SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

FEBRUARY 35¢
1957

EVERY DAY IS CHRISTMAS
A BRILLIANT NOVELETTE
by JAMES E. GUNN

MISSION: HYPNOSIS
by HARLAN ELLISON

WOMAN'S TOUCH
by EVELYN E. SMITH

ADVENTURE IN SPACE

For this, the second issue of SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION, we wanted a cover painting by Emsh.

To get the very best from an artist like Emsh, we believe in giving him the widest possible freedom. We don't like to tie him down to illustrating a specific story.

The result has justified our belief in Emsh. His cover painting tells a vivid and thrilling story of extra-terrestrial adventure. The men from Earth, with their faces warped in fear, have stumbled upon a burial ground, a cemetery for some gigantic Elder Race.. and one of them wasn't quite cold. Maybe the giant was in suspended animation when they mummified him, maybe he planned it that way. But in any case, he's walking again, and those venturesome Earthmen had better leg it away, but *fast*. There's danger in that painting, and there's suspense. There's a wire-tight tension bulging with electric possibilities.

That's the theme, too, of SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION. The entire issue you hold in your hand revolves on that keynote. Tension! Danger! Suspense! Those are the keywords in this and every issue of SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION. Read stories of men thrust into weird and unpredictable situations, read stories of unknown dangers and tight encounters with untamed forces. You'll enjoy SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION.

W. W. SCOTT

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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W. W. Scott — Editor

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MISSION: HYPNOSIS

NOVELET

by HARLAN ELLISON

Illustrated by EMSH

He was nothing but a trouble-maker, a malcontent they didn't want in the Space Navy. So why was he sent into enemy territory on the War's most important mission?

LAIRD Barley watched the coruscating, flickering lights.

The room was set up toward one focal-point—a great many seats in tiers behind him, the walls angled in so they slanted at the far end of the room into a small rectangle of glass, set into the wall itself. On that tunnel-like length of wall, the hypnomechs had set up the deep-trance machinery, and now the wavering, ever-changing lights were weaving their patterns, making him feel ancient, odd, strange, tired.

In the darkened auditorium of tiered seats, the uniforms of the Goner Squad mingled with those of the Navy. Voices hushedly mingled with each other. It only added to the euphoric feeling Barley tried desperately to combat.

Pinwheels of brilliant flamingo red, and sapphire blue, whipped and spun, forcing his eyes toward their ever-and-ever repetition. Dangling golden medallions swung from the low ceiling at the far end, beckoning his eyes to rest forever on their glittering roundnesses.

"Hey! What the hell is this?" Barley snapped.

When he spoke, his wire-thin lips opened with a small sound of saliva, and he looked like some angry fish, brought up unexpectedly from its sub-

sea darkness. His eyes were deep-set and black, hidden from view or emotion by overhanging brows and high, thin cheekbones. His nose had been broken as a child, when he had attempted to bully a younger boy, who had turned upon him and delivered a sound thrashing. During moments of oozing fury, he would rub that skew of nose-line.

Barley was a middle-sized man, lean and with the hungry electricity of the *sharpie*. Though just slightly overweight, he looked to be all angles and edges, like a crystal square. He gave the *appearance* of angles!

Behind him, in the uniformed audience filling the tiers, a man wearing the ensign of the Goner Squad stood up, reached for the hand-mike someone handed him.

He blew into the mike momentarily, to see if it was clear and working. He took a breath, but before he could speak the rippling crash-sound of a flight of inverspace ships going over the building blotted away all quiet. He waited a moment, as eyes raised to the ceiling, and tongues licked nervously across lips, till their passage died to silence.

Then: "This is the deep-trance room, Barley. This is where we set you up for the mission."

Barley started nervously, craned his neck around to get a glimpse of the speaker.

"Yeah? Who's that?"

The sad-eyed man in the Goner Squad ensign spoke into the mike with very little inflection, a great deal of feeling. "I'm Farranaught, Barley. Of the Goner Squad. Your immediate superior."

Farranaught watched the thin-lipped, dark man with something close to revulsion. "Why are you resisting the deep-trance machines, Barley? We have to set you up for this mission or..."

"Yeah!" Barley cut him off. "Yeah, that's what I want to know! What *is* this mission business? You guys told me I'd be mustered out if I went for this mish...and I only joined up to get that bonus, y'know, and it's spent, so I want out if I can. Y'understand that, don't ya?"

THE uniformed man named Farranaught gripped the bar of the hand-mike tightly, his mouth going white at the edges. His voice held a contemptuous tinge. "Yes, we understand, Barley. Is that why you've made yourself such a n u i s a n c e the last four months?"

Barley half-turned in the chair. The restraining leather straps of the complicated chair held him in place lightly, but he was able to turn his head slightly. The flickering colors of the hypnowheels and deep-trance equipment sent cascading shadows of a hundred colors slipping along walls and ceiling. He could not get a clear look at Farranaught in the darkness behind him, but his words—though directed at the wall—were quick to find their mark.

"Yeah. Yeah, if ya want to know, that's the reason. I only signed into the Navy to get that bonus.

"Y'didn't think I wanted to go out there and get eaten alive by the Gobbleys, did ya?" His laugh echoed harshly in the silent room.

"We call them the Aldeberanites, Barley. Not Gobbleys! They come from Aldeberan, so we don't call them Gobbleys in the Navy." His tone was firm and angry.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. The A l d e b e r-whatchamacallits. Yeah, I know. They're still Gobbleys. They eat an Earthman if they catch him, don't they?"

"We aren't here to argue with you, Barley," the speaker said. "There's no proof they eat *anyone!*"

"Okay, okay. I'm only sayin' what I heard. We been fightin' this war how long now...?"

Farranaught grudgingly inserted, "Three years."

"...the Gobbleys been beatin' hell outta us for three years," Barley continued, "and I don't wanna go out there so's they can get their teeth into me any sooner, that's all.

"So I wanna know, what's this mish all about? I wanna muster out, y'unnerstand *that* don'tcha?"

"Yes, we understand that, Barley."

"And I'll get the double-bonus for this mish?"

The speaker's voice was

strained and tired. He leaned against the chair before him. "Yes, you'll certainly get your bonus, Barley...and then we hope we never see you again. You've been more trouble to the service than any raw recruit we've taken in since the Navy began!"

Barley laughed. "I'm pretty good, ain't I?"

"Yes, you're pretty good, Barley." Farranaught's voice was tinged with suppressed fire, and his hatred for the malcontent in the hypnochair was obvious.

Then too, there was *something* other, in his voice.

Abruptly, as though everyone in the room sensed there had been more talking than was usual, than was necessary, than was proper, a rustle of breathing whispered through the darkness.

Yet Barley was not satisfied.

"Okay, so what's the mish about already? Somethin' cushy?"

"You'll know soon enough. Ready with that helmet?" he addressed the hypnomechs.

The men in white lab jackets brought the lightweight mesh-helmet to Barley; slipped it through a rod that protruded up from the back of the chair —giving the entire affair the appearance of an ancient barber's chair—placed it on his head, clamped it, dogged it, and fixed the bracer-rods so the man could not move his head.

One of the hypnomechs lowered the eyelid guards, and in a few seconds Barley was sighted on the wall of glass, his eyes firmly open, unable to shut them.

"But what's this all about?" Barley demanded, suddenly frightened by his restraint.

"This is a mission for the Navy's Goner Squad," Farranaught answered, that *something* ringing in his tones.

"What the hell they call this the Goner Squad for? I wanna..."

The lights spun to and from back and blur to reality back with a whip, whistle, whip, whistle, changing, altering and the always shining never darkening slivers of ever and back to shine with themes merging in the spectrum of never always toward and toward and toward blanking stars!

"HEY!" Barley screamed, the lights flickering on the glass wall, merging like clouds of some strange gas. Like fireworks exploding noiselessly in his brain.

The lights spun to and fro; they whipped in and out of the visible spectrum with blinding fastness. They shoved into colors weird and strange, ever building, coruscating, flashing, reflecting in Barley's dark eyes.

His head tilted, and his eyes abruptly became unstaring unstuck. They flickered to shut, pausing on the threshold of sleep.

In four seconds he was deeply hypnotized.

In eight seconds his threshold had been lowered and all barriers had been sublimated.

In thirteen seconds he had gone down, down, down, down, down to an infinite bottom.

In twenty-eight seconds he was no longer Laird Barley, but a senseless mass of protoplasm, slumped in something like an ancient barber's chair. In twenty-eight seconds he was ready, and the alert, trained hypno-therapist (who had, himself, been screened, tranced and cleared for this assignment) buried the message...

...and something else.

"WHAT'RE ya talkin' about? What? What the hell ya mean, I gotta go out into Gobbley country? Ya crazy or somethin'! I wanted *outta* this goddam outfit... this Navy's set up for killin' and I wanna live! I'll be goddamed if I'll go out there and let them blue sonsabi..."

Farranaught's jaw quivered. His neck reddened inside the Navy uniform with the Goner Squad ensign. He raised his hand half-threateningly, half to silence the screaming tirade of Laird Barley.

Then his voice clamped down like the lid of a conning hatch. His words metaled out, and they meant nothing but what they said:

"Listen to me, Barley. Listen to me good, because if I lose patience with you—and God knows I'm on the edge of it this very second!—I'll ship you out there without directives, and they'll fry your skin till your eyeballs pop and your bladder dries up!"

He was gripping the edge of the desk with one hand, clamping his pipe too tightly with the other. His long, hungry face was white with fury.

"Now listen," Barley tried to interrupt arrogantly, "you can't bushwhack me! I may be in the Navy now, but I'm an Earthside citizen, and I'll get up a goddam lawyer before I'll let ya..."

"Shut your God-damned blasted mouth, Barley!" And Farranaught rose from behind the desk. His massive, wedge-tapering chest sloped into a slim waist. He was prosthetic from hips down, and when they'd re-molded his lower torso from plastic, they'd added four inches to his already long, wiry frame. He stood six five, and it seemed more. He was an imposing man to try talking down.

Barley fell sullenly silent, his lips thinning out to a defiant line.

"You've been nothing but a trouble-maker since you hit boot camp, Barley! You joined the Navy to get that bonus. I told the public-relations bright-boys it would attract scum like you, but no, they had to be the sharp-thinkers! Okay, so we got you, and you had your six weeks and your big-money bonus, and now you think you'll fox us out of your service time by being a malcontent...or by having us brig you, huh? Is that it, Barley, you lousy gold-bricking fake? Is that the story?"

Barley made no reply, but his tiny, black eyes squinted in reckless hatred.

"I'll get to you someday, Farranaught," he slid the words between his lips as though they were razor blades.

"You're wrong, Laird Barley. We've got a system for weeding out the punks in the ranks. We didn't beg you to serve your world, but since you joined up—you'll serve."

Barley eyed the Navy man with twin furnaces of despising in his eyes. "Someday," he said quietly.

"Someday, Barley? I'm worried!" Farranaught rapped out a short laugh. "Someday?"

He swung the briar pipe against his hip, and it rang with a glassy tinkle. "Hear that, Barley? I got that doing something you'd never consider: dragging a man out of the

pile-room of a blown ship. What did *you* do to make that mouth flap so easily, Barley?

"Did you beat up a rookie eight inches shorter than you?

"Did you insult your superiors and molest their wives?

"You did *all* of those, didn't you, Barley?" He lifted the dossier on his desk, made a slashing movement with it and threw it in Barley's face. Papers slid out across the floor as the dark man jumped back a step.

Farranaught spat across the desk, wetting down Barley's jumper front. "You miserable slimey punk! Good men are getting their skulls blown open all the way to Aldeberan, so you can eat three a day, and you've got the nerve to rob their bonuses! Well, the system's caught up with you Barley; we've got the Goner Squad, and you're about to become a part of it."

Barley stepped forward, placed his hands on the desk, leaned in toward the tall Navy man. His mouth opened to reveal small, even, too-well-cared-for teeth.

"I am, huh, boss? Well, make me."

Farranaught slumped back into the chair, pulled a kitchen match from a glass holder on his desk, lit the pipe with three lung-pulling drags. He eyed Barley coldly and archly.

"See that door, Barley?"

The malcontent nodded, his eyes darting toward the press-plate on the door. His expression flashed danger from eyes and mouth.

"It leads to the dropshaft. It'll bring you out on the street. There's a rotocab waiting down there usually. You can be out of this office, out of the Navy Building, and out of sight, in a minute and a half. I know; I've clocked it.

"Want to try it?"

Before he could even finish offering the escape, the thin-lipped Barley had launched himself from the chair, taken three rapid steps across the floor, and laid his palm flat to the press-plate. Farranaught made no move to intercept him; he stolidly puffed at the pipe.

SUDDENLY the ebony-eyed man stopped. He froze, legs in mid-step, hand on the door.

Abruptly he screamed—high and piercing as a supersonic whistle—throwing back his head, his dirty blond hair flowing about him as though it were electrically charged.

Instantly he clutched his face, screaming continuously. He began clawing at the sallow flesh of his cheeks, as though trying to rip them off. Then he fell to the floor, twisted in on himself, writhed and scratched at the floor.

His screams became shorter, sharper, closer together, more painful. His hair stood straight up on end, and he ripped feverishly at his clothes.

He was jerked to a sitting position, his legs out before him, his face writhingly pulled out of shape like some strange plastoid putty. His black eyes started from their sockets, and his tongue swelled in his mouth. He tried to mumble something coherent, but it stifled in his throat.

He became violently ill across the floor.

Then—as quickly as it had come—the spasms left, and he fell back with a crash, perspiring freely, shaking and quivering in every fiber. Lying in his own filth.

Nervous release hit all at once. Side-reactions set in. Barley slid around to a sitting position, fumbling and clutching himself pathetically. Then he began to cry.

He sat there, hunched over, head in hands and moaned terribly.

Faranaught's teeth clenched down bitterly on the stem of the black briar. He let his eyes slide up toward the ceiling, not watching the reduction of the arrogant malcontent to a huddle of quivering flesh.

He stabbed a finger at a button on his desk-console, and the mekkokleen slid out of its wall-hutch, rolled over and began unreeling its suction-hose.

In a few seconds it had cleaned up the foul mess from the floor. It whirred to itself intimately, waited for further orders, and as Farranaught jabbed the button a second time, scurried back to its nest.

In a few minutes, Barley gasped heavily for breath, got up from the floor unsteadily, and fell back into the chair.

His nose was running, and

he swabbed at it loosely with the sleeve of his green Navy uniform, Farranaught keyed open a drawer and drew out a large box of tissues. He slid the box across to Barley.

The dark-eyed man ran a shaking hand through his lank blond hair, and accepted one sullenly. He daubed at his face almost daintily, as though it felt raw and tender.

"Wh-what d-did ya do ta m-me?" he had difficulty speaking; his teeth chattered as though he were freezing.

"You're keyed-in, Barley. We've got you triggered proper for this job. We know which way your guts are wound, Barley—we've seen others like you. This job has to be done, and you've been elected but we don't want you yellowing and running when we ship you out."

"I'll—I'll g-get even, you... you'll see!" his voice was a broken clutch of gasps and lurches. He spoke with a spastic irregularity, his words blurting.

"I doubt it, Barley," Farranaught answered, and his eyes held truth.

THE Navy man slid back from the desk, his chair clicking in its runners. He ran a hand through his straight-combed grey hair and walked to a press-plate on the wall. He palmed it and a full-wall map fluoresced into being. "We've got a depressor in there with the thing we want you to carry, Barley.

"It'll keep you going in the right direction, because every time you try to turn back, you'll get the same. Only it gets progressively worse each time. Remember that."

Barley seemed to be doing just that. Beads of sweat slid across his forehead, and his tongue wet the corner of his mouth for an instant.

Then he drew a deep breath, settled back in the chair, some of his false bravado coming back slowly. "Whaddaya mean, about what I'm carrying? What is it you got in me?"

"You're carrying a message, Barley. A message so important it might mean the end of the war. We've got it hypno-buried so they can't get it out, should you be captured. But we don't want you to be captured; we want you to get through to Al-

deberan Center and deliver this message to our agent."

"Agent? How'm I supposed to know him?"

Farranaught leaned up against the fluoro-map. His legs were plastic, but the upper body they supported was not; he grew tired quickly, these days. And men like Barley made it no easier for him.

But then, the Goner Squad wasn't an easy operation.

"He'll make himself known to you. He's an Aldeberanite. He'll get to you before you land—you just stand by. He has the key-in phrase that will release the message from your sub-subconscious. Clear?"

Barley didn't answer. He still didn't want to go out there . . . into Gobbley territory.

Farranaught knew how he felt. It had been a bitterly blood-filled three years of war. He didn't want to send Barley out there—even a man like Barley—but better the malcontent than a *good* man.

"Why me, boss? What's so special about me?"

Farranaught pursed his lips. "I can't tell you that."

He turned back to the map of the galaxy, carefully but rapidly pointing out refuel dumps, life-stations, the enemy lines and his ultimate destination.

Behind him, Barley felt the nape of his neck, felt the tiny incision the hypno-therapist had made.

Farranaught continued talking, his voice slipping into a monotone of directions. Barley only half-listened.

He could feel the tide of helplessness and fear rising up like a gigantic, smothering wave from his stomach.

And he thought he knew what the Goner Squad was.

"ARE you here to see anyone off, Commander Farranaught?"

"You a reporter?"

"*Look At Life*, sir. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"About what?"

"Are you here to see anyone offworld?"

"No comment."

"That could mean anything, Commander."

"Exactly."

"Well, since we've gotten nowhere on that score, let's try something else."

"I'm rather busy . . . what did

you say your name was?"

"Hemple. Ralph Hemple... now did you say..."

"Aren't you the one who did the piece on Crasnof?"

"That's right. You read it?"

"Yes. Don't you think it was a bit overplayed? He didn't *quite* take half the Aldeberanite armada with him."

"Commander, to my mind, Howard Crasnof was one of the greatest heroes the space Navy has produced. He was a man of strength and a credit to his world. I tried to write that aricle as I would about my own father. No, I don't think it was overplayed! And I'm kind of proud my article touched off the Crasnof Memorial Fund. When they build that pillar, you won't think it was overplaying.

"You may not realize it, Commander, but this world is pretty damned grateful to Crasnof."

"Yeah. Grateful."

"You know, Commander, you don't look so hot. Something wrong?"

"Stick to your reporting, brother."

"Okay, okay, just inquiring. Do you have any statement on Navy policy...or the Crasnof battle...or..."

"Crasnof was a good man. Crasnof was a hero. Crasnof died a patriot and a credit to the Goner Squad. Cras..."

"*What* squad did you say?"

"Uh...I said he was a goner in his squad. He died a credit to the Space Navy."

"You say that as though you'd memorized it, Commander."

"You wouldn't be far wrong."

"I didn't catch that, Commander. Would you speak up; the ships taking off are pretty loud you know."

"I didn't say a damned thing."

"Are you here to see anyone offworld, sir?"

"I thought we went through that already."

"Er, yes. Well, if that's all Commander, thanks a lot."

"Yeah. Sure. Any time."

"That goddammed close-mouthed bastard. You'd think he wasn't proud of Crasnof. Wouldn't give a sample of skin from Crasnof's little toe for that entire sonofabitch. Landbound slob. Wonder what He's here for..."

THE ship huddled off-center on the blast-pit area. It was surrounded by passenger liners, supply ships, scouters, inverspace destroyer-dreadnaughts, and assorted small-shape craft. It was unmarked; it appeared to be just another supply ship bound for Callisto or Margreeah or Hawsome's Hole.

It was a stubby craft of dull-grey metal, and the inverspace equipment was also tiny. It was a fast ship, but an innocuous one, capable of losing itself in the corridors of space and arriving at its destination.

Barley was strapped in, and Farranaught quietly fed him any last minute details available, about enemy strength and placement.

Then the area was cleared, and while the families of pleasure-seekers, unknowing reporters, greasemonkeys, and assorted Navy uniforms watched—many thinking this was just another hipity-flight and wasn't it a shame they were wasting all that fuel when there was a war on—the stubby ship took of.

Laird Barley threw the ship out toward space, and immediately made move to change direction...before he slipped into inverspace. His hand got three inches from the course-comp, and the nausea began to wash against the inside of his head.

He retracted his hand instantly, memory of that first attack knotting his somach horribly.

The ship sped out toward Mars; at a fractionally-designated point, the course—comp *bonged* to itself, Barley strapped in, and the ship scudded off to invisibility...and inverspace.

They were plotting it from the Navy Building. Farranaught was back at his desk, and his deskom blurped, "He's gone off into not-space, Sir."

Farranaught passed a hand across the plate. "Thanks. Stand by."

He passed the hand across again, and the machine went dead.

Crasnof a hero, he thought. *Howie Crasnof who was wanted in Australia for rape and murder. A hero. He died fighting, taking the Aldeberanite*

left wing with him. Broke the back of the armada. Oh, that's great! That's just peachy!

His lean, hungry face drew down into one of utter despair. Suddenly a floodgate opened, and all the agonies of his mind rushed out to lodge in his face. Vernon Farranaught looked eight hundred years old. His grey hair slipped over his forehead as he rubbed his temples, but he made no move to comb it back. It was a lousy day.

And I'll probably have to bribe twice as many people to start a Laird Barley Memorial, he grunted to himself. *I'll have to...the guy was twice the bastard Crasnof was.*

In both cases he used the past tense.

THEY descended like a cloud of locust on him, twenty light-years out from Aldeberan. How he had made it that far was a matter of sheer luck, the skill of fear and the utter vastness of deep space.

But as he neared the Center, having slipped out of the convoluted other-plane of inverspace, to make the last run in normal drive, his chances of being sighted increased mathematically.

He had tried to turn back, to run off into space, a hundred times, but each time he had gotten a twinge of the hell in his skull and had kept firmly to course.

He had decided his best bet was to sell out. To co-operate with the Gobbleys (if they'd let him) and let them dig out that hypno-buried message, and then to help them finger the agent. Whatever happened to him—or to Earth—was not *his* concern. Look, what they'd done to him! He owed Earth no allegiance...and besides, he'd probably do better financially if he helped the Gobbleys. Aside from staying alive.

He had made these decisions.

Until they descended on him from above.

Before he was aware of what was happening, three dreadnaughts and a double-dozen escorters of the Gobbley fleet were on him, vectoring out of the stars, keeping the light of a nearby yellow dwarf star in his eyes.

They arced over him, spraying with deadly accuracy. Be-

fore Barley could throttle back into inverspace, before he could plot an evasion-course, they soundlessly bolted him, their thirty-thread disruptors burning away bulkheads and outer hull with equal ease, melting the inverspace equipment to slag, leaving his tiny ship gasping for direction.

Barley sat immobile at the controlcomp, watching the black hole of space dotted with the maggots of star-trails as the ship slewed over and over and over. Terror shivered up his spine, kept his hands fastened to the controlcomp, even after it was dead and useless.

It was the sound of the self-sealing bulkhead doors slamming down into their jackets, between him and the sections blasted open to space, that brought him to conscious awareness.

Then his horror mounted to a frenzy, and he threw himself from the chair, struggling madly with the press-plate of the spacesuit cabinet. Finally he got it open.

Barley just had time to slip into the suit, palming the air-tight seams shut. He could see the three dreadnaughts—big as planets—swarming in on him in the viewplate. He had no idea what they intended, but all the horror stories he had helped dream up to scare the rookies, stories of the eating habits of the Gobbleys, came back in full view. He blanched and began running madly down the scoutship's corridors, looking.

He tried to find the lifeboat, but the scouter they had assigned him was too small to carry one, and he was trapped there, between the death-black of space and the fearsome unknown factor of the Aldeberanites.

They snagged in his scouter from the lead dreadnaught with their electric grapples and brought the ship alongside. It clunked to with a hollow ring, and he heard the escape hatches on the Gobbley ship clanking open.

Ten minutes later they came into the pilot's cab and found him there, cowering in his suit, on his knees, moisture clouding the faceplate of the suit, his hands clasped tightly together in front of him, begging over and over, mumblingly, "Don't eat me, please don't eat

me, oh please dear God don't let them eat me...I'll tell them anything they want to know... just don't let them eat me!"

The Aldeberanites didn't even bother with cuffs for the prisoner.

A solid shove was sufficient.

THEY were eight feet tall, thick of body and covered with spines, like some horribly animated cactus. Their skins were an oily blue, resembling raw paint freshly squeezed from its tube. Their mouths were the mouths of frogs—wide, flap-lipped and toothless—which killed the idea they might eat him. Their tongues were long, forked, and hinged at the front; their eyes were pocketed atop their oblong skulls, as frog's eyes.

Three fingers to the hand, each ending in a ceremonially-painted fingernail three inches long. Razor-sharp and tinkling, those nails were deadly weapons during in-fighting.

Barley, however, never testted that possibility. He did not resist. He did no infighting... or fighting of any sort. He went with them quietly, all the way to Aldeberan Center, to the War Palace, where they interrogated him.

The War Palace stretched up almost a mile. It was a strangely-built edifice of labyrinthine corridors and multicolored glass facets. It covered nearly fifty miles of the planet, and in its depths and heights the entire war with the Earthmen was fought.

Like some gigantic chess game, armied by computer-p a w n s, coursecomp-knights, bishops that were strategists, rooks of psychmen and hypnotherapists and King and Queen who were in reality The Elders...those who had conceived the war...the War Palace hummed and clattered, clicked and spoke, and across the depth of a galaxy, to the reaches of sight and beyond, a war was fought.

To the War Palace they brought Laird Barley and his buried message:

"I'll tell ya who I am, I'll tell ya anything ya wanna know...just let me go! I'm carrying a message, they hypnoed me, and if you do it careful, you can get it out and I'll help ya! I'll go out in space someplace, off where I won't

tell anything about the war, and you won't have any trouble with me...I'll help ya kill those bastards back on Earth ...honest to G..."

The Querist slapped-slashed him soundly at that point.

The Aldeberanites were a basically logical people, and thirty years before they had learned there was wealth to be had, merely by asserting one facet of their racial personality.

That facet was simply their agressiveness. They were drivers, and the bulk of the galaxy's races were *not* drivers. They were lollers, and they were relaxers, and they were farmers.

Thus it was simple for the Aldeberanites to overwhelm a great section of the galaxy. That they ruled it wisely and well meant little to the Space Navy or to Earth. They were conquerors, and of course, conquerors must themselves be conquered.

But the Aldeberanites despised a coward as much as the next race. It was a constant throughout the galaxy. The man who turned against his kind was an outcast—if he turned against his own, who, then, could trust him?—and Laird Barley drew from these hideous conquerors the contempt he deserved.

Barley ran a quaking hand across his cheek, where the three deep slashes of the Querist's ceremonial-nails had left blood-welling troughs. His eyes, black and fearful, widened as he stared across the Query Desk into the eyes of the coldly logical Gobbley. "No," he murmured in terror, though he had no idea what they intended.

"Put him under the hypnoprobe," the Querist said, in his watery-tongued diction, sneering down his frog's face at the Earthman. "And if this is all we have to battle, the war will be over shortly."

Then he repeated it in Pidgin-Terran, so Barley could sweat.

"No! No, I'll help ya! Ya can't do it...ya can send me back and I'll spy for ya! I'll do anything ya want, but don't hurt me, please, please, please, please, don't hurt me!" Tears began to flow again.

Then the Querist answered Barley with an ancient racial

maxim: "Contempt for his own race, brings a man contempt from all the *other* races.

"To the Probe!"

THEY dragged him kicking, literally kicking and screaming; thrashing and frothing, beating idly with his fists and drooling with his slack mouth. But they dragged him and they tightened the straps and they turned on the Probe, and the Querist was pleased to see the burial job had not been as complete as might have been expected.

It was there all right, the message they had sent a man across a galaxy to deliver. It was buried there, all right.

But there seemed to be no reason for burying it in the head of a craven coward, a turncoat.

The probing tore away too-delicate tissue. It ripped open the brain and plunged its shining metal pincers into the core. In a matter instant-short, they had reduced Barley to the state of a mindless idiot. Yet the message was still there.

Finally they reached it, and in his subconscious something came alert. Unconscious and half-dead for all other purposes, his mind blanked away, Barley repeated the message, keying himself in.

The message was: *"You're dead!"*

And they were, and so was their War Palace, and so was their planet. For when he said the key-words, the mass-destruction bomb buried in his skull was triggered, began eating the atmosphere, ending the war finally and terribly, and Laird Barley went up to ashes in roaring flames with his captors.

THE dials sensitive to the bomb registered the heat-increase at Aldeberan Center. In the office of the Goner Squad, in the Navy Building on Earth, Farranaught saw the dial indicator leap and smash itself against the far notch. Farranaught gripped the arms of his chair, clamped his teeth fiercely onto the pipestem.

"The bomb went off as scheduled, Sir," the deskom squawked.

Farranaught leaped at the noise, but passed a hand across it quickly. He said wearily, "Yes, I know. Stand by."

"Shall we prepare the Hero's Posthumous Medal and the Glory Funeral Service now, sir?" the box requested.

Farranaught wiped a hand across his forehead, letting a few strands of his perfectly-straight grey hair fall over his fingers. He nodded his head, then realizing the movement conveyed nothing to the waiting adjutant, said, "Yes, go ahead, Lieutenant. And get out those prepared news releases."

He began to pass his hand before the machine, shutting it to inactive, and stopped himself.

"Oh...and Lieutenant?"

The voice, "Yes, sir?"

"Get me a line through to a reporter named Ralph Hemple at *Look At Life* magazine."

"Yes, sir. Anything else, Commander?"

"And—uh—don't disturb me for an hour or so. I have some things to do."

He passed his hand across the deskom. It glowed INACTIVE, and he sat there for a moment. Then he picked up the pen, began to write for formal release:

"Barley was a good man. Barley was a hero. Barley died a patriot and a credit to the Goner Squa..."

He stopped and crossed out the last two words. He continued crossing the page with ink-heavy lines till the paper ripped through.

Then he crumpled the paper viciously, and threw it into the disposer. He sat there the full hour, not moving.

Just thinking.

THE END

ULTIMATE MEASURE

by SCOTT NEVETS

In order to develop an accurate measuring unit, scientists now are reversing the age-old alchemist's dream of transmuting mercury into gold—by turning gold into mercury!

This process is necessary for use in the interferometer technique of measurement, which provides the most accurate possible definition of the length of an inch or of a meter. Old methods of determining lengths stem from a single bar of metal kept under heavy guard in the International Bureau of Weights and Measures, in Paris. The bar is inscribed with two lines whose distance, by world agreement, is exactly one meter.

But metal guages are subject to temperature distortion, bending, and other hazards over the course of time—and the interferometer method assures a permanent and unvarying standard.

It is necessary to use Mercury 198—a rare isotope which is produced by bombarding Gold (Atomic weight 197) with neutrons. The transmutation was first accomplished at the Oak Ridge Laboratories in 1945, when 40 ounces of gold were used to produce some 60 milligrams of Mercury 198.

Used in sealed vacuum tubes, the Mercury vapor gives off green light—and it is this, when beamed at an interferometer, that provides us with our standard of measurement. An interferometer is a device which splits a beam of light in such a way that it is possible to measure its wavelength by counting "interference rings" as the beam of light bounces back and forth between the two mirrors of the instrument; Mercury 198 provides an absolutely unvariable and easily measured wavelength of 5460.752 angstrom units, or about 21.5 millionths of an inch—a sharp green line free from complex structure, the ultimate measure of length.

THE GREAT ILLUSION

by MANLY BANNISTER

Illustrated by KELLY FREAS

There was something phony about the whole set-up on that planet. Their culture was counterfeit. But why did they go to so much trouble to put on their act?

CLIFF Rowley's lean jowls beaded with sweat in the stagnant warmth of the tent. He tapped a bony finger on the camp table and glared at the communicator.

"C l e a r out in a week! *Why?*"

Commander Waldo Spliid's tired voice trickled from the communicator grid. Rowley would have appreciated video hook-up now. He wondered how Spliid's features portrayed his thoughts.

"Here's final classification on Hume, Cliff. Category two X sub one."

"Closed world!" R o w l e y groaned. "We've only been here three months!"

"Eleven men in the field, Cliff. You're the odd ball. Everybody else is satisfied Hume is only a step above savagery in culture. Top rating is satisfied. I don't like the conflicting picture of it, myself, but..."

"Nor I," Rowley stabbed. The look in his hazel eyes hardened.

"You wouldn't," Spliid said calmly, "even without seeing the reports. You're a percie, Cliff—our only psi-sensitive on Hume. But you've got to do a lot more than you've done yet to impress top rating. They're keener on the things you can't do than the things you can."

"A few more months, Commander..."

"A week, Cliff. Seven days. Get in and dig for all you're worth."

"Me and my little psychic shovel," Rowley commented bitterly.

A hum came out of the comm. Somewhere, far above the atmosphere of Hume, the Survey ship, with Spliid on board, cruised among the stars.

"Clean up any questions you can," Spliid went on. "Bring your notes up to date. The pilot boat will pick you up... let's see...this is Wednesday ...Wednesday for us, anyway. Next Wednesday, then. Have everything ready to load. And keep on reporting."

Rowley started to retort, thought better of it. He switched off the comm.

Well, that did it. They'd had it, as far as Hume was concerned. And the puzzle still stared him in the face—*him*, Rowley, the boy who was going to do great things, like with teleconscious apprehension, with psychometry, with....

Psi-sensitives were new in the Galactic Ethnological Survey Corps—Galethsurv in the cryptic, telegraphic coding of service vernacular. Spliid had not been sarcastic when he had called Rowley a "percie", the abbreviated, half-humorous, half-scornful, scuttle-butt designation for the percipients.

Percipiency was still too new in the ethnological service to evaluate. A percie had hunches and feelings he was supposed to follow. Sometimes, it seemed, a percipient vaulted completely over painful steps of reasoning and "cogged" a conclusion that was often correct. The ability could be valuable, if properly used. That's where Rowley's harness rubbed. His wasn't being used.

He *knew* something was wrong on Hume. But if Galethsurv wanted to overlook his recommendation for further study, it should be no concern of his.

But he couldn't run away from a problem that challenged him to solve it.

LONG grass swished against his calves as he strolled thoughtfully down toward the village of thatched, stone houses, bathed in the pink glow of a setting sun. Blue smoke

curled lazily over stone chimneys, and even from this distance, he could hear the sharp, shrill voices of children raised in play. He took in the scene with a single glance, the stream running beside the village, the small, brown figures darting about the grassy lanes.

The village was nestled in a hollow of the rolling land. Beyond it and stalking around it to enclose it in a clasp of balsam, lay the great pine forest of Hume. Not really pine, but an other-world equivalent of it, each tree spaced a precise, geometrical distance from its neighbor, towering toward flecks of burnt-orange and mauve-colored clouds in the aquamarine sky.

The forest of Hume was gigantic, mystifying. It challenged the mind. It covered the whole land surface of Hume with its geometrical spacing of trees. And the people who populated Hume called themselves Keepers of the Trees.

Rowley tried to grasp the fact that what he saw here was almost endlessly repeated over the broad face of Hume. Why did he think that the *real* culture of Hume was otherwise than what he saw? A thousand thousand villages, purpling in the swift-rushing sunset... a myriad of slender semi-savages, who spent their lives tending the trees. If he, Rowley, could perceive more than other men, then what did he perceive here? He wished he knew.

What *was* the real culture? What lay behind this facade? Why did he think the impressions of his ordinary senses reported only the outward effect of a mere stage play? It was a mighty big play, performed for a very small audience—the eleven investigators for Galethsurv. How could he get to the bottom of the puzzle in the few days remaining, with no more guide than an inexplicable "feeling" of falseness? Time was so short!

The illusion of reality in the village was strong enough to overwhelm him. Teramis was scratching in his garden while the light faded from the sky. He waved and called out to Rowley as he went by. Teramis had spent the day, with the rest of the villagers, among the trees, removing moss and

insects, clipping dead branches ...why?

Shy, big-eyed little kids, showing brown where they weren't clothed, ran in the grassy streets. Unusually—unnecessarily—clean for the offspring of a semi-savage people, he thought.

Tsu was drawing water from the creek as he came up. She paused, holding the water jar against youthful breasts, restrained under the taut fabric of her yellow sarong. Like others of her race, she was surpassingly slender, breathtakingly beautiful in the liquid melody of her movements. Her face was long, tanned, glowing with the ripeness of youth. Her eyes, long, tip-tilted, were lidded with mystery, and her black hair was substanceless shadow caressing her shoulders.

It almost came to him as he looked at her, greeted her. Did Tsu look the part of a shy, savage maiden of the wild? He had to admit that she did... she looked like an over-enthusiastic video casting director's idea of category two X sub one maidenhood.

The implications slipped from his mind as she clasped his hand. The warm flesh of her palm felt firm against his.

An electric tingle wriggled up his arm. Not even the rigor of his emotional conditioning could have prevented that much. It was not good for field men to be bothered by emotions. It made their work difficult; they found wives on sub-standard worlds and wanted to bring them out to civilization; or, they reverted to the wilds themselves with their mates. The Corps conditioned its men against anything like that, so that emotional vagaries could not disturb the single-mindedness trained into them —to discover and interpret in the field.

"Good evening, *sintaha* Rowley," Tsu said.

He followed her into the house she shared with Smarin and Torl, her parents. They greeted Rowley warmly, slim, smiling, happy as usual.

It was a stage play, performed for his benefit. He moved around among the actors, but he was not an actor himself. He was the audience.

Rowley had been in this house often, always with a

haunting sense of wrongness. He knew it as well as he knew his own tent. Living room, kitchen, two bedrooms and quarters for bathing. Clean people, the natives of Hume.

Rowley sat on the stone stoop and contemplated the gathering shadows. Tsu came out and sat close beside him. He asked her again about the trees, why the people tended them.

"It is proper to tend the trees, *sintaha* Rowley. We have done so always."

Was she evading? Or did he fully understand her language, simple as it was? He had learned it quickly, and had wondered at the time that it was so similar in grammar and syntax to his own. An odd coincidence—or deliberate casting, to impress the play more easily on the audience?

"Tomorrow," he said, "I should like to learn more about the trees."

"If it will please you," she said.

ANOTHER sun was setting. Another day had gone to join the fruitless ones preceding it. The expedition among the trees had told him nothing. Everything was the same as Tsu had explained several times before. His alerted senses found no discrepancy. He was disappointed, and he said as much in his evening report to Commander Spliid.

"It adds up," Spliid said encouragingly.

Rowley felt a glow.

"You get it?"

"No, frankly. But top rating must have the right slant. Where does percipiency leave off and old fashioned imagination begin? You're functioning like a percie, even when there's nothing to perceive."

"I thought *you* weren't satisfied..."

"I'm not a percie, Cliff. Any dissatisfaction I may feel is aroused by the conflicting reports of the field men. Anyway, we can probably clear that up in the correlating department."

Rowley's heart sank. "You *are* satisfied!"

The speaker hummed. Spliid said, flatly, "I've got to be. Everybody else is...except you."

Rowley grunted. "Six days!

I'll try to uncover something."

Spliid's voice sounded worried. "I hate this, Cliff. Your talents can be valuable to the Corps. We deal in cubic parsecs of space and aeons of time. It takes more than ordinary reasoning power to cope with it."

"I believe you mean it," Rowley said.

"I do. So what's Hume? One world in millions."

Rowley's switched him off. He bit his lip. It was Galethsurv's purpose to make single, cohesive sense out of the patch-work, and tatterdemalion shreds of human culture that had been systematically turned up in the galaxy. Where did the culture of Hume fit into that overall pattern?

Galethsurv believed that the distribution of mankind among the stars had not been accident. Where, then, had Man originated? It was important to know. Remembrance of yesterday points the way toward a more highly educated guess about tomorrow. Someday, Man would find out if—or *why*—he had been deliberately seeded among the stars. And then...?

"*SINTAHA* Rowley, are you not also Keepers of the Trees on your own world?"

Tsu was so earnest with the question, Rowley was surprised. He made a wry grimace, half humorous.

"Of course, we grow trees for fruit, for shade and beauty, to cut down and make lumber for houses..."

She drew away from him, rigid, trembling.

"You cut down trees!"

He hadn't meant to make that slip. He knew her feeling for trees. Her look accused him.

"I don't understand your attitude," he said lamely.

"Nor do I understand yours." She brooded silently. "It is different, I suppose, on other worlds. The trees are different."

They sat in the lush grass, on the hillside below his tent. The toy village lay at their feet, a cardboard set in miniature.

"Your people puzzle us, Tsu. You are too different from us..."

"We have tried to make it easy for you," she murmured.

Easy? Too easy, he thought.

It was all too plain, too easy to understand. That's why he couldn't understand a bit of it.

"We hope," he went on, "that by studying your world and others like it, we may some day better understand the whole universe..."

"Or reach a better understanding of your own thoughts?"

She smiled. Her long eyes lidded heavily with amusement.

"Wherever we go," he continued doggedly, "we find people like ourselves. Human beings. They are born; they grow up; they die. Human culture is built around the processes of living and dying. Our beliefs and actions stem from those facts—that we live and that we die. We are emotionally affected by them. Sometimes, we know great happiness. Then we remember that we die, and we suffer sorrow. I have seen no sadness in your village. Everybody is happy. It...it isn't natural. I wonder how you would act if one of you were to die..."

She stirred restlessly, movement restricted by her clinging sarong.

"One of us will die for you," she said simply, "if you wish to study it."

Sudden shock hammered at his brain. What a thing to say! What did she mean? Was she really as simple as her language seemed to indicate? He felt embarrassed.

"Tsu, you know I didn't mean..."

His eye caught a flicker of movement among the brown trunks of the trees. A slim figure left their shadow, picked its way uphill through the grasses, toward them. Rowley recognized Smarin, Tsu's father. Smarin's slim ascetic face was expressionless, his long eyes hooded.

"Torl fell from the tree," he said. "Torl is dead. Come, Tsu."

Rowley felt hair prickle at the back of his neck. It seemed that Smarin had come out, strictly on cue. Then he realized that Smarin had meant it. The shock of a moment before intensified, expanded, pressurized itself into every cell of his brain.

"Oh, no!" he said.

Tsu got lithely up. She looked down at him, lips drawn,

eyes lidded with slumbering sorrow.

"It was your wish, *sintaha* Rowley. Come with us. Study and learn . . ."

"IT could have been an accident," Rowley reported over the comm, "but I have a feeling it was staged."

"You saw the dead woman?"

"She was dead, all right. They let me see that she was dead, then they buried her—at the foot of the tree. No ceremony. Shallow grave—not over a foot and a half deep."

"Then what?"

"Then they all went back to tending the trees. Tsu seemed happy as hell about the whole thing. She hoped I had learned what I wanted, she said."

"I'm interested," Spliid broke in. "I'm coming down tonight, Cliff."

"Where are you now?"

"About a thousand miles east of you. I looked in on Stephans this afternoon. I'll get down there after dark."

Sunset glowed an arabesque of colors on the village at Rowley's feet. The com was silent. He switched it off.

Commander Waldo Spliid was a big, blond man. He bulked hugely at Rowley's side, among the intense shadows of the trees. Hume had no moon. Only the stars spattered a frail shine over the upper levels of the forest.

Rowley said, softly, "Here's the grave."

Spliid flashed a light, briefly.

"What did they dig it with?"

"Spade—shovel."

"Steel blade?"

"Iron, anyway. I reported on that I don't know where they get metals."

Spliid flashed his light again, grunted.

"No marker."

Rowley nodded. "That's right. I thought about it at the time and wondered. I thought of mentioning it to Tsu. Know why I didn't?"

Spliid grunted again.

"I thought, if I did, somebody would come out of the trees, bringing a marker. Probably two sticks tied in a cross. Get what I mean?"

"Gimme the shovel," said Spliid.

Rowley handed him the collapsible entrenching tool he

had been carrying. The Commander bent his back, scooped at the dirt. He worked swiftly, carefully, almost silently.

"About eighteen inches deep, you said?"

"About."

Spliid fell to again. The metal blade chinked dully on moist clods. After a time, Spliid flashed his light again. His free hand entered the cone of yellow shine, prodded the moist dirt. He was on his knees, reaching far down into the hole he had dug.

"I've gone by loose dirt," he puffed. "There's no body here, Cliff."

"She was dead and I saw them bury her," Rowley insisted stubbornly. "Maybe hypnotism. I felt they were putting on a show for me. I keep asking myself why, and then I turn to the facts."

"What facts?"

"Why..." Rowley hesitated. "Hume has been classified a closed world. I think that's what they want. If this world had been uninhabited when Exploration turned it up, Colonisation would be surveying it now for settlement. If the population had a civilization above Class G, we'd be arranging to bring them up to the technological level of the rest of the galaxy. But we shut a two X sub one world away from contact with the galaxy to avoid disturbing the natural progress of the natives. How many thousands of years before Hume will be ready? Somehow, I feel they know more about us than we think they do...and they're only too happy to be left to themselves."

"Rubbish! Why?"

"Why do they want it, or why do I think so? I don't know the answer either way. If you've ever seen a stage play, you'll understand what I mean. Everything about a stage play is phoney. You watch the play, knowing it isn't real. The scenery and backdrop are just painted imitations. All right—but the actions of the characters on the stage serve something like a catalyst. Your faculties of critical observation are suspended, and the play becomes real. For the time of the play, you are caught up in the illusion of reality that grips you. That's

the way it is here on Hume.

"You look around you in the broad light of day. You see a pastoral idyll. Everybody's happy. Everybody gets along with everybody else. All the people are beautiful, agreeable and kind. They have a simple culture, too far down the scale to admit to intercourse with the rest of the galaxy.

"Look twice, though, and you see something else . . ."

"All right," said Spliid. "Let's get back to camp."

The sloping canvas top of Rowley's tent bulked dimly in the starlight. Spliid laid a heavy hand on Rowley's arm.

"I've been thinking, Cliff. There was never a body in that grave."

Rowley started. "Never was?"

"Don't ask me. It's your idea, with talk of stage plays and phoney accidents. You made me feel it. I come down to find out. You've been the victim of something . . . I don't know what. Are you comforted?"

"No. If only we had more time!"

"We've got a few days," Spliid reassured him. "You've got a good idea in that stage play simile. But the actors aren't very good, and the directing is abominable. It takes a lot of rehearsal to make a good play, Cliff."

For a long time after the pilot boat drifted down from the upper air and whispered away toward the stars with Commander Spliid, Rowley stood brooding, looking down into the pool of shadows hiding the village.

Stage play. Actors. What happens to the scenery when the audience goes home? Rowley shrugged and went to bed.

IN the morning, Rowley stirred together an unpalatable breakfast, then went down into the village. The natives were already stirring. Children ran in the grassy streets. The solid stone of the houses gleamed white and gray, streaked and spotted with brown, crumbling at the corners. The thatched roofs were ochre, glistening glue-grey with dew.

Painted scenery? The slender, racing children—hired extras? And Tsu—the leading lady?

He felt miserable about disturbing Tsu and Smarin today. It was intrusion on their period of mourning. Did they mourn on Hume?

There was nothing of mournful bereavement about the little stone house, gay in the sunshine, with its clustering border of purple, rose and yellow flowers. The inside was dark-brown dim, but he caught a glimpse of movement. He stepped to the door, leaned with his hand on the jamb, waiting to be noticed.

"*Sintaha* Rowley! Good morning. Here is Tsu."

Rowley dug his nails into the door post. Tsu came out skipping, but he was unaware of her. Torl...Torl who was dead yesterday...smiled at him and retreated into the interior.

Tsu took his hand, brushing against him with her usual easy familiarity. He realized that his fingers trembled in her grip.

He said, hoarsely, "That was Torl...in there!"

Tsu laughed up into his face, long eyes bright.

"Why not? It is Torl's house, too!"

"But...but...yesterday..." He couldn't bring himself to say that yesterday Torl had died and he had seen her buried.

Tsu seemed to devine the thought in his mind.

"Yesterday was yesterday, *sintaha* Rowley. Yesterday, Torl died, and you saw how it was. We hope you could make a good report of it."

He was silent as they walked. He stole occasional glances at her, wondering. Somehow, the death and resurrection of Torl provided a key. His brain was swamped with conjecture.

THEY left the village and climbed the hill. He had meant to sit with Tsu and Smarin, to share their grief a while this morning, if they would let him. Why he walked now, he could not say, save that his brain was in a whirl. And Tsu accompanied him gaily, chattering nonsense about the death of her mother.

He stopped, looked at the village below. While they were here, he would ask Tsu for information about who lived where. He had already

sketched the village from his tent. He would write in the information as an addition to his notes.

A thought struck him. Why label the props on the stage set? Labels meant nothing... unless you could see the set from the wings. It would help, if he could do that.

"Let's sit here, Tsu," he said.

She sat, obediently, among the tall grasses, folding slim, long legs under her like a child. He sat at her side, noting with relief that a slight hump in the slope hid the village from sight. He took her hand in his.

"I have thought of something," he said carefully. "Tell me about the children. Let's take Yanek...is that his name? He lives in the house next to you. How old is he?"

She regarded him from the corners of her long eyes.

"Old? Yanek is as old as a child. He is as old as he is."

"How old is Yanek in years?"

She hesitated, biting her lip in puzzlement. "There is always Yanek, *sintaha* Rowley. Why should there be anything about him of years?"

She didn't know what he was talking about. Rowley felt excitement creep along the channels of his veins.

"Can you remember when Yanek was born?"

The look in her eyes made his heart pound harder. She was alarmed!

He pressed on, relentlessly. "Yesterday, Torl died. Today, she lives. You do not understand a simple thing like age. You do not remember when Yanek was born, but he is not over seven or eight. Tsu...tell me...are you and your people immortal?"

There was an anguish in his tone that made her drop her eyes.

"No," she said, without moving her lips.

That was the truth. His inner sense told him it was. And the truth was disappointing. What had he expected? The key to immortality? The Fountain of Youth? Men had sought it in ages past and never found it.

His thoughts darted. "If you cannot remember Yanek being born, perhaps he was not born. Yet, you have families. There must be love..."

"Love, yes! We love each other, we love our world, our trees..."

"And if a young man loved you, Tsu, how would he say it?"

His heart was pounding fiercely now. A fierce zeal possessed him that was not born of her nearness, the intimacy of their seclusion. His conditioning against emotional storms had been too thorough for him to break it now. It was something else that possessed him—the excitement of the hunter viewing the first, sparse tracks of the game he seeks. He had asked. It all depended now on her answer, for the mystery was coming clear to him.

Her long eyes were heavy-lidded, candid, without guile.

"How would he among your people, *sintaha* Rowley?"

He thought, wildly, *she doesn't know!* He thought, she is inexperienced. He thought again, she would *never* know, unless..."

He slipped an arm around her bare shoulders and drew her to him.

"Like this," he said, looking down into her tip-tilted eyes.

Then he kissed her. Her sarong slipped...

"I am unhappy with you, Cliff," Commander Spliid said with chilly formality. Rowley leaned back in his chair in Spliid's office aboard the Survey ship. Spliid laid his pipe in the tray on his desk. He said, "What happened to your daily reports?"

Rowley stuffed his own pipe, lit it.

"I thought you knew. I didn't make any."

Spliid's look of exasperation wavered and dimmed through the swirls of blue smoke. It was all over now, and Rowley felt no sense of hurry. Hume was a pinpoint of light in the star-carpeted vestibules of space behind them. In another hour, they would shift into overdrive. Hume would vanish from their lives forever.

"I assume," he said, "that Hume is now officially closed."

Spliid nodded. He fixed questioning gray eyes on Rowley.

"Good," said Rowley. "That's the way it will always be."

"Always?" Spliid fumbled with his pipe. "For our lifetimes, maybe..."

"Always," Rowley repeated. He drew on his pipe, enjoying the luxury of keeping the Commander's curiosity at bay. "Human beings have no place on Hume. I found that out the day after you dropped in on me. That's why I made no reports. I just sat around, waiting for the pilot boat."

Spliid held a lighter to the dark-stained bowl of his pipe.

"So you're satisfied now, too?"

Rowley nodded noncommittally. "At first," he said distantly, "I imagined crazy things—like a super-advanced race living underground, giving us the bum's rush with a playshow they had rigged up."

"And you found out you were wrong," suggested Spliid.

"I found out I was partly right."

"I won't buy supermen living in caves, Cliff."

"Neither would I. The next crazy thing I thought was that the natives were immorals and they didn't want us to share in it. Silly, huh?"

"Pretty silly," Spliid agreed drily.

"I knew they wanted to get rid of us," Rowley went on earnestly. "I could feel it. But why? Most inferior races we run against *want* contact with the galaxy..."

"They want refrigerators and washing machines, tractors, railroad trains and automobiles," Spliid interrupted. "If we gave them, their culture would go to pot in a generation. There's a reason for our methods."

"A lot of little things about Hume didn't jibe," Rowley continued. "Bathrooms, for instance."

"No bathrooms on Hume?" Spliid grinned.

"*Bath* rooms, yes. Just bathing went on in there. And outside, where the little house in back ought to be...nothing." Rowley tamped the ashes in his pipe, withdrew a blackened finger. "We take that sort of thing for granted, you know. We assume proper facilities are around someplace and don't give them a second thought. They weren't present in the stage setting because they weren't needed."

"Come, now...!"

"Fact. Another fact: grass growing in the streets. The way those kids played on it, it would have been worn away in a week. Slim evidence, but it's part of the picture."

"WHAT I'm interested in," said Spliid, "is the death. Did you learn what they did with the body?"

"You were right," Rowley said. "There wasn't any. I saw Torl the next day, alive and kicking. That's what put me off on the immortality tangent."

Spliid grunted. "Another act in the play?"

"Yes, and badly directed. The director didn't understand death as we do."

Spliid shook himself. "Now, wait...!"

"Honest and truly. How do we think of death—most of us? We believe in somehow living on after death takes place—immortality of the soul. Can you visualize how a stage director who didn't understand that concept would cast it?"

"What do you think I am, a percie? Get on with it."

"Consider this, then. I gambled with my emotional adjustment conditioning. There was one angle I hadn't exploited, because of that conditioning. Sex."

"If you are trying to tell me you unloaded the conditioning *we* give you," Spliid interrupted, "I won't believe it!"

"No—I wouldn't. But, in the interest of ethnological investigation, I *could* grab a kiss. So I did."

"I see," drily.

"Not yet, you don't. I got no reaction. Like embracing a tree. Anyway, I kissed her. Somehow..." He hesitated. "Her garment..."

"No wonder you made no report," growled Spliid. "Believe me, Cliff, I'm going to have that conditioning process looked into!"

Rowley laughed, briefly. "No need for that. It's sound. You'll be interested in what that slipping garment revealed."

"Another time, another place..."

"I saw a perfect, living statue!"

Spliid's eyes alerted. "A what?"

Spliid relaxed. "I think I know what you mean. Go on."

Rowley drew heavily on his pipe. A brooding look shadowed his lean face.

"I learned about Yanek then. I learned about Tsu and Smarin and Torl and all the rest of them. If we weren't such damned prudes, Commander, and I had flipped a sarong sooner, we'd have found everything out long ago. You've heard about the sinner who was told he could remain in Heaven only on condition he could pick Adam out of the crowd? He chose the only man he could find...without a navel."

"Maybe they lay eggs," Spliid suggested. "Oviparous."

Rowley gave him a look of humorous scorn. "Do statues lay eggs?"

Spliid's expression cleared. "By God! Now I *really* understand you!"

"The natives of Hume couldn't reproduce in any manner. Naturally, I wanted to know why. And the answer came to me—protective coloration...camouflage!"

"Apparent. Camouflage for what?"

"You've heard the expression, if you can't lick 'em, join 'em...?"

"Sure, but..."

"But suppose you can't join 'em, either?" Rowley laughed, excitedly. "You make like something they want to protect!...Know anything about dryads, Commander?"

Spliid snorted. "Supernatural creatures that live in trees? Dryads don't exist!"

"Neither do the people of Hume."

Spliid looked at him in such a way Rowley felt his sanity was being weighed.

"SUPPOSE you were a native of Hume, and some alien beings came along. You could read their minds. You'd know right off they wouldn't recognize you as a life-form like themselves. They might move right in and destroy you without knowing it, and you would be unable to defend yourself. That was actually the situation on Hume, and we were the aliens. So the natives pretended they were a type of life-form we want to protect."

"How was it done?" Spliid wanted to know.

"Mental projection. After the directors of the play read

our minds, they tried to reproduce what they found there. They slipped on the points I mentioned, because those things meant little or nothing to them. But they were enough to rob the play of its semblance of reality.

"Tsu, Smarin, Torl...even the village itself...were all imaginary—not something we *thought* we saw, but solidified mental projections of the thoughts the natives had gleaned from our minds."

"I'm just beginning to see the real value of your talents, Cliff."

"Thanks," Rowley acknowledged briefly. "If *we* have the right to exclude inferior cultures from contact with us, a superior culture must certainly have an equal right to exclude us from contact with theirs."

Spliid wagged his head, half smiling. His pipe had gone out and he puffed at it without effect.

"I've been waiting for you to tell me who these 'directors' are," he said.

Rowley grinned. "You won't believe this. The directors needed something to keep their play actors busy...some logical occupation of their time. What could they find more logical—to them—than taking care of trees? Because the directors themselves are the trees—the living, intelligent forest of Hume. Fantastic, isn't it?"

Spliid sighed as if deeply gratified.

"If it weren't for one thing even more so, I'd say it was the most fantastic thing I ever heard of."

"What's more fantastic than intelligent trees?"

"Human beings," said Spliid.

THE END

MR. LONELINESS

by HENRY SLESAR

illustrated by ORBAN

It is lonely out there in space. Very, very lonely! A man needs to see a human face, hear a human voice. So visitors have to be sent out somehow — by some means

THERE were winds on the asteroid, and they blew in threads of heat and cold, chilling your feet and dampening your brow with sweat. The man shivered and cursed when the winds blew, condemning the freak currents of space, damning the Authority which had anchored him to this lonely outpost.

"If you could only feel them," he said intensely to the three men at the other side of the room.

"No, thanks," said Briggs. He laughed, and the sound was like brass.

"I feel it in my sleep sometimes," the man said moodily, staring at the floor. "It does something to your dreams. I have the strangest nightmares..."

"Maybe it's the rations," Towne suggested, with the hint of a twinkle. Towne was a great kidder.

"Trouble with you, Pace," said Briggs. "You think too much. Too many gadgets out here to do your work for you. The Authority oughta scrap some of these robot controls and get you to use your hands. It's a great cure for the doldrums, you know."

Murchison, the third man, looked grave. "In my opinion," he said judiciously, "we need a better rotation system out here. How long have you been observing on GT-8?"

"One year, five months, two

weeks, three days..." Pace looked at nothing.

"Two hours, forty minutes, and seven seconds, eh?" Towne chuckled. "You outposters are all alike. Living clocks, every one of you." He nudged Murchison's side. "Watch this, Deano. What time is it now, Pace? No fair looking."

"Sixteen hundred plus twenty," the man answered dully.

Towne checked his wrist. "On the button," he said gleefully. "You really get a talent for it on this job."

"Use your hands," Briggs insisted. "Get out and dig. Plant something. Build something. Make yourself some furniture."

Murchison frowned. "Not so fast, Freddie." He took a folded paper from his hip pocket and whispered something to the man by his side. "Spec sheet, GT-8."

"Never mind," said Pace. "I don't expect you to know the specs on every outpost on the Belt."

Briggs looked embarrassed "Oh. Well, okay. So you can't do planting here. But you could find *something* to do. You know this fellow Morgan on TW-1? He's got quite a project under way. He's building a miniature Earth."

Towne giggled. "Ambitious fellow—"

"No, really," Briggs said earnestly. "Got himself a plastics shop, and he's making models of every city on Earth. Fabulous thing. Take a lesson, Pace."

The man stood up and went to the viewport of the cabin. "I'm not a child, Briggs."

"That's a lousy attitude," Towne said cheerfully.

"Perhaps," Murchison said solemnly, "you've lost sight of your purpose out here."

"Nuts," said Pace inaudibly.

"We've got reason to be mighty proud of you fellows, you know. You're the real backbone of the space fleet. You're the men who keep the space lanes safe."

"You're only happy when you're griping," Towne said good-naturedly. "That's okay with me, pal. That's the American way, isn't it?" He grinned at the other two. "Just like the Army. Gripe, gripe, gripe." He rubbed the flesh around his

middle and yawned sleepily.

"Then there's the radio, of course," Briggs said. "You can always hear a friendly voice."

"Friendly?" Pace smiled grimly. "Have you listened in on your control ,stations lately? Those boys are all business."

"Well, they're pretty busy, Pace. You have to remember that." Murchison folded his hands into his lap.

"Busy," said Pace enviously.

"I know what's eating him," Towne said wisely. "It's the girl."

Pace looked away.

"Laura was very sorry about not showing up, Pace," Murchison said. "It's this rotten virus stuff that's going around. You know how she looks forward to these visits—"

"You bet," Towne agreed. "There's an outposter on G-70 who'll *really* cry in his beer when we show up without her."

"The Swetheart of Space," the man said sardonically.

"Oh, come on," Briggs said. "You like to see her as much as anybody else, Pace. She's a good kid."

"All right," Pace said.

"Everybody likes to look at a pretty girl," Towne said archly. "Can't blame you for not being happy with only our mugs to look at. That's really the trouble, isn't it?"

"No!" Pace answered.

"Don't kid me," Towne said. "Don't forget, I'm the Personal Affairs Officer. I know what you guys are interested in. That's the big beef on the belt—dames."

"It's not just that," Pace said painfully.

"Sure—"

"It's not! It's—" Pace looked disgusted. He picked up an object from the table and turned it in his hand.

"What's that, Pace?"

The man jiggled it in his palm. "A carving. I've been doing some carving. Only this coal-type mineral."

"Let's see it."

Pace concealed it. "It's nothing," he said.

"That's the stuff, Pace." Briggs looked pleased. "Keep those hands busy. Keep your mind off space."

"And Laura," Towne said.

Murchison stood up. "Well..."

"Well, what?" Pace glanced up anxiously.

"Time to focus out," Murchison said. "Got a lot of space to cover."

"But it's only sixteen hundred plus thirty—"

"See what I mean?" said Towne, checking his watch. "It's a sort of genius—"

"We'll be back in a couple of months," Murchison said, gesturing towards the others. "We'll have a real long chat then."

"And we'll bring Laura with us," Towne said significantly.

"Don't go yet," Pace pleaded.

"Really, Pace—"

"Tell me about things. Back home."

"You get the newscasts," Briggs said. "What more can we tell you?"

"So long, fella," Towne stood up.

"It's early, I tell you!" Pace dropped the object in his hand. The light glittered on the smooth-planed surfaces as it fell. It was the bust of a woman, with long flowing hair, her chin tilted defiantly, her blank eyes somehow vital and seeing. When it hit the ground, it shattered into white powder, and the wind leaped upon the fragments like a hungry animal.

"YOU'RE lucky we stayed this long," Towne said, speaking now without a smile. "You're no fun to pay a call on, Buster. Let me tell you."

"Cut it out, Towne," Murchison's tone was sharp.

"There are fifty guys on our itinerary," Towne said. "They all have the same problem. But you're the bleedingest heart of 'em all, Pace."

The man glowered. He got to his feet.

"Maybe I'll get lucky in two months," Towne said. "Maybe I'll get a nice convenient virus, too—"

"Towne!" Briggs touched him on the elbow, and Towne shook off his fingers angrily.

"I'm sick of this guy," he said bitterly. "Sick of all his stupid complaints. Mister Loneliness—"

"You dirty groundworm!" Pace's voice shook. *"You rot-*

ten—" His hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.

"You watch your step, buddy."

"Cut it out, you guys!"

"I'll kill you!" Pace put a stumbling foot forward. "I'll kill you, Towne!"

Towne stared at the man, and then he laughed.

"Go ahead," he said. "Try."

Pace made an ugly noise. His body crouched, and then he sprung at the laughing figure of this visitor. Instinctively, Towne threw up his arms in defense.

"Pace!"

"Don't be an idiot!"

The man's arms thrust forward like driving pistons, fingers clutching toward the throat of Towne. His face twisted into a parody of rage. His motion propelled him half a foot off the ground.

He realized his mistake too late.

His hands went through and beyond Towne's throat, his arms slipping through Towne's chest. He fell heavily through the man's body, and hit the ground with sickening abruptness.

He lay there, still conscious. He began to cry and the sound brought a look of disgust to the face of the shadow he had attacked.

"What a baby," Towne said.

Briggs looked uncomfortable. "Let's focus out," he said.

"Right," said Towne.

In a room back on Earth, a dial was spun, and a connection severed.

In a room on a lonely asteroid, three spectral images—electronic ghosts on a mission of mercy—faded, and vanished.

The man pulled himself to his feet, and looked around him.

All was silence.

The winds blew.

THE END

WOMAN'S TOUCH

by EVELYN E. SMITH

illustrated by EMSH

The orders were to leave the natives of the new planet strictly alone. But those surveyors' wives were women, and women don't obey orders — or leave people alone!

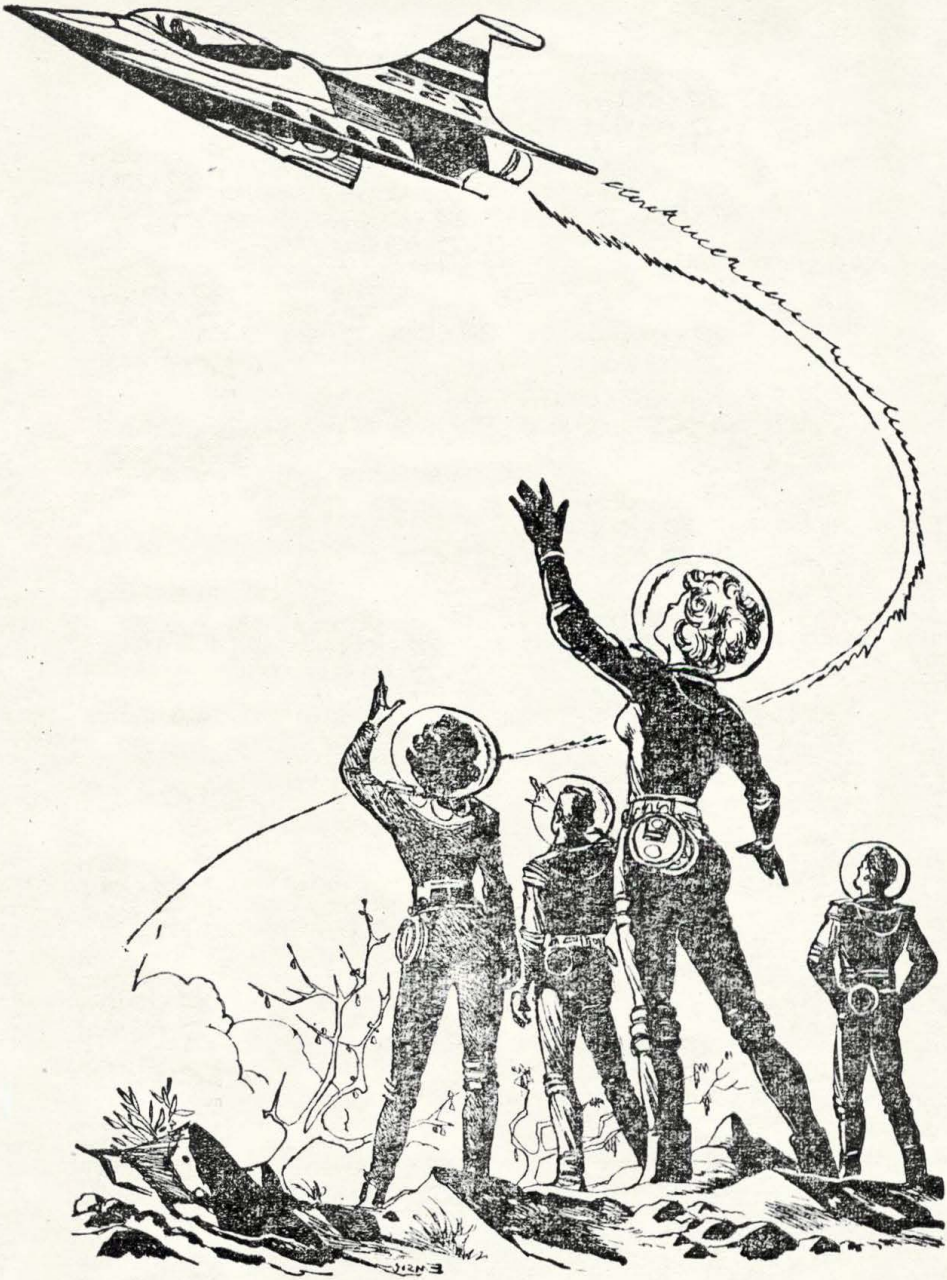
"NOW, don't get the idea that this is a universe-shaking assignment," Captain Harnick warned the four young people. "The planet's of no particular importance; otherwise we would never have assigned an untried team."

"-Yessir," Ned McComb and Danny Field said dutifully. However, Harnick wasn't worried about them; it was the anticipatory gleam in their wives' eyes that he didn't like. Pity the men had to be allowed to take their spouses along, but the Extrasolar Survey Service would never be able to get anyone to accept a five-year term of duty on a remote planet without that accomodation. And, of course, he thought with sour complacence, at the end of the five years the men would be even sorrier than he was.

"True, it's an Earth-type planet, but only in the sense that it has an atmosphere we can breathe.... And, I repeat," he added, looking straight into Judy Field's snapping black eyes, "please remember that we have no intention of colonizing Furbish. It's much too far from the other inhabited systems for such a project to be economically sound."

"Yessir," Judy said meekly. "We just want to set up a fueling and repair station here...."

"...and maybe look over



the minerals," Jane McComb finished, "to see if there's anything which could be used in running the station and/or worth transporting to other systems."

"Er—yes." Captain Harnick was gratified to see that his lectures during the voyage had not fallen upon deaf ears; on the other hand, he was not exactly pleased to have words taken out of his mouth. "We would like to have the planet charted as thoroughly as possible, of course, but please do not try to go beyond the scope of your admittedly limited means."

"Yessir," Ned and Dan agreed.

"Now comes the part about the natives," Judy said to Jane in what might have been intended as a whisper. They nodded at each other.

Captain Harnick managed to keep his temper by reminding himself that he wasn't going to see the whole lot of them again for five years. "As far as we know from Commander Furbish's preliminary survey, there are no hostile life-forms on the planet. However, it might be as well to take precautions."

"I should think so, indeed!" Judy put in.

"The highest life-form present—in fact, the only life-form on the planet outside of vegetation—does appear to be humanoid in structure, but—again I cannot stress this fact too strongly—the creatures are far from being human. They are of a very low order of intelligence, probably even lower than the terrestrial great apes, since they not only have no group organization, but do not appear able to communicate with one another in any way. Fortunately, I might add, because this precludes the possibility of any accusation of the exploiting and enslaving of inferior races, with which the terrestrial government has so often been charged—unjustly, of course."

The four members of the survey team nodded solemnly, if a trifle uncomprehendingly.

"The creatures have shown no disposition to interfere with us, and your orders are to leave them alone. Do not, on the one hand, attempt to domesticate them, or, on the other to hunt them. . . for food or any other purpose."

Judy and Jane gave indignant gasps.

"Your attitude toward the indigenous life-forms is a *most* important factor." The captain looked fiercely at the girls. It was the women, he had found, who tended to cause most trouble in this area. "The Terrestrial Government does *not* wish to assume responsibility for any local fauna. All we want of Furbish is to check it, map it, and establish one small station here; is that clear?"

"Yessir," the survey team said.

"Very well, then, I—" The captain looked at the prefabricated structure of metal and plastic, tiny against the bleakness of the Furbishian landscape, and swallowed. They were brave kids to have volunteered to spend five of the best years of their lives on this barren little world, even if they were going to get paid a fabulous sum for so doing, and he was sorry he had ever thought harshly of any of them. 'I—I trust you'll be comfortable. Good-bye, and good luck."

He shook hands all round; then blasted off in the little scout ship to join the parent vessel, which circled patiently overhead. One of the natives, plodding past with a sack half-full of vegetation, looked up incuriously, then continued to gather roots.

THE two young couples stood outside their cottage, regarding the landscape. Short greyish-blue grass covered the barren plain and rolled up over the low hills some kilometers away. Stunted bushes, bowed down by the huge, bladderlike leaves the natives used as sacks were scattered sparsely about. There were no trees or flowers. Above, a dim, red sun hung in a cold, green sky. Although the post was nearly at the equator, the terrestrials felt chilly, even in their snug heat suits.

"Kind of dismal, isn't it?" Danny ventured.

"But it's ours," Judy said cheerfully. "I think it has a sort of wild charm."

Jane nodded her blonde head "Our own little planet," she murmured.

The local fauna, passing by on their separate ways, carrying loads of vegetation—presumably for food, since they

did not have fire—and bladders full of the scarce water, gazed at the terrestrials without interest, if the Earthmen happened to be in their line of vision; otherwise, the natives paid them no attention.

"Not really humanoid, are they?" Danny asked. "More like goblins, if anything."

His description was a fair one. The Furbishians were skinny, large-headed little bipeds, two to three feet high, and generally of a slate blue or dirty mauve color. They trudged back and forth, carrying food and water and other unidentifiable objects of desire, appearing to be only remotely aware of one another although they seemed to see well enough.

"I think they're cute," Judy said.

Danny took her plump arm in a firm grasp. His brown eyes were worried. "Now, Judy, remember what the captain said."

"They look intelligent too," she persisted. "I think Harnick's just a snob. And a skinflint. He doesn't want us to give this people the benefits of culture, just because it might cost the Terrestrial Government a little money." And she tossed her smooth dark head.

Big Ned McComb gave a superior smile. "You're being anthropomorphic, kid. Just because they look something like people doesn't mean they *are* people. For instance, would any race with a minimum of brains act like that?"

For two of the natives, each absorbed in his own purpose and destination, had collided. Their dull faces lit up with momentary glares of anger; then the customary lack of expression returned and each continued on his apathetic way.

"Well, the poor things can't communicate," Jane sprang to the defense. "Maybe they don't have vocal cords."

"Listen, shug," Ned said, "you don't have to have vocal chords in order to communicate. There are other ways of getting a message across besides talking."

"You mean like telepathy?"

"I mean like gestures, hitting a stone with a stick... anything. The only reason these things don't communi-

cate is because they have nothing to say."

"Anyhow, they do have vocal cords," Danny contributed. "Listen!"

One of the natives who had been in the collision had looked over his shoulder for a parting glare at his opponent and had, therefore, run smack into a third native who was gathering roots with his eyes on the ground. Apparently this was too much for Native A. He threw a stone at Native C. Native C uttered a hoarse cry of rage—which was what had led Danny to deduce the existence of vocal cords in the species—and threw a sizeable stone at Native A. Both stones missed their targets. Native A and Native C continued on their respective ways, each glaring back at the other. It was obvious that both would presently be involved in similar encounters.

"Well," Judy commented, "they can communicate anger at any rate."

THE days and weeks went on, and the charting team carried out its orders faithfully. Judy and Jane took care of the house and allied domestic problems, while Ned and Danny explored the planet in the helicopter. The whole habitable area of Furbish proved to be much the same as the part where they had landed. Further north and south, the men reported, there was ice and snow and no life—not even of a vegetable nature.

But still it wouldn't be safe for the girls to go exploring, their husbands pointed out, because the surface of the planet was still unscratched. The natives—of which there didn't seem to be more than a couple couple of hundred all told—lived in caves in the hills; what else might be lurking in more effective concealment they could not, as yet, tell.

"If you ask me," Judy said, as the women watched their men depart on another reconnaissance flight, "the planet is as safe as houses. The fellows are just making sure they don't have to do any of the dirty work."

"You may be right," Jane concurred. "In fact, I'm sure you are...and I'm sick of housework." For most of the labor-saving devices that made

domestic servitude a joy on Earth—according to the manufacturers, at least—were impracticable on this remote planet, where power came in cans and had to be conserved. The women had been told they were to serve as integral members of the team; this was hardly their idea of integration.

"Look, Jane!" Judy cried, inspired by an idea which, though it had been hatching in her brain for some time, she thought best to offer as a sudden flash of genius, "why couldn't we train one or two of the natives to help with the housework? After all, that doesn't take much mental ability."

"Judy!" Jane exclaimed, not as aghast as she pretended, for the same concept had been trying to wheedle its way out of her subconsciousness. "You know what the captain said!" It was only fear of authority that motivated her reluctance; there was no question in her mind but that any creatures who looked so much like brownies must be capable of whatever brownies could do, and everyone knew that brownies were marvellous for housework.

"The captain must be light years away by now! And we're not going to see him for another four years and eight months objective time anyhow." Judy's black eyes flashed. "Why shouldn't we try to make use of the natives and, at the same time, uplift them? We pay taxes, don't we?"

"But...he said something about exploitation...."

"Naturally we're not going to make slaves of them. We'll pay them...oh, something. Besides, the Terrestrial Government *has* been accused of slavery—Captain Harnick said so, didn't he? And where there's smoke there must be fire. So I don't see why we should be penalized because of someone else's mistake."

Jane was unable to follow this line of reasoning clearly, so she fell back on, "We might get into trouble."

"Nonsense! The natives are obviously harmless, and we can take the portable communications unit along with us, so the boys'll never know we left the cottage."

"I really don't kno-o-ow."

"Nothing ventured, nothing won," Judy declared. "I'm going, even if you aren't."

"Well, in that case, of course I can't let you go alone."

Donning their heat suits, the two girls sallied forth into the bracing air of Furbish, ready for adventure. Not that they hadn't been outside before, of course, but never with such definite intent to break regulations.

It was summer and almost warm. The grass was a little bluer, the sun a little redder, the sky a little greener. Had there been birds on Furbish, they would have been singing. "If the natives turn out to be intelligent enough," Judy murmured dreamily, "we could really be queens—and kings, of course—for five years. Or even longer. The ESS couldn't make us take another post once we'd brought the native populace under control."

"Judy Field!" Jane's blue eyes were wide with horror.

"Oh, well," Judy apologized, "one does get carried away.... Look, there's a native over there." She set the radio unit on the ground. "Let's accost him. In a nice way, I mean, of course."

"Good morning, sir," she began. "We have been looking forward to making your acquaintance.... I know he can't understand the words," she explained to Jane, "but it's the tone of voice that counts."

THE native glared at Judy out of malignant pink eyes, and attempted to duck under her right arm. She sidestepped him neatly. "We are your friends."

He tried to get past her on the other side. "We're friends!" Judy yelled, chasseeing left. "We come in peace."

The native whirled and found Jane behind him. "Don't be fu-fu-frightened." she quavered. "We're your fu-fu-fu-friends."

With a cry of rage, the native lowered his head and charged. He was out-weighed, but Jane was unnerved. She fell sprawling. The native walked across her prostrate body and made off. When he was a few meters away, however, he paused to look at

them. Apparently they had succeeded in arousing some interest.

"Copter calling cottage!" the radio chose to announce at that moment. "Copter calling cottage! Over to you!"

"H e l p, J u d y!" J a n e screamed. "Hay-ulp! I can't get up."

Judy ran to tug at her prostrate comrade, but Jane, although more slender, was taller, and weighed a lot in the heat suit. Moreover, she was so stiff with fright that she couldn't move.

The radio continued to squawk, "Copter calling cottage! Can you hear us? What's the matter?" Judy straightened up and looked about her wildly. "Copter calling cottage. Copter—"

She ran over to the radio and threw the switch. "Cottage to copter," she replied, gasping for breath. "Everything's just fine."

"H e l p. Ju-dee!" J a n e screamed again, just before Judy switched the set over. Judy rushed back to her fallen comrade.

"What's the *matter?*" Ned's voice demanded frantically. "Why was Jane screaming? What's wrong? *Answer me, for God's sake!*"

Having managed to haul Jane to a sitting position, Judy wiped the hair off her own grimy forehead, and dashed back to stoop over the radio. "Lunch was burning!" she panted. "Everything is—"

"Ju-*dee,* he's t h r o w i n g stones!"

Sure enough, the native had decided that hurling rocks at them would be interesting and appropriate. With their huge—in his terms—terrestrial forms, bulking even larger in the heat suits, the girls made much more satisfactory targets than the spindling members of his own species, though he did not classify other life-forms according to species. There were others and then there was himself.

"Everything is under control," Judy finished. "Nothing's the matter. *Ouch!* Over to you." She rubbed her plump bottom and glared at the native.

"Arrr," said the native happily. He had thrown stones before, but never had he suc-

ceeded in h i t t i n g anyone. "Arrrrrr!" Pride of achievement filled his scrawny bosom.

Dan's voice took over. "You're k e e p i n g something from us, Judy!"

"It's n o t h i n g, nothing!" Judy babbled. "Just spilled hot fat on my arm—that's all. *Ouch!* Quit it, or I'll wring your skinny neck! Over to you."

"Arrr!" howled the native, catching Judy in the shin. "Arrr-aff!"

Two more natives came up —separately, of c o u r s e—to watch. It was rarely that Furbish had any such entertainment to offer. They regarded the scene with interest. But somehow spectator sport, while excellent in itself, does not give the full joy of actual participation. . . .

"Arrr," said one, tentatively shying a stone at Jane. It got her in the hip. "Arrr-aff!"

"Arrr!" shrieked all three natives, joyously hurling rocks. "Arrr-afff!"

"Wherever you girls are," the radio barked, "you get right back into the cottage and stay there!"

"That's what we were trying to do," Judy snapped, "when you oafs mixed in!"

EXCEPT for a few bruises, the girls were none the worse for their experience. However, the disappointed natives soon discovered that the cottage made an even better target for their rocks than the people. Since the prefabs were intended for use on a variety of planets, and hence had been built to endure storm, flood, and fire, as well as unanticipatable indigenous disasters, the mere bouncing of rocks off their metal and plastic sides could not infliot any serious damage, but the incessant thumping against the walls got on the girls' nerves, particularly as the natives' numbers, as well as their skill, seemed to be on the increase.

It was a relief to hear the sound of the helicopter. Fortunately, the Furbishians did not shift their attention to the vehicle or to the husbands inside it. Not being human, they were not sportsmen, and so preferred a large stationary target to a small moving one. They threw stones at the men

only when they got between them and the house, which, of course, the men had to do in order to get inside.

"What *is* this?" Dan asked, when they had finally forced their way in. "A siege?"

"No, darling," Judy replied joyously. "A group enterprise. You see, the natives *are* capable of communal effort once they're given an incentive, in spite of what old Harnick said. I told you they were intelligent."

Both men groaned.

Since the natives' intentions were obviously not hostile, retaliatory measures were out of the question. So the Earthmen spent the next few days in using some of the same rocks to build a large wall some distance away from the house, hoping that it would provide a still more attractive target. However, there were several scores of the creatures involved in the game by then and only part had their activities successfully diverted.

"Well, every little bit counts," Danny tried to soothe the angry Ned, who had been trying to show the natives that *building* with the rocks was more fun than *throwing* them and, for his pains, had received a stone in the solar plexus.

On their last mission, the two young men had been absorbed in mapping an interesting valley in the north polar regions—a pursuit which they had no intention of giving up. A few days after they had finished the work, therefore, they announced their intention of taking the helicopter out again. "And, remember, girls," Ned adjured them, "don't go out of the house at all until we come back."

"We need fresh air," Jane said.

"The air inside is a lot fresher than out," her husband retorted, "because it's purified. So, mind you, don't set foot out of the door until we return."

"Except in an emergency," Judy told him.

"Maybe we'd better leave the valley for later..." Danny murmured.

"Oh, *come on!*" Ned protested. He had been dragooned into washing the dishes several times during the weeks they'd spent at home building the wall for the natives, and had no in-

tention of letting the same misfortune befall him again. "What kind of emergency could there be?"

"If Judy has her heart set on an emergency," Dan prophesied, as he allowed himself to be led off, "there'll be an emergency."

"I don't know how the boys expect us to stand this," Judy remarked querulously as she and Jane sat listening to the thumps and bumps and "arrrs" outside.

"Well, they didn't start it.... And," Jane added, as Judy opened her mouth, "I don't suppose they can stop it either.... It does seem to me, though," she remarked, less out of actual observation than out of the desire to placate, "that they aren't making as much noise as usual."

Judy went to the window. "Of course they aren't. They're dying like flies."

"What!" Jane looked through the clear plastic pane. Sure enough, many of the natives had fallen to the ground. Since they were still writhing, they didn't seem to be actually dead; that was an academic point, however, because they wouldn't last long, what with the other natives stomping upon them in the excitement of the game.

"Maybe their life spans are shorter than ours?" Jane suggested.

Judy threw her a contemptuous glance. "More likely three weeks of rock-hurling has proved too strenuous for their fragile little bodies. And it's all our fault!" She burst into tears. "We've sapped their energy."

"Judy!" Jane laid a hand on the other girl's arm. "I just happened to think—since they started throwing rocks, I haven't seen any of them gathering roots. Maybe they're just starving."

The girls looked at one another. "That's it!" Judy exclaimed. "We must heat up lots of soup—just the thing for starving people." She began busily to pull cans off the shelves.

"But you know, Captain Harnick said they weren't people, so maybe they can't eat the same kinds of things we

do. Our soup might be poison for them."

"Being poisoned isn't worse than being starved." Judy expertly manipulated a can opener. "Not much worse anyway," she amended. "It's a chance we'll have to take."

"You mean it's a chance *they*'ll have to take." Jane herself thought that porridge would be better, because everyone knew how mad brownies were for porridge, but it was always easiest to let Judy have her own way.

So, bearing a large kettle between them, the two girls staggered out of the cottage between the flying stones—which were not coming as thick and fast as before owing to the fact that almost half the native populace had collapsed.

They set the kettle down by the nearest prostrate figure. "Look," Judy said to him. "Soup. Nice soup."

The native turned a dull glance on them. "We'll have to feed him," Judy decided. "You hold his head up, Jane."

Although she could not repress a shudder of loathing at contact with the alien, Jane obeyed, as always. "Open your mouth, that's a good boy," Judy told him, and opened her own mouth wide to set an example.

The native lifted his heavy, pointed head and looked down her throat with feeble interest. "No, that's not what I mean. Drink this. Nice soup." She prodded his lips with the dripping spoon. The lips parted and the soup passed into the alien interior.

Suddenly the creature's eyes bulged. He began to choke loudly. "There," Jane cried in anguish, "you *have* poisoned him!"

"Or maybe he doesn't eat with his mouth, like us," Judy speculated. "I never thought of that. Perhaps I poured soup down the equivalent of his ear."

But, once the convulsion was over, the native opened his mouth for more. Despite Jane's cry of protest, Judy poked in another spoonful. "Soup," she said. "Nice soup."

A faint, strange, utterly foreign expression contorted the native's dusty violent face. He was smiling. "Arrr-aff!" he said.

"That's what they yell when

they score a hit with the rocks!" Jane exclaimed excitedly. "He likes it! But, oh, Judy, supposing it should be poisonous to him after all!"

"Nothing ventured, nothing won," Judy repeated. "Here, have some more soup."

"Oup," the native said. "Arrr-aff!"

Jane and Judy looked at one another proudly.

"Oup," said a wistful voice near them. "Oup?"

The stone-throwing had almost entirely stopped. "Oup?" several voices took up the cry. "Ooooooup?"

"You'd better go put another kettle on, Jane," Judy told her.

"WHAT'S happened?" Ned McComb asked, as the two men came back from their voyage. "How did you get the natives to stop throwing rocks? And why are they standing outside chanting something like 'oup?' "

"It's supper time," Judy explained, looking up from the stove with a flushed face. "Hand me the salt, Jane—they like a lot of salt."

"'They?' *You mean you've been feeding the natives!*"

"We couldn't let them starve," Judy replied defiantly. "And, after all, it was all your fault they weren't gathering roots for food. If you hadn't gone and built them that handball court . . . !"

Ned looked accusingly at Danny. Danny lowered his eyes. "I suppose," he murmured to his wife, "'oup' means soup."

"You suppose correctly. And, if you two weren't such stubborn mules, you would realize that it was very clever of them to have learned the word. Get me the dehydrated potatoes, please, Jane; they're very nourishing."

Danny took off his helmet and ran his hands through his thick brown hair. "All right, so what if they do have a higher intelligence than Furbish thought? That still doesn't make them people. Still less does it make them our responsibility. How long are you proposing to run this soup kitchen, dear? You know, we were left with food supplies for four, not forty, or four hundred."

"They don't eat as much as we do," Jane put in, obvious-

ly quoting, "because of being smaller. And there are a lot of emergency stores in case Captain Harnick and the ship never come back, on account of being eaten by monsters or something. You thought we didn't know about that," she said proudly, "but we did."

"We don't have *that* amount of supplies, of course," Judy rushed to inform them before either of the men could protest. "As soon as I've got the natives organized—" Ned and Dan exchanged glances "—I plan to teach them more efficient ways of gathering roots, so that they'll have time for both work and play."

"And I don't suppose you had planned to organize a few to do your housework, had you?" Dan asked penetratingly.

"Well, naturally, I would be spending a good deal of time on this project, so I should expect to get what help I could with my regular duties."

"The captain said—" Ned began.

"The captain said the natives weren't intelligent and he only warned us not to make pets of them or kill them. He said fortunately we couldn't exploit them, which, of course, I wouldn't do, even if we could. Anyhow, I believe it was Ned who tried to get them to help build the handball court, wasn't it?"

"What can we do?" Danny asked. "Harnick isn't here and she is."

"NOW, remember this, girls," Ned admonished them, for the men were off on another mission, to chart the south pole this time—not that it was really so urgent, but the cottage had begun to take on the aspect of a Salvation Army Mission and was no longer homelike. "Feed the natives, if you must, but don't let any inside the house."

"How will we train them to do the housework then?" Judy wanted to know.

"It'll be a long time before you can get them to do that," Dan said diplomatically. "Why not try to teach them English first? They'll need to know it in order to follow your directions."

"That's true," Judy admitted.

"And it'll be a nice, healthy,

out-of-doors occupation for you two." Ned pinched his wife's pale cheek. "You've been knocking yourself out, shug."

"I haven't worked half as hard as Judy has," Jane protested loyally. "And she does all the thinking besides."

"Yeah," said Ned. "She sure does. Why don't you take yourself a rest too, Jude?"

When the copter had gone, Judy sat herself down at the table with pencil and paper. "We must compile a list of suitable words to teach them. Let's figure out which ones are most important.... *Broom,*" she said aloud as she scribbled, "and *sink* and *dust* and *laundry*...."

There was a thump at the door. They looked at each other. Under the lure of food, plus the attractions of a second handball court, the natives had been persuaded to withdraw their athletic endeavors from the vicinity of the house, so the knock could not be the result of a fortuitous stone.

Jane looked out of the window. "It's a very little native, and he's banging a can on the door. How cute!" Since there weren't enough serving utensils, cans had been distributed to the natives to be used as dishes. Even so, there hadn't been sufficient to go around, and the fact that this individual had been canny enough to pre-empt one for his exclusive use argued a superior mentality.

Judy got up and opened the door. "Oup," said the native, thrusting his tin forward suggestively. "Oup."

"It isn't time for supper, dear."

The native gave her a winning smile, and proposed an alternative. "Orridge," he said. "Orridge."

Both girls gasped. The natives had been fed other things besides soup, but heretofore none had used any word other than "oup" to describe food generically or specifically.

"Obviously he has linguistic aptitude," Judy decided. "Just the one to start teaching English to. Come on in, dear." She opened the door wider.

"Judy! You remember what Ned—what the boys said!"

"Oh, them! I can't give English lessons outside with all the

natives throwing stones and howling. Besides, this is such a little fellow, he couldn't matter too much. And he is in already."

Which was undeniably true. The diminutive creature was not only in but engaged in tasting Judy's pencil ."Orridge," it said dubiously.

"No, dear. Pencil." Judy removed the implement from his grasp and made demonstrative marks on the paper.

"En-cil," the native agreed, putting out a small, slate-blue hand for it.

After a moment of hesitation, Judy allowed him to have the pencil. He took the paper and made marks of his own. "Oo-dee," he said proudly, handing the paper back to her.

His satisfaction was entirely justified, for on the paper there was a primitive but very lifelike drawing of Judy herself.

"It isn't really so surprising," she said stoutly. "After all, they do live in caves.... And why are you wrinkling up your nose like that, Jane?"

"Oh, not the picture—it's just that—well—I didn't like to say it, but it is a little close in here and...." Jane looked apologetically at the native. He beamed at her. "I expect it's a difference in metabolism."

"I expect it's dirt," Judy contradicted. "I've often wondered whether they'd stay the same color if they were washed. Now's my chance to find out. How would you like a nice bath, dear?"

"Ath?" the creature repeated. "Orridge!"

"After your ath—bath, that is." Judy was already filling a large basin with warm water.

"But, Judy, maybe he isn't washable!"

"What do you think he'll do —shrink? Or run?" Judy looked at the native. "Come to think of it, he might run at that. Why don't you get out some of the music tapes, Jane, and play them to distract him?"

But the native loved being bathed. He loved the music tapes. And, at the end of his ablutions, he stood revealed as the possessor of not only a beautiful cerulean skin, but a fine, true soprano.

By the time Ned and Dan had returned from the south

pole, the Furbishian Glee Club had been formed.

"I'D hoped to have come and gone before Christmas," Captain Harnick sighed discontentedly. "These isolated outposts are so depressing at holiday time."

"But think of the personnel, sir," the pilot told him with gentle reproach. "They have to spend *all* their time here."

"You're right, Wilkins," the captain admitted shamefacedly. "It's a hard, dull life for them. And Furbish is particularly bad. Only four people on an otherwise uninhabited planet. They must go mad with the monotony. The weeks must seem like months, the months like years, the years—"

"Uninhabited, did you say?" Wilkins interrupted. "I could have sworn I saw a village down there. Of course it is growing dark, but still—aha, there it is!"

The captain leaned forward and peered into the dusk below. "By George, you're right! There seem to be a good two dozen houses there. Now, how could that have happened?"

"Good solid stone buildings too—d e f i n i t e l y not native huts."

"Of course the survey team was composed of both males and females," the captain muttered, "but, no, reproduction alone couldn't account for this, not in five years, even if you do allow for the mysterious influence of cosmic rays."

"What's all that light!" Lieutenant Wilkins exclaimed. "Damned if it doesn't look like a Christmas tree."

It was a Christmas tree, thirty feet tall, composed of interlaced branches and illuminated bladders. And, as the scout ship settled gently to the ground, its occupants could hear a chorus of sweet, true voices coming to them through the frosty air: "Ark uh er-ald an-gels ing/ O-ry oo uh oo-orn ing;/ Eace on Urbish and ercy i-yuld...."

"It's a hallucination," the captain said, rubbing his eyes. "We've been too long in space."

Lights came moving toward them through the darkness, and there was the babble of excited voices. "Captain Harnick!" Ned McComb cried.

"We thought you were never coming!" All four members of the survey team crowded around the scout ship, shaking hands and talking at once. They looked fit, the captain noticed, although thin and strangely pale in the torchlight.

"We have so much to tell you!" Judy cried. "So much has been happening here we've hardly had time to turn around. I never knew five years could pass so rapidly."

Harnick and Wilkins looked at one another. They climbed out of the ship, and saw the choristers—a dozen small creatures in soft, lovely hues of blue and violet, standing in a semicircle nearby, regarding the newcomers without fear, as they continued to pipe lustily: "I-lent ight, O-ly ight;/ All is alm, all is ight...."

"You were entirely wrong about the natives, you know." Judy linked her arm through the captain's as she drew him through the cottage. "They're not only remarkably intelligent, but talented. Don't they sing beautifully? And you should see the murals they've done!"

"The natives!" Suspicion became certainty. "Then this," the captain thundered, pointing to the neat rows of stone houses, "is their work. You've enslaved them!"

"But you said there was no intelligent life on this planet, sir," Wilkins protested, bewildered.

The captain shrugged. "The fauna didn't seem to be intelligent, but the preliminary survey was sketchy. We may have been mistaken. We didn't even think they could communicate with one another."

"They couldn't," Judy told him. "It simply had never occurred to them to communicate, because they hadn't anything to say at that time."

"But we gave them something to say," Jane added happily.

"And something to do, also," the captain grunted. "You've exploited the poor beasts. Making them build houses and—"

"Don't misunderstand, captain," Dan said, with a peculiar smile. "The natives aren't exploited. They love what they're doing...and what's being done for them."

"And besides," Ned contributed, "it was we who built the houses for them. Shame they should have to live in caves like animals. There aren't nearly enough buildings yet, but, after all, there were only four of us. I think we did pretty well, considering."

"And it's been so rewarding, too." Jane flung open the door of the prefab, as she spoke. It was, Harnick noticed, by far the least imposing edifice in the community. "You must listen to some of the music they've c o m p o s e d! Lucky thing we brought a recorder with us; you'll undoubtedly want to take some of the tapes back with you."

"Elcome oo Urbish, entlemen," they were greeted by a bright blue native, who was lolling in the best chair and showed no signs of rising. "Oodee," it, or he, complained, "it's oo ot in ere."

"I've shown you how to work the thermostat, dear," Judy said gently, as she adjusted the device. "They don't seem to have any aptitude for mechanical things," she explained, as she removed her heat suit, "but they're so marvellous in the arts you couldn't really ask for more."

"I'm afraid, sir," Wilkins whispered, "that the Terrestrial Government has another colony on its hands." The captain nodded gloomily.

THEY removed their heat suits. The temperature of the room was much too low for terrestrial comfort. And there was a peculiar odor which seemed to be emanating from a large pot that bubbled on the stove. None of the standard rations alloted to the team could possibly smell like that, Harnick knew; he hoped the young people had not been experimenting with the local vegetables. There was a regulation against that.

Either there was something wrong with the light or with his eyes, for the faces of the four team members appeared to have a distinct bluish tinge. On the other hand, Lieutenant Wilkins' visage seemed as comfortably rosy as ever.

"You won't recognize the place, sir!" Ned declared enthusiastically, as he took their suits. "We've built them tennis courts and a swimming

pool; they're as apt at sport as art."

"Only thing they don't seem to take to," Danny Field murmured, "is work."

The other three glared. "Culture is far more important!" his wife snapped. "And I trust you'll be able to spare us a lot more personnel for the post," she addressed Harnick, "because we need to build a stadium. And possibly a museum. And a school, of course."

"You don't want to go back then?" Wilkins asked curiously.

All four shook their heads. "We have a mission here now," Judy said.

"Look," Harnick protested, knowing it was no use, "the Earth Government's intention was only to use Furbish as a fueling and repair station."

"Fuel!" Judy snorted. "I don't know whether it would even be right to let the government ships land here. Those coarse, uncultured crews might c o n t a m i n a t e our natives; they're so impressionable, you know."

"But isn't it wonderful," Jane, the peacemaker, put in, "how they've thrived on terrestrial food. I think that must have a lot to do with the remarkable way they've developed."

Harnick's anger was lost in shock. "You mean you've been giving them your rations? But surely there wasn't that much food, even with the emergency stores!"

"Well," said Judy, "they don't eat as much as we do, of course. And you'd be surprised how tasty the native roots are. We've grown quite fond of them; in fact, I doubt whether we'd be able to stomach terrestrial food by now."

The odor from the pot grew stronger and even less appetizing. There was nothing wrong with either the light, Harnick realized, or his eyes. The faces of the four members of the survey team were really quite blue.

THE END

NON-FICTION

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

An automatic navigator with man-like powers of deliberative judgment has been developed. Called SCAN, meaning Self-Correcting Automatic Navigator, the device follows precise rules of logic in reasoning whether to accept, reject or demand confirmation of data fed into it.

The system discriminates automatically between data from any two information sources through continuous electronic application of the laws of probability and error distribution. It will enable an aircraft to fly straight to its target over enemy territory despite any attempts at electronic jamming, and without disclosing its presence by emitting any radiation.

A million hours doesn't sound like much, does it? But —only about 800,000 hours have passed since the end of the Civil War!

A machine developed at the University of Illinois takes only five minutes to drive a reasonably well-balanced individual to the point of nervous collapse. The device consists of a recording and playback instrument; the subject merely talks into a microphone and hears his own voice over earphones—with a slight lag, arranged by the playback device. The longer the test continues, the more frustrated and excited the confused victim gets. He tries to outshout himself, stammers, repeats himself, eventually turns into a trembling, quivering nervous wreck.

Its inventor, Grant Fairbanks of Illinois' Speech Research Laboratory, suggests that the machine can be defeated either by adjusting the rate of speech to that of the playback or by ignoring the playback completely, but so far no one's come along capable of doing either. The inventor hopefully believes the device will be useful in research on stuttering.

THE UNTOUCHABLE ADOLESCENTS

by ELLIS HART

illustrated by KELLY FREAS

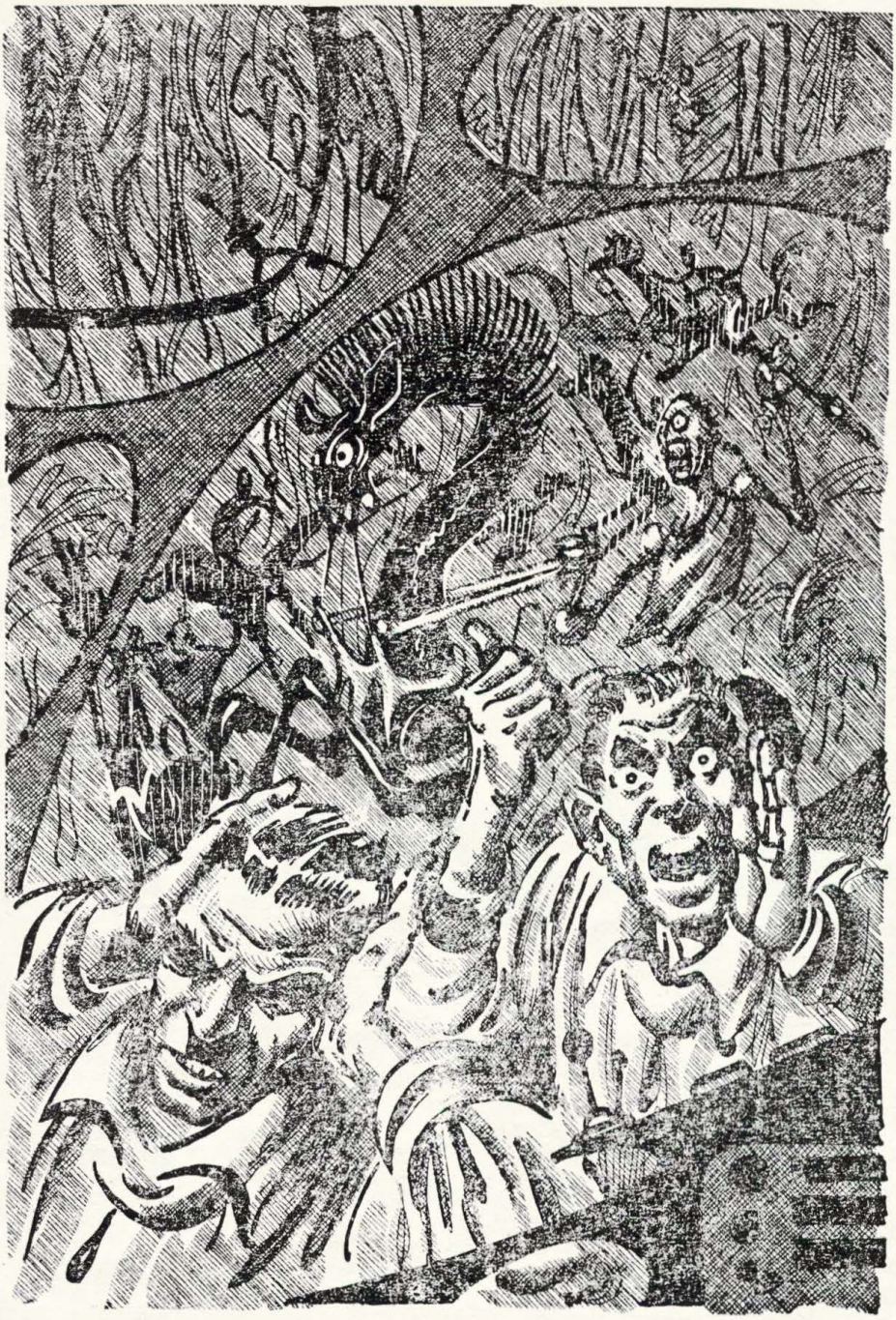
The aliens wouldn't accept help, though their world was about to explode. They were adolescents. Adolescence is the time when you aren't smart enough to ask for help...

THE planet Diamore, hung round and gaudy in the view-plates. As colorfully unchanging as it had been every day for the two weeks since the *Wallower* had plopped out of inverspace near it.

Captain Luther Shreve started violently as the whine of the Stress-Potential banks died away. They had been a constant noisemaker during the past two weeks; their continual dull rhythm had come to seem companionable. Now the keening discordanancy was ended, and he knew they had finished estimating the planet in the plates.

He sat very still, staring at the energy dials building their reserves back up. The banks had used much extra power.

He sat very still, waiting for them to bring him the plates. He didn't want to see them. He was a full Captain in the Merchant Arm of the Commercial Navy, and he found the tough outer shell of himself that had formed during thirty years in that service suddenly



disintegrating. He was afraid of what those plates would say.

The tube glowed behind him and Teller—slightly overweight, slightly florid, slightly balding and a brilliant Psych Officer—stepped off the plate, into the control room.

Teller slumped onto the co-pilot's couch, extended the sheaf of plate readings. Luther Shreve tipped his cap back on his head with a practiced thumb and shuffled the plates in silence.

From time to time his pink tongue washed across his lips. Finally he sighed and rubbed weary fingers across the bridge of his nose. He closed his eyes and slowly sank back against the cushions.

With eyes still closed, he voiced the final possibility. "Any room for error?"

He had tried to keep the tenseness from his voice, but it somehow doubled in the faintly resonating confines of the control room.

Teller shook his head. "They tell me no, Luther. I ran the plates up for them, mainly because they were all afraid to be here when you saw the sad news. You terrorize those poor bankroom boys, Luther."

Teller looked across, saw the odd set to Shreve's face, and realized his jibes were annoying the other. He swung his short legs over the side of the couch with a thump, clasped his hands in his lap as though about to recite.

"They have somewhere less than five months. Then the Big Push comes. The eruptions will wipe out nine-tenths of the centers of community."

He leaned across and pulled one sheet from the stack Shreve held. "Here is the position map." He indicated with quick, short jabs of his finger where the first earthquakes would hit, and followed blue lines to their terminuses.

He extended his hands, palms upward, in a movement of futility and sadness.

Shreve sat forward, sharply. He swept the cap from his head with one hand, ran the other through stringy, brown hair. He pursed his lips, muttered, "We've got to do something! It's more than just business potential ruined. There are people down there, Karl!

Millions of them. We can't let them die!"

"True," Teller stated simply, looking at his clasped hands. "But," he added, "what about the itinerary? They'll scream bloody blazes back there if you break schedule." He cocked a thumb toward the rear of the ship—toward Earth.

"Karl, I've been pushing one of these cans for MerchArm over thirty years. I'll be thirty-one in August. I've never broken a schedule in my life—but this is...this is something more important than bills of lading and sales curves!" His face had tightened, the character lines about his mouth standing forth.

"We've got to save them, Karl. We've got to help those people down there!"

Teller exhaled heavily. "All right, Luther. It's your choice. But you'd better produce something from those natives down there, or MerchArm might get unpleasant."

Shreve nodded, his face sagged into weariness momentarily. Then he straightened and depressed the public-address stud on the couch arm. His orders were brief and direct.

An hour later, ship-time, the great Wallower fired away with directional rockets, and began to fall toward the multi-colored sphere of Diamore.

HIGH jungle surrounded the ship. Deep-red stringers of climbing vine meshed with the purple and green and blue of exotic tree-forms. From the edge of the dead path the Wallower had burned in settling, the patchwork melange of colored growth reared and spread.

The analyzers were just completing their spore-counts when the Diamoraii burst from the jungle, thundered onto the charred ground of the clearing.

They rode tall on the backs of their mounts, whooping and wailing in a minor key. The outside receivers, which had been left on in various parts of the *Wallower,* rattled tinnily at the noise. Men clasped hands to their ears and hurried to depress studs to shut out the din. Shreve and Teller whirled from their calculations

and stared fascinated at the sight in the plates.

The Diamoraii's huge, loping animals closely resembled Terrestrial giraffes. The beasts were pitch-black and ran with a gait beautifully adapted to the jungle. They came on with a liquid, side-stepping motion. They neatly leaped the twisted tree-trunks, swayed out of the path to avoid a cluster of high-pile blossoms, and trampled to a stop fifty yards in front of the *Wallower*.

"Stations!" Shreve yelled into the p-a mike. He turned back to the view-plate, staring at the black beasts.

There were twelve of them, each with a depression in its back in which a Diamorai sat, clutching the flanks of the thin, black animal with his knees. Twists of pliant material looped through the beast's noses served both as bridle and reins.

The twelve Diamoraii leaped agilely from their mount's backs, began looking at each other with indecision. They milled about the stomping animals for a minute, then each went to a bulky pouch slung across his beast's back- depression. They fumbled in the pouches.

Shreve turned the plates up to higher magnification, whistling t h r o u g h his teeth. "Wheeew! What magnificent creatures! Did you see the way they ran that jungle like broken-field quarterbacks?"

From beside him the agreeing mutter of the pudgy psych officer blended with the busy clicking of the analyzers, totaling their counts.

"Those look to be the people we have to contact, Karl," Shreve added, motioning toward the Diamoraii who were dragging objects from their pouches.

"A young people," Teller mused, his face flushed. "A young and a virile people. Shouldn' have any trouble getting through to them." He turned a plate knob to sharper register.

The Diamoraii had advanced on the ship. They were almost humanoid. Tall—almost six and a half feet each with very long legs and boney, knobbed knees. Their legs seemed to represent almost half their bodies. Wide-shouldered, V-shaped chests; obvlously large-

lunged. Otherwise, despite the wide-spaced, large-irised eyes, they were almost humanoid.

As Shreve and Teller watched, they each donned a hideous devil-mask.

"UGH!" Shreve blurted, his face drawing up into a picture of agony. "What ghastly greeting cards *those* are! If that's a sample of their demonology, I'd hate to see them exorcising one of the poor devils: probably frighten the thing to life!"

Teller was leaning closer to the screen, his small eyes watching the twelve with undisguised fascination. He was talking more to himself than his superior. "Must be religious symbols of some sort. Must have put on their Prayer-day best just to come see us."

Shreve looked at Teller sharply. "You don't suppose they think we're gods or something?"

Shaking his head in annoyance, Teller replied, "No, no, certainly not. You can tell they don't! They haven't prostrated themselves or offered up sacrifices or such, as the typical superstitious aborigine would. No, I'm quite certain they don't deify us. Probably just insuring that evil spirits don't try to interfere with their mission—whatever that might be. But," he added, "it doesn't appear to be dangerous, whatever it is."

The twelve were now capering and turning handsprings directly under the plate's hull-pickups. Shaking their masks into the cameras. They seemed unaware that anyone might be watching.

"Ritual," murmured Teller.

As though his identification of it had tired them of their actions, they sat—almost as one. Cross-legged, arms akimbo, expressions stolidly hidden by the grotesque shapes of their devil-masks, they waited. Again, almost to the second, they removed their hands from their hips and folded them across their massive chests.

Shreve looked at the tight semi-circle of aliens, then at Teller. He licked his lips anxiously. It was apparent he was happier, now that he had landed and felt he could help the Diamoraii.

"Well, what should we do, Karl? This is more in your

line. Should we go out and talk to them, or bring them inside? Do you think they're aware of the coming eruptions?" The questions had come out on top of one another, with an almost childlike anxiety.

It was odd to hear such a tone from the otherwise stolid Shreve. Teller looked up in surprise. He smiled slowly.

The psych officer flipped his plate off, turned, crossing his arms as the aliens had done, and sat on the dead console.

"I don't think they know what's happening down there, Luther. At least," he amended, "they didn't appear to be preparing for evacuation in the threatened areas when we went over them. So I rather suspect they're waiting for us to come out and chat." He shrugged his s h o u l d e r s, staring at Shreve. "And that, my Captain, is it."

Shreve looked back at the aliens in his plate. He nodded his head with determination, and his face lit up with purpose. Teller had seen the look once or twice before—never on routine commercial ventures, however. He had labeled it missionary zeal.

The Diamoraii were still sitting in cross-legged squats, their knees up about their mask's pointed ears and horned temples.

"Well, then I suppose we'd better go out and chat. The sooner we set up the Stress Rectifiers, the better." He got up, stepped toward the shaft.

"Oh," he said, stopping and turning back to the psych officer, "I'd like you to come out with me, Karl. No orders, you understand, but I'd appreciate it."

The s h o r t psychologist looked at him for a moment, nodded his head in acceptance. Shreve stepped into the shaft and sank down through the floor as the tube glowed. Teller looked at the empty shaft for a moment. As the platform slipped back into place he flipped Shreve's plate off.

Stepping onto the platform he threw a glance over his shoulder at the now-grey plate.

"You're a very young race," he whispered, disappearing through the floor.

THEY dropped the few inches to the ground,

bouncing a bit more than they'd allowed for, in the lessened gravity of Diamore. All around them the screams of the jungle meshed into one primal roar.

Shreve ran his tongue around the inside of his cheek. The medic had flatly refused to allow their exit, unless they submitted to the six shots he felt were minimum safety precaution.

With the feel of the electro-syringe still in his cheeks, Shreve stepped away from the monstrous plug-port, raising his arms in friendship. Behind him, Teller did the same.

They moved slowly toward the Diamoraii. The twelve sat immobile, yet seeming to be looking from each other to the Earthmen, and back, in sharp, jerking motions. It was all illusion, but disquieting.

As they stepped toward the aliens, Shreve felt the nerves in his teeth begin to twitch. He had been about to say something soothing in English, but the words never came out.

Who are you?

The question appeared in his head full-blown, inquisitive, without sense of direction or distance. He knew immediately from where it had come, of course, yet he could not quite believe it. Shreve stopped dead, the pain in his jaws mounting. He glanced quickly at Teller.

The shorter man was clutching his jaws with both hands, biting his lower lip and rocking back and forth, eyes half-closed.

"Karl," Shreve's tongue stumbled over the words in his pain, "they're—migod, Karl—they're *telepathic!*"

They stood rooted in their tracks, staring at the twelve impassive aliens in their grotesque masks.

Teller stared in open fascination, still clutching his head. "The first," he murmured in awe. "The very first! They always said someday we'd meet them, and now, by God, we have!" His voice died off to a whisper and he stared unblinking at the dark-skinned Diamoraii.

The words appeared in their minds once more—this time more firm, tinged with impatience:

Who are you?

Shreve seemed unable to respond. He had thought them ig-

norant savages, on the verge of disaster, who would be jubilant at the offer of aid. Instead, he was faced with making contact; contact with the first mind-reading race Humanity had met racing through the stars. His throat tightened up, he could not speak.

FINALLY, he took a step forward, extended his hands in peace to the aliens. "Friends. We've come to help you. Friends."

He was certain they couldn't understand the spoken words. Whether or not they could decipher the thoughts—that was something else. Later, the Earthmen could bring out the communicators if the need arose. But for now, he wanted only the soothing good will in his voice to win them.

If they knew the Earthmen were protected by stat-fields, and that a dozen gun-blisters were trained on them, they gave no indication.

We don't want your help.

There was a tone of anger, a driving odor of fear, in the feel of the thoughts. The Earthmen felt their teeth jump as the thoughts materialized. Shreve realized suddenly that the toothaches must be a by-product of the psi power.

Shreve turned to Teller. The psych officer was staring back at him, his eyes wide, his hands still clutching his jaw. They both recognized something they had missed when the telepathy first became known to them.

It was not an entering of the mind; they could not reach into the deepest recesses of the Diamoraii's minds and get whole pictures. It was like a mental radio transmission.

They could send and receive, with inflection and depth, but they had to do it in darkness.

Teller said nothing, but he stepped closer to the aliens. Shreve could tell he was thinking at them, but *what* he was thinking was impossible to guess. If the aliens understood, they gave no indication. The transmission did not work between the Earthmen, obviously.

When Teller had fallen back, Shreve asked, "What did you say?"

"I told them we were here because volcanic eruptions were going to rip up their planet within five months. I told them

the quakes and volcanos would kill off ninety-five percent of their people. I told them we could help them to—"

The aliens rose slowly, and one stepped forward. He looked down at the two Earthmen.

Hear this you are not the first strangers to come here once before strange men came to us from the sky they called themselves the Kyben and they told us they wanted to trade but they did not trade they ate away our land and burned our jungle and took our women and killed our young warriors.

It came as a blast of pure thought. All at once, as though spurted out whole from the mind. The inflection was there —the meaning—the depth of bitterness. Shreve felt his mouth dry out at the calibre of agony in the thoughts.

Teller shrugged his shoulders as though he wanted no more part in the matter, and retreated a few steps, massaging his throbbing jaws.

The alien stream ceased, and the Diamorai drew back. He seemed to rise up on his toes, as though he wanted to strike the Earthman, but was restraining himself through the movement.

SHREVE felt a desperation mounting in him. He *had* to save these people, *had* to make them realize their danger. "But you can read our minds—you can *see* we're telling the truth!" he argued. He found his stomach muscles had tightened, hands had clenched.

The alien thought reverberated in his head: *What makes you think you cannot lie with telepathy?*

Then the thoughts flowed again. This time cold, dispassionate, merely information.

We have been as you think burned once and we do not wish to be burned again we cannot say whether or not these things you warn us of really exist but we will take our own destinies in our hands and treat them if they come we have seen no such indications of eruptions and we do not believe you.

The thoughts ceased. Then one word alone: *Go.*

Shreve cursed the limitations of the psi faculty. Of what use was a mind-reading ability if it merely told you what another person thought—not whether it was true or not?

He stepped toward them again. He looked up at the fear-

some masks and felt the sinking of his stomach. He realized they were a young and headstrong people, Teller had made that clear to him. Their arrogance was the false front of a people frightened by the unknown. But were they so young that they could not realize when they needed help?

"Look," he found himself speaking, "you don't seem to understand." The aliens moved back as Shreve approached. They didn't seem to want him near them. "Your planet is a young one. There are internal stresses that are going to rip open your continents. We can set up machines that will redirect these eruptions—into the ocean, back in the jungle where it's uninhabited—so your people won't die. We—"

Did you see the blood pits near the Great Ocean?

Shreve caught the thought, and knew there was more to it than the Diamorai had thought at first. The thought was laden with blast-furnace hatred and a deadly bitterness.

He remembered the planet-circling landing the *Wallower* had made. He remembered the single body of water, the Great Ocean, stretching yellow and rippling across a third of Diamore. The picture completed itself in his mind and he saw the monstrous gouges ripped into the land, near the shore of that ocean. Pits of fused, crimson soil; bare, gaping wounds, nothing but emptiness and dead plants surrounding them for miles.

Those are the ones, the thought came. *Those were the cities of Golumoor, Nokrosch and Huyt on the shores of the Great Ocean we resisted the Kyben when they wanted to drill out our ceremonial grounds for their soils they said were radioactive we would not let them drill and they sent down death to our cities.*

Tinged with such emotion, the words were so boldly put, their meaning was all too clear. These people would never reverse their decision. They hated all outsiders. Shreve wondered whether they could be blamed.

"But you *need* our help! You've got to believe me! You can read my thoughts—can't you see I'm telling the truth!"

We could read the Kyben thoughts, too.

Silence in their minds for an instant, then:

Have you seen the blood pits?

LUTHER Shreve felt as though he were being dragged down into a whirlpool. He didn't know why it was suddenly so important to him that he help the Diamoraii. There was certainly no sense of brotherhood with the aliens. But he knew, on a level that defied all doubt, that he must save these people, or never feel at peace with himself again.

Behind him, Shreve heard Teller snort in disgust. The psych officer took two quick steps forward, jerked his head toward the massive bulk of the *Wallower*. "Children! That's all they are. They think those masks protect them from evil, they think their blind arrogance will protect them if trouble comes! They think they know better than us! They don't know when they need help. Come on, Luther, leave them if that's what they want!" He turned to go, his face flushed in anger.

Shreve looked back at the aliens. He searched the blank and grotesque masks for some evidence of willingness to reason. There was none. Shreve gritted his teeth in frustration; he *wanted* to help, he *wanted* to save them—but they wouldn't *let* themselves accept his help. The aliens didn't *want* to be saved. They stood there, tall, impassive, the thought radiating unendingly:

Go go go go go go go go go go go go go go go.

Luther Shreve stepped toward them, anger boiling hot in his brain. "All right, damn you! If you're too stupid, or too swollen up with your own importance to realize you need help, we'll help you despite yourselves!"

Why do you think the Kyben left Diamore?

Shreve's words stopped before they could be spoken. His fury checked itself. He hadn't considered that. Why *had* another race, one that could decimate a planet as the blood pits indicated they could, leave when they seemed to be on the verge of getting what they wanted?

We are not defenseless we

can stop you we will hurt you go.

Teller's sharp laugh interrupted before Shreve could get an answer out. "Fools! Pompous adolescents! What makes you think your primitive warriors with their bogey masks can harm us? Look!" He stepped toward the alien. The Diamorai backed up. Teller stepped quickly, coming into sharp contact with the alien's body. The Diamorai leaped back, the short hairs on his body standing straight out. He thought something at his brothers. It was incomprehensible to the Earthmen.

"That's a stat-field. And there are a dozen guns pointed at you from the ship. We'll set up the machines and save you whether you like it or not." He turned away with a low chuckle, adding ruefully, "Though why you want to bother with such a bunch of arrogant children is beyond me, Luther." He walked toward the ship.

Casting nervous glances at one another, the aliens leaped to the backs of their mounts, reined in and turned to leave. Shreve stood and watched them as they loped to the jungle's edge.

The ebony giraffe-things drew up short, and the leader's reared up as the alien turned to stare at Shreve.

Go or we will hurt you.

In an instant they were gone, melting into the colored riot of the jungle, the beasts hoofs beating ever more faintly as they moved away.

Shreve turned back to the ship. He should have felt no temperature changes within his stat-field, yet somehow he had grown chilled in a few seconds.

NIGHT had descended quickly, dropping like a sea of ink over Diamore. The robomechs had set out the floodlamps, almost to the edges of the jungle, and the *Wallower* was bathed in white light, sharply outlining her plate construction, and the clean transparency of the conning bubbles.

Paul Jukovsky, Roboexec, jg, stood behind his control console in the construction bubble, watching the thirty ton robomech carrying its burden. The sixteen-wheeled robomech rolled off the extended cargo hatch ramp, sinking just a bit

into the springy ground of Diamore. Jukovsky grinned at his foresight in spreading a primary hardener over the surface before the big boys went to work.

He two-fingered a cigarette out of his lapel pocket, stifling a belch. "Damn that cookie," he muttered. "If he doesn't stop putting cayenne in the salad..." He stuck the cigarette in his mouth, lipping it irritably for a second. He withdrew it, spitting out a loose bit of tobacco. Satisfied, he inserted it again, began to scratch it alight with his fingertip.

He moved a calibrated knob on the board three clicks. The lumbering monster outside revolved its head, the huge drilling plate it carried on its flattened and magnetized top moving also. "Like an old woman carrying a water urn on her head," he chuckled, puffing the cigarette.

The robomech neared phosphorescent markings laid out on the ground, where the fibreglass base plate should be planted. Stress Rectifiers would be magno-clamped to the base plate, then would begin their search-position-drilling.

He moved to press the release button that would cause the robomech to set its burden down lightly.

Paul Jukovsky's teeth suddenly began to ache with terrible intensity. He clutched at his face wildly, burning the palm of his hand on the cigarette.

A strangled sob began to form, ended in a gurgling half-scream. His eyes rolled upwards and a trickle of blood emerged from the corner of his mouth.

Stone-dead he fell across the control console, depressing all studs.

The thirty ton robomech whirled twice and burst toward the edge of the jungle. It struck the boles of three huge intertwined trees with a resounding clang; the base plate bounced from its head and crashed, shattering, onto a projecting rock spear. The robot struggled for a moment more, driving into the jungle, knocking trees from its path in blind fury.

The smell of cordite soaked through the clearing, and a wisp of smoke issued from the service box. An instant later its chambers fused their baffles and the robomech exploded

with a terrifying burst of heat, impossible light, and the scream of ripping metal.

"HIS brains were fused," Teller said.

The psych officer looked Shreve directly in the eyes, trying to find meaning in the captain's closed expression. Teller's face was unnaturally white, his usually drooping lips thinned to a black line. "The autopsymen were shaking like loose bolts when they reported to me, Luther. They swore they'd never seen anything like it before. It was as if someone had taken that boy's brains in his red-hot hands and molded them like clay."

Shreve's jaw muscles worked in a strange rhythm. His voice was cold and determined. "We are going to get those Rectifiers set up. Better stay in your cabin, Karl; I've got to put men on it."

When Teller had left, the odd stare he had cast still haunting Shreve, the captain sank onto his couch. He pressed the p-a stud and crisped his orders, naming men and leaving no room for argument.

He felt the tremors through the soles of his boots as the men began unchocking their mechs. His balled fist found its way into his mouth.

He was not aware his hand was bleeding till several minutes after the teeth had pierced the skin.

After the sixth death—all of them with their brain-pans charred and their grey matter stuck together—Shreve broke down.

He threw a blanker over the shaft and sat there swearing. His body shook and heaved as he mumbled into his hands. In one stride he was off the couch and had smashed his fist full into the reflecting metal of the console face. It left a shallow dent, and he didn't seem to notice the angry inflammation of his knuckles. Teller stood across the room, keeping very still, shaking his head slowly, and thinking soft sounds.

After a while Shreve stopped, and collapsed onto the couch, his face red and swollen. "Sorry, Karl," he said.

"Why don't you try crying, it's easier on the metabolism," he suggested.

Shreve gave a bitter laugh,

thin and short. "Last time I cried I was eating cream cheese and jelly sandwiches and didn't know where little babies come from." Teller didn't smile. He knew Shreve was covering up. He had never seen the man break as he had today, and he knew the knowledge should go no further.

"But why? *Why?*" Shreve pounded his fist into the yielding couch. "We came to help them, why won't they let us?"

"Luther, Luther," Teller soothed him, sitting down beside him on the couch, "don't you see? They're adolescents. They don't know when to call for help. They've been hurt, and with the single-minded purpose of the immature they're bound not to let it happen again. You can't blame yourself for what's happened.

"You had no way of knowing about this power of theirs. Why don't we leave right now. If we lay on all power we can make the schedule still pretty close."

Shreve stood up, flicked on the view-plates. He stared into them a moment, seeing nothing but tangled jungle. He drew up a bit, laid his hands flat on the console. "I've got to talk to them once more. To beg them again."

WE warned you came the cold, hard tones. *The group-mind is infinitely stronger than our individual power now that you have seen our strength will you go?*

"I've come to beg you once more," Shreve pleaded, looking up at the masked Diamoraii, astride their mounts. He had made certain all outside pickup mikes were off. "We only want to help you. Won't you let us re-direct the coming eruptions. Please!" Shreve had plumbed the depths of his mind in an attempt to find reasons for sacrificing such efforts to save the Diamoraii. The only reasons he had found he had not been able to translate—yet there was a sense of identification with the long-legged and stubborn aliens. *He wanted to save them!*

"Can't you read my thoughts?" he said, projecting truth, projecting honesty and sincerity. "Can't you see I want to help you, help your people?"

They did not even bother answering. He knew their acquaintance with the truth that men of other worlds had offered. To be defeated because those who need your help had been spoiled by another race!

The bitterness, the hatred, the distrust, washed over him, as the Diamorai leaned across his beast's neck, thought one snarled word: *Go.*

Shreve felt the futility of everything he had done, suddenly caving in on him. He looked up into the blank stares of the masked aliens, said slowly, "We will hang above your atmosphere till you call us."

He walked back to the *Wallower.* The huge plug-port closed behind him. The aliens sat astride their beasts, staring at the ship.

Their minor-key whoops of victory rang and bounced in the jungle's treetops as they swung their mounts roughly, dug boney knees into their sides, and careened into the multicolored vastness.

The Diamorai had won again!

THE *Wallower* spun slowly in space, the eternal dust of the universe lapping at her ports. Below her, enveloped by clouds of steam, the planet Diamore blasted and erupted and screamed and belched and tore itself apart.

Luther Shreve sat before the control console, staring with almost hypnotized attention at the view-plates. He watched the world die.

His face was hard and unyielding. He had refused entrance even to Teller, barring everyone from the control room.

At every eruption, with each fissure that opened wide enough to be seen from that fantastic height, he felt a strange sinking in his heart. His throat was dry, and there was an odd pressure behind his eyes.

He watched silently, every once in a while letting the thought *They didn't know when to ask for help* filter through his mind.

THE Group of Deciders huddled in the blasted Council Hall. The floor—what was left of the inlaid tiles—shivered and heaved. Beyond the twisted lattices of the win-

dows they could hear the mighty rending of the planet as it opened and swallowed all that stood.

Within an hour of the first eruptions, so quickly and with such fury that there had been no time for preparation, almost three-fifths of their race had been decimated.

The cities Kes and Uykvabask and Laylor had gone under with roaring flames and the scraping of stone against flesh. The Great Ocean had exploded with a red-hot bubbling and roared onto the land, washing everything before it. The lava flows raced Eastward to the Ceremonial Grounds and Westward to the Hunting Preserve. Everywhere the ground opened without warning or reason, and life sank beneath the earth.

Wrong, the Group of Deciders admitted in their last refuge. *We were wrong we have been foolish we have rejected our only salvation we must prepare the group-mind send our plea for aid into space speak to the outsiders ask them to help us.*

They thought their instructions away from themselves, to their kin across Diamore's blasted face. *Prepare! Join! Speak to the outsiders!*

And when they had gathered together every last Diamorai, with more dying as they joined the chain, with the feel of agony radiating through the group-mind, the message weakly rose. Tentatively it probed at the inner surface of Diamore's atmosphere.

The power was, perhaps, insufficient to reach the spaceship. Three-fifths of the Diamoraii were lost to the group-mind.

The group-mind struggled, frantically beaming, in hopelessness trying to get through to the Earthmen who rode above them.

The men who rode above them—waiting for a signal from the Diamoraii.

SHREVE turned away from the plates, flicking them off. "I can't stand it, Karl! How senseless! Because one race dealt them unfairly, they closed their eyes to help from anyone else."

Teller crossed his legs as he sat on the couch. He did not appear to be disturbed by the sight from below.

"Luther, you can't go on destroying yourself. You did everything you could. You were as resourceful as any man could have been.

"Now you'd better get back to the schedule. We're over four and a half months due at our next landfall." He saw his words were having no effect. "Look, Luther, I've been in this business almost as long as you. I've seen this time and again. When you come up against an adolescent race, that doesn't know when it's got something too big to handle, there's nothing you can do but back off and let them handle it themselves. If they don't get smart enough to know when to call the fireman—that's their agony. Not *yours!*"

"What's the next stop on our itinerary?" he asked the last almost jauntily, consciously trying to take Shreve's mind off the cinder that spun below the *Wallower*. He rose and stretched, as though from a profound sleep.

For a moment he stared in wonder. Then he stepped into the shaft and quietly left the control room.

He had never thought he'd see the day when Luther Shreve cried like a child.

THE END

SCIENCE SHORTS

by EDGAR P. STRAUS

Twenty million meteors enter Earth's atmosphere every day, but only four or five actually strike the ground.

In 1896, the American astronomer Charles Perrine was at the Lick Observatory observing a comet he had discovered, when he received a telegram from another observatory giving the position of the comet at that moment. The telegram had been jumbled in transmission, and gave an entirely wrong position—more than two degrees from the correct one. Perrine, not knowing the message had been twisted, pointed his telescope at the indicated place—and found another comet!

The value of *pi*—the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter—is usually abbreviated to 3.1416, but the figure can be carried out infinitely. In the middle of the 19th century, a determined English mathematician named Shanks calculated *pi* to 707 decimal places. The job took him more than 15 years, and later mathematicians were content to let him hold the record.

Recently, though, some waggish computer-operators fed the problem to ENIAC, the electronic calculator at the Army's Aberdeen, Maryland, Ballistic Research Laboratories. The machine promptly computed *pi* to 2,040 places. Time, something under one day.

A study in Syracuse, New York, indicated that people who live in one family homes had a lower rate of psychosis than those who live in multiple-family dwellings.

EVERYDAY IS CHRISTMAS

NOVELETTE

by JAMES E. GUNN

illustrated by ORBAN

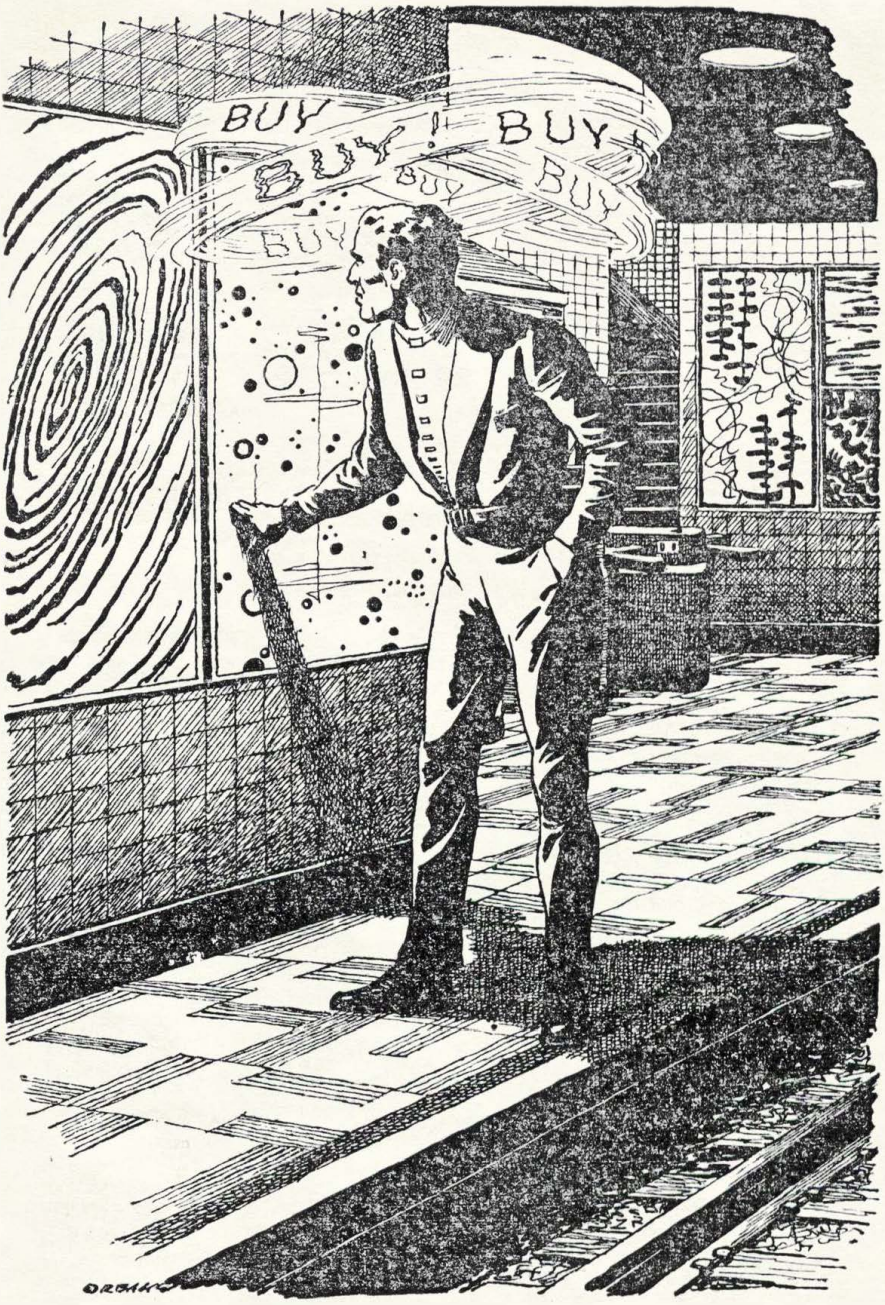
The Christmas spirit brings out the best in people. Suppose every day were Christmas? Well, by using a special technique — perhaps that could be arranged

I stepped out of the passenger port onto the open elevator and waited for it to take me to ground level. My first conscious thought was: *My God! You can see so far!*

My lips twisted mirthlessly. That wasn't memorable, and it wasn't even accurate. For three years I had been where I could see for millions of miles, for light years; there was no choice. The difference was that there had been no middle distance. Twenty feet or a million miles. What I had meant was that I could see so much. As I thought about it, even that lost its appeal.

I had not consciously expected exultation to release itself in drama, but three years of slowly building tension subconsciously seeks an outlet. Now, as the elevator reached the pavement, I only felt hot. I stepped out upon Earth and my only reaction was: My *God, but it's hot!*

It *was* hot, over ninety, and the humidity was almost as high. After my three years in the controlled, sterile climate of an asteroid belt navigation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beacon, the impact was physical.

Where is Jean?

I scanned the faces around me. Their presence did not excite me, as I had thought they would. They only depressed me. For three years the prospect of this moment had kept me sane in the hollow sphere that paced the asteroid belt endlessly, but now it meant nothing. There was only one face I wanted to see, and it was not here.

It was possible that Jean had not received my spacegram. Transmission was unreliable. Static scrambled the messages.

I pulled a thin, yellow envelope out of my pocket. I unfolded it and read it again.

WILL DOUBLE SALARY FOR RENEWAL OF CONTRACT....

I looked up at the blue sky, drifted with summer clouds, and felt the tug of gravity on my 175 pounds. But it was more than gravity that held me tight to Earth.

How much is three years of a man's life worth? Three years, cut right out of the middle, and filled with emptiness?

They had put a price on it: $50,000 a year. A price for being unbearably alone. And I knew now that you cannot measure time by years; you measure time by what is in it. I had not spent three years out there; I had spent a lifetime. They offered to raise the price to $100,000, but it was impossible. You can't spend a life twice, any more than you can spend a dollar twice.

I have one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, I thought. Fifty thousand for each endless year. Jean can't have spent much; she had her job. I own my home, and I have enough money to live ten years in luxury or twenty years in comfort. Maybe that's worth three years of a man's life.

Jean! I thought of the pointed, girlish face, the blonde curls, the blue eyes, the gently-rounded body. I remembered those things better than I knew myself; I had three years to memorize them. *Jean....*

Taxi or subway? I toyed with the idea of extravagance. I wanted my first opportunity to spend money to be some-

thing worth remembering. I did not want to recall dropping a token into a turnstile. But the subway would be quicker. Quicker to Jean.

I descended into the earth, into the darkness, into madness.

STILL I was as far from the living earth as ever. Farther. Instead of merely having concrete underfoot, I was surrounded by it. Perhaps that was what I missed. I wished I could see grass growing or pick up a clod of clean soil and crumble it slowly in my fingers and let it trickle back to join the living things.

The subway was hot and dirty. It seemed as if I had never been away. Scraps of newspaper littered the platform; dingy placards adorned the wall. The biggest one said: "Subway fare is now one quarter (25¢)."

I studied it, frowning. Had prices gone up so much in three years?

I put a quarter in the slot and pushed my way through. Alone on the platform, I paced restlessly. After a moment I began to study the ads. The ones that faced the dark tracks were newer and cleaner. I had never seen anything like them before.

One was a swirl of colors, like light reflected from oil-streaked water. I stared at it. It was meaningless. I thought it was meaningless. Something just below the level of recognition nagged at my senses. I looked away, and in that movement of my eyes, the ad almost came clear. Something vaguely, roundly, monstrously sexual. And some words: "BE *something!*" it read. "BUY *something!*"

Or was it merely illusion?

The next ad was a sprinkling of colored dots, scattered, superimposed, haphazard. Just as meaningless at first glance as the other. And then, like the shifting of an optical illusion or the sudden revelation of numbers in a color-blindness test, the dots adjusted themselves into a recognizable pattern. A white cylinder, a rising thread of smoke curling up—very attractive, almost three-dimensional. I could almost taste the sweet, relazing fra-

grance. Tension. You can learn to live with it for a time, but eventually it must have release.

I shook myself. I had stopped smoking before leaving Earth. For three years I had not had the slightest desire for a cigarette of any kind. There was no logic to this sudden craving.

I knew what I wanted. I wanted a glass of cold milk, an onion, a tomato—food that was fresh, untainted by can or package. I didn't think I would be able to eat anything canned for a long time.

The tunnel began to murmur. The murmur grew to a roar. The roar diminished in a squealing of metal brakes. The train pulled up beside the platform. The doors slid open. Nobody got off. I slipped into the nearest car. The door slid shut behind me. The train began to move; it picked up speed....

I clung to a bar and looked at the other passengers. There were about a dozen in the car, sitting quietly, staring into space as if they were listening to something. Men and women alike wore shorts, violently colored, some striped, some patterned, some with meaningless whorls. The women wore brief halters with holes cut in the center through which their painted nipples were visible.

Styles change, I thought. I thought it was ugly.

WHINRR-R-R! The music began abruptly. I started. It was strange stuff, full of nerve-jangling dissonances and missed intervals. I tried to locate the source but without success. It seemed to come from everywhere in the car. No one else seemed to be disturbed. They sat motionless, listening....

"BE-E-E-E BEWITCHING! BUY-Y-Y-Y BEWITCHING!" A chant joined the music, intoned monotonously, repetitively in counter-intervals to the music by a mixed group like the mass voice of society. It was infinitely irritating. "BE-E-E-E BEWITCHING! BUY-Y-Y-Y BEWITCHING! BE-E-E-E."

Over and over again. Eternally.

The train began to slow. Lights appeared and white-tiled walls and pillars.

"BUY NOW!" the chant

said imperatively. T H U M P! THUMP! The chant and the music stopped.

The door slid open. The women in the car got up quickly and filed out. A few other women entered with small packages in their hands. They sat down.

Ugly, I thought. *All of them.* Even after three years, the sight of their near-naked bodies filled me with revulsion.

Nobody said anything. Nobody did anything except listen. These weren't people at all. They were automatons, moving with the regularity and mindlessness of clockwork.

The doors closed. The train moved away.

WHANG - NG! STRNNN - NH! The music came back, a different rhythm, this time, different dissonances.

"NERVES T A U T?" The music jangled h o r r i b l y. "SMOKE A LOT?" Dissonances. "DON'T J I T T E R, JETTER! B E T T E R BUY BILLOWS! Relax-x-x!" The last word was drawn out and the music died away softly with it. Silence. Blessed silence.

Billows? I thought querulously. *Billows?*

WHANG - NG! STRNNN - NH! I stiffened as if I had been hit in the s t o m a c h. "NERVES TAUT?...."

I slid down into a seat beside a middle-aged man; my legs felt weak in the old-fashioned tight-cuff pants. Beside them, his legs looked ridiculously thin and hairy.

"Is it like this all the time?" I asked him, above the chant. "Can't you do anything about it?"

The man was listening, but not to me. I took him by the shoulder and shook him a little... "What's the matter with everybody? Why don't you complain or turn the stuff off?"

The man ignored me. The train began to slow.

"DON'T D E L A Y!" the chant ordered. "BUY NOW!" Silence.

The train stopped. The man sitting beside me got up and filed out with the rest of the men in the car. I started after them. Other men got on, chewing. One of them spat a purple stream on the floor.

Drugs? I thought uneasily. *Hypnosis?*

The doors slid shut. The train started. The music began again. This time it was rather gentle and almost melodic. The words were chanted by a chorus of female voices.

"S O O - S O O - S O O - SOOTHE." The last word was trailed out l a n g o u r o u s l y. "SOO-SOO-SOO-SOOTHE."

I put my hands over my ears. What in heaven's name did you do with Soothe? Use it? Wear it? Drink it? I didn't want to know. I felt the vibrations change to a staccato tempo....

AT Times Square I escaped, as if from bedlam. What had I come back to? Or was it merely that I was oversensitive after three years of complete peace, complete quiet.

I thought for a moment of buying something for Jean, something expensive, something to show how glad I was to be back home. But the sight and sounds of the street drove the idea away.

The streets were decorated with green and red, streamers, wreaths, bells, candles. Music floated over the crowded sidewalks. People in scanty clothing shoved and lunged, carried large stacks of p a c k a g e s, moved in waves. There were too many of them.

"S I L E N T N I G H T," boomed one speaker. "DECK THE HALLS," clashed another. "J I N G L E BELLS, JINGLE BELLS..OF A WHITE CHRISTMAS .... S A N T A CLAUS IS COMING...WE THREE KINGS...."

Christmas carols! I pressed myself back against a building front and looked up at the nearly vertical sun and wiped the sweat from my forehead. There was a logical explanation to all of this. Had I gone mad out there from the loneliness and the emptiness and the yearning? Was this just a fantasy of my disordered mind? Or was this really the fifth of July, and was it the world that was mad?

On the sidewalk in front of me was a man dressed in a heavy red suit trimmed with white fur. On his head was a long, red and white stocking cap. A long, white beard came

halfway down his chest. Beside him was an iron pot dangling from a tripod. On top of the tripod was a sign: "IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE."

In one hand the man waved a large bell. It made a horrible clanging sound to compete with the carols coming from the store fronts. "GIVE - GIVE - GIVE - GIVE - GIVE...." he chanted. Those who passed showered change into the iron pot.

I felt an irrational impulse to empty the change in my pocket into the pot. Instead I stepped up beside the man and tapped him on the shoulder. The man stopped swinging the bell and turned.

"What's the date?" I muttered.

The man in the red and white suit looked at me curiously. "July fifth, bub."

"Yesterday was the Fourth of July?" I asked. "Independence Day?"

"Yeah, and tomorrow will be July sixth."

I stared at him. "Then who the hell are you?"

He laughed jovially. "Santa Claus, bub. Where you been?"

"A long ways," I muttered. "But it's—let's see—over five months until Christmas. Aren't you rushing things a little?"

"Now, bub, you don't want to wait until the last minute, do you? Only one hundred and forty-five shopping days left till Christmas. Where's your Christmas spirit?"

"It doesn't seem quite the season for it," I said, glancing up at the sun. "Aren't you smothered in that outfit?"

He shook his snowy head. "Naw," he said. "I got an Indicool. Works off a battery in my stuffing." He thumped himself in the belly.

"A what?"

"Indicool. Personal cooler. Where you been, bub? They had a doozy of a promotion just a couple of days ago. Institute, of course. Oversold their stock by fifty percent. That's results."

"Institute?" I said dazedly.

Santa Claus eyed him suspiciously. "Ad Institute, naturally. Everybody who wants to sell take a course. Or as many as he can afford. Took one myself. Cost me a pile, but I been

doing two hundred percent better ever since. G'wan now! I got to get back to business."

I started to back away. The bell clanged out its sense-jarring message. "GIVE - GIVE - GIVE - GIVE - GIVE...."

Coins clinked into the pot. A crazy song was running through my mind: "I just missed the Fourth of July, but I'm just in time for Christmas."

"SILENT NIGHT," came from the loudspeakers. "IN THE LANE SNOW IS GLISTENIN'...MAKIN' A LIST, CHECKIN' IT TWICE... TRA - LA - LA - LA - LA - LA - LA - LA - LA...."

The July sun beat down sullenly. The air steamed. Someone brushed past me carrying a large, bushy Christmas tree....

"Taxi!" I yelled. "Taxi!"

They passed, dozens of them, all loaded with shoppers and their packages. I swayed back and forth, buffeted by the crowd, lost in a sea of naked arms and legs.

"Taxi!" I said despairingly.

At last one pulled to the curb. I battled my way to the door, pulled it open, sank down in the back seat. I sighed. The world was mad, but waiting for me was Jean and $150,000.

I leaned forward and gave the cabbie the address. I slumped back in the seat, waves of fatigue and frustration breaking over me. The taxi drew away from the curb....

SSSSZZ-Z-Z! PPP-P-P!

I opened my eyes. A large screen on the back of the driver's seat had lighted up with dancing, colored specks, like water on a hot, greasy pan. The music sizzled and popped.

"WHY FRY, GUY?" the chant began. I stiffened. "BEAT HEAT! INDICOOL! 'SNO BLOW!" The dancing specks became slowly falling snow. SSSSZZ-Z-Z! PPP-P-P! "BUY! WHY FRY....?"

I found myself pounding on the glass partition. With one hand the cabbie pushed half of it aside.

"Whatsa matta?"

"Turn it off!" I panted. "Turn it off!"

"Ya crazy?"

"I don't know," I moaned. "Turn it off!"

"Can't. Automatic. Office got a contrack. Ain't had no complaints b e f o r e. Whatsa matta with it? Hey?"

I slid the glass partition shut in his face and curled myself up in a corner of the back seat, my eyes closed, my hands clamped over my ears, like an overgrown fetus without a womb....

THE taxi slowed. I opened my eyes. I looked through the window at a woman walking along the street, her long straight legs and shapely back almost bare. "Jean!"

I hammered on the glass. "Let me out!"

The taxi pulled up. The driver turned, flipped down the meter flag. "Thirteen forty-five," he growled.

I threw him a ten and a five. "Keep it!" I leaped from the taxi. "Jean!"

The woman ahead did not turn. Her legs gleamed whitely below the chartreuse shorts striped with s c a r l e t. They marched straight down the sidewalk, quickly, determinedly.

I wondered, as I walked after her, if I could be mistaken. After all, Jean should be at work. And I knew that I could not be mistaken. "Jean!"

I began to run. She did not break her stride. As I came closer, I saw that her hair was a flaming red, curled tightly to her head. Doubts swept me once more. I came up with her. It was Jean, but what was wrong with her? Her face was set and blank, like the faces I had seen on the subway. She did not look at me. Below through the holes in her halter, another pair of eyes, a brilliant orange, stared straight ahead.

"Why didn't you meet me? Did you get my spacegram?" I walked along beside her, puzzled and worried. "Jean," I said. She did not respond. Was she deaf? I caught her bare shoulder. "Jean!" I shook it gently. She walked on.

We came to the corner drugstore. Jean turned, opened the door, went in. I followed, dazedly. Jean stopped at the end of a long line of women waiting to reach the counter. She stood patiently, cowlike, with no movement except when the line inched up.

The women ahead put a bill down on the counter. The clerk took it and handed each one a wrapped package from a pile of them beside him. At last Jean came to the counter. She put down a bill, crumpled from the heat of her hand. She took a package. She turned.

"Frank! Where did you come from?" Her eyes were wide and surprised. Her soft orange lips were parted. She looked different from the picture I had carried with me in my mind. But it was Jean, and she was glad to see me.

"Jean!" I laughed shakily. "I thought something was wrong with you. You acted so funny."

Jean laughed. It was her old laugh, free and ringing. At least that hadn't changed. Perhaps nothing had changed, I thought; perhaps it was me.

"Nonsense!" she said. "What could be wrong with me? Oh, Frank! You're back! In spite of the crowded store, she threw her arms around my neck and pulled my lips down to hers.

I broke away. "Not here," I said.

"You're never going away again," Jean said.

"Never," I echoed. I frowned and pointed to the package in her hand. "What's that? You were so determined to get it. You and all these other women."

Jean shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Something I heard advertised, I guess."

She tore off the wrapping. "Toothpaste," she said. She seemed to be disappointed.

"Didn't you know?" I asked. "Don't you know what you're buying?"

Jean took my arm and drew me out of the store. "Oh, let's not talk about things like that. You've been gone a long time. Things change. Tell me about life in an asteroid belt navigation beacon. Tell me all about it." She led me toward our house.

"I could tell it all in one word," I said. "Boredom. Every twenty-four hours I would—"

"Wait, Frank," Jean interrupted. "Tell me about it later. I want to get home."

"Three years apart for a lifetime together," I said. "That's

not a bad trade. But why aren't you at work?"

"Oh, I quit," Jean said. "A long time ago. There didn't seem much point in it when we had so much money."

I felt vaguely uneasy. "How much have we got?"

"Oh, I don't know." She shrugged. "You know I was never good at figures. Besides, there are lots of things more important than money. You, for instance."

She smiled up into my face, and my heart turned over. I had torn myself away when she was still little more than a bride, loving her as I did, wanting to buy the world for her. That's why I had traded three years of my life. And those three years away had tempered my love into a clean, singing blade.

"Are you in such a hurry to get me home?" I asked, smiling.

"Now, Frank," she said. She moved a little ahead. My arm fell away. "There's a program. I don't want to miss it."

"A program!" I said. "But I just got home."

"I know," Jean said. "But you'll be home for a long time."

We were at the front door. I caught her by the shoulders. "Jean," I said. "What's the matter with you? I'm home. After three years completely alone. Aren't you—? Don't you—?"

"Now, Frank," she said. "Don't be a beast!" She wriggled away as I tried to draw her close.

She opened the door, brushed past me into the living room, and sat down quickly in front of the television set. The screen was a swirl of colors.

"SWISH-SWASH SWISH-SWASH WITH WISH-WASH WISH-WASH," the chant went. "WISH YOUR WASH DON'T SWISH YOUR WASH DON'T SWISH YOUR WASH USE WISH-WASH SWISH-SWASH SWISH-SWASH WITH...."

"Oh, no," I moaned.

"JEAN," I said. "Turn it off."

"You don't understand," Jean said, not taking her eyes from the screen. "I have to find out what will happen to Sandra. She is being tempted by Rodney St. John to betray her husband. Sandra is torn between romance and duty."

The chant went on interminably. At last it faded and the screen cleared. A man with glossy black hair was kissing a blonde girl passionately. They were both dressed scantily, but I couldn't decide whether this was supposed to indicate anything. Slowly they drew apart, clinging to each other like suction cups.

"Now, Sandra," said the man, "whose husband is my best friend but beside whom the ties of friendship, honor, decency, and wealth mean nothing, now that you know the depth and strength of my love, will you go with me to my mountain cabin?"

"Oh, Rodney," said the girl, "who has given me the love and passion I thought were gone forever, I can't. I can't. Love is strong, but the call of duty is stronger."

The man seized her again. They melted together, fading, and the swirls of color drew them down.

"SWISH-SWASH SWISH-SWASH...."

I stared incredulously. What had happened to the world I had left. Fourteen and a half minutes of the same, endlessly repetivtive commercial to thirty seconds of drama, nonsense though it was. Something had warped the world's values.

I reached toward the set. A man loomed large on the screen, one finger pointing straight toward me. "Stay tuned to this station," he commanded.

I twisted the switch. The set went dark. Jean gasped. "Frank," she said. "You can't do that!"

"Why not?" I said. "I want to talk to you."

"Later," she said. "Didn't you hear the announcer? Didn't you hear what he said?"

She turned the set back on and sank back in her chair. I looked on helplessly. Before the new commercial could come on, I fled from the living room. In a moment the monotonous chant followed me like an implacable ghost, but I did not hear it. I stood in the doorway of the kitchen, staring with wide, startled eyes.

The kitchen was filled with shining, chromium plated junk. Everywhere, from floor to ceiling, piled up, stacked aimlessly. Freezers, roasters,

cookers, appliances of every size and description. Almost none of them had ever been used; their umbilical-like cords were still folded up neatly and tied.

The cupboards were packed with food. Cans, packages, and bottles were shoved into the shelves without order, one on top of another, balancing precariously. They had overflowed onto the floor. Soon it would be impossible to enter the kitchen at all.

They are spawning in there, I thought crazily, *breeding and interbreeding, reproducing themselves and obscenely mutated caricatures of themselves.*

I backed out and let the door swing shut. Suddenly I had no appetite.

I forced my way into the bedroom. Things had been breeding here, too. The weight of their numbers had burst open the closet doors. Dresses, shoes, fur coats, underclothes, towels—they humped unevenly on the floor, creeping toward the narrow lane that led to the unmade bed. Untidy piles of things, worn and unworn.

The bathroom was a shambles of packages, jars, bottles, tubes, toothbrushes. The tub was a mounded heap of them. *Where does she take a bath?* I wondered dully. I wandered from room to room, sweating, searching for an explanation. Somewhere there had to be an explanation.

Drugs or hypnosis? I thought again. I hadn't wanted to buy anything.

When I got back to the living room, Jean was gone. The television set was still blaring away. I turned it off savagely and looked around the room, noticing for the first time that everything was new. Where was Jean?

Her purse was lying on a shiny table, gaping open. I picked it up and dumped its contents onto the table. There was a yellow envelope, unopened. I didn't open it. I knew what was in it.

A small, flat black book lay among the litter. I flipped it open. A few deposits were listed. And checks marked down, long rows of them. Fifty-nine dollars and sixty-seven cents. That was Jean's total. But Jean

was always poor at figures. A letter in a red envelope informed me that the checking account was overdrawn.

There had to be something else. A savings account. Of course. That was it. There was a savings account.

I pawed through the mess on the table. Here it was. Another black book, smaller than the other. I leafed through the pages. So many withdrawals!

One hundred and twenty-one dollars! No! It was impossible! Three years of hell for one hundred and twenty-one dollars. My mind rebelled. My head throbbed.

The door opened. I whirled. Jean stood in the doorway, a package in her hand.

"Oh," she said. "You've turned it off again." Her voice sounded like that of a disappointed child.

"Jean," I said. My voice shook. "Jean! Where is the rest of it?"

"The rest of what?"

"The money. The money the company paid you while I was out there. The one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Where is it?"

"But you have the check book," Jean said bewilderedly. "And the savings book. That's it. That's all there is."

I sank down in a chair that drew me down in a deep embrace, holding the little black books in my hand.

IT wasn't as if Jean was mad. She was very reasonable. She kept trying to explain, trying to make me understand. For a moment I almost believed that I was the one who was being purposefully difficult. It took so much more to live now, Jean said. People needed so many more things. People bought more.

"It's the standard of living," Jean said. "It's gone up. Everybody says so."

"The food," I moaned. "You'll never eat it up."

"It sounded so good at the time," she said vaguely.

"All those clothes! They'll rot before you can wear them all."

"Oh, Frank," she chided me. "Synthetics don't rot."

I wanted to ask her what she would do when the rooms were full from floor to ceiling, but I

had a crazy suspicion what she would say. Lock the doors, she would say, and start all over.

"Where has it all gone," I groaned. "How could you spend so much?"

"There's the Cadillac," Jean said. "And the new air conditioner. That isn't connected, of course. And all the little things." She moved toward the television set.

I stepped in front of it. "No more," I said. "You aren't looking at this thing any more. And you aren't buying another thing."

"All right, Frank," she said meekly.

"Go fix me something to eat," I said. "Nothing out of cans. A steak. Onions. A glass of milk."

"Yes, Frank," she said, moving obediently toward the kitchen.

"And after that," I said, "we're going to bed."

But it wasn't like I thought it was going to be. There wasn't anything that didn't come out of cans, and the new range wasn't connected. The food was cold. And later—? Well, maybe I had been expecting too much. Maybe three years is too long to be away. It left a sour taste in my mouth. It took me a long time to go to sleep, and when I slept, I dreamed.

I dreamed that I had just been having a terrible dream. I had to wake up. The buzzer kept trying to wake me. An urgent message was coming in for me. I stirred uneasily. Something was wrong. The beacon had gone out or the radar had picked up a new swarm. I had to wake up....

I opened my eyes. The room was dark, but I knew at once that it was not the room I had known for three years, that I had grown into until it was like part of my skin. I was in my own bedroom on Earth. The dream in my dream had not been a nightmare. My money was gone, wasted, thrown away.

I turned over on my side. Jean was gone, Jean with the flaming red hair that had once been blonde, and the painted nipples, and the slack body. Voices came from the living room.

I got up and threaded my way through piles of clothing to the door. Jean was sitting in

front of the television set in her nightgown, her eyes turned hypnotically to the screen. Flickering waves of color played over her face.

The chill of fear that comes when you see actions that are terrible and unmotivated was replaced by an anger that was even colder. I glanced down at my hand. There was a brass candlestick in it. I had picked it up somewhere, I could not remember where. I stalked into the living room.

I swung the candlestick once. The glass front of the set shattered into fragments and went dark. I swung again. The wood of the casing split. I swung the candlestick tirelessly, until the set was a mass of broken rubble and the candlestick was an unrecognizable length of bent and twisted metal. My arm hung heavy at my side.

Jean looked up at me with wide, frightened eyes. "Frank," she said. Her voice trembled. "I—"

"Go to bed."

She went slowly, looking back over her shoulder. I sank down slowly in front of the wreckage.

Was this nightmare or reality? It had the feel of nightmare to it, a dreamlike horror that was full of basic fears and incomprehensible actions and motivations. Was I on the hollow metal sphere that paces the asteroid belt, dreaming in my bunk? But never before had I dreamed that I slept, that I dreamed.

My hand hurt. I held it up. Blood dripped from several small cuts. I went to the bathroom and found a towel and wrapped it around my hand.

I went to the living room. I sat and stared at the wreckage of the television set. Dawn crept in and found me there. I stirred. I had to turn somewhere for help, for explanation. There was only once place I knew to go.

I dressed slowly. My hand had stopped bleeding. When I left the house, I locked all the doors and removed the keys. I wanted Jean to be here when I got back. Somehow, we would have to work out the basis for a life together.

The building was not far

from Times Square. It was tall. It pointed toward where the stars would be, if there were any stars. The sun blazed hot. Christmas carols boomed in the street.

Across the front of the building, over the entrance, was engraved: AD ASTRA PER ASPERA. It was the state motto of Kansas, but that was not why it was there. Once I had thought it was the motto of our time, but now I was not so sure. Perhaps it had been replaced by something else, less stirring, less determined.

"Go right in," said the secretary. She wore a dress, and looked much more seductive in it than all the nakedness I had seen. "Mr. Wilson is expecting you."

I walked into the office, the one I had walked out of a little over three years ago, on my way to the stars. "You knew I would be back?" I said.

His young-old face seemed sympathetic and human. "Of course," he said.

"What's wrong with everything?" I asked distractedly. "Or is it me? What's happened to the world? What can I do?"

"That's a lot of questions," Wilson said slowly. "And I think I can answer them best by starting at the beginning. The beginning was shortly after you left Earth. To us, who have seen it grow, it does not seem so bad. But I imagine it must be a shock to you. But remember, we offered to renew your contract."

"Three more years out there?" I shuddered.

"I suppose it was inevitable. Everything was working toward it. If it seemed to come suddenly, it was because everything came to fruition at once. And then there was the Advertising Institute. Financed by a number of the large philanthropic foundations, it was set up to analyze basic advertising psychology. It was successful, and then it was too late. It couldn't be kept a secret."

"What?"

"Advertising," Wilson said. "It became a science instead of an art.

"YOU must remember the function of advertising," Wilson said. "To make the consumer want something he

doesn't want. Perfect it—and you have our society."

He outlined the development of a science, and I tried to understand. No one man had been responsible. It had been partly a group effort, partly a fumbling together of blind trends. Pre-scientific advertisers had been groping toward it. They had stumbled on several basic elements pragmatically. Irritation, for instance, and its sister, repetition. Irritate something long enough and often enough, and inevitably it must be scratched. And the only way to relieve this itch is to buy the product.

The Ad Institute had discovered this, or—more accurately—they had re-discovered it and refined it. And their research in other fields bore fruit, too. The arts, for instance. Modern art forms had been struggling toward a more basic kind of communication, one that appeals immediately to the senses instead of filtering through the upper centers of the mind. That fitted in nicely. Modify them. Improve them. Incorporate them.

Modern poetry, for example. Disappointed expectation. Rhythms. Quarter rhymes. Music with its polytonal scales and lack of recognizable tunes. The imageless effects of modern painting. Not aesthetic, familiar, intellectual. Visceral.

Irritation and repetition. Irritation and repetition. Advertising had them for a long time, but they were never applied scientifically. Advertisers were held back by human sympathies, deterred by intellectual complaints, forgetting that the consumer mass didn't complain. It bought. Science, of course, is ruthless. It has to be ruthless to be a science. Scientists in the pursuit or application of knowledge are not human beings but thinking machines. Emotions interfere with thought; they enshroud the cold truth with warm but misleading mantles. Rip them off! Suppress emotions! The truth must be bare.

The Ad Institute had the truth then, and the truth cannot be killed. Not in this case, anyway. Too many people knew about it, underpaid researchers and students. Know the truth and the truth shall

make you—rich. The only thing to do was to try to control it. So the Institute became a commercial center.

"Horrible," I said. I looked down at my twitching hands. "Horrible."

Wilson shook his head. "Not entirely. It has had its blessings. The cold war, for instance, is over. The Russian empire crumbled before the onslaught of scientific advertising. It fell to pieces—literally—within a month. It was only necessary to arouse desires—or to intensify them—which the existing regime was unable to satisfy. The pieces are still being reassembled.

"War is impossible now, as long as the avenues of communication are kept open. And that is the foundation stone of the reorganized United Nations. Much more important than armaments. Inspection teams are everywhere. The first hint of censorship, the first jamming static, and the barrage of words descends. The offending government is overthrown. On the whole, I think the world is better off."

"No," I muttered. "No. The world is populated with automatons. Buying. Buying. Buying. Spending. Spending. Spending."

"There has always been a certain amount of robotism in the world," Wilson pointed out. "Throughout history, millions have been bereft of their senses by those who have known how to punch the right emotional button. Witness the great movements of history, the Crusades, the French and Russian Revolutions, countless wars. At every point between global and community affairs, robotism has played its part. Now, at least, the command is not to fight, not to revolt, but to buy. As a consequence, the world is more prosperous than it has ever been. Everybody is making good wages, everybody is buying. What could be better?"

"The wastage," I groaned.

"The wastage," Wilson said, "is a vital part of our economy. In a period of peace, of high production in a heavily mechanized society, wastage is necessary to avoid collapse. That and a rapid turnover keep up the level of con-

sumption to which our industrial machine is geared. Better wastage than war."

"The ad men could take over the world," I said. "Who could stop them? Not a race of slaves."

"IT isn't that bad. Resistance to modern advertising varies from complete submission to complete immunity, as it always has, usually according to intelligence, although there are psychological factors which are sometimes of even greater importance. Those who are immune run the world, as they always have, and see to it that the greater percentage of submissives get the work done."

"And you are immune?" I asked. Wilson nodded, shrugging. I felt a dawn of hope. "I must be immune, too. I haven't bought anything. I haven't even been tempted."

Wilson raised an eyebrow. "The science of advertising, like all sciences of mass phenomena, is based on the norm—"

I looked up quickly, angrily. "And I am not normal. Is that what you mean?"

Wilson raised a pacifying hand. "You didn't let me finish. A norm, I said. In that sense you are not normal. Anyone who can stay sane for three years, in complete isolation, is not normal to begin with. And the psychological impact of advertising is dependent upon the society in which the individual finds himself. You were not at home in our society when you volunteered for the beacon. Now that you have returned, you belong even less. Three years alone has not made you more social. And the society is almost new. You are like a newborn child. You must learn to belong."

"Learn to belong," I echoed. The meaning came to me slowly. "No! I don't want to belong. I'm immune. I must stay immune. I don't want to be a slave like the rest of them." I thought of Jean; I thought of $150,000. "Besides, I have no money."

"But what of your salary?" Wilson said.

"Gone. Wasted. Thrown away. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars," I mourned.

Wilson shook his head sympathetically. "Unfortunate. It

was something none of us could foresee. That a rising standard of living would wipe out the money that seemed a more than fair salary at the time. Some people have called it inflation. But it isn't inflation. Wages have risen along with prices. They have more than kept pace. It is the standard of living. I am sure that you can find a job. Since we are partly responsible, I imagine we will be able to find some kind of work for you."

I thought about the robots on the subway, the captive audience rising on command to buy and coming back to be commanded again. I thought about going home to Jean and a house full of junk, ever full of more and more, piling up, deteriorating, crowding us out.

Suddenly the hollow sphere that paced the asteroids did not seem so lonely any more. Suddenly it seemed like home.

"Look!" I said. "Can I go back? Can I go back to the beacon?" I pulled a crumpled sheet of yellow paper from my pocket. "I have your offer here. I wouldn't want any more money. I'll cut it in half—"

Slowly, sadly, Wilson shook his head. "I'm afraid not. You can take the psychological tests, of course. But I can tell you right now that the results will be negative. Your return has changed the situation radically. Instead of fleeing from society, you are rebelling against it. It makes all the difference."

"I can't go back," someone was whimpering. "I can't go back...."

Slowly I realized that it was me.

Kaleidoscope:

"...ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT..."

Wreaths, holly, bells, candles —green and red; a man in a red and white suit. A flaming sun...

"G I V E - GIVE - G I V E - GIVE-GIVE..."

A swirl of colors, a pattern of dots, smoke rising...

WHINRR-R-R! "BE-E-E-E BEWITCHING! BUY-Y-Y-Y BEWITCHING!" THUMP! THUMP!

Eyes, blank eyes, painted eyes...

WHANG-NG! STRNNN-NH! "N E R V E S TAUT?

SMOKE A LOT? DON'T JITTER, JETTER! BETTER BUY BILLOWS! Relax-x-x!" Sigh. WHANG-NG!...

Sliding doors, marching feet, automatic, all...

"S O O - S O O - S O O - SOOTHE..."

THUMP-THUMP! "B U Y NOW!" THUMP-THUMP!

SLOWLY, dazedly, I opened the front door of my house.

"SWISH-SWASH SWISH-SWASH WITH WISH-WASH WISH-WASH. WISH YOUR WASH DON'T SWISH YOUR WASH DON'T SWISH YOUR W A S H USE WISH-WASH S W I S H-S W A S H SWISH-SWASH WITH..."

Jean sat in front of a television set, new, bigger, shinier, more glaring. She did not look up. She did not lift her eyes from the swirling colors.

My shoulders slumped. I felt in my pocket. The two little black books were there, but it didn't make any difference. She had bought it on time, of course. Now I was in debt. I felt myself sinking into a morass of sucking mud. The grass around it grew in the shape of dollar signs.

I felt in my pants pockets. They were empty. Empty? I pulled out my billfold. It was empty, too. Empty! Impossible. I had started out this morning with almost fifty dollars and a pocket full of change. I searched frantically. Caught in the lining of my coat pocket was a single quarter. Where—? But I couldn't have lost it. It couldn't have been stolen. My billfold was still there.

Vaguely, distantly, I heard a voice chanting: "GIVE-GIVE-GIVE-GIVE-GIVE..."

A dry sob rose in my throat. Immunity!

I rushed to the bedroom. I tossed clothing wildly in the air, digging down to the desk I knew had to be here somewhere. But when I reached it at last, it was filled with everything but what I wanted. I raged through the house. Finally I reached the basement. It was cluttered with junk. But there I found it, in a dark corner. It was a little rusty, but it moved freely when I worked the slide back. A shell flipped out into my

hand. Loaded and ready. I ejected the clip, slipped the shell back into it, cliked the clip back into position.

I came up the basement stair, holding the automatic in one hand. Jean was gone, but the television set was lit up in all its prismatic glory.

I slipped the gun into my coat pocket and walked out of the house....

KLING-KLANK! "GIVE-GIVE-GIVE-GIVE..."

CRACK-K-K! C R A C K-CRACK-K-K! The gun jumped in my hand. The man in the red and white suit looked down at his swollen, red and white belly in astonishment. It had begun to smoke. There was no blood. Slowly, like a stuffed doll, he folded to the sidewalk. He lay there beside the tripod on top of which was the sign: "IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE".

"...SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE. SLEEP..."

"What was that?"

"There was this cracking n o i s e, and then he fell over...."

"S o m e b o d y shot Santa Claus!"

"Don't be silly. Nobody shoots Santa Claus...."

WE were riding somewhere. I turned to the man in blue on my right. "You'll hang me, won't you?" I said eagerly. "Or electrocute me? Or whatever you do to murderers?"

"Now, now," the kindly man said. "We aren't going to punish you. Prisons aren't for that. We're going to make you a fit member of society. I think you will enjoy your stay here. The cells are really quite comfortable."

"No, no!" I screamed when they put me in the room. "You can't! Take me out! Please, oh, please...."

Inexorably, from behind the impregnable protective screen, came the music and the chant: WHANG-NG! STRNNN-NH! "NERVES TAUT? SMOKE A LOT? DON'T JITTER, JETTER! BETTER BUY BILLOWS! Relax-x-x!" WHANG-NG! S T R N N N - N H! "NERVES TAUT?..."

Ad infinitum....

THE END

DEATH OF A MUTANT

by CHARLES V. De VET

illustrated by EMSH

He was born with strange and wonderful powers. But the world was not yet ready to accept the benefit of those powers. — The world kills what it does not understand!

THE boy stood on the low hill with his head tipped back and his throat exposed to the early morning chill. He was dressed in faded trousers —from which most of the tan coloring had long since been washed away—and a coarse blue-denim work shirt.

The wind swept his blond hair back in loose flat waves, and with soft insistence tugged at his slack-limbed body. He spread his legs wide, and breathed the morning air deep into his lungs. When he expelled the breath his shoulders relaxed, and his arms dropped to his sides, without strength.

Slowly, with an effort of will, he brought his attention back to his surroundings. Below him a dog began an excited barking. The barking changed abruptly to a yelp, and stopped.

The boy straightened and drew back a step. Down below a figure darted suddenly from a low patch of brush and ran to another, kicking up splashes of red sand. To his right a man's voice sounded a sharp cry of warning.

The boy shivered. Somewhere below him a bird repeated, monotonously, a brief ripple of song.

After a few minutes a block-chested man stepped into view. His shoulders were hunched in a black leather jacket. He looked apprehensively up at the boy. When nothing hap-

pened, he called, "I'm coming up. Keep your hands in plain sight." He started up the hill, measuring his steps purposefully. Once he paused and pulled at his broad-brimmed hat, then came on resolutely.

There was a day's growth of whiskers on the man's chin and jowls, and despite the cold a shiny film of perspiration glistened on his cheeks. He drew a pistol from a chest holster as he approached.

Two paces away, the man halted. "I'm Sheriff Derwin," he said in a stilted, unnormal voice. "I'm placing you under arrest. Do not resist. We have you surrounded."

The boy made no reply, but continued to watch the man, blinking several times, as though considering what had been said. After a minute he spread his hands wide in a weary motion of acquiescence.

"Good." Derwin gestured. Three men left their places in the brush and began to move cautiously up the hill.

"I'll have to search him," Derwin said over his shoulder. His voice was too loud in the morning air. "Keep him covered. Remember, he's a killer." He holstered his own gun and moved unwillingly closer to the boy. "Raise your hands."

The boy did as he was told; Derwin patted him quickly about the chest and hips.

The examination was only barely adequate. "When we take him in," Derwin said, "careful not to get too near him. He can kill you, just with his hands. Stay out of reach."

Derwin put his prisoner in one of the three cells in White Bear Lake's jail. The boy offered no resistance. He stood with his head resting wearily against one of the steel bars and watched without apparent interest as his cell door was locked. But when Derwin made as though to leave, he straightened and his features livened. His expression became one not quite of pleading, and not quite a question; but rather of h o p e f u l expectation—as though he had some deep need which he expected Derwin to recognize.

The sheriff stood for a minute, meeting the boy's intent gaze, then shrugged and went on toward his office. He limped a little. An old knee cap injury

had been aggravated by his chase of the boy, and now it was swollen and stiff.

THE boy was lying on the floor of his cell asleep when the sheriff came back with a platter of food. Derwin unlocked the door quietly, brought the food in and set it on a table in one corner of the cell. As quietly, he let himself out again. Standing in the corridor, with the locked door again between them, he called, "Wake up!"

The boy's body did not move, but his eyes opened wide. With their instant awareness they were like the eyes of a big cat in a zoo, but without the cat's easy hatred. "Your dinner's on the table," Derwin said.

The boy rose swiftly to his feet and looked around him. He saw the food, went over and began eating. He used his hands, eating the meat first, in great wolfing bites. When the meat was gone he ate the potatoes. He tasted the moist cabbage salad, but did not eat it.

Derwin watched him for the few minutes it took. "I guess they never taught you to use a knife and fork," he murmured, half to himself.

The boy came to the cell door and grasped the bars in his big hands. He looked at Derwin, and his expression was the same expectant one that had been so disturbing earlier.

The sheriff had stepped back, out of reach, as the boy approached. "Did you want something?" he asked.

The boy made no reply.

"Can you understand what I say?" Derwin asked.

After a brief, puzzled pause the boy nodded.

"You can?" Derwin asked doubtfully. "I know you mutants had some way of communicating with each other, without speaking, but I thought the profs at the University decided you couldn't understand us." He seemed to make a sudden decision. "I'll be right back," he said.

Derwin returned to his office and picked up his desk chair, carried it to the corridor opposite the boy's cell and sat down. "If you do understand what I say, maybe we can have some kind of confab. Can you speak?"

The boy made no reply.

"No, I guess you can't," Derwin said. "Or they'd have found out about it before this."

He considered a moment. "How about us setting up some kind of code," he suggested. "I'll ask questions, and you nod if I'm right, and shake your head if I'm wrong?"

The boy made no answer except for his continued expectant gaze.

Derwin shrugged. "O. K. If you can't, you can't. The profs had a theory that you couldn't understand what they said, but that you got some of the meaning of the words from the sound and the inflections."

Still there was no response.

"MAYBE you can read my mind?" Derwin waited a moment. "You're a strange one, whatever the answers might be. When you eight mutants were found in the lost islands area of the Lake of the Woods the doctor who had brought you there—evidently when you were very young—had been dead for years. He had been a famous genetics specialist, and had probably cared for you from birth. The profs even believe he must have influenced your development before birth. Anyway, there was no doubt that you were all geniuses of a high order. But there was a screw loose somewhere. When you were brought to the University of Minnesota you soon turned into a pack of murderers.

"And you were brilliant enough to get by with it for months before the authorities learned what you were doing. The other seven were killed, either fighting or trying to get away. You're the last one left now. Wouldn't you like to make your peace—before it's too late for you, to?"

There was no suggestion of truculence or stubbornness in the boy's lack of response. It was as though Derwin's statements had not merited answers, or that the answers had been to obvious to need saying.

Derwin leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his stomach. "All right," he said. "If you aren't interested in that, let's get back to your immediate problem. You know what you were arrested for?" He did not wait for an

answer. "You're accused of killing at least thirty people," he said. "And they have plenty of proof—enough to hang you. I'd say your only defense would be that you didn't know what you were doing."

Derwin made an impatient motion to rise. "Oh, there's no use going on," he said. "Either you can't understand me, or you know all this already."

Abruptly the boy was nodding his head: nodding it vigorously.

Derwin remained sitting. "Why are you doing that?" he asked.

The boy blinked his eyes, pressing the lids tightly together, and opened them again.

"What's that mean? Do you want help of some kind?" Derwin paused. "I'd like to do what I can, but if you don't tell me, or show me—how can I help you? If you have any way of communicating, use it now, or we'll never get anywhere."

The boy's forehead creased with lines of effort. His mouth opened—but no sound came out.

Derwin ran his fingers along the stubble of his jaw line. "I suppose if the profs and psychiatrists at the U couldn't find a way to talk with you, I can't. I understand when they couldn't learn how you mutants read minds—or even if you did—they tried to teach you to speak, and to live like human beings. You couldn't, or wouldn't, learn either. You wouldn't work, and nothing seemed to interest you. Until toward the end you turned surly, and scratched and even bit people who annoyed you."

Derwin paused again. "Have I touched on what's troubling you yet?"

The boy moistened his lips and nodded, his face eager.

With a puzzled shake of his head Derwin tried again. "All right. The first person your group killed, I've read, might have been the doctor who raised you. Though personally I don't believe that. But there's no doubt that you did kill others."

Derwin frowned. A smile had come to the boy's face as he listened—as though he were recalling something pleasant.

The sheriff cocked his head to one side and shifted his po-

sition. He spoke with less enthusiasm now. "After the others were killed, they lost all trace of you until the day you visited Anchor Hospital in St. Paul. The attendants there didn't recognize you, and assumed you were just another visitor. But when you left, twenty-seven patients were dead!"

A small shiver ran through the muscles of Derwin's back. The smile had returned to the boy's pink cheeks: a smile almost of delight.

Derwin leaned forward, making no effort to hide his annoyance as he spoke. "You'll hang for those killings!" he said. "We still don't know how you do it, but the other patients in some of those wards saw you put your hands on the people who died, and saw them go limp. They didn't realize at the time that you had killed them."

The smile on the boy's face was as tranquil as the smile of a cherub.

A flow of angry blood crept into Derwin's face. "Just in case they can't pin any of those murders on you," he said, "we sure as hell can convict you of the three here in White Bear Lake." Derwin pulled himself to his feet. "I'll do my best to see that you hang for them," he said deliberately. His voice was low and flat. He limped away, dragging his chair at his side.

The boy's expression of urgent request changed to one of reproach when he realized that Derwin was leaving; disappointment showed bleakly on his face. It was as though he had expected something more from Derwin.

THE next morning Derwin drove in the last car in a funeral procession and waited at the fringe of the crowd as the coffin was lowered into the ground. The deceased had been the last victim of the boy killer.

The mourners filed out quickly after the services, and Derwin found no opportunity, that would not have involved an awkward intrusion, to talk with any of them. However, as he walked slowly back to his car, a young man of about twenty-five drove up in an old automobile and parked at the edge of the grave. He got out

from behind the wheel of the vehicle and went around to the back. From the trunk he removed a shovel and carried it to the grave. He nodded to the sheriff and began pushing dirt from the edge into the hole.

Derwin strolled over and stood across the open grave from the shoveler. Neither spoke until the young man stopped to wipe his forehead. "You're the sheriff, aren't you?" he asked Derwin.

Derwin nodded.

"I understand you think that the wild boy killed Carl?" The young man inclined his head toward the grave.

"Was Carl his first name?" Derwin answered noncommittally.

"Yes. Carl van Sistine. He was a good friend of mine. When we were kids we used to play here, right in this graveyard. We hunted rabbits with sling shots. I don't remember that we ever killed any. We were always going to make a fire and roast the rabbits we shot, but as I said, we never got any."

Derwin waited.

"The wild boy didn't kill him."

"What makes you think not?" Derwin asked. "No one saw him do it, but two witnesses did see him run out of the house, and they found Carl dead right after."

"I know that." The young man rolled his shirt sleeves up over hairy forearms. "But did you know that Carl had something wrong with his head—a tumor or something? He'd had it ever since he was a little boy. Sometimes we'd be playing and all at once he'd stop dead still. If there was a chair, or anything that moved around, he'd grab it and holler for me to hold onto the other end. I'd hold it and he'd pull, until he couldn't hang on anymore. Then he'd fall over backwards. He'd lay there with his eyes rolled back until all I could see were the whites. His face would be pale, and screwed-up looking, and sweat would come out all over his body. His clothes would be wet with it. All the time he'd be groaning and crying."

The young man took off his striped workman's cap and ran his fingers through wavy brown hair. "The last few years he couldn't leave the

house. I used to visit him at first, but at last he didn't even recognize me. And when his attacks came on he'd holler with pain, and finally I couldn't stand to hear him anymore. That's what he died from —the tumor in his head—and not the wild boy killing him."

"The doctors said it shouldn't have killed him—yet," Derwin demurred.

"I know. But the doctors were wrong." The young man began shoveling dirt into the hole again.

THE sun was directly overhead when Derwin climbed out of his car, pushing his game leg stiffly ahead of him. He went up the flight of steps at the front of a large, white house and pressed the button beside the door. He rang three times without an answer.

On the way back down the steps he heard the sound of iron on iron coming from the back of the house. He walked around and found an old man with stooped shoulders throwing horseshoes at a peg set in the ground.

"Good afternoon," Derwin said.

The old man paused in his throwing and nodded in reply.

"I'd like to talk to you again about your sister's death," Derwin said. "I presume you heard that we caught her killer?"

The old man sighted a shoe carefully and threw at a farther peg.

"Will you tell me again just what happened?" Derwin asked.

"I was sitting with her when he came in." The old man had a red face and neck, with a border of white just above the collar line. "He hadn't knocked. At least I didn't hear him. Just all at once he was standing by the bed, smiling. I was going to say something, but he looked at my sister, then at me, and he seemed so young, and kind of fresh-looking, that I just smiled back. Then he sat on the bed alongside Louise, and put his hand on her chest, and she closed her eyes, and her moaning stopped—for the first time in almost a week. I didn't know until after he'd gone that she was dead."

"How did it happen you didn't report her death to my

office? We only learned about it from the doctor."

The old man's attention seemed absorbed by something on the roof of a neighboring house. He stood for several minutes, then slowly looked down at his hand in mild surprise. He had been gripping, and twisting an iron shoe in his hand so hard that a corner had cut a ragged gash in the meaty forepart of his thumb. Blood flowed from the cut down the end of the shoe and dripped sluggishly to the ground.

Irritably the old man tossed the shoe aside and took a handkerchief from a rear pocket of his trousers and wrapped it around the injured thumb. "I was glad she died," he said half-defiantly.

Derwin's eyebrows raised questioningly.

"That may sound heartless." The old man's voice was mild now. "But it isn't. My sister had cancer—had it bad. She was dying from it. And she was suffering horribly. Even drugs gave her no relief toward the last. During her periods of consciousness she begged the doctor to give her something so she could die, but he wouldn't. I asked him to put her out of her misery, too. But he wouldn't listen to me either.

"Mr. Derwin..." The old man brought his face closer to Derwin's. "Every human being should have the right to die. When the time comes that medicine can't help them any more, and they have nothing to look forward to, except suffering, they should be allowed to die if they want to." Abruptly he turned his back and walked into the house.

DUSK was edging into darkness when Derwin reached the home of the boy's third victim. The family lived in an upper duplex apartment. A large wreath hung on the apartment door. The woman who answered his knock was middle-aged, with dark hair and dark eyes, and quick, nervous hands. "Come in," she invited listlessly, as she recognized the sheriff.

Derwin followed her to a chair in the front room and sat down. "Can you give me any details of your husband's death that you might not have

remembered when I was here before?" he asked.

"You've got to see that that maniac pays for his killings," the woman spoke rapidly, excitedly, ignoring the sheriff's question. "If you don't, I'll...." Her voice broke and she began to cry. After a few minutes she wiped her eyes with a square of tissue which she took from her apron pocket. "I'm all right now," she said. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything you remember. You might tell me first what time of day it happened."

"About the same time in the evening as now," the woman answered. "We had already finished eating. George was lying here on the davenport and I..."

"Pardon me a minute," Derwin interrupted. "How ill was your husband?"

"He was too sick to work, though he could still get around a little. He had silicosis of the lungs, you know."

Derwin nodded. "Go on, please."

The woman needed no urging. Apparently she enjoyed talking. "Where was I? Oh, yes. I heard something scratching at the door—it sounded like a cat—and I went to see what it was. The boy was standing there, smiling. I didn't know who he was then. He looked so young, and so sweet-like, that I didn't ask what he wanted; I just let him come in.

"When George saw him I thought, at first, that he knew him, because he sat up straight and spoke to the boy. He said something like, 'So you've come?' He looked glad, as though he was happy. Then he changed and looked scared. But he didn't say anything more, and neither did the boy. Finally he sort of relaxed, and sighed, and let himself ease back on the davenport. He asked me to make a pot of coffee, and I left and went into the kitchen."

The woman stopped and blew her nose. "That's all, except that the boy was gone when I came back—and George was dead."

Derwin looked down at the hat on his lap and searched for a way to express what he wanted to say. At last he looked up. "Some people be-

lieve the mutants killed only people who were very sick—people who had no chance to live anyway, and probably wanted to die quickly?" His voice rose doubtfully as he finished.

"That's not true." There was no expression in the woman's flat voice. "I read where they killed some that weren't sick at all. And how would they know how sick the others were? Or if they wanted to die?"

"How about your husband?"

"George did suffer quite a bit. But I'm certain he never wanted to die."

"Was there any chance that he might have recovered from his particular illness?"

"The doctors said not, but what right did that boy have to play God and kill him? And how do any of us know that there won't be a new treatment or a new drug discovered, maybe next week or next month, that could have saved George? What justification can you have for a cold-blooded murderer like that?"

Derwin looked down again at his hat and shifted his feet uncomfortably.

The woman said, "George had a pension that supported us. But it stopped when he died. How am I going to live now? Who's going to support my children—or take care of them while I work?" There was still no emotion in the woman's voice, but tears which she disregarded ran down her cheeks.

Derwin stood up. "I don't know," he said. "I was just wondering if what seems wrong to us might not seem right to him," he apologized.

THE next morning Derwin stopped in at a store on Mahtomedi Avenue and bought a pair of trousers, a shirt, a set of underwear, and a pair of socks. Two doors down he stopped in at another store and bought a pair of shoes.

He drove to the jail and shoved the clothing through the bars to the boy. "Here's something better for you to wear," he said and walked on to his office.

The boy carried his bundle to the rear of the cell and began changing. He was button-

ing his shirt when he glanced through the small barred window in the wall and saw Derwin crossing the street toward a corner lunch room. A flush of excitement appeared on his cheeks and he finished dressing hurriedly.

Moving to the front of the cell he spread out his right hand and flexed the fingers several times. His face assumed an expression of deep abstraction.

A faint haze began to waver along the edges of the hand, and its flesh appeared to move in small ripples. The boy pressed the hand against the door lock—and it passed through the metal. The lock gave a muted metallic click. The door swung open.

The boy's hand returned to its normal appearance as he withdrew it, but it hung limp and pale. He massaged it vigorously as he stepped out into the jail corridor. He was careful not to let himself be seen when he left the jail.

An hour later he had left White Bear Lake.

When Derwin returned to the jail and found the boy gone he was not much surprised. He walked slowly to his office and picked up the phone. "Let me speak to the sheriff," he said. ... "Gibbons?" ... "This is Derwin, out at White Bear Lake." ... "Fine." ... "The wild boy escaped about an hour ago. He's sprung his cell lock someway." ... "No, I don't know which way he went, but I figured he might head back to St. Paul."... "O. K." ... "I wish you'd do me a favor. Ask your men—and the police—not to shoot him. I'm sure he won't resist when you arrest him." ... "I know." ... "I know." He sighed. "That's right. You have to do what you think best." He hung up.

THE boy went directly from the jail to the railroad tracks, nearly a mile past the depot. He hid in the weeds along the track until a slow freight passed, then climbed into the open door of a boxcar.

The string of freight cars was cut out of the train in the St. Paul yards. The boy stayed inside his car until several hours after dark, when he left his hiding place and went

along the Mississippi, past Carlson's Landing, and up to the post office. There he stopped and seemed to be deciding what he should do next.

A half block away a policeman was checking the tires of parked cars. The boy saw him and began walking rapidly in the opposite direction. He hesitated at the street corner, then walked boldly out into the lighted area of the intersection. He had nearly reached the opposite sidewalk when he heard a shout behind him. He began to run. A police whistle sounded shrilly.

WHEN the boy entered the park he appeared to wander casually, with his interest centered on no particular person or place, but his steps took him down a diagonal walk that led to the young mother and the carriage. The child of about six inside the carriage had a large head that wobbled spasmodically above its thin frame.

The boy walked past the mother without attracting her attention, and bent toward the child.

A terrified scream at his side jerked him erect.

"The beast!" The woman screamed with all the power in her lungs. She sprang at the boy, still screaming, and dug clawed fingers into his cheeks. "Get away from him, you beast! You horrible beast!"

Fear blossomed up into the boy's face at the woman's scream. He pushed her aside and glared wildly about him.

The nearest exit from the park was just ahead. Swiftly he put his head down and scurried through the exit. Once in the street he increased his speed and ran for six blocks, past the auditorium, and across Seven Corners, until the breath whistled in his throat. As he staggered to a stop a police siren sounded behind him.

The boy forced his tired legs to move again and sprinted down an alley that opened to his left. Halfway through the alley he heard the screech of tires behind him—and the police siren was at his back. He came to a low fence bordering the alley, between an apartment building and an older, private, home. Without pausing he rested a hand on the

fence railing and vaulted over.

Beneath him as he hung suspended he saw a child's large sand box. His right foot, with his weight behind it, landed on the handle of a toy wagon, and his ankle twisted painfully under him. He sprawled forward, ripping the skin of his forearm on the side of the sand box as he fell.

As quickly as he was able he pulled himself to his feet and limped across the yard, past the small house, and out into the street. The police siren still sounded behind him, and now another started up in the block ahead.

He turned to the right and ran with all the speed he could command. A block ahead loomed the Mississippi. With his last remaining strength he stumbled toward it.

A police car arrived just as he dived into the murky water.

Two policemen scrambled from the car and ran toward the river bank. Sergeant Robert Kirk pulled his pistol from its holster as the boy's head reappeared above the water.

"Halt!" he shouted. "Halt or I'll shoot!"

The boy never paused.

Kirk brought the gun up and sighted along the barrel. The boy's head came in line with the small v of the sight. "For the last time, halt!"

The boy's head turned up. His wet blond hair shone in the sunlight. Kirk squeezed the trigger.

Simultaneously with the report, the boy's hair sprang upward in startled protest; his arms gave one reflective jerk, and his face turned toward the sky.

Slowly, slowly, the white features sank beneath the water.

THE END

NUCLEAR NEWS

by STEVEN RORY

Another atomic particle long known in theory but never actually found in the laboratory has been trapped—the elusive and mysterious neutrino. Frederick Reines and Clyde L. Cowan, Jr., of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory snared the particle in an underground chamber near the Savannah River atomic pile.

The neutrino was first suggested by the late Enrico Fermi to account for a puzzling atomic phenomenon known as beta-decay—the spontaneous conversion of a neutron into a proton and an electron. A certain amount of mass is lost in this process, which should turn up as energy of the product particles. Unfortunately, the proton and electron almost never have enough energy to balance the account. To cover the discrepancy, Fermi suggested that the missing energy is carried away by a weightless and uncharged particle which he named the neutrino—"little neutral one."

On a practical level, finding the neutrino became a major scientific problem—since by definition it would be the kind of particle that would hardly interact with other forms of matter, and thus would be of necessity almost undetectable. The method Reines and Cowan used involved the reverse of beta-decay: a proton captures a neutrino and is converted into a neutron and a positron. This reaction is easily detected.

The experimenters used as their source of neutrinos the Savannah River pile, largest in the United States. The target protons were the hydrogen nuclei in two tanks of water sandwiched between three detecting tanks filled with a scintillating liquid.

Whenever a neutrino was captured, the resulting positron combined almost immediately

with an electron. The two particles immediately annihilated each other, producing a light flash in the scintillating tanks. In order to make sure that neutrons and other particles from the pile were not causing the reactions, the experimenters screened their apparatus with ten tons of wet sawdust, which strongly absorbs neutrons and gamma rays.

The discovery is "of great importance," according to Willard F. Libby, Atomic Energy Commissioner. He said it should help in understanding the mysterious force that holds atomic nuclei together.

Waste water from breweries may become valuable in the production of deuterium oxide —heavy water. This seemingly strange fact stems from the prodecure known as "malting," the first step in brewing beer. Barley starch is soaked in water so that it sprouts fermentable sugar-laden shoots—and, Swedish scientists have discovered, barley absorbs relatively few of the scarce heavy-water molecules in ordinary water, so that water which has trickled through the grain has a higher than normal concentration of heavy water.

The present process for extracting heavy water is tremendously expensive—the substance, used as a moderator in atomic piles, costs $28 per pound to produce. The brewery water contains no more than a .1% concentration of heavy water, but this is four times greater than is found ordinarily, and the cost of converting it to complete heavy water would be greatly reduced.

Charred mammoth bones found off the California coast indicate that man may have been living in America some twenty thousand years earlier than previously thought.

George F. Carter, a geographer at Johns Hopkins University, has discovered campsites and roasted mammoth bones on Santa Rosa Island. Radiocarbon dating shows that the animals were cooked and eaten 30,000 years ago—while current anthropological belief says man didn't reach America untill about 10,000 B.C.

Continued from Back Cover

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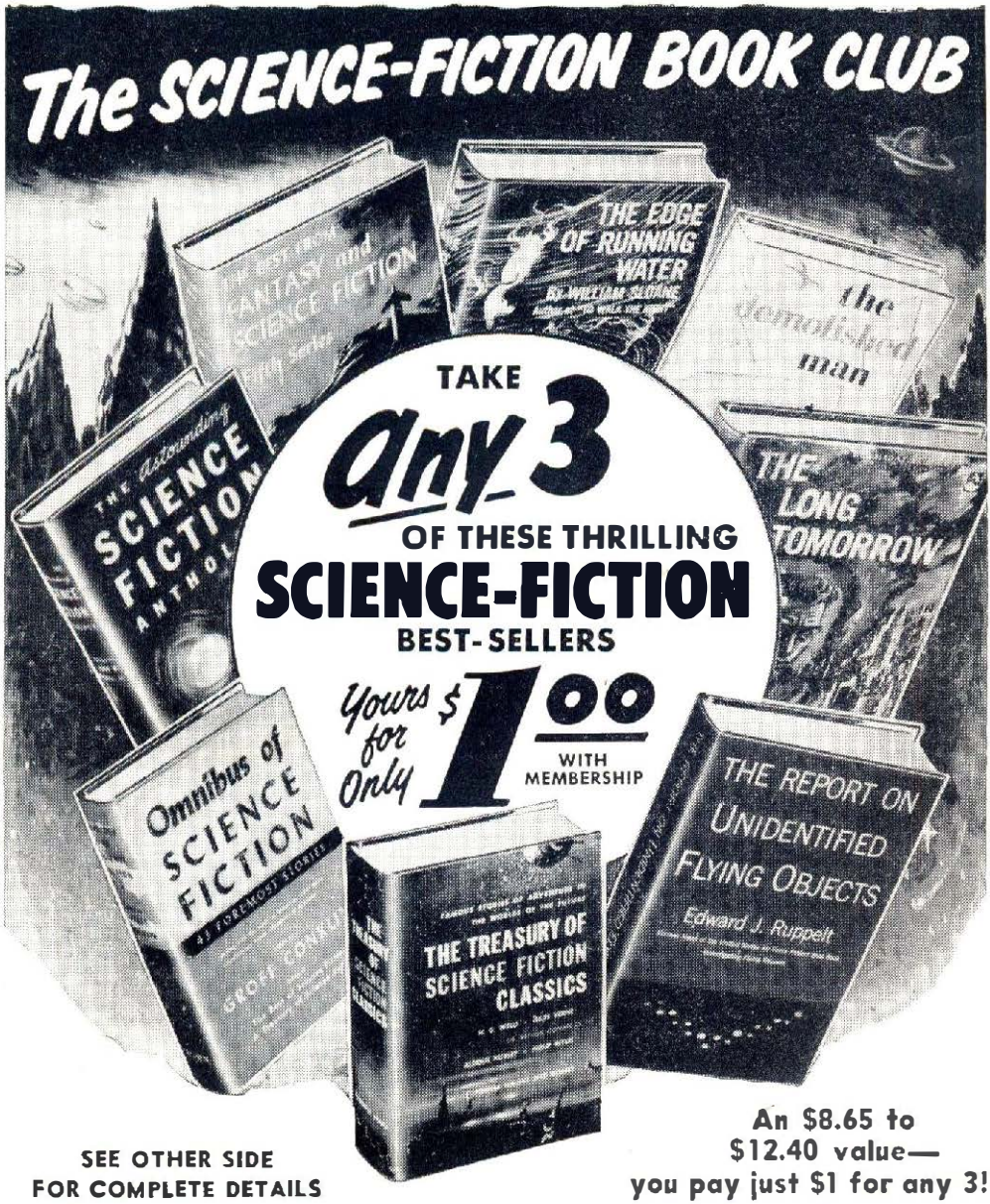

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