SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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THE COLD-BLOODED ONES
by CALVIN M. KNOX

A WORLD CALLED SUNRISE
by ERIC RODMAN

A PLANET ALL MY OWN
by RICHARD F. WATSON

SUPER-SCIENCE

F I C T l O N

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A WORLD CALLED SUNRISE

by ERIC RODMAN

NOVELETTE *illustrated by* **EMSH**

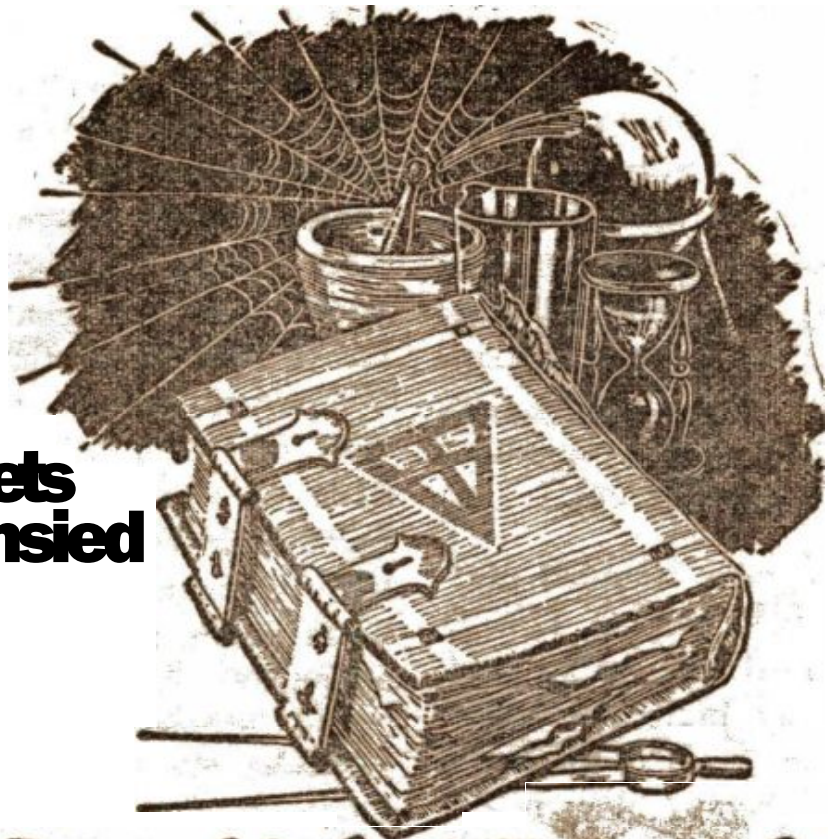
Rocha was banished to a distant planet because of a condition of his body for which he was not to blame. But he vowed he'd break away and get back to Earth!

'yHE whole thing took perhaps half an hour, the trial and the sentence—the verdict had been a foregone conclusion. It was a hot day in mid-August of 2120, a dry month in a dry year. The courtroom conditioners hadn't been working very well that day.

Ryne Rocha sat in the lead-lined box with the leaded glass window and looked out, listening while they expelled him from Earth.

The judge was a weary-looking fat-faced fellow in blue court robes. He had been through all this a thousand times before. He looked at the sheet of notes in his hand and said, "Defendant Rocha, it is the finding of this court that you shall be removed from Earth immediately, at government expense, and sent to the Quarantine World until decontaminated and fit to enter society once again."

Rocha stared across the courtroom at the man who had just pronounced sentence. Rocha was a tall, wiry man with a cadaverous face and intense red-rimmed eyes. At this moment radioactive emissions flared and crackled about his



Secrets cntmsied to a few

The Unpublished Facts of Life-

THERE are some things that cannot be generally told—*things you ought to know.* Great truths are dangerous to some—but factors for *personal power* and *accomplishment* in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws—their amazing discoveries of *the hidden processes of man's mind,* and *the mastery of life's problems.* Once shroud' ed in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today;

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body, but he neither felt nor otherwise was aware of them.

He said. "I'll appeal."

"There is no right of appeal. This is not a court of law. Our job simply is to hear evidence and make the proper disposition of the case. In your case, the sentence just pronounced is the only possible one."

Rocha's voice sounded muffled and indistinct to him in the lead-lined box as he said, "It's not my fault I'm radioactive! How was I to know the pile was going to blow up? I was an innocent bystander."

"The people who might suffer from your radiations are equally innocent, Defendant Rocha. For their protection, you must be taken from Earth. There will be full compensation, of course, and your passage will be paid in both directions."

"Thanks." Acidly.

"According to the report of the radiologist, sufficient radioactive sodium is lodged inextricably in your body to cause serious genetic damage to anyone approaching within **ten** feet of you **and remaining** in such contact longer than five minutes. We recognize the fact that you are the victim of circumstance, but this is irrelevant to the matter at hand. The isotope of sodium with which you are contaminated has a half-life of three years. Therefore, you are not to return to Earth before July 1, 2126, on penalty of immediate execution. Full compensation will be made to you for the unfortunate necessity of this action."

Rocha stared stonily at the judge, at the two radiologists, at the law-enforcement officers. They all huddled at the far end of the courtroom, even though his neutron-emitting body was adequately shielded from them. They were afraid of him. He was unclean.

A modern-day leper. A radioactive one.

Banished to a world of his own kind, far beyond the borders of the solar system.

"I'll be coming back!" he shouted. "And long before 2126, too! I'll be back!"

"The penalty for premature return **to** Earth is death," **the** judge said **mildly. "And our** radiation-detectors are ex-

tremely efficient. Such a return would be ill-advised, as well as impossible. You will leave tomorrow for the Quarantine World."

TT had not been his fault.

The injustice of it was what bothered Rocha more than anything else. He had been a chemist, doing polymer research, trying to synthesize amino acids. The building in which he worked had been powered by an atomic pile—nothing out of the ordinary there.

He had been working late, one night, when the basement developed galloping neutrons. The damper-rods failed, for the moment. A blast of radioactivity hissed through the entire building. Rocha was hurled to the floor of his lab by the sudden explosion. He waited for death.

But death did not come.

When he woke, he was in a lead-sheltered hospital bed, and they were giving him a transfusion. He hadn't expected to wake up. But when they told him what he had now, he wished he hadn't awakened.

"Sodium contamination," they said. "Well above the permissive level. You're like a miniature pile. Half-life three years."

The rest was just formality. The radiologists studied him and prepared their reports and recommendations; his case was sent to the proper authorities. Exile was inevitable. The law prescribed that for the greater safety of the people of Earth, any human sources of radioactivity were to be sequestered on a world of quarantine for the duration of their condition. At least five hundred people a year were banished from Earth that way, all of them victims of some atomic mishap that made them unfit to live on Earth, where they might infect others with the deadly radiation that streamed from their bodies.

Rocha was uprooted. He had a home, a family, a job, a future—and in one searing atomic blast he lost all those things. His wife was not allowed to kiss him as, lead-jacketed, he stepped aboard the ramp of the government spaceliner that would take him to exile.

Bleakly, he waved his goodbyes. The woman at the edge of the field waved back, uncertainly. At her side, two small children flapped their arms at him. Neither of them could understand that Daddy would have to be away from them for the next six years.

I'll be back before then, Rocha said to himself, as they shepherded him aboard the ship and sealed down the hatches. *You watch for me, Earth. I'm coming back.*

A late-summer fog curled in around the spaceport as the big ship rose from Earth. Rocha's last glimpse of his home planet showed it wrapped in fleecy fog; then the ship catapulted into hyperspace, and nothing was visible outside the viewplates except a mocking gray nothingness.

THE name of the quarantine world was Sunrise. Rocha laughed out loud when they told him, aboard the ship. It seemed that the survey team that had discovered it, thirty years before, had made their landing just as the sun, a blue-white, was coming up in the sky.

The atmosphere of Sunrise was highly ionized. Those first explorers had been treated to a fantastic sight—a blaze of electricity in the sky as the first rays of the blazing sun crept over the horizon, a glaring interplay of crackling reds and blues and yellows lancing across the sky in agonized leaps.

So they named the world Sunrise. A cheery, optimistic name for a quarantine world.

There were eighty-seven passengers aboard the liner. They lived in a special lead-lined dormitory, never leaving it, and their food was brought to them on conveyer belts. Every one of those eighty-seven was in one stage or another of radioactive decomposition.

Some, like Rocha, were merely contaminated; that is, their bodies were infiltrated with particle-emitting isotopes, but no actual organic damage had been done yet. Doctors had told Rocha he might live another thirty years before succumbing to the effects of his inward radioactivity, though of course his germ plasm was already hopelessly damaged by

the radioactivity, and any children he might father after this date would undoubtedly be monsters.

But some of the passengers were not merely contaminated. Their bodies were half-consumed by the fiery crash of alpha particles; some lay near death with bone cancer, others with leukemia, others with their flesh parched and withered and dead-looking. Rocha knew that these would never live to return to Earth.

The journey through space took just over a month. It was mid-September, Earth-time, when the loudspeaker in the passenger quarters announced, "Prepare for landing. We are about to leave hyperspace and make landing on Sunrise. No one is to leave his quarters."

OUNRISE. It was an appropriate name.

Rocha stood by himself in the burning heat of early morning, watching the brilliant blue-white dot of the distant sun climbing in the tortured sky. Ghost-fires flickered through the air, and Rocha's skin crawled. On Sunrise, electricity was everywhere. Your hair remained perpetually on end. When you touched metal, a little spark flamed for an instant. No wonder Earth had set this planet apart as the quarantine world; it wasn't good enough to use for colonial purposes.

While he stood there in the broad clearing that was the Sunrise spaceport, a voice shouted over a megaphone, "All new arrivals this way! Follow me!"

Rocha saw someone in the trim blue-and-yellow uniform of the Space Service beckoning. Reluctantly he headed toward the indicated direction, along with his eighty-six fellow passengers. He walked briskly, feeling the oppressive heat in the air and the eternal crackle of electricity. Some of the eighty-seven barely dragged along, or moved in wheelchairs.

They gathered together in a prefab hut at the edge of the spaceport. Rocha stared at the man in the Space Service uniform. His face was pitted and seamed with the effects of radioactivity; he was an exile too!

He stared down at them from a platform and said, "Welcome to Sunrise, all of you." His voice was hollow, as if radioactivity were eating away the inside of his throat. "My name is Captain Ford, and I represent the Terran government on Sunrise. Before you get any ideas, let me add that I'm also condemned to a life stay here, thanks to a spaceship blowup five years ago. I won't be eligible to return to Earth for another hundred and seven years, and somehow I don't think I'll make it.

"But some of you ***will*** be going back. I've got the papers here. I want to assure you that Earth will be looking out for your interests, and that when your contamination time is up you'll be sent back home on the first ship. For instance"—he selected slips at random from the sheaf of papers he held— "Melody Brightson, half-life eighteen months. She's due to return to Earth in three years. Ryne Rocha, half-life three years. Rocha, you go back to Earth in six years. David Harshman, half-life—ah—half-life forty-two years. Harshman, I'm afraid you're in ***my*** boat. But you see that you haven't been forgotten, any of you. You'll be sent back to Earth when your time comes."

The crowd stirred. Rocha looked around at them, at the miserable wrecks of humanity all around him, at the pit-faced man on the platform.

He had not looked at a mirror since the day of the accident. He did not know what effect the inward fire was having on his features, whether it was distorting them the way the grotesque victims near him were distorted. He tried not to think of that.

"There are dwellings ready for all of you," Ford said. "It's part of the system that every new arrival on Sunrise finds a house waiting for him, and then helps to build more houses for the next arrivals. If you'll pass through the gate on your left you'll find Sunrisers who will conduct you to your new homes and help you **settle** down.

I don't want to settle down,

Rocha thought. *I want to get back to Earth. Somehow.*

He followed obediently along through the gate, and there a group of veteran exiles waited.

Earth seemed impossibly distant to him, as he began his exile on Sunrise.

HTHE man who took him to his new place was named McDermott. He was short and swarthy, with greasy dark skin and a brooding bitterness in his eyes. He came over to Rocha and said, "New arrival, aren't you?"

Sullenly, Rocha nodded.

"My name's McDermott. What's yours?"

Rocha told him. "My half-life's three years," he added. "I expect to be staying here a while."

"I've been here five years already," McDermott said. "I have eight more to serve. Come on, I'll show you to your place."

Rocha watched as the man named McDermott checked a list he held, running down it for the name.

"Ah," McDermott said finally. "Here you are. You get Cabin 116 on Sunrise Row."

"That's a pretty name for a street," Rocha said sourly. "Everything here seems to have a lovely name."

McDermott turned to face him, looking upward into his eyes. Rocha saw the bitterness, the loneliness, in the other's eyes. McDermott said, "They give this place a lovely name so you don't talk about its real name."

"Which is?"

"Hell. This is the place where those with sin are sent. - Only modern-day sin is called radioactivity. You're in Hell, Rocha—only if you live long enough they'll let you out. Come on. I'll take you to your place."

McDermott led him away from the spaceport, down the winding street into the village. Rocha saw that the village had been laid out on the strip plan, long and narrow, with open farmland stretching out behind the narrow rows of houses. The buildings looked ramshackle and rundown, the streets were filthy, the pavement crooked and poorly laid.

"Doesn't anyone clean the streets around here?" Rocha asked.

McDermott snorted. "It's on a volunteer basis. Everything here is. If you think the streets are dirty, get out and clean them yourself. It's every man for himself on Sunrise, Rocha."

Grinning coldly Rocha said, "I guess I'll let the streets stay the way they are. I'm only in for a six-year stay."

They reached Cabin 116. Rocha stared at the hut that they thought was going to be his home for the next six years. It was made of unpainted wood, and the beams had been cut badly; the house leaned heavily to starboard. It had only one floor, two or three rooms. It looked as if it had been built by amateurs, which it had. He stepped inside. A little puddle of rainwater had formed in what was apparently supposed to be the living room. He looked up and saw the brightness of the sky through a hole in the roof.

"Needs some fixing up," he remarked.

"You've got plenty of time to do it."

"I know," Rocha said.

He sat down on a packing-crate that was probably intended to serve him as furniture, and hunched his head down. The roof needed fixing. The whole place had a stale, musty smell, and all he could think was *six years in this crude hut.* It wasn't fair. He wanted to strike out, to lash away in revenge. But there was nothing to strike out against, he realized dully.

"What did you do on Earth?" McDermott asked.

"I was a chemist. Polymer research, synthesis of proteins. That mean anything to you?"

"A little. Not much. I was a computer technician before I got a dose of hard radiation. That was all a long time ago," McDermott "I've been here five years."

Lightning flared across the sky. Rocha's skin itched, and he knew it would stay itching for the next six years. Electricity seemed to hover in the air; he felt tense, as if some explosion were gathering.

He looked at McDermott, sizing up the man. Small but muscular, tough, embittered.

Rocha said, "You've been here five years, you say. And you're just going to sit here and wait for your time to be up?"

"What else can I do?"

'"You can try to get off," Rocha said. "You can go back to Earth. They could have given us a place in Africa, somewhere. They didn't have to send us all the way out here. It isn't fair."

"Nobody said it was. But we're stuck here."

Slowly Rocha shook his head. "Oh, no we're not. I've no intentions of rotting here for six more years. I'm going back to Earth. Soon."

TN the next few days, Ryne Rocha found out plenty about the world called Sunrise and its strange population of exiles.

The planet itself was about the size of Earth, and the air was breathable, though the ozone content was high. It was the seventeenth planet of a thirty-planet system that revolved around a furiously bright blue-white star, and it was the only one of those thirty planets that was even remotely habitable by human beings.

It had not been marked down as a potential colony because of the fierce electrical storms that brought about constant physical discomfort, but at the" same time it was a fertile planet, capable of supporting agriculture, and so it was set aside as the quarantine world.

There was no intelligent native life. There was plenty of life, though, most of it reptilian; a couple of the inhabitants had managed to tame small gray cat-sized lizards with golden eyes, and found in them the one spark of brightness in an otherwise bleak world.

The human population was about five thousand, a figure that remained fairly steady from year to year. All five thousand lived close together, in one sprawling untidy village clustered round the spaceport area. About five hundred new exiles arrived each year; about two hundred of the old ones outlasted their period of contamination and became eligible to return to Earth, where they

would find a fat government pension waiting for than, and about three hundred died each year of their radioactivity.

No children had ever been born on Sunrise—at least, none that Rocha was able to find out about. Certainly none had lived past the early hours of infancy. Most geneticists believed that the radioactivity-infected people were totally sterile, anyway.

The official head of government on Sunrise was Ford, the Space Service man, himself an exile for life. But in practice he had few functions except to welcome the newcomers and file regular reports to Earth; government was a sort of formless anarchy. Each man farmed for himself, and voluntarily turned over a tithe of his yield to support those who were too ill to farm. A few of the castaways had been medical men on Earth—one of them had been contaminated in the practice of his profession, in fact—and they served as medics for the community, trying to comfort those whose injuries left them in unending pain and aiding those who needed occasional care.

Rocha had a plan for getting off Sunrise. But he couldn't do it alone; he needed strong men to help him. He began to look around for his strong men. And before long, he found them.

McDermott was the first. A man of determination, but one who needed someone to lead him.

Through McDermott, he met Graham and Curtis. Rocha saw that these were the men he needed. After four days on Sunrise, he invited them all to his shack, for a very special discussion.

TT was raining outside. Torrents of water poured down from above, while lightning split the many-colored sky and the boom of thunder sounded again and again, rolling off the tree-shrouded hills that ringed in the settlement. A single candle was sufficient to light the room in which the four men sat. Rocha had plugged the roof and had built a bench; he sat on his packing-case, facing them. In the half-darkness, a faint glow was visible. A radioactive glow—the glow of men condemned to **exile.**

Rocha said, "I think McDermott told you why I called you here. I'm new on Sunrise. I don't want to stay here much longer than I have to."

Graham chuckled. He was a massive man, as big through the chest as he was tall, almost a short stubby beard sprouted from the rolls of fat that covered his chin. When he spoke, his voice was a rattling boom. "We all were new once, Rocha. And we all swore we'd come back to Earth. I've been here two years, with five still to go. Half-life three and a half years. And I won't make it. I have cancer of the bone."

"Wouldn't you like to die on Earth?" Rocha asked, "instead of slowly rotting away here on this godforsaken place called Sunrise?"

Graham lowered his heavy eyelids in a skeptical frown. "I'd like to go back to Earth. Sure. But how?"

"Don't worry about that," Rocha said. "It's easy." He looked at Curtis. Curtis was a big man, six feet six or more, with a jutting, massive jaw and thick beetling eyebrows. He wore only **a** ragged pair of trousers. His broad chest probably once had boasted a covering mat of thick black hair, but now it was bare and pink with radiation sores. He had been a wrestler, on Earth. He clenched hs mighty fists.

"Well, Curtis? You have eleven years left here. You want to stay here forever?"

"I want to go back to Earth just as much as anyone else," Curtis said slowly. "I don't have wings. Earth's half a galaxy away from here."

"There are such things as spaceships," Rocha said.

"And we're going to build one," said McDermott acidly. "Simple."

Rocha stared coldly at him. "I didn't say anything like that. We aren't going to build a ship, McDermott. We're going to steal one."

Rain pounded against the roof, clearly and maddeningly audible in the interval of silence that followed. Rocha looked speculatively at his three men, wondering if he had judged them right. His plan was a daring one, but it was obvious; certainly someone had t r i e d it before—and

failed. There had been no escapes from Sunrise.

"Let's have it slowly," Graham grunted. "Who are you stealing a spaceship from?"

"Once a month," Rocha said, "a ship comes here from Earth, drops off a load of new exiles, and picks up anybody who is no longer radioactive, to take them back to Earth. The next time that ship lands, it's going to pick *us* up and take *us* back."

Curtis snorted in contempt. '"You can't fool a geiger counter, Rocha. Ford won't let you get aboard that ship—and as soon as you do, they'll throw you off. You can't just pretend you aren't hot anymore."

Water dripped through the ceiling, splashing on Rocha's shoulder. He squinted up at the roof, looking for the hole, and cursed. Then he said to Curtis, "I don't mean that we'll pretend we're clean, either."

"Then what the hell *do* you mean?" McDermott burst out.

"Simple," Rocha said. In a quiet voice he said, "What I propose to do is grab that ship by force and compel its crew to take us back to Earth. We can land the ship in Africa or someplace else where they won't bother us. It'll be better than this damned rain and lightning, anyway."

"How do you propose to seize the ship?" Graham wanted to know. "We don't have any weapons."

"We have one," Rocha said. "The deadliest weapon of all. Radioactivity."

TT was going to work, Rocha told himself, after they had gone. He felt feverish, and knew it was not only the burning radioactivity in him, but consciousness of a drive within him that would let him rest only when he had achieved success.

He stared through the blurred window at the discordant symphony of color raging in the sky. Angry reds blotched with unharmonious streaks of dark black; swirls of lemon-yellow clashing with blue. The rain had stopped; the ground outside was sodden, and the air was supercharged with electricity. A small lizard was creeping across the patch of ragged bluish grass that was

his front lawn, scuttling off into the distance.

He had a goal, and the goal was to return to Earth. Now, not in six years. He felt no hatred of Earth for what it had done to him; he was, after all, dangerous, and had to be segregated. But they could have done it in so many other ways.

They could have built a leadwalled hospital for them, somewhere in an empty part of the world. They could have built a space station for radioactives, and let them orbit forever in sight of their home world.

But instead they had reacted in horror, and sent him halfway across the sky. Five hundred people a year met the same fate. Atomic power was worldwide in its use, and there were bound to be accidents. Until the day it happened, Ryne Rocha had always believed that atomic accidents were things that happened to other people.

Now he knew. It had happened to him.

Others came out to Sunrise, bitter against the world that had condemned them—so bitter that they brooded by themselves, refusing even the company of their fellow sufferers. As a rule, the stronger a man was, the less likely he would be to cooperate on anything, preferring to sulk sullenly.

But cooperation, Rocha saw, was the answer. If they cooperated, they could get off Sunrise. Exiles they would be forever—but at least they would spend their exile on Earth, not on an unfriendly alien world.

The next ship from Earth was due in twenty days. Rocha bided his time, waiting.

"TWENTY days later, the ship came down. The announcement had gone up on the bulletin board outside Ford's hut, as it always did, that a new ship from Earth was on its way. A list of empty huts was posted, and the newcomers—there were ninety-one of them—were assigned. Ford requested ninety-one volunteers to meet the newcomers at the spaceport and show them to their places. Curiously, Rocha was among the volun-

teers. So were Graham, Curtis, and McDermott. So were thirty other men who had been recruited for the plan by one of the original four, during the weeks of waiting for the ship.

It rained the day the ship arrived—not a cold rain, but a warm, muggy kind, where the humidity hit the top of the scale and the air was gray with water-vapor. Rocha waited in the shelter with his companions, watching the rain pelt the thickly-leaved tops of the knifeleaf trees that lined the field. Minutes ticked past. The ship was due at noon, bringing with it not only ninety-one new exiles but mail and gifts for the castaways whose Earthside relatives still remembered them. And twenty Sunrisers had served their time and had been pronounced free of radiation by the geiger counter in Captain Ford's office; they were going home on the ship. Or at least they thought they were going home. S° far as Rocha was concerned, they could wait for the next ship.

"What time is it?" Curtis whispered.

Rocha was the only one of them who had a watch. The others had long since broken theirs. He looked at it and said, "Eleven-thirty."

"I'm getting tired of waiting around. The rain's driving me nuts."

"You'll be rid of the rain by tonight," Graham said, tuggir.g at his beard. "Just be patient."

"I'm trying," Curtis growled.

Rocha's red-rimmed eyes flicked quickly over the group. These were tough men, hard men. They knew their roles in the encounter to come, and he had faith in them. He smiled inwardly. He was going home, home to Earth, long before Earth had expected to see him again.

Rain pelted down.

Minutes trickled by.

McDermott began to sing, in a cracked, off-key bass voice: *Carry me back, to old. Virginny. ...*

"Shut up, you idiot!" Rocha snapped.

McDermott looked up. eyes glaring. "You don't like the way I sing?"

"I don't like what you're singing," Rocha said. "Ford has more sense than you give him credit for. He doesn't need

much of a hint of what's up."

For an instant tension crackled between the two men, more intensely than the lightning that eternally played in Sunrise's upper atmosphere. Rocha held his breath, hoping that his team of unruly, sullen exiles would not break apart at this crucial moment. In only ten minutes, the ship from Earth was scheduled to land.

These were men who hated everything, even each other, for the dirty trick that had been played on them. They hated ccopera'ion. That was why they had been stranded here so long, before Rocha had come along. He had welded them together into a unit striving for a c·m'non purpose—freedom from Sunrise. Freedom.

Half-life, three years. That meant that in three years the atoms disintegrating within his body would have sped half their course, that half th?ir time of radioactivity was past. But the words had another meaning. A man who had a half-life label was only half alive; he was cut off from human companionship, love, friendship. He was isolated, a plague-bearer, a carrier of the dread thing that was radioactivity. He was fit only for the company of other wretched damned ones like himself. He was allowed to have only one emotion, and that emotion was hatred.

Rocha looked at his wa·ch. Five minutes to arrival-time. The words of the song McDermott had begun to sing still echoed in the prison of his mind, and now a new song started up in his memory: *Going home. . . going home. ..*

Ford came over to the place where the volunteer welcomers stood. The Space Service man looked tired; he was a lifetime exile, and the strain showed. His eyes were dim and weary.

He said, "That, ship's going to be here soon. You all know the procedure. I'll meet the newcomers as they come down the gangplank and conduct them into the main bui'ding for a brief peptalk. Then I'll send them out here to you. Each one of you is to attach yourself to one of them, find out his name, and look up on the list

you have, the number of the cabin to which he's assigned. It wouldn't hurt if you tried to be friendly as you conduct your man to his cabin, either. If there's any problem, see me. All clear."

Ninety-one heads went up-down in an affirmative nod. Rocha moistened his lips. The Space Service man was in for a little surprise.

One minute to noon. Overhead, there was a sound ten times as great as thunder, as the Terran spaceship burst out of hyperspace and came roaring down for a landing on Sunrise.

OOCHA watched it land,

It came down gracefully, like a great silver-hued beast of the skies, plunging groundward with a devil's shriek. It was landing on its rockets, and fiery bursts of fuel-discharge bit at the surface of the landing-field.

She's a beauty, he thought. *Comin' for to carry me home.*

The tail of the great ship was still a hundred feet above the ground when the full jet-blast went on. For a moment the ground quivered with the impact, and the spaceship sat suspended on a spike of fire. Then, slowly, it drifted downward, landing tail-first with barely a perceptible jolt.

A gangplank dropped out of the side. Minutes passed; then the newcomers emerged from the ship. It was a grotesque sight to see them: cripples, blind men, human beings maimed in every possible fashion. Bald, boiled-l o o k i n g, scarred, twisted. But by far the worst were the ones like Rocha —the ones who had no outward manifestation, who looked as if they were in the peak of health, except for the insidious radiation that leaked from every cell of their bodies, leaving a trail of destruction on all things the plague-bearer touched.

Rocha waited, breathing deeply, while Ford led the new arrivals across the space-field and into the building where they would be briefed. He shaded his eyes with his hands, trying to see across the field through the downpour. Yes, the hatch of the ship was still open. Waiting.

"Okay," Rocha called out. "Let's go."

He stepped out of the shelter with McDermott, Graham, and Curtis right behind him, and the rest of their men following. In close formation they trotted across the rain-drenched field toward the great hulk of the Terran spaceship.

Rocha reached the gangplank first, with Curtis right back of him. He dashed up and through; thirty radioactive exiles followed.

A crewman stood just inside the lip of the hatch, hosing down the walls with some anticontaminant spray. He turned, looking startledly at the ragged, wild-eyed men who had burst into the ship.

"What—who—"

"Put down that hose," Rocha ordered.

The midshipman let the hose drop. He went utterly pale as he realized he was surrounded by radioactives. He backed away, heading for the sphincter-door that served as a bulk-head between this outer compartment and the inner ones. Curtis loped across the compartment and collared the quaking spaceman effortlessly.

"You're—you're all radioactive, aren't you?"

"That's right," Rocha said.

"What are you doing here? Let go of me! I don't want to get contaminated!"

"Everything's going to be okay," Rocha said. "If you do as I tell you, we won't expose you to radioactivity any longer than we have to."

"W-what should I do?"

"Where is the captain?"

The spaceman shrugged. "In his quarters, I guess."

"And the rest of the crew?"

"Scattered around the ship. It's a regular decontamination routine. We spray all the radioactive areas before we make the return trip."

"And how many crewmen are there?"

"T-twenty," the spaceman said.

"How nice," said Rocha. "That means we outnumber them. All right. Get yourself into the passengers' quarters and stay there."

ROCHA nodded to Curtis, who speedily trundled the

spaceman out of the vestibule of the ship and toward the lead-walled chamber where the outbound passengers were required to stay. Rocha picked out ten men and instructed them to follow Curtis, and to lock up any of the spacemen they found in there.

He and Graham headed fore, toward the captain's quarters.

They met with no opposition as they moved upward in the ship, past the astrogation dome, past the crew-bunks, to the cabin door labelled *Captain.*

Rocha knocked.

"Who's there?"

"Important message from groundside, sir," Rocha said.

There was a momentary pause; then the door opened. Rocha found himself facing a short, well-built man in middle age, wearing officers' uniform. Rocha put one hand on the captain's chest and pushed him back into the office; Graham slipped in behind him, locking the door.

Fear glistened on the captain's pink, clean-shaven face. He was evidently not accustomed to trouble on the Earth-Sunrise route.

"What do you want in here?"

"Your ship. Captain."

"My—get out of here, you madmen! Get out before I call the crew!"

"The crew is having troubles of its own," Rocha said. "There are thirty radioactive men roaming around the ship catching your crew now."

At the mention of "radioactive" the captain backed into the farthest corner of his office. Rocha went on, "Both of us happen to be radioactive too, of course. You're being bombarded with hot particles at a quite remarkable rate, in here. Unfortunately we forgot to wear our lead underwear today. If we stay here much longer, you'll .become seriously contaminated yourself. You wouldn't want that to happen to you, would you?"

The officer's voice was a dry croak as he said, "Tell me what you want me to do and then get out of here."

"First thing: pick up your intercom and order your crew throughout the ship not to attempt any resistance."

"No!"

"No?" Rocha said. He glanced at Graham. "Why don't you go over there and give our friend the captain a bearhug, Graham? Wrap your radioactive arms around him and let him sizzle."

Grinning malevolently, the fat man stalked toward the captain, arms spread wide. The maneuver worked. Actually, the captain would be in no more danger from close contact than he was already, but the psychological effect was what counted.

"Don't—don't touch me. I'll do as you say."

With trembling fingers the hapless officer reached for the gleaming copper microphone of his intercom outfit. He flicked a button.

"Attention—attention, all crewmen. Captain Joslyn speaking. You are to surrender to the attackers at once. Repeat: surrender."

He put the microphone down. "All right. I did what you wanted me to. What now?"

Rocha jerked his head. "Get going down the hall to the passengers' quarters. We're rounding everyone up and keeping them there. It's safe in there, captain. Lead walls, you know."

WHILE Graham escorted the erstwhile captain down the hall to his new quarters, Rocha looked around the officer's cabin, familiarizing himself with it. There was a main intercom on which he could broadcast throughout the ship; a more specialized communication system allowed him to contact any part of the vessel he wanted. On one wall, a video screen provided a view outward from the nose of the ship.

Right now, the view showed the Sunrise spaceport, gray with falling rain. *But soon I'll be going home,* Rocha thought.

It hadn't been hard to take over the ship. The spacemen could only retreat in the face of radioactivity; they all knew what a stiff jolt of alpha particles could do to their reproductive systems, and they weren't anxious to become sterile or—much worse—the carriers of mutated genes. So they ran and hid, and let Rocha and his men take over the ship.

He reached up and snapped on the phones that led to the passenger quarters.

"Curtis? This is Rocha calling, from up front. Can you hear me?"

"Clear as a bell," came Curtis' answering rumble.

"Good. How do things go at your end of the ship?"

"Everything under control. We've got eighteen crewmen in here so far. They're huddling together down at the far end, keeping their distances."

"Eighteen," Rocha said. "There are two more."

"McDermott and Kennedy are out looking for them now," said Curtis. "Oh—here they come. Okay. We've got the whole crew in here now. What do we do next?"

"March them down the gangplank and out of the ship. We're going to blast off. Call me when all of them are out."

"Right-ol"

Rocha hung up. Suddenly a bell bleeped behind him, and he turned hurriedly. It was nothing but a ground-to-ship visiphone, he discovered. He wondered who was calling, sis he switched it on.

The scarred features of Ford appeared in the field of the screen. He said, "I'd like to speak to Captain Joslyn, please." Then his jaw dropped as he recognized Rocha. *"You* —what are *you* doing aboard that ship?"

"Captain Rocha at your service," was the mocking answer. "I've taken over the ship."

"Rocha, what kind of joke is this? Where's Captain Joslyn? What's going on?"

"I'm going back to Earth," Rocha said levelly. "Thirty of us took over the ship just now. Captain Joslyn and his crew are in the process of being dumped out their own hatch at the moment. You better make sure that the field's clear, because we're blasting off."

"You madman! You can't pilot a ship!"

"I can try," Rocha said. He grinned amiably. "You know, we still have room for some more passengers, Ford. Care to come along? You might want to see Earth again yourself, maybe."

Ford's radiation-frosted eyes

glared bitterly out of the screen at Rocha. He shook his head. "No thanks, Rocha. I'll stay on Sunrise."

"Do whatever you want, Captain."

The intercom suddenly went on and Curtis' voice said, "I'm speaking from the air-lock, Rocha. We just sent the whole bunch of them scuttling down the gangplank. You ought to see them run!"

"Good going. Close the hatch and seal it."

"Hatch closed."

Rocha glanced at the image of Ford in the screen. "Anybody on Earth you want us to give your regards to, by any chance?"

"Go to hell."

"Wrong, Ford. We've *been* to hell. Now we're on our way back home."

Rocha grinned and turned off the phone.

'T'HEY blasted ten minutes later. Rocha had done plenty of scouting around, and nine of his thirty men were former spacemen—including an astrogator, a computer man, and a drive technician. The return course to Earth was pre-plotted anyway, taped and filed away for ready use; there was no need for an astrogator to recompute it every time it was necessary to travel from Sunrise to Earth. Rocha made sure his men were at the right places, gave the signal for blastoff, and the ship lifted.

He watched the departure through his videoscreen. Sunrise hung below them, its surface shot through with violent storms, looking like a bloated tarnished coin in the sky.

The ship rose higher and higher, taking them far from the quarantine world. The signal for entry into hyperspace came. There was the jolting twist as the big ship left the normal continuum and tumbled into the nullness of hyperspace, and then the gray void was all that was visible through the screen.

It was all that would be visible for the next month, as the ship moved inexorably along its pre-set course, on its way to Earth.

Rocha sat alone in the captain's cabin and thought about his victory.

He had been a law-abiding citizen once, a family man, a respected chemist. But by a prank of fate he had been turned into a figure of fear, a creature no longer fit to live on Earth. They had hurled him forth, to the hell that was the world called Sunrise—and they had taken something from him when they made him an exile. He had lost that which made him proud to be a human being.

So he had stolen a ship, and was coming back to the Earth that did not want him. He smiled in inner satisfaction. He had been gone from Earth only a little over two months. They hadn't been able to keep him away.

I showed them, Rocha thought. *And now I'm coming home.*

The days passed slowly on the stolen ship. There was nothing to see outside but the everlasting nothingness, and in general the ship took care of itself. Rocha assigned men to various posts, and they did their jobs carefully enough: checking the meters and dials, making sure the fuel flow was even, the hydroponics tanks functioning in a well-balanced way, the food being consumed at a regular rate that would leave them enough for the entire journey.

Things were dull. They were gliding through hyperspace toward Earth, toward home. They were men who had little to say to each other, men who lived all their thoughts and words in the confines of their own skulls, brooding over the wrongs that had been done to them.

Every one of them had been radioactively contaminated through an accident unrelated to his pattern of life; it was as if an invisible hand had reached out and cast the fire upon them, making them immediate exiles from civilization. When that is done to a man, when fate destroys all he has for no good reason, it changes the man. Corrodes him. Makes him into something that hates the whole blind unthinking universe about him.

Rocha brooded, and waited for Earth to draw near.

HPHE first indication they had that Earth was aware of the incident on Sunrise came eleven twenty-four hour periods after they had blasted off. Rocha was in the ship's large library, scanning book films with weary eyes, when McDermott entered.

"Rocha!"

Tiredly, Rocha looked up. "What is it?"

"They want you down in the signal cabin. Seems Kennedy just picked up a subspace beam from Earth."

Instantly Rocha came to life; the weariness left him, and he became aroused. "What kind of beam? A message?"

McDermott nodded.

Rocha rose. "Any idea what they want?"

"Kennedy didn't say. He just said for you to come down to the signal cabin."

By the time Rocha was out the door, he was half-running. A pulse beat somewhere in his throat. Earth was calling! Earth knew!

In the signalroom, Kennedy looked up at him and nodded hello. Kennedy was a wiry little fellow who had been signalman aboard the spaceship *Defiant;* there had been a pile explosion aboard that ship nine years earlier, and Kennedy had come out of the holocaust alive —but totally blind, and filled with enough radiation to make him dangerous for the next fifty years.

He was still blind, but he had insisted he could run a spaceship's communications network, and Rocha had taken him aboard for that purpose. Now he turned his sightless face toward Rocha and said, "There's been a call from Earth. They know we stole the ship. They want to speak to anybody who's in charge."

"Tell them I'm here," Rocha said. "Open the contact again."

He watched as Kennedy's nimble fingers flew over the leads and studs of the communication panel. The blind man seemed to know the precise location of every one of the hundreds of various connections on the control board before him. Rocha realized that for the nine years of sightless exile he had probably been reliving his spacegoing days over and over, until the

layout of the communications room was indelibly burned into his mind.

Kennedy said, "I've got Ryne Rocha here. He's in charge of the ship."

"Put him on."

Kennedy signalled to Rocha and handed him the microphone. Crisply he said, "Rocha speaking. Who's this?"

"Earthside talking, Rocha. Commander Lesters of Space Service. I order you to return that ship to Sunrise and restore it to its rightful commander."

"I don't take orders from Space Service, Lesters. I'm a civilian."

"I don't care who you are! You stole that ship from Captain Joslyn!"

"True."

"What do you plan to do, Rocha? Ride around hyperspace forever in that ship?"

"No, Commander. I'm going to bring it back and land it on Earth."

"You'll never get away with it. We'll blast you out of the skies with tracer rockets the second you come out of hyperspace. We aren't going to tolerate brazen criminality of this sort, you can be sure of that. And you're all subject to the death penalty if you attempt to make a landing on Earth in your radioactive condition."

"We knew that before we started out," Rocha said. "If necessary we'll abandon ship and enter Earth by liferaft. We'll go where you can't find us. We just want to be left alone, Lesters—can't any of you understand that? Can't you?"

"The law says—"

"The law is blind!"

"Be that as it may," the Space Service man said. "I'm simply warning you that if your ship becomes visible within striking range from Earth, you'll be destroyed immediately and without warning. If you choose to return to Sunrise and surrender, we'll allow you to remain on Sunrise without being troubled."

"Damned considerate of you, Commander. But we'll take our chances." Rocha looked at Kennedy. "Break the contact, signalman. And don't acknowledge if Earth tries to call us again."

W/HEN he stepped out of the signalroom, McDermott was standing there, looking pale and uneasy.

"I heard that conversation, Rocha. I'm worried."

"About what?"

"They said they were going to blast us, didn't they? Maybe we're better going back to Sunrise like they say. At least—"

"No," Rocha said. "We're going to Earth."

"You ought to put it to a vote."

Rocha glared bitterly at the smaller man. "We've gotten this far. We're not going to turn back."

"I still think—"

"All right. I'll put it to a vote."

He called a meeting of the thirty renegades and explained the situation to them, reporting exactly what the Earthman had threatened. When he was finished, he called for a vote on going ahead and taking the chance of being detected, or turning back.

The vote was thirty to zero in favor of going ahead. Even McDermott reluctantly raised his hand when he saw he was the only one who objected.

The journey continued without incident for four more days. Now it had reached the halfway point in the trip from Sunrise to Earth, and Rocha began counting the remaining days, and wondering what sort of reception they would get when they arrived on Earth.

He did not consider the fact that they might not arrive on Earth at all. He was expecting no interruptions in the smooth course of the flight through hyperspace, and when the interruption came it came from an utterly unexpected quarter.

Kennedy was the first to know about it. He phoned up to Rocha in the captain's quarter's and said, "I'm picking up a funny signal on the subradio set."

"How funny?" Rocha frowned. "If it's another message from Earth, I don't want to hear it. Ignore them."

"No," said Kennedy. "It isn't from Earth. It—it isn't like any signal I've ever heard. I think" —he paused— "I think it's alien, sir. It's coming in over a wavelength that isn't supposed to be function-

ing, and it's a code I've never heard of."

"Maybe it's something new," Rocha snapped. "I'll be right there."

He found Kennedy hunched intently over his communications panel, keying in an amplifier to pick up the signal coming across. Rocha listened. It did sound strange; but then, he knew very little of space communication.

He listened for a while; he snatched up the microphone and said. "Who is this? Come in, please. We get your signal, but no words."

The strange signal continued. After a long pause Rocha heard faintly: "Do...you... understand. . .this?"

"Yes! Yes! Who are you!"

"Spaceship Seventeen of Vengilani Fleet. You are—from Earth?"

"We're Earthmen, yes," Rocha said. A puzzled frown spread over his face. "Where are you from? How is it you speak our language?"

"We ... use ... thought-converter. Delicate mechanism. Do you understand the word surrender?"

Rocha blinked. "Yes. What do you mean?"

"We are invasion fleet. Heading for Earth from Vengilan. We call on you to surrender, Earth ship."

Rocha realized with sudden shock that he had stumbled over something much bigger than he had been counting on. "Where is Vengilan?" he wanted to know.

"Actual location is military secret. We are not of this galaxy. Will you surrender to us?"

Rocha took a deep breath. "No!"

After having come this far, he had no intention of yielding to alien invaders. He wondered from what dark star they had come, for what purpose they headed toward the unsuspecting Earth. A flicker of loyalty that he had not known existed in him arose. Much as he hated the planet that had expelled him, it was still *his* planet.

"We will destroy your ship if you do not yield to us," the alien voice warned, in a toneless monotonous drone. "You have only a short time remaining to permit grappling."

"Save your time," Rocha replied. "We'll fight you but we won't surrender."

"Our guns are unstoppable."

"We'll take that chance," he snapped. He turned to Kennedy "Break that contact, "

The blind signalman ripped out the plug that led from the input-pickup to the amplifier. "It's broken. Now what do we do?"

Rocha paused. "I want you to send a message to Earth. Beam it as wide as you can, and repeat it until I tell you to stop. Ready?"

"Ready."

"Okay: here it is. *Have encountered alien invasion fleet in hyperspace. They request surrender, say they are heading for Earth. Consider yourselves warned Rocha.* Repeat it."

Kennedy repeated the message.

"Good. Start beaming it."

Fifteen seconds after the message had been beamed for the first time, the alien guns went into action. Rocha's ship quivered as the first bolt of force slammed into the energy screens.

He grabbed up the all-ship intercom. "Battle stations, all hands. Don spacesuits! We're under alien attack!"

tt E climbed into a spacesuit that hung in an emergency rack just outside the signal-room, while Kennedy continued to beam the warning to Earth. A current of excitement thundered in him. Attack!

A second bolt of force battered the hull of the ship. The vessel had high-megawatt screens designed to protect it from meteor bombardment, but they couldn't stand up to any prolonged energy assault. War in space was unknown; Earth had never found any enemies. But, of course, this race was from some other galaxy....

The ship had no guns. It was strictly a peaceful passenger vessel. Rocha knew the only hope was that their screens would withstand the enemy assault, but he realized such a hope was an impossible dream. Any moment now the screens would give.

He made his way down to the drive room. There, Curtis

was on duty, monitoring the big screens and trying to pour more power into them. Rocha wished they had had at least one skilled screen technician with them, but there were none aboard. Well, they would have to make do.

The ship quivered as yet another enemy shot battered into them. Rocha saw the needle on the screen indicator come perilously close to the *overload* mark. He knew what would happen when the screens blew. The next alien blast would rip the ship apart, and the crew would go spilling out into space.

"Give it all the power we've got," he shouted over his suitphones to Curtis.

The big man looked up, glowering. "I've channeled everything I could into it. We'll just have to hang on."

The aliens were evidently hovering not far from them, cascading beam after beam of heavy-cycle force down on their helpless ship. Probably they were hopelessly off course now; they might have been knocked hundreds of light-years from their path by the power of the assault. Gloomily Rocha saw that even if they survived, they might never find their way safely back to Earth now.

The ship shivered as another sweeping bolt of energy crashed into the hull-screens. Rocha heard the screens groan as they labored to absorb the overload and dissipate it into harmless energy. The needle crept up...up...up into the red band of *overload.*

The screens died with a whining screech. Rocha looked up at Curtis; the two space-suited men exchanged glances of desperation. Their mad flight was at an end now. The ship lay bare to assault, and the next furious blast of energy would—

It did.

It ploughed through the now screenless hull like a sword through jelly, cutting and hewing its way and leaving the hull glowing red where destruction's hand had touched it.

Like peas in a pod the men aboard the ship went spilling out through the split side; those who had not had time to

don spacesuits perished immediately, while Rocha and the others in protective garb went hurtling into the grayness of hyperspace knowing that they were as good as dead.

And that's how it finishes, Rocha thought coldly. *We nearly made it. Nearly.*

He drifted, hanging with seeming motionlessness in the utterly empty void around him. He could see the split ruin of what had been his ship, not far away; corpses hovered in eternal orbit around it. *At least they had a quick death,* he thought. *Not like us.* He saw eight or nine men in spacesuits drifting helplessly nearby. *We'll starve to death. What a lousy way to finish up.*

He swung his head back and saw the alien ship orbiting above him—a darkly purple needle, strange in appearance, with symbols in no language Earth had ever seen inscribed on its side.

As he watched, a glowing arm of yellow light sprang out from the alien ship's side. He frowned, wondering what the beam might be.

Then he felt it around him, seizing him gently as if it were a giant's hand, and drawing him up and up, toward the ship. He realized now: it was some sort of energy grapple. He was being picked up, possibly for .questioning, by the aliens.

He was a prisoner of war. That was not much better than being an exile on Sunrise —but at least he could hope for a quick death.

TT took nearly an hour for the arm to bring him to the alien ship. He noticed that four or five of the others had been caught by the energy grapple too; they clustered about the skin of the ship like hooked fish drawn to a pier.

The hatch opened. The ship swallowed them in, hungrily.

Rocha found himself in an airlock of strange design. A voice said over a loudspeaker, "Remain where you are, Earthmen. Our air is not suitable for you to breathe at present. We will question you."

A screen lit. Rocha found himself staring at an unutterably alien face. It was fleshy,

with drooping bags of skin around the throat; it seemed to be a greenish-yellow in color. Five stubby antennae rose from its high hairless forehead. It had four eyes, placed in a straight line beneath the antennae. They were round, lidless eyes with a baleful, fishy look about them. The alien's mouth was huge; when it opened, Rocha saw triple rows of tiny fang-like teeth.

The alien spoke into a device that was undoubtedly the thought-converter. The loudspeaker said: "I am Thagran Dyorm, Commander of the Vengilani Invasion Fleet. We are about to make a transition from hyperspace to normal space. When we emerge, we will be in the orbit of the fifth planet surrounding the sun of Earth."

Rocha's eyes widened. No wonder these beings had been able to cross the unimaginable gulf between the galaxies! It would have taken his ship at least ten more days to reach the orbit of Jupiter; they were making the hop almost instantaneously. He saw now that his warning to Earth had been futile; against this sort of science, Earth was hopelessly lost.

Part of him tried to pretend that he did not care. But he *did* care. Earth was his home world.

There was a sudden twisting sensation, and Rocha knew they had emerged into normal space. He wished there were some viewscreen in the airlock where he stood; he wanted to know if the aliens actually had emerged from warp in the orbit of Jupiter, or whether they were creating a hoax to impress him.

The alien commander said, "We intend to launch our attack on Earth at once. If you grant us the information we request, you will be allowed to live on after we have established our dominion over Earth. Otherwise—"

"Don't tell them anything," Rocha said to his companions.

"You don't have to worry about .me," Curtis said.

"Or any of us," added Graham. "Dammit, we should have stayed on Sunrise."

"Too late for that now," Rocha said.

A WORLD CALLED SUNRISE

Ignoring the intersuit exchange of words, the alien said pompously: "First we desire to know the names and location of the chief Terran cities. Then, the military bases. After that, we will want to know detailed data on the technological strength of Earth. And then—"

The alien paused. In the screen, Rocha saw that another of the same species had come within camera range. He looked highly agitated. He muttered something to the comander which the audio pickups did not register.

When the alien commander swung round to face the captive Earthmen again, his entire expression had changed. The fishy complacency was gone; now his alien features were contorted with unmistakable signs of horror.

"My aides tell me you emanate great quantities of radioactivity. He says you exceed the figures on our detectors."

"That's right," Rocha said. An inspiration struck him. "Every Earthman is radioactive. Didn't you know that? We all give off alpha particles. It's a racial characteristic of ours."

"The entire race—"

"Of course. Do you want to examine us one by one? Every blessed one of us is radioactive. And so are the men you killed when you blew up our ship. Go back and look, if you like."

"No, no!" Dismay was evident on the alien face. "An entire world radioactive? Impossible!"

"Examine us and see," Rocha challenged.

"No. You must be cast from the ship. You will contaminate us." The alien turned his head and barked orders to invisible aides—o r d e r s which the thought-converter translated clearly.

"Expel these beings from the ship! Order a retreat! Earth will be unlivable for us!"

Rocha repressed a chuckle. Behind him, the airlock door swung open, and the mighty fist of the energy grapple, operating in reverse, hurled him out once again into space.

Not into gray nothingness, this time. Into true space. The

bright glory of the heavens was spread out before him. He saw ringed Saturn and red Mars, whirling in their distant orbits.

And he saw Earth.

TLTE drifted.

The energy grapple had imparted a high inward velocity to him. Clad in his protective suit he sped across the orbit of Mars, heading Earthward.

It was a cosmic joke, he thought. The aliens had had some superstitious fear of radioactivity—enough, in any event, to frighten them away and end their invasion plans.

He saw the splendor of Earth through his faceplate—a great s green ball, spinning slowly, with the moon keeping silent company. He wis alone. His companions had each gone sprawling in a different direction, Curtis to Jupiter, Graham inward toward the Sun. They were long since out of radio range now.

Rocha meditated on the irony of it; for the second time in his life he had been cast forth because of his affliction, and now he was returning to Earth. Because of his radioactivity, he had saved the world that had thrown him forth—and they would never know it. They would always think that his radioed warning had been some jeering hoax. They would never know how close Earth had come to enslavement, nor by what a slim margin it had been saved.

He was drawing close to Earth now—a tiny object in a spacesuit. His suit was not made for high-velocity entry into a planetary atmosphere. He knew what would happen to him. He did not care.

Rocha entered the atmosphere, and felt the heat rise up about him. He smiled once; then his suit burst into flames and he was consumed. On the Earth below, it looked like a shooting star, blazing fitfully and quickly burning out.

Rocha had come home at last, to the world that did not want him.

THE END

THE COLD-BLOODED ONES

by CALVIN M. KNOX

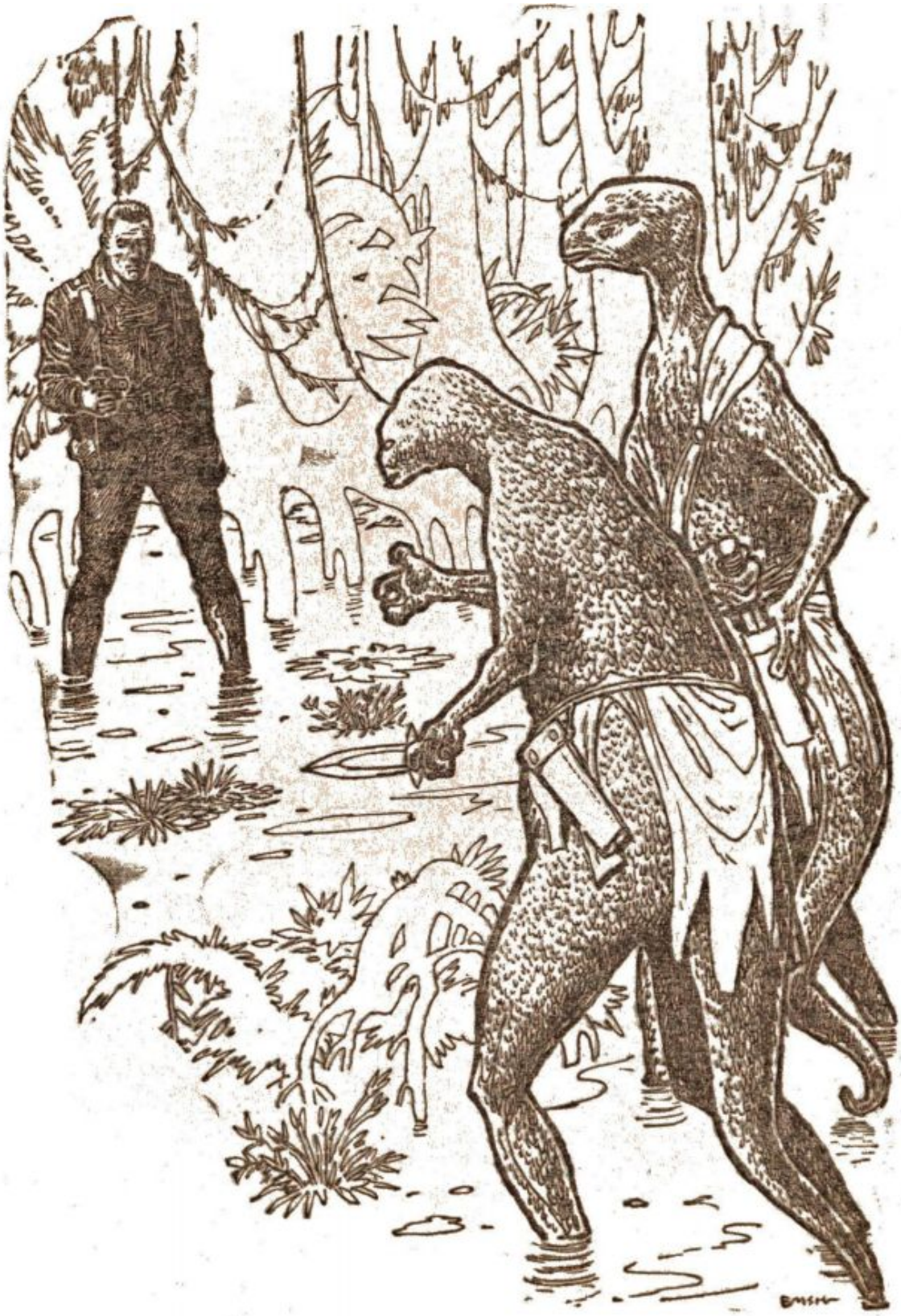
illustrated, by EMSH

The intelligent life on Xhcenna was reptilian in form, and beneath those scaly hides beat hearts in different rhythm from the warm-blooded human beings — from Earth

rpHE natives of Xhcenna were cold-blooded beings, intelligent reptiles who walked on their back legs, and that made Survey Corpsman Mark Hennessey suspicious of them from the start. And since Hennessey was Coordinator of the six-man Terran survey team, his opinions carried a lot of weight.

Even so, the members of the expedition were overwhelmingly in favor of giving a positive report on Xhcenna, where they had stayed Jor eleven weeks. A positive report would mean opening of Xhcenna to Terran trade and commerce, and even to tourists if there were any tourists who cared to make a nullspace journey across a gulf of more than two hundred light-years.

In the Meeting Room of the survey ship, which stood tall and gleaming in a broad clearing a mile outside the nearest alien village, Mark Hennessey called the members of his team together to discuss plans for the oncoming departure date. Twelve weeks was the normal maximum time any survey team spent on a single planet; Terra Central figured that if



they were still undecided about a planet's virtues or dangers after that time, it was best to nwtrk the world off as undesirable and try a new one.

Hennessey faced the other five members of his team: Julia, his wife, biologist; Don Farrell, geologist and his wife Moira, chemist; Paul MacDonald, communications specialist and Gala, his wife, ecologist. Hennessey himself held the post of sociologist. The Survey Corps insisted on sending out only teams consisting of married couples, but even so every member of the team had to practice a needed specialty.

Hennessey locked his thick, powerful hands together and said, "As you know, we'll be leaving Xhcenna in seven ship days. I'm simply confirming what I unofficially announced last time."

His wife said, "Mark, will there be a rearranged schedule? After all, I can't get my biological specimens in order if I still have to spend half my day out on field trips."

"Same here," Farrell said. "We'll have to redistribute our time."

"Exactly why I called this meeting," Hennessey said. "It's time to make a first tentative decision on our ultimate report for this planet. When that's taken care of, we can figure out new work-schedules for the final week of study."

He leaned forward. He was a big man, heavy-set, with tangled dark hair and oddly piercing blue eyes. He said, "Let's hear from you first, Paul. From a communications aspect, what can you tell us about this planet that will help us to judge it?"

MacDonald cleared his throat noisily. He was short and thin, with a constant nervous quiver. "Well—ah—it's this way," he began. "The natives have a complex but easily understood language of the agglutinative type. It is quickly learned by Earthmen, as I think we've all proven. It indicates a fairly high level of civilization—on a non-technological level, of course."

"Of course," Hennessey echoed. "Let me interject at this point that as a sociologist I find the Xhcennans a well-developed people who because of the non-metallic nature of their world and because of their own

physical characteristics have developed a largely non-technological culture. There's a strong tribal organization and a fairly advanced kind of religion. Don, do you want to talk about the geological angles?"

"Simple enough," Farrell said cheerfully. "The planet's rich on light elements, poor on middle-sized ones, and absolutely a blank on the heavy ones. That means it's out as a source of radioactives. It's a fairly old planet. No active volcanoes that I could find, no worthwhile geological faultlines, in short no indications of any great geomorphic disturbances in the recent past or in the foreseeable future. A quiet and stable planet, geologically speaking of course."

Hennessey nodded. "Moira?"

Moira Farrell said, "Chemical analysis shows that the planet's inhabitable by human beings. Slightly low oxygen content in the air and a minute fraction more carbon dioxide than we're accustomed to, but in both cases the difference from Earthnorm is not significant. As on Earth, the life-forms have carbon-base molecules."

"Julia?"

"Biologically speaking, this is pretty much an Earth-type world," Julia Hennessey said. "Similar microorganisms, similar genetic patterns, similar life-processes. Most of the native foods are edible by Earthmen, though one or two would seem to be violently poisonous —I haven't finished testing those in the lab. I'd say the planet was definitely livable."

Hennessey glanced around the room, his heavy brows furrowing. He looked at Gala MacDonald and said, "I guess we're missing only the ecologist's report, and then we've made the circuit. Go ahead, Gala."

"The balance of life here is similar to that on Earth," Gala MacDonald said. "With the one glaring exception that mammalian creatures never evolved here. The dominant form of intelligent life is reptilian—upright saurian, of course—and the minor animals, household pets, and the like, are reptiles too. There are large predatory reptiles in the jungles, and a few dangerous

amphibious beasts in the seas. There is evidence that birds did evolve and became extinct, and perhaps when we've done further paleontological research here we'll discover that the entire mammal family did develop here but died out. As for the flora, it's fully evolved through the spermatophytic range. I guess that covers everything I have to say right now, Mark."

Hennessey was silent for a moment when Gala had finished. His eyes roved around the ship's cabin, out the big viewport to stare at the thick alien-looking jungle, then at the five people facing him.

Finally Julia said, "Well, Mark? We really haven't heard from you, you know. What's the sociologist's report on the situation?"

"Yeah," MacDonald said. "Your word is the most important."

Hennessey was conscious of that. He had veto power over all the rest; no matter how suitable for Terran use a planet was, the sociologist-coordinator of the team could cause a planet to be closed off if he saw fit.

Right now he could not make up his mind.

"I don't know," he said after a long pause. "I've studied the Xhcennans and I know them pretty well____I think. They seem to be a virtuous and kind-hearted people. But____*I'm not sure"*

"What do you mean by that?" Farrell demanded.

"I don't think I can phrase it." Hennessey waved his big hands futilely, groping for the words. "I—just don't fully trust these aliens, somehow."

"Oh, Mark—"

Hennessey cut the protest off at once. "I haven't made any official statement yet. I need a few more days to reach my decision, and in the meantime we'll go right ahead without waiting. I take it the sense of the meeting is that there's nothing much wrong with Xhcenna, and that pending my own report we can consider the planet approved for Terran contact. Any discussion?"

There was none. Hennessey waited a moment, then rose. "In that case I'll declare this meeting adjourned. We leave Xhcenna in exactly a week. Until I've reached my final

conclusion, we'll let the tentative findings of this meeting stand."

THE next day was slightly cloudy, as most of the days were on Xhcenna. The sun was a pale gold, of the same spectral type as Sol but not quite as intense, and a layer of drifting fleecy clouds seemed to hang constantly in the atmosphere. On a hotter world, the sun would have burned those clouds away before midday; here, they clung not far above the surface of the world all day.

Hennessey took the jeep down the winding dirt road that led from the clearing where they had landed to the small Xhcennan village nearby. For the past eleven weeks he had been making daily visits to the Xhcennans, studying them as he learned their language, getting to know their customs and way of life. It was important to have a firm estimate of any alien creatures of intelligence, Hennessey knew.

So far, the surface of what he had seen impressed him. But Hennessey was too shrewd and too cautious to be content with surface impressions. He wanted to get to know the Xhcennan way of thinking well enough to be able to read the deeper motivations. It takes time before you can learn from a man's eyes and lips that he's lying; it takes even longer to develop the ability of interpreting the mannerisms of an alien being whose blood ran cold and whose eyes were yellow lipless feral slits.

Hennessey parked the jeep at the edge of the village, which consisted of ten concentric circles of thatched wooden domes radiating outward from a central town hall. A couple of Xhcennan "children"—it was hard for him to think of small lizards as children—congregated at a respectful distance, staring at the vehicle. There was no motorized transport on Xhcenna at all; they simply had never developed a technology complex enough to handle the job of developing even a primitive internal-combustion engine.

What little metal they mined was used for hunting-weapons, and the like. The Xhcennans didn't even have gunpowder; but they had raised the tech-

nique of knife-wielding beyond the status of a fine art to that of an elaborate science.

They were calm, peaceful people, Hennessey admitted. But he thought darkly that it was foolish to take them on face value.

They're cold-blooded reptiles. Don't be fooled by the peaceful villages or the little children or the calm philosophical way of life.

Look carefully. Look for the hidden things, the dark things, the cold-blooded things. Earth people will settle here. You wouldn't want them to be massacred one moonless night by the Snakes.

As an automatic gesture Hennessey checked the magazine of his hundred-shot repeater pistol. Then, reassured, he walked forward into the Xhcennan village.

'T'ODAY he was spending several hours with old Truzzk, the venerable religious leader of the community. Apparently word of Hennessey's arrival had travelled rapidly through the village, because long before the Earthman had reached the House of the Sun he saw the old priest come shuffling toward him, followed closely by the small two-legged reptile that was a sort of sacred pet.

Truzzk was very old: exactly how old, Hennessey had never been able to find out. But the green of his scaly body had long since darkened almost to a rich leathery brown, and his eyes, once golden, had dimmed and faded. A withered bunch of flesh dangled at the old reptile's throat. He was slightly taller than Hennessey, and walked upright on two thick-thighed legs. Two other limbs hung kangaroo-like over his chest, and he balanced with a powerful, muscular tail.

"Sun's warmth upon you, Earthman," the priest said when he was close.

"May the clouds part above you, Truzzk."

The alien beckoned, leading Hennessey onward into the domed hut that was known as the House of the Sun. It was both the priest's residence and the village temple; through a hole in its roof the sun's rays could enter, beaming down upon an altar set in the ground. The Xhcennans had worked

out a split-second schedule of the moments during each day when the sun would be directly overhead the House of the Sun; it was considered the holiest moment of the day, and it was then that worship took place.

Like all of his people, the old man was naked. He wore only the ceremonial sword belted round his waist, a gleaming steel weapon with deadly barbed edges.

The old priest said without further preamble, "I hear that you are leaving us."

Immediately Hennessey became suspicious. "Where did you hear that, Old One?"

Truzzk shrugged ambiguously. "It—it is in the air, so to speak. I feel it. You will be leaving us soon. Is this not right?"

In a tense voice Hennessey said, "We'll be leaving Xhcenna at the end of this—" He fumbled for the alien word meaning "week," and gave up. The aliens had little sense of time in the formal meaning of the word. "We'll be leaving very soon," Hennessey said lamely. "In only a few more sunrises."

The dim reptilian eyes fastened piercingly on the Earthman. "Why do you leave? Are you not happy here, Hennessey?"

The way the alien said his name was a drawn-out hissing whistle that brought shivers of revulsion to the Survey Corpsman. He said, "We've enjoyed our stay, Old One. Your people have been very cooperative."

"Then why must you leave?"

"We—must return to our own people," Hennessey said. He began to feel uncomfortable in the musty dankness of the House of the Sun, and he searched for ways to change the subject. "Yesterday we spoke of the Nine Laws of Righteousness, and the Seven Tables of Justice. I'd like to discuss these a little further with you."

"What would you know?"

"Your philosophy of vengeance, for one thing. You began to recite the chapter to me yesterday just when it got dark."

The alien's eyes filmed over for a moment; then, in a sonorous monotone, Truzzk said, *"Thou shalt deal out jair-*

ly to him who dealt fairly to you, and evil for evil. He who causes a breach in your body armor, so shall ye rend his scales; he who treats all with justice shall himself receive justice from all."

JJTENNESSEY recorded all that the old priest said, on a minorecorder strapped to his left wrist. It was the universal basic ethical statement: do unto others as you would have others do unto you, a rule that in one form or another seemed to crop up at the heart of every philosophical teaching.

But there were undertones of vengeance here, more than an echo of the Old Testament creed of retaliation, *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.* There was no question of love among these poeple, thought Hennessey, either in personal relationships or in ethical formulations. Everything about the Xhcennans was remorselessly rational, logical, unemotional—-

Cold-blooded.

Which was not surprising. They were reptiles; their metabolisms, their means of reproduction, their internal plumbing, all differed vastly from the human and humanoid patterns.

Hennessey spoke with the old priest for several hours. At the end of that time, he had achieved a clear understanding of the Xhcennan philosophy, and he thought he knew a little more about what made the alien beings tick. He was still unsure.

As he rose to leave, Truzzk said, "In truth, you and your people will be leaving us shortly?"

"Yes. I told you so already."

"You did not tell us why you found it necessary to leave Xhcennan."

Hennessey took a deep breath. He said, "We're simply advance scouts, you know. Not permanent settlers."

"This was understood."

"Well, it's time for us to go back to Earth and report on our findings. Our job is to decide whether or not Xhcenna should be opened to unrestricted traffic from Earth."

"And will you return to Xhcenna after you have made your report to Earth?"

"Probably not," Hennessey said. "We'll have to go on to

other planets and carry out the same task there. But perhaps other Earthmen will ccme here."

The great reptilian head swivelled in the alien gesture of understanding. "You said you were happy here; that means you will urge your fellow Earthmen to come here. Soon there will be many Earthmen on Xhcenna."

Hennessey said nothing, neither affirming nor denying. This was one point he had grave doubts about. Suppose the aliens didn't *want* Earthmen coming to their world? He wished he knew whether he could trust these aliens. They seemed so innocent, so virtuous —but yet, they carried barbed swords.

Were they waiting, readying themselves for the massacre? It was impossible to tell. They held their true feelings masked behind those unreadable saurian eyes.

Time was running short. Soon Hennessey would have to make a decision, he knew. The planet was a good one for Terran use—but could the aliens be trusted to receive visitors without demur? That was the key question, on which all else hung.

I wish I knew, Hennessey thought. He muttered the courtesies of a formal Xhcennan farewell, bowing three times to the old alien being, and made his way back to his jeep wrapped deeply in the indecisions of his own mind.

HPHE next two days were busy ones for the six members of the Terran survey team. They had to carry out double duties: both to continue their field work with the natives, and to begin packing and storing their collected specimens for the long voyage homeward.

Each of the crew members had been working up to the hilt already—MacDonald in attaining a deeper understanding of the alien language and in instructing his companions, Gala in studying the balance of life on the planet, Farrell in ranging the world in the ship's lifeboat studying the possible natural resources, Julia in classifying and examining Xhcennan life-forms, Moira in testing the chemical constituents of the planet.

They were an experienced

team, and they did their job well. By the time their twelve-week tour of duty on Xhcenna was up, Earth would have a detailed and documented analysis of the planet.

But ultimately the responsibility rested on Hennessey, as it always did on a planet that was inhabited by intelligent life. The previous world—Eta Aurigae XIV—'had been uninhabited except by minor animals, but there Julia's research had ascertained that a deadly airborne virus would make Terran colonization impossible. On Omega Orionis IV, Moira had discovered that a levorotary twist in certain carbohydrates made native food inedible; scratch that from the list.

Here, though, there was intelligent life, and Hennessey was the one who had to search out the hidden dangers. He had found none. He had spent dozens of hours with the aliens, and at no time had he found them to be other than highly ethical, rational beings.

It was too pat. They were *too* good.

There had to be a catch somewhere. But time was running short, and Hennessey realized gloomily he was not getting any closer to an answer.

'T'HREE days before departure MacDonald told him, "The aliens seem to know we're going, Mark."

"I know. I told the old priest about it a few days ago. He kept bothering me until I let him know. How are they reacting?"

"Strangely, I'd say." The communications man frowned. "They don't seem happy about it. The ones I spoke to are reluctant to see us leave."

"I've had the same reaction," Hennessey agreed. He moistened his lips thoughtfully. "It means one of two things: either they love us so much they don't want us to go—or else they know that if we go, it probably means we'll be touching off a deluge of Earthmen in the next few years."

MacDonald looked startled. "You really think so? They seem to like Earthmen."

"They like *six* Earthmen," Hennessey said. "But maybe they don't like the idea of six *million* Earthmen coming to settle here. We'd better keep an eye on them for the nextj

couple of days, I'm thinking."

Hennessey scowled and walked away, one hand touching the butt of the repeater pistol at his hip. It was a cold day, hinting at the advance of winter. His body had a built-in thermostat; he shivered now, but he would adjust. The aliens could not. They, being cold-blooded, would simply enter hibernative states until the coming of spring, four months hence. It was just another example, thought Hennessey, of the unbridgable gulf between Earthmen and these strange untalkative alien beings.

He prowled restlessly through the ship. In the second-level lab, Julia was busily packing away her slides of Xhcennan micro-organisms, to be filed eventually at the vast central headquarters of the Institute of Extraterrestrial Life. She sat with her back to the door, head bent over her work; bottles containing formaldehyde-preserved specimens of small native animals covered one entire work-bench nearby.

She looked up. "Oh—Mark."

"Hello, Julia."

In the last few days he had hardly more than glanced at his wife, the sturdy fair-haired woman who had been his companion on these journeys for more than a decade. He had been too wrapped up in the problem of the decision that he would soon have to make.

Now he let his hands trail absently down to nestle on her shoulders. She glanced up at him.

"Mark?"

"Eh?"

"We'll take the six-month leave next time, before the Shaulan trip?"

He blinked at her. They had always refused the optional six-month rest between voyages, preferring to have the time credited against their retirement date far in the future. "Why do you want to do that? You feel you need a rest, Julia?"

"No. Not me. *You.*"

"Me?" Hennessey repeated, startled. "Why, I've never felt better. I—"

"Quit fooling yourself," Julia said levelly. "Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

"No, I haven't."

"There's one over the microscope table. Go have a look."

Grumbling, Hennessey crossed the lab and peered into the mirror. A strong, ruggedly unhandsome face peered back at him. He frowned. He hadn't realized he was getting so thin; he must have lost a lot of weight. Circles ringed his eyes darkly. His cheeks were pinched, haggard.

He didn't look like a healthy man. He looked like a man who was wrestling with an insoluble problem and consuming his own soul in the process. After a moment he forced himself almost reluctantly to look away from the mirror. The spectacle of his own worry-eaten face was oddly fascinating.

"You're right," he said quietly. "I look like hell."

"You're worrying too much about these natives, Mark. You're trying to find something in them that isn't there. Why can't you just relax."

"I wish I could!" He clenched his fists. "I'm wound tighter than a string, inside. Ready to pop."

"You need a rest."

Hennessey nodded. "I'm afraid I do. Ten years without a vacation is too much. Well, in a couple of days we'll be out of here and on our way back to Earth. I can get some rest then."

He smiled hopefully, as if anticipating the vacation to come—but even as he smiled, he realized that before he could rest he would have to reach some decision about this planet, and his smile faded suddenly like sunlight obscured by passing clouds.

THE final day came at last.

It dawned bright and clear and cold; according to Julia's information, winter was only a month away on Xhcenna's big central continent, where they had landed.

The ship was a beehive of activity; the tents in the clearing had to be disassembled and packed, the specimen-crates had to be battened down in the cargo hold, the fuel-feed had to be checked and the space-drive completely tested, all in this one day.

The six of them functioned like parts of a well-oiled machine. Each member of the team had a specific group of duties to do, and each of them did them. Hennessey, as coordinator, was everywhere,

checking off items on a long regulation checklist.

Blast tubes aligned. Yes.

Nullspace converter warming up. Yes.

Suspension coils ionized. Yes.

Cargo hold secure in gimbals. Yes.

Blasting area clear—

Hennessey felt someone pluck at the sleeve of his gray uniform. He was so absorbed in the hectic job of terminating a survey mission that he did not look up for even a moment.

Don Farrell's impatient voice said, "Mark, take a look out the port, will you?"

"What's going on?"

"All around us," Farrell said agitatedly. "The natives. Coming out of the jungle!"

It was like a clammy hand coming down and squeezing Hennessey's heart. He whitened, and faltered unsteadily; after a moment he regained control of his tired body and walked to the nearest exterior viewport.

He looked out.

At least five hundred aliens •—perhaps as many as a thousand, Hennessey thought grimly—stood in a loose circle at the edges of their clearing, staring intently at the slim needle that was the survey ship.

The aliens had brought their swords.

They held them gripped in their small upper arms, as if ready to use them.

Stunned, Hennessey turned away from the port and put his hands to his head. He stared silently at nothing in particular.

MacDonald appeared, jittery and excited. He said, "You see what's doing outside?"

"Yeah. I see," Hennessey said dully. "Hundreds of aliens. With drawn swords."

"You were right," MacDonald said. "They didn't want us to leave because they were afraid we'd bring more Earthmen back with us. So they're going to attack—attack a spaceship with swords!"

Hennessey shook his head. "If we blast off now we'll kill hundreds of them. We have to drive them off somehow."

"Who cares if we kill hundreds?" Farrell wanted to know. "In the face of this we'll have to declare the world no damned good, anyway. Hostile alien life means an automatic red mark."

Hennessey felt his legs quivering, partly with fear and partly with anger. Suddenly an idea came to his feverish, overtired mind.

"I'm going to go out there and warn them to get out of the way," he whispered.

THE five of them clustered around, arguing against him, but he was coordinator and none of them, not even Julia, could change his mind. He threw the switch that opened the main airlock and stepped out.

The closest of them was no more than fifty feet from the ship. Hennessey felt a burst of irrational fear. He cupped his hands and shouted, in the hissing alien language, "Get away from here! You'll be killed when we blast off!"

Hennessey recognized some faces in the front row of aliens. Old Truzzk the priest was there, and Mirrsst the town chieftain, and some of the other important villagers. They stood with swords upraised; even in the pale sunlight, they glinted like a thousand bolts of lightning.

"Get back!" Hennessey roared. His voice cracked as he pleaded with the steadily advancing aliens to get back, out of the danger zone, so the ship could take off. He told them how fiery matter would cascade down on them from the jets of the blasting ship.

Maybe they don't understand what I'm saying, Hennessey thought. *But there's a language they ought to understand. And if they come any closer—*

From behind him he heard Julia cry half-hysterically, "Mark! Get back in the ship! They'll kill you!"

He ignored her. He drew his hundred-shot repeater and gripped the cold butt tightly in a sweat-dampened hand. He raised it and fired three times, in rapid succession, over the heads of the nearest rank.

Three loud reports echoed in the silent clearing, and the aliens took another step inward. Desperately Hennessey fired again; and, seeing that not even the warning of the gun had any effect, a wave of panic swept over him and he lowered the gun slightly and

pumped a dozen shots into the nearest file of massed aliens.

There was a stunned *ahh!* as several aliens dropped—and the reptiles gave ground, moving back twenty feet and buzzing to each other in quick, excited tones. Hennessey stood his ground, ready to charge back into the ship. He was totally the prisoner of his emotions, now; his body quivered with inward tension.

In the space created by the retreat of the aliens, eight or nine lay wounded, some thrashing their thick tails feebly, others perhaps already dead. Hennessey felt a moment of shock as he realized that one of his victims was the priest, Truzzk.

Before he had time to think of what he was doing he dashed forward into the clearing and tried to lift the old priest. Truzzk was still alive; his eyes met Hennessey's reproachfully.

Hennessey remembered the eye-for-an-eye philosophy of the aliens. In a moment they would recover from the shock of the gunshots and would advance, swinging their formidable blades, to cut him down. He realized he was in deadly danger, but he could not move.

The aliens were coming forward now.

Suddenly Truzzk rose to his feet, tottering; his scaly hide was stained with blood. He murmured a few half-audible words to Hennessey; then he turned, gesturing with his sword to the oncoming aliens.

They halted in their path at the gesture from the priest. They paused indecisively—then, turned and retreated once again. Hennessey and the priest stood alone in the clearing, as the aliens moved beyond the safety boundary, lowering their swords.

Truzzk started to say something; he never got it out. He toppled, spun and fell, and twitched convulsively for an instant. Then he was still.

Hennessey felt the stasis that had gripped him break. He hurled the gun to the ground, turned, and ran wildly back to the ship and through the airlock.

He tumbled forward, a quivering, sweat-bathed heap, into MacDonald's arms.

•yHEY blasted off immediately; and, an hour later, with the ship safely launched into

the grayness of nullspace, Hennessey felt sufficiently calm again to call a meeting of the survey team.

He felt drained of emotion, utterly weary and exhausted. In a calm, quiet voice he said, "I think there's no doubt of our decision now. I cast my vote against further dealings with Xhcenna. I will recommend total quarantine; no further Terran contact there whatsoever."

"Mark—"

Hennessey looked at the speaker: MacDonald. He said, "I know. You want an explanation. The explanation is simple. I made a great mistake."

Five glassy-blank faces stared at him.

Hennessey said, "All along I suspected the Xhcennans of being up to something. I pried and snooped, hoping to find something evil behind their appearance of virtue. I was trying to find something that doesn't exist."

"How about that sendoff with swords, though?" Farrell asked.

Hennessey smiled faintly. "The old priest explained it to me as he lay dying out there. They were coming to wish us goodbye. The swords were purely ceremonial; they were doing us a great honor. And I had to panic up and start firing."

"How come they didn't attack you?" Moira asked.

"Because the priest told them not to. And that's why I'm voting to quarantine this world. Those people will never understand Terrans, and Terrans won't understand them. The Xhcennans just don't understand what evil is, I guess."

His lips curved in a bitter smile. "You know what that priest said to me just before he died? He said, 'You have killed me in cold blood—and yet I forgive you. I will ask my people to have mercy on you.' "

Hennessey looked around at them, knowing that they all shared the blood-stain that was upon him. "Imagine that," he said. "He forgave me and ordered his people back so we could blast off. But he said 1 killed him *in cold blood."*

THE END

PLANETARY COLLISION

by STEVEN RORY

The recent discovery of huge meteorite craters in Canada seems to indicate that the earth once looked as pock-marked as the moon. At the same time the discovery points the way toward the conclusion that the planetary collision believed to have created some or all of the meteorites took place at least 300,000,000 years ago.

Four craters "probably" caused by meteoric impact have been found. All are larger than any previously found, one being more than seven miles across.

A study of aerial photographs and maps has shown eight other possible craters in the region. The largest, on the eastern shore of Hudson Bay, is about 400 miles in diameter —comparable in size to the largest of the visible moon craters, the Mare Iubium.

The largest meteoric craters known before this discovery were the Telemzane, in North Africa, one and a quarter miles wide, and the Barringer, in Arizona, three quarters of a mile.

Studies have been carried out on six meteorite specimens to see how long they have been exposed to the influence of cosmic rays, and the conclusion is that before 300,000,000 years ago the meteorites were embedded in a planet and hence not exposed to the rays.

It is believed that a planetary collision in the solar system about this time caused a shower of debris on the surface of the earth and the moon. The moon, not having an atmosphere, has retained its meteoric craters in their original state, whereas those on earth have been eroded and otherwise concealed by the passage of time and the development of life.

MANY MANSIONS IN THE SKY

by KOLLER ERNST

NOVELETTE *illustrated by* **BOWMAN**

The refugees from atom-blasted Earth had been in space for years, their Ark headed for the stars. But who was sure there was a hiding place for man in the firmament?

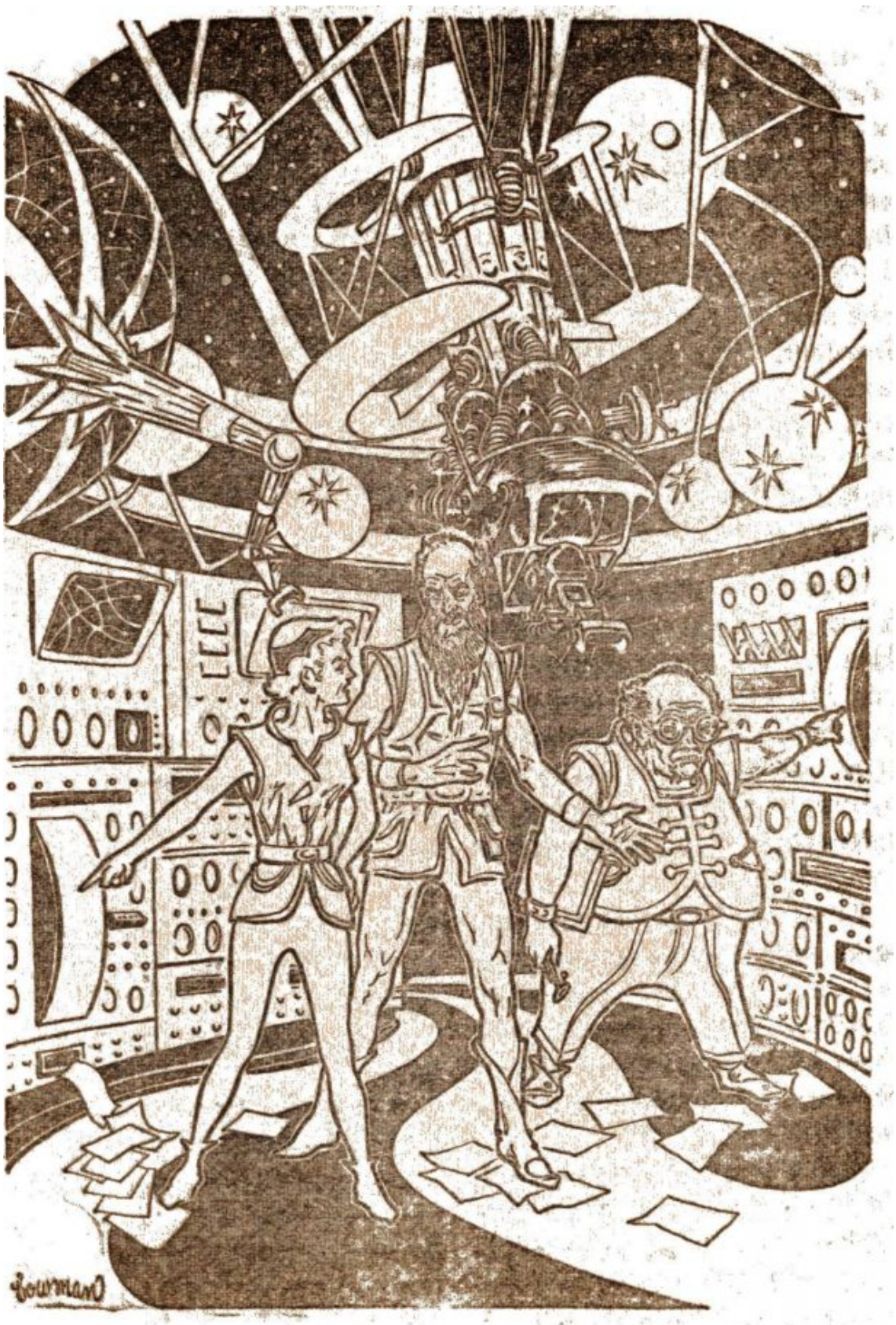
J^T the moment there were just the two of them in the Star Ark's observatory as they rushed toward Alpha Centauri's worlds at the speed of light. They were Agar Tomas and his wife, Myra, the ranking astrogators.

The unease, which for months had been a tingling undercurrent in the lives of the ten thousand men, women and children in the vast space ball, was present with them. It was more than a vague feeling now, though. It was almost tangible; something there in the lighted room; something menacing, yet invisible.

Agar turned from the electron telescope and shook his head. For a while he had hardly heard his wife speaking, so intent had he been on his study of the cosmos. Now, as he answered, his voice was sharp and, a little weary.

"Woman's intuition," ha said. "W O m a n's intuition. What kind of talk is that in this age?"

Myra watched him manipulate the delicate eyepiece, her dark, sensitive face drawn. Of


Bourman

course, she thought, men were always like that, scorning women's intuition. But...history showed where they had conquered nations in the past, heeding it.

"It's more than intuition," she said quietly. "I feel like an intruder. The farther we get away from our own solar system, the stronger that the feeling gets—the people of the Ark feel it now, too. Stronger every day."

This was true. And Agar knew it. Only that morning Healy, the mayor of the Ark, and his ward-heelers had come in, demanding to know when they would reach an earth; demanding that the scientists, or astrogators, or someone do something.

"You can't keep ten thousand constituents cooped up in...in a space rain barrel like this," he shouted, "and not let them know how long it will be or when we'll land on a new world. If ever!"

Police Captain Hansen, senior physicist Hammar; Willmut, the head mathematician, and Marrivale, the astronomer, had been there for a conference when Healy had burst in.

"Easy," Hansen said. He was a big, slat of a man with cold, ice-blue eyes. "You tend to your politicking, and we'll tend to our navigatin'."

"See here!" yelled Healy. "I want some word for my people. They're on edge. Space happy, they are. As who wouldn't be? What do you think will happen if I go back to them and tell them: 'People, the scientists, your lord and masters, don't know where they're going, or how long we'll be in space. In fact, people, we're doomed in space.' Suppose I tell them this, which begins to look like the truth?"

"You tell them that," said Hammar, a big, black, beetling man. "And they'll run amok. They'll kill you and themselves and destroy the Ark. That make you happy, sar?"

Healy grumbled. Looked at Myra.

"You, too, Myra?" he said, still grumbling. "You know something about what's really going on. Are we going ever to land somewhere? Or are we going to have to live in this ball for the rest of our lives?"

"I don't know," Myra said. "We can only hope, and put our faith in God."

Willmut and Agar exchanged glances and shrugged. But they did not say anything. Healy noticed it.

"Hogwash," he said. "I can see it in their faces, Myra. That's hogwash. We're doomed. I'm going to tell my people. They have a right to know."

Agar sprang forward, grabbed him by the throat and shook him. A ward-heeler leaped in and Agar sent him flying with an elbow chop. That stopped the others an instant.

"Listen, Healy," Agar said through clenched teeth, the anger making him white. "You frighten the people with a story like that and, so help me, the first thing I'll do is break your neck, so you'll never know how it all came out in either case. Do you understand?"

He hurled the politician among his men. Healy rearranged his coat. His hands were shaking, whether with fear or anger Agar could not tell, nor did he, at that moment, care.

Then Healy straightened and his voice was flat and dead and under full control. "I'll give you brains two weeks," he said. "Then if nothing definite happened, we, the people, will take over the Star Ark."

THEY stomped out. The scientists stared at one another. Then they shrugged helplessly. After all, they knew their position. A few hundred scientists, against ten thousand civilians. Their police force, too, was too small to control more than one level of the Ark at a time. And there were forty levels in the half-mile-in-diameter spaceship. Forty levels, split among the residential streets; factories, schools, and hospital; farms and storage and refrigeration levels.

The cattle, poultry, sheep, pig farm levels were down in the bottom of the sphere, just above the atomic power plant. There were also the textile levels, and the level where the gravity equalizer machines whirred steadfastly, the air

circulation and ventilation level. At the very apex was the observatory and, in the center, the artificial lake, with its artificial blue sky and painted white clouds, and its earth sand, where 700 men, women and children could relax each day, so that, every two weeks, every person in the Ark cculd enjoy the synthetic seashore as they continued on their now seemingly endless journey.

Now, as Agar recalled the scene, the sense of misgiving in him grew heavy and frightening. In a way, Myra was right. Suppose their calculations of distances were entirely wrong 1 Suppose Centauri and its worlds were even hundreds of light years away! How could they ever reach it? How could the gigantic Ark withstand, over centuries, the constant rain of cosmic dust? Suppose, even for a day, that the gravity equalizers let go.

He shook his head at the picture of their weightless world, of the terrible vertigo death as the ship would begin to whirl, faster and faster. Of the chaos; of the floating machinery; and animals and humans, each helpless to help the other; each too sick to care.

He shut out the distressing thoughts.

"We're pioneers in space, Myra," he said now. "There are a lot of calculations which will be wrong. But, basically, we will come out all right."

"Babes in starland," Myra said. "I hope you're right."

Hammer came in. His startlingly white teeth flashed in a grin. But his words were not light.

"That Healy," he said, "he will make much trouble for us, young sar. Whatever do you suppose is wrong with our calculations?"

"We're in the grip of some power," Myra said. "If you ask me, it's Divine power. We were never intended to go to Centauri."

"Nonsense," snapped Agar. "You make it sound as though we'd just come into some kind of cosmic trap."

Hammar and Myra stared at him. Almost in unison they said:

"God may punish, but He does not set traps."

COR the next week they continued on toward Alpha Centauri without incident. There was one thing, however, plaguingly wrong. They did not appear to be any nearer their goal. The great star was not the least fraction of a glimmer nearer on the intensity meters.

"Suppose," said Myra, on duty with Agar, now in the control room deep in the bowels of the ship, "our calculations of light distances were really off. Like a thousand years?"

Agar stared at her. "A thousand years?"

"Yes. A thousand. Do you know how many generations that is?"

Agar laughed. "Too many."

"I'm serious, Ag. Do you realize what would happen to us?"

"Assuming we got past Healy and his rabble all right, why we'd be dead anway, Kitten. We'd sure be long dead if it landed a thousand years from now."

"If it landed," Myra answered. "Do you realize that there would be so many people on the Ark, life would be impossible?"

"You're talking in paradoxes," Agar said. "But the way I see it, a lot of people on this ship are impossible now."

"I mean," cut in Myra, "there are roughly three thousand generations in a thousand years. Do you realize how many people a nucleus of 10,000 can produce in three thousand generations?"

Captain Hansen came in, his thin, cold face set.

"When you talk like that," he said, "you'd better be sure the intercom is off. We can hear you all over the thirteenth level. People are jumpy enough now, as it is." He walked to a bank of instruments and flicked a switch. "Now, what about three thousand generations? There'd be so many people on the Ark they'd be crawling like lice."

"It would be impossible," Myra said, looking at the intercom switch. "It would mean that the people would have to institute some kind of exermination plan to keep the population at the 10,000 level as it is now. You know how impossible

a plan like that would be."

"So?" They said it almost together.

"So I don't think God intended us to stray from our own solar system. That's why Alpha Centauri and its worlds don't seem to get any nearer. They...they never will."

Agar flushed. "Nonsense, Myra!"

But, before he could continue, Willmut, the little round, nearsighted mathematician came in.

"Trouble?" he said. "Always trouble, yes?"

They brought him up to date on Myra's startling theory. But, if they expected him to show surprise, they were mistaken. He pursed his lips and kept nodding his head, as though he were all alone in the control room.

"Myra thinks it's God," Agar said peevishly. "She believes in such superstitious claptrap like they did back in the Black Ages."

Willmut looked at him then. Almost pityingly. "I don't know claptrap," he said softly. "I really don't know what to think any more."

"You?" Agar said. "You're the one, above all, the mathematician, who was so sure there can be no God. Good superstition to keep the people in line, you said. But, in the light of science, a ridiculous concept."

"I know," Willmut said shrugging. "But a man learns. I have been wondering. For one thing, we are definitely wrong about spatial distances. Alpha Centauri, definitely, is more than four light years away. It is many, many more light years away, I now believe."

"So?"

"So, we scientists can be wrong about God, too."

TTOUR after hour the Ark sped through black space. Anxiously now they made their four daily observations, hoping for even a fractional sign of progress, as they thought also of Healy's threat, and the rapidly dwindling days of the final week. But they were no nearer Alpha Centauri. Hammar was on duty with Agar this morning, the seventeenth day since Healy had threatened

to lead the people in mutiny.

"Any indication of any progress at all?" Agar asked.

Hammar shook his huge black, bearded head. "Not one iota, young sar. As far as we're concerned, we haven't moved an inch."

Agar shuddered as he recalled the flaming mass of atomic destruction which, now almost two years ago, they had left behind them when they had quit earth. It had been one of those lucky things. When the destruction came, they had been holding their space drill in the Ark. The thousands were inside, with the animals, going through their routine six-monthly drill.

At first he had hoped that many of the other thousands of Space Arks had escaped. But, in the two years, they had been unable to make contact with any other survivors, so he knew the others hadn't been so fortunate as they. Below him now lay a white, gleaming disk in the darkness, all that was left of a dead, seared earth.

Man, finally, had destroyed himself in his own power-lust. They had barely escaped the final chain explosions which all but tore a rent in the very earth's atmospheric envelope.

For a while they studied their charts in silence. Hammar broke it.

"Maybe we might have survived there," he said.

Agar shivered. "No. Not there. It was like leaving the wicked, burning cities of Sodom and Gommorrah. Anything is better than that. Even a thousand years in space; living and dying in space. Where there's life, there is hope. At least, we're alive."

Hammar shrugged and smiled. "Yes, young sar," he said softly. "Like a squirrel on a treadmill is alive."

TT was on the following day, however, that Hammar lifted his head from his observatory desk, littered with charts and pencilings, and said with a tired but happy smile:

"We're moving."

Agar gave a cheer. Myra, who had come in from her trick at the controls, slumped into one of the air cushions.

"Thank God," she said.

"Are you sure?" Agar asked.

"Yes, young sar," Hammar said. "We make definite progress. I'd figure now that we're no more than a half dozen light years away. For a while..." He broke off, shook his head.

The good news spread rapidly. There was dancing and singing in the streets that afternoon, and parties through the night as the thousands felt relief and immediately went about picking up the threads of their normal lives. Love, play and the self again became the centers of interest.

"Now," said one of the carpenters during a Vox Pop program, "we can raise our families. Those who wish to. It's safe, eh?"

Yes. It was safe. They were not doomed to endless space; to endless whirling with only death the ultimate; death, the end ultimately of a civilization, strangled by press of numbers in the cosmos. Even Healy stopped grumbling, and the threat of mutiny was passed.

That night, in their room, Agar hugged Myra.

"My," she said. "Such ardor." But she hugged back with considerable vigor.

"I can't help it, darlin'," Agar said. "I'd like to have a family as well as the next man. After all..."

He saw her blush, and he kissed her tenderly and so they retired, happier than they had been in many months.

The following week Hammar revised his estimate and said it would be no more than three years. Then it happened.

Svenson, a minor night-watch astrogator, came off duty, checked in at the central office. He was a big, square, unimaginative man. But he was visibly frightened. He came hurtling in, his huge, red-boned hands trembling.

"We're caught in some kind of force, sir," he reported to Agar, the officer of the day.

"Explain yourself," Agar said, thinking the man must be drunk, there being that wild light in his eyes. There was nothing worse, he thought, than a drunken Swede. He moved away from the desk, so as to have freedom of movement, so as to be ready in the event Svenson was touched with space fever.

"Something's altered our way. We're being affected by an unknown force, Svenson said.

"Have you been drinking?" Agar asked.

"No. No. For God's sake. Come ahead into the instrument room. See for yourself."

With a grunt of annoyance, Agar followed the huge Swede into one of the elevators, down past the observation level, to the control level with its smell of oil and its great whirr of gyro-compasses, stablizers and directional instruments. The beam in the radar-like direction-keeper, was fixed four degrees left. Normally it rested dead center of the dial, like an hour-hand, bisecting the face of a clock at midnight.

Agar thudded his palm against it. But the light-level remained fast, four degrees left.

"Not haywire, sir," said Svenson. "We're off course."

Agar studied the other instruments. All were four degrees off course. He reset them, but immediately they returned, like little flashes of lightning, hurrying back four degrees off the proper course.

"Something haywire with the beams," he said. "I'll have to get Hammar. Nothing to be worried about. Remain on duty till I get back."

Svenson saluted briskly, but his big, flat face said eloquently of the space fear gnawing in his heart.

"It's more than that, sir," he said. "Something. . . something's changed our course."

"Nonsense," said Agar, slamming the door.

TTAMMAR scratched at his beard. Agar and Myra frowned at the instruments; Willmut looked blank. An astronomer named Dr. Marrivale, whom Agar had brought along, because once he had expressed a theory of new dimensions being penetrable at speeds of light, was also there, looking quite excited at this chance to test his theory. All of them, including Captain Hansen, who stood stern guard at the door, stared at the perverse light flashes which, no matter what Agar did, returned immediately to four degrees left.

"I don't understand it," muttered Hammar.

Myra started to open her mouth. Agar said quickly: "Don't you start on God again, Myra."

Myra shut her mouth. Marrivale scratched at his blue jaw, said:

"You know, I've always felt there was something in space. I've had the impression repeatedly when taking pictures, that there was something there besides distances and emptiness."

"Space worms?" snapped Agar. "Like they used to write about in the Twentieth Century. You think a space worm is pulling us of course?"

Marrivale looked annoyed. "This is no time for sarcasm," he said. "There is something in space. I've always felt it. There can be no such thing as pure vacuum; pure space, with nothing in it. Here, I think, is proof."

"You're not thinking in terms of things, tampering with us, are you, Doctor?" Hammar asked.

The astronomer shook his head. "I was thinking in terms of matter. Or another dimension. We are pressing into it. It is force reacting on our force. I imagine all we'll have to do is overcompensate to the right, eight degrees and, thus, we'll run a true course."

Hammar nodded thoughtfully. "Like a man swimming a river current. To go straight across he has to swim into the current, a considerable distance north of his destination, lest he land too far south. Right?"

"Right," said Captain Hansen.

"In theory," Myra said.

Six heads swiveled and stared at her.

"Well?" It was a challenging chorus.

"What about the new dimension you mentioned, Dr. Marrivale?" Myra asked. "You expressed the opinion we may be pressing into it and, thus, were being pushed off course."

Dr. Marrivale nodded, his eyes bright with excitement.

"So," Myra continued, "if we overcompensated and succeeded in straightening our course to Centauri, we might be entering this new dimension. Then what?"

"For heaven's sake, Myra," snorted Agar. "Then what what?"

"Where would we be?"

For a moment they stared at one another. Then Captain Hansen snorted impatiently.

"Who cares," he said. "If we succeed, we'll at least not be stymied here in space the queer way we are now. New dimension, old dimension, who cares, so long as we're moving?"

"I suppose Captain Hansen's right," Dr. Marrivale said. "At least we must try it. We can't hang in space like this forever, now can we? Any moment we may penetrate this new dimension and our troubles may be over."

"That's what I'm afraid of," growled Captain Hansen.

But they all agreed. The instruments were re-set, the course re-charted and the matter, for the moment, forgotten.

But not by Myra. In the privacy of their room, she cuddled in Agar's lap, her arms around his neck and hugged him, shivering a little.

"I'm afraid," she said. "I still have the feeling that we're invading. "I'm afraid G..." she peeped at him quickly, changed it to, "something doesn't want us to go to Alpha Centauri and its planets."

Agar laughed, turned her face up, kissed lightly her eyes, her nose, then fully her lovely, soft, red lips.

"Acushla," he whispered. "You're silly. Dr. Marrivale's probably right. We're just forcing our way past a different dimension."

But she squeezed closer to him and held him all the tighter. She was now, not a scientist, but a pure, helpless, frightened woman.

The alarm came the following morning.

Hammar came off the observation bridge, his face tense, almost grey against his wild black beard.

"We're orbiting!" he cried.

Myra and Agar had just come in.

"Orbiting?" Agar gasped. "Something must have gone haywire with the atomic drive."

"Or our nice theory," said Myra, thinking God, finally, had stepped in to stop their

folly. "We... we were never intended to go to another solar system," she added impulsively. "It's God's will."

Hammar stared at her, then at Agar. Then he sat down and stared at the screens showing their progress through space. They were no longer going outward. They were circling.

jpOR a week they orbited before the panic slowly mounted to the danger point on the Star Ark. Then Healy became aware of it, and peace could no longer be kept on the lower residential sections.

"It is the hand of Doom," the crowds cried. "We are lost! We have become a satellite, doomed to whirl in space 1"

Extra police were sworn in. Young men, strong and ruthless. They patrolled the streets in pairs, for a kind of crazy revelry had sprung out among the thousands of people.

"It's the end of the world!" cried the revelers. "Today we live, tomorrow we die! Live and be merry while you mayl"

And there came debauchery; rape and robbery, all in the little world as it spun, two light years from Earth, describing an everlasting ellipse around the Sun and its planets, so that they could stare out at any time and see the Solar System they had left behind them, like a sparking, nine-faceted jewel, spinning around their sun, with darkness everywhere around them.

For a week there was this mental chaos. Then the police got control by deputizing still more men and even women, and the frantic space madness ended, and the thousands suddenly began to flock to the churches and pray. * i

"Oh, Father in Heaven," they, who had not prayed in years, now prayed. "Have pity on our immortal souls. Take us, when the time comes, into Thy Mansion."

"The Lord," said the priests and ministers and rabbis, "is the Father of our Souls. In His Home there are many Mansions. The good, the just, will be taken into these Mansions."

And so, gradually from extreme debauchery, to extreme religious fervor, the lives of

thousands turned and twisted and bowed like reeds in a gale.

The scientists, however, continued their feverish quest for reasons.

"Why," said Hammar, "should we suddenly be orbiting? Our atomic drive is going as strong as ever. Our atomic pile will continue to drive us thousands of years, if necessary. But..." Helplessly he shrugged, stared out at the velvet blackness which now never changed, with the Earth and Sun and Mars and Saturn and Neptune and Mercury spinning past below them, ever there.

Willmut studied the skies and shook his head.

"A vacuum trap, perhaps," he said.

"What," asked Agar, "is a vacuum trap?"

Willmut looked at him hopelessly. "I don't know," he said.

After they had been orbiting a full month, a kind of lassitude came over them. They gave up. They were like people who faced doom so long that it no longer had the power to terrify them.

They went about their work, as though nothing had happened. Nobody wanted to think of the future; to look ahead; to plan. The most terrible part of it was the fact that no longer did anyone want to plan. They were alive. That was all that mattered. Nothing hurt them. Even Healy's attempts to lead them to mutiny fell flat.

Myra had noticed it, and brought it up to Agar in their room while at dinner one evening.

"Yes," agreed Agar. "That's the worst part When human beings stop looking ahead, stop planning, even revolting, they ... they're nothing."

Myra nodded. Silently they ate their dinner. Silently they sat and read. But there no longer was pleasure in reading. They tried their TV. The entertainment from the central station, however, was listless. Even boring. The actors, the humorists, went through their lines like horses drawing, wearily, their plows.

So they shut that off and, silently, went to bed, feeling neither fear, nor joy nor expectation. And that was the

worst feeling, worst of all.

"I feel," Myra said, pulling up the covers, "like the living dead."

Agar shuddered at the picture, for it was one which he had had that very moment. He kissed her. "Good night," he said. And he sought escape desperately in sleep.

^S the days and weeks passed, it became very clear that there was, definitely, some force in space; that they were maintaining their endless orbit, and that no matter what they did with their machines and atomic drives and their mathematics, one thing remained constant: They orbited.

One night, as she sat at the controls, staring out into the velvet, dazzling darkness around her, Myra said, as though talking to herself:

"It's God's way of showing us he doesn't want us out here."

"For heaven's sake," Agar said. "You on that track again."

"Oh," gasped Myra. "You startled me. I didn't hear you come in." She rose and gripped his arms excitedly. "Think about it, Ag. Please. Doesn't it strike you as right? It must be the answer. We... we're just not intended to hop from one solar system to another. Perhaps God has other kinds of civilizations in His House. Remember the Scripture, in which He said: 'In My Father's House, there are many Mansions'."

Agar shook his head, kissed her lightly. "That's exactly why I think you're wrong," he said. "If He had so many Mansions, why can't He spare one for us now?"

Myra looked at him, but her mind was light years away. "On Earth people had mansions," she said. "Millions of mansions. That didn't mean that you and I could just run into one of them and say to the owners, 'Hey, move over. We're taking over.' Did it?"

"That's hardly a fair analogy-"

"Why isn't it? Why should we be able to leave our world and invade another? Maybe the people aren't at all like us? Maybe we would, eventually, hurt them; destroy them, or they us."

"So? Is that something new?" he said, thinking of the burning world they had left.

"So, we're one form of life. Out there may be another. We are all intended to work out our own salvation. We are not intended to barge in on another culture's living. I think we should go back to our own solar system."

"Really," said Agar. "Back to dead Earth? Or Saturn, and its impossible temperatures? Back to Neptune, and its atmosphere of ice? Back to Mars and its red sand and airlessness? Back to Venus and its quaking, hot unformed bogs? Back to Jupiter, where you would weigh 500 pounds and be unable to lift your arm? Back to where, Myra? Where?"

"Back to Earth. It's been two years. Perhaps the radiation . . ."

"Back to nothing," Agar snapped. "We're people. We go forward. We do not go backward. Seriously, I think we'll discover soon enough what's wrong with our machines, and then we'll be winging straight for Centauri and new worlds. Besides, in two years the radiation from the B Bombs would be as deadly as the day they exploded."

Myra shook her head. "They can't fix the Ark," she said. "I know what's wrong."

Agar gave an exasperated, explosive bark. "And I suppose you know how to fix it, too?"

"Yes," said Myra calmly.

"How?"

"Prayer. We scientists haven't prayed in years. We might try prayer."

OUT if Myra prayed, nothing came of it. Nothing seemed to work. Steadily they continued to orbit. Then, early of an evening in April, the night observer, came into the observatory, looking beat and bewildered.

"We're tightening our orbit," he reported.

And so they were. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the great Star Ark tightened her orbit. Slowly, imperceptibly, she came backward in space, although all the atomic reactors were forward at full thrust.

The mech crews worked at the puzzle immediately. But they could discover nothing

wrong and, although the leaders tried to keep it secret from the crowds, lest they cause, this time, full, unreasoning panic, the word, somehow, got out.

The masses gathered in the skyless streets, angry, frightened knots of men; shrilling groups of women; taunting gangs of children. The police guard was doubled and a day and night patrol of the streets set. Only those in the rural sectors, far in the lower levels of the great Star Ark, made no to-do about it. The farmers calmly tended to their farms, to their cattle, their sheep, hogs, cows and steers and chickens and, generally, held themselves aloof from the industrialists, the factory workers, the city crowds.

It reminded Agar greatly of how it had been on the late Earth. The farmer, secure in his land, was the last to become shrill and excited.

Mayor Healy, however, came to the Observatory, followed by a half dozen wild-eyed ward-heelers.

"We're going back to Earth!" he cried. "Why?"

Myra and Agar were in the room, along with Hammar and Captain Hansen. They looked to Hammar, the senior physicist. He spread his hands, frowned at the instruments which continued steadily to show their backward spiral through space.

"I don't know," he said gravely. "Believe me. It's nothing we... want. It's something happening. We're studying it. We'll find the trouble, then..."

"It's a trick!" yelled one of the ward-heelers. "You're planning to drop us on a dead earth, then take off again."

He rushed at Hammar. Agar stepped in between, saw the unreasoning madness in the man's eyes, and hit him a sharp, hard right cross on the chin. The man reeled back into the arms of his comrades.

"Assault, too!" cried Healy.

"Please," said Hammar quietly. "There's no point in becoming hysterical about something which, at the moment, we do not understand. No one has any intention of stranding anybody back on Earth and taking off again.

Why? Whatever gave you such an idea?"

The men stared at their Mayor. He stepped forward then, somewhat mollified and shrugged, a little bewilderedly.

"It's the talk in the streets, sir," he said, the hysteria out of his voice, the whine of the seeking politicain back in. "Rumor that you scientists discovered something out in space that's too good for the common run. So..."

"That's crazy," gasped Myra. "I never heard such a crazy thing. We're all people. One great family. Why, we're the future of civilization."

Healy licked his lips, stared at her. The men behind him grumbled. One of them spoke up.

"Suppose we keep going back down," he said. "Soon we'll be back on Earth. It's dead. Destroyed. What will happen to us?"

Hammar frowned. He'd wondered about that himself. As it stood now, that was exactly what was going to happen. In another month, in his calculations, they would be entering the Earth's atmosphere. Then what? He did not know.

"I don't know," he said finally. "We've been gone almost two years. Perhaps the radiations have lost enough intensity so we can begin rebuilding, if such a thing comes to pass."

"Radiation keeps up for hundreds of years," Healy said, jumping upon this flaw in Hammar's reasoning. "Sometimes maybe thousands. I wouldn't know. But I know a couple years wouldn't make no difference. We'll be doomed down there."

The angry rumble started at his back again. Agar swore then. He was getting angrier by the minute at the senseless argument, for every second was needed for clear thinking, not argument, to find out where the flaw entered into the ship's drive.

"Get the hell out of here!" he yelled. "Damn every last one of you. Get out! We've got enough on our minds now, without every weak-minded politician in the colony breaking in here, disrupting our w©xk, taking up our time!"

Ha seized Healy and hustled

him roughly to the door. He was surprised to find that the big, soft man went without trouble, and that his satellites followed docilely.

"There," he said, slamming the door and dusting his hands. "Now what do we do?"

Hammar stared at him. Captain Hansen, who had not said a word, looked at Myra. Then all of them looked at him and shook their heads helplessly.

"COR the next two weeks, as the great ship continued to orbit toward Earth and, as the Solar System grew larger and larger on the screens, rioting began to take place in the streets. It extended down to the farm area and the police shut off the farm level from the others after locking up the raiders. Then, systematically, they isolated the scientists' level; closed the schools, threw a strong guard around the central hospital, and pneumatically closed off the machine rooms in the very depths of the sphere, and in the quarters of the upper echelon scientists.

And so, with life boiling and seething within its gigantic metallic shell, the Star Ark continued to tighten in toward the Earth.

Agar watched the flat, white disk draw closer in the spatial darkness.

"Whatever could have happened, Myra?" he asked. "We were going along so fine. Speed of light. Man's greatest achievement. Nearly two years in space and...Poof! There we stood!"

Myra nodded. She was making calculations.

"I'll have to take over the orbit braking tomorrow," she said.

Agar looked at the figures, groaned. "Then it's just about over," he said.

Myra nodded. But, where he looked worried and drawn and on edge, she tried to appear confident. She put an arm around him, kissed his cheek lightly.

"Don't worry, Darlin'," she crooned. "If we'd been intended to reach Centauri and whatever worlds it holds, we wouldn't have been stalled in mid-space as it were. I'm convinced that was Divine intervention."

Agar shook his head impatiently.

"For God's sake, Myra. Can't you stop sounding like ...like the clergy? Don't you realize what's happening to us, having to come back to Earth, with no choice?" He hammered one fist into the other, rose and walked around the observatory, making faces at nothing, muttering. Suddenly he stopped and stared at her. "Why the Earth?" he asked. "Why not the sun, with its infinitely greater mass? Why are we being drawn out of space by the Earth?"

Myra shuddered at the thought. "Don't question Providence, dear," she said. "We'd be consumed like a gnat before we got within a million miles of the Sun."

"Of course, I am wondering now how does the Earth's feeble gravitational pull keep us from plunging into the Sun, with its enormous pulling force?"

Myra did not answer. She continued her figures. "We'll have to brake orbit for a week, as far as I can figure, before our speed will be down enough to let us settle nomally."

Agar groaned. "One mistake," he said, "and we can burn up like tinder doing that, too."

"We won't burn up, Darling," Myra said. "We're going to dive into the Earth's atmosphere and right out again after a very few seconds. We'll keep that up until friction slows us. Then it'll be over. And I'll be glad."

Agar stopped pacing, stared at her quizzically. "You sound as though you're happy about the whole deal. Do you know something I don't?"

Myra nodded. "Come here, honey," she said.

Puzzled, he came and sat beside her. She took his big hands in her warm, small ones, and squeezed and rubbed them.

"Do you remember when we stopped making progress?" she asked.

Agar nodded.

"We lay in the same spot in space for weeks. As though a great will held up there by some kind of celestial hypnosis."

"Myra."

"Well, that's the way it seemed to me. Then, suddenly we began to orbit."

"Of course," Agar said with impatience. He made to rise, but she drew him back.

"Please," she said, "I want to get about it my own way. We'd been orbiting for several weeks, right?"

"Yes. Yes, yes, yes. For heaven's sake, if you want to tell me something, tell me. Don't drag it out like this."

"All right, Ag. I became convinced then that there was a Will, a Being, and He didn't want us to go farther. So I... Please don't be angry with me, Ag. Promise?"

"For heaven's sake, Myra! You can be the most exasperating. . ."

"I then set the Star Ark's course back toward Earth," Myra said.

Agar rose as though he had been stabbed. "You what?"

"On my trick of duty, I carefully reset the course back to Earth."

Agar stared at her aghast. Anger suddenly burned in his eyes. He took a step forward then, suddenly, stopped and slumped hopelessly, wearily into the seat before the screen on which Earth now was a gigantic orange with black ecrustations and mysterious crater-like valleys.

"My wife," he muttered. "My own wife. Do you realize what you've done to us; to every man, woman and child, yes, to every animal on this ship?" He stared at her in disbelief. "Back to a dead world. Myra, do you realize what that means? As surely as though you had set off a bomb under each one of us, you've doomed civilization!"

"Please, Ag! You don't understand. You've got it all wrong. According to the Fitzgerald Contraction..."

She never had a chance to finish what she had intended to say. Police Captain Hansen burst into the observatory, cold anger in his flat eyes.

"So, you tampered with the Ark!" he cried. "Set the course back to a dead earth, jeopardizing every living thing aboard. Mrs. Agar...No... Stay where you are, Agar." He drew a paralyzing needle gun. "This woman is mad. I'm

sorry, I have a duty to do. She must be jugged, until the scientists can undo the harm she's done."

Agar threw a startled glance at the open intercom switch, and cursed his carelessness. He could never seem to remember to shut the thing off when they spoke of confidential things. He launched himself at the big, purposefully advancing police chief.

"Run, Myra," he cried, realizing in that instant, the significance of the. Fitzgerald Contraction. "Lock yourself in the control room. You can hold out there until the Ark's back on Earth. I'll hold Hansen off..

"Stop!" shouted Captain Hansen, bringing his gun up as Myra, with a sob, ran for the door.

Agar sprang quickly in between, then he was at grips with the big police chief and in an instant Myra was gone, speeding down the corridor to the elevators.

"Help!" bellowed Captain Hansen. "Mutiny!"

But Myra was already gone.

JN the control room Myra relieved an assistant astrogator.

"You can leave now," she said.

He rose from his instruments in surprise. "But, you're early. There's still four hours on my trick."

"Now," said Myra, taking out a ray gun and pointing it bravely, although, under her tunic, her knees shook and she hoped he could not hear them, for to her they sounded like Spanish castanets.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, getting up with alacrity and leaving in bewildered retreat.

Myra closed the pneumolatch, set the vault-like bars n place, then returned to her nstruments and set the brakng rockets to assist the ship's)raking orbit, for time was iow of the essence lest they >urn away the door and stop icr.

It was imperative to land on larth as quickly as possible.

"Dear God," she prayed, etting the great ship into a eep dive into the atmosphere, guide me."

Dive after dive she made

into the atmosphere blanket and slowly the speed of the ship came down until it registered in Mach numbers. When it was down to Mach 12, the hammering and pounding came on the door and she could hear the clamor and yelling of the crowd outside.

"Open up!" yelled Mayor Healy. "You're under arrest!"

But Myra maneuvered the giant ball, calculating her distances, her speed, watching the Mach needle drop to 10, then 9...8...6...

She heard then the hiss of torches, cutting with their minor explosions into the alloy door. She pressed a button and the great periscope eyes opened. But it was night, and there was nothing outside to see. Mist and clouds swirled past, however, giving her hope.

She watched the Mach needle. Five. ..three...

Ssss went the torch and, with a sudden roar of heat, it cut through a section of the door. The roar of the crowd came through. Angry, mad, senseless, demanding her death.

"Kill her! She's crazy! She doomed us! Kill her!"

Ssss went the torches, attacking another section of the door.

"Please God," Myra prayed. "Another five minutes."

The Mach needle dropped to 2... 1. It clicked at Zero. She checked the altitude then. Forty-one thousand feet. She checked the location. The Star Ark was somewhere over the mountains of eastern Turkey.

Her heart hammering, she feathered the gigantic space ball down toward Earth. Nowhere was there a sign of life. There was no light in the darkness. Clouds continued to mist past, looking yellow and sickly in the periscope screep.

Then, as the torches again exploded through in a blaze of heat, and shower of burning carbon, and a big section of the steel door fell aside and clanged on the floor, the Star Ark settled with a jar, teetered a moment, like a ball on a pedestal, then lay still.

In rushed Captain Hansen, followed by Hammar and Agar and Mayor Healy. Behind them police tried to hold back

a screaming, clawing, fear-mad crowd.

Agar reached her first. He seized a ray gun from the navigation desk and leveled it at the surging crowd.

"Back!" he cried. "We're landed, and everyone's still alive. There's an explanation. Let Myra explain!"

A roar went up, in which his words were lost. But then Captain Hansen's bull voice rose above it.

"Quiet! At least, we can give her a chance before we put her in irons for trial!"

SLOWLY the rumble subsided and, while the people watched, bug-eyed, straining at the police cordon, and Willmut and Hammar and the other scientists listened curiously, Myra explained her decision to return to Earth after they had been stymied for weeks in the cosmos.

"I felt then," she continued, "we weren't intended to go farther out there."

"But back here?" Hammar said rather kindly. "Child. Why here? To a dead world. Dear me, we daren't even open the vents. The radiations after two years would be as strong as they ever were."

"Not two years, Professor," Myra said. "Two thousand."

"What?"

The rumble ceased in a kind of shocked silence, and all eyes centered on her.

"Two thousand years," Myra repeated. "You've all forgotten Fitzgerald's Contraction."

Hammar gasped. Willmut blinked. Healy looked puzzled.

"What's Fitzgerald's Contraction?" grumbled Captain Hansen.

"The speed of light theory," Hammar said quickly, clucking to himself, as a man will at discovering his own stupidity, or thoughtlessness. "Two mathematicians, Lorentz and Fitzgerald had a concept that as an object approaches the the speed of light, it diminishes in the direction in which it was traveling."

"So?" said Healy, more puzzled than ever.

"It means," said Willmut, the mathematician, eyeing Myra with open admiration, "that while we thought we

were two years in space, we actually were closer to two thousand. Einstein also reasoned that light is the ultimate speed. Then, as you reach it, you must become, virtually, motionless. So, once we reached that speed, we thought in terms of minutes and hours and days. But months and years were flashing past."

"Rot!" snapped Healy. "Boubletalk to save the girl. All these scientists stick together like beer collectors."

The crowd began to shuffle and mutter uneasily, testing the strength of the police cordon.

"She's doomed us. Every last one of us!" a voice yelled. "Kill her!"

The cordon bent under the answering pressure but, with the help of the menacing ray gun in Agar's hand, managed to hold.

"Wait!" cried Myra, "I'll prove we're safe. Bring one of the doves up here."

This was done and Myra took the soft, white, frightened bird and cooed to it a moment, stroking its soft, bobbing head. Then she walked to one of the space-jeep chutes beside the periscope and gripped the level which would open the chute to Earth atmosphere.

"Don't!" cried Healy. "The radiations. Seize her!" But nobody moved.

"After two thousand years?" Myra said.

Contemptuously she pulled the lever. Then she released the dove. It fluttered a moment over their heads, then it flew straight into the gleaming chute and vanished.

Air, sweet, cool, slightly damp, rushed into the room. Air which they had, not breathed in two years. For a moment the crowd jammed there in surprised silence. Then they deafened themselves with hysterical hurrahs.

"Air!" they cried. "Clean, fresh Earth air!"

For a moment the control room rang with their jubilation. Then, suddenly, something fluttered far out in the chute. Those nearest fell silent and, with fear clutching their hearts, watched the strange, staggering progress of

the thing which, they recognized, was the dove.

Myra, too, felt a stab of fear. Dear God, she thought, what has happened to it? Was I, after all, wrong? Was there, after all, so much radiation that...

Then the bird floundered into the room. It was only then that they saw the large olive sprig in its bill, so large that it had difficulty flying a true course.

Madness broke the tension. "The Earth lives!" the crowd cried. "The Earth lives! Hurrah for Myra! Hurrah for Myra! Hurrah for Myra!"

"Miraculous," breathed Hammar, his black eyes bright. "You, young sar, have a most remarkable wife."

Myra pointed to the landing chart with a smile. Agar kissed her, then bent to look where on the map she was pointing. He gasped.

"Mount Ararat! We're on top of Mount Ararat!"

"The Ark," said Mayor Healy with awe. "We're the second Ark."

"Hallelujah!" cried someone. Then the chant was taken up, and, as one, they sank to their knees, the scientists, the farmers, the technicians, the plain workers, and for the first time prayed as one with a new understanding.

THE END

A PLANET ALL MY OWN

by RICHARD F. WATSON

illustrated, by ORBAN

The planet that George **won** in **a** lottery had **never been** settled. It was a virgin world, and he believed **he** was alone *on* it — until he began to have those odd visions

(T^EORGE Marks hadn't expected to become sole owner of a planet, that day. He hadn't been expecting much of anything to happen to him. The television set was turned on, though. And suddenly he heard the voice of the announcer say:

"I hope you have your vidset tuned in to this channel today, Mr. George Marks. I really do. Because this is your lucky day."

George Marks glanced up from his reverie in surprise when he heard his name mentioned. *Did he say me?* Ever since his mother had died, he had only half-watched the television set, keeping a perfunctory eye on the parade of moving images while letting his mind dwell constantly on the great lonely gulf that had suddenly opened out before him: the dull prospect of living out the forty or fifty years remaining to him all alone.

Without his mother.

"Yes, Mr. Marks," the announcer continued, a foolish grin on his face. He was looking earnestly at the camera as if for all the world he were talking directly to George. "The winner of the 2194 Grand Lottery is none other than— yourself!"

George Marks gasped. He reddened slowly as he realized it was no dream. He had won.

Every year he had taken a

Lottery ticket, just as a matter of course; everyone buys one. In '83 he had been the winner of a ten-thousandth prize, and he and his mother had taken a week's vacation, expenses paid, on the pleasure-world of Sidella.

Six years later, in '89, he had been successful again, this time taking twelve-thousandth prize, and they had given him a free Solar System tour for two. But all the other years he had regularly put down his three credits for a ticket, and just as regularly failed to place. He figured two Lottery wins were all he would ever get.

The announcer went on, "As you know, the identity of the Grand Prize is revealed only when the winner is announced. And this year's Grand Prize—hold your hat, Mr. Marks, if you're tuned in—is —holding your hat?—a small, uninhabited, lovely little Earth-type planet in the Procyon system! Did you hear that, Mr. Marks? A planet all your own!"

A *planet all my own!* George ^^ thought. If only my mother *could*— He cut the thought off before it had begun. *I have to learn to stop thinking about her.*

He tried to concentrate on what the announcer was saying.

"Here's some background on our lucky winner, ladies and gentlemen. George Marks is 36, unmarried, and lives with his mother in Appalachia North. He's employed as a clerk in the Appalachia North General Consumer's Bank, and has previously won in the Grand Lottery in 2183 and 2189, so he's no stranger to good fortune! Mr. Marks, if you'll stop in at the nearest Lottery Office first thing tomorrow, all arrangements for enabling you to visit your private planet will be made.

"And now on to the second prize winner. Hang on to your stubs, because—"

Marks snapped off the set and leaned back, contemplating the swinging pendulum of the antique Swiss clock on the wall. The clock read 8:03, automatically he translated from the old-fashioned system of reckoning, and saw that it was now exactly 20:03, Appalachia Standard Time.

King George the First. He liked the sound of that. So he had won a small, uninhabited planet in the Procyon system, eh? Probably a planet that was overflowing with fertility.

For the first time since his mother's death, George felt a sense of strength and independence. He decided to become a farmer; he would move immediately to his new planet (unlike most of the first prize winners, who usually sold their winnings at once) and live there, majestically, alone. Certainly, George thought, it was infinitely better to live alone as a king on a planet of Procyon than alone as a bank clerk on Earth!

He would be a pioneer. He would build a house, plow his land, swim and fish, make his own schedules and live as he pleased. Life suddenly had some meaning again for him.

Accepting the prize meant, of course, that he would no longer be able to visit his mother's grave. But she would understand, he thought. Briefly, he considered the idea of taking her along with him and reburying her on his new planet, but he dismissed the thought as being both impractical and a little grotesque.

The phone rang. In all probability it was someone from the bank, or maybe one of his mother's old friends, calling up to congratulate him. Or perhaps it was just some crank, one of those strange people who loved phoning up new celebrities and talking to them. George let it ring. He didn't want any congratulations, and he didn't want to talk to any cranks.

He busied himself by writing down a list of the things he would take with him. Household effects, books, equipment necessary to build a new life on the new planet.

The planet would need a name, too, George thought. Procyon VI is a bit cold and empty as a name. His mother's name? No, George thought, shaking his head. A planet named Frieda just doesn't sound right.

The list grew and grew, until finally the little old clock signalled 11:00, which George translated out to its modern equivalent of 23:00. Time for bed. He slept uneasily, tossing and turning and dreaming of

the new life that lay ahead for him.

In the morning, he visited the Lottery Office, identified himself, and made the necessary arrangements. They bustled around and caused a tremendous fuss after he told them, "I'm George Marks," and he was a little annoyed by that. But everything was straightened out without too much confusion, and they booked reservations for him on an out-bound space-liner, departing in a week.

He phoned the bank and told them he was quitting. They didn't seem to imply he was indispensable. Then he notified a couple of his relatives that he was leaving Earth for good. The week passed, and departure time came.

There was some trouble getting the spaceline to transport everything George wanted to take, but the Lottery people were very accomodating about paying the extra costs. On the morning of blastoff, George made a last trip to his mother's grave, where a nasty scene developed when some press photographers tried to get shots of him paying his last farewell. He pushed his way angrily through them and headed straight for the spaceport.

No one was on hand to see him off.

I_TE spent most of the week-long trip trying to figure out names for his new planet, and gave up finally. Procyon VI would have to do.

Landing-day came. The air was fresh and clean on his private planet; he stood by the spaceship, drawing in deep breaths. The planet was, indeed, Earth-type—smaller than Earth, but with greater density, so that the gravity was still approximately 1G. The oxygen-nitrogen atmospheric ratio was a good one, about 71-21, and the land was fertile and heavily vegetated.

"Would have made a fine little world for a colony," remarked one of the crewmen of the ship that had brought George out.

"Would have," said another. "Except the Lottery people claimed it first."

George admitted that it *would* have been a good colony-world—but, of course, it was his now. The Lottery had seen

to that. And because the Lottery was just about the most powerful single force on Earth —over a billion people bought at least one three-credit ticket every year—once the Lottery had picked the little planet for its prize, there wasn't much anyone could do about it.

The men from the spaceship helped George set up his prefabricated home in a couple of hours (he had long ago given up the idea of building one.) Then they made sure George's radio was working.

"There's a colony on Procyon II, in case you get lonely," they told him.

"Don't worry about that," he said. He assured them that he had no possible desire for company—he had been telling them that since the voyage began, to their increasing displeasure—and, with some relief, they blasted off, leaving George sitting amid a heap of packing cases outside his house.

He looked around at the planet that was all his.

He had put the house down at a natural clearing by the side of a small but swift stream, a hundred yards or so from a thickly-vegetated jungle. The planetary survey people had assured him that the planet was inhabited only by a few insignificant species of small animals and some fish—no large animal life at all. He was planning to live off his hunting and farming, once his supply of synthetics ran out.

He stood surveying the beauty of the wild, unspoiled planet for a few minutes. He felt younger and stronger already.

Time to get down to work, he thought.

T_JE began by owning the packing-case nearest to him. He found the little folding bed he had brought along, lifted it out of the case, and dragged it through the door of his prefabricated dwelling. Working quickly, he assembled it in one corner of the room he decided would be his bedroom. Then he went back outside for the next item.

As he stepped across the threshold, he was startled to hear a pleasant voice call to him, breaking the placid silence.

"George? Come here, George," the voice said, in a sensuous purr.

Slowly, only partly believing, George turned. A bolt of shock ran through him. He felt numb with astonishment. He saw what seemed to be a lovely female figure stretched out in the soft grass about twenty yards away from him.

She was beckoning to him.

Hallucination, he thought. *I'm having an hallucination. Maybe it's something in the atmosphere.*

He walked closer to investigate, chewing nervously at his lips. He stared at the languorous figure before him. The girl was blonde, and young, and well-built; she looked almost like Miss Robbins who worked at the bank, except that her hair was blonder, her bosom was bosomier, and her teeth were straight and even and brightly white, unlike Miss Robbins'.

"I'm so glad you're here, George," the figure murmured, wriggling voluptuously. "I've been waiting *so* long for you."

George stared at her as if she were a snake about to strike. She beckoned with her arms; he drew so close he could detect the aroma of her gentle perfume, could see the color of her lovely eyes—

One was blue, one was brown.

The instant he noticed the discrepancy, the brown eye immediately turned blue.

He noticed she did not seem to be breathing. At once, her breasts began to rise and fall visibly.

There was a fairly strong breeze blowing down out of the forest, but her hair remained as motionless as if it were made of copper wire. As George observed this, her hair began to stir with the wind.

"Come here, George," she said, and the raw appeal in her voice was hard to resist.

But he cautiously moved a few feet back instead. There were legends of this sort of thing—sirens, space loreleis. Strange extra-terrestrial monsters that could cast telepathic projections capable of luring unsuspecting Earthmen to their dooms.

None of these legends had ever been documented; they were only fantastic tales told by grizzled space-hands. George felt a sudden hot burst of anger that this should hap-

pen to him, on his planet, the planet he had been told was uninhabited, the planet that was his kingdom, his own private world.

"George? Why don't you come here?"

The figure stretched, leaned back, almost writhed with impatience.

"You're a monster!" George said.

A vivid picture leaped into his mind of some gray reptilian thing, oozing up out of the ground, with a horde of fleshy squid-like tentacles and great bulging eyes, with the stale coffin-smell of an incredibly ancient being from some far star.

The girl suddenly melted and the monster he had pictured took shape before his eyes, in every vivid detail. His reaction was instantaneous and instinctive.

"Help me, Mother!" he yelled, closing his eyes and throwing his arm in front of his face. "Mother!"

WfHEN he opened his eyes again the monster had vanished, and yet another figure had taken its place. His mother.

She stood there, smiling sweetly, wearing the old lavender dress his mother had worn just before her death. Her hair was slightly disarranged, as usual, and she looked amused and peeved all at once. Altogether, it was a perfect likeness of the old woman.

George stared, feeling a mixture of terror and bitter rage, and then broke and ran for the doorway of his house.

"George, dear! Why are you running away from me?"

George dashed through the open doorframe of the house—he hadn't attached the door yet—and fumbled through the opened packing-case until he located the Webley adjustable aperture blaster he had stowed there.

He widened it to lethal range and returned to the doorway. The image of his mother was standing there.

"Let me come in, George," it said. "I'll help you unpack your things."

She smiled again. *It was her voice,* George thought. *Her voice exactly.* He shivered and shook at the sight of his mother came to life again.

II2 said coldly, "Get away

or I'll shoot. Go on. Back up or I'll blast you, whatever you are."

He gestured with the Webley, and drew his finger tighter on the stud. He wondered for a wild moment if the figure might actually be his mother; she had said to him, on her deathbed, "I'll always be with you, George, darling. Always. Wherever you go, your old mother will protect you and love you."

But then he remembered the lovely beckoning girl with the mismatched eyes, and the monster, and jolted back to reality.

"Get back into your own form or I'll cook you," he called out.

He pulled the trigger back tighter, tighter, wondering what would happen when the searing beam of the Webley shot out and blasted the old lavender dress and the crinkly lace around her throat, and then wondering if he would be able to shoot at the figure at all, even though his mind knew it was not his mother but only a blasphemous copy picked from his brain.

He broke into a sweat and started to draw back the trigger. At the last second, the form of his mother swirled and changed.

U"yOU win," said a tiny, wizened, rubbery, gnome-like figure. It was roughly humanoid in shape, with a pair of thick, long, powerful-looking arms and a subsidiary pair beneath them, much thinner, culminating in delicate tapering fingers. "You would never have shot at the mother-image anyway, but I decided I'd save you the trouble of trying. This is my real form. Can 1 come inside, now?"

"No," George said tensely. "You stay out there where you are, and tell me what you want. How do I know if this is your true form?"

"You'll just have to take my word, I suppose," the alien being said. "But look: I drew the other three forms right out of your mind, didn't I? What was the first thing on your mind? Admit it? That girl from the bank, Miss Robbins."

"No, I—"

"Don't deny it. You didn't picture her too clearly, though, which is why I botched some of the details. Then you

thought of that monster, clear and vivid, and I produced that image. And finally you called on your mother, and I turned into her. But this is a new form. You didn't have anything like this shape on your mind, did you?"

"No," George admitted. He was getting over his initial fear. "What do you want?"

The little old creature sat down on the edge of a packing case.

"Why don't you put your gun away first? I don't mean to harm you, George. Quite the opposite, really. Believe me. I only want your love. That's why I took the first shape. The monster was an accident. I want you to love me, and I want to love you. Please believe me, George. Please."

George licked his lips. "This is fantastic," he said, stepping warily out of the doorframe. "Explain yourself. Who are you, where do you come from, what do you want? Quickly and concisely, or I'll blast you."

"You know you don't mean that, George. I see it in your mind; you're just saying that to be brave."

It was true. Having the creature peering into his mind irked him. "Speak up," he said. "Who are you?"

UT'LL tell you. I've been living on this little planet for centuries, or maybe millenia," said the strange creature in a tired voice. "My race discovered the secret of immortality ages ago, and I was stranded here more years ago than I can remember, unable to reach a rescue party."

"You're telepathic. Couldn't you call for help?"

"It only works over short distances. I've lost all hopes of ever being found. My people come from far off—too far off for you to know what star I mean. It's been very lonely here, and I've had a lonely life. My people voluntarily gave up childbearing when our planet began to get overpopulated—immortality and children don't go together on a small world. I don't know what it is to love, or to be loved. And I'm an old woman, George, old and terribly lonely."

"You're a *woman?"* He stared at the small, gnarled, green-skinned body. "A woman?"

"Yes," the alien said. "A functional female. But an old one, George. And when you landed I saw how lonely you were, and I wanted to help you. We need each other, George. Can't you see how badly we need each other?"

While he watched she wavered, flickered, and turned back into the image of his mother for a moment. She reached out a wrinkled hand to him.

"Accept me this way, George. Pretend that I'm your mother, come back to life again. After a while, you know, the pretense will become reality. We can live together the way we did in the old days, with the little old clock on the wall and the bridge game after dinner , every night and—"

"K^ep out of my mind!" he shouted. He drew the blaster again. "The answer is no!"

A wave of fear went through him. The alien was surely dangerous, whatever its—her—story. He had heard all the old tales of the incubi of space which lure men into yielding up their minds to them.

He fired a blaster shot suddenly at the little alien, but she leaped nimbly to one side.

"You won't be able to hit me," she said, taking once again his mother's shape. "I'm telepathic, remember. I can always see one step ahead of you."

"Get away from here."

"Why do you fear me, George? Let me be your mother. I'll always be with you, George, darling. Wherever you go, your old mother will protect you and love you. Always. I still mean that."

"No!" he screamed. He fired again, and a third time, but both shots were wide of the mark.

"I'm going to leave you now," she told him. "But I'll be back, when you need me. I'll always be with you, George, darling. Always."

EORGE stood watching the figure of his mother stride off into the alien jungle. She walked with all her old jauntiness. It was all he could do to force himself to remember that it was not his mother but a weird star-born creature out there.

When she was out of sight,

he let himself sink limply down onto a packing case until the tension drained out of him. After a while, he got the radio going, and tuned in on the Procyon II operator. Suddenly, he was very glad that there was another human-inhabited world in the same system as his prize planet.

"Procyon II. Who's calling, please?"

He explained who he was, and what he was doing on Procyon VI. Then he went on to explain in detail the nature of his predicament.

"What's that?" the operator said. "Mindreading extra-terrestrial? No such thing."

"Look," George said, "I didn't ask for your opinion. I just want you to arrange for a ship to be sent out to get me off this planet before something happens to me. There's a dangerous alien roaming around near here, and I'm in a serious position."

"All right," came the bored voice of the operator. "I'll see to it that the authorities are notified, and they'll have a rescue ship sent out as soon as possible. It may take a little while. We're a bit shorthanded just now ourselves. Over and out."

The contact broke. George held the dead transmitter for a moment, then thoughtfully replaced it on its hook. He looked around.

There was no point in further unpacking, he decided, staring glumly at the packing cases. He would return to Earth, sell the planet—he would have been happier if he had done that in the first place, he realized—and retire on the money he would get. He would forget all thoughts of leaving Earth. Let someone else come out here and play with this maternal monster.

In the meantime, though, he had a grave problem on his hands. It might be a day or two before the Procyon II people sent out their rescue ship. Maybe it would be even longer than that. He set to work putting up defenses against the alien, in case he had to hold out for any great length of time.

He dug a pit and started to conceal it with leaves and branches that he gathered at the edge of the clearing. He hoped the alien was not listen-

ing to his mind as he worked. And then he realized the futility of trying to decoy a telepathic alien into the pit, and gave up. He stopped digging and tried to think of other means he could use for defense.

There was no way of setting up an electrified barrier, which seemed to him the most efficient way of keeping the alien away. He realized that constant vigilance would be his only means of safety.

He arranged his packing cases in a ring around his door as a next best resort, and sat behind them, holding his blaster ready to fire. The only thing he could think of was to sit tight without sleeping until the rescue ship arrived.

Once during the next day George saw the figure of his mother looking at him sadly from the edge of the clearing. She said something to him, as if in reproach, but he was unable to hear it, only to see her lips move.

He unleashed a bolt from the blaster, aiming low so it would pass not through the tall illusory body of his mother's image but through the real short body of the alien. He narrowly missed. He thought he might just have singed the being, but he wasn't sure. She converted back to her true form before disappearing into the thick forest.

He sat there resignedly as night started to fall. A small golden moon crept up over the horizon and hovered in the sky, turning slowly on its axis. The days on this planet were long, George noted, feeling a touch of melancholy sadness at the way his plans for a private kingdom had been ruined by the unwanted presence of the alien.

I could have enjoyed life here, he thought ruefully. *Really enjoyed it.*

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, the ship from Procyon II appeared overhead, dropped from the sky with a thunder of landing jets, and came to rest in the clearing.

He saw happily that it was a large ship, almost identical to the one that had brought him; that meant he would be able to take all his packed possessions off the planet at once.

A man clambered down the

catwalk of the ship and looked around.

"Here I am," George shouted. "Over here!"

He stood up and waved, but strangely the man from the ship failed to notice him. That was odd. George leaped agilely over the ringed barrier of packing cases and began to run toward the ship, shouting.

The spaceman still didn't seem to hear his calls, and George began to sense that something was very wrong. He was hoarse from yelling. He drew close to the other, almost close enough to touch him, and still the spaceman obstinately peered out in the wrong direction.

Then abruptly the ground opened under George. Ship and spaceman vanished, and George, with the sudden chilling feeling that he had been tricked, dropped heavily into his own pit, landing crumpled on his left leg.

QTRONG hands lifted him out of the pit, but he barely felt them. Powerful arms dragged him inside the house, stretched him on the bed, soothed his fever-hot forehead, set and bound the broken leg.

Days and nights passed, dragging on slowly.

George was conscious only of a silent, sweet-smelling figure that went quietly back and forth, ministering to his needs. The pain in his leg was a steady throbbing red beat of agony, except at the times when the silent figure took his head in her lap and rocked back and forth, crooning a soft wordless tune.

He slept for a long while, a long gray succession of days and nights, while the leg slowly healed. Finally, one day he woke up and looked around as if awakening from a bad dream.

All of his packing cases had been opened; the antique Swiss clock ticked away on one wall, the little bookcase was filled with his books, everything was arranged just the way it had been on Earth, so long ago.

Sitting quietly in one corner, knitting, was the lavender-clad figure of his mother.

"How do you feel, dear?" she asked. "Has the fever gone down any?" She crossed over and gently felt his forehead.

Her hand was cool and soothing-

.; "My leg...."

"Just about set," she told him. "I think we can take the splint off today. It's too bad there's no doctor here, but I guess we can manage just by ourselves, can't we?"

! He rolled over and looked at her strangely. "You're dead. Buried in Roselawn Cemetery. I bring flowers to you every [Thursday."

"Poor boy," she said. "Still delirious. Rest now, George. You need your rest. We can talk some other time, dear."

"No," , he said, sitting up halfway in the bed. Suddenly he realized where he was and what had happened to him. "You tricked me!" he snapped accusingly. "You led me right into the pit I dug, camouflaging it with the illusion of that ship."

"It was for your own good, dear."

"What happened to the *real* ship from Procyon II? Have they landed yet?"

"They were here a long time ago," she said quietly. "I sent them away. I told them everything was all right, that there had been a mistake."

George slumped wearily back into bed. "And I suppose you broke the radio, too. For my own good."

"That was an accident, George. You know the way I always am with machinery of any sort."

He closed his eyes. "That means I'm stuck here, doesn't it?" The throbbing in his leg grew stronger. "Stranded for good."

"Why do you say that? We have each other, don't we? We can play bridge, and read, and talk, and when I have my strong days I can help you with the farm. I've always wanted to work on a farm; it seems like such fun! Back on Earth you only had the bank, but here we'll be out of doors all the time, in the fresh air. And fresh air was always what you needed so badly, dear."

His leg was pounding furiously. "After you tricked me into falling into the pit—"

"Must we talk about that, George?"

"After you tricked me," he repeated, "you nursed me back to health. You saved my life."

"It was the least I could do, George. But why talk about that? Once you're well we can get started with our farm, and fix up the house—we can make it just like the old one we had on Earth, and it'll be just as it was in the old days together. Won't it, George?"

"Yes," he said dully. "Yes. Just as it was In the old days."

He started to rise from the bed; then he realized that any action of his would be futile, and sank back, deadly calm. His leg throbbed fiercely. Suddenly he saw before him the great empty sea of miles that stretched out between here and Earth, and the other great sea of years that lay before him on Procyon VI.

Well, why not, he thought, thinking of the sturdy, beloved old woman, *why not?*

"I'm sure we'll be very happy together, very happy—*mother,"* he said, quietly, through the red haze of pain. "Just as it was in the old days."

"It's wonderful to hear you say that," she said. She bent down and kissed him on the forehead, and her lips were cool, and it seemed to George ; that a teardrop fell from her eye and trickled down to his cheek. "I'll always be with you, George, darling. Always.; And you'll always love youri old mother, won't you—*son?"*

Feeling like a figure trapped in nightmare, he reached out and squeezed her hand. She allowed her shape to waver a little in her joy, but she quickly , regained control and fondly grasped George's hand, and, at last, made true contact with his inner mind. At last, after millenia of lonely emptiness, she began to feed.

THE END

THE GIFT OF NUMBERS

by ALAN E. NOURSE

illustrated by **ORBAN**

Strange things can happen when there is a switch of talents from one personality to another. Nobody can really understand such matters. But they do happen 1

Avery Mearns," the nurse-receptionist told the doctor, pointing her thumb daintily toward the floor.

When the patient walked in the doctor saw why. Everything about the man screamed of meek, reproachful resignation. His skinny neck extruded with apologetic bobs of his adam's apple from a prim white collar. His fingers twitched occasionally. He sat on the edge of the chair, one hundred and forty pounds of quivering indecision.

A bookkeeper, the doctor thought, steeling himself. "You say you're having some stomach trouble, Mr. Mearns?"

"Oh, it's frightful." Avery Mearns was pathetically eager. "An ulcer, you know. May be ready to perforate any minute."

"Mm! And how long have you had your ulcer?"

"Well, I can't be *exactly* sure, you understand—"

"Of course, of course. But roughly?"

"Thirty-eight hours and seventeen minutes," said Avery Mearns, sneaking a look at his wrist watch. "Give or take five minutes, I'd say."

The doctor blinked. "You're talking about your ulcer now?"

"That's right. It isn't strictly *my* ulcer, though. Belongs to an acquaintance of mine, you might say."

"I might!" The doctor gripped his chair arms tightly and peered across the desk at the quivering little man. "I think I missed the first act here. Let's try again. What was your line of work?"

"Bookkeeper. Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker. Twenty years with them—so far."

"And you're having pain?"

"Oh, it's terrible. It wakes me up at four in the morning, and gnaws at me all day. I haven't been able to eat anything but cream soup and crackers ever since I got it. It's really unbearable."

"I see," said the doctor. "Your friend's ulcer."

"That's right."

"Indeed. Well, we'll just take a look." One thing about that doctor, he could go along with a gag.

Between the doctor and the lab nurse and the X-ray man they took a look that would last Avery Mearns ten years. They listened to his heart and thumped his chest. They gave him chalk to drink, and squeezed him like a toothpaste tube beneath the dispassionate eye of the fluoroscope. They rushed blood samples upstairs and other samples downstairs. When they got through, they had learned that Avery Mearns had flat feet, a serious enlargement of the heart, congestion of the lungs, turgid kidneys, a sluggish liver, tired blood, polyps in his colon, and a mildly-advanced case of weavers' bottom.

But he didn't have any ulcer.

The doctor was apologetic but firm. Avery Mearns walked back down to the street the picture of dejection. He didn't find the doctor's gold watch and the nurse's sorority pin in his pocket until he got home that night.

But after a lunch of cream soup and crackers, the ulcer quit hurting. For a while, at least.

TT was the numbers that had started it all, the night the switch had taken place.

If it hadn't been for the numbers, the Colonel wouldn't have been broke, and the switch wouldn't have happened, and Avery Mearns would still have been an ineffectual little bookkeeper instead of the most dangerous

guy in seven countries, even if he didn't know it.

The Colonel had a way with numbers like no other guy around. It was sort of an inward and spiritual grace with him, which was pretty lucky because the Colonel didn't have any other inward and spiritual graces to speak of. He could pick a number and make it break out and sing MOTHER MACHREE spinning on its tail and strumming a ten string banjo. Nobody knew how he did it. If the Colonel himself knew, he wasn't telling anybody. He had a steady string of greenbacks hurrying into his pocket, and that was all he worried about.

The fact that he was almost always broke wasn't the fault of the numbers. The Colonel was just a little extravagant, was all.

"One would think," he was saying to George the bartender that night, "that you would be eager to advance me a small sum to enter a gentlemanly wager on the fight tonight. Five dollars would hardly strain your exchequer. And it isn't that I'm on the breadline, you know. It's just that my assets are temporarily frozen."

"Sure, sure," said George. "Like my right arm. Can't quite reach the cash register." He glanced up at the preliminary bout on the TV and a look of great craftiness stole across his face. "What numbers would you want to bet, by the way?"

"My dear fellow!" said the Colonel, nursing his glass of milk. "Would you have me betray a sacred trust? In the vernacular of the street, would you ask me to welch on the Almighty?" He brushed a fleck of dust from his London-tailored suit and smoothed his mustache gently. It was a pretty extravagant-looking suit, just like the fancy words he used and the fancy car he drove. "Anyway, I haven't any numbers for the fight, yet. The moment of divine inspiration has not come. Creativity must be sparked, you know."

"Yeah," said George.

"And there's no spark quite like the clink of coin." The Colonel's eyes rested thoughtfully on the meek little man drinking beer down the bar. "Like that gentleman, for instance. No doubt of the fierce flame that lingers there, eh?

That look of transport, of communion with rapture—"

Avery Mearns blinked doubtfully. "Me?"

"My dear fellow, outward appearances deceive," said the Colonel, moving down a stool or two. "In you I can sense the artist in agonies of creation, drinking the dew of heaven before dashing forth to translate ecstasy for the masses. Don't tell me, now—a writer? Artist? Musician?"

"Bookkeeper," said Avery apologetically.

"Ah," said the Colonel, seeking inspiration in his milk glass. "But a troubled bookkeeper, none the less." He shot a furtive glance at the TV screen as the second prelim began.

"I'll never finish in time, is all," mourned Avery. "I've got tax statements due, and inventories to audit, and payrolls to check, and a seven-day deadline I'll never make. They'll fire me next, and then what am I going to do?"

"Let me buy you a beer," said the Colonel. "Somewhere a solution lies within our grasp." A beer appeared for Avery and a milk for the Colonel. "Ulcer, you know. Nasty thing. Alcohol crucifies it. Hmmm, yes! As a custodian of accounts, you have the Gift of Numbers, no doubt."

"Well—I can add and subtract, if that's what you mean."

"Nothing so crass, my good man! With the Gift of Numbers the columns of figures should take care of themselves. Numbers have a powerful quality of cohesion, you know. No number is an independent member, but only a member in relation to its fellows—you follow?"

"Oh, yes," said Avery, taking a swallow of beer.

"So if you yourself can enter into the cohesion, the numbers become a part of you and you a part of them. They can't help but obey you."

"Sounds pretty nice," Avery admitted. "I guess I'll just have to go on adding."

"Nonsense," said the Colonel. "You have a column of numbers to balance—it's balanced!" He waved his hand airily. "An error to find on the page? A mere nothing—one look, and there it is!"

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

Avery licked his lips. "With

me, I've got to spend hours. And then I have more errors than I started out with."

"Obviously you're a man who *needs* the Gift. It's fortunate that it's transferable," said the Colonel. "I say, bartender—one minute and twenty seconds of the fifth for this bout. Mark it now."

"How was that again?" said Avery.

"The fight. I just saw the outcome in a flash. One minute and—"

"No, I mean before that."

"Oh, transferrable? Oh, yes."

"You could transfer part of your gift to me?"

"Certainly. It isn't all one way, of course—you'd transfer some of your bookkeeping tendencies to me at the same time. It's a function of higher cerebral centers, you understand. Constant high-frequency synaptics from the transthalamus and the hippocampus, communicating with the frontal and parietal cortical layers. Very close contact must be made, of cour; form of supratentorial juxtaposition."

"Come again?" said the bartender, who was getting interested.

'T'HE Colonel took out a slip of paper and wrote the words in large block letters:

SUPRATENTORIAL JUXTAPOSITION

Avery blinked at the words. "Of course," said the Colonel, "I couldn't consider anything permanent. The transfer is too deep-seated. Some authorities claim it's a basic subtotal somatic and psychomatic interexchange—"

"But for just a day or so!" Avery cried. "If I could make numbers behave like you say—"

The crowd was cheering and the announcer's voice broke through: "—by a knockout, in just one minute and twenty seconds of the fifth round—"

"You see," said the Colonel.

Avery was nodding eagerly, throwing caution to the winds. "All I'd need would be twenty-four hours! Enough to clear up the year's accounts—why, I'd be ahead of deadline. They might even give me a raise. If

you'd ever consider it, I mean—"

"Perhaps for a small consideration," said the Colonel. "Not for me, you understand I Merely to aid you in concentrating. Say twenty dollars, perhaps?"

Avery fumbled for his wallet while the bartender hid his mouth with his hand. "Will I feel anything?"

"Oh, no pain. A moment of exhaltation, perhaps. A strange prickling at the base of the X>ine. And of course you must •oncentrate with your whole •nind."

He began writing the block letters again.

SUPRAJUXTA TENTORIAL POSITION

"No, no, that's not right," he muttered. Then:

SUPK APOSITIONAL JUX-TATENTORIUM

and:

JUXTATENTORIAL SU-PRAPOSITION

"I can't seem to do it," the " onel said.

"Try, try!" cried Avery. The Colonel's fingers flew as Avery watched wide-eyed:

"You're following?"

Avery nodded, his eyes growing a little glassy.

"But not quite yet, I can see —wait, wait—I have it!"

SUPRATENTORIAL JUX-TAPOSITION

"That's it!" cried Avery. He felt a moment of exhaltation, a strange prickling at the base of his spine. "You've done it, just like you said—"

The Colonel slipped the twenty into his pocket with a solemn wink at the bartender. "See you at the fights," he said, and was gone, leaving Avery, sans tie-clip, staring glassily at the scrap of paper on the bar.

It wasn't until he shook his head groggily and took another swallow of beer that he felt the twinge in the pit of his stomach—

'T'HE change was little short of miraculous. Previously, an unbalanced account book had produced a deep sense of weariness and revulsion in

Avery Mearns, blinking up at him from his desk like some kind of alien intelligence—defying him, as it were, to do anything about it.

But now all that was changed.

The columns balanced like magic.

The errors on the pages lit up like neon signs and winked at him enticingly. Quite suddenly he found himself feeling a sense of warmth, of kinship, with those pretty little numbers that tracked up and down the page. Almost as though they were blood brothers, you might say.

But that wasn't all.

When he finished the tax returns and the inventories and the payrolls and everything he was going strong, just beginning to feel the bit in his mouth. The numbers beckoned to him, urging him on to greater things, even as his stomach screamed for a vanilla milkshake. He dug in, his fingers flying on the adding machine, immersing himself deeper and deeper into the columns of numbers.

When he came up the first time, he had discovered a way to bring the figures from column A over into column B, and the figures in column B over into column A, and save Bundy, Burbage, and Brubecker $40,000 on their income tax. It was simply incredible that he had missed it all this time.

Cream soup and crackers for lunch.

When he came up the second time he had found a way to apply some inspired numerical foresight and save them $80,000 on their next years' income tax.

It was wonderful.

When he came up the third time, he had devised a method of relieving B, B, & B of $160,000 in small increments over a six month period, with B, B, & B none the wiser. He had also, in a moment of transport, sensed the exact combination to the office safe and the exact fence value of Miss Capaccio's pearl necklace.

He had gained a touch of larceny along with the Gift of Numbers and the ulcer, it seemed.

He fled from his desk in horror and went down to the bar. He tried a beer, but beer was

poison. He had to settle for milk.

"Funny thing," George the bartender chuckled, "you drinking milk and the Colonel drinking beer. Almost a miracle, like, the way his ulcer left him all of a sudden."

"Oh, yes?"

"Couldn't figure it out. Said he even ate a steak and onions and nothing happened. Said he never felt better in his life."

"Well, I could figure it out for him. Where is he?"

"You thinking about that twenty, you might as well forget it, friend."

"No, not the money, the other thing. It's beginning to get out of hand."

"Sure, sure," said George. "I'll tell him. When I see him, that is. He was talking about getting a job as a bookkeeper somewhere, but I could tell he was just joking."

Avery went out and bought some bicarbonate of soda. As he reached for his change, he found the boss's cuff links in his pocket. He also found Miss Capaccio's garter.

That was when he really started worrying.

T JNFORTUNATELY, the ^ numbers and the ulcer and the pickpocketry were not all. The second evening Avery found himself in an all-night poker game. He was not there by choice. The compulsion to gamble was simply unbearable. He lost three weeks' pay in three and a half hours and they escorted him to the street by the seat of his pants.

Next day he bet on the horses, the football pool, the basketball pool, and a tall Nordic channel swimmer. But the basketball pool paid off on his football number, and his basketball number should have been riding on Hopeful Harry in the eighth at Belmont.

The worst of it was, he couldn't stop betting.

He arrived at work half an hour early, he was so eager to get back to his numbers again. He was like a bloodhound on the trail. He lost contact with all else, and the more he worked at the books, the more the numbers seemed to take control of themselves. It was high noon when he jerked awake again, with a dull aching pain in his middle. He de-

cided to see a doctor without delay.

Of course, the doctor couldn't find the ulcer—and Avery couldn't find the Colonel. The Colonel, the bartender reported, had stopped in to say good-bye. Said he was feeling so good he thought he'd take a little jaunt to Florida. He'd heard they needed bookkeepers down there—

Bookkeepers with the Gift of Numbers, he'd said.

Avery was just leaving to hunt up another poker game when the cops pinched him. Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker had just discovered what a bookkeeper with the Gift of Numbers and a touch of larceny could do with a set of the company's books.

It seemed they didn't like it so much.

THE police sergeant was very sympathetic.

"Sure, sure," he said. "I know how it is. It's just sort of a compulsion. You keep thinking how nice it would be until you can't help yourself any more, so then you go lift a couple hundred thousand. It happens all the time."

"But I didn't," Avery wailed. "It wasn't really me at all. That is, I didn't mean to. I wouldn't dream of such things under ordinary circumstances, except—"

"Sure, sure," said the sergeant. "Now just tell us how you planned to cart off the money."

"I didn't plan it. It was planning me. I switched with this man, just temporarily, in order to use his Gift of Numbers for a while, and now I've got his ulcer, and his gambling compulsions and everything."

"Mm," said the sergeant, deftly retrieving his wallet as it slid into Avery's pocket. "Switched, you say."

"That's right. It's all a horrible mistake." Avery's fingers twitched spasmodically. "He said it was a higher cerebral transfer. Just the position of the super-tent or something—it's all hazy in my mind now, somehow. But now when I work with numbers I just can't control myself—"

THE psychiatrist was very sympathetic.

"Been dropping money in

poker games," the sergeant told him, aside. "Horses, too. Affected his balance, you might say."

The psychiatrist nodded gravely and smiled at his patient. "Now, Avery! Tell me about yourself, Avery," he said.

Avery told him about himself.

"Very interesting," the psychiatrist reported. "Overwhelming guilt feelings. Pulsilating inferiority. It isn't that he's got a complex—just naturally inferior. Fixations, too ... like this man he says he 'switched' with. 'The Colonel'."

"Oh, oh," said the sergeant.

He called in Avery. "This friend of yours called himself 'the Colonel'?"

"Why, yes. Very pleasant fellow—"

"Tall skinny chap with fancy British clothes on?"

Avery's eyes lit up. "You know him?"

"Twenty-three states and four territories know him. Alias 'Numbers Gerrold', alias 'Bet-a-Million Beckworth', alias 'The Orange Kid', etc., etc., etc. This joker could con an eighty year old grandmother out of her uppers. You've been had, my friend."

"Not this time," said Avery. "It *happened* this time. Maybe he thought he was feeding me a line but if he did he was wrong. Parts of it came across twisted up a little, but it came across. And now I sit around waiting for his ulcer to perforate while he robs the State of Florida blind and deaf."

The sergeant rubbed his chin, dubiously, and put out ten-state alarm. "You might just be telling the truth," he conceded, "though I don't know how Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker are going to take it."

"Just find me the Colonel and let me switch back again," moaned Avery, "before I start picking my own pockets to keep in practice."

Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker generously declined to press charges. They had taken another look at those tax return figures and realized that they couldn't permit a little matter of attempted embezzlement to cloud their appreciation of a faithful, devoted employee like Avery Mearns.

Avery went back behind his desk—with an assistant, of course, to monitor his work and keep his fingers out of the till. Every morning he plunged into his books like a man obsessed, and every evening he unloaded the day's loot from his pockets before departing for home. In a few short days he had totally exhausted the numerical resources of Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker, only to find an eager list of applicants waiting for his peculiar talents.

He was flown to Washington and confronted with a financial-economic snarl that had floored the most competent of giant computers; he waded through it like a knife through putty.

He was wined by General Motors and dined by U. S. Steel.

He received, through surreptitious channels, an offer to visit certain foreign capitals where the fact that capital was **a** naughty word didn't dampen the intensity of capitalistic endeavor. The Gift of Numbers, it seemed, was **a** pearl of great price—so great that accompanying irregularities could easily be overlooked—

Everyone was excited and happy about it except Avery Mearns. The more he immersed himself in numbers, the greater the compulsion to deeper immersion. As days passed it grew worse and worse: less and less of Avery emerged each evening and more and more of the Colonel.

"It's very simple," the psychiatrist soothed. "Merely a d o m i n a n t personality overwhelming a recessive shadow." But it didn't make Avery feel any better, and it didn't cure the ulcer. His cheeks grew hollow and his eyes burned feverishly.

"You've got to find him," he pleaded with the sergeant. "I can't stand it much longer."

The sergeant was sympathetic but guarded. "Awfully hard to trace, you know. We'll call you the minute we find him."

But the call didn't come from the police. It came from George, the bartender.

"Better come down here quick," he said in a hoarse whisper. "The Colonel's back. He's gotta see you in a hurry, he says. A *real* hurry, he says. Urgent like."

"You mean he wants to change back?"

"Brother, you stated a truth. He even has the twenty bucks ready."

Avery didn't wait to break the connection. He was down the stairs in three graceful leaps. Even the ulcer cooperated. In a flash of horrible insight he had sensed the source of the urgency—

But he was too late.

The police sergeant met him at the door of the tavern, just as the two men carried out the long sheet-covered stretcher and popped it into the ambulance. The sergeant shook his head wonderingly. "Some guys got all the luck," he said. "You're too late, you lucky man. And here all the time the Colonel thought *you* were the sucker."

"But where are you taking him?" Avery wailed.

"Morgue," said the sergeant. "He just dropped dead this very minute. Of your coronary, that is."

THE END

SCIENCE SHORTS

by EDGAR P. STRAUS

New pictures of the sun, the sharpest and most detailed ever taken, are causing scientists to revise theories on the mighty gas storms that rage on its surface.

The photographs were taken by a telescopic camera suspended from a balloon 81,000 feet over Minnesota and Wisconsin. They were the first solar pictures taken without the blurring effects of our atmosphere. The 35-mm. camera clicked once a second until 8000 shots had been taken, covering 100,000,000 square miles of the sun's surface.

The results showed that the face of the sun was a mass of gaseous eddies 200 to 500 miles in diameter. Only the largest of these eddies had been visible in the previous highest-altitude solar shots, taken at 25,000 feet from a manned balloon over Paris in the spring of 1957.

Further study of the recent films is expected to yield new insight into the nature of the solar eddies, which cause flares and prominences that bring about magnetic storms and similar disturbances on Earth. Future plans of the Navy-sponsored group include taking photographs of planets and stars from the same height, through a thirty-six inch telescope.

A group of Oxford scientists has made a record descent on the temperature scale by cooling a tiny sliver of copper to a temperature only one one-hundred-thousandth of a degree above absolute zero. The researchers expect to refine their technique to a point where they can attain a temperature of a millionth of a degree or less.

THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

by AUSTIN HAMEL

illustrated by BOWMAN

Just because the inhabitants of a new planet are in **a** human form does not mean for sure that they are human. Nor does it mean that they're the highest form of life

]\JOT knowing who, or for that matter, what to expect on that world, we just found ourselves calling it—***it.*** No Grecian names, nothing as pompous as naming the world, the planet after our own names. It simply remained ***it*** all the way out in our little space raft we had fashioned together after five years of work. Of course, with the law against private excursions to new worlds, we hadn't told a soul, except for a newspaperman we knew who promised not to tell a soul until we were well out of the solar system. So it was a rather quiet departure with just Morris, the reporter watching glumly as we flamed off for the stars.

My partner's name was Graham—Gray, and mine, Ian. The trip lasted for twenty years, and with the time warp and the old reliable deep freeze method, we only aged two years each—the usual one tenth.

Wrecking the ship upon landing didn't help our morale any. I remember Gray looking up at me from the floor, his seat torn from its position up front.

"Guess we'll have to walk back," he said.

I looked around, rubbing my head where it hurt. "Guess we will, Gray."

We pulled ourselves togeth-


Bowman

er and ate, checking to find out .while we ate if there was anything outside that even resembled air. Happily, it was air, because the space helmets had also been smashed and spending the rest of our lives within the broken hulk was not a particularly pleasant way to wait out the last few days.

Gray finished eating. "Wonder who lives out there?"

"Monsters, I'm sure," I said, throwing the dishes down the shaft. "Ready to go out and see?"

"We don't have much better to do."

"I guess not."

We got out, walking shakily for a few moments, and decided we were in what looked very much like a park. The sky was a deep blue, the grass and leaves quite green, all lovely, but frightening.

Gray said what I was thinking: "Think we're back, back on earth?"

I swallowed hard. "No, we can't be."

"Remember the guy they locked up because he said he was from somewhere else? Landed right back at the Athens Drome?"

"We're there! The instruments proved it." I looked around for something different, something to confirm our position. Then I saw it, a flower growing about fifty feet away from us, the biggest flower I ever saw. "Look there," I said, pointing it out to him.

"So? It's a big tree."

"It is like hell. Come on." We jogged over and the closer we got the better we could see it wasn't a tree, but a flower with a greenish bark that soared about thirty-five feet in the air, the buds on the top about fifteen feet long, hanging down as if they were trying to grab us up.

"Still think we're back?"

"Big—huh? Maybe it would be better if we were back, though."

Gray walked around the thing for a while. "Do you suppose, well, maybe they have intelligent plant life here?"

"Oh, come off it, Gray. I'll eat it, if this is intelligent."

Gray shrugged. "Well, you

never know. We're a long way from home, sonny."

"We are, but this is a plant. That's all, so let's get on and see what and who is here."

"Figure we can take in a movie tonight?" Gray asked.

"You never know."

We returned to the ship and packed supplies, feeling the excitement now of discovery, wondering who was out there—hoping it would be something or someone—for the greatest fear we both had was that there would be nothing.

We spent all that night and the next day and night searching. We didn't meet a soul, not even a monster and gradually we began to realize that the chances of ourselves being the only inhabitants were high. Food was holding out, but there was the thought of it getting scarce. Even insects didn't exist in the places we had covered.

TT happened on the third evening, we heard the voices. Gray looked at me. I saw the perspiration on his face.

"I believe we are about to meet the residents of it," I said weakly, my hand touching my gun.

We stopped like statues on the lee side of the little rise, listening. Strangely enough the sounds were almost human, but not quite. That is, the quality was like a human's, but the tonal effect was different, and it kept up in a sort of continual yammer, yammer. There were a number of them we figured.

"They're coming closer," I said. We got behind a clump of high bushes and sat there watching and waiting. The noise grew louder and we thought we heard laughing, lots of strange, not quite human laughter.

Gray whispered, "Does it sound human to you?"

"I know what you mean. It does, but it doesn't. Sort of like the people they found on Venus that time—not quite, not all the way there, remember?"

"Well, this is what we came for, isn't it?" Gray asked.

I said yes and trembling a bit, fingered my gun again.

We sat there for hours, our eyes on the top of the hill, lis-

tening to the sounds on the other side. It got dark, and then there were no sounds.

"Figure they've bedded down for the night?" Gray asked.

"What?" I was sleepy. "Yeah, sounds that way."

Gray moved. "Well, let's have a look."

I shifted a bit. "All right. I guess we should."

We arose without making a sound and crept forward toward the direction of the sounds we had heard earlier. About forty feet from our bushes, Gray stepped on a dry twig which snapped with a loud noise. "Damn," Gray muttered. The yammering started again, a sort of frightened quality in their voices now. We looked at each other and ran like the devil back to the bushes, nose-diving to shelter.

"Guess we scared them," Gray said.

I panted. "Who scared who?"

The sounds diminished. We listened hard trying to discern an individual voice, noting the almost human quality, but animal slurring of tone. A sort of meaningless jabber that did not suggest language so much as animal talk.

They came with the light. First came the sounds, then, they appeared one by one.

Gray lowered his gun, his eyes as he looked popped from their sockets. "Look, Ian, for Pete's sake, look!"

"Good Lord," I muttered.

There were only three of them. They straggled along in a crooked line heading in a zig zag toward us. The first of them was a girl about nineteen with long black hair. I would say the most perfectly developed creature I had ever seen. Then came a young man, a blond Adonis, and then another perfect girl, a blonde. But the amazing thing was they were all in their birthday suits and walking as calmly as you please.

"Maybe it's a trick," I said. "Maybe this is all some kind of mind over matter deal."

"Ah, you're all wet," Gray said. "They're as real as you are. Just look at those girls!"

"All right, let's say hello, then." Gray nodded and put away his gun. We got up and stepped out. As they saw us,

their faces broke into beautiful smiles and they ran toward us like graceful animals. They jumped around us and yammered, "Roong—ahhhhh, theth!"

Gray smiled broadly. "Clever conversationalists," he said.

TPI-IEY touched us and laughed and frolicked around us all three of them. Then they noticed our clothing and laughing like the dickens started to pull it off until we, too, were in our natural attire. What we figured were the rest of them were coming over the hill now, about sixteen more, mostly women, all beautiful, all the pictures of health.

Gray exchanged looks with me.

"Paradise?" he asked softly.

I shrugged. They saw how white we were and laughed even more, gesturing at us, then a few grabbed our hands and hauled us away with them, over the hill onto a great, grassy plain where they ran like deer, half leading, half dragging us along with them, the sun burning into our skin. Finally we reached a water hole and they all jumped in gamboling and playing in the water. We joined them, welcoming the chance to cool off and drink. I found myself enjoying it very much, and spotting Gray sitting in some ankle deep water, exhausted, made for him.

"What do you make of it?"

"Do you happen to have a cigarette on you?"

I frowned. "Stop joking, Gray. What do you think is up?"

He looked over at the naked bodies swimming and playing, making those sub-human sounds. He sort of half smiled. "Would you say this is a high or a low form of intelligence?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean are these people or animals? Are they people so sophisticated that they've rejected language, work, ulcers, worries, cities for this natural life—or, or are they just animals."

One of the girls got close to me and splashed water. I looked into her blue eyes. "Those aren't an animal's

eyes—there's something there—but those voices."

Gray nodded. "I know, the voices got me, too. Maybe they were once like us—that is, troubled, looking for new worlds to go to, escape to, new planets to louse up, and now they're like this—a bunch of fully developed babies..."

Then I spotted it, and realized that there was more here than we had considered. I looked closer and I knew I was right, I felt it right in my stomach, not the little trembling feeling I had before we met the beautiful people, but a real fear now. "Gray," I said. "Take a look at that guy—the one over there with the reddish hair."

"Yeah, I see him."

"Well, notice anything peculiar?"

He looked. "No—what?"

"Gray, look at the back of his head."

"Yeah, I'm looking."

"Well?"

Gray was impatient. "Well, what?"

"You're not very observant. That fellow, Gray, has recently had a haircut."

Gray sat there quietly and let a thin stream of water spew from his mouth. I thought he shuddered, but I never found out. "You know, buddy, I believe we haven't really met the true residents of *it* yet."

Night finally came and they took us to the woods where they camped down on some grass and fallen leaves. A few of them went into the brush and reappeared with herbs and a blue fruit that turned out to be delicious. We stuffed ourselves. Gray and I were discussing whether we should leave the bunch and see what else there was or stick around for more, when a straggler, one of the girls, caught up with the rest of us. She just made it to our group when she collapsed in a heap, moved a bit and then made what appeared to be a groan.

"She's sick," I said.

"Let's have a look," Gray said.

We started for her but before we took a few steps, about six of the others blocked our way—they weren't angry, but they weren't happy either.

Most of them still smiled, but some frowned a bit.

"They don't want us to go near her," I said.

"I don't get it," Gray said puzzled. "Why can't we help the girl? She's having a miserable time of it."

We tried sign language, but there was no communication, no getting through to them at all. We gave up after a while.

We weren't surprised that night to discover that the most natural of acts were carried on with the utmost elan by the others. We slept well afterwards.

The sick girl was still there the next morning, looking a bit feverish but sitting up and peering about weakly and bewildered. The other arose and started for a nearby hill, frisking and running most of the way. Gray and I had calmed down a lot, with the haircuts occupying our thoughts. Where the hell, we wondered, did they come from, and worse, who gave it to them?

AS the day went along we got deeper and deeper in thought. We finally managed to slow down a bit and squat under a large flower. Gray decided they weren't just nature lovers, they were animals and they had once been or their ancestors had once been humans because there were still vestigial indications of human qualities and subtleties.

"Notice," Gray pointed out, "the way they eat. It's really not at all like a human would and not quite like an animal either. It's the same way with their voices."

"I'm more interested in their eyes—they're like our eyes."

"Eyes," Gray said, "Don't change."

"Think they're happy this way?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Do they want it, or is it something that developed here?"

"Well, surely if it developed there would be some indications of civilization around."

"Why? We haven't covered more than five square miles here. They just run around in circles, you know that. We haven't seen anything yet."

I tossed a pebble in a near-

by brook, making little ripples. "It's those damned hair cuts," I said

Gray nodded. "That's what scares me the most. I can't explain it. And any thoughts I do have about it are too terrible to talk about anyway. Did you notice that the girls too—their hair isn't wild either."

"Listen," I said placing my hand on Gray's arm.

The others had been making a racket and playing about. Suddenly they became quiet—very quiet. For the first time, we heard the leaves in the trees and flowers rustle in the breeze. Our companions buzzed now and cocked their heads to one side, listening intently.

Then for the first time, we heard it—from over the hills and across the plains it came ominously, a high-pitched buzz—short and long, then short and long, then continuous, then stopping suddenly. The breeze picked up a bit blowing icy air across our nervous perspiration. I saw Gray's face twitch and reached mechanically for my gun but felt only my bare hip.

Gray sat there motionless. "How helpless can you get?"

The sound started again, louder, closer now. The others picked up and moved quietly toward the plain.

I choked a bit. "I think, we are going to meet the real residents of *it*—very shortly."

"Let's go now then," Gray said and got up.

"May as well," I agreed.

We fell in with others, almost wanting to hold each others hands for comfort, but we managed not to. They moved to the plain, then stopped shortly. We felt the excitement among them, then they grew quiet as the sick girl came up from behind and staying about twenty feet away, waited with the rest of us.

They came as two nimbus clouds along the plain, but as they approached us, we could see that they weren't just masses of water and dust particles, but life. A form of life we had never dreamt of in our wildest space nightmares. They were making those high beep sounds as they came, they didn't walk, thus adding to the cloud feeling, but more or less

glided rapidly and smoothly.

They rose to about twenty five feet or more and were about fifteen feet wide, a blackish grayish appearance and an idea of shapelessness, but they were, we found out as solid as could be. When they came upon us, the sound was deafening and we looked at them, too startled to feel the fear that had engulfed us. But the others acted strangely. They began to dance and jump about and the girls and the boys ran to the black gray shapes and with their tongues licked what appeared to be hands. The extremities reached out and to our amazement patted the others on their heads.

The shapes continued their noises, in what we realized immediately was communication to each other, and bending over, plucked up a few of the naked people, turning them this way and that way while they licked and groaned happily in their animal-human voices.

Then the shapes focused their attention on the girl behind us. Without even a glance at us, they went to her. As they passed we could make out small red blotches which we took to be the shape's eyes, and we inhaled their maladorous fumes. The girl was frightened, the first time we had noticed anything like strong emotion among them. They looked at her closely—am examination we thought.

"Gray," I said. "Maybe *they'll* help her!"

Our answer came suddenly. One of the shapes leaned over and picked her up lifting her easily in the blackish limb and then calmly proceeded to squeeze her to death. There was a piercing scream from the girl, then nothing. It let her drop with a sickening dull sound to the ground. She bounced then lay there sprawled out. The shapes examined to make sure, flipping her over once, then, apparently satisfied that she was dead, returned to the others.

"Good Lord," Gray sobbed.

The beautiful people were oblivious, frolicking and laughing. As the shapes returned, they all stretched out on the ground and the shapes exam-

ined them one by one. All must have passed inspection because they each received a pat on the head and then went on playing. Then the shapes turned to us. They beeped to each other for a moment, then approached us.

"Lie down!" Gray called.

T almost fell to the ground as they approached. The two of us lay there shaking and waiting. The shapes got closer, their sounds coming higher and faster. They leaned over us, one over me and one over Gray. I could see the red holes grow larger as they examined, then I felt something nudge me gently and flip me over.

As I turned I could see Gray go over too. We both lay there face down now, our stomachs in knots, then I felt myself rising high and higher until I was right in front of the red holes, the eyes of the thing. I turned, saw Gray in the same position, then I felt it on my head. With what I imagine you would call extreme gentleness, the thing was patting me on the head. I suddenly had a feeling, a feeling that if I didn't do it I w o u l d soon be dead, squashed like that girl.

I knew Gray was thinking the same thing. I screwed up my face then, worked my mouth close to the blackish mess and began to lick—lick—lick it. Gray did the same. Then they put us down and to my shock the thing let out a beep, that appeared to me to be full of satisfaction.

Probably they could not figure out where we came from, but inasmuch as we had passed their physical examination and appeared to be good specimens, it figured that they had every intention of keeping us.

It turned out we were right. We found out a lot of things in the next few months. The black and gray masses, we presumed, since there was no way to communicate with them, no matter what we did, owned all the property we had been on, call it their estate. They had a sort of a house there—I can't explain it, it keeps appearing and disappearing and it doesn't look like a house, but it is one, you

just know that after a while. The shapes keep us there with the others.

We are fed and sheltered, and quite devoted to our masters, though I still can't tell one from another. We are permitted to go out once in a while to gambol about—just as on the occasion when we had met the others. Of course, there have been no stray ones like us since, and I am certain there never will be.

We mate, we eat and we sleep and once in a while we are displayed in a large place in town that appears when you approach it. They place us in a box after washing us carefully and cutting our hair and when the box is opened we are at another place and then this place appears and there are hundreds of us, laughing and running about. And many many black and gray masses are there examining and making their sound—but I find I am getting used to high sounds —even the highest.

Gray is around too, but we see each other very seldom. There is nothing to discuss. Yes, it is better than not having anyone else on the world of *it*—except for two things. They kill you when you are physically t h i r t y-five, and much, much worse for us, if you remember that girl they crushed. Well the reason for that was simply this: if you are ill, even the slightest cold, anything that they can detect —and they are indeed, experts, they will crush you to death at once.

Their creatures have to be the best on the world especially for their shows, and they are in constant and dreadful fear of illness—they don't understand it and there is, of course, no explaining to them. Yes, they are afraid of even the slightest cold and it means death—therefore Gray hardly ever sees me. We're in fear of each other's health.

They are coming for our daily examination, and I am writing this because—well, I must admit I felt it last night and this morning too, yes I felt it, just a little bit you understand, but it was there, you know the feeling—a slight tickling sensation in the back of my throat.

THE END

THE MARTIAN WINE

by CURTIS W. CASEWIT

In the whole wide Universe there's one beverage which, under certain circumstances is the tipple which most satisfies, refreshes and gladdens the heart of a man

W^E might have been visiting African natives, not Martians. I hated the whole setup: Bickel and his colleagues of the Terra-Mars Trade & Exchange Commission had insisted on a craft full of worthless beads; of Coney Island remnants: ceramic pigs, toy toilets, celluloid dolls; of merchandise from railroad salvage depots: battered tubes of toothpaste; swollen cans of hominy, kidney beans; rotten tins of potted meats, chitterlings.

Everything was now scattered on tarpaulins at our feet. But it had no meaning at all for the Martians.

I could hear Bickel curse them. He stood with the rest of us on a lichened elevation—a small fat man in his early forties, florid-faced, thick-lipped. He shuffled in his lead-soled boots, hands fidgeting in the spacesuit, waiting for telepathic contact between our psychologist and the Martian leader.

For a full day, there was no rapport whatsoever. The Martians squatted below us, their pitch-black faces all foolish simplicity. With their low, fleeing craniums they suggested monkeys. But they had no tails, nor the ape's tendency to rage. They were grave, benign, and completely harmless. The first expedition had made sure of that. It had been a military one, and I knew we could rely on their findings.

I belonged to the second expedition, consisting of mineralogists, geologists, agriculturists, and Bickel, my boss—the famous gourmet and wine

specialist. All were here to bilk the Martians out of their treasures.

Especially Bickel. I was against Bickel, but he'd given me the chance to see this planet. I was against his way of doing business, but I was part of it, as chemical analyst. My equipment—burettes, ebulliscopes, ph-and hydrometers, reagents in special bottles—• kept dangling at my belt, like so many weapons, and there was half a ship full of Bickels' barrels, kegs and pumps.

I watched him step down from the rocks. He was impatient. He carried his ambitions, his greeds toward the psi-apparatus and toward the interpreters—Bickel, the first Earthman to introduce Martian vintages to New York, Paris, San Francisco, Vienna. He had a brittle way of interrupting, of demanding telepathic progress. "How much longer?" he asked. "We haven't a year!"

The psychologist turned, electrodes gleaming, then smiled at the Martian chieftain whose white hair was covered with conducting jelly and more electrodes. "It takes time, Sir. But I know they have the best intentions."

"We came for goods," Bickel said sharply. "Not intentions."

"They've never heard of wine," said the psychologist. "I described grapes, vineyards, presses—"

"Try again!"

The psychologist obeyed. Then: "They've never heard of wine."

"Don't be silly," Bickel said. "The whole world knows wine. I'm not demanding a Chablis, a Frascati, a Liebfraumilch. I don't even expect grapes—" .

"Sir?"

"In the Phillipines, they ferment palm leaves, in Japan rice. Loganberries in Oregon." Bickel pointed to the Martian gifts that were spread on plankton—oval-shaped fruit, sable-colored vegetables, seeds, oils, tiny flowers. "Surely," he snapped, "they ferment those things. Ask him."

"Fementation is unknown to the Martians."

"What do they drink?"

The answer came slowly, all

poetry. "They consume the planet's heavenly nectars."

"Sounds good," I said.

"Quiet. Quiet," Bickel said. "Nectars? What color?"

"A chilly white-gold like the Martian icecaps in the sun."

Bickel's pink face bent forward under the helmet. All at once, his eyes were alert. "Is the nectar sweet?"

"Not quite," said the interpreter.

"How's that?"

The question was translated. The answer came. "The nectar is effervescent. Its taste is —festive, delightful, satisfying."

"Champagne!" Bickel cried, his face triumphant under the visor. The thoughts had suddenly matched; the Martian had spoken *his* language. The language of wine. He asked the interpreter if the Martians had a specialist, a vintner. There was one. He came forward ponderously, small like a Rhesus, solemn and naive. "The vintner, Sir."

"Is your nectar white-gold like the ice caps?"

"Indeed. Like—"

"And the bouquet? Is it festive, delightful, satisfying?"

"Indeed."

piCKEL'S lips opened with awe. He might have been standing in a newly discovered vineyard, in a forgotten mission cellar, in one of the hundreds of earth spots he had visited, buying his *cuvees.* I disliked him, but I had to admit it: he knew his field. He was a connoisseur, a celebrated taster, summoned by European royalty, Long Island millionaires, international shippers. His opinion was demanded the world over, his enthusiastic salesmanship was appreciated. I could see him back on earth now, speaking of Martian champagne vintages, "A good year, a vey good year, a most excellent year, a splendid magnificent year." He now asked, "How much do they have?"

"Enough."

"Be precise. In gallons, please."

"We would have to make calculations. Their measuring system is different from—"

"Later then. What price?"

"They desire to share it with their Terran visitors.

Half for them, half for us. Without cost."

"Then it can't be much good," Bickel said.

"On the contrary. They think it is most valuable. Each Martian is only allowed three mouthfuls a day."

Bickel ordered, all supercil-iousness: "Tell them to bring me a sample. At once."

"Is is as impossible as the disappearance of the double moons."

"Why?"

"They say it would be better to view the planetary source and the heaven's benevolence."

"Where's the source?"

The Martian's furry hand gestured toward the sands, the distant lichens. A vague gesture. "It is not far," the psychologist translated.

Bickel said, "Have them designate a Martian to take our taxis there. With our barrels and pumps."

After the taxis left, Bickel asked, "Shall we take a copter?"

"It is not far," the psychologist interpreted. "A few Martian moments."

I looked about me. Lichened mounds, elevations, plateaus—one following another. Waves and waves of land. We should have really scouted the route by air first. But Bickel was impulsive. "We'll go on foot," he decided. You would have thought him in a Terra business jungle. He always had to be first, he always had to bite out the competition. His staccato voice barked out orders. "Come on!" His incentive made him forget everybody else. He only thought of his own ends.

I said, "We should consult—"

"Never mind the others," Bickel said. "Let them fight their own battles." He strutted past the minerologists, the agriculturists, saying goodbye to no one. The Martian vintner stood near our rocket, and when his bare, horny feet started moving, we plodded on behind him. Into uncertainty.

An hour crawled by, two, three. The equipment kept slapping my sides—were Martian moments that long? I was beginning to be thirsty. I emptied my only flask, using the

aspirator bulb. Bickel had brought no liquids; he hated to carry things. And he had contempt for water, anyway. Water was for cattle, for washing his shiny round gourmet's face. His world revolved around wine.

He began to lick his lips. Thirst devoured him during the next hours, up and down the elevations of this endless, uninhabited land. "Damn suit," he grumbled. "Damn cooling system." The sweat trickled from his brow. He clearly began to loathe this hike, and his spacesuit. He sported orlon-nylon on Earth, and summer mesh shoes, not lead-soled boots. He cursed again, to himself. He hardly looked at me; he was not democratic enough to converse with a chemist.

After four hours, Bickel stopped, the base plate fogged with perspiration. The Martian had stopped, too, politely.

"How far?" Bickel asked.

The Martian didn't answer.

"How far?"

"He doesn't understand," I said. The Martian's face was grave, smiling. There was no communication at all between us.

"Imbecile," Bickel said, and the Martian smiled again, all courtesy, and continued walking. His trunk bulged with lungs; he was well-adapted for this trip. Bickel was exhausted, but ambition drove him on. He wanted to be the first earthman to introduce Martian vintages in New York, Paris, San Francisco, Vienna.

I looked ahead of me, eyes stinging with sweat. The mounds went on and on; a dozen visible summits, fifty barren craters. The air taxis had long soared overhead. Where did they land? Where was this Martian champagne? Still miles away, I decided, and no pilot had intentions to turn around for Bickel.

He stopped again. "How far?"

The Martian stared sweetly, solemnly.

"How many kilometers? Or miles?"

No answer.

T looked at my watch. Four o'clock. We had walked six

hours. I snapped on my radio transmitter. "Headquarters! This is—"

There was a static, then silence. Headquarters didn't pick up our waves. A retaliation for Bickel's taking off without consulting anyone, no doubt. We were cut off.

I checked my oxygen supply; there were just enough cylinders to get back. I grabbed the Martian's black, furry arm, indicating the direction we'd come from.

Bickel came between us. "Fool," he said. "Leave the man in peace. It can't be far. I'm going on." He staggered forward behind the Martian, still hoping for his wine.

I had no other choice but to follow. We walked another hour. Bickel let himself to the powder-dry plateau. "Got a drink?"

"Not a drop. And I only had *water."*

"I wouldn't mind now," Bickel said sensibly. "My thirst is hell." He had brought his own food to the Ship—cans of curried trout, anchovies, smoked truffles. He liked spicy things, but he was paying now. He rose again, flushed with exertion.

I grabbed the Martian again. He let me shake him without rancor. But he began to understand at last, and he motioned. Maybe he was right; it couldn't be much further. It was still day. I gave it another chance. I followed the Martian, Bickel stumbling half-crazed behind us.

An hour later, the plateau ended. A narrow road descended into the valley. The Martian led the way, his heels raising flurries of red dust. It took unbearably long to the bottom.

I could see no vineyards, only the straight, geometrical lines of the canals. We limped through knee-high ferns, and I could see that Bickel was shivering with sweat. I knew that he couldn't be aware of anything except the rawness of his lips, and the strain in his legs. His feet, like mine, were swollen, blistered. I saw our taxis, our barrels, the pumps, and I dimly remembered Bickel's impulsive orders: "Fill every keg. We'll analyze later."

We trudged toward our

equipment, toward the primitive, moss-covered Martian shelters. Bickel collapsed, got up, to fall again into the ferns. I helped him to his feet, and he forged on, all agony.

There were no vines or presses or grapes. There were only the canals, spreading into a network of small ditches. The Martian vintner went to a ditch, gesturing with triumph, with pride. Bickel staggered past the man, like a sleep-walker. His knees buckled again, and he crawled to the edge of the fast-flowing, water.

I said, "Wait! We've got to analyze!"

"It's good," a crew member said. "He can drink it."

Bickel had no strength left; he blacked out over the water's surface. I opened his helmet, and splashed his face. Presently, he started to drink, sucking up all this cool, bubbling wetness, without interest in profits, in ambitions now, not a bit supercilious. I took some long draughts, too, and I had to agree.

The Martian wine matched the grave, silly people's description. It had bouquet. You could call it festive, delightful, satisfying.

THE END

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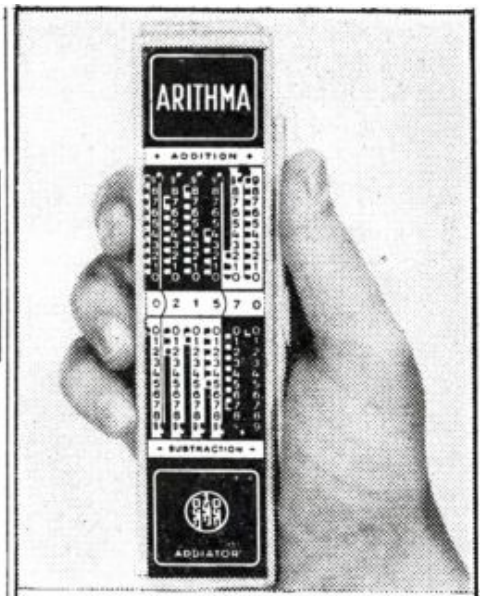

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Stop being a slave to figures. Avoid the costly mistakes everyone makes of being too lazy to check bills and statements. Try amazing ADDIATOR for one week free.

See how beautifully constructed it is . . . how easy to read the numbers . . . how smooth and silent the operation.

See for yourself how ADDIATOR adds up your bills in seconds . . . totals your grocery bills like lightning . . . checks your bank statement in nothing flat . . . figures up your mileage . . . does 1,001 adding or subtracting jobs for you and NEVER MAKES A MISTAKE.

Use it to check bridge, canasta and other scores. Let your children check their homework in seconds. Put ADDIATOR to every test. If you don't agree it will save you endless time, effort and money, you have used it entirely free. It won't cost you a penny.

3½ Million Amazing ADDIATORS Now In Use Throughout The World. Be The First In Your Area To Own One

MAIL FREE TRIAL COUPON TODAY

HARRISON HOME PRODUCTS CORP., Dept. PA-8
31 W. 47th St., New York 36, N. Y.

Please send my ADDIATOR with free carrying case as checked below for one week's NO RISK TRIAL. IF ADDIATOR does not do all my adding and subtracting for me in seconds . . . without ever making a mistake . . . if it doesn't save me time, effort and money . . . then you will refund my money immediately including postage.

( ) I enclose $3.98 with full money back guarantee. Send ADDIATOR postpaid. I save all C.O.D. charges.

( ) Send ADDIATOR C.O.D. I will pay postman $3.98 plus C.O.D. postage. Same money back guarantee.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____

☐ SAVE! Order one ADDIATOR for yourself, another for a gift. TWO ADDIATORS sent for $6.98. You save $1.00.

JUST IMPORTED FROM WESTERN GERMANY:

WORLD'S LOWEST PRICED PORTABLE TRANSISTOR TAPE RECORDER!

Fully Transistorized! Precision Built! Battery Operated! Hi-Quality Reproduction!

Records Anything! Works Anywhere! Weighs Less Than 2 lbs!

From Western Germany comes news of a remarkable new electronic achievement that will astound and amaze you. Top Electronic and Mechanical Engineers have developed a new type of tape recorder that has surpassed, by far, much of our up-to-date equipment. This revolutionary discovery now makes it possible for you to own a self-contained portable tape recorder for the unbelievable low price of just $29.95! This revolutionary machine is called the TELTAPE Recorder and it is the first time in recording history that a *fully transistorized* recording machine was made to perform all the functions of tape recorders costing five times as much and more. The secret, acknowledged by experts throughout the world to be perfect, is based upon a number of improvements and discoveries that made such a miniature unit possible. *Transistors* are used in place of tubes, eliminating the troublesome characteristics of tubes, making it possible to save a tremendous amount of space without *sacrificing* results!

Foolproof Operation

An ingenious new type of drive mechanism was devised that operates without belts, cams, gears or pulleys, thereby eliminating troublesome operation . . . and it does this on extremely low voltage without heavy, expensive battery packs. There is nothing to plug in . . . no batteries to charge . . . no springs to wind. The new TELTAPE Recorder is 100% portable and will record and play back music or speech —any audible sound anywhere! And the remarkable thing is that the entire TELTAPE Recorder weighs less than 2 lbs!

Use the Portable TELTAPE Recorder at home, in business, research, in the field, in cars for business, amusement and pleasure. TELTAPE records and plays back singing, speech or music with amazing clarity and fidelity.

Does Everything a $200.00 Recorder Can Do—And More!

The TELTAPE Recorder is a revolutionary reel-type tape recorder that permits quality recording and playback from *Standard American Tapes*. Instantly ready to clearly record anything from the slightest whisper in the loudest roar. Just a flick of a switch gives you fast rewind . . . then, in seconds, you can play back your recording! Imagine — $29.95 for a *portable* tape recorder that records, has fast forward, fast reverse, playback, erase, erase while recording and speed control.

Enthusiastic Approval Everywhere

From all over the United States every day letters pour in describing the many new uses satisfied and amazed customers are finding for their Teltape Recorders. A photography fan reports that he now makes *SOUND HOME MOVIES*. A Rochester Electronics firm plans to incorporate the Teltape in its Electronic Brain equipment. Audio Supply Companies by the score have ordered the Teltape Recorder for experimental purposes.

Used By Giant Corporations and Major Educational Institutions

Giant Corporations like U. S. **Carborundum, General Electric, Socony-Mobil, Bell Telephone, Thomas Edison Co., A. C. Neilson Co., Thor Power Tool Co., West Bend Aluminum, Curtis Industries, Addressograph-Multigraph, Lorraine Products Corp., Wm. McKinley Memorial Hospital** recognizing at once the many practical and useful applications of this discovery, immediately rushed us their orders for the Teltape Recorder. Many similar corporations are now using multiple Teltape units. Field operatives, secretaries and executives report amazing results in stepped-up efficiency, speed and accuracy.

Educational institutions such as **Columbia University, Yale, Wayne State and The Cooper Union in New York City** have Teltape Recorders in regular use, both by faculty and students. At Columbia University, a preview demonstration astonished a distinguished gathering of faculty members in the Audio-Visual Department's sound studios.

Magazine Editors Rave About Teltape

Special Press previews so excited and amazed leading magazine editors that immediate news releases were prepared and have appeared in such leading magazines as **Newsweek, Coronet, Parade, Esquire,** and many, many others. In fact, you will soon be reading about the marvels of the Teltape Recorder in more than 50 National Publications! Never before has a new product drawn such interest and enthusiasm from the nation's press.

Mail The No-Risk Coupon Today

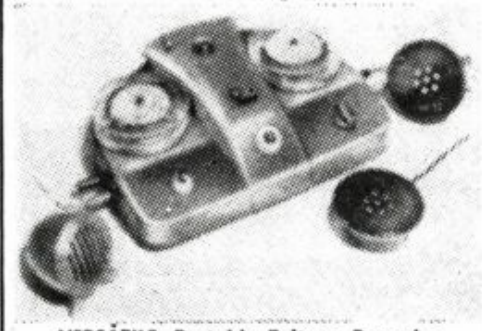
No longer do you have to rely on memory when, by just pressing a button, you can record every idea, thought, instruction or interview! Why not try the amazing Teltape Recorder in your own home or office yourself and see that every word we say about it is true.

Simply mail the no-risk coupon below. Within a few days the Teletape Recorder will be delivered to your door. See how beautifully constructed it is . . . note how easy it is to operate. See how the Teltape Recorder obeys your slightest command — records, plays back, erases . . . acts like a private secretary—never lets you make mistakes—never lets you forget. Put the Teltape Recorder to every test. Then, if you don't agree that it will save you time, effort and money . . . if you are not completely satisfied, return it within ten days and your money will be refunded at once, no questions asked.

Teltape Recorders Are In Short Supply!

The entire Teltape Recorder, the Head Set, Microphone, Magnetic Recording Tape and Reels cost just $29.95. That's because it is made in Western Germany, yet it is as accurate as costly tape recorders costing many times more. But, because it comes from Western Germany and the demand in Europe is tremendous, the supplies available to this country are very limited. Only if you act at once can we guarantee to fill your order. This offer may not be repeated in this paper this year. To get your Teltape Recorder for yourself, or for a gift, mail the coupon at right.

Thousands In Use Throughout The World By Business Firms, American And European Government Agencies, Embassies, Educators, Professional Men and Secret Service Agents!



VERSATILE, Portable Teltape Recorder

Here is the amazing new Teltape Recorder. The marvel product of West Germany's top Electronic and Mechanical Engineering brains. The Teltape Recorder is the most fabulous time-saving, work-saving, money-saving invention ever to be introduced to the American Public at such an unbelieveably low price that you simply cannot afford to pass it up. This portable precision instrument is battery operated. Nothing to plug in — No heavy expensive battery packs to carry — No springs to wind! Just a flick of the control switch and it's ready to capture any sound you wish!

Thousands In Use In The United States And On The Continent!

Ever since the Portable Teltape Recorder became available, it has been difficult to keep up with the tremendous demand. This unusually versatile and flexible tape recorder was originally slated to go on sale to the public in September 1957. However, because of the surprisingly large demand from major industrial firms and private businesses who purchased in quantities, we have been literally hoarding our remaining Teltape Recorders for fear of being sold out before new shipments arrived. By carefully scrutinizing and limiting our sales we have been able to save enough Teltape Recorders to take care of present sales from this announcement. When these units are sold we must wait patiently for further deliveries. This is why we sincerely urge you to send your order at once to take advantage of this outstanding offer. Do it today!

TELTAPE Transistor Tape Recorder ONLY $29.95 COMPLETE

Here's What You Get:

- TELTAPE Portable Transistor Recorder Equipped with Erase Head, Record-Playback Head, Fast Forward, Fast Rewind, Stop Controls, Pilot & Switch, Speed Control
- MICROPHONE for recording complete with plugs

Nothing Else To Buy

- HEADSET, complete with long cable and plugs
- MAGNETIC RECORDING TAPE, REELS. Splice-free virgin tape of finest quality

FREE! 20 Page Booklet that answers all your questions and helps you multiply the usefulness of your Teltape Recorder.

Here's What The Teltape Recorder Will Do For You—

Faithfully Records:

- LETTERS • IDEAS • INTERVIEWS
- SPEECHES • MUSIC • INSTRUCTIONS
- VERBAL AGREEMENTS • DISCUSSIONS
- PHONO RECORDINGS • RADIO-TV SHOWS

Hundreds of Uses

BUSINESSMEN (Office Use) Teltape quickly records anything that comes to mind. Simply dictate letters, sales summaries, field reports, memoranda into the microphone and it's done. Finished tapes can be played back immediately, errors can be erased and corrected. Tapes can be transcribed by any typist with a minimum of practice.

SALESMEN Take Teltape with you on the train, plane or car. Record ideas, sales discussions with customers, instructions, details. Mail tapes back to the office.

STUDENTS Read your lessons and then listen to them. Educators agree that this method of studying results in better marks, better memory retention because material is absorbed at the conscious and subconscious level.

PROFESSIONAL MEN Doctors—Record patient conversations, complaints, diagnoses. Take the recorded material along to specialist meetings and clinical conferences.

Lawyers — Record pre-trial examinations, testimony, client discussions, datum for preparation of briefs, memos to secretary.

DETECTIVES, INVESTIGATORS Tape conversations, evidence, secret testimony right on location.

REPORTERS Make an instantaneous record of events for later transmittal. Preserve your original, vivid impressions without error or bias. No writing!

FAMILY & HOME Record baby's first words, festive occasions, services, get-togethers, group singing, jokes, etc. You can record your favorite audio programs on TV or radio . . . or even duplicate recordings.

SERVICEMEN Talk to your loved ones thousands of miles away as easily as telephoning. Exchange tapes with your family, your sweetheart or friends.

There's no limit to the many uses of the precision-built TELTAPE Transistor Recorder. You'll find it an indispensable part of your life and wonder how you ever got along without it.

READ THIS MAJOR APPLIANCE WARRANTY

Each and every Teltape Recorder comes with a personal, individually numbered warranty certificate. This certificate will be permanently registered at our U.S. Service Bureau and will entitle you to complete replacement of parts and repairs for 90 days for merely parcel post and handling charges; and anytime after that for a full year at a very nominal service charge.

This is the same warranty contract that you receive when purchasing a $300.00 recorder. Our fully-equipped service department maintains a complete inventory of spare parts and replacements. You need never worry about being without the services of your Teltape Recorder for more than a short time.

Filnor Products, Inc.
Dept. PA-8
31 West 47th Street,
New York 36, N. Y.

SPECIAL INEXPENSIVE TELTAPE ACCESSORIES EXTENDS ITS USEFULNESS!

PATCHCORD A — Special plug-in attachment for playback through radio, TV or phonograph amplifier ..... **Price $2.00**

PATCHCORD B — Cable for recording directly from radio, TV or phonograph without interference ..... **Price $2.00**

STETHO-HEAD SET — Featherweight earphones leave hands free for taping dictated material ..... **Price $6.95**

MAGNETIC RECORDING TAPE — On reel. Highest quality tape for Teltape Recorder. 225 ft. ..... **Price, Ea. $1.25**

SPARE REELS — Empty reels are good to have for mailing purposes or storage ..... **Price, Ea. $ .35**

COMPLETE SET OF 4 BATTERIES ..... **Price $ .80**

MAIL NO RISK COUPON TODAY!

Filnor Products Inc., Dept. PA-8
31 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

I enclose $ ..... (check or money order) for items checked below.
Please send at once under the conditions of your warranty.

☐ COMPLETE TELTAPE RECORDER, Microphone, Head Set, Magnetic Recording Tape, Spare Reel and FREE Instruction Booklet. $29.95, plus $1.25 postage and handling.

☐ Patchcord A, $2.00
☐ Patchcord B, $2.00
☐ Stetho Set, $6.95
☐ Magnetic Tape, $1.25
☐ Empty Reel, $ .35
☐ Set of 4 Batteries, $ .80

Please Print To Avoid Errors And Delay

Name .....
Address .....
City ..... Zone ..... State .....

☐ Send C.O.D. Enclosed is $3.00 deposit. I will pay postman $ ..... plus all C.O.D. and shipping charges for items ordered.