tailed hairy folk of the island of Za and the Koloft Swamp often available for such exploitations, the former because they were semi-civilized and militarily formidable; the latter because the Republic of Mikardand protected them. But the timid little forest people from Jaega and Aurus were still kidnapped for sale in the western ports of the Triple Seas, though this traffic had declined since the suppression of the pirates of the Sunqar, the continent of floating terpæ'la weed in the Banjao Sea.

Fallon had no time now to wonder what the Yeshtites meant to do with the forest-female. For the bell rang again, and the dignitaries

sorted themselves out into a formal procession at the head of the column. The harpist and the gong-carrier began to make musical noises. The mass moved forward in a stately march that contrasted with their previous informal haste. As they marched they broke into a wailing and lugubrious hymn. Fallon could not understand the words because the priests sang in Varastou—a dead language that was the parent of Balhibou, Gozashtandou, Qiribou, and the other tongues of the Varasto nations, who occupied the lands west of the Triple Seas.

Chanting dismally, the priests paraded down the robing-hall and through a door that opened into the side of the chapel. Led by the hierarchs and the musicians, they passed down the right-side aisle to the rear of the chapel, across the rear, and to the front again. Fallon's eyes swept over the decorations: rich and old and fantastically ornate, in which the safq-shell, as the principal symbol of the god, occurred over and over. Around the capital of one of the pillars a scaffolding showed where the priests were renewing some of the gilt.

AROUND the upper third of the walls ran the great mosaic illustrating the myth of Yesht. Fallon could interpret the pictures from Lyarra's account. The god had

been just an earth-god in the Varasto pantheon, having been adopted by the Varasto nations from the Kalwmians when they overran and broke up the latter's empire. In recent centuries, however, the priesthoods both of Yesht and of Bakh, the Varasto sky-god, had developed henotheistic tendencies in Balhib, each trying to seize a monopoly of religion instead of living and letting live as in the old days of Bahibo polytheism. To date the Bakhites had had the better of the struggle, enlisting the dynasty among their worshippers and asserting that Yesht was no god at all but a horrid cacodaemon worshipped with obscene rites by the tailed races who had roamed the lands of the Triple Seas before the tailless Krishnans had settled the country many thousands of years before.

According to the current canonical myth of Yesht, the god had incarnated himself in a mortal man, Kharaj, in the days of the pre-Kalwn kingdom of Ruakh. In this form he had preached to the Krishnans. Being an earth-god he was naturally concerned with fertility, which he exhibited in his own person by begetting offspring upon a number of mortal females.

YESHT-KHARAJ also overcame monsters and evil spirits, exorcized ghosts, and raised the dead. He underwent a number of adven-

tures that seemed to the outsider surrealistically meaningless, but which to the devotee no doubt had a profound symbolic significance.

At one time he was captured by a she-demon who let him go only at the price of getting her, too, with egg. The offspring grew up to become the legendary King Myande the Execrable of Ruakh. After a long and intricate struggle between the god and his domidemonic son, Yesht-Kharaj was arrested by the king's soldiers, tortured with great persistence and ingenuity, and at last allowed to die. The king's men buried the remains, but the next day a volcano burst from the ground at the spot and overwhelmed the king and his city.

The mosaic showed these events, including the begettings and the tortures, with exemplary candor and literalness. Fallon heard a low whistle from Fredro as the latter took in the tableau. Fallon trod on Fredro's toe to silence him.

The procession passed through a gate in the railing between the pews and the altar. There it split into groups. Fallon followed the other third-grade priests and squirmed into the rearmost rank of their section, hoping to be less conspicuous. He found himself on the left side of the altar as one faced it, with the cylindrical silver pulpit cutting off a good

part of his view towards the congregation.

On his left, as he faced the audience, rose the great statue of Yesht, standing on four legs in the form of tree-trunks, wearing a mountain on his head and holding a city on one of his six outstretched hands and a forest on another. The remaining hands held other objects: one a sword, others things less easily identified. The sculptor had emphasized the god's masculinity to what seemed even to the sophisticated Fallon an extravagant degree.

PAST THE pulpit Fallon could see the altar between the statue and the congregation. He observed with some shock that the hierarchs were shackling the forest female prone upon the altar by golden fetters attached to her wrists and ankles.

Beyond the altar, he now noticed, there stood a brawny Krishnan with his head concealed by a black cloth bag with eye-holes. This Krishnan was setting up and heating an assortment of instruments whose purpose was obvious from a comparison with the torture-scenes of the mosaic.

Fallon heard Fredro's appalled whisper: "Is going to be *tortures?*"

Fallon lifted his shoulders in a suggestion of a shrug. The chanting ceased and the most gaudily-bedecked hierarch climbed the steps to the

pulpit. From somewhere nearby Fallon heard a whisper in Balhibou—, “What ails the third-grade section this Mass? They’re so crowded one would think there was an extra man among, ’em. ”

Another whisper shushed the complainant, and the head hierarch began to speak.

The beginning of the service was not very different from those of some of the major Terran religions. Fallon fidgeted, shifted his feet, and tried not to scratch. The hierarchs bowed to each other and to the statue, and handed symbolic objects back and forth.

Finally the chief hierarch ascended the pulpit again.

THE HIERARCH began in modern Balhibou: “Listen, my children, to the story of the god Yesht when he became a man. And watch as we act out this tale, that you shall always be reminded of these sad events and shall carry the image of them engraved upon your liver.

“It was on the banks of the Zigros River that the god Yesht first came in unto and took possession of the body of the boy Kharaj as the latter played and sported with his companions. And when the spirit of Yesht had taken possession of the body of Kharaj, the body spake thus: ‘O my playfellows, harken and obey. For I am no longer a boy, but a god, and I bring

you word of the will of the gods. .’ ”

During this narrative, the other hierarchs went through a pantomime illustrating the acts of Yesht-Kharaj. When the high-priest told how one of the boys had refused to accept the word of Yesht and mocked Kharaj, and the latter had pointed a finger at him and he fell dead, a gaudily-clad priest fell down with a convincing thump.

The pantomime became grimmer when the high priest came to the story of the youth of Kharaj, and how he had used his six wives; for at this point the man with the bag over his head proceeded to demonstrate upon the forest female just what Kharaj had done and how he had done it.

AT LONG last, the high priest came to his climax: the story of the imprisonment and torture of Yesht-Kharaj on the orders of his own son. This time the masked one took the part of King Myande’s torturers, with the forest female as Yesht-Kharaj.

Anthony Fallon was not a man of high character. But though he had been responsible for a certain amount of death and destruction on his own account in the course of his adventures, he was not wantonly cruel. He liked Krishnans on the whole—except for this sadistic streak which, though usually kept

out of sight, came to the surface in such manifestations as the public games of Gozashtand, like those of ancient Rome, or in this torture-sermon.

Now, though he tried to retain his attitude of cynical detachment, Fallon found himself grinding his teeth and driving his finger-nails into his palms. He would cheerfully have blown up the Safq and everybody in it, as the obnoxious Wagner had suggested. Had Mjipa's missing Earthmen ended up on this bloody slab, too?

"Steady," he whispered to Fredro. "We're supposed to enjoy this."

THE SMELL of burning flesh made him cough. The screams kept on and on; it seemed incredible that any higher organism could be used in this manner and still live. But at last the sounds diminished little by little and then ceased.

The high priest called for another hymn, during which a collection was taken up. Then after prayers and benedictions the high priest came down from his pulpit and led the priests, chanting, down the aisle along the route that they had entered. When Fallon and Fredrō, marching with the sacerdotal procession, passed back into the robing-hall, Fallon heard the general scurry of feet as the congregation departed out the main entrance, where the

clink of coin told that another collection was being taken up. Watching the authentic priests, Fallon tossed his cape on the counter and strolled off with Fredro, still shaken by what he had witnessed.

The unexplained noises now came to Fallon's ears again more clearly, since there was no more singing and haranguing to drown them out. The other priests were either standing about in groups and talking, or drifting off about their own affairs. Fallon jerked his head towards the corridor that ran around the outer wall of the building.

FALLON AND FREDRO walked along this curving hallway. Above the level of the doorways on the left ran a series of inscriptions, at the sight of which Fredro became excited.

"Maybe in pre-Kalwm languages," he whispered. "Some of those I can decipher. Must stop to copy..."

"Not tonight you shan't!" hissed Fallon. "Can't you imagine what these blokes would think if they saw you doing that? If they caught us they'd use us at the next Full Mass."

Some of the doors to the left were open, revealing the interiors of miscellaneous chambers used for storing records and transacting sacerdotal business. From one door came the smell of cookery.

Fallon could discern as he walked that the wall of the structure were of enormous thickness, so that the passages and rooms were more like burrows in a solid mass than compartments separated by partitions. No doubt the early builders, while infinitely painstaking and industrious, lacked the knowledge of large-scale architecture that had come in later millenia, and so had allowed much larger safety-factors than were needed.

Nobody had yet stopped or spoken to the Earthmen as they rounded the gentle curve of the hall to the stair that Fallon was looking for. The noises came more loudly here. The stair took up only half the corridor; priests went up and down it.

FALLON walked briskly up the stair to the next level. This proved to be that on which the hierarchy had its living and sleeping quarters.

The Earthmen snooped briefly about. In a recreation-room Fallon recognized the high priest, his gorgeous vestments replaced by a plain black robe, sitting in an arm-chair, smoking a big cigar and reading the sporting page of the *Rashm*. The mysterious noises seemed fainter on this storey.

Fallon led Fredro back down the stairs and started along the corridor again. Underneath the upgoing stair, was the entrance to another stairway going down. At least so Fallon inferred, though he could not see through the massive iron door that closed the aperture. In front of this door stood a Krishnan in the uniform of a Civic Guard of Zanid; he held a halberd.

And Anthony Fallon recognized Girej, the Yeshtite whom he had arrested for brawling two nights previously.

[To Be Concluded]

Fallon and Fredro are now trapped in the depths of the Safq, and they cannot hope to evade discovery long. *You can't afford to miss next month's thrilling chapters, which bring "The Tower of Zanid" to its conclusion. They will appear in the August issue of SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, which goes on sale June 5th.* Reserve your copy now at your newsstand — or be safe and sure of it by subscribing today. PS — A subscription saves money, too: 12 topnotch issues for \$3.50!

HELLO, TERRA CENTRAL!

Vignette by George H. Smith

"HELLO, TERRA CENTRAL. Hello, Terra Central. This is Captain Jess Service calling. This is Interstellar 92 calling. Come in, please."

"Hello, Captain Service. Hello, Captain Service. This is Terra Central. We hear you. Go ahead."

"Hello, Terra Central. This is Captain Service. I am returning to base. I am returning to Pluto Base. Over."

"Returning to base? You mean that you have failed, Captain Service? Like all the other interstellar expeditions?"

"Yes. Yes, I've failed. I can't go any farther! I can't stand it! We'll never be able to send a spaceship to Centaurus. We'll never get out of our own system."

"Hello, Captain Service. This is General Lang at this end. Your orders were to push through to Centaurus II at all costs. Why are you returning? Why are you returning?"

"Hello, General Lang. I've got to come back. If I don't, I'll end up like all the rest, I'll go crazy like the other ninety-two pilots who tried before me."

"Captain can you hear me? Are you still there?"

"Yes...yes, I'm still here."

"Captain, you've got to go on! The whole fate of Earth Interstellar Flight Program is at stake."

"General, do you want me to go mad like all the others? Is that what Earth wants?"

"No, that's not what we want, Captain, but we must get through!"

"Do you want *them* to get me like they did all the others. I'm

going crazy just like all the others".

"*Them?* Captain Service what do you mean?"

"Ha, Ha! That's right...get me...they're getting me. The Centaurians are getting me...General...they're getting...me!"

"Captain Service! You can't mean what you're saying. You can't! There hasn't been any insanity among the people of Earth since we became a truly rational people, just before the dawn of space flight. Our whole population is trained to be reasoning and sane beings."

"Ha, Ha, Ha, ha! That's why the voices do...what they do...to us, General...voices ha, ha, ha, ha!"

"What voices, Captain? What voices are you talking about, man?"

"THE VOICES...the same voices that...got...the...other men. The voices that drove the other ninety-two mad...the voices that are driving me mad. The voices that I can't shut out of my mind."

"Hang onto yourself, man! Tell me about the voices, Captain. It may help you to talk about it."

"The voices...the never ending stream of words... I can't stand it! The words...such unreasonable words...so semantically meaningless or unsound... I can't stand it! I can't stand it!"

"But where do the voices come from, Captain?"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha! From Centaurus. They beam them at us with a special beam that strikes the human mind. They knew...that we

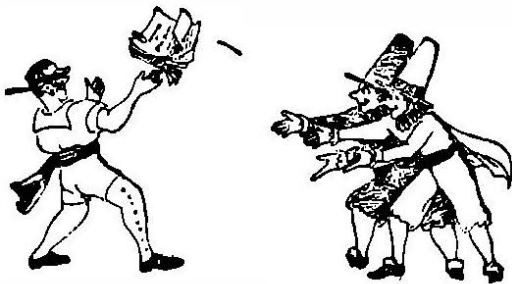
would...ha, ha, ha!...try to... try to...go to Centaurus some day. They set up...ha, ha, ha!...defences. Defences that no rational creature could break through... ha, ha, ha!

"But what are the voices saying, Captain."

"Ha, ha, ha! Can't stand it... I can't. They must have watched us for...ha, ha!...generations. Must have...recorded...ha, ha, ha! recorded...radio and...ha, ha, ha! TV commercials...whole

of age of madness, whole of 20th Century...and now they beam them at us...ha, ha, ha! 'Come to Honest Joe's. No money required. We're giving our cars away! Come to Honest Joe's. No money required. We're giving away cars and we're paying twice as much to get new ones!...ha, ha, ha! Hee, hee, hee!

"Poor devil, poor devil," the general said. "I guess he's gone. He's right—no sane, rational mind could stand it."



Following a certain merry jingle in Sir William Gilbert's "The Gondoliers", we offer you

A Certain Answer

by Robert Randall

(In reply to an uncertain fan who mentioned a certain paragraph in a Robert Randall story and said: "That was good! Which one of you guys wrote it?")

In nineteen hundred fifty-five,
When we two started writing,
We thought if we could just connive
To write as one, and thus contrive

A CERTAIN ANSWER

To make enough to stay alive,
We'd find it quite exciting!
Now, one was lean, the other stout,
And both were smart and clever.
Of that, there is no manner of doubt—
No probable, possible shadow of doubt—
No possible doubt whatever.

The editor took the first with smiles,
And said: "Go write another!
"Try, if you can, to fill my files,
"And heap them on my desk in piles!
"You have a perfect blend of styles;
"I can't tell one from t'other!"
Which was which, he could never make out,
Despite his best endeavor.
Of *that* there is no manner of doubt—
No probable, possible shadow of doubt—
No possible doubt whatever.

Time sped, and when two years had passed,
We both were deep in clover.
We had no time (we worked so fast)
To read the stories we'd amassed,
But one day we sat down, at last,
To look our copies over.
Now, though we worked with hope devout,
Our styles we could not sever!
Of *that* there is no manner of doubt—
No probable, possible shadow of doubt—
No possible doubt whatever.

So when you murmur in our ear
Your praise for some selection,
We both declare, with a mind sincere,
That one of us two who is standing here—
But *which* of us two is not quite clear—
Is the one who wrote that section!
Search in and out, and round about,
And you'll discover never
A tale so free from every doubt—
All probable, possible shadow of doubt—
All possible doubt whatever!



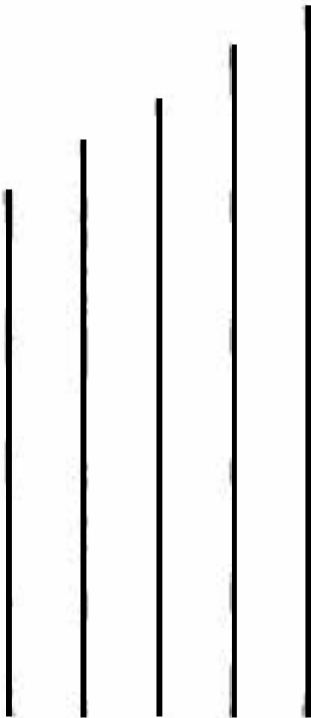


editorial

Those Letter Columns

THE VERY first science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, started a letter department, entitled "Discussions" in its tenth issue (January 1927), and that pretty much set the pattern for reader's columns in this type of publication. Each letter had a heading; the general practice was to publish them complete and the editor commented upon each one.

There have been a few deviations. *Weird Tales*, for example, would run excerpts from letters, rather than an entire communication, and these were generally tied together with editorial comment, running from one subject to another. (I tried this, too, in *Future Fantasy and Science Fiction* in 1942.) In 1934, *Weird Tales* shifted to the practice of printing entire



letters; but editorial comment was rare—usually a summary at the opening of the section—and an occasional reply when a reader asked a specific question which could be answered.

Astounding Stories' first editor, Harry Bates, ran complete letters, with—at times—a series of salient excerpts from other interesting communications, at the end of the column, when space did not permit more letters to be run in their entirety. Sometimes, he would list the names and addresses of readers who had sent in interesting letters, but which space couldn't accommodate—as a sort of thank-you, and a suggestion for readers who wanted to strike up correspondence acquaintanceships. He didn't reply to letters at the end of each missive, but would insert a terse comment in brackets, like this [Agreed. Ed.], and didn't always restrain the urge to pun.

ORLIN TREMAINE commented only in the headings, and even there but rarely. Many readers, myself included, pleaded with him to make "Brass Tacks" a two-way section, but his standpoint was that he did not want to obtrude. He wanted the reader to have the last word, (he'd say in personal correspondence with readers), and did not want to squelch anyone. Tremaine claimed that editorial com-

ments often had that effect when there was no such intention.

The early letter sections, apparently, were not copy-edited—that is, spelling and grammatical difficulties which a reader might have suffered were exposed for all to see. (Letters below a certain level, in this respect, just were not published.) Nor were obvious lapses of the reader's memory in respect to story titles, or authorship of stories, amended. (I, myself, usually smooth out such rough spots.) This is what was written, and this is what *Amazing Stories* published—never mind what the reader clearly meant. When necessary, Dr. Sloane would correct the writer in his comment—always politely. (Gentility was always the keynote of his comment.)

Content of the early departments ("Discussions", "The Reader Speaks" in *Science Wonder Stories*, "The Reader Airs His Views" in *Air Wonder Stories*) was pretty well split between discussion of scientific and technological points in the stories—and questioning authors, and general listings of likes and dislikes. Only *Weird Tales* told the readers anything about how the consensus rated an issue, and they only listed the top three in reader approval.

Later departments, such as Charles D. Hornig's handling of "The Reader Speaks; "The

"Ether Vibrates" in *Startling Stories*; and "The Vizigraph" in *Planet Stories*, encouraged what is now generally thought of as the fan-letter. This included cross reference discussion—a mounting at times to public personal correspondence between one reader and several others—which must have been confusing to new readers after a while; virtually unlimited range of subject matter, drawing the line only at mailability and danger of suits for libel (the thin-skinned might think that the line was definitely crossed now and then); eccentricities in style and presentation; numerous hoax attempts (a reader sending in letters under assumed identities in an effort to create a non-existent fan—sometimes successfully); and a great deal of trivia which serious-minded readers (some of them ex-juveniles) found irritating.

IN THESE departments, particularly in "The Ether Vibrates" and similar departments in *Startling's* companion magazines, *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Captain*

Future, the policy encouraged trivia, and the editorial comments (written by "Sergeant Saturn") were on the same level. Though if you read them over, you'll find that the Sarge was not always quite as bird-brained as he appeared to be; there were quite a few cogent remarks buried in the slang and xeno juice. Most notable in the all-inclusive letter department was the MC work of Malcolm Reiss and Wilbur S. Peacock. Reiss did not comment on each letter, but when he did, he wrote a public personal letter in reply, and never worried about length; Peacock rarely, if ever, failed to reply. Joe Fann's missive would be followed by a heading, which looked as if there were to be no editorial comment, but the salutation would read, "Dear Joe...". Both Reiss and Peacock kept on a literate level. Reiss was sincere and urbane; Wilbur enjoyed taking off his coat and being one of the crowd. Despite the sharpness of some of his comment, there's no indication that anyone was squelched to the point of not

[Turn To Page 127]

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just desserts

by Irving Fang

It was an open-and-shut case for the Oba's majestic judgement. The accused were discovered adding new roofing to their houses. The substance they used was metal, but not tins from gasoline containers: therefore, it was obvious that the metal had been stolen!

THE OBA of Benin Province in central Nigeria disliked making these secretive trips.

He would be much more comfortable, he reminded himself, if he had remained in his palace among his four wives. He should let the petty chiefs or the British courts hand out justice, especially during the season of the Harmattan, when the winds from

the Sahara brought fine grains of sand over the jungle, stinging the eyes and filling the nostrils.

But there was Mr. Ruggs to think about. The British District Officer of Benin Province had not been pleased at finding that two of the Oba's tax collectors had taken bribes. And the Oba's political enemies would love to discover more proof that he was not fit to reign. The Oba, who had ceremoniously eaten a portion of the heart of the Oba before him, would live to see his enemies crawling in the dust before him.

So he had taken of late to touring away from the capital whenever he learned of a wrongdoing. If he administered justice on the spot, he would show his interest in the public welfare. Also, the crime would not be listed on the public records.

Now he sat on a camp chair in a clearing in the center of the village of Ikgenge, a portly man in his fifties, his white hair a sharp contrast to his deep brown skin. His bright blue robe was getting gray with sand, despite the wide palm fronds held above his head by two of the palace royal guard.

THREE accused thieves, flanked by files of constables, marched up and prostrated themselves fully before him in the proper man-

ner, sprawling with fingertips outstretched, their foreheads in the dust.

The Oba languidly motioned twice with his thick hand. The first wave permitted the men to rise. The second informed the chief constable of Ikgenge that he could proceed with the reading of the charges.

The chief constable was proud of his opportunity, obviously, to demonstrate before the Oba himself that here was a man of intelligence and learning—the type of chief constable who was able not only to write, but to read what he had written. He puffed out his barrel of a chest, pulled in his equally large barrel of a stomach, and bowed low. Then he straightened and proceeded to the business at hand, first looking severely at the accused trio.

He opened his notebook and began: "Musa Adetunji, Ayo Badaru and Oseni Ishola stand accused on the crime of thievery."

At this the crowd of villagers around the clearing murmured a low, prolonged "Ohhh!"

THE CHIEF CONSTABLE looked around sternly, then pulled a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles from his pocket and clamped them firmly on his nose. He proceeded:

"It was noted by me, Chief Constable Adenekan Akanni, that the accused men were adding new roofing to their houses. It was also noted by me, Chief Constable Adenekan Akanni, that the substance used by the accused to roof their houses was not of tins from gasoline containers, but was of metal of the best quality.

"Upon questioning the accused as to the nature of how they came into the possession of this roofing, I learned from the accused that they had not purchased it."

Another drawn out "Ohhh!" from the crowd produced another stern look, this time from over the tops of the gold-rimmed spectacles. The Oba of Benin, meanwhile, brushed at a mosquito.

"When the accused by the chief constable were asked from where the new roofing came, the accused all declared that they had found it in the bush, at a time when they engaged themselves in the pursuit of hunting.

"The accused further stated that they were unable to recall the exact place they came upon the roofing metal.

"As chief constable of Ikgenge, I examined the evidence upon the roof and concluded they had come upon it by means of thievery. They are therefore so charged," he concluded, closing his notebook and carefully replacing his glasses in his pocket.

THE OBA shifted his weight in the camp chair. "Bring me a piece of the roofing," he said.

A young constable stepped forward bearing a jagged chunk of dull, bluish-gray metal that had been flattened with a rock. The Oba took it, studied it closely, then handed it to one of his aides.

"How do you plead?" the Oba asked the trembling trio.

"I am innocent, Your Highness," Musa Adetunji said fervently.

"I, too, am innocent, Your Highness," Ayo Badaru said. "No matter how my belly cried for food, I would not take the property of another man."

Oseni Ishola's knees shook violently and all he could manage was a wide-eyed nod of his head.

"Are you innocent also?"

"Y-Yes, Your Highness," Oseni stammered.

The Oba frowned, brushing at another mosquito. "Where did you find the metal?"

Ayo, the tallest of the three, replied. "Your Highness, we were hunting for small animals in the bush two days from here. We had found none and we were hungry. The day was hot and the Harmattan sand was blowing on us. Suddenly we heard a noise."

"Your Highness," Musa interrupted, "from the sky

came a great round piece of metal and it fell almost on top of us."

GASPS WENT up from the crowd.

"Why did you not tell this to the chief constable?" the Oba asked.

"We were afraid he would laugh at us," Musa said.

The crowd laughed.

"We were afraid he would not believe us," Ayo added.

The crowd gave a disbelieving set of sniggers.

"Why do you tell this story now?" the Oba asked.

"We know the Oba will believe us," Ayo answered.

"It is the truth," Musa declared.

Oseni Ishola nodded vigorously.

The crowd murmured acceptance of the story.

"Proceed," said the Oba.

"We were afraid to approach the metal," Musa said.

"We were also afraid to run. We waited. Nothing happened. I said to my friends that the metal had been sent to us from Ogun.

At the mention of Ogun, the powerful god of iron, a great "Ohhh!" went up from the assembled villagers. Even the Oba sucked in his breath.

Ogun, the most potent of all the gods, the god who had given such strength to the British, Ogun had favored three of their fellows. Surely, their village was smiled upon and would be lucky.

"But," the chief constable protested to the accused men, "you did not tell me that Ogun had presented you with the new roofing."

The crowd jeered at the chief constable.

THE OBA held up his hand and the crowd fell silent. After his initial surprise, he realized there must be more to the story than a gift from Ogun. He had seen airplanes on his visits to Lagos, the capital city of Nigeria. He reasoned this was an airplane and further reasoned that airplanes do not fly by themselves.

He turned to the three accused before him.

"What else did you see?"

"Nothing, Your Highness," Musa said nervously. "We carried away as much of the metal as we could. We made new roofs for our houses."

"We were very hot and hungry," Ayo added, "but Ogun gave us strength to bear away a great portion of his gift."

The Oba frowned again. "What became of the man inside the metal?"

The three men fell back a step as if they had been struck. Their bodies shook and sweat poured from their brows. Then, one by one, they again prostrated themselves before their ruler.

The Oba grew angry. "Stand up," he said, "and tell me of the man."

THE ACCUSED rose to their feet.

"They were not men," Ayo said sincerely.

"How many were there?"

"Two," said Ayo. "They were small, about so high," he indicated, holding his hand to the level of his waist. "And they were the color of fresh plantain."

Yellow-green men, three feet high, the Oba thought. He had not known there were such men.

"Ayo speaks the truth," Musa said. "Your Highness, they were the color of plantain, very small, and they stood and walked on three legs."

The assembled villagers "Ohhhed" very loudly.

"They had very long ears which stuck from the tops of their heads," Ayo recalled.

The Oba of Benin turned to the third accused.

"Oseni Ishola," he said, "the men who stand accused with you have described the two in the metal as small, the color of fresh plantain, with three legs and long ears on top of their heads. Yet you say nothing."

Oseni gulped. "Your Highness, they speak true."

"Can you tell any more about them?" the Oba asked.

Oseni Ishola thought a long while. Then he smiled bashfully and said, "They tasted like chickens."



Those Letter Columns

(continued from page 122)

writing again, or not answering back.

Right through the war years, science fiction magazines which had reader departments considered them a necessary part of the book, and I suspect that when the choice lay between shoving a story ahead to the next issue or letting the letters go this time (or drastically reducing the length of the department), the fiction was considered expendable. Now, correspondence departments often have lower priority. Readers of *Astounding Science Fiction* know that if "Brass Tacks" is missing this month, it doesn't mean a change of policy—the department will be back later when there's room. I use the same system.

BUT THE big—really big—letter section seems to be a thing of the past. In a way, it's too bad; but in another way, it is just as well. A good part of what made the letter departments lengthy in their heyday wasn't good for the reputation of science fiction, or the particular magazine, in many instances.

One reason why this is so—of course, it reflects the fall-off of correspondence as much as policy—is that science-fictionists have other, more satisfactory means of inter-communication. Between 1927 and 1931, there were very few fan clubs, and the fan publication (fanzine in today's argot) had barely begun to show itself. Science fiction was far from respecta-

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ble in the public eye (today's youngsters who may claim, justly, that they have to suffer indignities because of their tastes, don't realize how well off they are in comparison), and about the only way for readers to talk to each other was through personal correspondence and the letter departments in *Amazing*, *Wonder* and *Astounding*. Not only the "fans" but many readers, whose names appeared but once, or seldom, in the departments, stated that they always turned to the letters first when a new issue arrived. I know that I did.

In fact, I wonder now if this does not play a part in many oldtimers' fixing of certain periods as the "golden age" of science fiction. There were some very good stories published in the 1929-1932 and 1934-1936 period, but re-visiting these issues shows that far more were not so good, and many were very poor. It's not so much re-evaluation from "maturity" as it is remembering upon re-reading a story that I didn't think so much of it the first time, either. I suspect that, for me at least, the old "sense of wonder" depended almost as much about the readers departments as it did upon the stories.

THEN...two things happened. True, with any hobby, interest is likely to wane after a time, and some regu-

lars among the readers and fans—Jack Darrow is an example—sort of drifted away. The first factor, though, was that of the well-known fan and letter writer becoming a professional, and showing less inclination to write innumerable pages for free. (An outstanding exception is author Robert Bloch.) There's a sizeable list of editors (most of them authors) who were first seen in the letter columns, or whose names became prominent therein after a debut in the fiction department of the magazines, or in fanzines. Such a list would include Raymond A. Palmer (prominent in one of the earliest fan clubs and one of the earliest—and best—fanzines, *The Time Traveler*, and its successor, *Science Fiction Digest*); Mort Weisinger (who appeared with Palmer in TTT and SFD); Charles D. Hornig (who became editor of *Wonder Stories* shortly after he started his *Fantasy Fan*); John W. Campbell, Jr. (whose arguments with Dr. E. E. Smith in "Discussions" were almost as famous as his stories); Donald A. Wollheim (widely remembered for his outspoken dissent in "The Reader Speaks"); Frederik Pohl (a regular in "The Reader Speaks" and "Brass Tacks"); Lester del Rey (whose lengthy comments were featured in "Brass Tacks" before he shortened his name—but a good many

readers of *Astounding* thought of "Ramon Alvarez" when they saw "Lester" del Rey listed on the contents page of the April 1938 issue); Damon Knight (whose criticisms brought him into collision with Sam Moskowitz as early as 1942); Larry Shaw (the "hermit" of the "Vizigraph"); Sam Moskowitz (prolific with letters and fanzine material); James Blish (Who first appeared in "The Readers Corner" of the Bates *Astounding*); and Yours Truly (whose first letter appeared in the July 1932 *Wonder Stories*, with name misspelled—are you reading, Dr. A?). This is by no means a complete list.

Then, among the authors who successfully avoided the editorial chair, but otherwise

fit the description above, can be found P. Schuyler Miller, Eando Binder (in one or more of his permutations), Bob Tucker, Robert Bloch, Henry Kuttner, Isaac Asimov, Milton Lesser, Ray Bradbury, Forrest J. Ackerman, Richard Wilson, Marian Zimmer, Robert Silverberg, Harlan Ellison—this could go on indefinitely.

THE OTHER factor was the rise and growth of the fanzine, wherein fans could express themselves at greater length, on a wider variety of subjects, under less stringent standards of literacy, (some would say "none whatsoever") and have their efforts circulated quicker than through the letter department.
[Turn Page]

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ments. To the extent that this activity siphons off a lot of nonsense to which editors used to be subjected, so far as running a letter department is concerned, the competition of the fanzines is welcome. Unfortunately, it also bleeds off much material which editors would be delighted to run in their columns.

But the reduction of letters received (in comparison to earlier days) does not indicate a corresponding lack of interest in science fiction, or

necessarily in the magazines concerned.

At times, editors have appealed to readers to keep their letters short and to the point, or not to do this, that, or the other. I've tried to direct letters, too, in the past—and found that it just didn't work. So all I ask now is (yet again!) please, if you type your letter, use only one side of the sheet. See how tame I've become—I'm not even trying to get you to type double-space, although my blessings on those of you who do!

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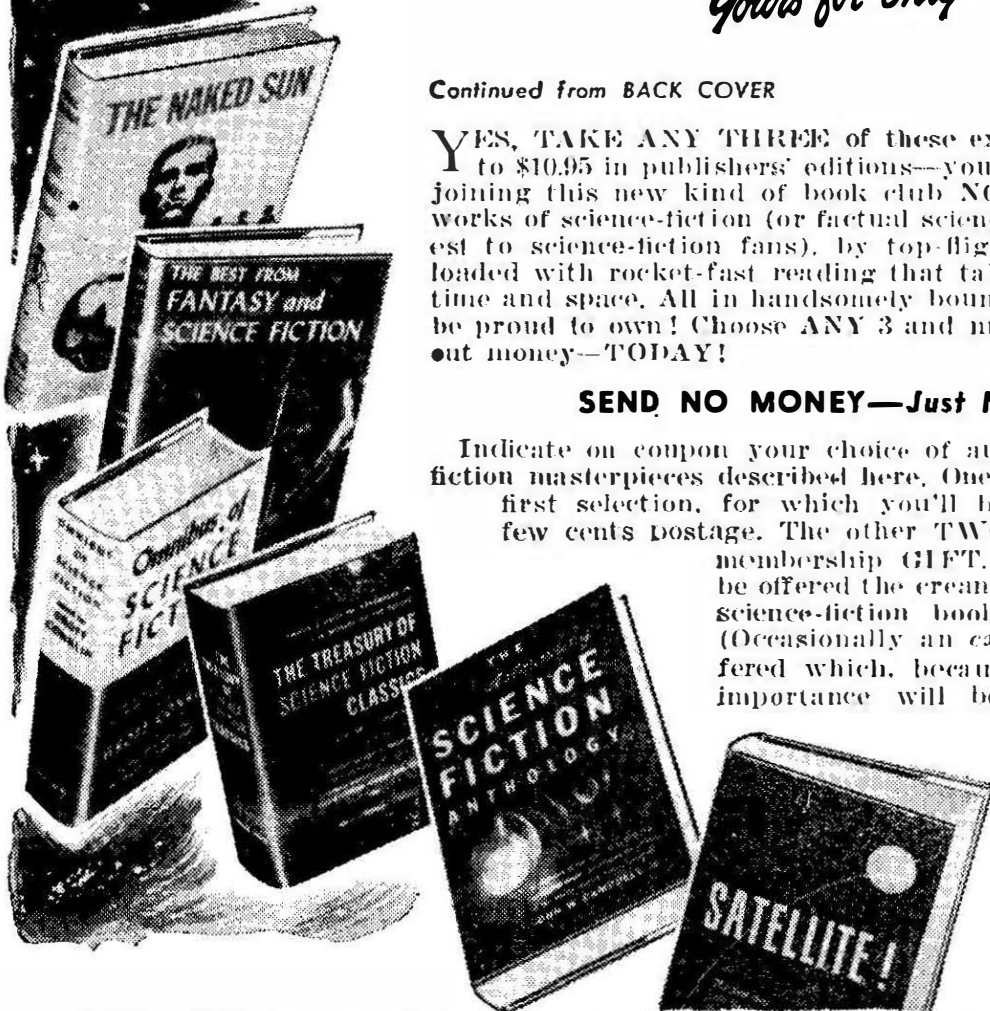
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