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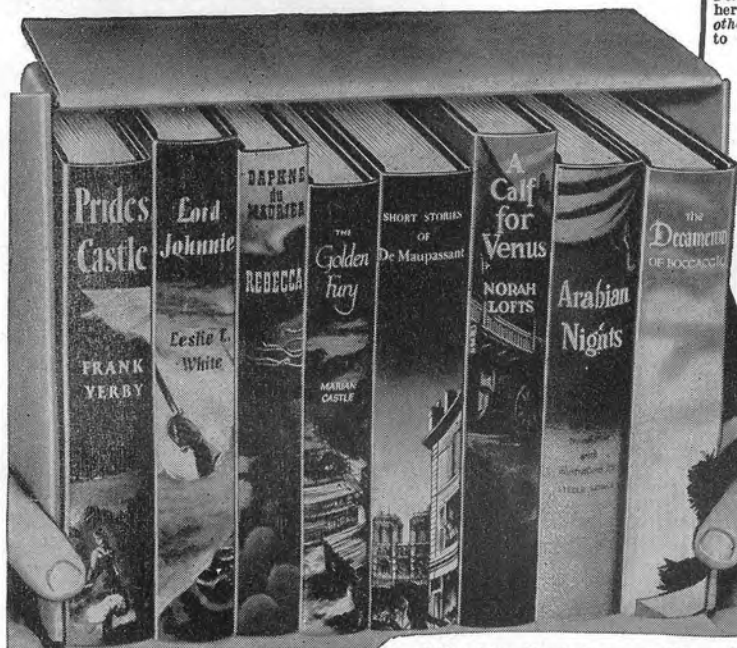
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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 4, NO. 9

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

NOV., 1950

► *Powerful Novel of Star-Born Savagery*

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Aram Jerrold watched helplessly as Kaidor V's beast-rockets screamed into the Void and knew that this was cosmic Armageddon . . . the crimson horror of Space-war would smash Galactic Civilization utterly and forever! Yet in his tortured mind a voice from the past commanded: "You must save something from the ruins!"

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T. T. SCOTT, *President*

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Mars Is -- Hell! By Forrest J. Ackerman

ACCORDING to an often reprinted story by Ray Bradbury, "Mars Is Heaven," but according to the new scientific film, **ROCKETSHIP X-M**, Mars is quite the opposite; in fact, the **Warrior Planet** is found to have lived up to its name, and an atomic Armageddon has destroyed its civilization!

I have just come back from a trip to Mars, the only survivor of a hundred million mile voyage thru the void. You think me mad? No crazier than you will be to miss **ROCKETSHIP X-M** when it opens at your local theater! This is the second of the **Interplanetary** films to have been produced in the forthcoming cycle, and goes far beyond the original **DESTINATION MOON** in mileage. For while the "X-M" in the title stands for **Expedition Moon**, the 180' step-rocket actually—thru mishap—lands on Mars!

Enroute to the Moon, a meteor shower imperils the rocket. All armchair astrogators will sweat along with the cinematic explorers as the menacing swarm all but grazes the hull of the ship.

And then, when calculations indicate the necessity of changing course and fuel mixture, an error is made that causes the rocket to leap ahead with dangerous acceleration. The crew of five are all knocked unconscious, while the rocket rushes unchecked thru the starry vacuum toward a new destination—destination Mars!

Every red-blooded science fiction enthusiast will thrill to the landing on the **Red Planet**, when the foot of Man is first set down 50 million miles away on the enigmatic world . . . world of sombre atmosphere, crumbling rocks, towering cliffs,

violent lightning storms, and—horrrifying inhabitants!

Yes, the Mars of this movie is inhabited. The Martians are great tall dark-skinned humanoids, deformed by hideous scar tissues, the end product of their own Nagasaki nightmare. For **Atomigeddon** has come to Mars, leaving it a ruined world, its ancient cities smashed, its civilization a memory, its men degenerated to a Stone Age level of living.

Two of the crew of **Rocketship X-M** are killed on Mars by the primitive mutants. The remaining three escape to Earth, but their fuel supply gives out before a landing can be effected, and they perish in the resultant crash.

Failure?

No, in the closing words of the film's Dr. Fleming: "The flight of the **R-X-M** established every point of our rocket theory; it proved interplanetary travel is not only possible but practicable. It demonstrated once again that no pioneering is too difficult, no dream unattainable, when man's vision is broad enough to encompass it. No, the trip was *not* a failure. Tomorrow we start construction on **R-X-M-2!**"

And if you would like to see a sequel, urge your friends to attend **ROCKETSHIP X-M** when it is released, and drop a line to its producer, Kurt Neumann, Lippert Productions, 5746 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood 28, Cal., after you have seen it, letting him know how you enjoyed it, and indicating that you would support another in what could well be a series of *Journeys into the Unknown*.

by C. H. Liddell



On that fog-shrouded Venusian mountaintop lay an eternal Pool, where icy diamonds and blood-red rubies, emerald idols and rich yellow gold sparkled seductively in darkling depths . . . and striding confidently up the strange path toward that island in the sky came Red Rohan, thief of Venus. But the treasure, of course, had a Guardian: a Monster . . . or possibly a god . . .

carry me home



The fog split and took fire and burned like the blaze of a white-hot sun . . .

YOU COULD SEE THE Mountain sometimes, on the clearer days, from as far away as the town called Foggy Morning. The unearthly lands between swam in jungle, stirring endlessly with the pale, restless foliage of Venus, garrulous jungle full of a continual murmur that had all the notes of

human speech imperfectly heard.

The Quai told fabulous tales about the Mountain, drawing up the third eyelid dreamily over their yellow gaze and humming gently through their noses between words, in the disconcerting way of Quai. They said there was a pool up there, and something in the pool. They said the pool

was blue—under a sky of unbroken, eternal cloud, the pool was blue.

They said there was a monster in it. Possibly a god. No Terrestrial understands Quai speech very clearly yet, so they may have said both monster and god. It sounded intriguing, but too remote to interest anyone in the frontier towns along the Terrestrial Highway. Terrestrial holdings on Venus are precarious yet, strung along a chain as narrow and perilous as Bifrost, and infringements against Venus and Quai have proved too dangerous for any man to commit more than once.

Three men slipped out of Foggy Morning just ahead of the vigilantes one day, getting the jungle equipment they needed by direct and deadly means. Frontier justice being what it always is, the vigilantes pursued them only far enough to make sure they would not return. The men were robbers. If the vigilantes had caught them they would have hanged them. But when they had chased them past the turn-off that leads southwest toward Flattery and north toward Adam and Eve, and on along a little winding, diminishing path due west, they paused and looked at each other and began to laugh. The path went straight into forbidden Quai lands, and its far end was the Mountain. The vigilantes shrugged and went back to Foggy Morning.

There were *d'vahnyan* in the jungle. *D'vahnyan* is a complex term, but its basic import is death-dealer. The Quai were quite competent to look after their own lands. Hanging *might* have been preferable.

THE CAVERN was reasonably dry, considering. It was reasonably safe, or as safe as any refuge could be in Quai territory. A small, soft fire burned in a hollow of sand near one wall, pale lavender flames licking up and whimpering in the annoying way all fire does on Venus. Something in the wet air damps its color and the flames never feel really hot even when they burn you.

A man named Rohan lay drowsily with his back to the cavern wall and his eyes shut, singing to himself.

"*Swing low,*" he sang, "*sweet chari-ot, comin' for to carry me home.*"

Condensing fog gathered in big drops along the outer brow of the cave and dripped continually as an obligato to the song and the whimper of the fire. One of the other men was sitting on his heels just inside the fringe of dripping water, gun across his knee, peering into the misty jungle. The third man threw down an emptied ration-tin with violence and said, "Red!"

Rohan did not open his eyes.

"Yes, my little friend?" he said.

"Red, I'm sick of it. I'm going back! You hear? There's no use waiting any longer. Barber isn't coming. Why should we sit here waiting for the police to come and get us? I tell you there's been a *d'vahnyan* on our trail since yesterday morning, and I don't like it. I'm going back. I'll take my chances—"

Rohan grinned sleepily.

"*If you get there before I do,*" he sang, "*tell all my friends I'm comin' too—*"

"It's crazy," the other man said. "It isn't safe to wait around here any longer. I'm afraid of the *d'vahnyan*, if you're not. I'm going."

He made no further move. Rohan listened to the quiet complaint of the flames and thought of the *d'vahnyan* of Venus.

The *d'vahnyan's* place in Quai society is not comparable to any Terrestrial equivalent. He approximates police, judge, jury and executioner all in one, though his powers are not limited to the enforcing of justice; he also—for no reason Terrestrials have yet grasped—destroys trees or whole forests, burns occasional villages, dams or diverts rivers, and at times sterilizes the soil of agricultural areas. His decree is never questioned. He is debarred from the fields of science, using the weapons the blue-clad *W'ghirae* give him, without understanding the principles of the devices he wields. The *W'ghirae* correspond to scientists or priests of science, and are forbidden knowledge of the Realities. Exactly what the Quai mean by Realities is not yet known.

But a few of the more concrete realities of life on Venus the Terrestrials have learned fast, often the hard way. Fore-

most among them is the absolute power of the *d'vahnyan*. To wield it they seem to have surrendered much—perhaps the whole ego as we think of it. They rule by a sort of divine right, and no one dreams of questioning or disobeying them or lifting a hand against them. Their lives are sacred and their decrees irrevocable.

"I don't trust them," Forsythe said again. "I'm going back."

"The Quai are a funny people," Rohan said cheerfully, opening his eyes a little to peer out past the watcher on the threshold and into the drifting mist. "They work in a mysterious way their wonders to perform. An amazing race, the Quai. All right, Forsythe. Goodbye. Jellaby and I are going to climb the Mountain."

FORSYTHE JERKED AROUND heavily, his dark face flushing with anger and incredulity. Even Jellaby, at the door, looked back over his shoulder and his freckled jaw dropped.

"What?" Forsythe demanded.

"You heard me."

"I won't do it," Forsythe said excitedly. "You're crazy. That wasn't what you told me. You said Barber Jones would pick us up at the clearing and fly us out with the loot. The road toward the Mountain was just to fool the vigilantes. Oh no, Red! Oh no!"

Rohan rolled over lazily to face his companions.

"Did you really think," he inquired, "that Barber would bother with us if we didn't get away with the bank hold-up? We're in an interesting spot, Forsythe, my friend."

"I don't like it." Forsythe's voice was heavy. "We should have left the bank alone. There was pretty near as much money in the saloon safe. But no, we had to bust into the bank and set off the alarm in Police Headquarters clear over the bay at Swanport. How long do you figure before the police come for us, Red?"

Rohan closed his fist on a handful of moist, sandy soil and let it trickle slowly through his fingers. His look was gently marveling. Terrestrials were still so new

on Venus that sometimes a man found himself struck with astonishment at the simple discovery that this world was made of soil. Plain dirt, rock, sand, prosaic as Earth itself. You expected something more glamorous of the Morning Star.

"A band of angels," Rohan sang, "comin' after me, comin' for to—"

"You can't go up the Mountain," Forsythe pursued doggedly. "What's the good of it? What's up there but some kind of devil-fish in a pool? I tell you, it's crazy!"

"What's up there, my friends," Rohan said, and in the violet firelight his face took on a sudden look like fever, "what's up there is a fortune! There's a pool, all right. There's a—well, some kind of a monster. And you know why it's there? To guard a treasure. Jewels, Forsythe. Rubies and diamonds, Jellaby. For a thousand years the Quai have been throwing offerings down to their monster-god. And nobody knows it except us. Not a soul except us three. That's why we're going up the mountain, Forsythe."

Forsythe grunted.

"You been dreaming," he said.

"I had it straight," Rohan said, "from the horse's mouth." He laughed. "I got it from Crazy Joe."

Forsythe's head snapped around sharply and he caught his breath to hoot with angry derision. But Rohan saw the derision pause and heard the breath run out in an uncertain, half-reluctant sigh.

"Uh-huh," Rohan said. "Think it over. I did. I got him drunk, you see. First time I ever saw Crazy Joe drunk, but I happened to be the lucky guy who drank with him. And he talked . . ."

ROHAN HALF SHUT HIS EYES and looked through his lids at the dim, complaining fire. Crazy Joe, he thought. How crazy? Babbling over his liquor about a treasure he'd seen and walked away from, not wanting it, not really caring. That was crazy. Only a crazy man would do it. But wise in his craziness, with strange threads of sanity twining through the warps of his mind. The Quai paid him a curious respect and abided by his owlish council. They told him things he was not too crazy to turn

to account sometimes. It was probable that he knew much more than he ever admitted to. He wandered freely in Quai territory, and he knew what lay at the top of the Mountain . . .

"I saw him next day," Rohan said. "I thought it might have been just drunken talk. But he claimed the whole thing was true. He told me all about it. I believed him." Rohan grinned. "Would I be here now, if I hadn't? Why, if even a part of it's true, half the jewels on Venus are lying right up there on top of the Mountain, just waiting for three guys like us to come and get 'em."

Then he shut his lips together on a tight, secret smile and thought of the other thing Crazy Joe had said was up there. Forsythe and Jellaby were dubious enough about the jewels. What would they say if he told them about the *d'vahnyan*?

"You needn't be afraid of the *d'vahnyan*," Crazy Joe had said, combing his beard through his fingers thoughtfully, drawing down his thick, bleached brows. "I'm not. I know too much about 'em. I found out. Up there." He had chuckled, looking shrewdly at Rohan. "They're not so mysterious, once you know the secret. It's all up there. The treasure, the pool, the monster—and the secret of the *d'vahnyan*."

Rohan had regarded him dubiously, with rising excitement imperfectly tempered by reason. The strangest part of the whole strange business was that he believed Crazy Joe. You had to know Crazy Joe to understand why. Nobody knew what his real name was, or where he came from. Oddly, there were times when the part of his face that showed between ragged beard and ragged bangs had a distracting familiarity to Rohan, but he could not identify it. The man was unquestionably mad, but there was dignity in his madness, and he was not known to distort the truth.

Moreover, he could talk to the Quai. He had even been known to hold conversations with the *d'vahnyan*, at a distance, looking up into those cold, inhuman faces and stroking his beard as he spoke. They never exchanged an unnecessary

word with sane humans, but to Crazy Joe they spoke with respect.

"What do you know about them?" Rohan had asked eagerly, all his own hatred and distrust of the *d'vahnyan* boiling up in him behind the question. The inhuman, the unspeaking, the terrible *d'vahnyan*, because of whom his one real success on Venus had been thwarted. "What do you know?"

"The secret of the *d'vahnyan*," Crazy Joe had said mildly. "I can't tell you. I couldn't if I would. It isn't a thing you can tell. You have to see it."

"A weapon?" Rohan had asked urgently. "A machine? A book? Come on, Crazy Joe, give me an idea! What is it?"

"It's up there on the Mountain," was all Crazy Joe would say. "Go up and see for yourself. I did. I'm not afraid of 'em now. They talk to me. If you want to know about it, you'll have to go up the Mountain and find out. It won't be easy, but what is? Go ahead. Find out for yourself."

So Rohan was going.

HIS CURIOSITY about the *d'vahnyan* was devouring. The death-dealers were such a terrifying class of people, if you could call them people at all. They weren't *people*. They weren't alive. They weren't dead. They were more like beings from another star than creatures of human stock.

What their powers were nobody knew, though Terrestrials made guesses. They could destroy at a distance in many changing ways, all of them explicable by analogy, though the analogies might be quite wrong. Ultrasonic waves can focus invisibly to a point and destroy with heat and vibration. Did they kill with a power like that? Perhaps.

The intricate wrappings of gleaming black stuff they wore, interwoven with shining curled threads, might in themselves be some unearthly sort of weapon; as the winding of the armature on an electromagnet controls its efficiency, so these elaborately wound patterns woven with strange threads no Terrestrial had ever seen at close range might control

the enormously efficient powers the *d'vahnyan* wielded.

The sciences of the Quai both paralleled and diverged from Terrestrial sciences. No Venusian has ever seen the stars, but from the structure of the atom the Quai evolved a very pretty picture of their own sun and sister planets. It was known that they drew upon the very short-wave radiations that filter through the clouds of Venus from the sun and stars, for example converting (in controlling the balance of food supply) starch to sugar with the aid of polarized infra-red, as Terrestrials learned to do long ago. There can be biological converters as well as technological ones. So a converted energy drawn from without or from within, and probably controlled by the gleaming black wrappings of the *d'vahnyan*, was the weapon they wielded. But where they came from, what they were, nobody knew. Perhaps not even the Quai.

Perhaps Crazy Joe knew. Perhaps, if Rohan reached the Mountain, he too might know. He only knew now that his hatred of the *d'vahnyan* was an uncontrollable and an irrational thing, resembling more a man's deep, instinctive aversion to an alien life-form than his dislike of a fellow creature, however unpleasant. They did not suffer from the drives that made Rohan what he was, and he hated them for that. They were passionless, and he felt bewildered scorn for them. They were curiously selfless, and he felt contempt because of that. But his reasoning mind told him they were simply men, after all, men who followed orders in what they did, as most men do. He did not mean to let them thwart him this time. He was afraid of them, but he feared failure more than the *d'vahnyan*. He would not, this time, turn back for anything.

"I don't know," Forsythe grumbled. "I don't like it, Rohan. It isn't safe. That Mountain's a long way off."

"You like it here?" Rohan inquired, smiling. He rose limberly. He was a tall man, good-looking, pleasantly smiling. You had to look twice to see, underneath, the kind of a man he was and had been.

"You wait here," he said, "and the *d'vahnyan* will come and get you. You

go back and the vigilantes will string you up, unless the police get there first. You come with me, and the chances are good that a genuine, authentic monster-god will eat you. But you'll see such a treasure before you die, Forsythe, I promise you'll die happy."

The man in the doorway had been watching the jungle all this while, but his large ears were alert. Now, without turning his head, he said hoarsely,

"Red, how much of this did you plan?"

Rohan's pleasant face went blank with guilelessness.

"Plan, Jellaby?"

"You wouldn't have told us about the treasure—if there is one—unless you'd needed us. Right? You knew we wouldn't run the risk on your say-so unless we had to. Right? So I'll ask it again—how much did you really plan?"

Forsythe was slower on the uptake, but he got the idea after a moment.

"Yeah!" he said, and then, with gathering heat, "Yeah, Red—what about that? You figured the bank hold-up, didn't you? It couldn't be the saloon—it had to be the bank, so the Police would chase us if we muffed it. You *wanted* the Police after us, Red! So we couldn't turn back. So we'd have to come along on your crack-pot scheme into Quai territory. Well, here we are! We can't go back or forward. And all because you're as crazy as Crazy Joe when it comes to money! Red, I—"

"Shut up, Forsythe," Rohan said in a sudden whisper. "Look out there—Jellaby! Is that something—something black?"

THERE WAS INSTANT SILENCE in the cave. The breathing of the three men seemed loud in the close confines of these rock walls which made up an alien planet. The dripping fog sang plangently on the sill and the fire whimpered thinly to itself.

Jellaby shifted the blaster in his hands and his whole position changed so that he seemed to become part of the weapon, lifting it toward the jungle path.

"No," Rohan breathed. "Careful, Jellaby. You don't know the Quai. Don't shoot. Just wait."

"Red, can you kill a *d'vahnyan*?" Forsythe asked in a faint voice.

"I don't know. I'd like to find out." Rohan's voice seemed to come through his teeth. His face had a touch of the fever tint again in the violet firelight, and his eyes looked bright and hard. "I'd like to know," he said. "Someday I'll find out. Maybe today. Maybe now. If there's any thing I hate—"

The mists parted dramatically and out of the unveiled jungle aisle a tall, black figure with a white face came stalking straight toward them. Jellaby's finger crooked convulsively on the trigger. Forsythe swore under his breath. Rohan did not make a sound. He stared, eyes a little glazed, at the approaching figure.

A part of his mind reminded him that the *d'vahnyan* must be following orders in what they did. There had been nothing personal in the ruthlessness of the *d'vahnyan* who three weeks ago had stalked into Rohan's flourishing mine camp on the outskirts of Careless Love and with one gesture brought Rohan's whole investment crashing.

But he felt the heavy beat of anger throbbing above his ears as he thought of it. The rich lands of Venus invited exploitation. No frontier was ever a place for the scrupulous, and Rohan had come because his talents flourished best where the law was weakest. He had the seed of greatness in him and he knew it unerringly. The knowledge had driven him all his life. But he needed a raw frontier to flourish in, and Venus had seemed so perfectly the place for him—until that *d'vahnyan* stepped out of the pale jungle and with one gesture dismissed all the toiling Quai . . .

"They're mine!" he had protested to the passionless, unseeing figure in black. "They owe me more than they can pay! They've got to work it out!"

The *d'vahnyan* may not have heard at all. Barter is something the Quai society does not recognize. And so Rohan's budding empire crashed and he found himself empty-handed again, with empty pockets, with nothing but the driving knowledge of his own potential power and a corrosive hatred for the *d'vahnyan* who had

come between him and all that Venus promised.

He smiled pleasantly into the face of the black-wrapped being before him. Of course it hadn't been this particular *d'vahnyan*, back in Careless Love—or had it been? How could you tell? You tend to think not of "them" but of "him" in every separate case when you think of the *d'vahnyan*. Perhaps because you never see more than one at a time, and there is no way whatever to tell them apart. Inevitably you come to feel that there is but one omnipresent, omnipotent *d'vahnyan* in all Venus, miraculously appearing in hundreds of places at once. Empty-eyed, remote, passionless, he stalks about his duties. His very name means one who is beyond life and death.

THE *d'vahnyan* paused almost on the threshold of the cave, looking at them out of remote, indifferent yellow eyes. Behind him there was a soft flurry of motion among the pale trees and a little group of Quai in single file came out one by one into the clearing behind the *d'vahnyan* and paused too, looking into the cave.

The Quai were tallish men, supple in intricate, tightly wrapped, white waterproof bindings that fitted them like a second skin. They looked like spectral mummies with triangular faces and seal-sleek fur for hair. A Quai is strikingly reminiscent of the little Venusian tree-chuck that slips quietly through the trembling foliage, looking down at you with a wondering gaze. While you are still an Earthlubber you may be reminded of a lemur or an owl, but after you know Venus the Quai will remind you of the tree-chuck and nothing else.

These four stood still and regarded the Terrestrials with an air of deprecating curiosity. The *d'vahnyan*, in glistening black, his remote gaze unfocused, stood facing the cavern, watching some vacancy in the air about six feet beyond the three Terrestrials. He laid his right hand under his left forearm, letting his left palm fall forward toward the cave. The black wrappings gloved him, and their glistening blinded the observer a little. You could

never be sure if he really held a weapon or not.

In a totally expressionless voice the *d'vahnyan* said:

"The Mountain is forbidden. Go back."

Rohan smiled cheerfully. The four Quai blinked their mild yellow eyes.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Rohan said. "We seem to have lost our way. Hope we aren't trespassing." His smile was ingratiating.

All four Quai exposed their teeth in a sudden, unexpected snap at empty air. One of them said something that had the overtones of a Gregorian chant. He added a few words in ill-accented Spanish, all of them profane. Then the four looked at Rohan in grave, astonished inquiry and put their hands on top of their seal-sleek heads.

The *d'vahnyan* might not have heard. He stood silent, unmoving, waiting, Rohan was aware of a little chill down his back, and he swallowed hard, choking down anger.

"The Mountain is forbidden," the *d'vahnyan* said again. "Go—now."

Rohan grinned deliberately. "Certainly," he said. "Glad to."

You don't argue with the *d'vahnyan*. It was probably a great concession that this one had repeated himself even once. Rohan wondered if the thing—the man—felt anything at all. If he did, he was probably a little concerned about this rather delicate situation of trespass. Relations between Terrestrials and the Quai were not very easy.

It is extraordinarily hard for Terrestrials, reared in the severely practical, commercialized thinking of ancient Rome, to understand a society rooted in a world that never knew Rome. Thinking contacts might have proved literally impossible, if it had not been for the *d'vahnyan*.

It seems commentary enough on the problems of cooperation to point out that eccentrics like Crazy Joe appeared to find the Quai and the *d'vahnyan* far easier to understand than normal Terrestrials could. Wandering subnormals like Crazy Joe are inevitable in any frontier society, which attracts misfits by its lawlessness and wrecks them by its ruthless inflexibility.

But it was in great measure thanks to the Crazy Joes of the Terrestrial Highway towns that a rough sort of working harmony had been achieved between the peoples of the neighboring worlds. They were cousin races at least, children of sister planets and sprung from human stock. But oh, the differences in their thinking!

Behind Rohan, Forsythe spoke in a low voice.

"We'd better go back, Red. He means business. You know you can't kill a *d'vahnyan*. It's been tried. I don't want any part of this. I'm going back." His boots grated on the cavern floor as he took a step forward. Rohan swept him back with an outstretched arm.

"We're going," he said aloud, in his pleasantest voice. "Hand me my pack, Forsythe. We're going." But in his mind, above the seething of controlled anger, he was saying, "Oh no, not this time! I gave in once, but not again. This time the risk's worth anything I have to do. Oh no, we won't go back!"

HE SHOULDERED HIS PACK and stepped through the veil of dripping water, out of the cave. The *d'vahnyan* uttered a sudden sharp hiss, and the four Quai unexpectedly shivered and drew back. Some heavy burden of awareness seemed to come over them and the four slumped inside their wrappings. It occurred to Rohan suddenly that they must be prisoners—the *d'vahnyan's* prisoners for some obscure Quai crime. The *d'vahnyan* hissed again, without seeming to move a feature. The Quai bent their heads and filed on across the clearing. A billow of mist rolled out to meet them and they plodded into it and vanished. The last to pass turned one bright, anguished, hopeless glance toward the Terrestrials, then let his third eyelids film across the look, and the mist swallowed him up like death itself.

Rohan felt a sudden burning contempt for them. How spinelessly they gave in to the *d'vahnyan*, four against one, and never dreaming of resistance. It was the way on Venus, but it was not Rohan's way.

Forsythe, shrugging his pack into place, stepped out past Rohan.

"You were a fool," he said disagreeably, "to think you could get away with this. If Barber's ship came down right now, I wouldn't get aboard. I don't trust you, Rohan. You're crazier than Crazy Joe." He scowled and turned to the *d'vahnyan*. "Will you guide us back?" he asked. "We were fools to come. I'd have left long ago if I'd known the way."

The *d'vahnyan's* slanting forearm with the enigmatic threat of the half open palm moved in the direction the Quai had vanished. Forsythe grunted and stepped down onto the path. Jellaby, awkwardly cradling his blaster in one arm, lumbered after. Rohan did not move.

The *d'vahnyan's* cool, implacable gaze rested upon him lightly. He lifted the threatening hand higher. There was no way to know what weapons he had—a flick of the finger might annihilate them all.

Rohan, looking into that expressionless face, deliberately let his banked anger rise. This was the turning point in his life on Venus, he thought. Give in now, and wind up like Crazy Joe. Face the *d'vahnyan* down, and the treasure on the Mountain would buy an empire. It might even buy the power to crush the *d'vahnyan* forever, and he knew that an empire would be valueless if he failed to crush them. He knew suddenly that it was neither the empire nor the treasure he yearned for now—it was the ruin of the whole *d'vahnyan* clan. The thousands of dead-faced replicas of the single *d'vahnyan* before whom a planet humbled itself. Confidence and power surged up in Rohan's mind. He could do it. He knew he could do it—in this single showdown he could outface the *d'vahnyan*.

He saw Forsythe striding down the path toward the oncoming billows of mist which had already swallowed the submissive Quai. Jellaby paused uncertainly, looked after Forsythe, looked back at Rohan.

Rohan drew a deep breath. There was only one way to conquer, now. Had anyone ever really killed a *d'vahnyan*? Had anyone, before now, dared try? "Why

not?" he thought. "What have I got to lose?"

He dropped his hand to the blaster at his side, tipped the holster up and fired very quickly, not drawing the gun, not giving the *d'vahnyan* any warning or himself time to think.

THIS WAS A NIGHTMARE, Rohan thought. They were running, running, running, the three of them, through mist and pale trees wreathed in vines and fog, and the leaves talked continuously around them, trembling like a jungle in terror.

Rohan could scarcely see the pale foliage before his eyes. That flash, back there, had been so nearly blinding . . .

What flash?

"Oh yes," he thought casually. "The flash when I shot the *d'vahnyan*."

Reason suddenly took over in his spinning mind, and he seemed to be screaming a shocked and incredulous question at himself: *Shot the d'vahnyan? I shot the d'vahnyan?*

He stumbled and fell forward, clasping a tree-trunk to break the fall, and leaned there for a long moment, his cheek against the wet bark, water dripping down his neck from the trembling foliage above, while he wrestled with his own stunned and awakening memory.

"I shot the *d'vahnyan*," he told himself carefully. "Oh yes, I did it. I, Red Rohan, shot a *d'vahnyan*, and here I am, alive. So it *can* be done. I did it. But what happened then? Why am I here?"

His memory did not want to retrace its path, and he set his teeth and forced his mind back to the moment before the cave, when the gun jolted in his hand, and—

The flash. The blinding sun-flash, yellow white, the brightest light that had ever burned on Venus. No Venusian ever saw the sun. Even the fires burned lavender. Even gun-fire flashed pale violet. But this flash had been the color of the sun. Blinding. Stunning the eye and the mind.

It engulfed the *d'vahnyan*. And the mist rolled forward to cloud the sun-color. Rainbows, he remembered, had shim-

mered for an instant in the mist, surely the first rainbows that had ever shone on Venus.

But had the *d'vahnyan* fallen? No man could stand against the discharge of a blaster fired into him from three feet away. But was the *d'vahnyan* a man? He asked himself the question, and the garrulous leaves whispered all around him, giving no answer. There was no answer. There was only the blinding flash, the mist, the rainbows, and—

And then they had run.

"Forsythe," Rohan called, his voice unsteady above the conversations of the leaves. "Forsythe. Jellaby!"

Dark figures looming up out of the trees behind him gasped and slowed in their forward plunge.

"Red?" Forsythe's uncertain voice inquired. "Red?"

"All right," Rohan said, forcing his tone toward normality. "All right, calm down now. We're okay. Everything's under control."

"Control!" Forsythe said bitterly, leaning against a tree and gasping for breath. "Oh, sure, everything's fine! You shot a *d'vahnyan*. I saw you do it! You know what the penalty is for that?"

"Do you?" Rohan managed a wry grin.

"Nobody knows. Maybe nobody ever tried it before. Maybe it's a brand new crime. But they'll work out some punishment to fit it. And *we*—"

"Shut up," Rohan said. He was striving hard to regain his lost composure. He said again, "Shut up, Forsythe," and his voice was almost pleasant. "What's done is done. Now you'll have to come along with me. If we reach the Mountain we won't have a thing to worry about. I promise you that."

"I won't do it," Forsythe said, still breathing hard. "I'm going back and wait for Barber. You got the message to him and I think he'll come. We didn't give him time enough, that's all. He—"

Rohan said wearily, "Barber's dead, Forsythe. He died two years ago."

THERE WAS A DREADFUL silence among the three men for a very long moment. Then Jellaby slowly un-

slung his rifle, his big hands moving almost unguided, his eyes beginning to burn upon Rohan.

"Don't you do it," Rohan said. "I'm your only chance."

"Barber—dead?" Forsythe echoed blankly. "I don't believe it. You're lying. You—"

"I lied before, yes. I had to. I needed you two." Rohan's voice was assured, gently urgent. "No message ever went through to Barber because it couldn't. I haven't got any pipeline to hell. Barber lived a long, nasty life and he died in a crack-up in the jungle two years ago. I heard about it from Crazy Joe. I was afraid you might have, too, but I took the chance. I had to. I tell you, if we get to the Mountain you'll never regret what I've done. We'll be so rich no government can stop us. We'll carve an empire out of the Venusian jungle and we'll be three emperors who rule half a world. There's enough for all of us. This whole planet is just lying here waiting for men like us to take over. I know the way to do it. I'm going on. I need your help and I've made sure you'd have to give it. You can't go back now. The whole planet's against us. All we can do is push on toward the Mountain, and if we get there, we can buy and sell the world." He elbowed himself away from the tree. "I'm going on. You can follow if you want to."

The two in the path looked at him wordlessly, rage and terror stopping up their mouths. Forsythe choked a little and tried to speak, but the words died and his eyes went suddenly round, showing a circle of white around each iris. He was looking back the way they had come.

Rohan swung about and looked too. Distinctly in the murmuring silence they all heard the crunch of soft feet moving over pebbles. Rohan thought violently back along the way he had come, searching for a memory of crossing pebbles. He looked down. His feet were dark with moisture. Yes, a broad shoal of pebbles and then a rushing brook that wound through the trees. A long way back? He couldn't remember.

They heard pebbles roll and crunch, far

off, hidden among the leaves. Then there was the sound of rapid water gurgling around an obstruction—such an obstruction as wading legs. Pebbles crunched again on the nearer bank. After that, silence.

It might be farther than it seemed. Sound carried strangely sometimes among these deflecting leaves.

Rohan sucked in breath, settled his pack with firm, decisive hands, checked his blaster.

"Come along," he said, and his voice was almost cheerful again. The pressure of danger was like a strong drink to him now. There could be no hesitating, no uncertainty. The only course was forward. "Come on—quick! We can make it if we keep ahead."

"Ahead of what?" Forsythe whispered, rolling his white-ringed eyes back toward the mist-hung jungle they had passed. "It's *him*, you know. I—I've been seeing flashes of black through the leaves. He's after us. He'll get us, Red. We killed him and he'll follow us till he gets us. Red, I—"

Rohan's big hand cracked sharply across the swarthy, sweating face.

"Shut up and get going. Ahead of me. Jellaby, you too. I don't trust you behind me. Go on—march!" He laughed on a note of exhilaration. "I'll come last, so if *he* catches us I'll be the first to go."

Uncertainly, on hurried, stumbling feet, the two plunged ahead of him. Rohan drew another long breath, grinned, let it out in a melodious whistle. The trembling, pale leaves conversing all around them shivered to the notes of defiance in his voice as he began to sing.

"*Swing low,*" he sang to the mist and the vine-wreathed trees, "*sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home . . .*"

THE MOUNTAIN'S tremendous shoulders loomed above the mists, monstrous, streaming with veils of cloud, naked above the clinging jungle. It was gray scoriac stone, smudged all up and down its sides with great soft blurs of color where lichens grew pink and amber, pale green, dusky blue. The peak was

hidden. The pool, the treasure, the secret, drew cloud about themselves and pretended not to exist at all.

Rohan looked up at the peak warmly and lovingly, hardly believing he stood here, so close to the goal that would make all his dreams come true. He saw the steep road winding upward and half shut his eyes, picturing himself coming down it laden with treasure. With rubies and diamonds. And wiser than the Rohan who stood here at the edge of the jungle: He would be stronger than the *d'vahnyan* when he came down that road. A Rohan would come down who knew the secret of the *d'vahnyan* who held a whole planet in submission. It would be Rohan who gave the orders, then.

He glanced back. The following feet still came on. They had seen nothing through the whispering leaves all the way, but the follower had not faltered. Nor had he tried, Rohan thought, to overtake them. It had been enough to follow. Rohan knew he ought to feel frightened. Forsythe and Jellaby were cold and shaking with long-sustained superstitious dread as they looked back. But Rohan felt so sure of the secret which was almost in his grasp that fear did not touch him. By the time that unhurrying follower caught up with him, he would know more than the *d'vahnyan* knew. He would be stronger than the *d'vahnyan*. If he hurried, now.

"All right," he said. "Get along. Up the Mountain, boys. I promise you, once we—"

"Listen!" Forsythe said. They stood frozen. The jungle babbled with mindless, lispng voices. A wind sighed down from the heights above. Somewhere far off, thunder rolled. And then the sound came again, hollow and thin, distorted by the leaves between.

"Ro-han," the voice was calling. "Ro-han. Red Ro-han!"

This time a cold shiver went sharply down Rohan's back.

"Go on!" he said. "Up the Mountain, quick!"

The voice called again, miraculously nearer. The follower seemed to be coming after them now in seven-league boots.

"Ro-han, Rohan . . ."

Rohan broke into a leaden run, the pack bumping on his shoulders. The Mountain was so near. If he could get even a little way ahead, perhaps—

"Rohan?" the voice said from the edge of the trees. "Rohan, wait for me."

He turned in spite of himself. Then he let his breath out in a long, foolish gasp and said, "Crazy Joe!"

The old man grinned at him above the ragged heard. "Sure it's me. What did you think? Wait a minute."

He came striding confidently across the moss, swinging his arms. He was a stalwart old creature. No one knew how old, or how young. The bleached beard and hair might be white with age, or from some more obscure reason. Nobody knew much about Crazy Joe except that he came and went when he felt like it and answered no questions. His face was extraordinarily bland and peaceful. He did a great many very odd things at odd times, and it was probably quite true that he was mad.

He looked immaculate, which was an unexpected part of his eccentricity. His blue jeans were spotted with dew and rain, but he wore them tucked neatly into the tops of wrapped Quai sandals, and his denim shirt was Government Issue designed at Swanport for Terrestrial wear on Venus. He had stuck a pink flower in its pocket-flap and he was probably not aware that several spotted blossoms and a pale butterfly rested on his tousled hair.

"Thought I'd get here first," he said, grinning his rather foolish grin. "You must have come fast." He tilted his head back and peered up the steep road that wound about the Mountain. "Well, well," he said softly. "Hasn't changed at bit. Which one of you plans to go up first?"

Forsythe said unsteadily, ignoring the question, "Was that you behind us all the time? There wasn't—anybody else?"

"I dunno just what you mean, son," Crazy Joe said, blinking.

"Was there a—did you see any—" Forsythe could not quite get the word out.

"A *d'vahnyan*," Rohan said it for him. "We think one of them's after us, Joe. See anything?"

CRAZY JOE TURNED and looked thoughtfully at the jungle, running his fingers through his beard. The pale butterfly struggled furiously and freed itself, blew away on a soft gust of wind.

"He followed down the labyrinthine ways," Crazy Joe murmured, "of my own mind."

"What?" Forsythe asked impatiently.

Crazy Joe shook his head and his grin was vacant. "Which one of you plans to go up first?" he asked again.

"We'll all go, of course," Rohan said. "What about that *d'vahnyan*, Joe?"

"If he wants you, he'll catch you," Joe said. "I wouldn't worry if I were you. There was a band of angels comin' after me." He smiled at Rohan. "I heard a lot of singing about 'em. You going up first, Rohan? You can't all go together, you know. That's against the rules."

Rohan made an impatient gesture. "I make the rules from now on. Who's going to stop me? There's nobody up there, is there?"

"Oh yes. One Quai, always. Waiting."

"What for?"

"Waiting to be devoured," Crazy Joe said casually. "By the thing in the pool. You knew the treasure was guarded, didn't you?"

Forsythe looked at Rohan expectantly. Rohan looked away, and met Jellaby's tense gaze on the other side. The two men spoke simultaneously.

"So that's it!" Forsythe and Jellaby said with a single voice.

Rohan laughed. "Not what you're thinking, no. I'll dive for it if you're afraid to. I never said it would be easy. But you'll have to help. If somebody's standing by with a gun, I'll feel a lot—"

"No, Rohan," Crazy Joe said earnestly. "You can't do that, you know. Only one at a time. Think it over, Rohan. Remember what's up there." The eyes under the faded bushes of brows were keen. "That you won't discover unless you're alone."

"What's all this?" Forsythe demanded.

"It's a secret," Crazy Joe said childishly. "Rohan knows." He glanced back at the shivering jungle and his voice blended with its dreamlike soughing. "*Behind, the vats of judgment brewing,*" he

said, "Thundered, and thick the brimstone snowed." He looked at Rohan and smiled. "He to the hill of his undoing . . . Pursued his road . . ."

"Ah, you're two crackpots together," Forsythe said, turning abruptly away. His face was thoughtful. He seemed to be evolving some new idea, and that Rohan could not—dared not—allow. There was again, as always, only one solution.

Rohan stepped back from the little group, laying a hand on his holstered gun, tipping it up ominously. He would not have to draw it. He could shoot well enough at this range from the holster. It was a trick he liked.

"All right, Forsythe," he said, not troubling any more to make his voice cheerful or pleasant. "Jellaby, over here. Both of you. We'll go up together, you two first. Crazy Joe—"

He looked speculatively at Crazy Joe. He was thinking that he would have to kill the old man, sooner or later. He was dangerous on too many counts. He could lead the two others back to the Terrestrial Highway, and only fear of the jungle kept them submissive to Rohan now. With Crazy Joe for a guide, they would be free of him. Also, Crazy Joe knew too much about the Mountain. What he had babbled once he might babble again, and Rohan did not intend for anyone else to stand where he stood now. He fingered the trigger meditatively, hesitated, decided the moment was not yet. "Crazy Joe," he said, "get back and don't bother me. I make the rules from now on."

Forsythe's heavy face wrinkled up in a thoughtful grimace. Rohan didn't like it. He jerked the holstered gun threateningly.

"Forsythe—" he said.

Forsythe squinted at him, lifted his upper lip and laughed harshly.

"Crazy Joe," he said, without taking his eyes from Rohan's, "is there another path down this mountain?"

"Only this one," Crazy Joe said tranquilly.

"No other way to get down?"

"No. It's all precipices except this side, where the road is."

Forsythe, still holding Rohan's gaze,

stepped back deliberately, found a convenient rock and sat down, laughing his annoying harsh laugh, his eyes small and full of malice on Rohan's.

"Go on," he said, goadingly. "Why don't you shoot?"

Jellaby barked out a sudden, understanding burst of amusement.

"He won't," he declared. "Not him."

"Why won't I?" Rohan demanded, struggling hard to keep his anger in check.

"Because you need us, that's why," Forsythe said flatly. "And we don't need you. You wouldn't have let us in on this at all if one man could have made that trip through the jungle alone. You needed us. When you come down the Mountain loaded with jewels you'll need us worse than ever. All right, you tricked us into coming. But it was your idea, not ours. You go right ahead and wrestle with your devil-fish up there. If you get the treasure, fine, we'll share it with you. If you don't come down, that's fine too. Crazy Joe will guide us back. Suit yourself, Red. You asked for it."

"We didn't shoot any *d'vahnyan*," Jellaby added. "We're clear. We'll help you carry your rubies and diamonds back, but we won't get 'em for you."

Rohan looked at Crazy Joe. The old man smiled impersonally.

"One at a time, Rohan," he murmured. "That's what I said. It isn't allowed any other way. Even if you shot me, it wouldn't make any difference. You'll have to go up alone."

THE STEEP STONE ROAD curved around a leaning monolith and wind poured downward along it like a stream of cool, invisible water. Below, through gaps in the mist, the trembling jungle showed. Stormclouds hung purple and laced with distant lightning. Rohan's feet as he climbed left stains of pale green and pink and violet on the road, the colors of crushed lichens.

He could not see the men below any longer. He knew what they were thinking, though. He knew what they were planning, for he would plan identically if the situation were reversed. Forsythe and Jellaby did not mean to risk the ascent,

but when he came down loaded with jewels, they would shoot him as he came. Or try to.

He thought of Crazy Joe's mild, witless gaze, watching him up the road until mist blotted the lifted faces out. He thought of Crazy Joe's voice, babbling old poetry.

*"Oh youth that would attain,
On, for thine hour is short,
It may be thou shalt gain
The hell-defended fort . . ."*

He laughed a little. He felt very sure of himself. Continents of cloud rolled beneath him like the planet he was going to conquer when he had conquered the Mountain. It was odd, how sure he was of the treasure and the secret that would make the *d'vahnyan* vulnerable to him. He had only a madman's word for it, and yet he was very sure indeed. The breath burned in his chest, not wholly from the climb. He was brimmed with excitement, dread, a fierce anticipation. Crazy Joe had been right, after all—he had to be alone at this climax of his life. He must stand or fall by his own efforts. But he would not fall.

The road turned sharply. He had reached the top.

He stood quite still, looking about him with narrowed eyes, whistling through his teeth without being wholly aware of it. "*Sweet chariot,*" he whistled, "*comin' for to carry me home.*"

There was an island in the sky. A walled island with a wide, wide gate like no gate he had ever seen before. Through the strange, lacelike meshes of it he could see the flat summit of the mountain in a gray light that cast no shadows. A windy whispering sighed across the plateau. The scene was as still and colorless as a steel engraving except for the startling blue of the pool. Crazy Joe had not lied. It was sky-blue, on a world that had never seen the sky. Thirty feet across, lapping level with the smooth rim around it, colored like eternity, the pool lay waiting him.

He stood on the lip of a wide stone semicircle with the wall beyond it. Against

the wall facing him was a rickety structure like something you might see in a bazaar near the Mediterranean, back home on Earth. A roof of tree-fronds on unsteady poles leaned against the wall, sheltering a fantastic clutter of objects beneath its dripping eaves. The hut was a jackdaw's nest of junk. Lying motionless in a huddle of fringed blankets on the ground, a Quai slept placidly.

Waiting to be devoured, Crazy Joe had said.

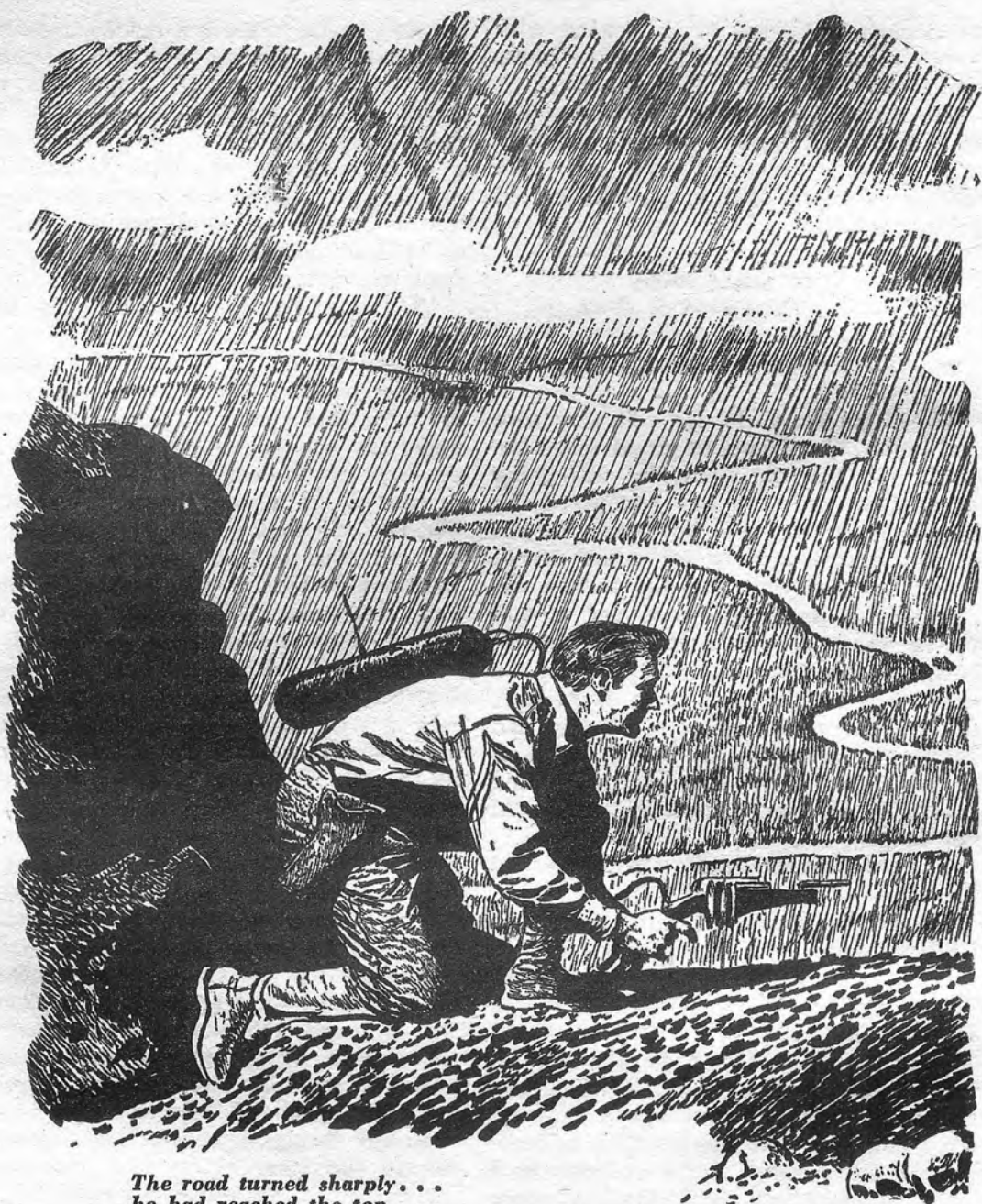
Rohan looked curiously over the bazaar-booth's contents, taking an inventory of the trivia in a Quai's life that had seemed important enough to bring with him to the hour of his death. Surrounded by the detritus of his incomprehensible Venusian life, the man slept on. He lay on his face and only the pink soles of his bare feet were visible beneath the tumble of blankets. His hands were clasped together on top of his seal-sleek head.

Above him fringes and braided ribbons fluttered from pins on the wall. There was a wire cage with a captive insect like a moth crawling about inside, chirping softly. A chain of bells hung from a carved globe of deep red wood. There were three totally incoherent paintings in irregular frames. A whistle hung by a long tassel. A pot of water held three colorless flowers, each with two petals creased down by a careful hand.

Rohan's feet did not make a sound on the rock, but he was aware after a moment that a round yellow eye had opened in the shadow of the Quai's uplifted arm and was regarding him without expression. The Quai did not move.

Rohan shrugged a little and went on toward the gate.

THE WALL WAS HIGH and very thick, so thick that the gate aperture was really a passage about twenty feet long. The gate itself was a web which entirely filled the passage from end to end. Some spider who spun glittering, curled metal thread had been at work here. It reminded Rohan of something. What? Curled threads—yes, like the threads woven into the wrappings the *d'vahnyan* wore. His heart beat a little



*The road turned sharply . . .
he had reached the top . . .*

faster in triumph at this implied confirmation of Crazy Joe's promise.

How you passed the Gate was another matter. He squinted up at the wall. Far too high to scale. He glanced back at the Quai, and saw that the man was now sitting up, cross-legged, clasping his ankles and watching Rohan without expression. He was a little struck by the Quai's face. Arrogance was on it. This was a man who

had wielded much power over a long period of time. The set of the mouth showed it, and the imperious gaze. How strange that such a man would forsake life among his people and climb the Mountain with his few small valued things to bear him company until the summons came . . .

Rohan looked back at the gate. This time it seemed to him that there was an



opening which led a little way into the web, like the entry into a maze. He put out a cautious hand, tested the firm, curled lace of the metal, found a vacant space the size and shape of a man, stepped forward into it.

He stood there, peering intently before him, searching for the next open space. He was certain that it existed, but he had to keep his mind firmly fixed on the patterns to find it. Wind blowing through the gate sang faintly among the webbings.

After a moment Rohan saw the next opening, squirmed to the left, squeezed between vibrating traceries of bright wire, and stood in another open space several paces inside the gate.

It was certainly, he thought, a machine. Some intricate Venusian mind had built it for some purpose no Terrestrial was likely to understand, but it was definitely a functioning mechanism. It took the most intent concentration to find one's way through, and, the moment the mind re-

laxed, the gate began to press the intruder back toward his starting point, gently, resiliently, almost imperceptibly.

Rohan pushed ahead, paused for long minutes, searching the dazzling confusion before him until suddenly the right perspective took shape and he saw the next passage opening, clear and unbarred, leading another three feet or so into the tangle. When he stepped into it, the way he had just come blended instantly into the labyrinth. Suddenly frightened, he searched for the way back, found it after a few minutes, and discovered he had lost the forward way. While he hunted again for it, he was aware of the pressure of the web, of bright curled wires moving past his face. The gate was pressing him toward its outer surface.

Resolutely he fixed his mind on the immediate problem, found the way forward, pushed into it, paused, searched again. Very slowly he made his way toward the plateau on the far side of the wall. The pool lay placid, waiting.

"IS THIS ALL?" HE THOUGHT, looking around the empty mountaintop. Only the wet, sighing wind hissed in his ear for answer. It was all. The encircling wall hid nothing. Bare stone overgrown with blurs of colored lichens and the pool itself, an unlidged eye staring up at infinity.

Rohan strolled toward it, paused on the brink, looking down.

His heart turned over.

This much at least of Crazy Joe's tale was true. There were stars down there in the deep sky-blue of the water, stars that winked up green and red, blue and amber. Great drifts of jewels set and unset, thicker than the sands of the pool's floor.

Then a shadow stirred, deep down. A vast, thick coil moved upon itself, turned over slowly, settled back to rest. It was only a part of a vaster shadow. He leaned to peer closer. But the water was milky. He could not see . . .

Not very much is really known about the fauna of Venus. Terrestrial exploration has been confined to narrow corridors, and if there are dangerous beasts

in the jungles they generally shun the highways and the towns. What may dwell in the seas of Venus is as unknown as the deepest secrets of our own seas. This thing was vast and sluggish, dimly gleaming where light struck it strongest. Rohan measured its bulk as well as he could, considered it with a sort of reckless caution. It was slow. It was probably not hungry, or the Quai outside the gate would not be waiting there. Presumably some kind of summons would come when the Quai was wanted. Or did they operate on some private schedule of their own? At any rate Rohan was a strong swimmer. Also, he had a knife.

He thought, unfastening his shirt, "If I can get up only a load or two of what's down there, it'll be a start. I can hire a ship and come back here with enough artillery to kill the thing and clean out the pool. Maybe I won't even wake it up, if I'm careful."

Then he thought of the *d'vahnyan*, and glanced again, rapidly and with uneasiness, around the plateau. Had Crazy Joe told three truths and one lie about this place? The pool was blue, as he had said. It held treasure and a monster of some kind. But the greatest treasure, the secret behind the *d'vahnyan*—where was it? What was it? No, Crazy Joe did not tell lies. Unless it was unwittingly. Could that be it? Some vague fantasy he had dreamed up here, staring into the hypnotic eye of the pool? No, for he *did* know the secret. He *did* talk with the *d'vahnyan*, easily, with strong influence sometimes. Well, never mind. At least, the jewels were here. After that there would be time enough to explore further.

A curious sureness drove him on. The secret was here. He could see no tangible evidence but something deeper than reason told him Crazy Joe had not misled him. In its own time the secret would come to him, as it had come to Crazy Joe.

He stepped out of his trousers, settled the long knife on its thong around his wrist, poised on the pool's brink.

HOW SOFT AND SMOOTH the water was. Not like real water. Stroking strongly downward, Rohan mar-

veled at the texture of the blue infinity he sank through. He kept his eyes open, enjoying the deepening blueness, watching for the flashes of color that struck upward like some sunken autumn from the bottom of the well. It was like swimming through blue air toward stars. He felt happy and light. It was strange to think how intimately he shared this water with a monster whose shape and nature he did not know. The water was full of death, but he did not fear it. It was full of life and light too, if a man had the courage to reach for them.

The jewels lay heaped in thick, bright hillocks, unevenly on the sand. It seemed to Rohan that they lay smoothest in a broad path across the pool's center, as if—something—had dragged a wide track across the treasure many times. But the deep waters hid all sign of the dweller here. Perhaps it slept. Perhaps it had withdrawn.

Rohan shook out the strong, light sack he had brought for the treasure. It wrapped itself around his arm, clinging like seaweed. He reached for a heavy, half-submerged outcropping in the sand to hold himself down and found he was gripping a carved figure studded with slippery gems. It served the purpose.

What a lot of the treasure there was, he thought warmly, riffling it over with his free hand. Big rubies like blood-drops, strings of half dissolving pearls, linked diamonds set in imperishable yellow gold, corroded boxes spilling out colored drifts of stones. Little idols with enormous emerald eyes. Ivory furred with the swaying green hair of water-growths. Steel mirrors pitted with corruption that had once given back the yellow-eyed glances of pretty Quai girls, corruption now themselves. Steel daggers dissolving off studded gold hilts. So much of it, too much, richness pressed down and running over.

Happily Rohan brushed the surface, uncovering yet more treasure underneath. Working fast, he sorted out the largest and the best and thrust them into his sack. Great pale-eyed diamonds, globes of preciousness as live as stars, strings of lustrous rainbow color, faceted drops of congealed brightness. It was wonderful.

It was Christmas morning. It was Easter, with all the dazzling eggs nested here awaiting him.

His lungs began to burn. He turned over and shot up through paling blueness toward the air, his heavy sack trailing. He began to laugh exultantly just before he broke the surface, and hung sputtering and choking for a while before he emptied his jewels on the bank and dived again.

The treasure flashed brighter than before. He dug into it, tossing it over and over, filling the sack anew with the power and the glory of a planet. A second time he rose to the surface, emptied his bulging sack, dived.

This time he uncovered a drift of pure crimson drops, like a man unearthing a vein of clear gold in a mountain of crystals and silver. He dug with both hands into the rich heaps, blinking in the clouds of sand his digging had dislodged, reaching for the bigger and brighter jewels which always lay just an arm's length out of his grasp.

A long, slow coil of disturbed sand rose out of the milky distance past his face. The water stirred, deeply and slowly.

Then with great deliberation a grasp like marble closed around his ankle.

ROHAN WRITHED OVER in the water convulsively, letting the rubies fly. They sank in a sluggish red rain about him through the blue water, turning over slowly, as he tugged in a moment's almost fatal panic at that relentless coil. It was heavy and hard and cold, like stone. And it was drawing him in . . .

It did not seem possible to him that a slow sun was beginning to burn through the clouds of blinding sand which he was raising in his struggles. He thought wildly that the light burned in his own mind, a symbol of shock and fear. But the tentacle drew him downward and inward toward the light, and as it grew and broadened with nearness it was the color of the sun itself, clear, bright white gold, shimmering in the waters that were colored like the blue skies of Earth. Blue skies and sunlight—two things no eye upon Venus had ever seen, except perhaps here.

His lungs burned. His vision blurred with sand and water and terror. He was not aware of himself as a reasoning creature at all in this moment. He was only a wild, struggling thing frantic to escape.

The thong-hung dagger, following his flailing motions faithfully, struck his palm finally and brought reason back. His fingers closed and with his last conscious strength he drove the dagger down hard, into the murk where the sunlight burned, into the heavy coil that was creeping higher around his ankle.

He felt the whole coil flinch. He slashed again. The water churned and the marble grasp slackened a little. Writhing double, blind with light and darkness, he stabbed once more into solid flesh which he could not see, and this time the heavy coil relaxed and slid slowly, slowly away.

Rohan shot up through foaming water, luminous water that boiled with sand and sparkled with broken reflections from that strange sunlight which burned at the bottom of the well. He broke the surface with what seemed his last despairing effort, and hung there clutching the stone rim, his body swinging helplessly in the churning water, wondering how soon the coil would rise again and lay its marble weight around his legs.

A hand seized his wrist. Two hands. Without looking up he made feeble climbing motions against the side of the pool, but it was the strength of the two pulling hands that saved him. He stumbled, gasping and choking, over the edge at last, onto dry pavement, and lay there spent for an unmeasured space of time.

WHEN BREATH AND VOLITION came back to him he opened his eyes and saw a pair of white sandal-wrapped feet on a level with his face, a tumbled heap of jewels kicked this way and that between them. Slowly, as exhaustion ebbed a little out of him, he pushed himself up until he was sitting beside the flashing heap of his treasure, looking into the face of the standing man. Imperceptibly he was working the dagger forward around his wrist so that his fingers could close on it.

The Quai was not looking down at

him. He knew the arrogant face, but its arrogance was not for him. The Quai's third eyelids were drawn across the round eyes and their gaze was focused remotely beyond Rohan and downward, into the pool. Automatically Rohan turned to follow that veiled gaze.

He had not imagined the light in the pool. It burned stronger now, very bright, very clear. And the water was troubled from deep underneath. A sudden turbulence rushed up, subsided, rushed higher, spilling blue trickles over the rim. Then a great bubble rose and burst, and just under it the shining light came floating, up, up from the bottom of the well and the center of the world. A cold, still brilliance that dazed the eye.

The Quai spoke in a hushed voice.

"Were you summoned?" he asked Rohan.

"Summoned?" Rohan echoed the question blankly. Then a little of his old confidence came back, and even in the face of this uprising mystery from the pool he found himself laughing. "Summoned? Oh no—I came!"

The two men looked at each other for a measuring moment. Even through the veiling lids Rohan saw the cold arrogance in the Quai's eyes and knew it for a remote echo of his own. But there was a difference . . . the Quai had come humbly, acolyte and sacrifice in one. Rohan laughed again and scrambled to his feet. Exhaustion still weighted him, but he could not rest—yet.

What was going to happen next he had no idea. He only knew that he could deal with whatever came.

His discarded clothing lay beside the pool. Shivering a little in the soft, wet wind that breathed across the Mountain, he got quickly into his shirt, pressing the seal-tapes with one rapidly moving hand while with the other he groped for his trousers. The cloth felt clammy against his wet skin.

He was buckling the reassuring weight of the gunbelt around him when the next great bubble burst. Another rose after it. And another. Rohan turned, settling the holster against his thigh. The Quai stood motionless, with the jewels in a glitter-

ing tumble around his feet. He too stared down into the pool. The water boiled. The light like the sun rose higher, higher . . .

Out of the seething blue waters lifted the monstrous head of the dweller in the well. Slowly, slowly it rose, water streaming from its shoulders, and over its head the flat, unwavering sun burned cold white gold, shimmering, shivering, sending out slow rings of light that eddied and faded, spread and paled to an embracing potency that was felt but not seen. They touched the mind. Delicately they touched the mind . . .

What did it look like? Rohan could not be sure, even while he stared. The light dazed him. He only knew the thing was monstrous. Mailed and shining, it drew its magnificent length over the verge of the pool, coil by coil. Before it, stealthy, slow, tentative as the first light of dawn, moved the rings of expanding radiation. The thoughts of Rohan and the Quai moved out from their skulls in measurable waves from each thinking brain, and the radiations from the flat white light met them and moved inward as if on concentric stepping-stones, inexorably toward the center and the source of all thought.

Gently, gently. But the storm was rising.

ROHAN SHUT HIS MIND TIGHT, violently rejecting that touch. It drew back slightly, puzzled. Then it came on again and there were no doors of the mind he could close against it.

A great many lightning thoughts rippled one after another through his head. The jewels. First and last and always, the jewels. And how he could hope to get to them, with that monstrous light-crowned thing rising so slowly from the pool. And how, even if he did get them, he could escape. For he felt very sure that the rings of expanding light were quiescent now, barely stirring. There was no way of guessing their full power if the creature were aroused, or how far down the mountain they could spread, burning and sinking, paralyzing the mind.

It was not immortal. He had struck it with his knife and it had let him go. Certainly it was not a normal creature by

any Terrestrial judgment, but it was not supernatural, either. He had struck it, and—

The slow, upsurging coils hesitated. Out of the water a slash in the mailed side rose gingerly. The creature paused, swung its magnificently crowned head back to consider this twinge. And Rohan knew his chance . . .

The Quai never even heard him coming. Rohan's long knife flashed twice in the quiet air, hard, accurate blows to hasten the sacrifice which this man of Venus had come to offer his god. Rohan knew what he was doing. He knew how to guide the blows.

It takes perhaps three seconds for oblivion to come, when you strike deep at the right spots. In those three seconds the Quai had time for one quick look of blank amazement over his shoulder, and then no more.

Rohan was braced to catch the sagging body before it began to give at the knees. He caught it neatly and strongly over his bent shoulder, letting its weight double across him, and surging forward in the same quick instant that he stooped.

His timing was perfect. When the sun-crowned head of the monster swung round again, the hurled body of the Quai sprawled limply against its gigantic face, hung there for unmoving seconds, and then slid very gently downward to lie flat upon the pavement in the pools of spilled blue water. The pools turned red.

Rohan wasted no glance at what was happening between the sacrifice and the god. He was moving with the rapid, accurate gestures of an automaton, scooping up gems with both hands, dropping them blindly into his pockets. He had hoped to go down from this pool laden heavily, pack and pockets, with treasure. But now he told himself rigidly that he could make these scooping gestures twice more—once more—no more—

Resolutely he poured the last double handful into his pockets and scrambled backward on his knees, ignoring the bruise and scrape of the stones, trying not to look at the monster and its victim as he went.

But when he stood panting before the

gate he glanced back once, for just one quick, curious look, before he flung himself forward into the slow, intricate web that lay between him and freedom. It was for this, chiefly, that the Quai had had to die. The treasure was only part of it. Even if Rohan had had time to load himself with jewels, still a man must die to give him time to negotiate this gate.

He had one backward look only. The monster had halted half in the pool and half out of it. The great crowned head was bent, and light floated very lazily outward in slow, slow rings. The creature seemed to be inspecting the sprawled Quai leisurely. And Rohan saw one thing about it that struck his mind with stunning impact. He could not understand this. It was impossible. He had assumed all this while that sacrifices between Quai and monster would be consummated in the time-honored way—that the god would devour its victim.

But he saw now that the god had no mouth.

THE THREADS OF THE gateway shimmered like the intricate armature-wrapping of the *d'vahnyan*. Outside, in the leaf-thatched hut where the Quai had slept his last sleep in life, the caged moth chirped with plaintive sweetness. There was no other sound on the Mountain but the sigh of the grey wind and the soft thinking of the jewels in their pockets around Rohan's waist.

He went fast, down the steep road. He did not know how soon the rings of light might begin to pulse out and drop down after him, delicately touching the secret chambers of the mind, touching and pulling him back . . .

Part of him wanted to be pulled back. For he had accomplished only half his purpose. Or had Crazy Joe lied, after all? He had thought that when he came down this road he would carry a double treasure—jewels and knowledge. Something had gone wrong, somehow, somewhere. Tantalizingly, at the very edge of his mind, wisdom knocked for entry.

The curled threads of the gateway—the curled threads of the *d'vahnyan's* ominous wrappings. The gate, and the wrap-

pings—each was certainly a sort of un-earthly machine. The latter controlled by the waves flowing from the strange, inhuman brain of the *d'vahnyan*, the former activated and shaped by Rohan's desire to enter, to pass through. Or by the monster.

Twice on Venus Rohan had seen the sun—once in the crowned monster's brilliance, once when he shot the *d'vahnyan*. Surely the link between the Mountain and the *d'vahnyan* was a strong one. But it was not clear. He had missed its significance, somehow, somehow . . .

There was not time yet to worry about it. He had the jewels. Later, he could come back with weapons and reinforcements and take what he wanted from the pool. If the secret knowledge that could make all *d'vahnyan* vulnerable was there, and he thought it was, he would take that too, at his leisure. He could manage everything, with what he carried in his pockets.

There was only one last obstacle now. He touched his gun reflectively and watched the road below. Forsythe and Jellaby. They would be waiting for him . . . no, for what he carried. To their minds he knew he himself was only a vehicle now, for the delivery of treasure.

Somewhere on the path below they would meet him to dispute the treasure. He grinned, wondering which of them he would shoot first. That it would be Rohan who shot first seemed self-evident to him. And with Jellaby—or Forsythe—out of the way, the balance would shift once more and the survivor's return to civilization would depend solely on Rohan in the long jungle trek ahead. One man alone could not make the trip in safety. It took two at least.

"Forsythe," Rohan thought. "If there's any choice, I'll kill Forsythe."

It was curious in a way how totally he discounted Crazy Joe.

WHITE FOG SWAM LAZILY UP, to meet him as he descended. Looking out over the immeasurable miles of dissolving jungle, he thought he saw a glitter of light wink once and vanish, very far away. Foggy Morning, Flattery, Swanport, civilization, A long way off.

The fog closed around him. He walked half blinded, in white cloud. Rocks loomed like waiting figures at every bend. After a while he drew his gun and carried it ready, the safety off, knowing that he was coming nearer and nearer to the danger area where almost certain ambush waited him. He went very cautiously now, searching each crevice he passed, all his senses tuned to a singing alertness. And presently, with no surprise, he heard a gentle click of metal on rock a little way ahead in the blankness, and knew that the moment was upon him.

Feet shifted on rock. A voice whispered a fierce warning. Rohan smiled. "Forsythe first," he thought. It was bravado and nothing more. He knew he would simply fire at the first moving shadow and hope for the best. He stood perfectly still, hugging the rock wall, his senses straining into this blank grey world where death waited him on the downward path.

Behind him, above him, quite clearly in the fog, footsteps sounded.

Rohan pressed flat against the rocks, turning his head sharply. That was impossible.

He told himself that acoustics must be confused in this heavy, blind dimness. He told himself he had imagined the sound. For there could not possibly be footsteps behind him. No one had passed him going up. There was no other way to the top. And he had left nothing alive on the Mountain. Only the moth in the cage and the monster in the pool.

But now the sound of footsteps rang clear again on the rock above, coming nearer. It was no trick of the echoes or the mind. Someone was following him down the steep road. Someone striding firmly on shod feet that struck loud on stone and muffled on lichens.

Suddenly the mist felt cold around him.

The Quai was dead. Surely, surely the Quai was dead. But there had been no other human up there. For a disorienting moment he thought that the man who strode the path so confidently was himself, and he who pressed shivering against the rocks a stranger without a name.

He made himself lean out, peering urgently along the way he had come, curs-

ing the mist and yet grateful to it, for he was not sure he really wanted to see the face of this follower at his heels. How confidently the footsteps rang upon the road. How fast they came.

The mists blew thicker still.

The men below him on the road heard the footfalls now. Metal clinked on stone as someone raised a rifle with awkward haste. A voice hissed angrily. Feet shifted on pebbles. The ambush was ready.

For whom? For what?

Rohan laid a hand on his heavy-laden pocket, lifted his gun tentatively, the beginnings of panic stirring uncontrollably in his mind. In seven-league boots the following footsteps strode down upon him.

At the last moment some quick instinct warned him to clear the path, to get out of the way. He flung himself flat against the high rock wall which was the road's inner edge.

Out of the mists and past him the *d'vahnyan* stalked. His black wrappings gleamed. His empty, remote, passionless eyes touched Rohan indifferently and moved away. From very far off the impersonal eyes saw and dismissed him, eyes which held no ego and no consciousness of self.

But Rohan knew the face.

There had been arrogance and pride upon it like his own, the last time he had looked into it. But the man was dead now. He knew that. The man had to be dead, with Rohan's knife-thrusts in him, at the edge of the pool, and the monster nuzzling its sacrifice. The monster with no mouth . . .

It had received its sacrifice, then. And now a *d'vahnyan* came striding strongly down from the Mountain, his face stamped into the same imperishable matrix of selfless, dispassionate calm which every *d'vahnyan* bore.

Stamped—by what?

Rohan leaned, sick and shaking, against the rock, waves of cold revulsion pouring over him, knowing the secret at last. So *that* was the source of the *d'vahnyan*. So *that* was what the monster fed upon. Staring into the lost, ghostly, erased face of the *d'vahnyan*, he knew why the death-

dealers of the Quai are beings beyond life and death.

But the two in ambush just below him did not know. Rohan held his breath, shivering, powerless to intervene in what came next, although he knew to the last spinning whirl of the brain in his skull exactly what would come. He had been through this before.

Below him he heard the whisper of an indrawn breath as the *d'vahnyan* strode by and was swallowed in cloud. It was the inhalation a man takes when he braces a blaster stock to his hip and holds until the finger finishes tightening on the trigger.

It finished. The sharp, echoing crack of gun-fire exploded stunningly in the fog as Jellaby fired at the half-seen, stalking figure which he disastrously mistook for Rohan—

The fog split and took fire and burned like the blaze of a white-hot sun. The eye and the mind went blind before it.

WHEN ROHAN COULD SEE again, the road was clear before him. Jellaby's blaster lay abandoned ten feet below. The fog had burned itself away for a broad half-mile around the sun-hot flash of expending energy. And time had burned away, too. How long a time he did not know.

Then scuttling motion, far below him at the foot of the road, told him the answer. Ten minutes? Fifteen? Thirty? Long enough for Jellaby and Forsythe to run blindly almost to the edge of the pale, garrulous forest at the Mountain's foot. Mindless panic still controlled them, and they ran like little mannikin figures jerking on strings, seen from far away. They ran, from no pursuer, driven by their own blind terror.

For the new-made *d'vahnyan*, unharmed, another mannikin far off, stalked away into the jungle at an angle divergent from their flight, moving steadily upon his own inhuman business, answering some soundless call which no human ears could hear. Who could guess what summons a *d'vahnyan*?

"You ought to know, Red," a voice said from very near by.

Rohan jumped convulsively, glaring. How could he possibly have missed seeing Crazy Joe?

The familiar figure leaned against a rock in full sight, six steps away on the downward path, arms folded, eyes on Rohan. He was smiling in his bush of beard.

"You were thinking out loud, Red," he said.

Rohan laughed shakily. His head was still buzzing and there was a misty, dream-like quality over everything he thought or did. He moved, and his laden pockets jingled faintly. Thought of the jewels brought him back to something nearer sanity, and sudden cunning moved in his mind.

The jewels in the pool were his. He had suffered much for them. He would go on down the Mountain, catch up with Forsythe and Jellaby, kill one of them and travel with the other to safety. After that—time enough to decide. But one thing he must do first. Crazy Joe had talked too much once already about this Mountain and this treasure . . . now it was Rohan's and nobody else's. Forsythe and Jellaby knew. They must be silenced, eventually. Crazy Joe had better be silenced, too. Now.

Rohan felt for his gun. The holster was empty. He looked down in sudden panic. Far down the slope pale light glinted on steel. He must have dropped the blaster when the flash of sun-glare stunned them all.

He sighed, met Crazy Joe's eyes, thought of his knife. Yes, that would do. Crazy Joe never carried a weapon. The knife would do very well.

There was no use talking about this. Crazy Joe was smiling at him, and he smiled back, automatically, and with one smooth motion drew the knife from his belt and stepped forward, his lips still curved in the meaningless smile as he tipped the blade for that fatal spot just inside the collarbone, where life beats so near the surface that one thrust quenches it forever in the briefest count of seconds.

Moving like a man in a dream, he drove the knife straight home.

How strange, he thought remotely, that Crazy Joe made no move to defend him-

self. How irritating that calm smile was.

A streak of jagged lightning sprang up at the knife-point as it slid across Crazy Joe's chest. Not biting in, but sliding, and trailing cold fire after it . . .

Stupidly Rohan blinked at the slit shirt-front. And at what he saw beneath the shirt. The tight black wrappings, glittering with curled metallic thread.

From a long way off Crazy Joe said quietly, "This wasn't my idea, Red. On Venus, when the summons comes, you go."

"Was I—summoned?" Rohan whispered, and hardly heard the answer because of the ringing in his ears.

"I told you about the Mountain, didn't I? That was the summons, Red. Only the strong men answer. Only the men it can use. Look up, Red."

ROHAN LOOKED UP. A slow ring of light was dropping gently downward around the Mountain. Light like the sun, white gold, shivering in the dim air. It flickered by Rohan's face and faded. But another ring came after it, stronger and broader, touching the brain as it passed.

Crazy Joe, still smiling calmly and compassionately, nodded toward the upward road.

"Go on, Red," he said. "Get it over. There's work to be done on Venus. I know. I do it too. You were summoned. Go on."

The third ring of light floated down past Rohan's face, and his mind reeled in his skull. The fourth ring touched . . .

Suddenly Rohan's hands rose and clasped tight on top of his head. But under his defending fingers, under the cuirass of his skull, he felt movement. No, not movement—light. Brilliant and clear, white gold like the sun and the short, strong microwaves which the sun and stars send out even through clouds, even to a world that never sees the sun.

Rohan thought quite lucidly for an instant of the sun in a clear blue heaven, warm, shining. Quick nostalgia stirred in him at the memory of a world called Earth, a long way distant, dissolving in space and memory. A world called Earth,

where a man named Rohan used to live, a long, long time ago.

A man called—what?

He stamped once on the path, feeling rock solid under him, searching for reassurance in an eclipsed universe. There was a bearded face before him. He knew that face. It had always been hauntingly familiar, under the disguising beard, and something more concealing than the beard—a calm and passionless peace. The peace that comes when a strong ego drains out and—something else—flows in. Something else, like light, like blazing gold, like the white flame that was stirring in his brain. This time he knew the erased identity that had dwelt once behind that face.

He said, "You were Barber. You were Barber Jones."

Crazy Joe smiled and nodded.

Rohan's hands clasped tighter on his head. He said painfully, "And I—I'm—"

But he could not finish. He was no one. He had no name at all.

"Go on back," Crazy Joe said from infinite distances. "There's nothing else left for you now. Nothing at all."

A ring of clear bright light sank about him, widening and expanding, and the name of Rohan faded, the name of Earth dissolved. Jewels clinked as he turned obediently to face the rising path. Last of all the bright thought of power faded, and the use of treasure.

In the emptiness of his mind he searched remotely for a name that had dissolved irretrievably in the burning of the light of his brain. And after a moment or two he seemed to find it. D—it began with d—

D'vahnyan.

He leaned motionless against a rock for a long time, doing nothing. Once his lip drew back in a fading snarl of defiance. But then he moved, took an unsteady forward step, and then another, back along the way he had come. It was the way he had come all his life, toward this Mountain and this upward path.

Burning with light and color, the jewels dropped from his pockets one by one as he climbed, marking the stumbling stations of his return to the Mountain and the pool and the thing that waited for him.

sidewinders from

▶ SIRIUS ◀

by Fox B Holden

The treacherous aliens from Outer Space gave Earth six months to surrender or be destroyed . . . but Vice-colonel Gaylord Kram, fearless ace of Terrestrial Intelligence, had a daring plan: Why not surrender now?

GAYLORD KRAM, VICE-colonel of Intelligence, Terrestrial Federal government, sat pondering one of the worst poker hands he had ever witnessed, and he had witnessed a goodly number in his 38 years, when he should have been sweating blood over his tottering government's most perplexing problem: what to do about the colonists from Sirius and their G-ray.

But what could even a Kram do with two deuces, the joker, a five and an eight-spot, all of different suits?

The other three Intelligence officers who were taking a little badly-needed recreation the "old fashioned" way weren't too surprised when Kram raised a thousand credits. There was no sense in trying to analyze Kram's poker, any more than there was any sense in trying to analyze Kram. He usually won. Always a different technique, but he usually won anyway.

Major Ignacius Luverduk, Kram's somewhat useful assistant, knew this and folded his lowly hand which consisted of nothing more than dogs-over.

While he was waiting for the colonel across from him to up-ship or get off the runway, Kram fell to thinking.

Xenthl had pulled a dirty one. Forty

years ago, the people of Iaaro, system of Sirius, under the too-able leadership of Xenthl, had finally made their presence known on Earth. For three centuries, they had examined Earth from afar to assure themselves that it would make a suitable landing spot. For awhile, during the mid-twentieth century, they had scared the pants off some people and incurred the ridicule of some others less imaginative with their disc-shaped space and aircraft, but that couldn't have been helped. One had to trace a culture, a civilization, for a long time before one could analyze its true character-traits, abilities, potentialities. Especially when one's forces were few in number, and there were nearly two billion of the other fellow.

But the people of Iaaro had finally landed, back in 2010, satisfied that Earth with its faults was better than more light-years of space with its uncertainties and hardships. And Xenthl had been very nice about the whole thing.

THE COLONEL decided to up-ship. He was new. He pushed a mountain of white chips forward. "I'll stay," he said, with a tremulous sort of confidence. The lieutenant to his right folded,



The first space-cruiser hull was blown to atoms . . .

and being the dealer, gave Kram the two cards he asked for. The joker, Kram had decided, ought to be kept this once for a kicker.

"I'll play these," the colonel said in what he intended to be a convincing tone.

"Check blind to the pat," Kram heard himself saying.

"Umm. Five thousand should be enough."

Kram edged his hand open, and now it was his turn to up-ship or. The two twos and the joker had been somewhat disgustingly joined by a six and a seven.

Yes, Xenthl had been very nice about it all, but then, in his position with only a few thousand followers, how else could he have been? Conquest and occupation, even with superior weapons, would at any time have been unthinkable; force of numbers alone would have told as long as Earthmen had cannon and aircraft. And mass-murder of Earth's people prior to the planet's methodical examination would have left an immense, empty planet with only a few thousand of the newcomers to work it.

Xenthl had wanted not only a planet, but slaves to work it as well.

So he couldn't kill 'em off, reasoned Kram in the back of his mind for the millionth time. The thing was to use strategy, not arms, and Xenthl could have his cake and eat it.

Which, in six months' time, unless somebody, probably himself, figured out a way to stop him, he would have.

"Hmm," grunted Kram, knitting his sleek brows in final appraisal of his hand. "Your five and my-y-y—seven-fifty." Smoothly he pushed a pile of whites into the center of the polished Marswood table—not too quickly, and not too hesitantly. Timed just right. Just the way Xenthl had timed things.

A firm toe-hold on Earth. That was first . . . the promise that, if allowed to colonize all the deserts of the planet, his people would within a few years' time make garden spots of them through their vastly developed science of hydroponics. They had come, they explained, seeking refuge from their own drying planet of Iaaro—they were all that were left. All

they wanted was a home, and they would, in turn, give to the men of Earth the advantages of their advanced learning. And see? No weapons!

And that was true. They had dismantled every defensive weapon they had carried in the disc-shaped spacecraft; had turned the parts and blueprints over to earth scientists for study.

And they had turned the deserts of the planet into garden spots, save for a few patches left barren for laboratory construction.

And they had improved the lot of Earthmen in countless ways—philosophically, governmentally, politically, educationally, religiously, scientifically, technically, and so on.

Nice kids. Until they had sprung the G-ray and shown their true colors, and by that time it was a little too late, even for the men of Earth to cuss themselves out for having been the most gullible jays in the Universe, fourth dimension included. While telecrooners were dripping songs about the delirious gal from Sirius and housewives were listening to the adventures of the young widow from Iaaro, Xenthl was quietly setting about to take over the planet.

And, he was doing that, too.

"You," said the colonel as he got off the airstrip, "win."

KRAM raked in his loot. There was some deliberation concerning the continuation of the game. Idly, Kram counted the credits he had bluffed the colonel out of. Or, which he more than suspected, he had counter-bluffed the colonel out of.

The G-ray, Xenthl had explained to the men of Earth when he announced to them that they would be given one year in which to reorganize their governments in conformation with his dictates and in subservience to his rule and under the sovereignty of himself and his people, operated on the practical principles of a theory once promulgated, but never put to work before his death, by an Earth scientist of the 20th century. The earthman had called it a "general theory of gravitation." The Sirians had their own name for it, and when applied in weapon

form, the result was the G-ray—a weapon capable of completely nullifying the forces of gravitational cohesion within any and all molecular structures. Result? Complete and instantaneous disintegration of any material object, solid, gaseous or liquid, at which it was aimed. Within its scope, the forces of what Xenthl termed “molecular gravity” fell completely to zero. Nothing exploded. It just stopped being, all at once.

There had been demonstrations. Three demonstrations, and the world was more than convinced.

Xenthl had demonstrated his weapon on three of his own no-longer-needed laboratories. Situated in their sterile patches of blistering desert, they had each covered areas about the size of three large earth cities. With the complete operation telecast to all the world, and with earth scientists watching at respectful distances in observation posts in one of which Xenthl himself had been present, the Sirian dictator had given the commands for his G-batteries to fire. They fired at ranges twice those of Earth’s best atomic cannon.

The lab-cities, each hit with a single blast, vanished one, two, three.

The places where the labs had been were minutely examined by Earth’s men of science for weeks afterward.

Not a trace. Of anything. Just sand. The sand, Xenthl explained, was kept as much below the ray-field as possible—digging holes for miles into the planet wasn’t, after all, necessary, and it would’ve wasted power . . .

Where there may have been signs of disbelief, Xenthl had only to infer that, really, did the credulous ones of Earth suppose that the Lords of Iaaro had disclosed *all* their great secrets of science when they had landed? Would they have divulged the very secret of their proposed conquest?

The brave man with the club facing an enemy with an atomic rifle knows he is licked. At such a point, Kram reflected, heroism would be a little silly; hysterical anger would be useless.

“Xenthl and his crowd,” mused Vice-colonel Gaylord Kram to himself as he

stretched the zipper on his bulging hip-pocket, “are a bunch of sidewinders!”

“The game, in which you have been the only victor, is over,” said Luverduk at his elbow, “and in your last statement, you are as usual, correct. But wait until the Old Man learns how much time we killed diddling instead of using the electro-relaxers!”

“Jupiter damn’ the ’laxers—You do not seem to have perceived, Luverduk, that I have a theory!”

THE OTHER’S globular countenance reflected no particular surprise at this quiet thunder, for to Luverduk, theories by Kram were things to be taken regularly for granted; monstrous theories which, oddly enough, were without exception correct in every detail when put into actual practice, as Kram himself, of course, would never fail to make perfectly clear in the first place. That Kram was an Intelligence expert with a brilliant background in weapon design was the fact, however, in which the Terrestrial government was at present narrow-mindedly interested.

And it was the fact that had led to the dumping of the Sirian G-ray problem right in his lap.

Unearthing the G-ray secret was Kram’s assigned mission; that made it Ignacius Luverduk’s, as well. “You have a theory. Should I take that Siriusly? Ha!”

Kram only quickened the strides of his long, gaunt legs as they headed for his office. There was not even the quiver of one long black eyebrow to denote his having heard Luverduk’s effort.

“For a ballistics and weapon-design expert,” the wheezing Major observed, “you, Kram, are at least a devilish poker player. You were bluffing on that last hand. Lying in your teeth! Psychologically speaking, you were guilty of the worst sort of misrepresentation.”

“Foof. He was bluffing every bit as bad as I was. Worse. Probably didn’t even have a pair.”

“You could tell?” Luverduk’s round blue eyes became excited, for his own brand of poker left something to be desired in the way of winning money.

"When the time comes," Kram said, "that I fail to perceive a bluff, and fail then to call it, I will start a mink ranch on Pluto."

No reply. Luverduk had heard that Pluto was a sterile planet, and was a little puzzled. The two strode into Kram's office, which was empty of staffers. It was laxer time. Kram started doing the talking:

"You, Ignacius, will deliver a message for me to Sectors-General Hoskins, in person." Kram was writing things on a memo pad, the blanks of which were stamped CONFIDENTIAL at their tops in big red letters. "It says, Iggy, that President Thurston is to be informed that I have unequivocally failed to glean any information concerning the Sirian secret weapon, and in trying further to do so, would seriously imperil whatever chances Earth may have left to escape total destruction. I, Kram, have somehow failed! The message points out in addition that I've lost seventy-three percent of my secret operatives already, and it explains that with each additional one captured, Xenth's temper is shortening to the breaking point. Being slightly paranoiac, he hates to be crossed. He's one of those egotistical bastards, you know . . ."

"Oh, but you can't—"

"Shuddup. It also advises that the Terrestrial government open truce negotiations for the consideration of terms."

"You mean you're telling Hoskins and Thurston that we should wave the white flag?" Luverduk paled to the color of old paste.

"You deliver it. And—" Kram kept writing, "there's a P.S.. It says that I personally—that *we* personally—plan to request audience with Xenth, to open aforementioned truce negotiations. Today!"

"You," quavered the Major scarcely above a whisper, "have cracked up!"

"We will take off for Xenth's Moon-side headquarters at precisely 1600 hours, radiating a truce signal. And you will now deliver this message." He thrust the memo into Luverduk's wringing hands. "And you will return here in exactly 30 minutes. That's an order!"

"Oh, Gaylord!" breathed Luverduk asthmatically. "Oh, oh, oh . . ." The length of the corridor down which he waddled swallowed up the gibberish that whispered in his wake.

THIRTY MINUTES to the second later, just as Kram was putting the finishing touches on the thing which he had estimated would take him precisely 30 minutes to rig, Luverduk returned.

"Gaylord!"

"I have something to show you, Major Luverduk. Come here." Kram gestured toward the outside door of the large office which led through a space-cruiser hangar and out to the experimental detonation range where new weapons received their first tests in the half-scale stage.

"Show me! Good Lord, Gaylord! Hoskins read it right there in front of me! He said for you to get to his headquarters as fast as you can double-time it! Sore! It was more or less nice knowing you, Lance-corporal Kram!"

"I knew he'd be a little silly about it at first."

"He said if you're not in his office in 15 minutes, he's coming to yours with his whole damned guard!"

"Might, come to think of it. Come here, Luverduk."

"But—"

"See this?" Kram held a shiny new needle-ray pistol in his hand. It was strictly an anti-personnel weapon, and good only for close-in combat. A hand weapon of limited powers, and nothing more.

"I see it. But as one skeleton in the museum told the other, if we had any guts we'd get out of here . . ."

"Follow me."

Since it sounded like an order, Luverduk obeyed it. Kram was not a lance-corporal yet. Luverduk followed his superior to one of the firing ranges for atomic cannon. Kram pointed to a dismantled space-cruiser hull, used regularly by cannoneer cadets for target practice. Its molybdenum hide was scarred with many accurately-directed blasts. It was

nearly a quarter-mile from where Kram stood.

"Watch," he said. Luverduk sensed an order in that word also.

Kram pointed the pistol, potent up to 50 yards. Slowly, his long right arm came up. The streamlined weapon glinted in the afternoon sunlight. Carefully, Kram aimed—aimed impossibly—at the distant cruiser hull! Then his finger constricted on the trigger. *Hiss* it went.

And the hull was blasted to atoms!

"You—" That was all Luverduk could utter. He gaped, pudgy mouth hanging open, first at the pistol, then at the rising column of white smoke where the scarred hull had been. He knew at the same time that had it not been for the shock-wave absorbers covering the range with their radiations, he would at present be flat on his face, or its reasonable facsimile.

"I," Kram said, "am a weapons expert as well as an Intelligence officer. You know that. Correct?"

"Gurgle."

"Confronted with the facts, Luverduk, which you yourself have just witnessed, what would you say?"

"That pistol is better than the—the G-ray! You—"

"I have. Xenthl's skin, I expect, should crawl. Agreed?"

Luverduk nodded slowly.

"Good. Because we are now going to see him. A ship is parked in the hangar."

"Not about that truce business—" Luverduk's voice rose in horror.

"Precisely."

"Hoskins?" Luverduk's voice was a challenge to all soprano mice.

"Umm," Kram said. Luverduk followed him.

* * *

From Karz, Commander, Sector Patrol III: For Kuul, Patrol Coordinator. Urgent. Subject: enemy flight. At 16:12, western hemisphere Earth time, single ship seen to be directed Moonside, no armament, but beyond restrictive boundary. Following, three smaller craft, likewise unarmed, towing six apparently unmanned cruisers of obsolete design. Sin-

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gle craft continues Moonside. Towing craft leave unmanned cruisers adrift after deceleration approximately 1,500 miles outside boundary. Speed of abandoned ships, less than 300 miles per hour. Adrift in loose line formation. Single ship, now radiating truce signal, continues course. Am holding fire pending your advisory.

From Kuul, Patrol Coordinator, Sirian Expeditionary Forces: For Karz, Commander, Sector Patrol III. Subject: communication 18Z. Continue holding fire pending my command.

From Karz, Commander, Sector Patrol III: For Kuul, P. C. Subject: armed enemy cruisers. Enemy fleet of military destroyer-units hovering in formation at edge of restrictive boundary. Armed, but have not fired into restrictive zone. Appear to be in command of General Flagship. No communications intercepted, no actual violation as yet of restrictive boundary. Twenty-one craft counted. Requesting further advice, to avert any possible breach of strategic diplomacy.

From Kuul, P. C., SEF: For Karz, Cmmdr., Sector Patrol III. Subject: communication 18Z1. Stand by. Deliberate disregard of ultimatum stipulations on our part would tend to lessen prestige and introduce possibility of unsatisfactory psychological reactions. It is to be remembered that Terrestrials are highly unpredictable when abruptly angered. Alert your command this headquarters.

* * *

"What did they say?" Kram asked. The Moon leered at him through the thick quartz conning-port like a pitted, rotted rubber ball that had once been painted with a diluted silver gilt.

Luverduk still shook, but not as much. "About those skeletons—"

"You'll be one if you don't cut your jets. What was their reply?"

"Xenthl will give us an audience upon our landing, but we have been emphatically warned that the slightest move we make which may be interpreted as a

breach of truce will be our last. And they added that any move made by anybody else in the neighborhood which may be so interpreted will be their last, too . . ."

"Told you things would work out."

"Work out? We're only flying a white flag with no authorization from anybody. We've only gone AWOL. And Hoskins is gunning right behind. We often leave without saying good-bye—"

"Parts of that statement are inaccurate. Hoskins is waiting at the boundary, not daring to fire into the Sirian zone—not gunning right behind. And he knows that one ship-length of an armed cruiser over the boundary will mean the G-ray for the whole shooting-match. He also knows we'll come back, so is just standing by until we do. However, to something of far more importance. Did you bring the blast-rifle?"

"I did. I assume it is like the pistol, only more so."

"It certainly is supposed to be."

"Your answer is only more or less perfect. I say again, is the rifle like a super G-ray?"

"No."

"Like a super atomic cannon, then."

"No. The rifle, as well as the pistol I showed you, are, to put it vulgarly, fakes. They wouldn't squirt water."

"I asked you a straight question, you should therefore give me at least the semblance of a straight answer. Come again."

"You heard me. Fakes."

"You mean they will not work? It will not work?"

Silence.

"Good Lord, you mean we're actually going to see Xenthl with truce in our white little hearts and not blow his headquarters to pieces? This is a real, honest-to-God truce mission?"

"In a manner of speaking, sort of."

"Then the explosion of the space cruiser hull . . .?"

"Was faked."

"You *tricked* me!"

"I did. But you believed me until I told you."

Luverduk was starting to hop up and down, although his feet never quite left

the deck. "I will admit that, but only because it's true!"

"It's true, all right. In addition to being an Intelligence and weapons expert, I am likewise rather clever in the field of psychology. Your foreknowledge of my expertness with weapon design had you half-convinced I could do something fantastic before you even saw me apparently do it. And when you saw it in what looked like actuality, it was all you needed."

"But we are surrendering anyhow! You are a mad fellow—"

"Let us not, Luverduk, confuse the term 'truce' with 'surrender.' What I told Hoskins and what I am actually doing are horses, one might say, of variable hues . . ."

"You see a way out of this, Kram?"

"Prepare to man the decelerators at 3.8 G on my signal."

As the roar of the forward jets cut in and Kram's vision grew momentarily blurred, the suspicion grew in his mind that Luverduk was mumbling something about northbound horses . . .

THE MILITARY headquarters of Xenthl, Commander-In-Chief of the Sirian Expeditionary Forces and Grand Protector of the Universe were, as Kram would have put it, somewhat stupendous. Simplicity was the keynote of its otherworldly architecture; the huge hemisphere of eerily glimmering alloy was first viewed by Luverduk with anything but a narrow-eyed, analytical gaze. And its interior, although not resplendent in the sense of the courts of ancient kings, was a breath-stopping spectacle of geometry as could only have been conceived by minds of Other Space. The involutions of its eye-defying curves were as gracefully simple as they were dimensionally complex; the very straightness of the corridor down which the procession of heavily armed guards and the men from earth proceeded was a masterpiece of structural design in itself.

Xenthl's sanctum sanctorum was an even greater achievement in the architecturally impossible. Kram made a mental note to make a requisition for a replas-

tering job in his own office immediately upon his return to Earth.

Luverduk was impressed, but more with Xenthl's bearded, rotund, pink-skinned majesty than with his surroundings.

"Without the beaver, he'd look just like me, Kram!"

"So he would, Major!"

The seated Xenthl signalled his guards to halt, and the envoys of truce to step forward. His oversized cranium, typical of his race, seemed to nod gently from its own weight.

"You come," he mouthed the Terrestrial language awkwardly, "as couriers of surrender?"

"You are crazier than Luverduk, here, if you think so!" Kram casually folded his arms. "As a personal representative of his Most Excellent Sovereign Worthiness, the Guardian of all Universes in Space and Time, the President of Terra, and also the Bronx, I appear before you to recognize and return the civility displayed by your forces in not attacking an Earth ship radiating a signal of truce. In short, I am here to offer you your life, and the lives of your people, with the alternative of instantaneous annihilation."

"I am amused," purred Xenthl. "But at your expense. For this impertinence, your government shall be given but one month more, instead of six months more, to prepare itself for my rule. And in addition, from this moment forward, it will be under the direct surveillance of my own armed forces. I have, it would seem, grossly overestimated the intelligence of you Earthmen. It had been my thought that, as you say, you knew what was good for you. I have erred."

"That," said Kram, allowing the flicker of a self-indulgent grin to play at the corners of his long mouth, "is something of an understatement, Mr. Xenthl. And to prove what I say—and a man of your intellect would require proof of any statement—I ask that the only armament aboard the ship in which I came, a blast-rifle, be brought here, to be fired as I direct by one of your own marksmen. By directing his aim telescopically, he should

have no trouble in sighting on the abandoned cruiser hulls which I have had towed into position for target purposes . . ."

Xenthl's mouth worked. "This is a trick of some sort," he said icily. "At the very least, a gross misuse of the purposes of truce."

"I offer you your lives," Kram said almost nonchalantly.

"As a man of my intellect—" Xenthl declared after a breath-take of hesitation, "I require whatever attempt at proof you may have for your childish statements. Guard!"

WITHIN MOMENTS, the rifle was in the hands of one of Xenthl's marksmen, and, sighting with a headquarters electrono-telescope, the soldier from Sirius drew a bead on the drifting cruiser hulls, and pressed the curved trigger at Xenthl's order.

In a visiplat, Xenthl himself witnessed an incredible white flash as first one of the space-cruiser hulls was blown to atoms, and then in rapid succession, the second, third, fourth, and fifth.

"You will observe," Kram said, "that only one hull was hit. But all were destroyed. A little chain-reaction gadget I developed last week—" A gasp at Kram's elbow; but Kram had not finished—"You have observed also," he continued matter-of-factly, "that with one blast of only a rifle, to say nothing of the *cannon* I have also developed, a myriad of targets may at once be destroyed. Your G-ray," Kram adopted a tone dripping with respect, "is capable, after all, of destroying but one target at a time."

Xenthl's features had lost their healthy pink tinge. "You have mastered," he said, "a practical application of the chain-reaction principle. It is impossible, but I have seen you do it with my own eyes."

"That was the object in my having come," Kram said in his most courteous tone. "And it is the proof which I knew your excellency would demand. In addition to which, I might inform you that I am Gaylord Kram!"

Silence. Then:

"This is indeed a matter for some con-

sideration," Xenthl said.

And even the mask-like face of the arrogant Sirian was not able to disguise the look of utter incredulity which was shadowed beneath its still-white-tinged surface.

* * *

"Kram, you'll hang for this!"

Gaylord Kram stood at rigid attention before Sectors-General Hoskins on the flight-deck of the General Flagship. He had drawn his own craft alongside and boarded with Major Luverduk at the General's command, and under the ugly snouts of the General's artillery.

"I trust," he said, "that you will accept my apology for having issued you a false communication. But I theorized that only in anger would I be followed so promptly and with such a show of strength. Only the thought of surrender could make you angry, sir!"

"You impudent puppy! You—" Hoskins was livid. He did not shake. He vibrated.

"It was necessary, sir. I was bluffing, but I needed at least the appearance of armed might to give credence to my strategy. I readily admit having rescued our planet by means of what may unappreciatively be termed trickery. As I tricked Luverduk, here, by simply using a mined target on the detonation range, so I also attempted to trick Xenthl with five unmanned space-cruisers, loaded to the seams with atomic detonators timed to produce the effect of chain-reaction and set off by remote control. There was a miniature radar transmitter of my own design within the blast-rifle which I had Xenthl's marksman use. Quite simple, really."

"Simple is hardly the word!" Hoskins thundered. "With the Sirian G-ray staring us in the face, *you* try your hand at strategy! I hope there is time to hang you before Earth is blown to Kingdom Come!"

"Never fear, sir! Xenthl had merely used an innovation of the Q-type light-bender to produce a mirage at the desert location of his supposed 'abandoned laboratories.' First the buildings were 'seen,' then, at the instant his weapon was supposedly 'fired,' they were not. A mirage had been turned on and off at will. That was all! Putting it simply, sir—I theorized that the G-ray was, in the first place, no more than a colossal bluff itself!"

"Theorized, the man says!" The General's complexion blended nicely with his lavender tunic. "To him, politics is five-card stud! To him—"

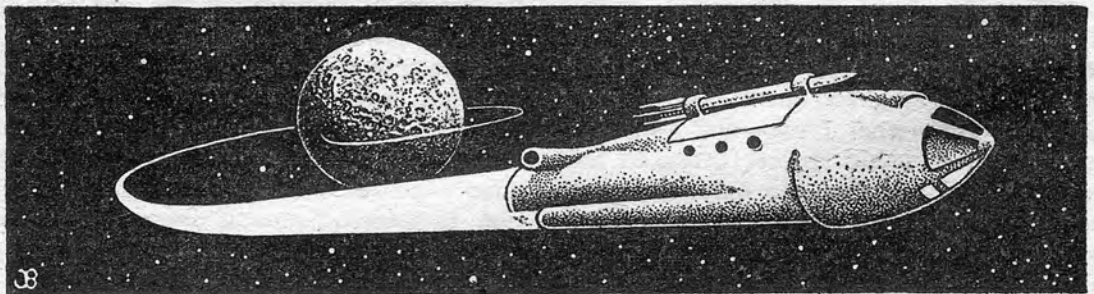
The tirade was interrupted by a wide-eyed orderly who bore a signal-technician's insignia on his sleeve. "Sir! Sirian ships are leaving the Moon, driving hard past Pluto! By the minute, sir, larger and larger flights are going up-ship for Deep Space! And at full drive! Sir!"

"Of course," murmured Kram. "I gave them twenty-four hours to clear out!"

Deftly mounting a portable G-gun which he had confiscated from Xenthl's personal arsenal, Kram pointed it directly at his own ship, drifting under robot control a few miles to the Flagship's starboard.

"They cleared out," he declared quietly, "because Gaylord Kram had called their bluff, gentlemen!" and triumphantly punched a firing-button.

A soft hiss, and Kram's cruiser was blown to smithereens!



cargo to Callisto

By JAY B.
DREXEL



*They screamed, in a dissonance
of agony and fear and death . . .*

Four Aarnian criminals — vicious and deadly—fled silently into the Martian night; and grimly the Patrol threw out an airtight dragnet. Nothing human could have escaped . . . but what's human about an Aarnian?

SARAH EMERGED FROM THE surface of the Great Canal as sleek and brown as a seal. Laughing and sputtering, she jerked her head once over each round shoulder, parting her soaked hair and revealing her face.

"Try that once again!" she flung at Joe.

Joe Caradac ducked her again, and Kent shouted something from the bank that wasn't quite audible over the squeals and splashes.

"What?" Joe held his wife's head firmly between his knees. "What'd you say, Kent?"

His Senior Intendant's grin widened as he cupped his hands over it to shout again:

"I said—you'll drown the poor thing!"

Joe grunted as Sarah cold-bloodedly located a nerve-center in his thigh and bit it. "Not this thing—" he released her and she bobbed up swearing in sand-coast Martian—"they had to rope it out of a canal to teach it to walk!"

He narrowed his grey eyes humorously and poised for the attack, but Sarah had conceded and was swimming toward the bank. The setting sun struck a series of glowing V's in her wake. Joe rubbed his tingling leg and followed. They reached the green slope at the same time and big Kent handed them up with ease.

"Ray's watching the franks," he said, "and I've been watching Ray and I think we'd better get up there or he won't be able to hold off much longer. His inner man is showing through."

THE PIANIST'S dark, saturnine face peered at them over the fire as they came up and he rose, wiping his hands carelessly on his sport tunic. He had evidently gone into the canal-skimmer and changed out of his bathing suit.

"How do," he greeted dourly; "the damned thing itched so I took it off."

Joe gave himself a last swipe with the towel and tossed it through the open hatch of the skimmer. Sarah carried her towel into the boat and came out presently in a suede skirt and bolero, looking rubbed down and delectable. Joe's wife was half Martian, and it showed in her long, slender eyebrows and delicately cleft nose and chin. She looked worriedly at the three men busy with the frankfurters.

"There's something on the telaudio," she said. "Come in and listen."

"What is it?" Joe asked.

"Something about somebody escaping from Mars Detain."

Ray's humming stopped. He'd been

practicing wrist octaves on a flat rock and his long hand hung motionless for a moment as if he were reaching for something. Kent set his frank across the top of his coffee cup—he was always careful about everything—and stood up.

Joe looked at his wife, looked at her eyes. They were frightened.

"That's pretty near here, isn't it?" Sarah said. She moved back to let the three men into the boat. They grouped around the telaudio.

"I don't think there's anything to worry about," Kent said slowly. "They're bound to catch the men—"

"They aren't men."

The four listened.

"—ruthless *Aarnians*. This warning cannot be taken too seriously. Detain is doing everything in its power to recapture the four criminals but, as is known, the *Aarnian* psyche is able to leave its body at will and inhabit the body of another entity, subjugating the mind of its host and contro—"

"My God," Ray whispered, "I've heard of those devils!"

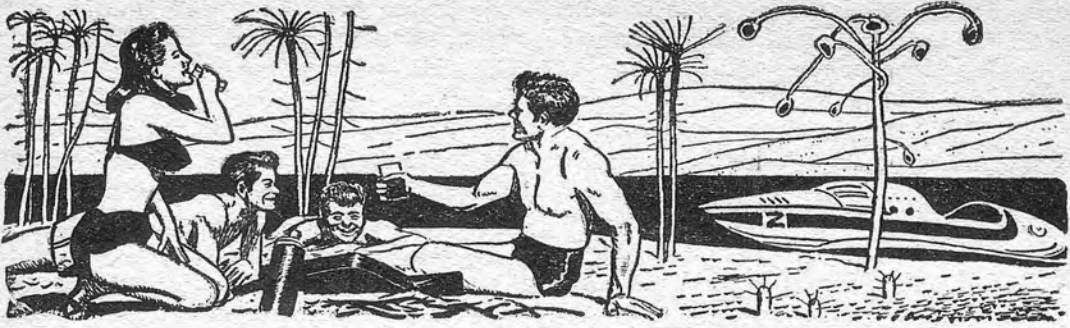
"—in all likelihood will seek to escape from Mars. To prevent this, all persons now holding tickets for interworld travel must submit to being psycho-screened before entering liners. No more tickets will be sold—"

Sarah's eyes were wide and round. "They'd have to leave their bodies behind—here on Mars!"

Big Kent—because he was one of the Caradacs' oldest friends and could do such things—put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. She was shivering.

"—tenant Smith of Detain informs us that the *Aarnians* are unable to pronounce certain consonantal diphthongs—such as jee and jay—even if occupying bodies that can normally pronounce such sounds. This is very important, as it may be an only possible means of identification, for the *Aarnians* will undoubtedly seek new bod—"

Sarah switched off the telaudio, her brown face openly sick. She bit her lip and looked at each of the three men surrounding her.



"That gives me the shivers," she said. "Let's go home."

After that they didn't talk much. Under the red twilight, they packed up the pots and pans, leaving the unwanted food for the night-crawling *nolls*. They spent a lot of time looking over their shoulders as they did this, although each tried to conceal it from the others. At last the skimmer moved silently away from the bank and pointed its nose at the distant haze that was Ofei, By the Great Canal.

AT PRECISELY seven o'clock the telaudio on the headboard of Joe's bed turned itself on. Sounds pricked the balloon of his disturbed slumber, tugged his mind out to wakefulness. He rolled over and sat up, listening, rubbing his lanky legs.

Instead of the usual symphonic music, he heard an urgent voice, obviously ad-libbing:

"—be very, *very* careful. The criminals—the *Aarnians*—have still not been found. All residents of Ofei and vicinity are warned—this warning cannot be overemphasized—"

Joe reached out and clicked on the screen. The announcer's tunic was wrinkled, his sash was awry. He looked as if he'd been up all night.

"—are advised to stay within the city limi—"

Joe snapped off the telaudio and glanced over at Sarah's bed. She was snoring delicately, one smooth arm pillowing her mass of blue-black hair. Better that she doesn't hear any more about that business, he decided firmly.

Joe liked the simple life. No servants, no flunkies, although he could have afforded a dozen. Five sunshiny rooms on

the Great Canal, with a nice view of Mars Memorial Park on the bank opposite. He robed himself against the early morning chill and headed for the kitchen. His head ached faintly and, to judge by what little he could remember of it, he'd had a dilly of a nightmare. Something about . . . being chased, or something? Or smothered by a . . .

Even as he stopped in his tracks to try to pin it down, the memory broke, dissolved as if in flight. Frowning, he pushed through the kitchen door and crossed to the deep-freeze, slid it open and rummaged in it.

The nightmare wasn't important surely, but he mulled it over with interest as he prepared breakfast, for Joe, being rather well adjusted, dreamed rarely, and then mostly about Iowa, back on Earth . . . a long-ago picture of a twelve-year-old boy, his first day in college; the boy sitting under his shining Projector, surrounded by a group of thunderstruck Psychologists; the quick death of their initial skepticism, and in its place a growing wonder as it became evident that, although a History spool was whirling in the scanner and the thought-helmet functioning to perfection, the boy's mind was receiving neither spoken text nor images . . .

"You don't feel anything?" a Psychologist asked skeptically.

Joe closed his eyes. There was a low, unmusical humming in his ears and that was all. He tried to shake his head and couldn't, so he said: "No, I don't."

"When was the World Federation formed?"

"I don't know."

"Are you lying?"

"No."

One of the other Psychologists standing

nearly looked up from the little box he held in his hand and said that Joe wasn't lying.

The first Psychologist raised his eyebrows. "We'll try another Projector."

While Technicians dismantled Joe's Projector and examined it for shorts or haywire, the Psychologists had Joe sit down under all the other Projectors in 1stY-Cubicle 149. Then they tried 148 and 150.

"It's some kind of block," the first Psychologist said finally, looking profound to cover up his tizzy. "There's some kind of barrier in his mind."

Joe Caradac clenched his fists. "That's not true—I want to learn!"

"Then you probably will, boy—" the Psychologist sat down to fill in some forms—"but you'll have to go back three hundred years to do it. You'll have to learn from books!"

There the dream would simply end, for no fantasy of wish-fulfillment could have exceeded in satisfaction Joe's actual conquest of this problem. At eighteen he wore thick glasses—he preferred them to contacts or artificial irises. At twenty he took tests contrived especially for him by the members of Central Education assigned to his case. He was awarded equivalence degrees in Business Administration, Metatomics and Interplanetary Law. His marks were the highest of the year and Joe Caradac's name was briefly in the newspapers.

He started with the New Chicago offices of Mars Imports and Exports as a mercury. After six weeks of flying back and forth with memos he traded his anti-gravs for a desk.

And on June 32, 2401, the newly appointed Regional Buyer for M. I. and E. got married and was flown to Mars by a chartered spacer to take command of the regional office at Ofei, By the Great Canal . . .

HE was putting the finishing touches on breakfast when he heard a groan and the sound of a stretch from the bedroom. When he turned around, Sarah was standing in the doorway.

Joe's sandy eyebrows went up. His wife was certainly not a modest woman, but

considering even that, this morning was an agreeable surprise. Her eyes were still dull—he guessed that she'd worried about those whatyoucallits after going to bed—but she was smiling broadly. Joe began to have visions of missing work for half a day. He smiled back at her and she laughed a little.

"Hohn, Uarnl!" she said.

Joe was thrusting halved oranges into the juicer. He turned off the machine and grinned.

"You'll have to talk plainer than that, little monkey," he said. He held out a glass of juice. "Drink this—it'll wake you—up—" The last word faded into an astonished silence.

Then Joe said, "Hey—come back!" He set down the glass and went into the bedroom.

She was lying on her bed, her face hidden. Joe dropped onto the edge of the bed and put a tentative hand on her back.

"Hey now," he said softly, "if that's the way you feel about it I'll juice up some grapefruit." He moved his hand down and spanked lightly. "Hein?"

She didn't look up. She had turned her head and was looking at the corner of the room by Joe's bed.

"I do not feel well. Go away."

Joe's face was immediately concerned. He bent over her, reached for a wrist. "What's the matter, Sarah? Can I get you anything?" The wrist hung limply in his hand.

"No. Go away."

Joe straightened up and drew his eyebrows together in thought. Sarah was usually tearful and pretty much of a leech when she wasn't feeling well. Excessive commiserations and breakfast in bed were the rule at such times.

"Do you want me to get Doc Halprin?"

The blue-black head shook from side to side.

"So what am I supposed to do, monkey? I hate to leave you this way."

"Go away."

"But can't I—"

"Go away, damn you!"

Joe stood up abruptly. He clenched his fists and looked at his wife's still form and gradually the anger dulled and left

him. He had no right to be angry. Everybody got tempermental once in a while.

But this was the first time she had ever cursed him.

"O.K." he said softly. "I'll see you to-night."

THE REGIONAL OFFICES of Mars Imports and Exports sat upon a hill at the end—or the beginning—of Ila Boulevard, depending upon which way you were going. It was twenty-five-hundred feet of silver and native marble, and covered four city blocks, and Joe Caradac was top man—literally—since his office and personal staff took up the whole two-hundred and fifty-first floor.

His morning mail—about twelve letters weeded out of the daily thousands—was gotten out of the way with skill and dispatch. Grinning, he propped his feet on the low, curving window sill and said: "Miss Kal—take an audiogram."

Miss Kal used two of her arms to adjust pad and stylus, looking up expectantly. Her other arms were busy transcribing a previously dictated letter into Venusian—her native tongue, although she spoke sixty-eight—and tugging at a humidified legging that had somehow worked down almost to the floor.

"My dearest, darling monkey—" Joe began. Miss Kal looked up again in amazement. Joe grinned at her and said, "It's to my wife."

Miss Kal nodded wisely and began to write.

"—I am sending this from my dark and dismal office," Joe went on. It was a habit they had when anything went wrong at breakfast. Joe had first proposed by audiogram.

He casually watched a skimmer that was in danger of creating a honey of a traffic jam down below. Didn't that schlemiel know his left from his right?

"—Where was I? Oh, yes—my dark and dismal office." Joe scratched a cigarette alight, blew a happy smoke ring. "I hope that you are feeling much, *much* better and that you will take luncheon with me in the Pluto Room of the you-know-what Hotel—" His mind went back to those honeymoon days and he lost track of

his dictation again. Another smoke ring, a somewhat more thoughtful one.

"You-know-what Hotel—" said Miss Kal phlegmatically.

"Yes—ah—just end it 'at one fifteen sharp, your everloving Joe.'"

There was a knock on the door and Miss Kal set down her pad and stylus and started to get up. Joe was on his feet and around the desk in a second.

"Stay right where you are," he smiled; "I need the exercise."

Miss Kal smiled also and settled back into her specially built chair with its temperature and humidity controls. A present from Mr. Caradac. He was such a nice being to work for.

Joe opened the door, and said, "Oh, hullo, Kent. Since when are you knocking?"

Big Kent nodded formally to Miss Kal and winked at Joe. He said, "Yoe, there's something I'd like to talk over with you in private."

With a sigh, Miss Kal rose again and made her way through the other door into her little office. The door closed behind her.

Kent let out a long breath. He smiled at Joe and the smile turned into a laugh that had an odd sound of triumph.

"*Hohn, Uarnl,*" he said, and laughed again. "*Ut sinna d'yonkwar?*"

Joe sat down behind his desk and looked at the big man. Hone you-arnel. Wasn't that what Sarah had said—or something very much like it? He shook his head.

"You wanted to talk to me about something, Kent? What are you and Sarah cooking up with this gibberish?"

The brilliant Martian sunlight — not as dim as had been anticipated in the days before space travel—came through the ceiling-high windows, struck little lights here and there from the bouquet of Venusian Glass-moss that Miss Kal tended so carefully. It slanted across Kent's big face as he looked at Joe for a long moment, giving his left eye a pale, shallow lustre and throwing the shadow of his jutting nose down over his mouth. He opened and closed his hands, and said:

"Nothing. It'll wait, I guess." His gaze wandered over the room and settled on

a corner that was empty save for a throw rug—a relic of Caradac's Iowa past. Kent's mouth tightened into a thin line. He stared at the corner.

"It'll wait—for a while," he said stiffly and opened the door and went into the outer office. Bone-faced, he walked toward the transveyor belt.

"Mr. Kent—Mr. Kent!" The big man's Mercurian secretary rose out of a chair near the door, his voice quacking from the speaker set into his fishbowl helmet.

"Yes?"

"They tolt me that you hat gone to Mr. Caratac's office, sir. I've been trying to finte you all morning, sir. A laty, sir, on the visiphone. She has callt many times—many times—"

"Thank you," Kent said tonelessly. "I know who it is."

JOE CARADAC stared in astonishment at the door. First Sarah—now Kent. This seemed to be the day for everybody to blast in orbits . . . well, hell . . . he shrugged his shoulders and called Miss Kal back out of her office. She dropped into her chair with a sigh and they picked up the day's business from where it had fallen.

San-Vika of Saturn Enterprises was threatening all kinds of things if he didn't receive his shipment of ato-rotors on the very next flight. Joe didn't waste much time with that. One of the many things that made him a top executive was that he knew how to deal with phonies. He told San-Vika—via spacephone—that he could go stick his heads in a waste eliminator and push the button, and that if he wanted to get nasty, M. I. and E. had an army of lawyers hanging around just itching to get their teeth into last year's insurance double-deal.

"We let everybody get away with it—once!" Joe told him and cut the suddenly fawning image off the screen. M. I. and E.'s investigators, he thought absently, could certainly give the Sol Secret Service a run for their credits. Now that he had tactfully gotten San-Vika straightened out, he might as well release those ato-rotors to be shipped.

At twelve fifteen an audiogram came from Sarah. *I don't feel well enough to come. Love, S. Well*, at least it was an improvement in tone.

At one o'clock, Miss Kal went into her office to open the mysterious little package of lunch that she brought with her every day. Joe stretched out his legs on the window sill and looked at the traffic jam below. That driver had really done a fine job. There were three Patrol skimmers circling the mess, darting to and fro like angry wasps.

He didn't feel much like eating. Breakfast and supper were his big meals—the habit was a long-standing one. However, he thought, this morning's breakfast hadn't been much to rave about. Orange juice, some burned Pohl, some undercooked sand-hoppers.

He switched on the inter-office visiphone.

"I would save you the trouble," he said, when Miss Kal's face appeared, "but they built this place so that all of my inside calls have to be routed through your selective tentacles."

"The usual, Mr. Caradac?"

"The usual."

Joe was rather proud of the fact that everything in his division of M. I. and E. worked smoothly and efficiently—even the kitchens. In a little less than forty seconds a portion of his desk folded back and the "usual" appeared on an elevator tray. A pot of light coffee and some doughnuts with powdered brown sugar.

Joe dunked the solid portion of his lunch and considered the morning's peculiar happenings. Apparently unrelated incidents that were related in part always intrigued him. There was usually a logical reason for parallels. The trick, he thought, was to concentrate not on the "coincidences" themselves but to examine the circumstances under which they occurred.

Sarah's illness—Kent's queer behavior. Not obviously connected. Separately neurotic. Yet what was it Kent had said that had reminded him of Sarah's strange greeting?

Hone you-arnel?

The two had played practical jokes on him before. He grinned. This was probably one of their special five-day jobs,

designed to make him into a shattered wreck by Friday so Sarah could duck him on Saturday and get by with it.

Joe repeated the syllables aloud, trying to make some sense out of them:

"Hone you-arnel."

INSTANTLY he was on his feet fighting, his lips raving silently. His big chair tipped back and fell over to the floor.

A furious, icily cold intrusion was being made upon his mind. He stood with feet planted on either side of the overturned chair and threw the force off but it came back again and again. The office was suddenly oppressive and stifling, and the objects about him were small and crystal clear, as if seen through the wrong end of a hand galaxiscope. The churning, utterly loathsome invasion surged up like a wave roaring against a reef—and fell back and away in horrible desperation.

From a million miles away he heard—or felt—a voice. It said: "*Uarnl—yes, Uarnl!*" and it said other things, raging things, that Joe could not understand.

Then it was gone. As suddenly as it had come. The office regained its normal perspective. The bright sunlight, reflected now from the tall buildings across the Great Canal, erased the ragged, black hole out of his consciousness.

Painfully he righted the chair and sank into it. His lungs felt pressed in and stale, like the inside of a folded blanket. He took a deep breath, shoved his wet palms hard at the top of the desk.

Uarnl. The nightmare.

It came back to him as dreams rarely do: down to its last beastly detail. A dream of fear and peril—a running dream—and not a dream, after all. *Uarnl.* He looked at the corner of the room, at the colorful throw rug. It lay there under the sun, brighter than it had been, as if a pane of glass had been lifted from it.

After a while he got up and went to the door of Miss Kal's office. She looked up vaguely, concealing a small, resigned lizard under her jacket.

"Miss Kal," Joe said blindly, "do you have my morning papers?"

He took the facsimiles back to his desk,

walking slowly, afraid to get there and sit down and open them. The nightmare; the first aborted attempt. Sarah and Kent—approaching him separately—yet similarly. Allies. Each had been confident that during the night *Uarnl*—had—

There was nothing else on the front sheets but the names *Ih, Lof, Dir,* and *Uarnl* and the story of their possessors' escape from Mars Detain. A power breakdown had weakened the energy barrier that kept their elusive minds, and hence their bodies, in confinement. By the time armed replacements could be sent to the *Aarnians'* isolated cell the beings had vanished. The guards had been strangled. Energy barriers had been set up at all space and canal ports. Other barriers had been formed into a hundred mile noose that was being carefully drawn in toward Detain.

Joe folded the last paper over the cruel three-eyed faces that seemed to mock him. He fumbled at the visiphone. Miss Kal was wiping her lips cheerfully.

"Miss Kal," Joe said, "get me Mr. Reader in Shipping." He leaned his elbows wearily on the desk and waited until Reader's puritanical face appeared on the screen.

"Yeah, boss?"

"Reader, has anyone consigned four large crates to go off-world tomorrow night?"

"Yeah," Reader replied promptly; "Mr. Kent. B-type mobile spacesuits. Had me alter the manifest this morn—"

"Do you have the crates down there?"

"Uh-uh. Mr. Kent said he'd skim them in sometime tomorrow. He was coming up to get the switch O.K.'d by you. Why? Anything wrong?"

Joe opened the center drawer of his desk.

"No. Nothing's wrong. Listen carefully, Reader. I'm going to take care of those crates myself. If I'm—not in my office tomorrow you are *not* to load them on-ship! No matter what Mr. Ke—*anyone* says or does! If the crates come in refrigerate them and call the Patrol and send the name of the addressee to Detain immediately!"

Reader came as near as he ever had

to looking surprised. Nothing wrong? His right eyebrow shot up several millimeters. Joe added, "Keep this in your cheek and there'll be double credits for you pay-day."

Reader nodded. "Yeah, boss. Don't I always?"

Joe took his atom pistol out of the drawer, handling it with unfamiliar fingers. It had been a long time since those target shooting days in Iowa. He checked the gun quickly, reloaded it with fresh pellets.

He had left the visiphone on, and when Reader had broken his connection the interior of Miss Kal's office and the surprised face of that eavesdropper had automatically returned. She stared at the atom pistol.

"Miss Kal," Joe said softly. "Get me a canal-cab."

* * *

The bodies were lying in a row beneath an overhanging ledge of sandstone. They had burrowed deep into a miniature jungle of thick leaved canal weeds, and it had taken him a long time to find them. The gleam of four shiny new B-type spacesuits, less carefully concealed, had finally ended the search. Kent and Ray had been busy this morning.

Standing where he was, Joe could look down the green and red dotted slope and see the ashes of the picnic fire, the scatterings of food that the night-crawling *nolls* had found unpalatable. And, blown by Mars' occasional winds—or taken by alien hands—to a spot only a few feet from where it had been thrown away, was the scrap of paper with his letterhead on it. The paper that he and Kent had marked up during their discussion of tomorrow night's flight to *Aarn*, Callisto.

If they didn't actually hear us talking, Joe thought, it was that paper that started the whole thing.

He said loudly: "Are you here, *Uarnl*? You thought it was perfect, didn't you? You thought you could repossess your bodies as the liner went off-world. Well, look at this!"

With executival thoroughness, he blasted the four bodies into cinders.

SARAH came out of the kitchen as Joe opened the canal door and let himself in. He turned and paid the cabby and the skimmer moved off.

"Hello, darling," she said, and tugged at his arm. "I've got a swell supper fixed!"

Joe smiled at her as he shrugged out of his tunic. He flung it casually over her favorite potted *Zinhaeat*. She didn't grab it off. *I should have been a detective*, he thought. He followed her into the kitchen.

"Anything interesting happen today?" Sarah began to arrange the table, moving things here and there fussily. She looked at Joe from the corner of her eye. "That's about how you like it, isn't it?" she asked.

Joe said, "That's fine." He ground out his cigarette on a clean plate. Sarah would have taken his head off if he had ever done that.

"No," he went on, "nothing happened. Same old stuff."

They sat down to eat. Joe tasted his soup. It was rotten. He wondered if they cooked like that all over Callisto, or only in *Aarn*.

"Is it all right, darling?" Sarah was looking at him brightly, her fingers twined under her chin with the left pinkie extended, her head cocked to one side. It was all so cute that it made Joe sick. He decided that if the showdown were put off much longer he'd never be able to stand the sight of her again.

"You haven't called me 'darling' since our days of stardust and chivalry," he said. "Call me Joe."

"What?"

"I said—call—me—Joe."

Sarah pushed her plate away. Her brown eyes were muddy.

"I wasn't hungry anyway," she said coldly.

Big Kent and Ray came through the door that led into the living room. Kent leaned against the wall and folded his massive arms. He grinned mockingly at Joe. "We never give up," he said. Ray stared nervously and wet his lips.

Joe shoved back his chair inch by inch. "*Uarnl's* dead," he said. "He blundered things in my office and got scared and tried to get off-world in a passenger. The Patrol blasted him."

Sarah rose calmly and looked at Ray and Kent. Their faces were stony. She said: "*Lof—Dir*—I think the four of us together can break down his resistance to Occupancy." Her eyes traveled to an empty corner of the kitchen. "Are you ready, *Uarnl*?"

She faced Joe again, a sly smile on her lips.

"*Uarnl* wasn't killed, Yoe—atomics don't kill us. The passenyer was."

Joe wasn't surprised when she floated away from the chair and toward him, her slippers hardly seeming to touch the floor. He'd been expecting to be attacked.

But what almost broke him into little pieces was her third eye—the one that blinked open in the middle of her forehead, brushing aside a brittle shell of skin and glaring at him with its wide, unhuman hunger. Then, for one terrible second, his brain felt packed in ice; the room was grotesque, filled with alien contrivances. The only sensible thing in it was *Ih's* warm, familiar third eye.

With all his melting strength, Joe thought, "*I destroyed the bodies!*" and the whole scene dangled unmoving before him, the weird, distant setting for the climax of a play, as he heard his own voice in a wrenching groan:

"Our bodies—destroyed!"

Appalling misery and hatred for himself rocked Joe's brain. Then *Uarnl* recoiled, as the *Aarnians'* rapport was broken.

Joe cried chokingly, "Lieutenant—Lieutenant Smith!"

The canal door burst open and Lieu-

tenant Smith of Mars Detain, who had been hugging the narrow metal landing ledge, came in like the proverbial tornado. What he'd heard had more than convinced him. The deadly little sphere in his hands started to make sharp spitting sounds.

Sarah and Kent and Ray and the invisible *Uarnl* screamed. All together, in a dissonance of agony and fear and death.

THEN, THREE OF THEM stood loosely, in puzzled silence.

Big Kent brushed a hand across his eyes. "Ray," he muttered, "what in hell were you yelling about?"

Ray looked at him and sank into the nearest chair.

"Yelling?" he said bewilderedly. His fingers began to unconsciously perform on the chair arm. "I don't know. Was I yelling?"

Sarah was in Joe's arms, her blue-black hair sending its aching fragrance into his nostrils. "Joe," she whispered, "Joe, what happened?"

He tipped back her head, ran a finger over her smooth, brown forehead. Hypnosis—to paralyze and freeze him, to weaken him. He drew her face against his shoulder again.

What *had* happened? What would those Psychologists back in Iowa say if this story ever reached their ears? *The barrier?—the "some sort of block" in my mind, my freakish mind, that keeps out Projectors—and Aarnians?*

"Kent," he said, "fix us all some drinks. Lieutenant Smith's got a story to tell us—about that picnic."

Don't forget...

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machine of KLAMUGRA

Captain Barnaby and Lieutenant Teajun stood at the brink of that vast stone amphitheater, staring wonderingly down at half-an-acre of gadget. This glittering mass of million-year clockwork was the Machine . . . and soon it was to judge them for their crime against Mars!

KLAGGCHALLAK, HIS FUR nose-flaps pulled tight against his nostrils, stumbled up to the gleaming pinnacle of steel that seemed to offer shelter against the night. He felt a dust-storm gathering in the west, and knew that not even the tough skin of a Martian priest could withstand the angry whippings of sand lashed up by the wind-warlocks of the desert.

The old priest drew a tiny, folded *mal*-skin tent from his back-pack. Without haste, for he knew that the elder gods of Mars were watching his safety, Klaggchallak pitched the tent against the west stabilizer of the rocket, drawing the tough hide down to form a floor-flap and fastening it to the steel of the stabilizer with tough *mal*-hoof glue, which would hold fast in the fiercest winds of Mars. He looked for the sun and found it low in the evening sky, then crawled leisurely into the yurt, pulling the door-flap down after him and gluing it to the floor. He had for himself a secure cocoon into which the sand-devils could not force their probing fingers. Before he slept, the old priest fingered his beads, reciting his evening invocation to various benevolent and protective gods.

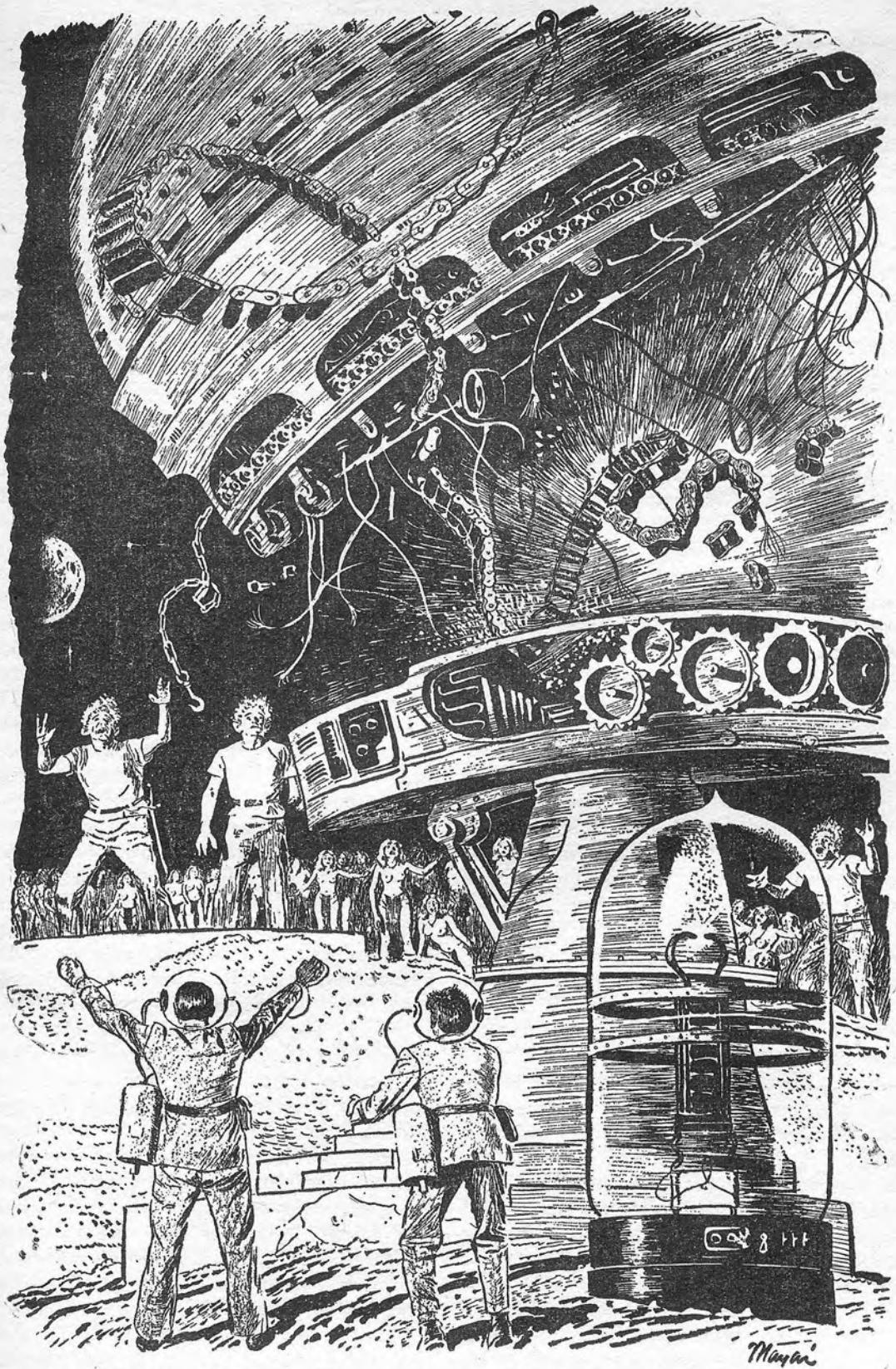
The falling sun threw a dancing star against the hull of the ship standing tall in its tail-chocks. A bewildering wail, the banshee-call of "Danger; ship jetting off!" sounded; but Klaggchallak slept on, hearing through his dreams only the howling of the wind.

Sixty seconds later, as prescribed in the General Regulations of the Extra-terrestrial Service, a second sound began, that most fearful of noises, the sirening of the rocket exhaust. The Martian in his skin tent wakened and felt fear gnaw at his bones; fear induced by subsonic tremors from the rocket blast. Klaggchallak reached for his beads as the heat soaked into his thick, wrinkled skin.

In a moment the floor sagged beneath him. With the *mal*-skin pouch dangling ridiculously from its tail assembly, the EXTS rocket *Vulcan* rose with great gentleness from its tail-chocks, pushed up on its spraying jets.

Four seconds later the ship was a ruby flame above the low hills. Eight seconds later a charred bipod, a bifurcated cinder, tumbled down from space to strike near the jetoff field, where the *Vulcan's* tail-chocks glowed dull red and the blackened ground smoldered. A moment later a

by Allen K. Lang



Bars of shining steel twisted and snapped, gear teeth flew singing through the thin air . . .

bracelet of blast-welded beads tumbled down from the sky, falling near the carbon hulk that a few seconds before had been Klaggchallak, a Martian priest great in wisdom and in honor among his people.

CAPTAIN JAN BARNABY and Lieutenant Kim Teajun of the Extraterrestrial Service stood before the Board of Inquiry at Denver, D.F. The President of the Board, a Chief Commander's star-on-silver gleaming at his right collar point, opened the proceedings:

"The military rocket *Vulcan*, EXTS light cruiser, is accused by the Martian authorities of causing the death of one Klaggchallak, a priest. They further claim that the death of Klaggchallak was caused by criminal negligence on the part of the pilot and co-pilot of the rocket, Captain Jan Barnaby and Lieutenant Kim Teajun, respectively. Such neglect being within the definition of murder in the Martian legal code, the Judging Authority of Mars demands that we deliver these two men to them for trial and eventual punishment."

The Commander stroked his grey hair thoughtfully as he looked up from his report to the two unhappy officers before him. "At ease, gentlemen." Barnaby and Teajun slumped. "While I'm inclined to agree with you two that Klaggchallak's frying was his own fool fault, I must say that you picked a damned poor time to become the instruments of his immolation. We had hoped to establish an extra-territoriality agreement with Mars, but the death of old Klaggchallak puts that out of the question. To further Martian tranquility, you men will have to return to Mars and face the Judging Authority there. If my feelings were all that is at stake, gentlemen, I'd tell the Marties to go trippingly to hell, and keep you here on Earth. But to do this would mean we'd be forced to abandon our bases and mines and surveys on all Mars. We'd be giving our European competitors a clear field." The Commander folded the report neatly, once and again. "Captain Barnaby and Lieutenant Kim, you'll be on the next Mars-ward ship. We can't help

you if you're convicted by our fuzzy friends. You'll have to stay there and take whatever punishment they demand."

Kim was remembering a scene he and Barnaby had witnessed at Klamugra, the seat of the Martian Judging Authority. A Martian, convicted of murder, was being executed atop a high metal platform. A large portion of the city's population was gathered before the platform, watching the edifying spectacle of a fellow-Martian dying with horrifying slowness as the chocks of a vise pressed into his skull. They were bearcats for gladiatorial amusement.

"Do you gentlemen have any questions?"

Lieutenant Kim glanced at Captain Barnaby, then spoke. "Yes, sir. I'd like to know how long we're going to let the Marties push us around this way. Thirteen Martian priests are on our payroll, just because they demand it. We've got to stay five kilometers away from their cities, or pay a five-hundred credit fine. We can't spit without special permission from the Grand Council of Mars. We don't think like they do; why should we submit to being judged by their million-year-old laws? In all respect, sir, why does our Service act so weak?"

The Commander made a pyramid of thumbs and forefingers, and considered it. "Lieutenant Kim, I've been asking myself that question for the last ten years. We've had to pay tribute to gain the Marties' permission to stay on their god-forsaken planet. That tribute represents half the operating expense of the Martian Department of the Service, credits that should be spent on new ships and more men. We've behaved like a bunch of patsies ever since von Munger and Ley landed on Mars.

"Still, we're all soldiers, and we must follow regulations. We mustn't disturb the indigenous population on Mars; that's Regulation 'A-1.' If our policies grow distasteful to the Marties, they may call in the Europeans to take our place. We wouldn't like that. It's bad form to admit it, gentlemen, but I'm ashamed to give you this order. You're to jet off for Mars tomorrow morning; and on arrival

at Klamugra, to deliver yourselves over to the Martian Judging Authority." The Commander rapped his gavel and stood; the two officers before the Board snapped to attention. "Board of Inquiry dismissed."

FULLY AWARE that tomorrow's jet-off would multiply by eight the hangovers they were breeding, Captain Barnaby and Lieutenant Kim sat that evening in the Denver Dive, alternating drinks of European vodka with rounds of California moon-dew. As Kim said: "Drink as much as you like, Barnaby; we're not driving in the morning."

"Tell me," Barnaby demanded of his co-pilot, "what you're thinking of, you Martie-roasting fiend of a Korean."

"I was considering the memory of the 'shlunk!' that Martian murderer's skull made when it finally gave in, that day at Klamugra. Do you remember, hard-headed Yankee?" Kim's eyes followed the blonde ecdysiast across the stage more from habit than present interest.

"Why did you have to remember that? 'Shlunk!'—ugh!"

"We're going to have to squirm out of this, Barnaby-sunsang," Kim said. "We'll have to beat that rap at Klamugra. It's not that I wish to avoid putting my head in a vise; it's only that it hurts me to see the Extraterrestrial Service made a monkey of this way. In a way it will even be a shame if we get off. Think of all the Marties who will miss the opportunity to see your punkin head smashed."

"You orientals have noble souls, Kim."

The blonde stripper, having uncovered as much of herself as she could without resorting to dissection, jumped down from the stage and walked over to the two EXTs officers. "Would you gentlemen like to buy me a drink?" she asked.

Kim's eyes roved abroad in a brief anatomy lesson, but Barnaby said, "I'll buy you one a couple of weeks from now, if I'm not laid up somewhere with a splitting headache." He stood unsteadily and tossed a ten-credit certificate on the table. "If you're really thirsty, get a drink out of that."

Kim reluctantly followed his superior officer from the bar. At the door he turned and called back to the blonde, "Don't catch cold, child. I'll be back."

* * *

The dawn jetoff was miserable, as jet-offs always are. Four days brought the ship within falling-distance of Mars; soon the jets thundered as it backed into a pocket of hills outside Klamugra. The air-pumps hammered to bring the air pressure inside the hull gradually down to that of the outside, so that instruments and equipment wouldn't be subjected to a sudden lowering of pressure. The men inside the ship slipped plastic helmets over their heads, checked the tiny air-pumps on their shoulders, and drew on heavy gloves and boots.

When the port swung open Kim and Barnaby climbed down the ladder to the blast-blackened sand. The sergeant of EXTs Provost Marshall who had accompanied them walked with the officers to a hill overlooking the ancient Martian city of Klamugra, which stood on a terrace about five kilometers to the north. The red adobe walls of the city, testimony of the ancient days when Mars had enough water to allow its use for brick-making, blended with the distance to seem a part of the red desert sand.

A cloud of steam and dust appeared between the hill where they stood and the city. Captain Barnaby un-leathered his binoculars and pressed them to the eyepieces of his helmet, and made out a hopping jeep, its top enclosed in plastic and a trio of supercharger coils poking through the sides of the hood. Clouds of steam followed the jeep as its exhaust streamed out into the chilly air.

IN A MOMENT the jeep spun up the hill and ground to a halt. There was a pause as the men inside the jeep fitted their helmets on their shoulders, checked their airpumps, and drew on their gauntlets. Then the plastic bubble lifted back, a sergeant jumped out from under the steering wheel and saluted, and a Colonel, EXTs Intelligence, walked up to Captain Barnaby and Lieutenant Kim. "Gentlemen," he said, "I'm Colonel Lee Mont-

gomery, Commanding Officer, Third Sector. It is my unpleasant duty to turn you over to the Chief Technician of the Martian Judging Authority, who is Rhinklav'n, here."

At these words a tall Martian unfolded himself from the back seat of the jeep. He climbed out and bowed before Captain Barnaby. "I am Rhinklav'n, Captain." The thick fur nose-flaps, looking like earmuffs pulled across his muzzle, muffled Rhinklav'n's high-pitched voice so that it gave the effect of coming from the bottom of a rain barrel. "You are to accompany me to Klamugra to be judged by the Machine, of which I am the Honored First Technician."

Barnaby and Kim bowed slightly to acknowledge Rhinklav'n, then crawled into the back seat of the jeep, next to Colonel Montgomery.

Rhinklav'n and the sergeant sat up front. The sergeant pushed a button on the instrument panel, and the plastic top of the jeep dropped down to cover them. As the engine started, the jeep's air pump drew in air until the atmosphere was thick enough for human lungs. The Martian squirmed uncomfortably in the heavy air while his human companions threw off their helmets. Lieutenant Kim gratefully drew a deep breath of air, and regretted it immediately. What with the million-year water shortage the Martians had lost even the word for bath. Besides, the most popular article of Martian cuisine is a bulb strikingly similar to the terrestrial garlic plant. Captain Barnaby turned to Kim. "Mars has a distinguished atmosphere, hasn't it?" He spoke in English, rather than in the Esperanto lingua-franca of space.

"Indeed it has," Kim agreed. "What was old fuzz-face up there talking about when he spoke of 'the Machine,' Colonel?"

"The law of Mars is the most rigidly systematized in the solar system," Colonel Montgomery replied. "Several millions of years ago, a bright Martie got the idea that it was unwise to trust mortal judges with a problem so important as the sentencing of criminals. So he called in a lot of mechanics—ancient Mars

had some pretty fair engineers, though they never discovered electricity—and had them build a judging-machine. Since the climate is right and the machine was built of a stainless steel, it's still here and still being used. It's an enormous thing; spreads over half an acre in a big amphitheatre in the center of town. It's an analogue computer, rather clumsy by terrestrial standards, but nevertheless well-built. You know the principles of analogue calculators. Instead of working with coded, position-valued impulses, like the electronic astrogator on our rockets, the mechanical machines solve problems by making use of the physical analogies between cogs and gears and differentials."

"Do you mean that we're going to be punished or set free by a bunch of clockwork, colonel?" Kim asked.

"In a way, yes. The Machine is a most impersonal judge. That fact won't help you, though. Martian legal code is strict about killing, there being some thirty-odd degrees of murder, ranging in seriousness from a 'simple homicide to secure a mate,' the punishment for which is death by dehydration, most often; to 'killing to secure for oneself material benefits,' for which there exist more subtle forms of death by torture."

"Like getting a small-head-size in a vise?" Captain Barnaby grunted.

"That's the usual punishment for murder in the seventeenth degree, where the crime is usually 'killing for spiritual advancement.' You see, each crime is given special study by the Machine. A great many factors are fed in, collated with certain constants within the Machine, processed through several dozen stages, and finally combined into a single number, which represents the punishment called for. By the way," the colonel studied the back of Rhinklav'n's head, "no consideration of the truthfulness of the 'defendant' is entered into the Machine. It is presumed that should a man say that he did not commit a crime, he didn't; if he did, he'd admit it. Martians have a peculiar character defect that prevents them from lying."

"A defect from which we humans are fortunately free," Kim grinned.

"That's no out," Colonel Montgomery countered. "They have witnesses who saw Klaggchallak fry. Besides, we prefer to have the mass of Marties ignorant of the average earthling's penchant for prevarication. It saves the Service a lot of money not to have to prove anything it tells our hairy hosts out here."

THE JEEP hit the first of the series of low terraces which set the city of Klamugra up from the surrounding desert plains, and the little car bounced high off the sand. Colonel Montgomery looked startled, as though he'd just remembered something. "You know, in my ethnological fervor I didn't realize what you two men are in for. Cosmos! I'm practically delivering you up as human sacrifices!"

"We came to that conclusion five days ago, colonel," Lieutenant Kim dryly observed.

"I can see what the Fleet Commander meant when he said that he was giving me 'a most unpleasant assignment.' Hell, I don't think the Machine is able to give a judgment of 'not guilty.'" Colonel Montgomery gazed toward the city they were approaching. "We've got to turn you in. We can't risk a blowup with the Martian Grand Council. There are rumors that . . ." the colonel glanced again with suspicion at the back of Rhinklav'n's hairy neck, as though suspecting that the Martian might be able to puzzle out the meaning of their conversation, though it was in English. "There are rumors that the -artiansMay have an agent among the -ussiansRay. We can't risk having the borsch-eaters more popular out here than the Western Powers." The jeep bounded up the last of the terraces and through an opening in the city wall. The adobe buildings raced past, and with a final bound the jeep came to the edge of the huge, circular bowl which held the Machine.

"There's your judge," Colonel Montgomery said, speaking in Esperanto again. "I haven't much hope to offer you. For one thing, you're the first humans ever to be judged by the Machine."

The men picked up their helmets and airpumps and adjusted them on their

shoulders. Rhinklav'n drew his furry nostril-flaps down into place against the sudden change in pressure. The plastic top of the jeep flew back on its springs and the men climbed out, stretching their cramped muscles. The radiophones in the helmets buzzed, and the colonel gave Captain Barnaby a last word. "I want to impress you with the fact that the Service cannot protect you, from this moment onward. If you escape being killed it must be on your own merits. And don't start shooting Marties—won't do you a bit of good. There's a lot at stake for Earth here. Good luck, men!" Colonel Montgomery saluted, and he and his sergeant jumped back in the jeep, slammed the top down, and whirled away.

Rhinklav'n turned to the two EXTS officers. "Gentlemen, I've assigned you quarters here, near the Machine. Will you follow me?" Kim and Barnaby followed the Martian a short distance from the edge of the amphitheater to a lone adobe building, one story high and about ten meters square. "Here are your quarters, where you'll stay tonight. Your judgment is set for tomorrow morning."

Captain Barnaby glanced into the building and was surprised to see that it closed with an airlock, had terrestrial canned foods on neat shelves, and had regular Service cots in place of the rough *mal*-leather mats that the Martians slept on. "It was good of you to go to all this trouble just for myself and Lieutenant Kim, Rhinklav'n," the Captain said.

The Martian paused at the door. "It's not just for you, Captain. Five other terrestrials have committed crimes of various proportions within the last few weeks. They will also be tried here, after your case is disposed of." Rhinklav'n left, considerably closing the airlock door and starting the pump on his way out.

Lieutenant Kim took a can of "B" ration beans down from the shelf and thoughtfully began to open it with his Service knife. "Captain," he said, "this sort of thing could drive our Service from Mars. If the Marties consider it their right to judge every Earthling who runs a jeep into a farmer's *mal* or lands half

a meter too near one of their cities, we won't have a man on the planet in a couple of years."

"Kim, we're precedents."

"What do you mean, Yankee?"

"If the Marties succeed in convicting us of murder in some unheard-of degree by using that overgrown Erector Set of theirs, we'll be only the first two of a long string of EXT Servicemen to be executed under Mars law. We can't let them do it." Captain Barnaby paused a moment to pour himself out a plateful of beans. "Kim, what was that process you used to rely on back in EXTS Academy in Denver? The one that gave you the right answers after you found that your first solutions to our astrogation problems were a few hundred thousand kilometers off?"

Kim stopped chewing for a moment in surprise. "You mean that you got through the Academy without using the 'finagle factor'? No wonder you made captain so soon. It's simple: I'd look up the right answer in the Service charts, find by what factor my solution was off, and introduce that factor into my next calculation, making it inconspicuous under a lot of mathematical camouflage. Don't bawl me out about it, Barny; I just couldn't see letting my extracurricular activities suffer for my schoolwork."

"Yes, you did a lot of your studying at the Denver Dive. No matter, little man. Eat hearty and get some sleep." Barnaby stirred his beans thoughtfully. "We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING a subordinate technician of the Machine hammered on the airlock. The two terrestrials pulled on their heavy jackets, fur boots, and gauntlets, started the little air pumps on their shoulders, and opened the lock. "The honored First Technician of the Machine invites your presence at your trial, which is to begin very soon," the Martian said, speaking halting Esperanto. Kim and Barnaby followed him to the edge of the Machine bowl. There had been several changes made during the night. An elevated platform had been set up, identical to the one used in the bloody execution

they'd witnessed. About twenty Martians were clustered around the Machine, some of them making last-minute adjustments in the mechanism; others, evidently sightseers, gazing curiously at the two principals in the trial.

Rhinklav'n was waiting, his nose flaps drawn over his nostrils to keep the cold morning air from cutting into his lungs. "I am pleased that you come," he said. "The Machine is fully assembled for your problem." He pointed down toward the Machine, a vast cluster of separate stages connected by rods. "On the far right, in that small building, is the power source of the Machine, a mercury-turbine engine. We can't spare the water to make steam, you know. The first stage contains the Martian actuarial tables, the second has the actuarial system for determining the probable life-spans of you two Earthlings. That's without taking into consideration the probability that you two will be executed as a result of the judgement of the Machine."

Lieutenant Kim nodded. "Most ingenious. But I'm afraid that there's a factor that you've omitted."

"We've made no factual error, Lieutenant," Rhinklav'n insisted. "The value of the sage Klaggchallak is represented there—" he pointed to the fourth stage, "and your social value to the people of Mars is here represented." Rhinklav'n waved one mitten-like hand toward the fifth stage. "If you'll examine that stage, you'll observe that your value is negative: the shaft representing it revolves in a direction opposite to that of the others. Yes, you'll surely be executed."

Captain Barnaby nodded, as though the reiteration of the probability of his early demise troubled him less than the philosophical question he'd stumbled across. "Still, as my subordinate officer has said, there's a factor which you seem to have omitted. In the terminology of terrestrial psychomentering, this quantity is called—what did you say it was, Lieutenant Kim?"

"The 'finagle factor,' sir."

"Really?" Rhinklav'n asked, the light of scientific inquiry in his eyes. "I thought I'd taken all the variables of Earthling physiology and psychology into considera-

tion when I set up the plans for the trial. What are the mathematics of this 'finagle factor'?"

CAPTAIN BARNABY put one foot up on a connecting shaft, as though he were in the Denver Dive, discussing the relative merits of two video dancers. "As you've doubtless noticed in your extensive study of the Terrestrial mind, Sir Honored First Technician of the Machine, we of Earth place almost equal value on a man's intelligence and on his financial standing as criteria of his worth."

"Yes," Rhinklav'n mused, "I noticed your preoccupation with both intelligence (a minor mental quality, by the way; far inferior to spiritual insight or time-sense) and with the individual's possession of Western Credits."

"As I said," Captain Barnaby continued, "there exists a precise formula, developed by the . . ."

"By the Noyoudont Dentifrice Laboratories," Kim supplied.

"Yes; their laboratories developed the mathematics of the finagle factor. Briefly, it is this: the square root of the product of Intelligence Quotient over one hundred times the number of credits the individual has outstanding. Or, written algebraically:" Barnaby knelt down and traced in the sand with his gloved index finger:

$$\sqrt{\frac{IQ}{100}} \times \text{money in the bank}$$

"Quite a simple equation, easily represented on the Machine," Rhinklav'n observed. He called a subordinate technician to his side and spoke to him in the clicking polysyllables of the Martian language. Turning again to Captain Barnaby, he asked, "And what are the values of 'IQ' and 'Money in the Bank' for you and Lieutenant Kim?"

"Our combined IQ's total about 243. How many credits do you own, Lieutenant Kim?"

"Hell, sir; I've got more debts than credits."

"Figure up your debts then, Lieutenant."

Kim raised his right gauntlet, drew a pad of paper and a pencil from a pocket at

the back of his hand, and scribbled rapidly. "If we get out of this, Captain, I'll owe about 1046 credits. Subtracting pay due for the last semi-annual period, I owe 437 credits."

"And I have debts totaling 600 credits," Captain Barnaby said thoughtfully. He turned to Rhinklav'n. "The debts of myself and Lieutenant Kim, Sir Honored First Technician of the Machine, total 1037 Western Credits. Being debt, that's a negative number, of course."

"Of course, Captain," Rhinklav'n agreed. "The Machine can handle any sort of number, even a negative number. You noticed that your social value to Mars was easily represented as a minus-number." Rhinklav'n talked rapidly to his assistant and handed him the values of the finagle factor, rewritten in Martian ideographs. He faced Captain Barnaby again. "It will take us about an hour to enter this new factor into the Machine," he said. "You'll not mind waiting?"

"No, not at all," Barnaby murmured. He and Kim leaned against the inside wall of the amphitheater, watching the Martian technicians hurry about; they removed gears and replaced them with gears of another ratio; they connected a stage consisting of eccentric cams strung on shafts; and they installed a mass of machinery at the sixth stage, where the operation of extracting square root was to take place. Kim, comparing the heavy gears and levers of the Machine with the compact tubes of his electronic astrogator, remarked, "It's like using a trip hammer to crack a walnut."

AFTER A FEW MINUTES of watching, Kim and Barnaby became conscious of an intruder within their helmets, a most unpleasant odor. They glanced up to the edge of the bowl. The Martian sightseers were sitting up there, dangling their legs above the Machine and utilizing the pause in the proceedings to eat their picnic lunches. They were busily unwrapping bundles of food from the *mal*-skin pouches hanging by their sides and eating as they watched the technicians work over the Machine.

One of the tourists, judging from his

height a young male, threw a small parcel toward Kim. The lieutenant picked it up and unwrapped it. The stench of Martian garlic became unbearable as Kim stared at the unidentifiable tidbit of meat the Martian had thrown him; the air-pump on his shoulder drew the redolence into his helmet in such quantities that Kim's eyes burned. He gestured to show that, while his every instinct demanded that he eat the delicious morsel, he couldn't take his helmet off to do so. With an elaborate pantomiming of sorrow, Kim pitched the gift back up to the Martian boy.

A few adjustments later the technicians filed up from the Machine pit. Rhinklav'n walked over to the two EXTs officers. "If you gentlemen will accompany me, we'll begin the trial at once."

Kim and Barnaby walked together up the steps that led from the Machine, then turned and looked down at the dozens of stages of complex machinery, into which memory and intelligence of a sort had been built. Rhinklav'n pointed toward the fifth and sixth stages. "It is there that the combined finagle factors of you men will be calculated. The fifth stage is quite simple; it will perform the necessary division and multiplication. The sixth stage will extract the square root of the product derived by the fifth. The next six stages of machinery contain the variables of terrestrial behavior, which I and my colleagues calculated from Earth texts. The other stages on the field, fifty-three of them, will collate the results of the calculations of the first twelve stages with our legal code and determine punishment. The final product will appear at the sixty-seventh stage, represented as the speed of rotation of a single shaft. The revolutions-per-time-interval are decoded by a simple formula to determine the punishment to be levied upon you. Doubtless, it will be some unpleasant form of death."

Kim muttered that he wished that Martians had a bit more tact.

Rhinklav'n waved a hairy arm toward his assistant who had remained below in the Machine pit; and that Martian ran to the power house to start the mercury-turbine engine that ran the Machine. With a

whistling that set the thin atmosphere trembling for miles around, the turbine began to turn.

The sightseers on the edge of the amphitheater wrapped up the scraps of their lunches, replaced them in their *mal-skin* picnic hampers, and stood up to watch the Machine. Kim and Barnaby paced up and down along the edge of the bowl, looking down upon the mechanical cerebation being performed by the huge Machine. With a smooth transfer of power from one stage to the next, the first problem—the probable duration of Klaggchallak's life when it had been interrupted by the jets of the *Vulcan*—was solved, and the mechanism of the second stage began to revolve.

"They're seeing how long we can be expected to live, now," Captain Barnaby commented.

That problem fled through a mass of gears and cams; and the partial solution, the sum of the two earthling's life expectancies divided by that of the priest Klaggchallak, ran across a shaft to the third stage, which would determine the old priest's value to the society of Mars. On into the fourth stage the problem flowed, to combine all previous factors with the earthlings' social value to Mars, a negative number.

In a few moments the problem had progressed to the fifth stage of the Machine, where the first steps of the 'finagle factor' were solved. The product, a negative number as could be seen by the reversed rotation of the main shaft, bowed into the sixth stage, which was to extract square root.

THE TURBINE HOWLED protest as it was forced to overcome the inertia of the sixth stage; but a governor at the input stage held the shaft-speed constant. The seventh stage, all ready for the problem when it should appear from the sixth, held all the computations of the first four stages in its smoothly-turning entrails. The initial portion of the sixth stage began to move slowly.

There was a sudden, grating noise as the feed-in gear of the fifth stage came in contact with a solution gear of the

sixth which refused to move. The whine of the mercury-turbine engine was shaking the ground beneath the two officers' feet now.

As the Martian technicians and picnickers looked on in amazement, the shaft between the fifth stage and the sixth began to twist like a stick of moist putty. The sixth stage strained and shuddered, then followed the twisting shaft over, tearing its moorings from the ground and smashing upside-down. The seventh stage entered into the chaos, ripping out anchors of steel-in-concrete and slamming onto its side. In a moment all the machines in the bowl were muttering and straining against the earth. Rhinklav'n ran to the stairway that led down into the pit. In the adobe powerhouse the mercury engine was whirling at twenty times its optimum rate, tearing the atmosphere with the sound of its screaming power. There was the rattle of shrapnel exploding within the walls of the powerhouse as the turbine threw off the restraint of its governor. The whole field within the bowl was a mass of twitching clockwork, shaken by the final stormings of the suicidal turbine. Bars of shining steel twisted and snapped, gear teeth flew singing through the thin air. The final chain of stages tore itself loose from anchoring and crashed to its side. There was a final roar of defiance from the turbine, and the powerhouse walls dissolved before an out-rushing blast of superheated mercury. Kim and Barnaby threw themselves to the ground as the din increased for a moment, and the Martian sightseers sought refuge behind nearby buildings. Suddenly, the Machine was silent, except for the tinkle of scraps of metal falling to the cement.

"Looks as though we were too much for judge, jury, and D. A.," Kim murmured into his radiophone. Barnaby nodded, then cautiously climbed to his feet.

Rhinklav'n climbed back up the stairway to the brink of the amphitheater-become-junkyard. He shoved his way through the questioning crowd of Martian sightseers without a word. "Looks like he's going to cry," Lieutenant Kim commented into his radiophone. True, Rhinklav'n's nose-flaps were hanging limply down below

his chin, a sure sign of great emotion in a Martian.

Rhinklav'n faced Captain Barnaby wordlessly for a moment. "You may leave now," he said at last. The Martian turned his back on the captain to look down again on the wreck that had been his beloved Machine.

THE TWO EXTS OFFICERS wandered about Klamugra, the cynosure of all Martian eyes, though no one tried to stop them or ask them questions. Lieutenant Kim finally spotted a radio tower jutting up above the red adobe buildings. Hurrying in the direction of the tower, Kim and Barnaby found the Klamugra headquarters of the Extraterrestrial Service.

Colonel Montgomery jumped to his feet as they came in, a look of bald disbelief on his face. "Man, I'm glad to see you two! I was about to storm out like a knight in shiny armor and save you from the Marties." He waved his hand toward the helmet and rifle lying on his typewriter table—"If I'd gotten there too late, I'd have ruptured interplanetary friendship for sure!"—and indicated a decanter on his desk. "Have some: that's Edinbourgh scotch, not Los Angeles moon-dew. Tell me why I happen to be talking to you now instead of making up a couple of packages for your next-of-kin."

"We wrecked their damn Machine," Kim said happily, dropping his helmet and gauntlets to the floor and measuring out several fingers of the colonel's scotch into his ration can.

"To be a bit more accurate," Captain Barnaby corrected, "we drove the Machine insane." He poured himself a stiff shot of scotch and downed it with appreciation.

"Our personalities are so complex that the Machine blew up all over the landscape when it tried to understand them," Kim said. He dragged a chair out from behind the typewriter table and sat down, carefully balancing the ration can.

"It's rather as though we should set our electronic astrogator to work on a problem with three variables in five dimensions, rather than in four," Captain Barnaby explained. "As you told us, the Machine

was a mechanical-analogous calculator. It can multiply, divide, add, square and cube, and extract roots. It performs these operations by coding numbers into mechanical relationships."

"Just a big adding machine," Kim commented irreverently.

"And our 'finagle factor' was too much for a mechanical system." Captain Barnaby briefly explained to the colonel how he and Kim had induced Rhinklav'n to add their invented factor to the Machine's setup. "You see, the finagle factor resolved itself into the square root of a negative number. An electronic calculator, like our astrogator, could extract the root of a minus-number: 'imaginary' numbers of this sort are implicit in its circuit. The Martian Machine out there couldn't do this though. Since there is no mechanical analogue for an imaginary number, the Machine tried to extract the square root of our finagle factor in the same manner in which it would attempt to extract the root of a real number."

Kim drained his ration can neatly and remarked, "The Machine couldn't do what it had to. All the power of the turbine was thrown into the root extracting system, which wouldn't revolve. So the Machine went nuts, pardon me, sir, and blew its top. Wrecked the power source and all

sixty-seven stages. With the square root of minus one, we busted up a Machine half a million years old."

"What now?" Colonel Montgomery asked, rhetorically.

Captain Barnaby studied the bottom of his ration-can a moment. "Well, sir, Rhinklav'n was more puzzled than angered. He wanted to judge humans not out of malice, but from a genuine scientific curiosity. He wanted to see how the Machine would act with an alien problem. His Machine is too badly broken-up ever to repair. He'll have to find another method of judging criminals, first of all. Martian society is founded on strict law."

"Just a moment." The colonel got up from his desk and went down the hall to a door marked "Judge Advocate General's Department, EXTS." He returned with a heavy book, bound between khaki-board covers. "We'll give this book to Rhinklav'n, and you gentlemen may return to the Denver Joint."

"Dive, sir," Kim corrected.

"Yes, Lieutenant." Colonel Montgomery handed the big book to Captain Barnaby. "Take this to Rhinklav'n before you leave, Captain."

Barnaby turned to the title page and read in Esperanto, "Blackstone. *On the Study of Law.*"

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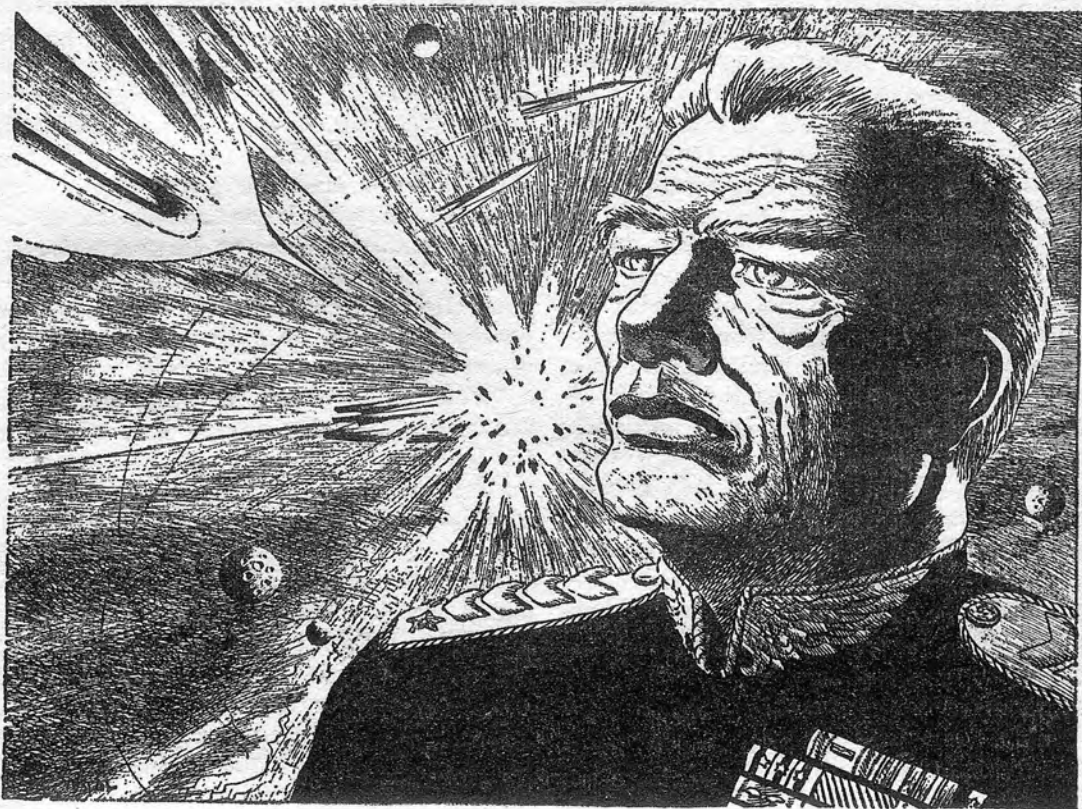
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So brass-bands played, and brass-hats brayed . . . and a coffin ship left for the stars . . .



"See that one with the scars? . . . that's Sandy Stake, who won at Rigel,"

final mission

by John D. MacDonald

(From Act II, Scene 3—SYNOPSIS for Cynthia)

CYNTHIA: (Distraught, pacing) Then what *are* we to do for them? They were here when we needed them. Are they to be surfeited with high honor, served like roasted duck at a billion banquets? Tell me, Roger, have we, the living, nothing

but boredom to offer those who made this living possible?

ROGER: (Sullenly) They are old heroes, my dear. The world no longer has need for the heroic impulse. And what is wrong with roast duck?

CYNTHIA: (violently) Everything! (She crosses to the bed, sits, posture ex-

pressing deep dejection. When she speaks her voice is soft.) You see, Roger, I *am* incredibly old. I saw him, you know, that last time we needed them. Oh, what a desperate bold look about him! Space had put its mark of flame on his hard cheek.

ROGER: (Distantly) Him? Him, indeed! I hadn't realized that we'd narrowed it to a specific and particular hero. I thought you were bleeding for the whole lot of them.

CYNTHIA: (Fondly) My poor jealous darling Roger! Was I to remain suspended and unaware until you came into my life?

ROGER: (Dryly) More of this hero please.

CYNTHIA: Oh, the look of him! That careful balanced walk of the spaceman! His eyes were deepest blue, Roger. We thought everything was lost then. He and those like him were our last hope, and such a forlorn one, too!

ROGER: You are turning into a professional sentimentalist, darling. All of them from those days are fat-haunched wheezing old men, with long and impossibly boring yarns of the space wars. I see them at the club, you know.

CYNTHIA: (Teasingly) Poor Roger! Let me see. When they left that last time to come back a year later bringing victory you must have been all of four years old. And I was seventeen. Seventeen! You should have known me when I was seventeen.

ROGER: Come now! Of which puffy old hero are we speaking?

CYNTHIA: (Arching her back, speaking boldly) Can't you tell, you stupid man? Which one looks most like my son?

Editorial from the "Tampa Times," entitled ODE TO THE MALADJUSTED:

"We look with dubious eye on the psyching programs which are now applied to us early enough to result in a balanced adjustment to the world as we know it.

"The other day we wondered what we might be doing were it not for the psyching which has made us such a complacent scribbler of these immortal words.

"For a moment we thought, with horror, of a neurotic, maladjusted little man,

full of sighs and dreams and imagery. And then it struck us that many of the men who have come forward in times of stress have been drawn from just such groups. During the space wars which ended a bare twenty years ago we would have lost, it is certain, were it not for men so maladjusted that violence was their creed, brutality their way of life, danger a necessary drug. Their very lustiness was our margin of victory. Their names are a heady drumbeat. Crewson, Hallison, Holt, Tane, Cryler, Stake.

"We know that the possibility of another space war is so remote as to be purest fantasy. With ten thousand planets open to us, mankind will spend a thousand generations before there is enough surplus energy for war, or industrial capacity to divert to armament.

"Yet, should it happen, we psyched ones are as unsuited for war as is a steer for the bullring.

"And who will there be to save the scalp of this scribbler next time?"

From the minutes of the annual meeting of the Tamarack Club:

TREASURER: When the heroes of space were given honorary memberships in the Tamarack Club twenty years ago, I do not believe that the members of that period realized that the recipients would make this club their headquarters. And . . . ah . . . I do not believe that they realized the troublemaking abilities of the group. Our dues are sufficiently high so that we are composed of top executives from industry in this area. All, of course, except those spacemen. The situation constantly grows more serious. During the past month our losses in club equipment destroyed and damaged were heavy. Mr. I. L. Intermann, after being thrown out onto the sidewalk by two of the . . . ah . . . spacemen, tendered his resignation. There must be an end to this brawling in the Tamarack Club, and an end to those interminable lies they tell in the bar every afternoon. This is a decent club for decent law-abiding members. It is within our power to rescind their honorary memberships. I doubt whether any one of them has saved the money from his pension

in sufficient quantity to pay the initiation fee. Thus, I move that . . .

CHAIRMAN: You have a list of the ones we want to get rid of? There's a couple of them that seem all right to me.

TREASURER: To make any exceptions would defeat the plan. I move that the honorary memberships given twenty years ago to the following men be rescinded: Crewson, Hallison, Holt, Tane, Cryler, Stake, Guthrie, Sterndees, Baranak, Schota, Mendez, Antonelli and McGuire.

SECRETARY: Second!

CHAIRMAN: All in favor . . . Motion carried and it is so ordered.

TREASURER: Who is going to tell them?

CHAIRMAN: I'll appoint you.

TREASURER: Oh, no, you don't! Not me, brother.

CHAIRMAN: You have a suggestion?

TREASURER: See what you think of it. We'll just post a notice on the bulletin board and underneath it can say 'By order of the Executive Committee'.

CHAIRMAN: Yes. Please handle it that way. What's the next order of business?

MEMORANDUM TO: Chief, Psyching SubSection, Federal Bureau of Adult Adjustment, Department of Interior, Septagon Building, New Washington, Nevada, Easthemi.

SUBJECT: Disposition of File 8.211j (Retired Commanders of Military Fleet)

FROM: Field Director, Special Problem Team Twelve

1. Reference subject file number, the undersigned has taken into Adjustment Custody the following listed men. The receptivity quotient appears after each name.

Crewson, Lawrence A.	.83
Hallison, Michael X.	.77
Holt, Brad A.	.49
Tane, Stanislaus M.	.60
Cryler, Albert L.	.83
Stake, Sanders S.	.44
Guthrie, Sherman B.	.51
Sterndees, Herman O.	.66

Baranak, Louis NMI	.76
Schota, Manuel L.	.41
Mendez, Joaquim G.	.82
Antonelli, Anthony A.	.75
McGuire, Sean P.	.77

2. It should be noted that receptivity ranges from a low point forty-one to a high of point eighty-three, with the two highest still short point ought seven of the minimum quotient necessary for the application of mechanical methods of correction.

3. Attention is respectfully directed to the fact that each of the above men draws from the federal government the full pay and allowances of a retired fleet admiral, and thus the problem of handling the situation appears delicate.

4. The attitude of the entire group is consistently scornful, facetious and uncooperative. It is only with the utmost difficulty that they are persuaded to refrain from giving nonsense answers to the test questions.

5. SubSection procedure in the past, when faced with less important citizens with the same problem, has been to revert to that period in personal history of each person when they were closest to achieving a true and valid adjustment, then re-create the environmental factors. As the period of true adjustment of these men was the time of the last space war, the problems of such environmental re-creation become evident. However, as no other approach seems feasible, it is recommended that permission from higher authority be sought so that this case may be taken out of active files of the SubSection.

By Order of the Section Chief
HILLARY K. CRONEN

1st Ind.

TO: Secretary of Interior, FROM: Chief, Psyching SubSection, Federal Bureau of Adult Adjustment, THRU: Chief, Federal Bureau of Adult Adjustment.

1. Forwarded recommending approval.
JOHN BROWN
Chief, Psyching SubSection

2nd Ind.

TO: The President of the United States

of the Hemisphere Alliance, FROM: The Secretary of the Interior, THRU: The Executive Vice-President.

1. Forwarded recommending approval and authority.

ELLISON G. MORTINSON
Secretary of the Interior

3rd Ind.

TO: COMINCCAP, USSN - THRU:
The Secretary of Space

1. Reference tri-screen conference on basic letter, release suggested ship from stores, man, equip and launch, coordinating with Chief, Defensive Propaganda, for assurance of friendly coverage.

By Order of-
MORGAN SERO
President

AND SO IT WAS DONE.

The "Tampa Bay" was one of the cruisers, taken out from under wraps, her hull polished and shining, her drives keyed to the maximum efficiency.

They boarded her, those thirteen old men, wheezing at the steepness of the ramp, straining the plastic seams of faded uniforms, while the decorations of nations long dead were brave spots of color against flaccid chests. They boarded her while the cold eyes of the video cameras followed every step, and, as far as the eye could see, the people of earth, adjusted and content, cheered and waved and wept.

"See, Angel? That one with the scars? That's Sandy Stake, who won at Rigel. And there's Crosscut Louis Baranak. He smashed their main fleet off Betelgeux. Lord, look at them trying to keep those bellies sucked in and look stern and heroic. Sure, I know. So are dinosaurs."

The warning drift of green smoke shows from the blockhouse. The people of the world count slowly. "Goodby, goodby." WHOOOOM! Adios, muchachos.

On the ship popular vote has put Red Mike Hallison in charge. He sets the constant at fifty lights, makes an assignment list, calls a meeting in the main lounge in officer's country, on this ship where every man is an officer.

Thirteen pairs of somber eyes, unsteady hands. Stolid dejection.

"Damn every neat, tidy, well-washed little soul of the universe," Irish McGuire says.

"Like old shoes," says Spick Mendez, picking his teeth with a thick thumbnail.

Mike Hallison sits and waits. There is no hot sharp anger. Anger is dulled, heavy, hopeless.

Then Red Mike speaks. "Remember the little fracas on the near side of Antares?"

"Sure," says Manny Schota. "You were ready to run when I came into range."

"The reason I bring it up," says Red Mike, "is because I still think I saw a stranger over there. A ship that was a perfect sphere, red gold when it picked up the reflection of the jolts we sent at them. After we licked 'em, the stranger wasn't around. I've always had a notion to go beyond Antares and see what I could find,"

A dim awakening in dulled eyes.

"Maybe they'd give us a scrap," Tane says with a glimmer of hope.

"We can do one of two things," says Red Mike. "We can go along at this speed until there's nobody left to give the last man space burial. Or we can go a-hunting."

A lift of heavy heads and a narrowing of the eyes.

"Hunting? How'd you like to hear a volley off the forward jolt stations again, Sandy? Now you're saying something. Maybe this is a break, after all."

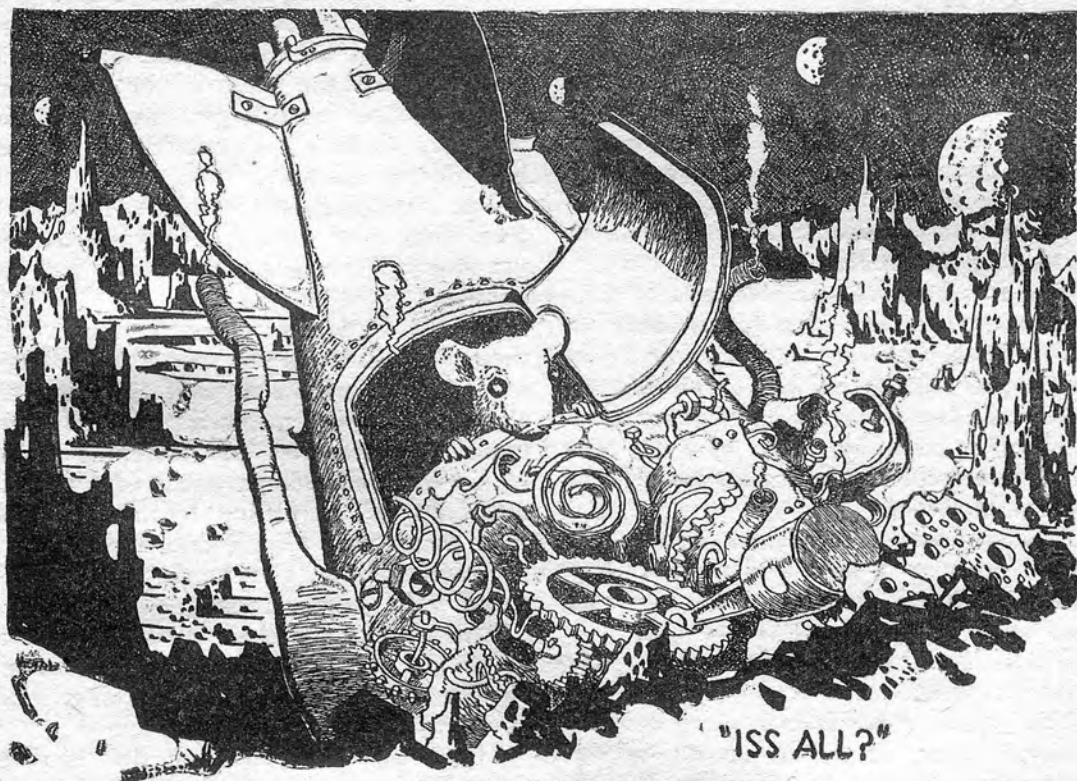
Red Mike cuts through the babble. "Okay, lads. We'll step up the speed and go hunting. Check the armament. See what we'll have to clear away for battle stations, if we ever find them out in that haystack of stars. Hop to it."

They go out into the corridors leading fore and aft from the lounge. There is a high note of excitement in their voices. Red Mike smiles. At a distance their voices sound . . . young. That's it. Young.

Still smiling he selects a red apple from one of the big baskets of fruit thoughtfully provided by the membership of the Tamarack Club.

He hums at first; then, his voice muffled by a large bite of apple, he sings hoarsely, "Never die, never die. They only blow away."

another thrilling adventure of Mitkey, the Starmouse



Illustrated by Vestal

MITKEY



rides again

"The moon is a long way up . . . but you can't keep a good mouse down. Bravely, Mitkey bared his biceps . . ." and so forth. That's the way this blurb should read. But, to tell the truth, Mitkey was tricked by a scoundrel, was sent streaking moon-ward to meet his end . . . and thereby hangs a tail . . .

by Fredric Brown

For Those Who Did Not Read Mitkey's Adventures in "THE STAR-MOUSE":

MITKEY, a small gray mouse, is captured by Professor Oberburger, a refugee German scientist living in Connecticut and working on a rocket to be sent to the moon. Mitkey is placed in a compartment of the rocket, for experimental purposes.

The rocket is deflected by, and lands on, Prxl—an asteroid with a highly eccentric orbit. It is inhabited by a race of tiny but super-intelligent beings.

The Prxlans, in order to question Mitkey, raise his intelligence level to the point where he can assimilate and understand his own memories and tell them about conditions on Earth.

Thus Mitkey finds himself with a language—the thick German dialect spoken by the professor, who had talked incessantly to himself and to Mitkey while he worked on the rocket.

The Prxlans, who became fond of Mitkey, send him and the rocket back to Earth. Mitkey approaches Professor Oberburger and tries to sell him on the idea of letting Mitkey raise the intelligence level of all other mice, by means of a ray projector which the Prxlans have taught him how to construct.

Mitkey believes intelligent mice could live in peace with men, and suggests that mice be given a portion of the earth as their own. The professor is doubtful.

But an accidental electrical shock spoils Mitkey's plans.

The professor has been keeping Minnie, Mitkey's mate, as a pet, on an 'island' surrounded by an electrical barrier. Mitkey, seeing Minnie there, dashes recklessly across and receives the shock which destroys his new-found intelligence and makes him again just an ordinary little mouse.

And he and Minnie resume their happy life behind the wall of the professor's laboratory, until . . .

IN THE DARKNESS WITHIN the wall there was movement, and Mitkey, who was once again merely a little gray mouse, scurried for the hole in the baseboard. Mitkey was hungry, and just outside that hole lay the professor's icebox. And under the icebox, cheese.

A fat little mouse, Mitkey, almost as fat as Minnie, who had lost her figure completely because of the professor's generosity.

"Always, Mitkey," Professor Oberburger had said, "vill be cheese under der izebox. Always." And there always was. Not always ordinary cheese, either. Roquefort and beerkase and hand cheese and Camembert, and sometimes imported Swiss that looked as though mice had

already lived in it, and which tasted like mouse-heaven.

And Minnie ate and Mitkey ate, and it was well that the holes in the walls and the baseboards were large holes, else their roly-poly little bodies would no longer have found passage.

But something else was happening, too. Something that would have pleased and yet worried the good professor, had he known.

In the darkness within a tiny mind there were stirrings not unlike the scurrying of mice within a wall. Stirrings of strange memories, memories of words and meanings, memories of deafening noise within the black compartment of a rocket, memories of something more important than cheese and Minnie and darkness.

Slowly, Mitkey's memories and intelligence were coming back.

There under the shadow of the icebox, he paused and listened. In the next room, Professor Oberburger was working. And as always, talking to himself.

"Und now ve pudt on der landing vanes. Much bedder iss, mit landing vanes, for vhen der moon it reaches, softly it/vill land, iff air iss there."

Almost, almost, it made sense to Mitkey. The words were familiar, and they brought ideas and pictures into his little gray head and his whiskers twitched with the effort to understand.

The professor's heavy footsteps shook the floor as he walked to the doorway of the kitchen and stood there looking at the mouse-hole in the baseboard.

"Mitkey, should I set again der trap und—Budt no. No, Mitkey, my liddle star-mouse. You haff earned peace and rest, no? Peace und cheese. Der segund rocket for der moon, another mouse vill be in, yes."

Rocket. Moon. Stirrings in the mind of a little gray mouse cowering beside a plate of cheese under the icebox, unseen in the shadow. Almost, almost, he remembered.

The professor's steps turned away, and Mitkey turned to the cheese.

But still he listened, and with uneasiness that he could not understand.

A click. The professor's voice giving a

number.

"Hardtvord Laboratories, yess? Brofessor Oberburger. I vant mice. Vait, no, a mouse. Vun mouse . . . What? Yess, a white mouse vill do. Color, it doess nodt madder. Effen a purple mouse . . . Hein? No, no I know you haff no burple mice. I vass what you call kidding, chust . . . Vhen? No hurry. Nodt for almost a veek vill der—Neffor mind dot. Chust send der mouse vhen convenient, no?"

A click.

And a click in the mind of a mouse under an icebox. Mitkey stopped nibbling cheese and looked at it instead. He had a word for it. *Cheese*.

Very softly to himself he said it. "Cheese." Halfway between a squeak and a word it was, for the vocal chords Prxl had given him were rusty. But the next time it sounded better. "Cheese," he said.

And then, the other two words coming without his even thinking about it, "Dot iss cheese."

And it frightened him a little, so he scurried back into the hole in the wall and the comforting darkness. Then that

became just a bit frightening, too, because he had a word for that, too. "Vall. Behind der vall."

No longer was it just a picture in his mind. There was a sound that meant it. It was very confusing, and the more he remembered the more confusing it became.

DARKNESS OF NIGHT outside the professor's house, darkness within the wall. But there were bright lights in the professor's workroom, and there was brightening dimness in Mitkey's mind as he watched from a shadowed vantage point.

That gleaming metal cylinder on the workbench—Mitkey had seen its like before. And he had a word for that, too, rocket.

And the big lumbering creature who worked over it, talking incessantly to himself as he worked . . .

Almost, Mitkey called out "Brofessor!"

But the caution of mousehood kept him silent, listening.

It was like a downhill-rolling snowball



YOU HAFF EARNED PEACE UND REST, NO? PEACE UND CHEESE."

now, that growing memory of Mitkey's. Words came back in a rush as the professor talked, words and meanings.

And memories like the erratic shapes of jig-saw falling one by one into a coherent picture.

"Und der combartment for der mouse—Hydraulic shock absorbers yet, so der mouse lands softly-safely. Und der short-vafe radio dot vill tell me vwhether he liffs in der moon's admosphere after . . .

"Admosphere," and there was contempt in the professor's voice. "These vools who say the moon it hass no admosphere. Chust because der spegtroscope—"

But the slight bitterness in the voice of the professor was nothing to the growing bitterness in Mitkey's little mind.

For Mitkey was Mitkey again, now. Memory intact, if a bit confused and spotty. His dreams of Moustralia, and all.

His first sight of Minnie after his return, and the blackout-step onto tinfoil charged with electricity that had ended all his dreams. A trap! It had been a trap!

The professor had double-crossed him, had given him that shock deliberately to destroy his intelligence, perhaps even to kill him, to protect the interests of the big, awkward lumbering race of men from intelligent mice!

Ah, yes, the professor had been smart, Mitkey thought bitterly. And Mitkey was glad now that he had not called out "Broffessor!" when it had come to him to do so. The professor was his enemy!

Alone and in the dark, he would have to work. Minnie first, of course. Create one of the X-19 machines the Prxlians had showed him how to make, and raise Minnie's intelligence level. Then the two of them—

It would be hard, working in secret without the professor's help, to make that machine. But maybe . . .

A bit of wire on the floor under the workbench. Mitkey saw it and his bright little eyes gleamed and his whiskers twitched. He waited until Professor Oberburger was looking the other way, and then softly ran toward the wire, and with it in his mouth he scurried for the hole in the wall.

The professor didn't see him.

"Und for der ultra-vafe brojector . . ."

Mitkey safe in darkness with his bit of wire. A start! More wire, he would need. A fixed condenser—the professor would have one, surely. A flashlight cell—that would be hard to handle. He'd have to roll it across the floor after the professor was asleep. And other things. It would take him days, but what did time matter?

The professor worked late that night, very late.

But darkness in the workshop came at last. Darkness and a very busy little mouse.

AND BRIGHT MORNING, and the ringing of a doorbell.

"Package for Professor—uh—Oberburger."

"Yah? Vot iss?"

"Dunno. From the Hartford Laboratories, and they said to carry it careful."

Holes in the package.

"Yah, der mouse."

The professor signed for it, and then carried it into the workroom and unwrapped the wooden cage.

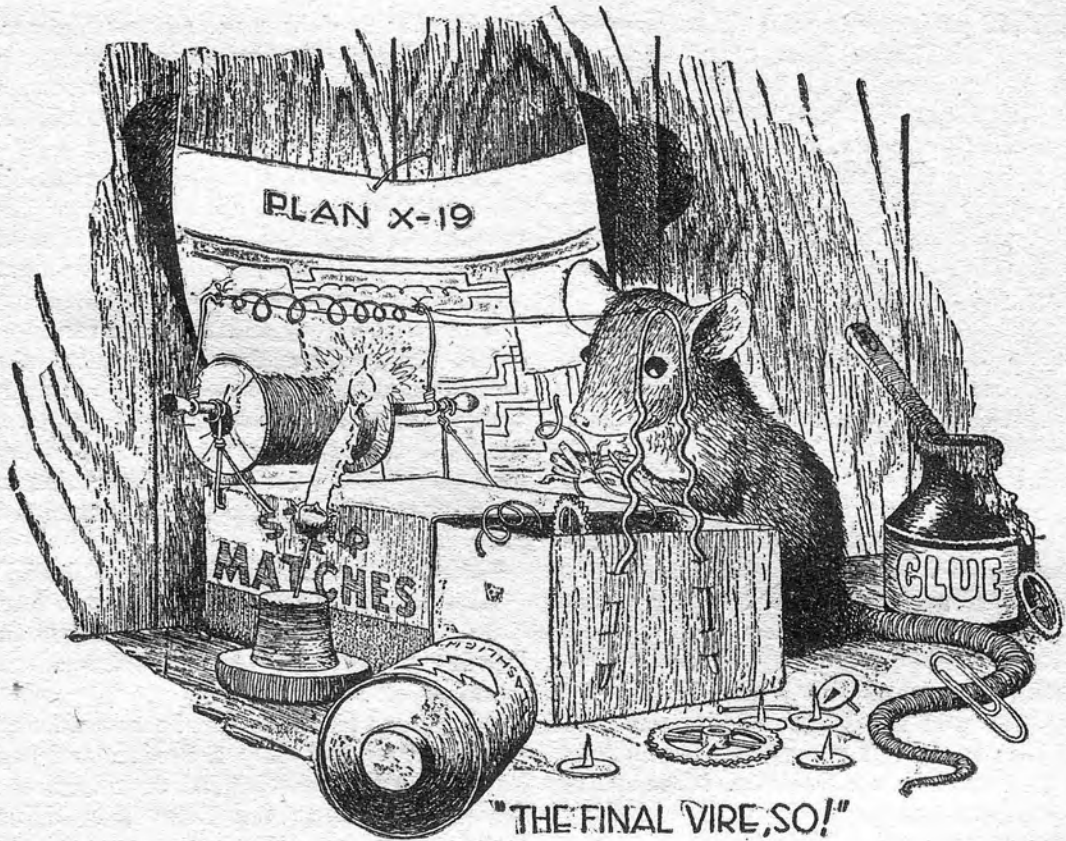
"Ah, der vHITE mouse. Liddle mouse, you are going a long, long vay. Vhat shall ve call you yet? VHITEY, no? Vould you vant some cheese, VHITEY?"

Yes, Whitey wanted cheese all right. He was a sleek, dapper little mouse with very close-set beady eyes and supercilious whiskers. And if you can picture a mouse to be haughty, Whitey was haughty. A city-slicker type of mouse. A blue-blood of the laboratories, who had never before tasted cheese. Nothing so common and plebian as cheese had entered his vitamin-infested diet.

But he tasted cheese and it was Camembert, good enough even for a blue-blood. And he wanted cheese all right. He ate with daintiness, a well-bred sort of nibbling. And if mice could smile, he would have smiled.

For one may smile and smile and be a villain.

"Und now, Whitey, I show you. I put der pick-up by your cage, to see if it iss set to broadcast der vaint sounds you



"THE FINAL VIRE, SO!"

make eating. Here, I adchust—"

From the speaker on the corner table a monstrous champing sound, the magnification a thousand times of the sound of a mouse eating cheese.

"Yess, it vorks. You see, Whitey, I eggsplain—Vhen der rocket on der moon lands, der combartment door it opens. But you can nodt get out, yet. There vill be bars, of balsa vood. You vill be able to gnaw through them, and you vill do so, to get out. If you are alive, see?

"Und der sound of your gnawing vill be on der ultra shordt-vafe to vich I shall stay duned-in, see? So vhen der rocket lands, I vill listen on my receifer, and if I hear you gnawing, I vill know you landed alive."

Whitey might well have been apprehensive if he had understood what the professor was saying, but of course he didn't. He nibbled on at the Camembert in blissful supercilious indifference.

"Und it vill tell me iff I am right about

der admosphere, too, Whitey. Vhen der rocket lands und der combartment door opens, der air vill shut off. Unless air iss on der moon, you vill liff only fife minutes or less.

"If you keep on gnawing through der balsa vood after dot, it is because admosphere iss on der moon und der astronomers und der spegtrosopes are vooling themselves. Und vools they are vhen they vail to subtract der Liebnitz revracton lines away from der spectrum, no?"

Over the vibrant diaphragm of the radio speaker, the champ-chomp-chomp of chewing cheese.

Yes, the pick-up worked, beautifully.

"Und now to install it der rocket in . . ."

A DAY. A NIGHT. Another day. Another night.

A man working on a rocket, and within the wall behind him a mouse working even harder to complete something much smaller, but almost equally as complex.

The X-19 projector to raise the intelligence of mice. Of Minnie, first.

A stolen pencil stub became a coil, a coil with a graphite core. Across the core, the stolen condenser, nibbled to within a microfarad of the exact capacity, and from the condenser a wire— But even Mitkey didn't understand it. He had a blueprint in his mind of how it was made, but not of why it worked.

"Und now der flashlight dry-cell which I stole from der—" Yes, Mitkey, too, talked incessantly to himself while he worked. But softly, softly so the professor wouldn't hear.

And from the wall, the rumble of a deeper guttural voice:

"Und now to put der pick-up der compartment in . . ."

Of men and mice. Hard to say which was the busier of the two.

* * *

Mitkey finished first. The little X-19 projector was not a thing of beauty to the eye; in fact it resembled the nucleus of an electrician's scrap pile. Most definitely it was not streamlined and gleaming like the rocket in the room outside the wall. It had rather a Rube Goldberg look about it.

But it would work. In every essential detail it followed the instructions Mitkey had received from the Prxlian scientists.

The final wire, so.

"Und now to bring mine Minnie . . ."

She was cowering in the far corner of the house. As far as possible from those strange neuric vibrations that were doing queer things inside her head.

There was panic in her eyes as Mitkey approached. Sheer panic.

"Mine Minnie, nothing iss to be avraid about. You must closer come to der brojector und then—und then you vill be an indelligent mouse, mine Minnie. You vill dalk goot English, like me yet."

For days now she had been puzzled and apprehensive. The strange actions of her consort, the strange noises he made that were not sensible mouse-squeaks at all, terrified her. Now he was making those weird noises at *her*.

"Mine Minnie, it iss all right. To der machine you must come closer, und you

vill be able to dalk soon. Almost like me, Minnie. Yess, der Prxls did things to mine vocal chords so mine voice it sounds bedder yet, but effen mitout, you vill be able to—"

Gently, Mitkey was trying to wedge his way in behind her, to push her out of the corner and edge her in the direction of the machine behind the wall of the next room.

Minnie squealed, and then she ran.

But alas, only a few feet toward the projector, and then she turned at right angles through the hole in the baseboard. Scurried across the kitchen floor and through a hole in the screen of the kitchen door. Outside, and into the high unmown grass of the yard.

"Minnie! Mine Minnie! Come back!"

And Mitkey scurried after her, too late.

In the foot-high grass and weeds he lost her completely, without a trace.

"Minnie! Minnie!"

Alas, poor Mitkey. Had he remembered that she was still only a mouse, and had he squeaked for her instead of calling, she might have come out from her hiding place.

Sadly, he returned and shut off the X-19 projector.

Later, when she returned, *if* she returned, he would figure some way. Possibly he could move the projector near her when she was asleep. To play safe, he could tie her feet first, so that if she was awakened by the neuric vibrations . . .

NIGHT, and no Minnie.

Mitkey sighed, and waited.

Outside the wall, the rumble of the professor's voice.

"Ach, effen the bread iss all. No food, und now I must go out und to der store yet. Food, it iss such a nuisance people must eat vhen on something imbortant they vork. But—ach, where iss mine hat?"

And the opening and closing of the door.

Mitkey crept to the mousehole. This was opportunity to look about out in the work-shop, to find a bit of soft string that would serve to tie Minnie's dainty little feet.

Yes, the light was on out there, and the professor was gone. Mitkey scurried to the middle of the room and looked around.

There was the rocket, and it was finished, as far as Mitkey could see. Probably now the professor was waiting until the proper time to fire it. Against one wall the radio equipment that would pick up the automatic broadcast from the rocket when it had landed.

Lying on the table, the rocket itself. Beautiful shining cylinder which—if the professor's calculations were correct—would be the first Earth-sent object ever to reach the moon.

It caught at Mitkey's breath to look at it.

"Iss it nodt beautiful, no?"

Mitkey jumped an inch up in the air. That had not been the professor's voice! It was a strange, squeaky, grating voice, a full octave too high for a human larynx.

A shrill chuckle, and, "Did I vrighten you?"

And Mitkey whirled around again, and this time located the source of the voice. The wooden cage on the table. Something white inside it.

A white paw reached through the bars of the door, the latch lifted, and a white mouse stepped out. His beady-bright eyes looked down, a bit contemptuously, at the little gray mouse on the floor below.

"You are this Mitkey, no, of whom der professor speaks?"

"Yess," said Mitkey, wonderingly. "Und you—ach, yess, I see vhat happened. Der X-19 projector. It vas in der vall chust outside your cage. Und, like me, from der professor you learned to dalk English. Vhat iss your name?"

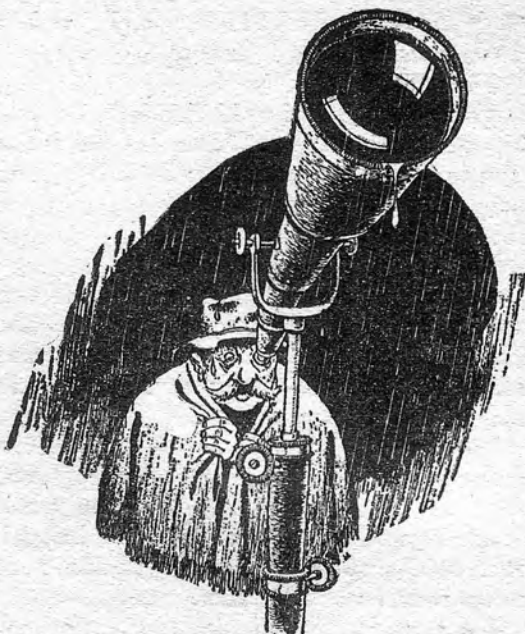
"Whitey, der professor calls me. It vill do. Vhat iss der X-19 projector, Mitkey?"

Mitkey told him.

"Umm," said Whitey. "Bossibilities I see, many bossibilities. Much more bedder than a drip to der moon. Vhat are your plans for using der projector?"

Mitkey told him. The beady-bright eyes of Whitey grew brighter—and beadier. But Mitkey didn't notice.

"Iff to der moon you are nodt going," Mitkey said, "come down. I vill show you



NOTHING TO DO NOW BUT WAIT... AND HOPE!

where to hide der vall inside."

"Nodt yet, Mitkey. Look, at dawn tomorrow takes off der rocket. No hurry iss. Soon der professor comes home. He vorks around a vwhile und dalks, und I listen. I learn more. Und a vwhile he vill sleep before dawn, und then I eggscap. Iss easy."

Mitkey nodded. "Dot iss smart. Budt do nodt trust der professor. If he learns you are now indelligent, he vill either kill you or make sure you do nodt eggscap. He is avraid of indelligent mice. Ach, vootsteps. Get back your cage in, und be careful."

And Mitkey scurried toward the mouse-hole, then remembered the piece of string and scurried back after it. The tip of his tail was just disappearing into the hole as Professor Oberburger walked into the room.

"Cheese, Whitey. Cheese I brought you, und to put in der combartment of der rocket too so as you eadt on der vay. You haff been a goot liddle mouse, Whitey?"

"Squeak."

The professor peered into the cage. "Almost I think you answer me, Whitey. You did, yess?"

Silence. Deep silence from the wooden cage . . .

MITKEY WAITED, and waited longer.

No Minnie.

"Der yard she iss hiding in," he told himself reassuringly. "She knows it iss dangerous to come in vhen iss light. Vhen dargkness comes—"

And darkness came.

No Minnie.

It was as dark outside now as it was within the wall. Mitkey sneaked to the kitchen door and made sure that it was open and that the hole was still there in the bottom of the screen.

He stuck his head through the hole and called, "Minnie! Mine Minnie!" And then he remembered she did not speak English, and squeaked for her instead. But softly, so the professor in the next room would not hear him.

No answer. No Minnie.

Mitkey sighed and scurried back from dark corner to dark corner of the kitchen until he had reached safety in the mouse-hole.

Just inside he waited. And waited.

His eyelids grew heavy and dropped. And he slept, deeply.

A touch awakened him, and Mitkey jumped. Then he saw it was Whitey.

"Shh," said the white mouse, "der broffessor is asleep. It iss almost dawn, und he has his alarm glock set to go off in an hour yet. Then he vill find I am gone. He may try to catch a mouse to use instead, so ve must hide und not go outside."

Mitkey nodded. "Smart you iss, Whitey. But mine Minnie! She iss—"

"Iss nothing ve can do, Mitkey. Vait, before ve hide, show me der X-19 und how it works."

"I show you quick, und then I hunt Minnie before der broffessor yakes. It iss here."

And Mitkey showed him.

"Und how vould you reduce der power, Mitkey, so it vould not make a mouse quite so indelligent as ve are?"

"Like this," said Mitkey. "But vhy?"

Whitey shrugged. "I chust vondered. Mitkey, der broffessor gafe me a very sbecial kind of cheese. Something new, und I brought you a liddle pice to try. Eadt it, und then I vill help you find

Minnie. Ve haff almost an hour yet."

Mitkey tasted the cheese. "Iss nodt new. Iss Limburger. But hass a very vunny taste, effen for Limburger."

"Vhich do you like bedder?"

"I don't know, Vhitey. I think I do nodt like—"

"Iss an acquired taste, Mitkey. Iss vonderful. Eadt it all, und you vill like it."

So to be polite and to avoid an argument, Mitkey ate the rest of it.

"Iss nodt bad," he said. "Und now ve look for Minnie."

But his eyes were heavy, and he yawned. He got as far as the edge of the mouse-hole.

"Whitey, I must rest a minute. Vill you yake me in aboutt fife min—"

But he was asleep, sound asleep, sounder asleep than he had ever been, before he finished the sentence.

Whitey grinned, and became a very busy little mouse.

THE RINGING of an alarm clock.

Professor Oberburger opened his eyes sleepily and then remembered the occasion, and got hastily out of bed. Within half an hour now, the time.

He went out behind the house and inspected the firing rack. It was in order, and so was the rocket. Except, of course, that the compartment door was open. No use to put the mouse in until the last moment.

He went indoors again, and carried the rocket out to the rack. Fitted it very carefully into place, and inspected the starter pin. All in order.

Ten minutes. Better get the mouse.

The white mouse was sound asleep in the wooden cage.

Professor Oberburger reached into the cage carefully. "Ach, Whitey. Now for your long, long chourney. Boor liddle mouse, I vill not avaken you if I can help. More bedder you should sleep until der cholt of der stardt avakens you."

Gently, very gently, he carried his sleeping burden out into the yard and put it in the compartment.

Three doors closed. First the inner one, then the balsa grating, then the outer one.

All but the balsa grating would open automatically when the rocket landed. And the radio pick-up would broadcast the sound of the mouse chewing its way through the balsa.

If there was atmosphere on the moon. If the mouse—

Eyes on the minute-hand of his watch, the professor waited. Then the second-hand. Now—

His finger touched the accurately-timed delayed-action starter button, and then he ran into the house.

WHOOOSH!

Trail of fire into the air where the rocket had been.

"Gootbye, Whitey. Boor liddle mouse, but someday you vill be vamous. Almost as vamous as mine star-mouse Mitkey vill be, someday when I can bublish—"

Now for the diary entry of the departure.

The professor reached for his pen, and as he did so caught a glimpse of the inside of his hand, the hand that held the mouse.

White it was. Perplexed, he studied it closer under the light.

"White paint. Where vould I haff picked up white paint? I haff some, but I haff not used it. Nothing on der rocket, nothing in der room or der yard—

"Der mouse? Whitey? I held him so. But vhy vould der laboratories send me a mouse painted vHITE? I told them any color vould do—"

Then the professor shrugged, and went to wash his hands. It was puzzling, very puzzling, but it did not matter really. But why on earth would the laboratories have done that?

* * *

But in the black compartment of the roaring, soaring rocket. Moon-bound and bust.

Doped Limburger cheese.

Black treachery.

White paint.

Alas, poor Mitkey! Moonward-bound, without a ticket back.

NIGHT, and it had been raining in Hartford. The professor hadn't been able to follow the rocket through his tele-

scope.

But it was up there all right, and going strong.

The radio pick-up told him that. Roar of the jets, so loud he couldn't tell whether or not the mouse inside was alive or not. But it probably was, hadn't Mitkey survived on the trip to Prxl?

Finally, he turned off the lights to take a cat-nap in his chair. When he awoke, maybe the rain would have stopped.

His head nodded, his eyes closed. And after a while, he dreamed that he opened them again. He knew he was dreaming because of what he saw.

Four little white spots moving across the floor from the door.

Four little white spots that might have been mice, but couldn't be—unless they were dream mice—because they moved with military precision, in an exact rectangle. Almost like soldiers.

And then a sound, too faint for him to distinguish, and the four white spots abruptly fell into a single file and disappeared, one by one at precise intervals, against the baseboard.

The professor woke, and chuckled to himself.

"Vot a dream! I go to sleep thinking of der vHITE mouse und vHITE paint on mein hands und I dream—"

He stretched and yawned, and stood up.

But a small white spot, a white *something* had just appeared at the baseboard of the room again. Another joined it. The professor blinked his eyes and watched them. Could he be dreaming, standing up?

A scraping sound, something being shoved across the floor, and as the first two white spots moved away from the wall, two more appeared. Again in rectangular formation, they started across the floor toward the door.

And the scraping continued. Almost as though the four—*could* they be white mice?—were moving something, two of them pulling it and two pushing.

But that was silly.

He reached out beside him for the switch of the light, and clicked it. The light momentarily blinded him.

"Stobp!" High and shrill and commanding.

The professor could see again now, and it *was* four white mice. They had been moving something, a strange little object fashioned around what looked like one of the cells of his own pencil-type flashlight.

And three of the mice were now doing the moving, frantically, and the fourth had stepped between him and the strange object. It pointed what seemed to be a small tube at the professor's face.

"If you moofe, I gill you," shrilled the mouse with the tube.

It wasn't completely the threat of the tube that kept the professor motionless. He was simply too surprised to move. Was the mouse with the tube Whitey? Looked like him, but then they *all* looked like Whitey, and anyway Whitey was on his way to the moon.

"But vot—who—vhy—?"

The three mice with the burden were even now vanishing through the hole in the screen door. The fourth mouse backed after them.

Just inside the screen door, he paused.

"You are a vool, Brofessor," he said. "All men are vools. Ve mice vill take care uf that."

And it dropped the tube and vanished through the hole.

Slowly the professor walked over and picked up the weapon the white mouse had dropped. It was a match-stick. Not a tube or a weapon at all, just a burned safety match.

The professor said, "But how—vhy—?"

He dropped the match as though it were hot, and took out a big handkerchief to mop his forehead.

"But how—*und* vhy—?"

He stood there what seemed to be a long time, and then slowly he went to the icebox and opened it. Back in a far corner of it was a bottle.

The professor was practically a teetotaler, but there comes a time when even a teetotaler needs a drink. This was it. He poured a stiff one.

* * *

Night, and it was raining in Hartford.

Old Mike Cleary, watchman for the Hartford Laboratories, was taking a drink, too. In weather like this, a man with rheumatism in his bones needed a drink to

warm his insides after that walk across the yard in the rain.

"A foine night, for ducks," he said, and because that drink had not been the first, he chuckled at his own wit.

He went on into building number three, through the chemical stockroom, the meter room, the shipping room. His lantern, swinging at his side, sent grotesque shadows before him.

But these shadows didn't frighten Mike Cleary; he'd chased them through this building for nights of ten years now.

He opened the door of the live-stock room to look in, and then left it wide behind him and went on in. "Begorra," he said, "and how did *that* happen?"

For the doors of two of the large cages of white mice were open, wide open. They hadn't been open when he'd made his last round two hours before.

Holding his lantern high, he looked into the cages. They were both empty. Not a mouse in either.

Mike Cleary sighed. They'd blame *him* for this, of course.

Well, and let them. A few white mice weren't worth much, even if they took it out of his salary. Sure, let them take it out if they thought it was his fault.

"Misther Williams," he'd tell the boss, "those doors were closed when I went by the first time, and open when I went by the second, and *I* say the catches on them were worthless and dee-fective, but if you want to blame me, sorr, then just deduct the value of the—"

A faint sound behind him made him whirl around.

There in a corner of the room was a white mouse, or what looked like a white mouse. But it wore a shirt and trousers, and—

"Ye Gods," said Mike Cleary, and he said it almost reverently. "Is it the d. t's. that I'm—"

And another thought struck him. "Or can it be, sorr, that you are one of the *little folk*, please, sorr?"

And he swept off his hat with a trembling hand.

"Nuds!" said the white mouse. And, like a streak, it was gone.

There was sweat on Mike Cleary's fore-



head, and sweat trickling down his back and under his armpits.

"Got them," he said. "Oi've got them!"

And quite illogically, since that was now his firm belief, he took the pint bottle from his hip pocket and finished the rest of its contents at a single gulp.

DARKNESS, AND ROARING.

And it was the sudden cessation of the roaring sound that wakened Mitkey. Wakened him to utter and stygian blackness of a confined space. His head ached and his stomach ached.

And then, suddenly, he knew where he was. The rocket!

The jets had stopped firing, and that meant he was over the line and falling, falling toward the moon.

But how—? Why—?

He remembered the radio pick-up that would be broadcasting sounds from the rocket to the professor's ultra-short-wave receiver, and he called out despairingly, "Professor! Professor Oberburger! Help! It iss—"

And then another sound drowned him out.

A whistling sound, a high shrill sound that could only be the rush of the rocket through air, through an atmosphere.

The moon? Was the professor right and the astronomers wrong about the moon, or was the rocket falling back to earth?

At any rate, the vanes were gripping now, and the rocket was slowing rather than accelerating.

A sudden jerk almost knocked the breath out of him. The parachute vanes were opening now. If they would—

Crash!

And again blackness behind the eyes of Mitkey as well as before them. Blackout in blackness, and when two doors clicked open to admit light through balsa bars, Mitkey did not see them.

Not at first, and then he wakened and groaned.

His eyes came to focus first on the wooden bars, and then through them.

"Der moon," he muttered. He reached through the balsa-bar gate and unlatched it. Fearfully, he stuck his little gray nose out of the door and looked around.

Nothing happened.

He pulled his head back in and turned around to face the microphone.

"Brofessor! Can you hear me, Brofessor? Iss me, Mitkey. Dot Whitey, he double-grosses us. White paint I got on me, so I know vhat happened. You vere nodt in on it, or der white paint would not be.

"It vas dreachery, Brofessor! By mine own kind, a mouse, I vas double-grossed. Und Whitey— Brofessor, he has der X-19 brojector now! I am avraid vhat he may be blanning. Iss wrong, or he vould haf told me, no?"

Then silence, and Mitkey thinking deeply.

"Brofessor, I got to get back. Nodt for me, but to stop Whitey! Maybe you can help. Loogk, I can change der broadcaster here into a receifer, I think. It should be easy; receifers are simpler, no? Und you quick build a ultra-shordt sender like this vun.

"Yess I stardt now. Goot-bye, Brofessor. I change der vires."

* * *

"Mitkey, can you hear me, Mitkey?"

"Mitkey, loogk, I giff instructions now und I rebeat effery half hour for a vvhile, in gase you gannot get der first time.

"Virst, when you haf heard insdructions, shudt off der set to safe bower. You vill need all der bower left in der batteries to stardt again. So do not broadcast again. Do nodt answer me.

"Aboutd aiming und calculating, later. Virst, check der fuel left in der dubes. I used more than vas needed, und I think it vill be enough because to leaf der light-

grafity moon vill need much much less bower than to leaf der earth. Und . . ."

And over and over, the professor repeated it. There were gaps, there were things he himself could not know how to do without being there, but Mitkey might be able to find the answers.

Over and over he repeated the adjustments, the angle of aiming, the timing. Everything except how Mitkey could move the rocket to turn it, to aim it. But Mitkey was a smart mouse, the professor knew. Maybe with levers, somehow—if he could find levers—

Over and over and far into the night, until the good professor's voice was hoarse with fatigue, and until at last, right in the middle of the nineteenth repetition, he fell sound asleep.

Bright sunlight when he awakened, and the clock on the shelf striking eleven. He rose and stretched his cramped muscles, sat down again and leaned forward to the microphone.

"Mitkey can you—"

But no, there was no use in that. Unless Mitkey had heard one of his earlier sendings the night before, it would be too late now. Mitkeys batteries—the rocket's batteries—would be worn out by now if he still had the set connected.

Nothing to do now but wait, and hope.

The hoping was hard, and the waiting was harder.

Night. Day. Night. And nights and days until a week had gone by. Still no Mitkey.

Again, as once before, the professor had set his wire cage trap and caught Minnie. Again, as before, he took good care of her.

"Mine Minnie, maybe soon your Mitkey vill be back mit us.

"Budt Minnie, vhy can't you dalk, like him yet? If he made an eggs-19 brojector, vhy did he nodt use it on you? I do nodt understand. Vhy?"

But Minnie didn't tell him why, because she didn't know. She watched him suspiciously, and listened, but she wouldn't talk. Not until Mitkey got back did they find out why. And then—paradoxically—only because Mitkey had not yet taken time to remove the white paint.

MITKEY'S LANDING was a good one. He was able to crawl away from it, and after a while to walk.

But it had been in Pennsylvania, and it had taken him two days to reach Hartford. Not afoot, of course. He had hidden at a filling station until a truck with a Connecticut license had come along, and when it took on gasoline, it took Mitkey, too.

A last few miles on foot, and then at last—

"Professor! Iss me, Mitkey."

"Mitkey! Mein Mitkey! Almost I had giffen up hope to see you. Tell me how you—"

"Layder, Professor. I tell you all, layder. Virst, where iss Minnie? You haff her? She vas lost vhen—"

"In der cage, Mitkey. I kept her safe for you. Now I can release her, no?"

And he opened the door of the wire cage. Minnie came out, hesitantly.

"Master," she said. And it was at Mitkey she was looking.

"Vot?"

She repeated, "Master. You are a white mouse. I am your slafe."

"Vot?" said Mitkey again, and he looked at the professor. "Vot iss? She *speaks*, budt—"

The professor's eyes were wide. "I do not know, Mitkey. Neffer she speaks to me. I did not know dot she— Vait, she says about white mice. Maybe she—"

"Minnie," said Mitkey, "do you nodt know me?"

"You are a white mouse, master. So I speak to you. Ve are nodt to speak except to der white mouses. I did not speak, so, until now."

"Who? Minnie, who are nodt to speak except to white mouses?"

"Us gray mouses, master."

Mitkey turned to Professor Oberburger. "Professor, I think I begin to understand. It is vorse than I— Minnie, vot are der gray mouses subbosd to do for der white mouses?"

"Anything, master. Ve are your slafes, ve are your vorkers, ve are your soldiers. Ve obey der Emperor, and all der other white mouses. Und virst all der gray mouses vill be taught to vork und to

fight. Und then—"

"Vait, Minnie. I haf an idea. How much iss two und two?"

"Four, master."

"How much iss thirdeen und tvelf?"

"I do not know, master."

Mitkey nodded. "Go back der cage in."

He turned again to the professor. "You see? A liddle, nodt much, he raises der lefel of indelligence of der gray mice. Der zero-two leffel, vchich iss his—so he iss chusdt a liddle smarter than der other white mice, und many dimes as smardt as der ordinary mice, who they vill use as solchers und vorkers. Iss diabolical, no?"

"It is diabolical, Mitkey. I—I did not think mice could be so low—so low as some men, Mitkey."

"Professor, I am ashamed of mine kind. I see now mine ideas of Moustralia, und men und mice lifing in beace—they vere dreams. I vas wrong, Professor. Budt no dime to think aboutd dreams—ve must act!"

"How, Mitkey? Shall I delephone der bolice und ask them to arrest—"

"No. Men can nodt stop them, Professor. Mice can hide from men. They haf hidden from men all their lifes. A million bolicemen, a million solchiers could not vind Whitey der First. I must do it meinself."

"You, Mitkey? Alone?"

"It iss for that I came back from der moon, Professor. I am as smardt as he iss—I am der only mouse as smardt as Whitey iss."

"But he has der white mice—der other white mice mit him. He has guards, probably. Vot could you do alone?"

"I could vind der machine. Der eggs-nineteen brojector vot raised their indelligence. You see?"

"But vot could you do, Mitkey, mit der machine? They are already—"

"I could shordt-circuit it, Professor. Referse der derminals und shordt-circuit it, und it vould kick oudt in vun flash—und make normal again all der artificially-raised indelligence mitin a mile from it."

"Budt, Mitkey, you vould be there, too. It vould destroy your own indelligence. You vould do dot?"

"I vould, und I vill. For der vorld, und

for beace. Budt I haff an ace up der sleeefe, maybe. Maybe I get mine indelligence back."

"How, Mitkey?"

LITTLE GRAY MAN with his head bent low over a white-painted little gray mouse, the two of them discussing high heroism and the fate of the world. And neither saw that it was funny—or was it?

"How, Mitkey?"

"Ve renew der vHITE paint virst. So I can vool them und get by der guards. It vill be in or near der Hartford Laboratories, I belief—vhere Whitey came from, und vhere he finds der other white mice to vork mit him.

"Und segund, also before I leafe here, I make another brojector, see? Und I raise Minnie's leffel of indelligence to mine, und teach her how to oberate der brojector. See?"

"Und vhen I lose mine indelligence in shordting der machine at der laboratories, I still haff mine normal indelligence und mine instinct—und I think these vill bring me back here to mine house und mine Minnie!"

The professor nodded. "Eggcellent. Und der laboratories iss three miles away from here, und der shordt vill nodt affect Minnie. Then she can restore you, hein?"

"Yess. I need vire, der vinest vire you haff. Und—"

Rapidly this time, the projecter grew. This time Mitkey had help, expert help, and could ask for what he wanted instead of having to steal it in darkness.

Once while they worked the professor remembered something. "Mitkey!" he said suddenly, "you vere on der moon! I almost forgodt to ask you aboutt it. Vot vas it like?"

"Brofessor, I vas so vorried aboutt getting back, I did nodt notice. I forgodt to look!"

And then the final connections, which Mitkey insisted on making himself.

"Nodt that I do nodt trust you, Brofessor," he explained earnestly, "But it vas a bromise, to der Prxlian scientists who taught me. Und I do nodt know how it vorks myself, und you vould nodt un-

derstand, either. It iss beyond der science of men und mice. But I bromised, so I make der connections alone."

"I understand, Mitkey. It iss all right. But der other brojector, der vun you vill shordt—maybe somevun might find it und rebar der shordt?"

Mitkey shook his head.

"Iss hobeless. Vunce it is ruined, no vun vill ever make head or tail of how it vorked. Nodt effen you could, Brofessor."

Near the cage—now with the door closed again—in which Minnie waited. The final wire, and a click.

And gradually, Minnie's eyes changed.

Mitkey talking rapidly, explaining to her. Giving her the facts and the plans . . .

UNDER THE FLOOR of the main building of the Hartford Laboratories, it was dark. But enough light came through a few cracks for the keen eyes of Mitkey to see that the mouse who had just challenged him was a white mouse, carrying a short club.

"Who iss?"

"Iss me," said Mitkey. "I chust eggscaped vrom der big cage ubstairs. Vot giffs?"

"Goot," said the white mouse. "I vill take you to der Emperor of der Mices. To him, und to der machine he made, you owe your indelligence und your allechance."

"Who iss he?" asked Mitkey innocently.

"Whitey der First. Emperor of der vHITE mices, who are der rulers of *all* der mice und layder der rulers of all der—But you vill learn all vhen you take der oath."

"You sboke of a machine," said Mitkey. "Vot iss, und vhere iss it?"

"In der party headquarters, vhere I now take you. This vay."

And Mitkey followed the white mouse. As he followed, he asked, "How many of us intelligent vHITE mice iss there?"

"You vill be der twenty-virst."

"Und all tventy iss here?"

"Yess, und ve are draining der slafe battalion of gray mice, who vill vork und fight for us. Iss now a hundred of them already. Der barracks is vhere they liff."

"How far iss der barracks from der headquarters?"

"Ten, maybe tvelff yards."

"Iss goot," said Mitkey.

The last turn of the passage, and there was the machine, and there was Whitey. Other white mice were seated in a semi-circle around him, listening.

"—und der negst moof iss to— Vot iss this, Guard?"

"A new recruit, Your Highness. He chust eggscaped, and he vill choin us."

"Goot," said Whitey. "Ve are discussing vorld blans, but ve vill vait until ve haff giffen you der oath. Stand by der machine, mit vun hand on der cylinder und vun hand raised toward me, palm vorward."

"Yess, Your Highness," said Mitkey, and he moved around the semi-circle of mice toward the machine.

"Iss so." said Whitey. "Der hand higher. Dot's it. Now rebeat: *Der white mice is to rule der vorld.*"

"Der white mice iss to rule der vorld."

"*Gray mice, und other creatures including men, vill be their slafes.*"

"Gray mice, und other creatures including men, vill be their slafes."

"*Those who obchect vill be tortured und killed.*"

"Those who obchect vill be tortured und killed."

"*Und Whitey der First shall rule ofer all.*"

"Dot's vot you think," said Mitkey, and he reached in among the wires of the X-19 projector and touched two of them together . . .

THE PROFESSOR AND MINNIE were waiting. The professor seated in his chair, Minnie on the table beside the new projector Mitkey had made before he left.

"Three hours und twenty minutes," said the professor. "Minnie, do you subbose anything could haff gone wrong?"

"I hobe nodt, Professor . . . Professor, iss mice habbier mit indelligence? Vould nott indelligent mice be unhabby?"

"You are unhabby, mein Minnie?"

"Und Mitkey, too, Professor. I could tell. Indelligence is vorry und drouble—

und in der vall und mit all der cheese you pudt under der icebox, ve vas so habby, Brofessor."

"Maybe, Minnie. Maybe only drouble do brains bring to mice. As to men, Minnie."

"But men, they cannot help it, Brofessor. They are born that vay. If it vas meant for mice to be smardt, they vould be born so, iss not?"

The professor sighed. "Maybe you are a smardter mouse, effen, than Mitkey. Und I am vorried, Minnie, aboutt— *Look, iss him!*"

Small gray mouse, most of the paint worn off of him and the rest dirtied to his own gray color, slinking along the wall.

Pop, into the mouse-hole in the baseboard.

"*Minnie, iss him!* He succeeded! Now I set der cage drap, so I can pudt him on der table by der machine— Or vait, iss not necessary. It vill broject to affect Mitkey behind der vall. Chust switch it on und—"

"Gootbye, Brofessor," said Minnie. She reached forward to the machine, and too late the professor saw what she was going to do.

"Squeak!"

And just a small gray mouse on a table, running frantically around looking for a way down. In the center of the table, a small, complex, short-circuited machine that would never work again.

"Squeak!"

The professor picked her up gently.

"Minnie, mein Minnie! Yess, you vere right. You und Mitkey vill be habbier so. But I vish you had vaited—chust a liddle. I wanted to talk to him vunce more, Minnie. But—"

The professor sighed and put the gray mouse down on the floor.

"Vell, Minnie, now to your Mitkey you can—"

But instructions were too late, and quite unnecessary, even if Minnie had understood them. The little gray mouse was now a little gray streak in the direction of the baseboard mousehole.

And then from a sheltered darkness deep within the wall, the professor heard two joyful little squeaks . . .

by ALFRED
COPPEL



• THE LAST

Aram Jerrold watched helplessly as Santane's beast-rockets screamed into the Void bearing madness to the Thirty Suns, and knew that this was cosmic Armageddon . . . the crimson horror of Space-war would smash Galactic Civilization utterly and forever! Yet in his tortured mind a voice from the past commanded: *"You must save something from the ruins!"*

*Jerrold smashed his fist into
Santane's distorted face . . .*



TWO ALIVE!

THE VERDICT, THOUGHT Aram Jerrold wearily, would be death. The Supreme Council itself would demand it. He had rebelled against the Tetrarchy—rebelled senselessly, desperately, without hope of success or escape—and the reckoning had come. The Gov-

ernment of the Thirty Suns would demand his life . . . more, if the science of the Security Police were up to it. Aram repressed a shudder. He knew that science well. No one rose to a position of command in the Thirty Suns Navy or to membership in the Executive Committee of

the Tetrarchy without respect for the methods of the dread Greens.

The courtroom was dark, a pattern of sombre hues calculated to impress a prisoner with the futility of hope. It had been weeks since Jerrold had seen the sun. Weeks of endless interrogation and repeated narcosynthesis. He had been shunted from Bureau to Bureau, from Department to Department, each set of cogs in the vast governmental machinery of the Terminus probing him for evidence of sabotage or rebellion within its own structure. He had been badgered, beaten, drugged and threatened. Now, at last, the end of the ordeal seemed near. There remained only the sentence of death to be passed—the method and place decided upon—and it would be done with. The ponderous bureaucracy of the Tetrarchy had wrung him dry, and now it prepared to cast him aside, satisfied that his rebellion was a purely personal aberration and not part of a widespread plot against the stability of galactic tyranny.

The drugs had clouded his vision, giving a nightmare mistiness to the shadowy courtroom. Jerrold could see that the room was empty but for the guards and clerks and the black-masked tribunes. It would not do, of course, to let the people know that one of the chosen masters—a member of the Executive Committee—had suddenly become an insubordinate rebel and traitor.

Behind him a door opened, splitting the gloom with a fleeting wedge of light. The wedge vanished and Aram Jerrold heard again the light, crisp footsteps. He knew without looking that it was Deve Jennet. She had been in the courtroom every day, giving testimony, slamming doors in his face. Doors that might possibly have led to freedom. Every day she had driven another rivet into the chains of evidence that bound him, methodically, deliberately.

She passed by him without turning her head and took a seat near the tribune's dais. Jerrold stared at her through the mist that swam sickeningly before his eyes. Dimly, the memory of her as she had been before this nightmare came to him. He remembered her, soft and yielding in his arms through the long nights of Terminus.

Nights filled with tenderness and longing talk of freedom for the two of them somewhere beyond the stars.

This was the same woman, but changed. The lustrous dark eyes were the same, and the full lips. The same pale hair and slim body. But it sat encased in a severely cut uniform, all femininity gone from it. The uniform was green. The hated color of the Security Police . . .

Jerrold had heard again all the words that he had spoken to her through those nights. Only this time the words had been retold to three masked judges and their clerk. This time, the words had had a ring of doom.

At first Aram had suffered the tortures of the damned wondering why Deve had betrayed him. He had known well enough her high connections in the Supreme Council and he had known that she served as a member of the Greens. But he had imagined that she loved him, and he had been stupid enough to trust her. Now, after weeks of ordeal, it seemed to matter no longer. Jerrold wanted only to rest.

ON THE DAIS, one of the black-masked figures was speaking. Aram leaned forward painfully to catch what was being said.

"This court wishes to go on record as favoring a severe reprimand for the Bureau of Psychometrics personnel involved in the testing of Aram Jerrold. His inherent instability should have been uncovered long before he was appointed to the Executive Committee. Only the chance use of a mental probe on him—at the request of the Security Police—" he nodded toward Deve Jennet, "—prevented serious inconvenience to the Government of the Thirty Suns. Such negligence cannot be tolerated in so vital a Bureau."

He paused while the clerk recorded his remarks, then continued: "Aram Jerrold, you have been convicted of treason against the Government of the Thirty Suns. You have been proved guilty of attempting to use your position as an officer of the Thirty Suns Navy to steal a spacecraft and escape from the dominance of your government. You have disgraced your uniform and your high office as a member of

the Executive Committee of the Supreme Council of the Government of the Thirty Suns—"The hooded man rolled the sonorous phrases off his tongue with obvious relish. "Have you anything to say before the sentence of the court is passed?"

Jerrold looked at Deve Jennet. She sat motionless, her body tense in the green Police uniform. It was hard for Jerrold to speak. The druggings and violent interrogations had left him weak. Yet a spark of rebellion remained. Enough to lash out against his tormentors for one last time.

"I . . . I want only to say," he began thickly, "that . . . what I have done . . . I would do again, gladly. I was sick of oppression . . . tired of not . . . daring even to think a thought of my own. Sick of pompous bureaucratic tyranny . . ." Jerrold drew a shuddering breath. "The Tetrarchy rules thirty star-systems . . . but thirty star systems are not the Universe. Somewhere, I thought . . . there must be freedom. My crime . . . was *failure* . . . nothing more!"

"Enough!" The tribune's voice shook with sudden anger. "This court is not convened to listen to treasonous tirades! The clerk will strike the prisoner's remarks from the record!"

Darkness flickered momentarily at the edges of Jerrold's field of vision. He felt spent by his effort at defiance. He forced himself to stand erect.

"The sentencing will proceed!"

"The prisoner will face the Standard!" intoned the clerk.

ARAM RAISED HIS EYES to the hated symbol on the wall behind the judges' dais. Long habit made him square his shoulders under the tattered remains of his blue uniform. He stared up at the Standard of the Tetrarchy's Spaceship and Sun, despising everything it stood for.

"*Aram Jerrold, traitor and rebel: you are sentenced by this court to death by slow disintegration!* For the safety of the Tetrarchy!"

The words fell like stones from the lips of the masked tribune into the fragile silence of the vaulted chamber.

In spite of himself, Jerrold flinched. Sometimes men survived weeks of torment

under the cancerous rays of the disintegrators . . .

One of the judges spoke in low tones to his colleagues.

"We have received a request from Kaidor V, gentlemen. Provincial Governor Santane asks that this sentence be commuted to life imprisonment on Kaidor V so that the prisoner may be used in some experimental work now in progress there."

Aram could feel his stomach muscles tightening and the weakness seeping into his knees. The disintegrators would be preferable to becoming an experimental animal on Kaidor V. The Kaidor province was the farthest of the Thirty Suns, and the arsenal of the Tetrarchy. The ghastliest of the Tetrarchy's weapons came from Kaidor, and they had to be tested there . . . on living men.

"It seems," muttered one of the tribunes pettishly, "that every time a naval officer is convicted of anything a request comes through from Kaidor that he be turned over to Santane. One would imagine Governor Santane is building a navy!" He shuffled the papers before him while the others waited. "Still," he continued thoughtfully, "it would be politically unwise to execute this prisoner here on Terminus. The spacemen of his command are based here and there is no point in stirring up trouble in the Fleet . . . I am inclined to recommend acceptance of this offer to take him off our hands."

"*Objection, sirs!*" Jerrold looked about to see that Deve Jennet was on her feet, addressing the members of the tribunal.

"As you know, sirs," she was saying crisply, "I have the good fortune to be one of the lesser members of the Executive Committee in my office as liason officer from Security. I feel it only fair to warn you that the Supreme Council would be extremely displeased if this prisoner should escape with his life. It is felt that an example must be made of him. If it is unwise to carry out the sentence here on Terminus, I will be happy to arrange a transfer to Atmion IV. On the Green planet there will be no possibility of trouble by Fleet members. I must insist that you accede to the wishes of the Council. Aram Jerrold must die in the

disintegrators. No other course of action will be acceptable to the Supreme Council!"

The three judges conferred among themselves and then the senior spoke again. The tone of his voice indicated all too well the awe in which the Supreme Council and all its appendages was held by members of the Judicial Department of the Thirty Suns Government.

"This court was not aware that the Supreme Council had any special desires concerning the disposition of this case. Had it been known to us earlier, we would not have considered even for a moment the request of Provincial Governor Santane."

"The Supreme Council, gentlemen," returned Deve Jennet stiffly, "has an interest in this case, as I have indicated to you. It has been communicated to you in the proper time and form. I await your action on it."

"Of course, Leader Jennet, of course. It was not our intention to question the policies of the Council!" The judge signalled the guards.

"Aram Jerrold is hereby remanded to the custody of the Security Police, to be transported by first available spaceship to Atmion IV, there to be put to death in the manner prescribed by Directive 25-A-38 governing Execution of Convicted Persons Above the Rank of Commander. Remove the prisoner!"

Aram passed near Deve Jennet as she replied: "It will be so reported, gentlemen." And then looking somberly at Jerrold she added, "I myself will go to Atmion IV to see to it that this prisoner is accorded the treatment he deserves."

Aram stumbled out of the courtroom under guard. Deve's final words rang strangely in his ears, a perplexing threnody of the dreams they had shared in the hazy past. He had the odd feeling that in spite of the things that had passed, the end was not yet . . .

* * *

Of the flight out to Atmion, Jerrold remembered almost nothing. The iron determination that had kept him on his feet during the last days of his trial failed him at last and the reaction of the druggings

he had suffered hit him . . . hard. He writhed in the agonies of addiction for the duration of the trip out from Terminus. He knew vaguely that he lay in the prison ship's infirmary, strapped to a bunk. The discomforts of acceleration and the shift into second-stage flight above light speed added themselves to his tortures and filled his nightmares with nauseating spectres. For two weeks Jerrold went through sheer hell as his drug-saturated system screamed for more narcotics. None were given.

By the time the huge prison ship touched down on the dread world of the Greens, Aram Jerrold was on his way back. Spent, weak and emaciated, he heard the landing alarms and knew that he would live to face the disintegrators.

ATMION IV, the only habitable planet of a star-system bizarre and hateful! Three suns in the smoky sky, air that tasted of brimstone and ashes. Heavy, deadening gravity. A world of hot rain that fell daily out of the hazy cloud canopy, a desert at periastion and quagmire at apastron. Barren ground and a turbulent, sulphuric sea.

The three suns blazed through the overcast as the prison ship settled into the steaming mud that was the spaceport. Scalding rain sluiced down the long flanks of the vessel, corrosive and fetid.

Aram Jerrold knew of Atmion IV. No officer in the Fleet did not. It was a foul planet, a world unwanted by any of the many Bureaus, and as such the perfect prison world. The planet of the Greens. On all its vast hulk there was only one settlement. The Green Fortress. Political exiles and condemned prisoners from all over the Tetrarchy of the Thirty Suns were brought to the Fortress on Atmion IV. None ever returned.

Aram remembered that Atmion lay in the Twenty Ninth Decant, only four light years from Kaidor on the very periphery of the Tetrarchy. These were the outpost systems, the suns far from mighty Terminus and the center of the teeming life of the galaxy. These were the hinterlands of empire, sullen, unknown, unwanted.

The Green Fortress proper stood on a high crag, etched against the smoky grey

of Atmion IV's eternal overcast. Standing in the open port of the prison ship, Jerrold could see the black bulk of the turreted stronghold through the curtain of driving rain. The spaceport was a sea of mud that still boiled in places from the heat of the great starship's landing jets.

Chained in a long line, the human cargo of the vessel was herded through the rain and mud toward an electrified wire enclosure. Aram smiled wryly at that evidence of "Security." What need was there for it on this world? Where could a prisoner go if he should find himself on the other side of the wire barrier? It was likely, Jerrold thought, that there was a Directive on it from Terminus, and that accounted for the electrified wire.

He estimated that there were perhaps nine hundred men and women in the human chain that stretched from the starship to the long reception buildings within the enclosure. The chaff of heterodoxy—cast off by the single-track machinery of galactic bureaucracy.

The Greens drove the sodden prisoners through the gates without rancor or interest. It was as though the prisoners had ceased to be human once they crossed the line that excluded them from the society of free men.

Inside the long, draughty shelters, the prisoners were stripped naked, men and women alike, run through cleansing water jets, dried, clothed and photographed. Then they were broken into groups and registered by Greens sitting in armored cubicles within the walls. There was a machine-like efficiency to the bureaucratic procedure on this level. Aram Jerrold had the impression that the operation would continue to run by sheer momentum should higher authority suddenly try to halt it . . .

JERROLD presented himself before a Green of about forty, a man with a thin, tired face and colorless eyes, who codified the information given him, looking up at the prisoner with no apparent interest. Quite abruptly, he emerged from his cubicle, signalling another Green to take his place.

"You," he said to Aram; "come with me."

Jerrold followed the Green out of the reception building and out into the rain. For a wild moment, Aram had the impulse to try an escape, but the thought died stillborn. Escape was plainly impossible. There was simply no place to go—even if he could shake free of his guard and the others stationed about the enclosure. The prison ship was being refuelled a short distance from the reception pen, but the valves were closed and guarded.

Presently Jerrold and his guide reached a shaft imbedded in the side of the crag, atop which sat the grim Fortress. Aram turned his eyes upward. The great, bastioned stronghold seemed to crouch on the crest of the cliff. On the highest turret, a green banner emblazoned with a golden Spaceship and Sun hung sodden and limp in the falling rain.

With no hesitation, the Green stationed at the guard-post by the shaft entrance signalled Aram and his guide through. There was a short walk up a spiralling ramp and then they stood before what appeared to be simply a blank wall. Jerrold stared in perplexity as his guard took a bit of metal from his tunic and held it to the wall.

"Isotope," said the guard shortly, "It acts as a key to the scanner . . . below."

Before Aram could question him, the section of wall slid back soundlessly and they stepped into a tubecar. Quickly, the Green set up a complicated series of stops on the tubecar controls and the vehicle started downward with a rush.

Aram clutched at the man for support. Something was not as it should be. Then, quite suddenly, he realized what it was. The tubecar was travelling *down* . . . and the Fortress lay above!

"Where are we going?" he asked cautiously.

The Green shook his head.

"Aren't the condemned cells above in the Fortress?"

"Be quiet. Talk is dangerous!"

"But . . ."

"Be quiet," the Green said again. "You'll understand soon enough. We have to be careful. Not all of us here are of the

Group." He turned his back on Jerrold.

Aram's head was spinning. What was there on Atmion that a Green need fear? And what was this . . . Group?

With a wisdom born of his long imprisonment, Aram Jerrold decided to hold his peace. What would be would be, and it was becoming increasingly plain that he was about to learn of things that he had not dreamed existed.

After what seemed to be an interminable period, the tubecar began to slow. The hum of atomics died and the car came to a stop. They must be well below the level of the Fortress now, reflected Jerrold, and very likely under the sea. The panels slid away and in front of them stretched a long white corridor lighted by dim bulbs set in the curved ceiling.

"There are miles of tubeways down here," said the guard, "and only the isotope key gives entrance. The central pattern on the tubecar has been altered, too . . . for the safety of the Group. Follow me."

At the end of the corridor, a steelite door barred further progress. The Green produced his isotope key again and touched it to the metal.

"A word of advice," he said to Jerrold coolly. "Listen and believe. A great many risks have been taken and a vast amount of work done to bring you this far."

He leaned forward and shoved the metal door open. Within lay a brightly lit chamber. The glare of it hurt Jerrold's eyes and he stood a moment, blinking on the threshold. Slowly, as his eyes accustomed themselves to the light, Aram became aware of a group of men and women who watched him impassively. There were a few in Fleet uniform. One or two of them casual acquaintances he had thought lost in space or imprisoned by the Greens. There were others in prison garb, and here and there he could see the dread color of the Security Police. His heart began to pound. Another trap? But why?

One slight figure in green stood a little apart, watching him through shadowed eyes. Jerrold felt the breath catch in his throat.

It was Deve Jennet!

WITH A CRY Deve ran to him. Jerrold felt a surge of mixed fury and desire. Almost defensively, he lifted his hand and struck Deve across the face.

She gasped and stepped back, eyes suddenly bright with tears, a thin streak of blood marking her pale face. The gathered strangers muttered angrily. Aram turned to stare at them; his face set and grim. Anger was pulsing within him, a deep, consuming anger born of the tortures he had suffered—he looked at the stunned girl—because of *her*.

"Oh, Aram . . . what have they done to you?" whispered Deve.

"What have *they* done to me?" he asked thickly. "*They?* Now tell me you had no part in it!" He was hemmed in, lost in a sea of treachery and formless dangers. For a few moments he had dared to let himself hope . . .! And this was the end of it. Deve again. And another trap! "What more do you want from me? Is this just entertainment for you? To raise my hopes and then step on them again? Maybe you'd like to open my veins and have a drink of my blood?"

"Aram . . . stop it!"

"You lying, cheating wench! Was it you that brought me to the Fortress? Was it you that spilled all my stupid dreams to those black ghouls who tried me?" he asked bitterly.

"Yes! Yes, it was me!" sobbed Deve, "but can you listen to me? Aram, I beg you! Listen to me!"

Aram felt some of the rage draining out of him. He stared at Deve in confusion. There were tears streaking her face. There was no reason for her to cry now, he thought heavily. Her job was done. Done well.

"I had to do it that way, Aram. You can't know how I've suffered for you . . . every minute of the time. But it had to be done, I swear it! There was no other way, I could get you here to the Group! If I had let you go your own way, you'd have been killed, Aram. I'd have died with you gladly, but there are other things that must be done. And we can live, Aram! Do you understand me? We can live!"

Jerrold looked about him. The group

had gathered around him. Someone said: "Listen to Deve Jenet, Jerrold!"

Dave stepped close to him again, her face upturned. He felt again the old desire for her, even here—now. Did it matter that she had betrayed him? Did anything matter any more to him? The last ebb of fury flowed out of him, leaving him silent and relaxed at last. If this was a trap . . . what did it matter? He had nothing to lose now.

He realized quite suddenly then that he wanted very much to believe what Deve said. He wanted it so badly that he reacted defensively, not daring to let himself be hurt by her again. Very cautiously, he let down the barriers that he had erected against her since the very first day of the trial when he had known for the first time that she had been his betrayer.

Dave sensed the change in him and laid a hand on his arm. "You . . . you will listen now?" she asked quietly.

Aram nodded, his eyes fixed on her face. The bruise on her lips was dark and painful looking.

"I heard of your arrest the day it happened, Aram," she said. "I knew what the end of it would be if they could find no real evidence against you—you'd have been subjected to an extensive mental probing that would have left you . . . an . . . an idiot. That's true. You know it is."

Aram nodded agreement.

"You would have been lost to us," Deve said, "and Aram, we need you! Need you desperately!"

Aram looked about him in confusion. Still weak from his bout with the drugs, he was having difficulty marshalling his thoughts.

"Who are you people?" he demanded. "What are you?"

A GRIZZLED NAVAL OFFICER stepped forward. Aram recognized him as Kant Mikal, recorded in the headquarters of the Thirty Suns Navy as having been lost in space two years earlier while on a routine exploration into the Thirtieth Decant.

"We have no name, other than 'the Group,'" he said simply. "We have as our purpose the prevention of a disas-

trous war . . . possibly even the destruction of civilization as we have known it."

"You don't make any sense," Jerrold said confusedly. "What is there in the galaxy that can threaten the Tetrarchy with a war such as you describe?"

"There is a very real and present danger, Aram Jerrold," Mikal said flatly. "Santane . . ."

Aram felt a chilling premonition. Santane again. He remembered the testy words of the black judge who had condemned him: "One would think Santane were building a fleet . . ."

Mikal seemed to read his thoughts. "Yes," he said, "Provincial Governor Santane."

"I don't ask you to join us for the sake of the Tetrarchy, Aram," pleaded Deve Jenet earnestly, "or because of any personal relationship between you and me. If the Thirty Suns Government knew of the Group, and of the manipulations we've performed to get equipment and personnel for our mission, not one of us would be left alive by the Greens. We've penetrated the highest circles, we've subverted loyal people. We've used every trick and subterfuge to get the men and women we need out here without giving away our secret." She smiled ruefully. "We've even had men arrested and condemned so that we could gather them here on Atmion IV . . ."

Aram felt a terrible load being lifted from his shoulders. No matter what happened next, it was good to know that Deve had not betrayed him as he had thought.

"The Tetrarchy would not allow the existence of such a unit as the Group for a moment. Every hour that passes increases our danger. But we must finish our mission, Aram; we can do nothing else!" Deve said fervently.

"If Santane overthrows the Tetrarchy," said Kant Mikal bleakly, "the dark ages will descend. The man is mad for power, cruel and intelligent enough to hold it."

Aram thought swiftly. Santane was a relative unknown back on Terminus, was merely one of the thirty civil servants that held the Governorships of the Thirty star-systems making up the Tetrarchy. The

Tetrarchy was a tyrannous bureaucracy . . . but at least it was not a one-man government. As bad as it was, Santane's iron hand would be infinitely worse.

"But how," protested Jerrold. "With what? How can Santane hope to withstand the whole of the Tetrarchy's power?"

"As you have guessed," Mikal said, "he is building a fleet; new construction and better than anything in the Thirty Suns Navy. However, if it were only that, there would be no real need for us to interfere. The Fleet is antiquated, as you know, but able to muster a force of more than ten thousand first line battlecraft. No matter how good Santane's ships might be, they could not handle an attack by that kind of numbers. The Kaidor system would take a terrible beating, and most probably Kaidor V would be bombed to rubble. That would be the end of it. The destruction would be strictly localized in the Thirtieth Decant. But there is, unfortunately more . . . much more."

"Aram," exclaimed Deve, "it's horrible!"

"Santane has developed interstellar guided missiles, Jerrold," said Kant Mikal. "Faster than any Fleet vessel and impossible to intercept. But that isn't the worst of it. It's the stuff he has developed for these missiles to carry . . ."

"Biological weapon?" asked Aram with a sinking feeling in his heart.

Mikal nodded. "Follow me," he said.

ARAM JERROLD followed the grizzled naval officer into an antechamber. With Deve Jennet at his side he let Mikal lead him down a narrow, zig-zagging ramp into a stone room below the meeting hall. The place was dimly lit and there was a smell in the air that reminded Aram of a zoological garden. A strong wire mesh had been stretched across the room to divide it roughly into two sections. In the corner of the interior division, a figure squatted, gnawing on a piece of bone. The sound of its teeth scraping the bits of flesh off the shank made Aram shudder.

Mikal led him up to the wire.

"That," he said, "was a man. Santane's weapon did what you see there."

Jerrold's stomach muscles knotted. The figure in the cage was roughly human, but it squatted on greatly foreshortened hams and waved long, hairy arms at them angrily. The forehead sloped back from a face completely bestial, and as Aram stood there, sickened and fascinated, the hirsute apparition flung the chewed bone at him and bared its fangs in a blood-chilling howl.

Aram turned away, white-faced. "Is . . . is there no cure for this thing?" he asked.

Mikal shook his head. "We have been able to develop none. This was an agent of ours who was taken on Kaidor IV by Santane's raiders. We tried to establish a surveillance point there and failed—the planet is hardly livable—and Santane has been able to maintain a very complete coverage of the two planets nearest his capital. The inoculation was made on Kaidor V, and Santane sent him back here, thinking him an agent of the Greens. He is laying the foundations of his psychological attack, you see. A few cases like this, and then the shocker—the announcement that every planet in the Thirty Suns can expect an attack by guided missiles loaded with that virus unless his demands are acceded to."

"But surely there must be a specific for this thing," pursued Aram. "It would be valueless as a weapon unless there is."

"The virus attacks the higher cerebral centers first," explained Mikal. "Then the endocrine balance. First memory goes. Our medical people believe that Santane has an antidote for this thing, but in very limited amounts. They tell me that if caught soon enough, it can be stopped. But within hours after infection permanent damage to the higher nervous system is done. They suspect that even if a very small amount of serum is introduced into the body after infection, *physical* damage can be completely avoided. What the effect on the mind might be, they do not care to say. Complete loss of memory certainly. A lessening of the ability to relearn the forgotten is also probable."

The creature behind the wire howled again, plaintively now.

"Let's get out of here," breathed Deve faintly.

* * *

"You see what Santane will use to seize the Tetrarchy," Mikal went on when they were once again in the meeting hall. "He imagines that the mere threat of it will subdue the Supreme Council."

"But that's wrong!" exclaimed Aram: "The Tetrarchy will fight! There has never been a bureaucracy in the history of mankind that didn't imagine itself invincible!"

"Yes, the Tetrarchy will fight," agreed Mikal. "And a war of absolute destruction will engulf the Thirty Suns. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" demanded Jerrold.

"Unless Santane can be convinced of that. Unless he can be prevailed upon to give up his ambition and content himself with being a balance for the rest of the Tetrarchy's power. Where there's one power only, tyranny results invariably. But if there are two, co-equal and autonomous, then they must compete for the favor of the people. Only in such a way can the civilization of the Thirty Suns survive, and the slavish lot of the people of the inhabited worlds be improved.

"That, then, is the purpose of the Group. We are pledged to stop—if we can—the impending struggle for power between Santane and the Tetrarchy. Savagery is the price we will pay for failure!"

IN THE DAYS that followed, Aram Jerrold grew to despise the name of Santane more than he had ever despised the Tetrarchy. Deep under the turbulent sea of Atmion IV, he rested—recuperating from his ordeals and making ready for the time when the small band of peacemakers would move to forestall Santane's bid for galactic dominion.

The plan, as Kant Mikal outlined it, was simple and direct. In the colony under the sea there were forty-five men and women. These were mainly scientists and soldiers who had incurred the wrath of the Government of the Thirty Suns, though there were some, like Leader Deve Jennet of the Security Police, who carried on a double existence on Atmion IV, living both above in the Green Fortress and in the tunnels . . .

Of the more than three thousand Greens stationed on the prison planet, some fifty knew of the Group, and of the fifty, perhaps ten had access to the secret quarters. These Greens, at great personal risk, supplied the scientists and workers of the Group with the materials needed for their medical and physical researches.

A falsified report of Aram Jerrold's death under the disintegrators was sent to Terminus under the personal cachet of Leader Deve Jennet of the Security Police; so for the first time in many weeks Aram had a semblance of peace.

Mikal's plan was for the Group to divide into two units. One, the larger of the two, would go—at the proper time—to Kaidor V, there to establish contact with the Provincial Governor and try by any means to dissuade him from his plan to defy the Thirty Suns Government. There were several among the Group who felt that such an approach to Santane would succeed where harsher methods might well fail in the face of the Thirtieth Decant's hidden power. It was Mikal's plan to lead this delegation himself in a starship now being fitted in the central pit of the tunnel maze.

But Kant Mikal did not delude himself that Santane could be won by arguments. Another expedition to the Kaidor Sun would be dispatched at the same time. A small two-man destroyer that had been rendered—Mikal claimed—"undetectable," would leave the Atmion system with the larger vessel and land on Kaidor III, a planet uninhabited save for a few bands of degenerated experimental subjects dumped there by Santane's biological ecologists. Mikal took care to point out that Kaidor III had two large land-masses, and the landing by the two members of the Group selected for that duty would be made on the land-mass unoccupied by the unfortunate subhumans.

This expedition would remain on Kaidor III to await word from the first as to the success or failure of the Group's plan. Failing to hear from them, or hearing of failure, the small ship would proceed to Kaidor V and try to wrest the secret of the virus weapon from Santane.

Plainly enough, the second expedition into the Thirtieth Decant would be a last, spasmodic attempt to save something from the ruins of galactic war. That phrase stayed with Jerrold as he listened to Kant Mikal. *To save something from the ruins.* That, he told himself, might well be the best the Group could accomplish with their meager resources.

DURING THE HOURS that Deve was working in the Fortress, Jerrold wandered freely through the maze of underground tunnels and chambers that the Group had built. The original catacombs had been built a thousand years earlier, and the men and women of the Group had expanded and refurbished the forgotten maze to suit their purposes. Jerrold was continually amazed at what they had been able to accomplish with so little at their command and under a shroud of almost complete secrecy.

Life in the tunnels centered on the central pit—the spaceport. This, as Kant Mikal explained with considerable pride, was connected with the surface by a series of locks that emerged through the bottom of the sea in the offshore shallows down the coast from the Green Fortress. Under cover of night, a spaceship could emerge from the tunnels and lift into space without arousing the garrison of Greens who served on Atmion IV never dreaming of the quiet life beneath their feet.

Two spacecraft rested in their cradles in the pit, a medium sized merchantman, the "Star Cluster," and a Fleet scout-destroyer, "Serpent." Jerrold recognized both vessels as craft that had long ago been reported lost in space in Admiralty headquarters back on Terminus. The Serpent still carried its Fleet insignie of the Spaceship and Sun, a reminder to Aram of his former life and of the immense power of the Thirty Suns Navy. He knew only too well the position of the Group in the coming silent struggle between the galactic Tetrarchy and the rebellious Santane. They were the smallest, weakest corner in a vicious triangular madness that threatened to smash the entire civilization of the Thirty Suns.

His personal happiness at being with

Deve Jennet again, and free of the haunting pain of her supposed betrayal, was mitigated by a realization of the dangers they would soon face when the Group's quixotic plan went into operation. Nor were these forebodings lessened when Kant Mikal informed him that he and Deve were the unanimous choices of the Group for the second—and secret—expedition into the Kaidor Province.

"It will be your purpose," Kant Mikal told him again, "to save something from the wreckage if all else fails . . ."

* * *

Aram lay comfortably under the bank of sun-lamps in the underground infirmary. The days of rest and treatment had brought him back into condition again, and he felt fit and ready for action. He had begun to chafe at the inactivity, but Kant Mikal insisted that the time to move out against Kaidor had not come, and Jerrold was forced to be content with the older man's judgment.

Deve sat with him in the infirmary, her slim body golden under the glowing lamps. Sitting near her, watching the graceful sweep of her pale hair as it brushed her shoulders, Aram was filled with a sense of well-being and contentment.

"Aram," asked Deve, "have you had time to examine the Serpent? Are you familiar with that class of ship?"

"I spent three years on Periphery Patrol with Serpent class scouts, Deve," murmured Aram sleepily. "There won't be any trouble . . ." He stretched himself and sat up. "But there's one thing I'd like more information on . . . if I can be trusted with it."

"Aram! We trust you! You know we do . . ." protested Deve.

"Kant Mikal told me the Serpent was . . . undetectable. In all my years with the Fleet, I never heard of a spaceship that could not be detected."

"Avon Marsh—one of our scientists—has developed an energy shield, Aram."

"That's nothing new, Deve," said Aram. "The Fleet vessels have had them for years. They use them against attack by ray weapons of all kinds."

"But this reaches into the highest fre-

quencies," Deve explained. "It shunts all radiation around the ship. Of course, it can't be used during second order flight above light speed, but it wouldn't be of any value then, anyway."

"You mean it shunts *all* radiation around the ship? All? Even light?" demanded Jerrold with sudden interest.

"Yes. At close observational ranges it results in a slight distortion—like a very clear lens, but—"

"Then the ship is . . . invisible?" Aram asked incredulously.

Deve Jenet smiled. "Yes, among other things. And it prevents a radio echo being sent back to a detector, too."

ARAM SANK BACK thoughtfully. An invisible ship! His spaceman's mind toyed with the thought. It was like something from a naval officer's dream fantasies. A battleship so equipped could very nearly rule the plenum . . . ! But Deve's next words cut that dream short.

"The field is so limited, though," she said, "that only a two-man scout can be equipped with it. And since the shield works two ways, the occupants of the ship are blind. Nothing outside the ship itself can be seen."

Jerrold was about to reply when Kant Mikal burst into the room. His grey hair was matted with blood, and his face was pale and drawn with pain and anxiety.

"I should have listened to you, Jerrold," he breathed heavily. "We should have moved out long ago!"

"Kant! You're hurt," cried Deve.

Mikal gestured impatiently. "It's nothing! We have to get out immediately! Get ready . . . !"

Jerrold and Deve were on their feet, reaching for their cloaks.

"What's happened?" asked Aram.

"The Greens have found the tunnel entrance. I think they must have caught one of our topside people with a mental probe, I don't know for sure. But there's fighting in the tube-shafts now. We have to get to the ships!"

Aram cursed. "Are there any weapons nearby?"

The grey haired officer shook his head.

"None. Only the medical instruments here."

Aram ransacked the wall cabinets and produced a single small scalpel. "This will have to do," he muttered.

"If we can reach the pit," said Kant Mikal, "the steelite doors may give us enough time to get clear. They're disintegrator-resistant."

"Let's go," said Aram tensely. "Ready?"

Deve and Mikal nodded and followed him as he opened the door to the corridor and stepped out. The tunnel was deserted, but there were muffled sounds of fighting coming through the ventilators. Aram sprinted toward the pit, his bare feet soundless on the stone floor. Deve and Mikal ran silently beside him.

As they came to a turn in the tube, a single Green seemed to appear out of nowhere. Aram had a fleeting glimpse of a pistol being raised and he felt the hot, searing touch of a graze as he launched himself bodily at the man.

There was a crashing roar as the tetro shell exploded harmlessly against the stone wall of the tunnel, sending echoes reverberating down the long passageway. Aram caught the Green in the pit of the stomach with the full force of his charge. The man doubled up painfully, dropping his weapon to the floor. Aram rolled to his feet, cat-like. The Green roared with rage and lunged at him. Aram stepped under the attack and brought his two clenched fists down on the back of the man's neck. The Green staggered and spun about, catching Aram in a vise-like embrace. The policeman was huge, and as his arms closed about Aram's lighter frame, Aram could feel his ribs being crushed. His hand closed on the scalpel he had thrust into the waistband of his shorts. He raised it high and drove it hard into the man's broad back. The Green stiffened. With an incredulous expression, he released Aram and toppled to the stone floor.

Aram leaned against the wall of the tunnel, panting, sickened. His hands were red with blood. From somewhere down the tunnel came the sound of booted feet clattering on the stones. Suddenly another Green rounded the turn, an energy rifle in his hands. Aram straightened for the

expected attack, but the Green stopped abruptly, his head vanishing into a red smear as another crashing roar echoed down the corridor. As he sank to the floor, Aram turned to see Kant Mikal lowering the first Green's still smoking pistol.

"Let's keep going," Mikal muttered breathlessly.

Stopping only to pick up the fallen Green's rifle, Aram, Kant Mikal and Deve ran on toward the pit.

"Will the others try to make the spaceport?" gasped Jerrold as they ran.

"There's nowhere else to go," returned Mikal simply.

THE GREENS had not completely occupied the tunnels, for they met no more opposition. The sounds of fighting had stopped, though, as they burst into the large chamber that housed the spacecraft, and Aram realized that the Greens were gathering their forces for an attempt to prevent the Group's escape in the vessels. Aram looked about him with a sick heart. Of the original forty-five that had been in the tunnels before the attack, only ten besides himself and Deve had reached the pit. The others, they told him, had been killed or captured by the Greens, and one of them must have been forced to tell of the spaceships and the plan of escape through the locks.

The steelite doors of the pit were closed, and the remnants of the Group straggled aboard the Star Cluster. Kant Mikal took immediate command of the ship and made ready for the perilous passage through the locks to the sea above. He laid a hand on Aram's shoulder and spoke with feeling. "This isn't the way I planned it, Jerrold, but we must do the best we can. Good luck!"

Aram helped rig the Star Cluster for flight and then stepped down onto the floor of the pit. He realized only too well, as he stood with Deve alone on the floor of the vast chamber, that they would have to wait until the heavy Star Cluster had cleared the locks before they could blast free of the cavern in the Serpent.

He helped Deve through the valve of the small scout ship and hoisted himself up, crouching in the open lock with the dead

Green's energy rifle, ready to pick off the first Green to come through the door. The Greens had brought their disintegrators into play, and within minutes the door would reach its limit of endurance. The steelite panels already glowed red. . . .

The Star Cluster lifted from its cradle with a hissing roar that set the smaller Serpent to trembling. The first lock opened above it and it was gone into the black maw of the vertical shaft, its tail-flare vanishing in the stygian darkness. The lock did not close, and Aram Jerrold breathed a silent message of thanks to Kant Mikal who had left it open to ease the Serpent's escape.

"How long will it take them to clear the remaining locks?" Jerrold asked Deve anxiously.

Deve divined his thoughts and shook her head. "More time than it will take the Greens to cut through that door!"

Aram was struck with an idea. "The shield, Deve! The energy shield!"

For a moment hope lighted her face, but it quickly faded. "There is a time-lag when the shield is deactivated, Aram," she said. "If we use it now, we won't be able to operate the locks in time. They are radio-controlled from inside the ship and the shield stops all radiation . . . both ways!"

"Then we'll ram the locks!"

"Will the ship stand it?"

"I don't know, Deve, but it's our only chance. If we can confuse them just long enough to get under way, we may make it. Show me how the shield is energized."

Deve shrugged and sat down before the control panel. Her fingers flashed lightly over the banks of switches. A low whining of generators started deep in the vitals of the small starship. Aram, watching the process, glanced through the ports at the melting steelite door of the cavern, and he was amazed to see the scene fade before his eyes into a murky grayness.

"They can't see us now," Deve Jenet said with a slow smile, "and we can't see them."

"Let's go," breathed Aram.

HE HURRIEDLY began rigging the Serpent for flight, warming the jets,

energizing the pumps and aerators. He gave silent thanks for the rigid training of the Thirty Suns Navy, for his hands automatically and swiftly found the proper instruments and controls. Gyros began their ascending crescendo, whining in strident unison with the shield generators to shape a harmonic pattern that pulsed in the eardrums and set the teeth on edge. Accumulators filled slowly, relays clicked shut as the *Serpent* poised itself for flight.

A harsh, thumping sound made Aram Jerrold pause. He cursed bitterly and resumed his work. The Greens, of course, were not fools. They could not see the *Serpent*, nor, presumably, had they ever encountered an invisible craft before. But having melted down the steelite portal at last and flooded into the vast pit, they could hear the *Serpent's* myriad warnings of impending takeoff, and they must have begun raking the pit with projectile fire. Some of the shots were finding the invisible *Serpent*, and Aram knew that the destroyer's light armor could not long withstand a shelling.

"Deve! Has Mikal had time to get the Star Cluster clear of the locks now?" Jerrold shouted at the girl over the whine of machinery.

Deve Jennet had heard the projectiles too. She nodded her head and braced herself against the navigation table. "Let's go!" she shouted back.

With pounding heart, Aram Jerrold lifted the *Serpent* off the floor of the pit. Blindly, he let the invisible starship nose into the open shaft above. He knew that the moment the Greens realized their quarry was gone, they would begin firing blindly up into the vertical tunnel above them. If one shot should hit the jets . . . ! Aram shuddered. The destroyer would come hurtling down out of the shaft to smashing destruction on the floor of the pit. He held his breath and eased the power forward. The *Serpent* responded eagerly, leaping up the mile-long tunnel . . .

Ahead lay the second set of locks and then the shallows of the sea. The small starship careened upward, scraping its flanks on the smooth metal of the shaft. Aram sat frozen before the controls. A

thousand questions burned in his mind, and there were no sure answers for any of them.

He couldn't be sure that Mikal had gotten the Star Cluster free. He might at this moment be driving the *Serpent* into the atomic tail-flare of the larger ship. He did not know whether or not the small destroyer could withstand the impact of the locks . . . or the sea itself. Still, he drove the ship upward and outward, the automatics set to continue the same suicidal course should his own human hands falter or fail.

He shouted for Deve to strap herself to the deck rings near the navigation table and make ready for the impact. Time seemed to slow down to a crawling pace. The breath came harshly in his throat, and sweat coursed down his naked back. His bare feet and legs felt cold and clammy . . .

He was not ready when it came. The first rending screech of tearing metal filled the tiny control room and the instrument panel came smashing up to meet him. He heard a whooshing roar and the scream of protesting gyros. He heard Deve cry out as her bindings ripped loose, and then blackness seemed to splash up out of the control panel and engulf him . . .

JERROLD WOKE. His head was pounding painfully and his lips felt mashed and bruised. The strap that had held him to the pilot's seat had broken, and he lay across the instrument panel in a welter of glass shards from shattered dials. The instruments were smeared with blood . . . his blood, Aram realized numbly. He put a hand to his face, and it came away sticky and red.

The atomics throbbed, and the dials told him that the *Serpent* was still under way. The high pitched hissing of escaping air attested to the damage, but it also told him that the ship was in space . . . and clear of *Atmion IV*.

Jerrold got dizzily to his feet and looked about for Deve. She lay crumpled in a corner under a chart-locker, bruised and scratched by the impact of the crash. She moaned slightly as Aram picked her up and carried her to the pilot's chair.

Red alarm lights glared at him from several points on the panel, showing that five forward compartments had been crumpled and ruptured by the ramming of the locks. The pressure in the ship was low enough to add to his discomfort. Methodically, fighting off the dizziness, Aram sealed off the leaky compartments and started the aerators to build up the pressure. The greyness beyond the parts indicated that the energy shield was still operating. The Serpent was traveling in slow first-stage flight toward Kaidor, four and one half light years distant.

"Aram!"

Jerrold turned to see that Deve had opened her eyes and was staring at him, horrified. He tried to grin reassuringly at her, but his bruised lips succeeded only in grimacing grotesquely through the bloody smear of his face.

Deve got to her feet, found the surgical kit that all Fleet vessels carried and set to work mending the damage. Aram was glad to find that aside from his battered lips, he had only a long scalp cut along his hair-line where the instrument panel had tried to decapitate him. The kit contained balms and soothing anaesthetics, and presently both Deve and Jerrold were patched and cleansed of blood and dirt.

There were coveralls in the lockers, and spaceboots; and a hot drink from the robot galley added to their rising spirits. They had escaped a force of the best the Thirty Suns Government could throw against them and they were free of Atmion IV. Their ship was damaged, but serviceable . . . and they were together.

Deve cut the energy shield and Aram took star-shots to reckon their position. If the Greens had chased them in spacecraft, their long flight under the shield had certainly lost the pursuit, for the space behind them toward Atmion IV was clear. The three stars of the system blazed below them and Aram pointed the ship at the spot where the yellow Kaidor Sun lay just under the range of visibility, shifting into second-stage flight. The three suns of Atmion streaked into a polychromatic blur, and the Serpent plunged through the interstellar night toward the Thirtieth Decant and the unknown.

IT WAS A STAR-SYSTEM of ten planets. Aram Jerrold could see clearly that, as was generally the case, one of them was a ringed giant. Under planetary first-stage drive, he brought the small starship down into the system's ecliptic plane. At a distance of one light day, as the Serpent passed the outermost planet, the energy shield was reactivated.

During the days of the trip from the Twenty Ninth Decant and the Atmion Suns, no word had come from Kant Mikal and his party aboard the Star Cluster. Both Jerrold and Deve Jennet had pondered the advisibility of trying to establish contact with the larger ship, but finally they decided to maintain radio silence. Aram felt it inadvisable to risk detection of the Serpent so close to Santane's stronghold.

Instead, they resolved to stick to the original plan as outlined by Kant Mikal back on Atmion IV—landing on the third planet of the Kaidor Sun and there awaiting word from the Star Cluster. Meanwhile, Aram could attempt to repair the damage caused the Serpent by the ramming of the locks.

On a dead-reckoning course, Jerrold guided the small spaceship sunward. The peaceful pleasure of the days in space was forgotten now, forced out of his mind by the nearness of Kaidor V and its hellish spawn of destruction. Thinking of the poor creature he had seen in the tunnels back on Atmion IV, Aram was taken with a sick chill. Here, under the alien light of Kaidor Sun, the virus that had degenerated what had once been a man lay quiescent in the sleek shells of uncounted interstellar missiles, ready to leap out and away and carry its mind-destroying power to all the inhabited worlds of the Thirty Suns. Jerrold knew that the use of such a weapon would mean disaster. If war came, it would be a war of stellar giants, smashing planets and minds alike in a hideous carnival of death and savagery. The spawn of the Kaidor Sun meant ruin . . .

As yet, Aram reflected with faint hope, there had been no break. Provincial Governor Santane was still, as far as anyone outside the Thirtieth Decant knew, a loyal

civil servant of the Thirty Suns bureaucracy. The Special Intelligence reports that clicked methodically through the Serpent's subspace communicator gave no hint of rebellion against the banner of the Spaceship and Sun in the Kaidor system. It was possible, too, thought Jerrold, that the Group under Kant Mikal could convince Santane of the folly of open defiance. But even as the thoughts formed in his mind, doubt grew. Kant Mikal had said that Santane had already stopped weapons shipments to the rest of the Thirty Suns. He had no such authority. It would take some time for an investigation to be activated through the ponderous bureaucratic procedures of the Tetrarchy, but investigation there would definitely be . . . and Santane could have nothing in his mind but war with the Thirty Suns Government to have taken such a risk. Kaidor Province was the scientific arsenal of the Tetrarchy, and as such strategically valuable beyond its intrinsic worth. It would not be too difficult, Aram realized, to imagine that the man who ruled Kaidor could rule the Tetrarchy. Only it wasn't so. No one system could muster enough power to crush the Thirty Suns without being smashed to rubble itself in the process. A man who had served in a galactic Fleet could understand that. But a man who had served only as a governor could not, and *that* was the danger . . .

As a naval officer, Aram Jerrold knew something that Santane did not. He knew that vast navies will fight and destroy long after the hope of victory has gone.

If war came, there would *be* no victory. There would be only galactic disaster . . .

WITH THE ENERGY SHIELD off, and under reduced power, the Serpent came down into the atmosphere of Kaidor III. The planet's satellite lay, like a crescent of silver, in the dark blue, star-flecked sky of the stratosphere.

Beneath them, the vast curving surface of the planet flattened as the starship sank lower, the mottled blues and greens and browns taking shape of oceans, islands and continents. The sky grew lighter—a pale blue—as the Serpent crossed the twilight line and slanted down toward the

surface of the turbulent sea.

Scud clouds raced across the sky and light rain pattered against the ports of the slowly moving spaceship. Quite suddenly the squall passed, and the Serpent hung above a sea of brilliant blues and greens, frothed with white-caps.

Deve watched through the ports, enraptured. "Look, Aram! Look at the colors in that sea!"

Side by side they watched the play of colors in the ocean, fascinated by the swirling grace and chromatic wonder of the waves.

In the far distance lay the low silhouette of land. Jerrold let the Serpent move toward it, keel skimming the dancing white crowns of the sea.

There were a few graceful sea-birds with leathery wings and brightly plumed breasts, and there was life in the sea. Deve and Jerrold could see schools of lithe shapes flashing silver beneath the water. But the land itself was silent. The white sand of a curving beach came up out of the distance to meet them. Beyond lay green rolling hills and wooded slopes bright with flowers, and farther into the glare of the morning sun great snow-capped mountains reared their jagged spines against the blue in the sky.

"Aram . . . it's beautiful!" the girl breathed. "It's the world we dreamed of finding . . ."

Jerrold remembered the nights they had shared back on mighty Terminus. He recalled their idle dreams of a world beyond the farthest stars where they could be free. This, he felt, was such a world.

Deve turned around suddenly to face him. There was longing in her eyes—a look of wistfulness that filled him with tenderness.

"We . . . we must never forget this world, Aram," she said. "Perhaps one day we can come here . . ." She let her voice sink low. "Oh, Aram! If we could only stay here! If we could just forget everything but this lovely, peaceful world!"

Aram Jerrold thought of Santane and the threatening clouds of war. He thought of the mighty, senseless civilization of the Thirty Suns—oblivious to the dangers that threatened to engulf it. Quite suddenly

he hated it all. Hated it more than he had ever despised it when it had tortured and persecuted him. He felt trapped by his unmasked-for responsibilities to the culture that had condemned him. But trapped he was, and he knew it. Even hating it, he could not let a galactic civilization vanish without trace and refuse to lift a hand to save it . . . *to save something from the wreckage.*

Kant Mikal's words came back to him. Pressing, insistent, demanding.

He took Deve in his arms. "I'd want nothing more than to stay here . . . with you," he said gently. "But we'd never be safe if Santane ruled the Tetrarchy. He'd never leave a paradise like this alone . . ."

"I know that," said Deve, sighing. "But maybe someday . . ." She broke off. "I'm so tired, Aram."

Jerrold thought of how long this girl had been fighting—in secret, in constant danger of her life—against the menace of an interregnum of savagery in the galaxy. It made him want to kill Santane with his bare hands and smash the Tetrarchy into cosmic rubble!

But it was no good. A responsibility had fallen onto Deve's shoulders and his. Kant Mikal had said it. And no matter how they might wish that two others had been chosen out of all the teeming billions of the Thirty Suns, both he and Deve knew that they must throw themselves between the galactic millstones and try with their last breath to avert the limbo that yawned to swallow the first stellar civilization that the race had laboriously built. It was not perfect—but it was their own.

FOR TWO DAYS and two nights Deve and Aram waited by the restless sea of Kaidor III. They wandered over the green hills and through the wooded glades hand in hand, caught up in the wonder and beauty of the silent planet.

Aram was able to patch some of the breaks in the Serpent's hull, and together he and Deve planned what moves they must make next. Each time they left the ship, the recorders were set so that any possible word from the Star Cluster would be caught; but only the endless stream of reports and routine messages of the

Thirty Suns Naval Intelligence Bureau marred the wire of the recording device when they sought the shelter of the ship again.

Together, they swam in the warm sea and rested in the sunlight on the white beach, listening to the restless sound of the ocean. It was an idyll of happiness made more poignant by the pressing nearness of danger coming ever closer.

It was on the evening of the third day on Kaidor III that the subspace radio shattered their faint hopes for the success of the Star Cluster's mission. The information came not from the Group and Kant Mikal, but viciously, shockingly, from the announcer in the Naval Intelligence sending station back on Terminus. It came, smashing the peaceful stillness of the evening calm.

"ATTENTION! ATTENTION! ALL FLEET UNITS OF THE TWENTY EIGHTH, TWENTY NINTH, AND THIRTIETH DECANT SQUADRONS! RENDEZVOUS CHECK POINT 45223 KAIDOR PROVINCE ACCORDING TO PLAN 5-25 DIRECTIVE 19-A-9! TASK FORCE COMMANDER WILL NEUTRALIZE PLANET KAIDOR FIVE FOR THE SAFETY OF THE TETRARCHY!"

Deve's face was pale. "Santane has done it at last!"

It had come, then, thought Aram heavily. The cosmic wheels were beginning to turn. A provincial governor rebelled and across light-years of space forces of mind-defying magnitude began to gather. Thousands of mighty battleships, millions of men! Planet-smashing weapons! Far away, on Terminus, government bureaus shifted ponderously from peaceful administration to War. Clerks and department heads, councilmen and executives—all shifting their attentions from peacetime routines to wartime expedients. And within hours, those wartime expedients would become routine. Fixed, immutable. Routines impossible to change without painful, *time-consuming*, effort.

Jerrold spun the radio dials, searching for the government station on Kaidor V. He needed information. He needed to know what Santane was telling his popu-

lation.

"... the *Thirty Suns* merchant vessel, *Star Cluster*, has fallen into our hands. The passengers and crew, sabotage agents of the Tetrarchy, have been imprisoned and will be executed..."

The voice of the Kaidor announcer echoed menacingly through the still control room of the *Serpent*.

"Aram! They've got Kant Mikal and the others!" cried Deve.

"Sabotage agents!" Aram spat.

"... it is expected that the worker population will conduct itself with courage and resourcefulness under the threatened attack," continued the announcer smoothly. "Our newly organized armed forces are even now taking measures against the tyrants' home worlds..."

Aram shuddered, thinking about the "measures" Santane had devised for use against the Tetrarchy. The brutalizing virus...

"... it is not to be expected that the war will be of long duration. Our scientists have developed a weapon that will make active resistance on the part of the tyrants impossible. They will not dare to attack us..."

Confirmation, thought Aram bleakly, of Santane's dream of winning power by threats. A savage, terrible blunder!

"Generalissima Santane has struck the shackles of the Tetrarchy from the people of Kaidor! Work and fight for victory!" The announcement was followed by the playing of martial music.

Jerrold snapped the radio off with a curse. Kant Mikal a prisoner—very likely dead already. The Fleet converging on Kaidor. Santane, drunk with power, brandishing his awful weapon over the heads of the mute billions of the *Thirty Suns*!

"What now, Aram?" asked Deve quietly.

"We must go to Kaidor V... now!" he replied.

In space again, Aram tried to shake off his forebodings and failed miserably. They were speeding into a tempest of stellar magnitude, and they were but two—a man and a woman—against a war-mad galaxy.

The tiny *Serpent* pointed for the fifth planet of the Kaidor Sun and drew its mantle of invisibility around itself, as though to hide from the fiery stars.

FAR BENEATH THE STARSHIP, Kaidor V lay like a bright scimitar. With the energy shield momentarily off, they approached the planet's night side, deep in the global penumbra. No lights marked the populous factory cities—the world rested dark, poised to lash out against the stars, falsely confident in its possession of frightful weapons.

Carefully, Jerrold lowered the *Serpent* toward the spot he had marked on the planetary chart—a deep valley near Santane's capital city of Astrel. Once course and rate of descent were computed, he reactivated the energy shield and groped his way downward through the sullen night of Kaidor V.

After what seemed an eternity of waiting, Deve and Jerrold felt their ship's keel touch the ground. Aram stood by the jets, alert for the sudden tipping that would warn them that the *Serpent* had landed on a steep slope or crag. The deck assumed a slight angle—no more. Aram cut the power and listened to the descending whine of the gyroscopes as they coasted to a halt. Then there was silence. Only the faint hum of the energy shield broke the stillness.

Jerrold and Deve studied the chart of Kaidor V carefully. Aram had no desire to have the *Serpent* meet with the same fate as the ill-starred *Star Cluster*. Concealment and secrecy were paramount.

On the gridded chart of the planet, the dark city of Astrel lay like a blot of ink. "There is a conveyor running near here, Deve," Aram said. "It must carry ores from the mines here—" he pointed out the shafts on the map, "—to the foundries in the city. They won't be able to guard the conveyor all along its length. We can get into Astrel that way, I think."

"And what then?" asked the girl.

Jerrold shrugged. "I'm a space officer—not a spy. I know that we must try to reach Santane and help Mikal and the others if we can—"

"We had some agents still in the city,"

said Deve thoughtfully. "Perhaps they haven't been discovered. We can try and reach them . . . they might be able to help us."

"It will be risky, Deve, now that the fight is in the open."

"I don't see how we can possibly reach Santane alone," she said.

Deve was right, of course, Aram realized. Without help they would never be able to penetrate the barriers of security the Provincial Governor must have erected between himself and the population of his planet.

Cutting the shield, Aram searched the dark landscape beyond the ports. The night was black and still. The stars made an unfamiliar pattern across the sky. A thin band of nebulosity showed the edge of the Galactic Lens in a peculiarly distorted perspective. Here, in the heart of the Thirtieth Decant, they were far from the populous worlds of the galaxy's center—farther even than they had been in Atmion Province. But this barren, cold world would be for the next few hours the center of the Thirty Suns. Here, on the metallic soil of Kaidor V, the fate of an interstellar civilization would be decided . . .

There were many deadly weapons in the lockers, but Jerrold decided to take only two plastic energy pistols. Such weapons would be less likely to be found by the weapons alarms that were standard street fixtures on all the planets of the Thirty Suns.

With a sigh, the valve slid open and Aram and the girl dropped to the frozen volcanic soil. The air smelled bitter, and the cold was intense. Kaidor V was more than twenty-four light-minutes from its primary, and warmth was slight. It had been chosen for the center of Kaidor Province rather than a more hospitable world because of the richness of its radioactive ores and immense nitrogen yielding deposits.

THE STARSHIP had landed in a small ravine, and there, Aram decided, it could stay relatively safe from discovery. Aram marked the spot on his chart and etched it into his brain. It was

hard to leave the tiny Serpent. It represented all the security they could expect on this unfriendly world.

They climbed to the crest of the ridge and dropped down onto a flat plateau, striking out across it toward the spot where Jerrold estimated they would intercept the line of the conveyor.

They walked along in silence under a canopy of oddly unfriendly stars. Presently the faint sound of machinery warned that the conveyor was near. In the darkness, they almost ran headlong into it. The light of Deve's small pocket torch revealed two belts. One bounced along empty, speeding back toward the mines in the hills; the other groaned under a heavy loading of metallic ores bound for the smelters and steel converters of Astrel.

"It's moving fast, but we'll have to jump it anyway," Aram said softly.

"Don't worry about me," replied Deve stoutly. "Just give me a hand."

Aram grinned in spite of himself. Deve's courage and resolution were a boon on this quixotic mission.

He picked her up and began to run along the uneven soil parallel to the racing conveyor. With an effort he heaved her up on to the pile of ore. He heard her give a little cry of pain as she landed among the sharp shards, and then she was gone into the blackness. Without pause, he leaped onto the belt himself, skinning his hands and legs on the rocky cargo.

FOR A MOMENT he stopped to catch his breath, and then began to crawl forward toward Deve Jennet. It took him a long while to reach her, and when he did, they found that she had dropped her gun in the scramble to board the conveyor.

The thought of facing a hostile city with one small pistol did not please; but Aram realized that under no circumstances could he have hoped to out-gun the combined forces of the Thirtieth Decant, so the loss of a gun really made little difference. The whole of the Serpent's armory would do them no good if concealment failed.

"We'll have to get clear of this thing before it reaches its destination, Deve," Jerrold shouted above the roar of the belt.

"I only hope the marshalling yards and ore stockpiles aren't too well guarded!" Deve replied—and Aram silently echoed her hope.

In the near distance, coming ever nearer, were the periodic flares of the great steel converters of Astrel. The city itself seemed blacked-out, but apparently Santane—the "Generalissimo," thought Jerrold wryly—was keeping his workers busy on weapons production right up until the last moment of danger . . . another proof to Aram's mind that Santane did not believe the Tetrarchy would dare to actually attack. He must already have warned the Thirty Suns Government, perhaps sending specimens of his handiwork to impress the Supreme Council of the power of his virus weapons. Yet the Fleet would attack—Jerrold felt sure of it. The very nature of the Thirty Suns Government made any other course unthinkable. Bureaucracies, Aram knew, reacted like headless beasts to the things that threatened them, unable to make fine distinctions or true evaluations. Defiance brought reprisal. It was as simple as that.

It was difficult to see anything in the darkness, and Jerrold began to fear that they might be catapulted into the furnaces themselves. The flares in the sky seemed very close now.

A tiny blue light flashed by that Aram thought must mark the entrance to the stockpiling yards. He scrambled to his feet and pulled Deve up beside him.

"Get ready to jump clear!" he shouted in her ear.

Wind snatched at his words, and the swaying conveyor made standing difficult—almost impossible. Deve clutched at him, trying to keep her balance. And then, without warning, the belt slammed abruptly into a flat right-angle turn, pitching them off into darkness filled with hurtling chunks of ore.

Aram clung to the girl as they spilled off the belt and banged hard into a great pile of ore. More of the stuff continued

to flood down on them from the conveyor above, burying them under an oppressive weight. Desperately, Jerrold clawed his way out into the open, and still clinging to Deve, rolled precipitously down the steep slope of the stockpile. They struck the bottom with bone-jarring force and lay there gasping.

A brilliant beam of light sliced through the dusty darkness, pinning them to the ore pile. Motes danced wildly in the gleaming cone. And in one awful flash of insight Aram knew what had happened . . . understood the meaning of that tiny blue light he had seen. A dark-light scanner!

Floodlights came on, and the intruders found themselves blinking into a semi-circle of energy-rifle muzzles in the hands of grim-faced, black-clad guards.

Aram Jerrold felt his heart sink. They were captured . . .

BETWEEN two files of guards, Deve and Jerrold walked into the city they had hoped to strip of its weapons. The bitterness of their failure rode hard on Jerrold's shoulders. He kept hearing again and again the phrase that Kant Mikal had used: "To save something from the wreckage . . ." It seemed impossible now. The giants and the furies were gathering. The might of the Thirty Suns would descend like a rain of fire on Kaidor V, and the mindless death nurtured here would sweep the inhabited worlds like a plague. The forces Jerrold had hoped to chain were free now, and threatening, like some ghastly cosmic storm. The teeming cities would crumble, the spaceways would be deserted. Night would fall on man's imperfect, but highest achievement, and he would return to the primeval muck.

Aram searched the faces of the streams of workers they passed. They were sullen, whipped men. From the tyranny of the Tetrarchy they had slipped into the clutches of Santane. For them, there was no hope, no dignity, and only the release of death could change their lot.

The black guards herded Deve and Jerrold onto a small air-sled, and the tiny craft nosed upward and into the streams of aerial traffic above the darkened city.

Ahead lay the black bulk of a towering skylon. This, Aram realized, must be Santane's citadel.

The air-sled was sinking slowly to a landing on one of the many landing platforms that marred the flanks of the mighty skylon when the first alarm sirens began to wail. Aram turned his eyes to the night sky automatically. He could not hope to see the Fleet, for they must still be beyond the orbit of Kaidor X, but he did see the red streaks of the first interceptor rockets taking off. The sky in the east was greying; the attack would come by day.

The air-sled touched the landing stage, and the guards hurried Jerrold and Deve Jennet into the citadel. Through a maze of halls thronging with white-faced officers in new and unfamiliar uniforms they went, past guards and armored doorways. At last they stood in a vaulted, oblong room that hummed with activity.

It was a Combat Center. In the center of the room lay a huge, three-dimensional chart of the Thirtieth Decant and the Kaidor system. Jerrold recognized the red blips that indicated the approaching Fleet, fully ten thousand strong . . . and he recognized something else too. He had felt this kind of tension in ships of the Navy. It was fear—universal, jittery fear. These people, Aram knew suddenly, were terribly, desperately afraid of that advancing armada. Their leader had told them that it would not dare attack, yet it came on inexorably and they were afraid.

Yellow streaks in the chart showed the track of interceptors, already fanning out from Kaidor V, seeking targets in the huge, onrushing formation of mighty battleships that spread across light-minutes of space. The tiny weapons had already taken a small toll of the slower Fleet vessels, but the rest continued sunward, their losses unfelt.

This was what Aram feared Santane would not or could not realize . . . that no matter how dreadful his virus weapon, forces of such magnitude could not be halted by threats once they were put in motion.

Now Santane's secretly built fleet was blasting into space. Jerrold estimated that

it consisted of perhaps five hundred large starships—torpedo launchers mainly, built for defense.

Near Kaidor VII, the ringed giant, the two Fleets made first contact. The battle of the Thirtieth Decant had begun.

The guards shoved at Jerrold, and he was led away from the chart and its fascinating picture of battle. He and Deve were taken up a spiralling staircase to the balcony that overlooked the Combat Center and through a heavily guarded door.

The chamber in which they now found themselves was strangely quiet after the fear-tinged confusion of the Combat Center. All but one of their guards withdrew, and Aram faced a tall, powerfully built man who stood engrossed in a bank of scanner-views of the battle.

Presently the man looked up to scowl at his prisoners. Aram Jerrold knew at once that it was—at last—Santane.

ARAM STUDIED THE MAN with interest. Here was the man whose rebellion had catapulted the galaxy into war. Because of Santane, billions faced degradation or extinction. It seemed impossible that one man could cause such a cataclysmic upheaval in a star-spanning culture. But there was more to it than that, of course. Santane—as a man—was simply one more bit of protoplasm in the vast mystery of the cosmos. But Santane—as a symbol—was real and important. He was a living monument to the immutable face that tyranny begets more tyranny, and that the very existence of absolute power results in the two awful corollaries . . . ambition and strife.

The Tetrarchy had spawned Santane just as surely as night follows day. Santane was the cancer in the body of the despotism of the Thirty Suns that was destined to destroy it . . . and, thought Aram grimly, himself with it.

Aram Jerrold studied the craggy face and the deep-set, glowing eyes as Santane stood there before the simulacrum of Armageddon in the scanners, and knew there was madness in the man.

Santane spoke, and the sound rasped across the senses.

"You are Aram Jerrold and Deve Jen-net—agents of the Tetrarchy. Spies . . . high ranking spies!" His icy gaze searched the faces of the man and woman before him. "Do you deny it?"

"We are who you say," replied Jerrold evenly, "but we are not spies. The Tetrarchy has undoubtedly set a price on our heads by now."

"You lie! The Tetrarchy sent you here because they are afraid of me." Santane laughed scornfully, "They have seen what I can do."

"Don't be a fool, Santane," Jerrold said softly. "The Tetrarchy is not afraid of you. It can't be. It hasn't the ability to fear you or anything else. Can't you see that?" He indicated the scanners. The Fleet was bearing ever closer to Kaidor V, slashing through the cordons of defensive craft doggedly, impervious to losses and dying ships and men.

Fear touched Santane's face . . . but for just an instant. Aram knew with sinking heart that the man's madness would not let him believe the truth.

"No," said Santane tensely. "They are afraid of me—or you wouldn't have been sent here."

Aram was struck with a sudden, grotesque pity for the man. All the weeks he had spent in danger and in preparation for this mission that had failed, he had thought of Santane as the living incarnation of crafty evil. What he saw before him now was a insane man—frightened by the mighty forces he had unleashed and could not now turn or control. In that moment, Aram felt that Kant Mikal's injunction to save something from the ruins was truly impossible, for nothing could come right when a single madman could smash in days the work of millennia.

Santane's face was again rigid and cold. "Perhaps you have not seen what my biological weapons can do . . . Guard! Bring in the others!"

Aram felt an icy hand closing about his heart. The others . . .

Kant Mikal . . . the men and women of the Star Cluster . . .

"Santane . . . you haven't . . .!" Jerrold broke off in horror as the guard re-

turned, leading a line of five shambling beasts. The creatures fought the chains that bound them, howling with outrage.

"How," demanded Santane, "can Terminus attack me if they face *that*?" His eyes lit, kindled with some obscene pleasure at the spectacle. "First there are pains in the neck and head. Blinding—agonizing pains! Then comes unconsciousness, and memory goes . . . then the glands alter, and men beome . . . beasts . . ."

Deve Jenet moaned. Her friends and comrades were in that line of disfigured subhuman things. She clutched at Aram for support.

Jerrold felt red fury explode within him. He wanted to feel his bare hands on Santane's throat . . . his teeth in his flesh. With an oath he launched himself bodily at the smiling madman, hands groping for the throat under the twisted grin. He saw Santane back away in sudden fright, and the black flash of the guard interposing himself between them. The guard raised his rifle and brought the muzzle down in a chopping arc. Aram felt a searing pain above his eyes and pitched into a reddish blur of oblivion . . .

JERROLD AWOKE in a small, glassed-in chamber. His head ached dully, and he could feel the stiffness of dried blood on his brow. He rolled over and staggered to his feet, realizing that he must be at the very pinnacle of the mighty skylon that housed Santane's headquarters.

The same black guard who had struck him down stood impassive in the corner, and Aram could see Santane standing with Deve on a small landing stage beyond the glass. He saw something else, too, and his breath came faster. There was a small air-sled on the landing stage, bright with new paint and Santane's own insigne of the Trident and Flame.

There was a subspace radio installation in the corner of the aerie, and Aram Jerrold knew instantly that he had been brought up to the skylon's top to establish contact with the invading Fleet, to warn the forces of the Thirty Suns to surrender.

Santane returned with Deve held at his side. The sight of the man's hand possessively on Deve's wrist brought a return of Aram's fury.

"You see," Santane said with a thin smile, "the Fleet *does* fear me. They have broken off their attack¹² and are circling beyond the stratosphere."

That meant, Aram knew, that the ships of the Thirty Suns were preparing for bombardment of Kaidor V. Knowing the richness of the nitrogen-bearing surface soil of the planet, the Task Force commander would undoubtedly be readying his vessels to rain down nitrogen fission bombs, trying to exceed critical mass in the air and ground of the planet and setting off chain reactions to rip it apart by the expenditure of the energy contained in the globe itself. Santane, not being a space officer, could not know that.

Kant Mikal's wish to have something saved from the wreckage now could be accomplished in only two ways—both impossible to Aram's mind.

He and Deve could escape, and save themselves . . . or he could prevent Santane from launching his interstellar missiles when the bombs began to fall.

"Call the Fleet commander," Santane ordered brusquely. "Tell him he must land and place himself at my orders."

Such a call would be ignored. Aram knew that . . .

"Hurry!" Santane demanded pettishly.

Still Aram could bring himself to no decision.

Santane turned, took a stoppered vial from a cabinet and faced Aram again with a scowl. "One drop of this on the skin, and a human being becomes . . . what you saw below. Shall I use it on the woman to convince you where your duty lies?"

Aram felt his heart skip a beat. Santane was not bluffing. Pressed, he would carry out his threat from sheer perverted malice. Aram looked hungrily toward the small air-sled on the landing . . .

He took a step toward the radio. Very probably his voice, recognized, would bring the bombs even quicker—but there was no way to convince Santane of that. He was beyond reason.

A high pitched sound broke the stillness. Aram pitched instinctively to the floor as a bomb struck the ground far below and near the base of the skylon! The whole structure shook with the force of the concussion, the glass of the aerie fogging into a maze of tiny cracks. Fragments of the ceiling came powdering down. Santane staggered against the wall, the vial still in his hand, a look of terrified disbelief on his face.

"No!" he gasped. "They wouldn't dare . . ."

Aram tried to reach Deve's side, but Santane was quicker.

"Tell them to call off the attack!" he screamed, "or I infect the woman! Quickly! Quickly!"

ARAM SPUN on his knee and dived for Santane. The vial flew across the room and shattered against the wall. Jerrold smashed his fist into Santane's distorted face—he felt the splintering of teeth in the shattered mouth. A sizzling beam of fire flashed past Aram's eyes. He straightened and struck Santane again, sending the man staggering across the room.

Instead of attacking or trying to escape, Santane leaped for a wall communicator. His battered face was a mask of maniacal rage. Jerrold caught him but . . . too late to prevent four words from screeching into the microphone . . .

"Fire the virus missiles!"

Aram sobbed with frustrated rage and swung his clenched fists again and again into Santane's bloody face. He rolled on the littered floor, trying to strangle the life from the wildly struggling madman who had spawned disaster.

Another bomb fell, rocking the skylon. Beams clattered down from the towering superstructure, caving in sections of the aerie's roof. The guard, who had been circling for a safe shot at Aram, shrieked in agony as a metal section took him across the shoulders and snapped his back like a twig.

Suddenly Aram felt a wetness on his clothes and a bitterness on his tongue. The two wrestling men had rolled into

the pool of liquid from the broken vial.

Sanctane screamed with terror, and in a frantic burst of energy, broke away and stumbled out onto the landing stage and the air-sled.

Deve rushed to Aram, helping him to his feet. As she touched him, he recoiled.

"Don't, Deve! Don't touch me!"

But the girl's hands, too, were wet with the sticky stuff of the vial, and Aram knew with a sick certainty that they were both infected with the virus of bestiality.

"After *him!*" Hopeless now, sick with despair, Aram wanted only to kill Santane.

But Santane had not launched the air-sled. Instead he knelt on its deck, a medical kit in his hands. He was trying with trembling fingers to fill a syringe from a narrow capsule. Jerrold knocked the instrument from his hands and dragged him from the machine. The madman fought back with desperate strength, but Aram smashed him again and again against the stones of the landing. In a last spasmodic effort, Santane caught Aram by the throat and forced him toward the edge. Far below, the glowing, radioactive smoke of death roiled against the sides of the weakened skylon. Aram could see flames eating ravenously at the lower levels. Santane shrieked with triumph as Aram hung momentarily over the abyss. Aram twisted . . .

And then Santane was gone, vanishing in a long wailing fall, twisting and turning like a rag-doll until his scream of terror blended with the cry of another falling bomb.

WITHOUT PAUSING to catch his breath, Jerrold returned to the air-sled and picked up the syringe. It was only partly full, and the capsule that Santane had used to load it had been smashed. It was the antidote . . . it had to be the antidote!

"Deve, here!" With shaking hands he caught her arm and sank the needle into her flesh, squeezing the plunger down. As the fluid in the cylinder reached the half-way point, Deve pulled away.

"That's enough! The rest is for you," she breathed.

"No, Deve! I don't know if it's enough for both of us. Santane was going to take the full measure for himself, and he should know . . ."

Deve Jenet shook her head. "I don't care," she said. "I wouldn't want to go on . . . without you."

Aram pleaded but Deve would not be convinced. She had no wish to survive alone. Finally, Aram took the syringe and emptied it into his forearm.

"Now, we'll see," he muttered.

The howl of bombs was a steady, increasing cacophony now, and, though ships of Santane's fleet still fought, the Thirty Suns naval force bombed almost at will. The skylon shook and buckled under the bombardment and the radiation count on the counters in the wrecked aerie showed an increasingly dangerous concentration. Still the virus missiles took the air, streaking the radioactive clouds with their tail-flares, and Aram watched with sick horror as the awful spawn of the Kaidor Sun rose to spread bestiality while he stood helplessly by.

"Aram," Deve spoke to him gently amid the rising symphony of destruction. "We have to get clear, Aram. Remember what Kant Mikal said . . . and *we* are all that's left now."

"The Fleet . . ."

"The Fleet will return to Terminus. We can't stop them," Deve said with finality.

Aram knew it was true. Mindless to the last, the bureaucracy would stick to its directives and general orders. The Fleet would return . . . to oblivion.

THEY MOUNTED the air-sled and slanted up into the tortured air of the dying planet. A huge starship with the golden Spaceship and Sun blazon came hurtling down out of the sky like a fiery brand, a smaller ship bearing Santane's Trident and Flame imbedded in its flank. The two ships dissolved into a ball of greasy fire as they smashed into the crowded buildings of shattered Astrel.

More and more nitrogen fission bombs were falling now as the air-sled streaked

across the flaming sky toward the ravine that hid the Serpent. The very soil of the planet seemed to dance in a hellish carnival of destruction. Glancing back, Aram saw the towering skylon come plunging down in torrents of rubble and human flesh. He knew with finality that he was witnessing the end of everything he had known—the chaotic collapse of a culture that had spawned its own nemesis. Man—diving from the pinnacle of stellar dominion to the depths of nothingness . . . because he had tolerated tyranny.

Jerrold shook his head to clear away the sudden pain that stabbed across his temples. One thought grew in his mind with increasing clarity. He and Deve must somehow survive. Perhaps other men and women would come through the end in remote worlds, but there was no way of being certain. He had to be sure . . . he had to know that the end would not come for all the race. He, a man, and Deve, a woman, could still carry out the mercifully dead Kant Mikal's injunction. In those fleeting moments above the writhing, doomed surface of Kaidor V, survival became an obsession with Aram Jerrold.

The Serpent awaited them where they had left it, and they hurried through the valve, feeling the tremblors of the fifth planet's death agonies.

Aram drove the ship upward, seeking the safety of space and their haven. Both knew where they were going, though neither had put it into words.

At a distance of five diameters from the globe of Kaidor V, Aram paused to see the death of a world.

Like a savage animal, the Fleet continued to worry the trembling planet with a vicious hail of bombs. The pair in the Serpent could see bright internal fires as the crust of the world split under the hideous attack. Like a stricken thing, Kaidor V seemed to totter on its axis. Great chunks of rock were blown clear by the pressure of expanding inner fires.

For hours, the death agonies of the planet continued, until finally, like a bursting bubble, the globe expanded. Huge slashes appeared from pole to pole. The ice caps vanished into twin clouds of

superheated steam. Fragments peeled off as gravitational balances were disturbed. Globules of molten lava fanned out, like strings of beads. Kaidor V trembled with a cosmic delirium—great prominences of atomic fire leaping far into space. And then, quite suddenly, it was over. With its heart ripped out by the violent fission of its inner substance, the hollow shell collapsed into a swirling, nebulous cloud of cosmic rubble, rapidly spreading out into a belt of tiny planetoids spanning the place where once a mighty world circled the parent star . . .

* * *

The Serpent settled softly into a wooded glade and grew still. Within, Aram Jerrold fought the wracking pains in his head, screaming aloud with the agony of it. Deve lay unconscious on the steel deck, moaning softly.

Aram knew that the antidote he had injected into their veins was not enough. Vaguely, he recalled that once—long ago, it seemed—he had been told that a small amount of specific would prevent physical damage. But the virus was claiming him, nonetheless. The pounding agony in his head was streaked with delirious phantasms. Kant Mikal's words echoed through his brain, though he no longer recognized them as other than his own. His screaming madness took the shape of those words as he lifted Deve in his arms and staggered out of the ship.

Driven by some deep seated racial memory, he stumbled toward the sea—the mother—the giver of life. The sheer brutal agony of the virus increased with every step, blinding him with its intensity, until at last he could bear it no longer and sank to his knees on the white sand of a beach and pitched forward across the still form of the woman he carried, hands outstretched toward the shallows of a restless sea that laved him . . . laved him . . .

DEVE STOOD NUDE in the glory of the morning sunlight and lifted her arms to the sky in an ecstasy of freedom. "How lovely it is," she murmured.

The figure at her feet stirred and she touched him playfully with a bare foot.

Aram woke, puzzled. Something, deep in the back of his mind troubled him. There had been something . . .

"Come swim with me!"

Aram looked up at the naked girl before him. She was Deve. He knew that. He tried to remember more, but he could not. A strange shroud seemed to have covered up everything . . . language he seemed to command, but . . .

He put the troublesome thoughts out of his mind and stripped off the strange coverings on his body. Hand in hand with Deve, he waded into the sea. They swam and played in the warm sunlight, and presently, tiring of their sport, sought the shade of a wooded glade.

As they walked hand in hand among the flowering shrubs under the trees, Deve stopped abruptly.

"Aram," she said, puzzled, "what is that?"

An alien shape stood among the verdure, gleaming where the sunlight pierced the foliage. It was a long cylinder, tapered at both ends and lined with round, blank ports. They stood there staring at the spaceship with perplexed incomprehension. Both had a vague feeling that it was familiar.

"What is it, Aram?" the girl asked again.

"I . . . don't know," he confessed.

"I think we did know . . . once," Deve said softly. "Aram, why are we here?"

Why? The question touched off sparks of memory that brightened and as quickly faded. Aram spoke, painfully dredging the words from beyond the veil of forgetfulness.

"We . . . must . . . save . . . something . . . from the ruins."

"What ruins?" the girl asked impatiently. "What is it we must save?"

But memory had faded. Aram could not answer her.

Still she persisted with feminine curiosity unsatisfied.

"Aram, what is this place?"

For a long moment he stood in silence beside her in the sun-splashed glade. He listened to the gentle sound of the wind in the trees and the restless murmur of the sea. Presently he replied, but with a question. "Are you happy here, Deve?"

"Oh, yes!" she breathed.

He took her in his arms, the spaceship and the past completely forgotten.

"Then this is . . . Paradise," he said.

EPILOGUE

. . . And twenty thousand years after, as Man reached again for the stars . . . these two lived in memory . . . as *Adam and Eve*.



DIANETICS: A Door to the Future

By JAMES BLISH

AN increased life-span, freedom from 70% of all human illnesses and a major increase in intelligence—these are only a few of the benefits promised us by a new science called “dianetics.”

“Dianetics” is both the name of a recent book about how the human mind operates, and the general term used to cover specific methods of repairing, healing and perfecting the human mind.

Just how does the human mind work? Up to a few years ago nobody really knew.

Why does the human mind fail to work efficiently at times, or all the time? Another mystery.

If the claims made for the new science of dianetics are borne out; both those mysteries are now solved. Some of these claims are so flabbergasting as to stagger even the hardened science-fiction fan. For instance:

Dianetics claims to have cured many types of heart ailment, arthritis, the common cold, stomach ulcers, sinus trouble, asthma, and many other diseases, amounting to about 70% of the whole catalogue of human ills.

Dianetics also claims to have cured virtually every known form of mental disease. These cures have encompassed the severest form of insanity, workers in dianetics declare flatly.

Furthermore—and in this claim (among others) lies dianetics’ bid to be called a science—dianetics claims to be able to cure all these aberrations and diseases every time, without fail. At the time this is being written, some months before you will read it, dianetics has been tried on a minimum of 300 people, and, its originators say, has worked 100% without failure in all these cases.

Nor is this all, fantastic though what I’ve already written may seem to be. Use of dianetic therapy on so-called “normal” people seems to produce changes in them which can only be described as dynamite.

“Normal” people treated by dianetic therapy, it’s said, undergo a rise in intelligence, efficiency, and well-being averaging a third above their previous capacity! In one case, a woman, the IQ—intelligence quotient—rose 50 points before the full course of therapy was run!

Such “clears,” as they are called, are said to be immune to any and all forms of mental disease, and to any and all forms of organic diseases caused by mental or emotional difficulties.

It might be a good idea to stop here and ask the names of the people who are making these incredible claims. They are none of them professional quacks, faith-healers, bread-pill rollers, or other forms of swindlers. They are all men with

solid reputations, and all, as it happens, quite familiar to the science-fiction reader.

The leader of the new school of thought is L. Ron Hubbard, author of “Fear,” “Final Black-out,” and many other science-fiction classics. By trade, Hubbard is an engineer.

Hubbard’s two principal confrères are John W. Campbell, Jr., and Dr. Joseph E. Winter. Mr. Campbell, of course, is widely known even to the general public as a government consultant in nuclear physics, the author of “The Atomic Story,” and to us as the editor of a top-notch science-fiction magazine. Dr. Winter, who by the way is an M.D., not a Ph.D., has published some science-fiction stories; but until dianetics came along, he was best known as an expert endocrinologist of unimpeachable reputation.

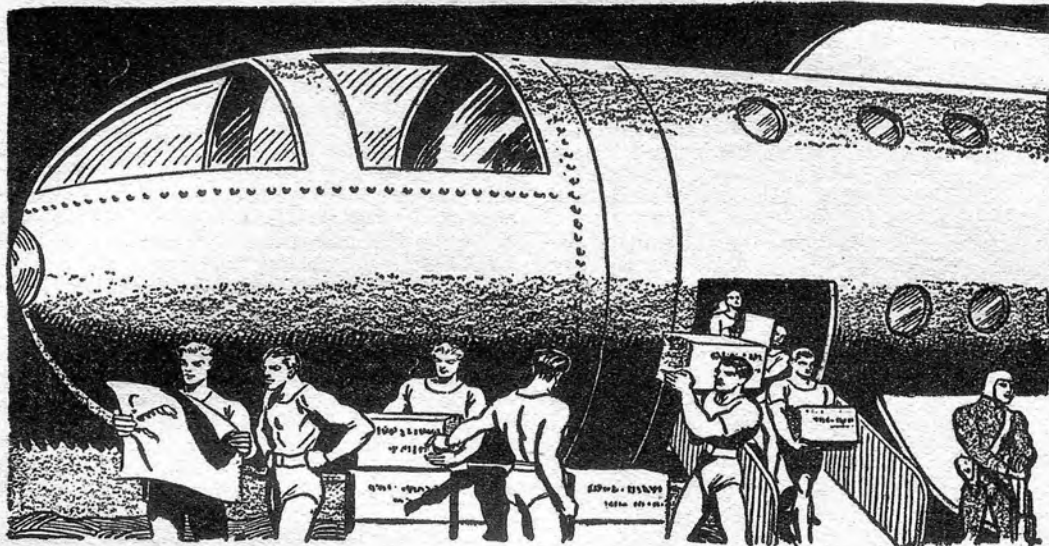
Hubbard’s book,* however, does not include any formal evidence for the claims. The Dianetics Institute in Elizabeth, N. J., is equally unwilling to offer authenticated case records or any other evidence of that specific kind. The book, dianetics men point out, offers the therapy procedures in complete detail. If you want case histories, perform your own experiments.

As it happens, one of the more spectacular cures claimed by dianetics took place in the New York area, and could be checked from outside sources. Jerome Bixby, editor of PLANET STORIES, checked it. The claim was so; hospital authorities who have no connection with dianetics as a movement vouch for it, cautiously but definitely.

My own personal tests of the therapy—on myself, my wife, and a friend (namely, Jerome Bixby)—haven’t proceeded very far as yet. But as far as they’ve gone, they check with the claims. The phenomena Hubbard describes in the book do appear. They appear in the order in which he says they appear. And they match his descriptions of them to the letter. Such after-effects as we’ve been able to observe also check.

If dianetics does work—and every check I’ve been able to run thus far indicates that it does—it may well be the most important discovery of this or any other century. It will bring the long-sought “rule of reason” to the problems of local and world politics, communication, law, and almost every other field of human endeavor—the goal of a 3000 year search.

*DIANETICS, by L. Ron Hubbard. Hermitage House, New York, 1950; \$4.00. Hermitage, by the way, is the publisher of a number of books on psychology and psychoanalysis universally acknowledged to be serious contributions to the field.



THE VIZIGRAPH

TO include James Blish's last-minute article on DIANETICS, we've had to cramp the Vizigraph a bit this issue; therefore (in order to run as many letters as possible) some five hundred words of your editor's carefully considered prose have just hit the wastebasket. The several items below, however, we stubbornly refuse to discard.

Two books, one recent and the other dated 1947: *THE SHADOW ON THE HEARTH* by Judith Merrill, and *THE KEY TO THE GREAT GATE* by Hinko Gottlieb. Recommended. Miss Merrill's first novel stands as an intimate and very immediate picture of what A-war may mean, not to our society as a whole or to the brass, but to and within the family group. It makes for thoughtful reading. Gottlieb's book, on the other hand, is a cheerful and fantastic canvas in a more-or-less solid Einsteinian frame. The publishers are respectively Doubleday and Simon & Schuster.

A mysterious system of our own reveals that the favorite stories of the last issue were *STRANGE EXODUS*, *THE CROWDED COLONY*, *STAR SHIP* and *THE SKY IS FALLING*, in that order. On debit, few stories received more than perfunctory snarls . . . hope you like this issue as well.

Pic winners are 1) Bruce Hapke; 2) Ed Cox; 3) Douglas Creighton,

JEROME BIXBY

TALES OF CHARACTER

130 West 183 St.
New York 53, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Congratulations (slightly belated) on your accession to high office—and with all due credit to your predecessors, *PLANET STORIES* seems to be improving under your guidance. The new typography, on the contents page and at the individual

story headings, is particularly good; is it permanent or is this only a trial run? (*Permanent—Ed.*)

The stories are good, too. (Don't snort and toss this away; I'll go into greater detail later.) One of the most pleasant things about *PS* remains its use of tales of *character*; though the plots are there (and very nicely worked out, besides) your readers aren't afflicted with the monotonously creaking, mechanically inhuman precision of plots in other science-fiction magazines, where characterization is reduced to the ultimate minimum, and the cast of the stories can only be distinguished from each other by the labels of their names. Maybe *PLANET* does contain "Cliff-Hanger Stuff" but the cliff-hangers-ers *do* come alive for at least the duration of the story.

And now for specific criticism.

THE REBEL OF VALKYR falls into the class of old wine in new bottles, but who cares? This "vintage" is a particularly fine one, and Alfred Coppel proves here that he has a keen historical sense as well as the ability to write with thrilling vividness. That picture of the warlords racing through space in technically near-perfect ships lit by smoky oil lamps is a magnificent bit of description that epitomizes the Second Empire's entire level of culture. Although the ending had a strong Prisoner of Zenda flavor, it was nevertheless effective, and the tale simply cries out for a sequel—perhaps more than one.

C. H. Liddell's *THE SKY IS FALLING* (awfully reminiscent, that title) was a nice exploration of slightly abnormal mental processes, and a really dangerous phobia that is becoming, unfortunately, only too common. A well-written yarn, nothing extraordinary, but distinctly promising better to come.

STAR SHIP displayed a marvelous instance of restraint in titles—it could so easily have been *THE KURSE OF KHAZAK*—but it really didn't have much bearing on the story, which

was pleasantly told. Poul Anderson's handling of the clashing loyalties of his characters was just a shade overdone, but, otherwise, STAR SHIP was truly interesting.

William Shedenhelm's PATCH repeated the old, familiar refrain: that machines can't replace human experience and ingenuity—and the author knew when to stop and also how to include a chuckly brand of humor.

Aside from its somewhat queasy-making descriptions, STRANGE EXODUS hadn't any particularly remarkable achievements of character or plot; Robert Abernathy has written better stories, especially novels and novelets. He seems to require a story-telling scope that the shorter form doesn't permit him. However, this certainly wasn't a bad story; in such company, though, it doesn't rate very high.

Margaret St. Clair's MEEM may have had great potentialities for irony or satire, but it didn't quite come off—the same problem as Abernathy's short story: insufficient space for development.

THE CROWDED COLONY—ah! Jay Drexel's tale deserves nothing less than superlatives. Like Alfred Coppel's novel, it was a well-worn plot, superbly handled and beautifully ironic—but events have a habit of occurring in just that way. It's not hard to guess why another story by this author is scheduled for the next issue.

If this be treason, make the most of it. Ray Bradbury's DEATH-WISH was not quite so conspicuous for the reek of the charnel-house as was some of his past work, but the general atmosphere was present as usual. It is high time that Mr. Bradbury realized that death is an inevitable experience for all humanity, that there is no reason for regarding it with a morbid delight and that he is alienating a good many of his readers with his persistent dwelling on the horrors of decay and dissolution. It's true that he possesses undoubted skill in writing and a fine literary style, but if he were to turn his talents to more constructive topics than the graveyard, I believe his stories would enjoy a far greater popularity and esteem than they do at present. (By the way, the title DEATH-WISH takes a towering place on the list of poor choices; it gave the whole plot away before the story began.)

This letter isn't very short either but I haven't written to PS for a long while, and I'm catching up on lost time.

Congratulations, again, on an outstanding issue.

Sincerely,

ROSE JACOBOWITZ

BEST SINCE "GREEN DEATH"

c/o 3555 Edison
Hillsdale
San Mateo
California

DEAR EDITOR BIXBY:

My earnest thanks for helping me out on the change of address concerning Conrad Johnson. This is one of the distinct traits of the cooperation between editor and reader that distinguishes fantasy and science-fiction from other fields.

The Fall PLANET was received with open arms, for its bi-monthly announcement, and because attraction of non-adventure still palls

when you consider the sum total of competitors which hand it out. PLANET alone mixes inter-planetary yarns with occasional time-travel, off-trail, and even sociological themes.

Alfred Coppel is not one of my favorite writers, but he will be. If Asimov and the Foundation are presently inactive, by all means let us hear Mr. Coppel's views on the intricate machinations of galactic empire. REBEL OF VALKYR is the best PS tale since McDowell's GREEN DEATH.

One comment here. Asimov borrowed the planet "Kalgan" from E. E. Smith, and Alfred Coppel reciprocated by using it in REBEL. Now, the question is not one of plagiarism (since a common description of a galaxy benefits the reader by placing him in familiar surroundings) but this: where did Smith get it?

Mrs. St. Clair's MEEM was one of those rarities in sfantasy: a theme of sex, treated adultly, and presented for obviously mature readers. If PLANET will pioneer in the use of sex themes as it is used by novelists, and not as employed for titillation by the current rash of "Sexy" novels, they will have as great a success as they had with Ray Bradbury. And altho I reserve judgment here, just look what Ray's doing: slick publication!

Maybe I'll write a sex-science-fiction novel for you, when I've 10,000 words to spare. "Scintillating Siren of Space" or "Valiant Valkyrie of the Void". Y'know. (Maybe "Whispering Were-Winds of Wilma's Weasel-World?" . . . hey! . . . that's "IT"!! . . . that's "IT"!!—Ed.)

That's all.

C. STEWART MELCHETTE

POOR LITTLE MARTIANS

546 Ellis
Wichita 9, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

Congratulations on your new issue as you seem to be endeavoring to take PLANET out of its old rut. I certainly hope you can do it.

Concerning the lead novel, are Alfred Coppel and C. L. Moore connected in any manner? Some of his phrases in this story are reminiscent of Moore's Judgment Night in Astounding some years back. It is as if a person were disguising their handwriting but some of the traits showed anyhow.

I cannot buy the basic premise of the story. People just don't act like that and forget everything they ever knew. Please don't go poking the fall of Rome at me either, as very little actual knowledge was lost in the shuffle. It was the loss of a strong central government that did the dirty work.

Nor did it sound natural for the guy to walk off and leave the girl just because he had made her Empress. If he, as a king, could not have her, nobody could. But history shows that people don't act that way. If they loved each other as they were supposed to, he would have become her consort and aided her in ruling. The other way just didn't jell.

STRANGE EXODUS certainly was unusual to say the least. I don't recall any story that had just that way of solving the problem. Speaking of parasites, though, wouldn't some of our politicians have gotten along splendidly under those circumstances! I could name quite a few that

have never been anything but parasites, so they would already be qualified.

Pop Gillette of PATCH was an unusual character and I rather liked him, as I could appreciate what made him tick. Perhaps we will hear from him again in the future?

The CROWDED COLONY was another story with an unusual twist. I thought it was going to be another one of those "naughty Earthmen persecuting the poor little Martians" stories that we have had now and then.

STAR SHIP was another good story. The theme was in reality the same as in the lead novel. However it was handled a lot better in the short story. To have events happen the way they did in the novel every school, library, factory, and every other thing that could recall the psat would have to be wiped out. (*In one swell foop?—Ed.*) Also the people then alive would know about science and they wouldn't lie to their children and pretend that science was witchcraft so nobody would understand it anymore. The people in the short story still had their knowledge left, so they built a modern culture so they could regain their ship. Man is inheritantly a builder, so the shorter story was far more plausible.

Respectfully,
EDWIN SIGLER

NEW IDEAS

201 Veterans Village
Canton, New York

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Congratulations upon congratulations! Two more PLANETS every blessed year. It shouldn't be long before you get up to the regulation number (how many planets are there, anyhow?).

The Fall issue was crammed with fine short-stories. To those who seem to find Bradbury an inferior imitator of the "expatriates" of the twenties, I'd like to say that Bradbury's ideas seem to me much more interesting than a lot of the earlier stuff and that I'm unwilling to admit, as a drawback to any kind of story, a style which makes the action and surroundings of the story exceedingly vivid.

The idea in STRANGE EXODUS is a new one to me and therefore most welcome. The idea of man as a parasite on a larger organism can probably be used several times more without exhausting it.

MEEM also is a new one—or else the idea never crept past the censors before.

But the combination of THE REBEL OF VALKYR and STAR SHIP in one issue make me suddenly conscious of a paucity of thrill. You might ask the readers whether they think feudalism intrinsically fascinating and the authors whether feudalism is a necessary and probable outcome of extended space travel. Personally, I'm glad we're out of it for the time being.

Pics in this order: Doug Creighton, Lin Carter, Larry Rothstein, For no particular reasons.

BETSY CURTIS


STF CYCLE?

Box 1723
Fargo, N. D.

DEAR EDITOR:

The tip you gave me in the Fall Vizigraph led

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PS's

FEATURE FLASH

C. H. Liddell, whose novelet CARRY ME HOME is spotlighted in this issue, is one of our newest and most valued contributors. After reading—and swiftly buying—several of his tales, we got to wondering about the man himself . . . so we asked . . . so he answered. Meet the creator of Red Rohan:

"You are embarrassing me, you know, by inquiring into my quite ordinary way of life and what makes me tick. However, I will answer your specific questions the best I can, and as to my peculiarities, I can only say that I have had a terrific interest in science and fantasy literature ever since I can remember. Being an only child, I found a lot of time to read—and I read everything I could get my hands on. I remember that once my father gave me a paperback copy of *THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND*, by Jules Verne, to read. My mother, God love her, found that book in my room before I had finished reading it and took it away from me, upbraiding Dad for letting me read such wild trash. Dad, ever a gentle man, mildly defended Mr. Verne to no avail. I believe this incident instilled in me a deadly curiosity to know more about such marvelous adventures which Dad said were scientific and Mother said were "trash." I fear the thirst has become an unquenchable flame.

"I do not have a great deal of time for interests outside of my work, but I consider writing science fiction and fantasy my hobby, avocation—relaxation. I think I first got started doing it because of my impatience with many radio programs which built up suspense and interest in their plays and then fizzled out miserably in the climax. And more recently the television shows have been doing the same thing. Only rarely have I found a fantasy play which builds up to a good climax and then has a decent one. I guess I grumbled too much, for my wife finally got exasperated and told me that if I didn't like the endings of the plays I listened to, to write some of my own.

"So I did. And to my unbounded amazement my stories are beginning to sell. I've been forbidden by my agent to give him a plug, so all I can say is that I am grateful to the editor and readers of *PLANET STORIES* for liking my material, and I'll try never to let you down."

There we have a thumbnail sketch of Charles H. Liddell, industrial research chemist of Kansas City, Missouri—one of the few writers who turns out science-fantasy because he loves it, and not because he has to eat. Still in his thirties, Charles H. Liddell is happily married to a Kansas City girl and commutes five days a week to K.C., Mo., to do laboratory research. On week-ends, when Mrs. Liddell hasn't other plans, he loses himself in the spinning of such stories as *CARRY ME HOME*,

me to read *MEEM* first. It was outstanding, which is the highest compliment I am willing to pay a stf story (I'm not convinced that the pulp field sprouts forth "classics" every few issues). I thought that the *CROWDED COLONY* would also be good, but was disappointed. The plot twist which ended the story was clever, but the excellent anti-exploitation and anti-racist theme was weakened, if not ruined, by thus contriving that terrestrial supremacy (white supremacy) should be upheld.

DEATH-WISH. Bradbury need never write another word. All he has to say is summed up in that title. And my congratulations to Wayne Pryor and Douglas Creighton. I don't like Bradbury. I have no taste for unrelieved morbidity. There was a time when I liked him, I admit, but no longer; and an increasing number of fans seem to be experiencing a like reaction.

Every *Vizigraph* includes a few letters commenting on *PLANET's* use of old-time interplanetary adventure fiction, as contrasted with the streamlined "serious" science story; such comments being hastily qualified with, "That's okay; that's the way I like it." Stick to your present policies. It may not be long before *PLANET's* type of literature will again dominate the field, and the tale of straight science, with its pretenses to serious significance, be in eclipse.

A change has come over science fiction within the ten years or more during which I've been reading it. We read less today about glorious inventions which will introduce the millennium. Since Hiroshima there has come about a widespread feeling among the public (dating from some time previously among philosophers, but not generally accepted until the last five years) that science does not have all the answers, nor necessarily very good answers; and it is not so easy as formerly to write convincingly about a scientific utopia. (Note to Weinstein: Please don't bother replying to me. I know your views, but I know also that increasing numbers of people are coming to disagree with you.) In place of the visions of bright tomorrows, three themes predominate: (1) world destruction, usually atomic; (2) super-scientific world of the future, represented as hell on earth; (3) new Adam and Eve escape into primordial world to start the race over. (*OUCH!—Ed.*) There is a certain romantic enjoyment in such reading, but nothing to guarantee long-term appeal to the public of any size.

The much-maligned stf thriller, while it too may have been influenced at the outset by the prevailing optimism (grandeur adventures than ever awaiting mankind in that chrome-plated future), has, due to momentum and reader appeal, remained almost unchanged. It can be taken without seriousness, as enjoyable light reading—and, all intellectual pretensions aside, that is what fans read for, even as anyone else. And as the scientific outlook darkens, increasing numbers of readers will wish to forget about it and read for escape.

Why not an illustration for Sigler? Nobody seems to like the fellow, but he keeps coming back undaunted. Such determination merits some sort of award.

RAY H. RAMSAY

DARNED GOOD ISSUE

2711 La Salle Street
Racine, Wisconsin

Ah, Jerome, my boy . . .

At last in all this seething, futile mass o. nomanity I have found a kindred soul. At last I have found an editor whose policy agrees with the way I would run the magazine. Our minds think as one. (Romantic, ain't it? If you were a beautiful blonde I'd ask you to marry me . . . if the dowry were right.) (*My daddy owns a bank—Ed.*)

No foolin' ed., you turned out a da. . . er . . . darned good issue, so good, in fact, that I can't decide which story was best. So I won't; I'll divide first place between STAR SHIP and THE CROWDED COLONY. The latter story had a novel twist that caught me right when I least expected it, and Anderson's novelet was a well-written, well-plotted tale by an author who I would like to see more of in P.S. (*January ish—Ed.*) Now that you have one big-name author besides Bradbury in your clutches, how about luring a few more? I'll bet van Vogt could write a thud-and-blunder story that would blow the house (FICTION HOUSE's sales, that is) sky-high. Other suggestions are Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, L. Ron Hubbard . . . on second thought, Hubbard's probably too busy with dianetics. (By the way, what do you boys think of dianetics? (*See article by James Blish on page 102—Ed.*))

Next, I have to divide second place between REBEL OF VALKYR, STRANGE EXODUS, and PATCH. RoV sounds like a good background for a series (aw common ed., give us a series on this story . . . and on the ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS background too), but I would like to submit that of all the silly asses PLANET's stories have had for heroes, Kieron of Valkyr takes the cake (but not the girl).

Tied for third place are the remaining three stories about which no comment shall be made, particularly Bradbury's.

I trust I expressed my sentiments about PLANET going bi-monthly sufficiently in a previous letter, but anyway: "Three Cheers!" Shoulda ben did a long time ago.

Turning to the Vizigraph: if I could, I'd vote myself number one spot . . . not because my letter was so good (no, no, it wasn't that good, really it wasn't . . . oh, do you really think so? . . . wel-l-l, if I have to admit it . . .) but because of your comments; I darned near laughed myself silly when I read them. Why don't you and I collaborate: I'll write letters and you comment on them. We'll put them into an anthology and make a million bucks. Since I can't vote for my letter, give originals to Morton Paley, Ed Cox (R. Dee is not terrific), and Lin Carter.

Always there's got to be somebody who claims that thud-and-blunder will drive P.S. from the market. But I beg to differ that it will not. It seems to me that there are two types of stf: there's the "scientific" science-fiction, as represented by aSF (please Jerry, do not ruin our beautiful friendship by following the example of your predecessor and deleting the names of other promags), and there's the so called "thud-and-blunder" science fiction, as represented by PLANET. I don't see how anyone can say that one is any better than the other, any more than he can com-



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pare pork chops and ice cream. They're both foods, and there are good and bad ice cream and good and bad pork chops. In the same way, there are good and bad scientific stf and good and bad thud-and-blunder. But *both* are science fiction. PLANET prints good stf (THE GREAT GREEN BLIGHT, MILLION YEAR PICNIC, and others), and unfortunately it also prints bad stf (*It does not!—Ed.*) (oh yes it does!) . . . but then so does every other mag. Personally, I'd hate to live on a steady diet of either, and I think that deep down in their dear little hearts most of the fen feel the same way: they read and enjoy both types of stf equally well. So, more good stories about space pirates and off-trail worlds!

By the way, I got quite a bang out of your scientificationians (or is the plural scientificationian?) . . . no, I guess it's scientificationians . . . my goodness, did I write all that? Also, just in case I ever win an original (just in case) is the one for the illustration on top of the contents page available? (*Sorry, no—Ed.*) Just thought I'd ask (just in case).

Looditoo,

BRUCE HAPKE

WHO'S LAUGHING?

35 Sterling Road
Harrison, New York

DEAR JERRY BUILT EDITOR:

After plowing and crabbing my way through PS and La Viz since I was twelve (all of four years ago, and don't sneer) I am now taking typewriter in finger (singular) and hopping on the bandwagon.

First some bone picking, using an author's head to start with, of course. Vote Mr. She-den-helm one large, first quality raspberry and a copy of The Chemistry and Physics Handbook. The day he pulls a trick like that I want to be present! The unknown you can tamper with, but leave us leave known facts alone; hoky-poky? I'm referring to the fact that Hg (Mercury to you dumbbuns) is almost as heavy as Lead. This you could restrain with Scotch tape? I ha' me doots.

There is no need of my knocking the cover and blurb thereon. They were so miserable and misleading I thought I had the wrong mag. However the artist? should have had guts enough to sign the mess; he's out of reach of the readers (lucky, lucky guy).

Now for the brickbats and bouquets:

1. THE SKY IS FALLING, superfine; nay, splendiferous. At last here is an author who knows astronomy! I'm sick and tired of guys who in writing about Mars depict her moons like ours, when the fact is that the farther, Deimos, would appear only as a bright star and Phobos wouldn't give a much better showing.

2. DEATH-WISH; far superior to his last misspent miscreation, DEATH-BY-RAIN. The title gave it away though; why not call it THE BLUE BOTTLE or sumthin'? Be that as it may, why doesn't Ray write something equal to ZERO HOUR or THE PILLAR OF FIRE these days? Could it be he's overproducing his capacity?

3. STRANGE EXODUS, two dozen roses to Mr. Abernathy!

4. THE CROWDED COLONY, bueno! Good

plot, well written. Too bad the second pic. wasn't in the story, I do so love a good wreck!

5. STAR SHIP, Good to the last drop, but brother that was right off the cob! (we'll now have a chorus of Hearts and Flowers). However credit the artist with the best pic of the ish. Maybe I shouldn't speak such blasphemies but I think he might even have read the story first!

6. MEEM, clever idea, maby should boost-um-up a notch or two, say to tie with STAR SHIP.

7. REBEL OF VALKYR, shades of Burroughs! 'nuf said.

8. PATCH, filler material no doubt.

As to your rolling ball, Bix, here it comes back. (1) Bi-monthly, HIP, HIP, HOORAY!!!! Best news since Bradbury started writing SF! (3) As to THE SKY IS FALLING, leave us have more Liddell! (4) We'll still holler about the covers. (5) Mitkey? Mitkey? Okay, so I'm stupid, who's Mitkey? (6) The new format? Yes, yes, triple yes. PS now looks much less like a collection of newspaper clippings and more like a mag!

Now to ostensibly more pleasant things; La Viz, viz . . . Hapke velly funny chapkie, me laffie yet! Hey, Sigler, try reading the story before knocking it, hum? Or would this be too much like work? Thank Mr. Cox for straightening out Mr. Bradbury about Venus; he beat me to it. Bye the bye congratulate the unpronounceable who procured the pics for La Viz. Clever people these Chinese!

Well I realize that this was short for my first opus to La Viz, but I've always got my tender age and the lateness of the hour as an excuse. And after all, it's quality not quantity that counts. Oh stop laughing!

Amateurishly,

JAMES STEWART

GIBSON REMINISCES . . .

24 Kensington Ave.,
Jersey City 4, N. J.

DEAR JERRY:

Having just picked up the Fall PS and, naturally, glancing into the back of the ish, I noted with a twinge of nostalgia the "scientificationiana" you tossed in, particularly the monorail illus.

For a moment, I stood once more in a luxurious, walnut-paneled study in a large mansion outside Dusseldorf, Germany. A bookcase reaching from floor to ceiling was on my left, and tall French windows opened on a spacious, if unkept, garden on my right. I was investigating a collection of bound magazines dating back to the turn of the century, pulling them down from the bookshelves and thumbing through them to my heart's content. Featured were such ideas as the mono-rail elevated, helicopters, dirigible air-stations for travelers wearing aluminum wings, etc., and your illus. from *Three Lions* was presented as, and I believe is, the work of a German artist. I spent a singularly delightful afternoon, there.

The only bad thing about it was that I didn't know whose collection this was—nor did I care to know him. There was a large color-photo of Hitler dominating one wall of the study, a swastika flag draping the wall behind the desk, and an open wall-safe indicating hasty departure. I had a Thompson sub-machine gun draped across

my middle and hadn't had a bath or a change of clothes in four months. It was to be another four before I did.

And now, I meet young fans who remember those times only as something they read about in their history books. Gives me the strangest feeling, as though I were old as Methuselah at twenty-five.

But you really should have mentioned the Turtle in regard to that illus. on submarine warfare. The Turtle, you remember, was a flat shell resembling a turtle, though it floated vertically rather than horizontally. It had ballast tanks operated by hand, submerging the craft; it had to be pulled up, afterward. It had an air-pipe and periscope, and saddle-seat inside for one man. A hand-operated crank turned a propellor in back, and a simple system of wires and levers operated a small rudder. An explosive mine was carried on top, with hooks that would sink into the wooden hull of a warship, held on by clamps that could be released from within.

I don't remember the name of the inventor, but I remember reading that he submerged in this craft in New York harbor and cranked his way out to a British warship. He tried to hook the mine to the hull of the warship, but it wouldn't take hold and he finally had to drop it to the bottom of the harbor. Then he cranked safely back to the wharf and was pulled up. Some time later, when the Turtle was being moved to a new base of operations, the ship carrying it was sunk.

This was during the American Revolution, about a hundred years before your unknown artist depicted submarine warfare.

Scincerely,

JOE GIBSON

... AND COHANE SLAVERS

Box 1497,
St. Bonaventure Coll.,
St. Bonaventure, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, now you've gone and done it! After all these years you've given in and made PLANET a bi-monthly! I liked your forthright declaration of principles except for one thing. That same gruesome pattern of covers. Gawd 'elp us! And speaking of covers, last issue's was a thing to end all things. And I call it a thing because I can't think of an adjective harsh enough to describe it without descending into the depths of profanity.

Will wonders never cease! The hero didn't get the girl in THE REBEL OF VALKYR. Would have been a good story if the plot, or should I say the background, hadn't been so fantastic. I think it and STAR SHIP were cut from the same bolt of cloth.

STRANGE EXODUS was excellent! The first new idea I've seen in a long time.

Regardless of what most of your readers seem to think, I like Bradbury. His backgrounds may stay the same, but his twist to the end of his plots are magnificent. Many authors try to make a history of space to fit in with their stories. And as for you, Wayne Pryor, go take your "three cents worth" and buy some cheap poison with it.

THE SKY IS FALLING and THE CROWDED COLONY are worthy of approbation, but the Fall list ends there. MEEM was lousy in my book and belongs in a scientific jour-

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nal rather than here, but at least it was better than those sickening Oona and Jick stories.

With that malicious crack I shall close, pausing to nominate Creighton, Campbell, and Leverenz for the pics.

'Bye now,

AL COHANE

P. S. I slaver with anticipation for this new Mitkey story. If it is half as good as the original, it will be twice as good as most of the stuff coming out today.

WE GUESSED

Washington, D. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

I hope the lack of an address on this letter does not make it ineligible for la Viz. My business (which is nobody else's) keeps me on the move; at present I am writing from a Washington hotel room. Anyway, I'll make it short.

The latest issue was very good indeed. Top story honors to St. Clair's MEEM (much out of the ordinary), Drexel's THE CROWDED COLONY (colorful and clever), and Liddell's THE SKY IS FALLING. The latter, by the way, is every bit as good as you claim in your editorial squib; but the plug itself may have been unfortunate. Fans are funny, I believe . . . you may receive many letters saying, "Well . . . yeah, he's good, but . . ." whereas the story without blunt sales talk (and resultant hypercritical attitude; they'd love to prove you wrong, you know) might have had more impact. At any rate, I'm looking forward to the appearance of this author again. And if you haven't guessed (all right, I'll confess!) I'm a salesman. And of shoes. Good shoes.

By the way, what really happened to PLP? The truth, now!

Sincerely,

RAOUL D. KYNE

(It was turrrible, turrrible . . . Paul Payne got into an argument with Squeedunk, the office BEM, and something he disagreed with ate him—Ed.)

OKE!!

760 Montgomery St.,
B'klyn 13, New York

DEAR JERRY:

The Fall '50 PLANET STORIES was a welcome visitor to my newsstand this nasty morning. The rain thundered down like bullets as I . . . oh, well:

First off, I'd like to thank all those Dear Hearts and Gentle People who voted for me. I was most surprised when I found out I had won. When I read that letter in print I was very annoyed at myself because . . . well . . . I detest the kind of letter that says, in effect, "I'm only 11 years old and have been reading PS since Summer 1940, and don't you think I'm very clever?" and then I went ahead and did that very thing at the end of my letter. Once more: oh, well . . .

I won't even bother to comment on the delicious new format; it's really fine, and I hope PS has reached its final physical form after 43 issues of various changes.

The stories? Ah yes, the stories. Coppel did a better-than-fair job on his spaceopera; for once I finished one of his stories straight through to

the end and liked it. Jay B. Drexel (*who could this be?* he asked, the soft green radiation from his middle eye falling on those initials) greedily grabs second spot with a cute story. Reminds me of Bradbury in all but the words. Don't consider this flattery soft-soap by any means, Drexel! Didn't read the other stories too carefully, but I liked the Bradbury (who else?) and Abernathy yarns particularly. THE SKY IS FALLING also sounds like Bradbury (monotonous, the way these guys imitate Ray, isn't it?). More from Liddell, please. Would like to see some Silverberg in PS too.

For the Viz: Worthy recipients of pix should be: Betsy Curtis (betcha I get [and burn] more chain letters than you, Betsy!), Ed Cox again (Ho, Hum) and Sneary (Whu give us mor fun akting himself than haff of the other "eddjicated" leterhax combined. I lkie his letters.)

AND I SWEAR . . . on my sacred Vol. 1, No. 1, PS, that I didn't just pick these three 'cause they voted for me. Isn't it enough that I rewarded them with proper libations and thanks? You should get a free pic yourself, JB, for your exceedingly and excruciatingly funny comments on letters. In fact, I will give you a pic: the one at the top of Column 2, page 107. For a buck more, you can have, not only the pic, but the model's address. Oke?

PLANET STORIES is very definitely on the upgrade after some weary, lean years—1947, 48, and the first part of '49. I think that now, every story is worthy of at least one reading—which is more than all the non-Bradbury stuff can be of which said. (*However, it might happen that the, and if in addition, don't you think, unless you already have one?—Ed.*) Also, it is evident that some of the stories are of that semi-classic stature that PLANET has eluded for many and many a month.

Poul Anderson, St. Clair, Coppel, and, of course, Bradbury, are rated as top authors; Drexel and Abernathy will be there also in a short time, probably. Liddell shows promise—but I've never, never heard of Shedenhelm. That's quite an impressive list of authors there; only Brackett and one or two others are missing from the group.

To sum up, the first all-Bixby issue of PS shows such enormously huge steps forward that I'm kinda overwhelmed. Keep this pace up in future issues, and PS will be up near the top among the many, many science fiction pulps.

Sincerely,

BOB SILVERBERG

URANIUM→RADIUM→LEAD

Redondo Beach,
California

DEAR EDITOR:

I am a novice at writing letters to editors but when I saw Buryl Payne's letter in the Fall '50 issue I just had to write. Mr. Payne stated that Uranium has a half life of 4.6 billion years. All of the information that I could find said that it was 4.5 billion years but I will forgive him that error if it is an error. But then he continued and said that Uranium has a whole life of 9.2 billion years. I would like to point out to him that the half life of Uranium is the length of time for half of a given amount of Uranium to disintegrate. But when this point is reached the remaining amount, although only half as large as the original quan-

tity, is still a given amount and therefore it also has a half life of 4.6 (4.5) billion years. Therefore, this would continue ad infinitum. Consequently the whole life of Uranium is infinite. This, therefore, is the answer to his question "How come there's Uranium left?"

As for the age of the Earth, it is at least well over 2,645,000,000 years. As for the rest of his questions, they are included in an advanced branch of cosmology and, as yet, cannot be correctly answered.

As for the stories I thought *The Crowded Colony* was the best. I am glad that PLANET is becoming bi-monthly.

Sincerely,

RODRIC CADWALLEDER DRINKWATER

WE'RE S-S-S-SORRY . . .

762 Broadway,
Somerville 44,
Massachusetts

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

In the Fall, 1950 Vizigraph, there are a pair of comments about one "Azimov," which seem to be favorable and which, naturally, are highly gratifying to me. Think how much more gratifying they would be if I could only be certain that the references really applied to me.

I know of no science-fiction author named "Azimov" and am therefore taking the liberty of appropriating the comment, in a very high-handed fashion, on no other basis than that my name is "Asimov" and there is some possibility therefore that it is myself they mean.

It probably seems picayune to worry about a "z" and an "s." I'll go further. It probably is picayune. Still, people *do* enjoy seeing their name spelled correctly. So if it isn't too much trouble, Mr. Bixby, could you post a little note of instruction at the copy reader's desk to the effect that the name is "ISAAC ASIMOV?" With an "s" in each name. *One* "s" in each name.

You probably won't have much occasion to worry about it; two mentions an issue is probably way above average, but every little bit helps.

Thank you,

Very truly yours,

ISAAC ASIMOV

PROFAN

227 East 7th Street,
Hastings, Nebraska

DEAR EDITOR BIXBY:

Being prolix, I can't say many of the things I have on my mind in two double-spaced pages; so I'll have to limit myself and not say all of them.

First, you're doing a fine job with PLANET STORIES; on the whole, it's a better looking magazine from the standpoint of page makeup than I can remember its being in the past. You're also to be complimented on making the magazine bi-monthly—with a reservation. If it means lowering the quality of your material to get enough stories to fill six magazines a year instead of four, by all means go back to a quarterly basis. Although most of your poorer stories in the last few issues have been mediocre rather than just plain bum, outside of Bradbury the level of your



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I'll put "The Rebel of Valkyr" in the Number One spot in your Fall 1950 issue for a reason that needs some explanation. It wasn't as good a story, from the strictly literary standpoint, as "Death-Wish"; but of its type it is of high quality and, I feel, ranks higher in its field than the Bradbury story does in its. "The Rebel" is better-plotted than most examples of what Bradbury has called the "bingety-boom" school of fiction, its ideas are more original, *granted the basic premises* it is more plausible, and it is a more completely developed piece of fiction. Coppel deserves encouragement. This is his best, and although he can still get better, it shows more promise than almost anything else he has done.

Bradbury takes the Number Two position, mainly because this story isn't as good as "Death-by-Rain" or any of the seeming hundred other classics.

Third place goes to "The Crowded Colony" because of a technical flaw. Withholding the information that Burke and Company (the first set) were Centaurians is justifiable only in the surprise-ending type of story. Since the story did not require the keeping back of that information, the result was confusion—thus spoiling the story's total effect. But Drexel had a good idea and should be encouraged.

Fourth goes to your little gem, "The Sky Is Falling," which was not maturely worked out. The St. Clair story, "Meem," rates fifth on the basis of good writing, but I don't understand it very well. Sixth to "Strange Exodus" by default; and I'd hate to have to make the choice of which was worse, Anderson's "Star Ship" or Shedenhelm's "Patch." Liddell's yarn was all right for a first effort, but he needs more study and harder work.

I don't see why Bruce Hapke of Racine, Wisconsin, is so surprised because his English prof is a fan. I'm an English prof (Hastings College) and so is my wife (same school); and I'm a fan and she will be too if she hangs around me long enough. (By the way, if Hapke were in my comp class, I'd give him a B for his letter and a stern talking-to).

Cordially,

SAM SACKETT

ATTENTION, MILD-DRUG ADDICTS

1711 Davidson Avenue,
New York 53, N. Y.

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

The last time I took the typewriter in hand (well . . . not quite!) and dashed off a note to PLANET was during the reign of "PLANET's (late) Lint-headed Pterodactyl" who captioned it "Attention, Drug Addicts." You need have no fear—nothing that violent this time.

Everyone else has said it thus far, so here goes—greetings Bixby. I hope you're as competent as PLP (hmmm, fast it sounds like plop). Probably are. Anyway, your interjections sound funnier (but then, I have no sense of humor).

School days and final examinations having just passed, I turned to the somewhat moldy stack of STF mags piling up near my desk. The latest one—the Fall PLANET—was on top. I read it

through, first time in almost a year. Usually—from September to June—I just rip through the shorts (*Should I have censored that?—Ed.*) and let the rest go for future reference. That explains the paucity of letters to PS (happy?). But, to resume, here's what I found.

PS is getting better!

PS is getting better!

Yes, PS is getting better!!!

For a long time I relegated PS to the bottom of the STF pack. Then, a few months ago, Robert Lowndes reintroduced FUTURE and I thought, "Aha, zounds and shades of the BEM, PS is no longer last." Next Avon House brought out its new STF mag and PS moved up another notch. Add in the recent decline of a few others and you're really going places. After reading the Fall ish, I must admit you've climbed up a bit all by your lonesome.

Perhaps I've always looked down on little old PS because it is a space-adventure mag while I prefer straight STF, ala Astounding. But in your area you're tops. REBEL OF VALKYR was a tee-rif-ic space opera. (What prompted Coppel to use the holy names of historian Quintus Bland and planet Kalgan from the latest of Asimov's fine "Foundation" series? Is Coppel Asimov? Nah.) The clinchers in convincing me of your reformation were two other good pieces, MEEM and STRANGE EXODUS (any unusual twist gets me), followed by THE SKY IS FALLING. (On Liddell: he is good but is that "power and clarity?" I'm giving the story to my psych professor; I gave the Bradbury-Wolfe yarn to my English prof.) Grouped together afterward were DEATH WISH (nice, but it did nothing to me) and CROWDED COLONY (I liked the idea but not the treatment—who is Drexel? Gad! I've lost touch). STAR SHIP is well done, but follows the hackneyed PS formula used year after year after—PATCH was last, but a neat piece. However, THERE WERE NO BAD STORIES in the issue. That did it! Up you go on the Badler scale. (Is there room? I'm up to 200 already. Quick, the handball gloves.)

About the future: I'm glad to see you a bi-monthly (if all the issues can equal this) but I'm sorry too. I have a vice—gad, no!—of buying and saving every STF mag that comes out. Done it for the last half-dozen years. It's not the extra \$\$\$ that worries me, but the space . . . (yeah, but then when I start sending in those manuscripts maybe I'll have a better chance . . . OK—bi-monthly it is).

To Lin Carter's "Gone are the vastly amusing, entertaining letters of yesteryear . . ."—Thank (fill in your own)! Protect us from a return to days of hashish nightmares. Leave us stay with the sane.

BEM 'Bye ever more)

MITCHELL M. BADLER

P. S. Just joined the—let's see, the card says—National Fantasy Fan Federation and they'd like us to mention the N3F in any letters we send to promags, so if you could . . .

Sure . . . more power to it and to all others off the genus fantasociety! Now, to get astride the proverbial limb, we predict Flying Saucer headlines within the year. One guess, students. Thanks for the letters . . . see you Nov. 1st . . .



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