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MARTIAN NIGHTMARE

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PLANET STORIES



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JAN., 1951

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THE VIZIGRAPH

A picture is worth a lot of words—more, certainly, than my tired, palsied hands could wring from this typewriter at present—so I won't make with the words but will rather ask you to turn to the very energetic advertisement on page 79 of this issue...

There's not much I can add to what you've just read—are your eyes back in focus yet?—except that Two Complete SCIENCE-ADVENTURE Books is a real pleasure to put out, a 2000% value, and a unique and much needed addition to the S-F field. We have great plans for it. Your move.

What's that? Why am I so tired? Well, that strange sound you've been hearing every evening after dinner is your editor grinding a hunk of Pyrex against a hunk of glass. Yep... an 8" f/8 Newtonian reflecting telescope is in the works, and brother, that's *works!*

Pic winners are: 1) James Stewart (To repeat: Who's laughing?); 2) Ray Ramsay (Stop giving our plots away, blast it!); 3) Joe Gibson (That's life, Joe; want to name your favorite charity?)—all choices to be made from the November Ish.

Now for the letters—good bunch this trip.

JEROME BIXBY

TALE OF THE RAT

1943 Marion Dr.
East Meadow, L. I.

DEAR ED:

Old, old, was the thing that sat on the rusty desert of the dead star world, brooding over the ancient issue of PS. As my timobile approached it I could hear it muttering, muttering: "Badler, take a pic. Hapke, take two, Silverberg, pick third..."

Gulk!!! I was about to pounce on you (figuratively, of course) for your misleading blurbs when I happened to read them. Gad, they actually describe the stories! Unforgiveable.

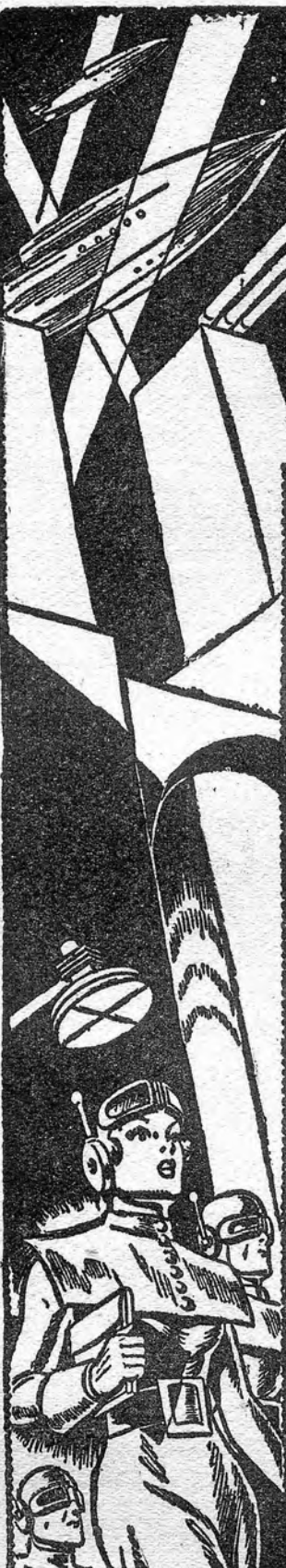
All the stories were good, but CARRY ME HOME was absolutely tremendous! More, in fact. It was super ultra colossal. In truth, 'twas a swell tale (NO WOMEN! Cheer madly). In LAST TWO ALIVE (foul title), the virus victims were supposed to be Neanderthal men, but Coppel forgot to tell us how they got to Earth. Walked, maybe?

Yuh know, I think PS has the best letter column of any stf mag. The writers are all slightly nuts, which makes for a nice friendly atmosphere. The letters usually give me an I-wish-I-had-said-that feeling. It seems they just have a lot of fun, and are not trying to solve Secrets of the Universe. Your editorial comments are quite witty (half, that is) and make for good reading.

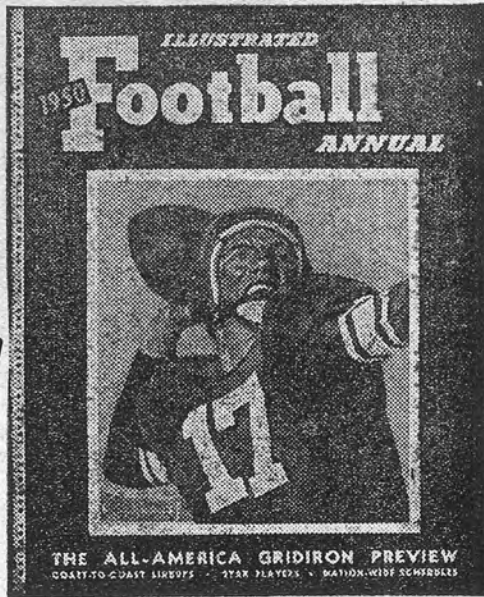
It seems to me that under your editorship PS has improved immensely. Already an issue has appeared without a Bradbury fiasco in it. Why doesn't someone tell him there is next to no oxygen or water in Mars' atmosphere, and that on a hot summer day on Mars the temp. wouldn't be much over 32°F. Get Kuttner,

Madly, (Totally, that is—Ed.)
JAMES (The Earth Rat) LEWIS

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Who's this?



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WITCH *of the demon seas*

● *A Novel of Alien Sorcery* by **A. A. CRAIG**

KHROMAN THE CONQUEROR, Thalassocrat of Achaera, stood watching his guards bring up the captured pirates. He was a huge man, his hair and square-cut beard jet-black despite middle age, the strength of his warlike youth still in his powerful limbs. He wore a plain white tunic and purple-trimmed cloak; the only sign of kingship was the golden chaplet on his head and the signet ring on one finger. In the gaudy crowd of slender, chattering courtiers, he stood out with a brutal contrast.

Guide a black galleon to the lost, fear-haunted Citadel of the Xanthi wizards—into the very jaws of Doom? Corun, condemned pirate of Conahur, laughed. Aye, he'd do it, and gladly. It would mean a reprieve from the headsman's axe—a few more precious moments of life and love . . . though his lover be a witch!



Corun fell under that smashing attack . . . fangs gleamed, and claws sank into his muscles . . .

"So they've finally captured him," he rumbled. "So we're finally rid of Corun and his sea-going bandits. Maybe now the land will have some peace."

"What will you do with them, sire?" asked Shorzon the Sorcerer.

Khroman shrugged heavy shoulders. "I don't know. Pirates are usually fed to the erinyes at the games, I suppose, but Corun deserves something special."

"Public torture, perhaps, sire? It could be stretched over many days."

"No, you fool! Corun was the bravest enemy Achaera ever had. He deserves an honorable death and a decent tomb. Not that it matters much, but—"

Shorzon exchanged a glance with Chryseis, then looked back toward the approaching procession.

THE CITY TAUROS was built around a semicircular bay, a huge expanse of clear green water on whose surface floated ships from halfway round the world—the greatest harbor for none knew how many empty sea-leagues, capital of Achaera which, with its trade and its empire of entire archipelagoes, was the mightiest of the thalassocracies. Beyond the fortified sea walls at the end of the bay, the ocean swelled mightily to the clouded horizon, gray and green and amber. Within, the hulls and sails of ships were a bright confusion up to the stone docks.

The land ran upward from the bay, and Tauros was built on the hills, a tangle of streets between houses that ranged from the clay huts of the poor to the marble villas of the great. Beyond the city walls on the landward side, the island of Achaera lifted still more steeply, a gaunt rocky country with a few scattered farms and herds. Her power came all from the sea.

A broad straight road lined with sphinxes ran straight from the harbor up to the palace, which stood on the highest hill in the city. At its end, wide marble stairs lifted toward the fragrant imperial gardens in which the court stood.

Folk swarmed about the street, mobs straining to see the soldiers as they led their captives toward the palace. The word that Corun of Conahur, the most danger-

ous of the pirates, had finally been taken had driven merchants to ecstasy and brought insurance rates tumbling down. There was laughter in the throng, jeers for the prisoners, shouts for the king.

Not entirely so, however. Most of the crowd were, of course, Achaerans, a slim dark-haired folk clad generally in a light tunic and sandals, proud of their ancient might and culture. They were loudest in shouting at the robbers. But there were others who stood silent and glum-faced, not daring to voice their thoughts but making them plain enough. Tall, fair men from Conahur itself, galled by Achaeran rule; fur-clad barbarians from Norriki, blue-skinned savages from Umlotu, with a high professional regard for their fellow pirate; slaves from a hundred islands, who had not ceased dreaming of home and remembered that Corun had been in the habit of freeing slaves when he captured a ship or a town. Others might be neutral, coming from too far away to care, for Corun had only attacked Achaeran galleys; the black men from misty Orzaban, the copper-colored Chilatzis, the yellow wizards from mysterious Hiung-nu.

The soldiers marched their prisoners rapidly up the street. They were mercenaries, blue Umlotians in the shining corselets, greaves, and helmets of the Achaeran forces, armed with the short sword and square shield of Achaera as well as the long halberds which were their special weapon. When the mob came too close, they swung the butts out with bone-snapping force.

The captive pirates were mostly from Conahur, though there were a number of other lands represented. They stumbled wearily along, clad in a few rags, weighted down hand and foot by their chains. Only one of them, the man in the lead, walked erect, but he strode along with the arrogance of a conqueror.

"That must be Corun himself, there in the front of them," said Chryseis.

"It is," nodded Shorzon.

THEY MOVED FORWARD for a better look. Imperceptibly, the court shrank from them. Khroman's advisor and daughter were feared in Tauros,

Shorzon was tall and lean and dry, as if the Heaven-Fire beyond the eternal clouds had fallen on him and seared all moisture out of the gaunt body. He had the noble features of the old Achaeran aristocracy, but his eyes were dark and sunken and smoldering with strange fires. Even in the warmth of midday, he wore a black robe falling to his feet, and his white beard streamed over it. Folk knew that he had learned sorcery in Hiung-nu, and it was whispered that for all Khroman's brawling strength it was Shorzon who really dominated the realm.

Khroman had married Shorzon's daughter—none knew who her mother had been, though it was thought she was a witch from Hiung-nu. She had not lived long after giving birth to Chryseis, whose grandfather thus came to have much of her upbringing in his hands. Rumor had it that she was as much a witch as he a warlock.

Certainly she could be cruel and ungovernable. But she had a strange dark beauty over her that haunted men; there were more who would die for her than one could readily count . . . and, it was said, had died after a night or two.

She was tall and lithe, with night-black hair that streamed to her waist when unbound. Her eyes were huge and dark in a face of coldly chiseled loveliness, and the full red mouth denied the austere, goddess-like fineness of her countenance. Today she had not affected the heavy gold and jewels of the court; a white robe hung in dazzling folds about her—and there might as well not have been another woman present.

The prisoners came through the palace gates, which clashed shut behind them. Up the stairs they went and into the fragrance of green trees and bushes, blooming plants, and leaping fountains that was the garden. There they halted, and the court buzzed about them like flies around a dead animal.

Khroman stepped up to Corun. "Greeting," he said, and there was no mockery in his voice.

"Greeting," replied the pirate in the same even tones.

They measured each other, the look of

two strong men who understood what they were about. Corun was as big as Khroman, a fair-skinned giant of a man in chains and rags. Weather-bleached yellow hair hung to his shoulders from a haughtily lifted head, and his fire-blue eyes were unwavering on the king's. His face was lean, long-jawed, curve-nosed, hardened by bitterness and suffering and desperate unending battle. A chained erinye could not have looked more fiercely on his captors.

"It's taken a long time to catch you, Corun," said Khroman. "You've led us a merry chase. Once I almost had the pleasure of meeting you myself. It was when you raided Serapolis—remember? I happened to be there, and gave chase in one of the war-galleys. But we never did catch you."

"One of the ships did." Corun's voice was strangely soft for so big a man. "It didn't come back, as you may recall."

"How did they finally catch you?" asked Khroman.

CORUN SHRUGGED, and the chains about his wrists rattled. "You already know as much as I care to talk about," he said wearily. "We sailed into Iliantis Bay and found a whole fleet waiting for us. Someone must finally have spied out our stronghold." Khroman nodded, and Corun shrugged a shoulder: "They blocked off our retreat, so we just fought till everyone was dead or captured. These half-hundred men are all who live. Unfortunately, I was knocked out during the battle and woke up to find myself a prisoner. Otherwise—" his blue gaze raked the court with a lashing contempt—"I could be peacefully feeding fish now, instead of your witless fish-eyes."

"I won't drag out the business for you, Corun," said Khroman. "Your men will have to be given to the games, of course, but you can be decently and privately beheaded."

"Thanks," said the pirate, "but I'll stay with my men."

Khroman stared at him in puzzlement. "But why did you ever do it?" he asked finally. "With your strength and skill and cunning, you could have gone far in

Achaera. We take mercenaries from conquered provinces, you know. You could have gotten Achaeran citizenship in time."

"I was a prince of Conahur," said Corun slowly. "I saw my land invaded and my folk taken off as slaves. I saw my brothers hacked down at the battle of Lyrr, my sister taken as concubine by your admiral, my father hanged, my mother burned alive when they fired the old castle. They offered me amnesty because I was young and they wanted a figurehead. So I swore an oath of fealty to Achaera, and broke it the first chance I got. It was the only oath I ever broke, and still I am proud of it. I sailed with pirates until I was big enough to master my own ships. That is enough of an answer."

"It may be," said Khroman slowly. "You realize, of course, that the conquest of Conahur took place before I came to the throne? And that I certainly couldn't negate it, in view of the Thalassocrat's duty to his own country, and had to punish its incessant rebelliousness?"

"I don't hold anything against you yourself, Khroman," said Corun with a tired smile. "But I'd give my soul to the nether fires for the chance to pull your damned palace down around your ears!"

"I'm sorry it has to end this way," said the king. "You were a brave man. I'd like to drain many beakers of wine with you on the other side of death." He signed to the guards. "Take him away."

"One moment, sire," said Shorzon. "Is it your intention to lock all these pirates in the same dungeon cell?"

"Why—I suppose so. Why not?"

"I do not trust their captain. Chained and imprisoned, he is still a menace. I think he has certain magical techniques—"

"That's a lie!" spat Corun. "I never needed your stinking woman's tricks to flatten the likes of Achaera!"

"I would not leave him with his men," advised Shorzon imperturbably. "Best he be given his own cell, alone. I know a place."

"Well—well, let it be so." Khroman waved a hand in dismissal.

As Shorzon turned to lead the guards

off, he traded a long glance with Chryseis. Her eyes remained hooded as she looked after the departing captives.

II

THE CELL WAS NO LONGER than a man's height, a dripping cave hewed out of the rock under the palace foundations. Corun crouched on the streaming floor in utter darkness. The chains which they had locked to ringbolts in the wall clashed when he stirred.

And this was how it ended, he thought bitterly. The wild career of the exiled conqueror, the heave and surge of ships under the running waves, the laughter of comrades and the clamor of swords and the thrum of wind in the rigging, had come to this—one man hunched in a loneliness and darkness like a colder womb, waiting in timeless murk for the day when they would drag him out to be torn by beasts for the amusement of fools.

They fed him at intervals, a slave bringing a bowl of prison swill while a spear-armed guard stood well out of reach and watched. Otherwise he was alone. He could not even hear the voices of other captives; there was only the slow dripping of water and the harsh tones of iron links. The cell must lie below even the regular dungeons, far down in the very bowels of the island.

Vague images floated across his mind—the high cliffs about Iliontis Bay, the great flowers blooming with sullen fires in the jungle beyond the beach, the slim black corsair galleys at anchor. He remembered the open sky, the eternally clouded sky under which blew the long wet winds, out of which spilled rain and lightning and grew the eerie blue of dusk. He had often wondered what lay beyond those upper clouds.

Now and then, he remembered, one could see the vague disc of the Heaven-Fire, and he had heard of times when incredibly violent storms opened a brief rift in the high cloud layers to let through a shaft of searing brilliance at whose touch water boiled and the earth burst into flame. It made him think of the speculations of Conahur's philosophers, that the

world was really a globe around which the Heaven-Fire swung, bringing day and night. Some had gone so far as to imagine that it was the world which did the moving, that the Heaven-Fire was a ball of flame in the middle of creation about which all other things revolved.

But Conahur was in chains now, he remembered, its folk bowed to the will of Achaera's greedy proconsuls, its art and philosophy the idle playthings of the conquerors. The younger generation was growing up with an idea that it might be best to yield, to become absorbed into the thalassocracy and so eventually gain equal status with the Achaerans.

But Corun could not forget the great flames flapping against a wind-torn night sky, the struggling forms at ropes' ends swaying from trees, the long lines of chained people stumbling hopelessly to the slave galleys under Achaeran lashes. Perhaps he had carried the grudge too long—no, by Breannach Brannor! There had been a family which was no longer. That was grudge enough for a lifetime.

A lifetime, he thought sardonically, which wouldn't be very much protracted now.

HE SIGHED WEARILY in the stinking gloom of the cell. There were too many memories crowding in. The outlaw years had been hard and desperate, but they'd been good ones too. There had been song and laughter and comradeship and gigantic deeds over an endless waste of waters—the long blue hush of twilight, the soft black nights, the gray days with a sea running gray and green and gold under squalls of rain, the storms roaring and raging, the eager leap of a ship—frenzy of battle at the taking of town or galley, death so close one could almost hear the beat of black wings, orgy of loot and vengeance—the pirate town, grass huts under jungle trees, stuffed with treasure, full of brawling bawdy life, the scar-faced swaggering men and the lusty insolent women, ruddy fire-light hammering back the night while the surf thundered endlessly along the beach—

Well, all things came to a close. And while he would have wished a different

sort of death for himself, he didn't have long to wait in this misery.

Something stirred, far down the narrow corridor, and he caught the flickering glow of a torch. Scowling, he stood up, stooped under the low ceiling. Who in all the hells was this? It was too soon for feeding, unless his time sense had gone completely awry, and he didn't think the games could have been prepared in the few days since his arrival.

They came up to the entrance of the cell and stood looking in by the guttering red torchlight. A snarl twisted Corun's lips. Shorzon and Chryseis—"Of all the scum of Achaera," he growled, "I had to be inflicted with you."

"This is no time for insolence," said the sorcerer coldly. He lifted the torch higher. The red light threw his face into blood-splashed shadow. His eyes were pits of darkness in which smoldered two embers. His black robe blended with the surrounding shadow, his face and hands seemed to float disembodied in the dank air.

Corun's eyes traveled to Chryseis, and in spite of the hate that burned in him he had to admit she was perhaps the loveliest woman he had ever seen. Tall and slim and lithe, moving with the soundless grace of a Sanduvian pherax, the dark hair sheening down past the chill sculptured beauty of her marble-white face, she returned his blue stare with eyes of dark flame. She was dressed as if for action—a brief tunic that left arms and legs bare, a short black cloak, and high buskins—but jewels still blazed at throat and wrists.

Behind her padded a lean shadow at sight of which Corun stiffened. He had heard of Chryseis' tame erinye. Folk said the devil-beast had found a harder heart in the witch's breast and yielded to her; some said less mentionable things.

The slitted green eyes flared at Corun and the cruel muzzle opened in a fanged yawn. "Back, Perias," said Chryseis evenly.

Her voice was low and sweet, almost a caress. It seemed strange that such a voice had spoken the rituals of black sorcery and ordered the flaying alive of a thousand helpless Issarian prisoners and counseled some of the darkest intrigues in Achaera's

bloody history.

She said to Corun: "This is a fine end for all your noble thoughts, man of Conahur."

"At least," he answered, "you credit me with having had them. Which is more than I'd say for you."

THE RED LIPS curved in a cynical smile. "Human purposes have a habit of ending this way. The mighty warrior, the scourge of the seas, ends in a foul prison cell waiting for an unimaginative death. The old epics lied, didn't they? Life isn't quite the glorious adventure that fools think it to be."

"It could be, if it weren't for your sort." Wearily: "Go away, won't you? If you won't even let me talk with my old comrades, you can at least spare me your own company."

"We are here with a definite purpose," said Shorzon. "We offer you life, freedom—and the liberation of Conahur!"

He shook his tawny head. "It isn't even funny."

"No, no, I mean it," said Chryseis earnestly. "Shorzon had you put in here alone not out of malice, but simply to make this private talk possible. You can help us with a project so immeasurably greater than your petty quarrels that anything you can ask in return will be as nothing. And you are the one man who can do so."

"I tell you this so that, realizing you have some kind of bargaining position, you will meet as us as equal to equal, not as prisoner to captor. If you agree to aid us, you will be released this instant."

With a sudden flame within him, Corun tautened his huge body. O gods—O almighty gods beyond the clouds—if it were true—!

His voice shook: "What do you want?"

"Your help in a desperate venture," said Chryseis. "I tell you frankly that we may well all die in it. But at least you will die as a free man—and if we succeed, all the world may be ours."

"What is it?" he asked hoarsely.

"I cannot tell you everything now," said Shorzon. "But the story has long been current that you once sailed to the lairs of the Xanthi, the Sea Demons, and

returned alive. Is it true?"

"Aye." Corun stiffened, with sudden alarm trembling in his nerves. "Aye, by great good luck I came back. But they are not a race for humans to traffic with."

"I think the powers I can summon will match theirs," said Shorzon. "We want you to guide us to their dwellings and teach us the language on the way, as well as whatever else you know about them. When we return, you may go where you choose. And if we get their help, we will be able to set Conahur free soon afterward."

Corun shook his head. "It's nothing good that you plan," he said slowly. "No one would approach the Xanthi for any good purpose."

"You did, didn't you?" chuckled the wizard dryly. "If you want the truth, we are after their help in seizing the government of Achaera, as well as certain knowledge they have."

"If you succeeded," argued Corun stubbornly, "why should you then let Conahur go?"

"Because power over Achaera is only a step to something too far beyond the petty goals of empire for you to imagine," said Shorzon bleakly. "You must decide now, man. If you refuse, you die."

Chryseis moved one slim hand and the erinye padded forward on razor-clawed feet. The leathery wings were folded back against the long black body, the barbed tail lashed hungrily and a snarl vibrated in the lean throat. "If you say no," came the woman's sweet voice, "Perias will rip your guts out. That will at least afford us an amusing spectacle for our trouble." Then she smiled, the dazzling smile which had driven men to their doom ere this. "But if you say yes," she whispered, "a destiny waits for you that kings would envy. You are a strong man, Corun. I like strong men—"

The corsair looked into the warm dark light of her eyes, and back to the icy glare of the devil-beast. No unarmed man had ever survived the onslaught of an erinye—and he was chained.

At thought of returning to the dark home of the Xanthi, he shuddered. But still wondrous sweet, and—once

free to move about, he might still have some chance of escape or even of overpowering them.

Or—who knew? He wondered, with a brief giddiness, if the dark witch before him could be as evil as her enemies said. Strong and ruthless, yes—but so was he. When he learned the full truth about her soaring plans, he might even decide they were right.

In any case—to live! To die, if he must, under the sky!

"I'll go," he said hoarsely. "I'll go with you."

The low exultant laughter of Chryseis sang in the flare-lit gloom.

Shorzon came up and took a key from his belt. For a bare moment, the thought of snapping that skinny neck raged through Corun's mind.

The magician smiled grimly. "Don't try it," he said. "As a small proof of what we can do—"

Suddenly he was not there. It was a monster from the jungles of Umlootu standing in the cell with Corun, a scaled beast that hissed at him with grinning jaws and spewed poison on the floor.

SORCERY! Corun shrank back, a chill of fear striking even his steely heart. Shorzon resumed human shape and wordlessly unlocked the chains. They fell away and Corun stumbled out into the corridor.

The erinye snarled and slipped closer. Chryseis laid a hand on the beast's head, checking that gliding rush as if with a leash. Her smile and the faint sweet scent of her hair were dizzying.

"Come," she said. One hand slipped between his own fingers and the cool touch seemed to burn him.

Shorzon led the way, down a long sloping tunnel where only the streaming torch-flames had life. Their footsteps echoed hollowly in the wet black length of it.

"We go at once," he said. "When Khroman learns of your escape, all Tauros will be after us. But it will be too late then. We sail swiftly tonight."

Sail—whither?

"What of my men?" asked Corun.

"They're lost, I'm afraid, unless Khroman spares them until we get back," said

Chryseis. "But we saved you. I'm glad of that."

A faint smell of fresh salty air blew up the tunnel. It must open on the sea, thought Corun. He wondered how many passages riddled the depth under Tauros.

They came out, finally, on a narrow beach under the looming western cliffs. The precipices climbed into the utter dark of night, reaching into the unseen sky. Before them lay open sea, swirling with phosphorescence. Corun drew deep lung-fulls of air. Salt and seaweed and wet wild wind—sand under his feet, sky overhead, a woman beside him—by the gods, it was good to be alive!

A galley was moored against a tiny pier. By the light of bobbing torches, Corun's mariner's eye surveyed her. She was built along the same lines as his own ship, a lean black vessel with one square sail; open-decked save at stem and stern, rower's benches lining the sides with a catwalk running between. There would be quarters for the men under the poop and forecastle decks, supplies in the hold beneath. A cabin was erected near the waist, apparently for officers, and there was a ballista mounted in the bows—otherwise no superstructure. A carved sea monster reared up for figurehead, and the sternpost curved back to make its tail. He read the name on the bows: *Briseia*. Strange that that dark vessel should bear a girl's name.

About a fifty-man capacity, he judged. And she would be fast.

The crew were getting aboard—they must have come down the cliffs along some narrow trail. They were all Umloottuan blues, he noticed, a cutthroat gang if ever he saw one but silent and well disciplined. It was shrewd to take only the mercenary warriors along; they had no patriotic interest in what happened to Achaera, and their reckless courage was legendary.

A burly one-eyed officer came up and saluted. "All set, sir," he reported.

"Good," nodded Shorzon. "Captain Imazu, this is our guide, Captain Corun."

"The raider, eh?" Imazu chuckled and shook hands in the manner of the barbarians. "Well, we could hardly have a

better one, I'm sure. Glad to know you, Corun."

The pirate murmured polite phrases. But he decided that Imazu was a likeable chap, and wondered what had led him to take service under anyone with Shorzon's reputation.

They went aboard. "The Sea of Demons lies due north," said Shorzon. "Is that the right way to sail?"

"For the time being," nodded Corun. "When we get closer, I'll be able to tell you more exactly."

"Then you may as well wash and rest," said Chryseis. "You need both." Her smile was soft in the flickering red light.

Corun entered the cabin. It was divided into three compartments—apparently Imazu slept with his men, or perhaps on deck as many men preferred. His own tiny room was clean, sparsely furnished with a bunk and a washbowl. He cleaned himself eagerly and put on the fresh tunic laid out for him.

When he came back on deck the ship was already under way. A strong south wind was blowing, filling the dark sail, and the *Briseia* surged forward under its thrust. The phosphorescence shone around her hull and out on the rolling waters. Behind, the land faded into the night.

He'd certainly been given no chance to escape, he thought. Barring miracles, he had to go through with it now—at least until they reached the Sea of Demons, after which anything might happen.

He shivered a little, wondering darkly whether he had done right, wondering what their mission was and what the world's fate was to be as a result of it.

Chryseis slipped quietly up to stand beside him. The erinye crouched down nearby, his baleful eyes never leaving the man.

"Outward bound," she said, and laughter was gay in her voice.

He said nothing, but stared ahead into the night.

"You'd better sleep, Corun," she said. "You're tired now, and you'll need all your strength later." She laid a hand on his arm, and laughed aloud. "It will be an interesting voyage, to say the least."

Rather! he thought with wry humo-

It occurred to him that the trip might even have its pleasant aspects.

"Goodnight, Corun," she said, and left him.

Presently he went back to his room. Sleep was long in coming, and uneasy when it did arrive.

III

WHEN HE CAME OUT ON DECK in the early morning, there was only a gray emptiness of waters out to the gray horizon. They must have left the whole Achaeran archipelago well behind them and be somewhere in the Zurian Sea now.

There was a smell of rain in the air, and the ship ran swiftly before a keening wind over long white-maned rollers. Corun let the tang of salt and moisture and kelp, the huge restless vista of bounding waves, the creak and thrum of the ship and the thundering surge of the ocean, swell luxuriously up within him, the simple animal joy of being at home. The sea was his home now, he realized vaguely; he had been on it so long that it was his natural environment—his, as much as that of the laridae wheeling on white wings in the cloud-flying heavens.

He looked over the watch. It seemed to be well handled—the sailors knew their business. There were armored guards at bow and stern, and the rest—clad in the plain loincloth of ordinary seamen the world over—were standing by the sail, swabbing the decks, making minor repairs and otherwise occupying themselves. Those off duty were lounging or sleeping well out of the watch's way. The helmsman kept his eye on the compass and held the tiller with a practiced hand—good, good.

Captain Imazu padded up to him on bare feet. The Umlothan wore helmet and corselet, had a sword at his side, and carried the whip of authority in one gnarled blue hand. His scarred, one-eyed face cracked in a smile. "Good morning to you, Captain Corun," he said politely.

The Conahurian nodded with an amiability he had not felt for a long time. "The ship is well handled," he said.

"Thanks. I'm about the only Umlothan

who's ever skippered anything bigger than a war-canoe, I suppose, but I was in the Achaeran fleet for a long time." Again the hideous but disarming smile. "I nearly met you professionally once or twice before, but you always showed us a clean pair of heels. Judging from what happened to ships that did have the misfortune to overhaul you, I'm just as glad of it." He gestured to the tiny galley below the poop deck. "How about some breakfast?"

OVER FOOD which was better than most to be had aboard ship, they fell into professional talk. Like all captains, Imazu was profoundly interested in the old and seemingly insoluble problem of finding an accurate position. "Dead reckoning just won't do," he complained. "Men's estimates always differ, no matter how good they may be. There isn't even a decent map to be had anywhere."

Corun mentioned the efforts of theorists in Achaera, Conahur, and other civilized states to use the Heaven-Fire's altitude to determine position north and south of a given line. Imazu was aware of their work, but regarded it as of little practical value. "You just don't see it often enough," he objected. "And most of the crew would consider it the worst sort of impiety to go aiming an instrument at it. That's one reason, I suppose, why Shorzon shipped only Umlotuans. We don't worship the Heaven-Fire—our gods all live below the clouds." He cut himself a huge quid of liangzi and stuffed it into his capacious mouth. "Anyway, it doesn't give you east and west position."

"The philosophers who think the world is round say we could solve that problem by making an accurate timepiece," said Corun.

"I know. But it's a lot of gas, if you ask me. A sand-glass or a water-clock can only tell time so close and no closer, and those mechanical gadgets they've built are worse yet. I knew an old skipper from Norriki once who kept a joss in his cabin and got his position in dreams from it. Only had one wreck in his life." Imazu grinned. "Of course, he drowned then."

"Look," said Corun suddenly, "do you

know where the hell we're going, and why?"

"To the Sea of Demons is all they told me. No reason given." Imazu studied Corun with his sharp black eye. "You don't know either, eh? I've a notion that most of us won't live to find out."

"I'm surprised that any crew could be made to go there without a mutiny."

"This gang of bully boys is only frightened of Shorzon and his witch granddaughter. They—" Imazu shut up. Looking around, Corun saw the two approaching.

In the morning light, Chryseis did not seem the luring devil-woman of the night. She moved with easy grace across the rolling deck, the wind blowing her tunic and her long black hair in careless billows, and there was a girlish joy and eagerness in her. The pirate's heart stumbled and began to race.

She chattered gaily of nothing while she and the old man ate. Shorzon remained silent until he was through, then said curtly to the two men: "Come into the cabin with us."

They filled Corun's tiny room, sitting on bunk and floor. Shorzon said slowly, "We may as well begin now to learn what you know, Corun. What is the truth about your voyage to the Xanthi?"

"It was several seasons ago," replied the corsair. "I got the thought you seem to have had, that possibly I could enlist their help against my enemies." He smiled mirthlessly. "I learned better."

"What do we know of them, exactly?" said Shorzon methodically. He ticked the points off on his lean fingers. "They are an amphibious non-human race dwelling in the Sea of Demons, which is said to grow grass so that ships become tangled there and never escape."

"Not so," said Corun. "There's kelp on the surface, but you can sail right through it. I think the Sea is just a dead region of water around which the great ocean currents move."

"I know," said Shorzon impatiently, and resumed his summary: "Generations ago, the Xanthi, of whose presence men had only been vaguely aware before, fell upon all the islands in their sea and slew

the people living there. They had great numbers, as well as tamed sea monsters and unknown powers of sorcery, so that no one could stand against them. Since then, they have not gone beyond their borders, but they ruthlessly destroy all human vessels venturing inside. King Phidion III of Achaera sent a great fleet to drive the Xanthi from their stolen territory. Not one ship returned. Men now shun the whole region as one accursed."

Imazu nodded. "There's a sailor's legend that the souls of the damned go to the Xanthi," he offered.

Shorzon gave him an exasperated look. "I'm only interested in facts," he said coldly. "What do you know, Corun?"

"I know what you just said, as who doesn't?" answered the Conahurian. "But I think they must have limits to their powers, and be reasonable creatures—but the limits are far beyond man's, and their reason is not as ours.

"I didn't try an invasion, of course. I took one small fast boat manned with picked volunteers and waited outside the Sea for a storm that would blow me into it. When that came, we ran before it—fast! In the rain and wind and waves, I figured we could get undetected far into their borders. So, it seemed, we could, and in fact we made it almost to the largest island inside. Then they came at us.

"They were riding cetaraea, and driving sea serpents before them. They had spears and bows and swords, and there were hundreds of them. Any one of the snakes could have smashed our boat. We ran for land and barely made it.

"We hadn't come to fight, so we held up our hands as the Xanthi leaped ashore and wondered if they'd just hack us down. But, as I'd hoped, they wanted to know what we were there for. So they took us to the black castle on the island."

MOMENTARILY Corun was cold as the memory of that wet dark place of evil shuddered through his mind. "I can't tell you much about it. They have great powers of sorcery, and the place seemed somehow unreal, never the same—always wrong, always with something horrible just beyond vision in the shadows.

I remember the whole time as if it were a dream. There were treasures beyond counting. I saw gold and jewels from the sea bottom, mixed in with human skulls and the figureheads of drowned ships. The light was dim and blue, and there was always fog, and noises for which we had no name hooting out in the gloom. It stank, with the vile fishy smell they have. And the walls seemed to have a watery unreality, as I said, shifting and fading like smoke. You could smell sorcery in the very air of that place.

"They kept us there for many ten-days. We'd brought rich gifts, of course, which they accepted ungraciously, and they housed us in a dungeon under guard. They didn't feed us so badly, if you like a steady fish diet. And they taught us their language."

"How does it sound?" as Chryseis.

"I can't make it come out right. No human throat can. Something like this—" They stiffened at the chill hissing that slithered from Corun's lips. "It has words for things I never did understand, and it lacks many of the commonest human words—fear, joy, hope, adventure—" His glance slid to Chryseis—"love—"

"Do they have a word for hate?" asked Shorzon.

"Oh, yes," Corun grinned without humor. After a moment he went on: "They wanted to know more of the outside world. That was why they spared our lives. When we knew the language well enough, they began to question us. *How* they questioned us! It got to be torture, those unending days of answering the things that hissed and gabbled at us in those shadowy rooms. It was like a nightmare, where mad happenings go on without ever ending. Politics, science, philosophy, art, geography—they wanted to know it all. They pumped us dry of knowledge. When we came to something they didn't understand, such as—love, say—they went back and forth over the same ground, over and over again, until we thought we'd go crazy.

And at last they'd give up in bafflement. I think they believe humans to be mad.

"I made my offer, of course: the loot of Achaera in exchange for the freedom of Conahur. They—I might almost say

they laughed. Finally they answered in scorn that they could take whatever they wanted, the whole world if need be, without my help."

Shorzon's eyes glittered. "Did you find out anything of their powers?" he asked eagerly.

"A little. They put any human magician to shame, of course. I saw them charm sea monsters to death just to eat them. I saw them working on a new building on the island—they planted a little package somewhere, and set fire to it, and great stones leaped into the air with a bang like thunder. I saw their cetaraea cavalry, their tamed war-snakes—oh, yes, they have more powers than I could name. And their numbers must be immense. They live on the sea bottom, you know—that is, their commoners do. The leaders have strongholds on land as well. They farm both sea and land, and have great smithies on the islands.

"Well, in the end they let us go. They were going to put us to death for our trespass, I think, but I did some fast talking. I told them that we could carry word of their strength back to humans and overawe our race with it, so that if they ever wanted to collect tribute or something of the sort, they'd never have to fight for it. Probably that carried less weight than the fact that we had, after all, done no harm and been of some use. They had no logical reason to kill us—so they didn't." Corun smiled grimly. "We were a pretty tough crew, prepared to take a few Xanthi to death with us even if we were disarmed. Their killing-charms seem to work only on animals. That was another reason to spare us.

"One of their wizards was for having me, at least, slain. He said he'd had a prevision of my return with ruin in my wake. But the others—laughed?—at him, at the very thought of a human's being dangerous to them. Moreover, they pointed out, if that was to be the case then there was nothing they could do about it; they seem to believe in a fixed destiny. But the idea amused them so much that it was still another reason for letting us go." Corun shrugged. "So we sailed away. That's all. And never till now did I have

any smallest thought of returning."

He added bleakly after a moment when silence had been heavy: "They have all they want to know from my visit. There will be no reason for them to spare us this time."

"I think there will," said Chryseis.

"There'd better be," muttered Imazu.

"You can start teaching us their language," said Shorzon. "It might not be a bad idea for you to learn too, Imazu. The more who can talk to them, the better."

The Umlothan made a wry face. "Another tongue to learn! By the topknot of Mwanzi, why can't the world settle on one and end this babble!"

"The poor interpreters would starve to death," smiled Chryseis.

She took Corun's arm. "Come, my buccaneer, let's go up on deck for a while. There's always time to learn words."

THEY FOUND a quiet spot on the fore-castle deck, and sat down against the rail. The erinye settled his long body beside Chryseis and watched Corun with sleepy malevolence, but he was hardly aware of the devil-beast. It was Chryseis, Chryseis, dark sweet hair and dark lambent eyes, utter loveliness of face and form, singing golden voice and light warm touch and—

"You are a strange man, Corun," she said softly. "What are you thinking now?"

"Oh—nothing." He smiled crookedly. "Nothing."

"I don't believe that. You have too many memories."

Almost without knowing it, he found himself telling her of his life, the long terrible struggle against overwhelming power, the bitterness and loneliness, the death of comrades one by one—and the laughter and triumphs and wild exultance of it, the faring into unknown seas and the dicing with fate and the strong, close bonds of men against the world. He mused wistfully about a girl who was gone—but her bright image was strangely fading in his heart now, for it was Chryseis who was beside him.

"It has been a hard life," she said at the end. "It took a giant of a man to endure it." She smiled, a small closed smile

that made her look strangely young. "I wonder what you must think of this—sailing with your sworn foes to the end of the world on an unknown mission."

"You're not my foe!" he blurted.

"No—never your enemy, Corun!" she exclaimed. "We have been on opposite sides before—let it not be thus from this moment. I tell you that the purpose of this voyage, which you shall soon know, is—good. Great and good as the savagery of man has never known before. You know the old legend—that someday the Heaven-Fire will shine through opening clouds not as a destroying flame but as the giver of life—that men will see light in the sky even at night—that there will be peace and justice for all mankind? I think that day may be dawning, Corun."

He sat dumbly, bewildered. She was not evil—she was not evil—It was all he knew, but it sang within him.

Suddenly she laughed and sprang to her feet. "Come on!" she cried. "I'll race you around the ship!"

IV

RAIN AND WIND CAME, A lightning-shot squall in which the *Briseia* wallowed and bucked and men strained at oars and pumps. Toward evening it was over, the sea stilled and the lower clouds faded so that they saw the great dull-red disc of the Heaven-Fire through the upper clouds, sinking into the western sea. There was almost a flat calm, the glassy water was ruffled only by a faint breeze which half filled the sail and sent the galley sliding slowly and noiselessly northward.

"Man the oars," directed Shorzon.

"Give the men a chance to rest tonight, sir," begged Imazu. "They've all worked hard today. We can row all the faster tomorrow if we must."

"No time to spare," snapped the wizard.

"Yes, there is," said Corun flatly. "Let the men rest, Imazu."

Shorzon gave him a baleful glance. "You forget your position aboard."

Corun bristled. "I think I'm just beginning to remember it," he answered with metal in his voice.

Chryseis laid a hand on her grandfather's arm. "He's right," she said. "So is Imazu. It would be needless cruelty to make the sailors work tonight, and they will be better fitted by a night's rest."

"Very well," said Shorzon sullenly. He went into his room and slammed the door. Presently Chryseis bade the men good-night and went to her quarters with the erinye trotting after.

Corun's eyes followed her through the deepening blue dusk. In that mystic light, the ship was a shadowy half-real background, a dimness beyond which the sea swirled in streamers of cold white radiance.

"She's a strange woman," said Imazu. "I don't understand her."

"Nor I," admitted Corun. "But I know now her enemies have foully lied about her."

"I'm not so sure about that—" As the Conahurian turned with a dark frown, Imazu added quickly, "Oh, well, I'm probably wrong. I never had much sight of her, you know."

They wandered up on the poop deck in search of a place to sit. It was deserted save for the helmsman by the dimly glowing binnacle, a deeper shadow in the thick blue twilight. Sitting back against the taffrail, they could look forward to the lean waist of the ship and the vague outline of the listlessly bellying sail. Beyond the hull, the sea was an arabesque of luminescence, delicate traceries of shifting white light out to the glowing horizon. The cold fire streamed from the ship's bows and whirled in her wake, the hull dripped liquid flame.

The night was very quiet. The faint hiss and smack of cloven water, creak of planks and tackle, distant splashing of waves and invisible sea beasts—otherwise there was only the enormous silence under the high clouds. The breeze was cool on their cheeks.

"How long till we get to the Sea of Demons?" asked Imazu. His voice was oddly hushed in the huge stillness.

"With ordinary sailing weather, I'd say about three ten-days—maybe four," answered Corun indifferently.

"It's a strange mission we're on, aye,

that it is." Imazu's head wagged, barely visible in the dark. "I like it not, Corun. I have evil feelings about it, and the omens I took before leaving weren't good."

"Why then did you sail? You're a free man, aren't you?"

"So they say!" Sudden bitterness rose in the Umlotuan's voice. "Free as any of Shorzon's followers, which is to say less free than a slave, who can at least run away."

"Why, doesn't he pay well?"

"Oh, aye, he is lavish in that regard. But he has his ways of binding servants to him so that they must do his bidding above that of the very gods. He put his geas on most of these sailors, for instance. They were simple folk, and thought he was only magicking them a good-luck charm."

"You mean they are bound? He has their souls?"

"Aye. He put them to sleep in some sorcerous way and impressed his command on them. No matter what happens now, they must obey him. The geas is stronger than their own wills."

Corun shivered. "Are you—Pardon. It's no concern of mine."

"No, no, that's all right. He put no such binding on me—I knew better than to accept his offer of a luck-bringing spell. But he has other ways. He lent me a slave-girl from Umlotu for my pleasure—but she is lovely, wonderful, kind, all that a woman should be. She has borne me sons, and made homecoming ever a joy. But you see, she is still Shorzon's and he will not sell her to me or free her—moreover, he did put his geas on her. If ever I rebelled, she would suffer for it." Imazu spat over the rail. "So I am Shorzon's creature too."

"It must be a strange service."

"It is. Mostly all I have to do is captain his bodyguard. But I've seen and helped in some dark things. He's a fiend from the lowest hell, Shorzon is. And his granddaughter—" Imazu stopped.

"Yes?" asked Corun roughly. His hand closed bruisingly on the other's arm. "Go on. What of her?"

"Nothing. Nothing. I really have had little to do with her." Imazu's face was

lost in the gloom, but Corun felt the one eye hard on him. "Only—be careful, pirate. Don't let her lay her own sort of geas on you. You've been a free man till now. Don't become anyone's blind slave."

"I've no such intention," said Corun frostily.

"Then no more need be said." Imazu sighed heavily and got up. "I think I'll go to bed, then. What of you?"

"Not yet. I'm not sleepy. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

CORUN sat back alone. He could barely discern the helmsman—beyond lay only glowing darkness and the whispering of the night. He felt loneliness like a cold hollow within his breast.

Father and mother, his tall brothers and his laughing lovely sister, the comrades of youth, the hard wild stout-hearted pirates with whom he had sailed for such a long and bloody time—where were they now? Where in all the blowing night were they?

Where was he and on what mission, sailing alone through a pit of darkness on a ship of strangers? What meaning and hope in all the cruel insanity of the world?

Suddenly he wanted his mother, he wanted to lay his head on her lap and cry in desolation and hear her gentle voice—no, by the gods, it wasn't her image he saw, it was a lithe and dark-haired witch who was crooning to him and stroking his hair—

He cursed tonelessly and got up. Best to go to bed and try to sleep his fancies away. He was becoming childish.

He went down the catwalk toward the cabin. As he neared it, he saw a figure by the rail darkly etched against a shimmering patch of phosphorescence. His heart sprang into his throat.

She turned as he came near. "Corun," she said. "I couldn't sleep. Come over here and talk to me. Isn't the night beautiful?"

He leaned on the rail, not daring to look at the haunting face pale-lit by the swirling sea-fire. "It's nice," he said clumsily.

"But it's lonely," she whispered. "I

never felt so sad and alone before."

"Why—why, that's how I felt!" he blurted.

"Corun—"

She came to him and he took her with a sudden madness of yearning.

Perias the erinye snarled as they thrust him out of her cabin. He padded up and down the deck for a while. A sailor who stood watch near the forecabin followed him with frightened eyes and muttered prayers to the amulet about his neck.

Presently the devil-beast curled up before the cabin. The lids drooped over his green eyes, but they remained unwinkingly fixed on the door.

V

UNDER A HOT SULLEN SKY, the windless sea swelled in long slow waves that rocked the tangled kelp and ocean-grass up and down, heavenward and hellward. To starboard, the dark cliffs of a small jungled island rose from an angry muttering surf, but there were no birds flying above it.

Corun pointed to the shore. "That's the first of the archipelago," he said. "From here on, we can look for the Xanthi to come at any time."

"We should get as far into their territory as possible, even to the black palace," said Shorzon. "I will put a spell of invisibility on the ship."

"Their sorcerers can break that," said Chryseis.

"Aye, so. But when they come to know our powers, I think they will treat with us."

"They'd better!" smiled Imazu grimly.

"Steer on toward the island of the castle," said Shorzon to the pirate. "I go to lay the spell."

He went into his cabin. Corun had a glimpse of its dark interior before the door was closed—draped in black and filled with the apparatus of magic.

"He will have to be in a trance, physically, to maintain the enchantment," said Chryseis. She smiled at Corun, and his pulses raced. "Come, my dearest, it is cooler on the afterdeck."

The sailors rowed steadily, sweat glis-

tening on their bare blue hides. Imazu paced up and down the catwalk, flicking idlers with his whip. Corun stood where he could keep an eye on the steersman and see that the right course was followed.

It had been utter wonder till now, he thought, unending days when they plowed through seas of magic, nights of joy such as he had never known. There had never been another woman such as Chryseis, he thought, never in all the world, and he was the luckiest of men. Though he died today, he had been more fortunate than any man ever dared dream.

Chryseis, Chryseis, loveliest and wisest and most valiant of women—and she was his, before all the jealous gods, she loved him!

"There has only been one thing wrong," he said. "You are going into danger now. The world would go dark if aught befell you."

"And I should sit at home while you were away, and never know what had happened, never know if you lived or died—no, no, Corun!"

He laid a hand on the sword at his waist. They had given him arms and armor again after she had come to him. Logical enough, he thought without resentment—he could be trusted now, as much as if he were one of Shorzon's ensorcelled warriors.

But if this were a spell too, the gods deliver him from ever being freed of it!

He blinked. There was a sudden breath of chill on him, and his eyes were blurring—no, no, it was the ship that wavered, ship and men fading—He clutched at Chryseis. She laughed softly and slipped an arm around his waist.

"It is only Shorzon's spell," she said. "It affects us too, to some extent. And it makes the ship invisible to anyone within seeing range."

Ghost ship, ghost crew, slipping over the slowly heaving waters. There was only the foggiest outline to be seen, shadow of mast and rigging against the sky, glimpses of water through the gray smoke of the hull, blobs of darkness that were the crewmen. Sound was still clear; he heard the mutter of superstitious awe, the crack of the whip, and Imazu's oaths that sent

the oars creaking and splashing again. Corun's hand was a misty blur before his eyes. Chryseis was a shadow beside him.

She laughed once more, a low exultant throb, and pulled his lips down to hers. He ruffled the streaming fragrant hair and felt a return of courage. It was only a spell.

But what were the spells? he wondered for the thousandth time. He did not hold with the simple theory that wizards were in league with gods or demons. They had powers, yes, but he was sure that somehow these powers came only from within themselves. Chryseis had always evaded his questions about it. There must be some simple answer to the problem, some real process, as real as that of making a fire, behind the performances of the sorcerers—but it baffled him to think what it might be.

Blast it all, it just wasn't reasonable that Shorzon, for instance, should have been able actually to change himself into a jungle monster many times his size. Yet he, Corun, had seen the thing, had felt its wet scales and smelled its reptile stink. How?

THE SHIP plowed slowly on. Now and then Corun looked at the compass, straining his eyes to discern the blurred needle. Otherwise they could only wait.

But waiting with Chryseis was remarkably pleasant.

It was at the end of a timeless time, perhaps half a day, that he saw the Xanthian patrol. "Look," he pointed. "There they come."

Chryseis stared boldly over the sea. The hand beneath his was steady as her voice: "So I see. They're—beautiful, aren't they?"

The cetaraea came leaping across the waves, big graceful beasts with the shapes of fish, their smooth black hides shining and the water white behind their threshing tails. Astride each was a great golden form bearing a lance. They quartered across the horizon and were lost to sight.

The crew mumbled in fear, shaken to their hardy souls by the terrible unhuman grace of the Xanthi. Imazu cursed them back to work. The ship went on.

Islands slipped by, empty of man-sign. They had glimpses of Xanthian works, spires and walls rearing above the jungle. These were not the white colonnaded buildings of Tauros or the timbered halls of Conahur—of black stone they were, with pointed towers, climbing crazily skyward. Once a great sea serpent reared its head, spouted water, and writhed away. All creatures save man could sense the presence of wizardry and refused to go near it.

Night fell, an abyss of night broken only by faint glimmers of sea-fire under the carpeting weed. Men stood uneasy watch in full armor, peering blindly into the somber immensity. It was hot, hot and silent.

Near midnight the lookout shouted from the masthead: "Xanthi to larboard!"

"Silence, you fool!" called Imazu. "Want them to hear us?"

The patrol was a faint swirl and streaking of phosphorescence, blacker shadows against the night. It was coming nearer.

"Have they spotted us?" wondered Corun.

"No," breathed Chryseis. "But they're close enough for their mounts—"

There was a great snorting and splashing out in the murk. The cetaraea were refusing to go into the circle of Shorzon's spell. Voices lifted, an unhuman croaking. The erinye, the only animal who did not seem to mind witchcraft, snarled in saw-edged tones, eyes a green blaze against the night.

Presently the squad turned and slipped away. "They know something is wrong, and they've gone for help," said Corun. "We'll have a fight on our hands before long."

He stretched his big body, suddenly eager for action. This waiting was more than he could stand.

The ship drove on. Corun and Chryseis napped on the deck; it was too stiflingly hot below. The long night wore away.

In the misty gray of morning, they saw a dark mass advancing from the west. Corun's sword rasped out of the sheath. It was a long, double-edged blade such as they used in Conahur, and it was thirsty.





"Kill them!" roared Imazu. "Kill the misbegotten snakes!"

"Get inside, Chryseis," he said tightly.

"Get inside yourself," she answered. There was a lilt in her voice like a little girl's. He felt her quiver with joyous expectation.

The ghostly outlines of the ship wavered, thickened, faded again, flickered back toward solidity. Suddenly they had sight; the vessel lay real around them; they saw each other in helm and corselet, face look-

ing into tautened face.

"They have a wizard along—he broke Shorzon's spell," said the Conahurian.

"We looked for that," answered Chryseis evenly. "But as long as Shorzon keeps fighting him, there will be a roiling of magic around us such that none of their beasts will approach."

She stood beside him, slim and boyish in polished cuirass and plumed helmet,

shortsword belted to her waist and a bow in one hand. Her nostrils quivered, her eyes shone, and she laughed aloud. "We'll drive them off," she said. "We'll send them home like beaten iaganaths."

Imazu blew the war-horn, wild brazen echoes screaming over the sea. His men drew in the oars, pulled on their armor, and stood along the rails, waiting.

"But did we come here to fight them?" asked Corun.

"No," said Chryseis. "But we've known all along that we'd have to give them a taste of our might before they'd talk to us."

The Xanthian lancers were milling about half a league away, as if in conference. Suddenly someone blew a harsh-toned horn and Corun saw half the troop slide from the saddle into the water. "So—they'll swim at us," he muttered.

THE ATTACK came from all sides, converging on the ship in a rush of foam. As the Xanthi neared, Corun saw their remembered lineaments and felt the old clutch of panic. *They weren't human.*

With the fluked tail, one of them had twice the length of a man. The webbed hind feet, on which they walked ashore, were held close to the body; the strangely human hands carried weapons. They swam half under water, the dorsal fins rising over. Their necks were long, with gills near the blunt-snouted heads; their grinning mouths showed gleaming fangs. The eyes were big, dark, alive with cold intelligence. They bore no armor, but scales the color of beaten gold covered back and sides and tail. They came in at furious speed, churning the sea behind them.

Chryseis' voice rose to a wild shriek. "Perias! Perias—kill!"

The erinye howled and unfolded his leather-webbed wings. Like a hurled spear he streaked into the air, rushed down on the nearest Xanthian like a thunderbolt—claws, teeth, barbed tail, a blinding fury of blood and death, ripping flesh as if it were parchment.

The ship's ballista *chunked* and balls of the ever-burning Achaeran fire were hurled out to fall blazing among the enemy. Chryseis' bow hummed beside Corun, a Xan-

thian went under with an arrow in his throat—the air was thick with shafts as the crew fired.

Still the Xanthi rushed on, ducking up and down, near impossible to hit. The first of them came up to the hull and sank their clawed fingers into the wood. The sailors thrust downward with pikes, howling in fear-maddened rage.

The man near Corun went down with a hurled javelin through him. At once a huge golden form was slithering over the rail, onto the deck. The sword in his hand flashed, another Umlothan's weapon was knocked spinning from his hand and the reptile hewed him down.

Corun sprang to do battle. The swords clashed together with a shock that jarred the man backward. Corun spread his feet and smote out. His blade whirled down to strike the shoulder, gash the chest, and drive the hissing monster back.

With a rising cold fury, Corun followed it up. *That* for the long inquisition—*that* for being a horror out of the sea bottom—*that* for threatening Chryseis! The Xanthian writhed with a belly ripped open. Still he wouldn't die—he flopped and struck from the deck. Corun evaded the sweeping tail and cut off the creature's head.

They were pouring onto the ship through gaps in the line. Chryseis stood on the foredeck in a line of defending men, her bow singing death. Battle snarled about the mast, men against monsters, sword and halberd and ax belling in cloven bone.

A giant's blow bowled Corun off his feet, the tail of a Xanthian. He rolled over and thrust upward as the Sea Demon sprang on him. The sword went through the heart. Hissing and snapping, his foe toppled on him. He heaved the struggling body away and sprang back to his stance.

"To me!" bellowed Imazu. "To me, men!"

He stood wielding a huge battle ax by the mast, striking at the beasts that raged around him, lopping heads and arms and tails like a woodman. The scattered humans rallied and began to fight their way toward him, step by bloody step.

Perias the erinye was everywhere, a flying fury, ripping and biting and smash-

ing with wing-blows. Corun loomed huge over the men who fought beside him, the sword shrieking and thundering in his hands. Imazu stood stolidly against the mast, smashing at all comers. A rush of Xanthi broke past him and surged against the foredeck. The defenders beat them off, Chryseis thrusting as savagely with her sword as any man, and they reeled back against the masthead warriors to be cut down.

A Xanthian sprang at Corun, wielding a long-shafted ax that shivered the sword in his hand. The Conahurian struck back, his blade darting past the monster's guard to stab through the throat. The Xanthian staggered. Corun wrenched the blade loose and brought it down again to sing in the reptile skull.

Before he could pull it loose, another was on him. Corun ducked under the spear he carried and closed his hands around the slippery sides. The clawed feet raked his legs. He lifted the thing and hurled it into another with bone-shattering force. One of them threshed wildly, neck broken—the other bounded at Corun. The man yanked his sword free and it whistled against the golden head.

BACK AND FORTH the struggle swayed, crashing of metal and howling of warriors. And the Xanthi were driven to the rails—they could not stand against the rallying human line in the narrow confines of the ship.

"Kill them!" roared Imazu. "Kill the misbegotten snakes!"

Suddenly the Xanthi were slipping overboard, swimming for their mounts beyond the zone of magic. Perias followed, harrying them, pulling them half out of the water to rip their throats out.

The ship was wet, streaming with human red and reptile yellow blood. Dead and wounded littered the decks. Corun saw the Xanthi cavalry retreating out of sight.

"We've won," he gasped. "We've won—"

"No—wait—" Chryseis inclined her head sharply, seeming to listen, then darted past him to open a hatch. Light streamed down into the hold. It was filling—the bilge was rising. "I thought so," she said

grimly. "They're below us, chopping into the hull."

"We'll see about that," said Corun, and unbuckled his cuirass. "All who can swim, after me!"

"No—no, they'll kill you—"

"Come on!" rapped Imazu, letting his own breastplate clang to the deck.

Corun sprang overboard. He was wearing nothing but a kilt now, and had a spear in one hand and a drink in his teeth. Fear was gone, washed out by the red tides of battle. There was only a bleak, terrible triumph in him. Men *had* beaten the Sea Demons!

Underwater, it was green and dim. He swam down, down, brushing the hull, pulling himself along the length of the keel. There were half a dozen shapes clustered near the waist, working with axes.

He pushed against the keel and darted at them, holding the spear like a lance. The keen point stabbed into the belly of one monster. The others turned, their eyes terrible in the gloom. Corun took the dirk in his hand, got a grip on the next nearest, and stabbed.

Claws ripped his flanks and back. His lungs were bursting, there was a roaring in his head and darkness before his eyes. He stabbed blindly, furiously.

Suddenly the struggling form let go. Corun broke the surface and gasped in a lungful of air. A Sea Demon leaped up beside him. At once the erinye was on him. The Xanthian screamed as he was torn apart.

Corun dove back under water. The other seamen were down there, fighting for their lives. They outnumbered the Xanthi, but the monsters were in their native element. Blood streaked the water, blinding them all. It was a strange, horrible battle for survival.

In the end, Corun and Imazu and the others—except for four—were hauled back aboard. "We drove them off," said the pirate wearily.

"Oh, my dear—my dearest dear—" Chryseis, who had laughed in battle, was sobbing on his breast.

Shorzon was on deck, looking over the scene. "We did well," he said. "We stood them off, killed about thirty, and only

lost fifteen men."

"At that rate," said Corun, "it won't take them long to clear our decks."

"I don't think they will try again," said Shorzon.

He went over to a captured Xanthian. The Sea Demon had had a foot chopped off in the battle and been pinned to the deck by a pike, but he still lived and rasped defiance at them. If allowed to live, he would grow new members—the monsters were tougher than they had a right to be.

"Hark, you," said Shorzon in the Xanthian tongue, which he had learned with astonishing ease. "We come on a mission of peace, with an offer that your king will be pleased to hear. You have seen only a small part of our powers. It is not beyond us to sail to your palace and bring it crumbling to earth."

Corun wondered how much was bluff. The old sorcerer might really be able to do it. In any case—he had nerve!

"What can you things offer us?" asked the Xanthian.

"That is only for the king to hear," said Shorzon coldly. "He will not thank you for molesting us. Now we will let you go to bear word back to your rulers. Tell them we are coming whether they will or no, but that we come in friendship if they will but show it. After all, if they wish to kill us it can be just as easily done—if at all—after they have heard us out. Now go!"

Imazu pulled the pike loose and the yellow-bleeding Xanthian writhed overboard.

"I do not think we will be bothered again," said Shorzon calmly. "Not before we get to the black palace."

"You may be right," admitted Corun. "You gave them a good argument by their standards."

"Friends?" muttered Imazu. "Friends with those things? As soon expect the erinye to lie down by the bovan, I think."

"Come," said Chryseis impatiently. "We have to repair the leak and clean the decks and get under way again. It is a long trip yet to the black palace."

She turned to Corun and her eyes were dark flames. "How you fought!" she whispered. "How you fought, beloved!"

THE CASTLE STOOD ATOP ONE of the high gray cliffs which walled in a little bay. Beyond the shore, the island climbed steeply toward a gaunt mountain bare of jungle. The sea rolled sullenly against the rocks under a low gloomy sky thickening with the approach of night.

The *Briseia* rowed slowly into the bay, twenty men at the oars and the rest standing nervous guard by the rails. On either side, the Xanthi cavalry hemmed them in, lancers astride the swimming cetaraea with eyes watchful on the humans, and behind them three great sea snakes under direction of their sorcerers followed ominously.

Imazu shivered. "If they came at us now," he muttered, "we wouldn't last long."

"We'd give them a fight!" said Corun. "They will receive us," declared Shorzon.

The ship grounded on the shallows near the beach. The sailors hesitated. To pull her ashore would be to expose themselves almost helplessly to attack. "Go on, jump to it!" snapped Imazu, and the men shipped their oars and sheathed their weapons, waded into the bay and dragged the vessel up on the strand.

The chiefs of the Xanthi stood waiting for them. There were perhaps fifty of the reptiles, huge golden forms wrapped in dark flowing robes on which glittered ropes of jewels. A few wore tall miters and carried hooked staffs of office. Like statues they stood, waiting, and the sailors shivered.

Shorzon, Chryseis, Corun, and Imazu walked up toward them with all the slow dignity they could summon. The Conahurian's eyes sought the huge wrinkled form of Tsathu, king of the Xanthi. The monster's gaze brightened on him and the fanged mouth opened in a bass croak:

"So you have returned to us. You may not leave this time."

"Your majesty's hospitality overwhelms me," said Corun ironically.

A stooped old Xanthian beside the king plucked his sleeve and hissed rapidly: "I told you, sire, I told you he would come

back with the ruin of worlds in his train. Cut them all down now, before the fates strike. Kill them while there is time!"

"There will be time," said Tsathu.

His unblinking eyes locked with Shorzon's and suddenly the twilight shimmered and trembled, the nerves of men shook and out in the water the sea-beasts snorted with panic. For a long moment that silent duel of wizardry quivered in the air, and then it faded and the unreality receded into the background of dusk.

Slowly the Xanthian monarch nodded, as if satisfied to find an opponent he could not overcome.

"I am Shorzon of Achaera," said the man, "and I would speak with the chiefs of the Xanthi."

"You may do so," replied the reptile. "Come up to the castle and we will quarter your folk."

At Imazu's order, the sailors began unloading the gifts that had been brought: weapons, vessels and ornaments of precious metals set with jewels, rare tapestries and incenses. Tsathu hardly glanced at them. "Follow me," he said curtly. "All your people."

"I'd hoped at least to leave a guard on the ship," murmured Imazu to Corun.

"Would have done little good if they really wanted to seize her," whispered the Conahurian.

It did not seem as if Tsathu could have heard them, but he turned and his bass boom rolled over the mumbling surf: "That is right. You may as well relax your petty precautions. They will avail nothing."

IN A LONG FILE, they went up a narrow trail toward the black palace. The Xanthian rulers went first, with deliberately paced dignity, thereafter the human captains, their men, and a silent troop of armed reptile soldiery. *Hemmed in*, thought Corun grimly. *If they want to start shooting—*

Chryseis' hand clasped his, a warm grip in the misty gloom. He responded gratefully. She came right behind him, her other hand on the nervous and growling erinye.

The castle loomed ahead, blacker than the night that was gathering, the gigantic

walls climbing sheer toward the sky, the spear-like towers half lost in the swirling fog. There was always fog here, Corun remembered, mist and rain and shadow; it was never full day on the island. He sniffed the dank sea-smell that blew from the gaping portals and bristled in recollection.

They entered the cavernous doorway and went down a high narrow corridor which seemed to stretch on forever. Its bare stone walls were wet and green-slipped, tendrils of mist drifted under the invisibly high ceiling, and he heard the hooting and muttering of unknown voices somewhere in the murk. The only light was a dim bluish radiance from fungoid balls growing on the walls, a cold unhealthy shadowless illumination in which the white humans looked like drowned corpses. Looking behind, Corun could barely make out the frightened faces of the Umlotuans, huddled close together and gripping their weapons with futile strength.

The Xanthi glided noiselessly through the mumbling gloom, tall spectral forms with faint golden light streaming from their damp scales. It seemed as if there were other presences in the castle too, things flitting just beyond sight, hiding in lightless corners and fluttering between the streamers of fog. Always, it seemed, there were watching eyes, watching and waiting in the dark.

They came into a cavernous antechamber whose walls were lost in the dripping twilight. Tsathu's voice boomed hollowly between the chill immensities of it: "Follow those who will show you to your quarters."

Silent Xanthi slipped between the human ranks, herding them with spears—the sailors one way, their chiefs another. "Where are you taking the men?" asked Imazu with an anger sharpened by fear. "Where are you keeping them?" The echoes flew from wall to wall, jeering him—*keeping them, keeping them, them, them—*

"They go below the castle," said a Xanthian. "You will have more suitable rooms."

Our men down in the old dungeons— Corun's hand whitened on the hilt of his sword. But it was useless to protest, unless

they wanted to start a battle now.

The four human leaders were taken down another whispering, echoing tunnel of a corridor, up a long ramp that seemed to wind inside one of the towers, and into a circular room in whose walls were six doors. There the guards left them, fading back down the impenetrable night of the ramp.

THE ROOMS were furnished with grotesque ornateness—huge hideously carved beds and tables, scaled tapestries and rugs, shells and jewels set in the mold-covered walls. Narrow slits of windows opened on the wet night. Darkness and mist hid Corun's view of the ground, but the faintness of the surf told them they must be dizzyingly high up.

"Ill is this," he said. "A few guards on that ramp can bottle us up here forever. And they need only lock the dungeon gates to have our men imprisoned below."

"We will treat with them. Before long they will be our allies," said Shorzon. His hooded eyes were on Chryseis. It was with a sudden shock that Corun remembered. Days and nights of bliss, and then the violence of battle and the tension of approach, had driven from his mind the fact that he had never been told what the witch-pair was really here for. It was *their* voyage, not his, and what real good could have brought them to this place of evil?

He shoved his big body forward, a tawny giant in the foggy chill of the central room. "It is near time I was told something of what you intend," he said. "I have guided you and taught you and battled at your side, and I'll not be kept blindfolded any longer."

"You will be told what I tell you—no more," said Shorzon haughtily. "You have me to thank for your miserable life—let that be enough."

"You can thank me that you're not being eaten by fish at the bottom of the sea right now," snapped Corun. "By Breannach Brannor, I've had enough of this!"

He stood with his back against the wall, sweeping them with ice-blue eyes. Shorzon stood black and ominous, wrath

in the smoldering, sunken eyes. Chryseis shrank back a little from both of them, but Perias the erinye growled and flattened his belly to the floor and stared greenly at Corun. Imazu shifted from foot to foot, his wide blue face twisted with indecision.

"I can strike you dead where you stand," warned Shorzon. "I can become a monster that will rip you to rags."

"Try it!" snarled Corun. "Just try it!" Chryseis slipped between them and the huge dark eyes were bright with tears. "Are we not in enough danger now, four humans against a land of walking beasts, without falling at each other's throats? I think it is the witchcraft of Tsagu working on us, dividing us—fight *him!*"

She swayed against the Conahurian. "Corun," she breathed. "Corun, my dearest of all—you shall know, you shall be told everything as soon as we dare. But don't you see—you haven't the skill to protect yourself and your knowledge against the Xanthian magic?"

Or against your magic, beloved.

She laughed softly and drew him after her, into one of the rooms. "Come, Corun. We are all weary now, it is time to rest. Come, my dear. Tomorrow—"

VII

DAY CREPT PAST IN A BLINDNESS of rain. Twice Xanthians brought them food, and once Corun and Imazu ventured down the ramp to find their way barred by spear-bearing reptiles. For the rest they were alone.

It ate at the nerves like an acid. Shorzon sat stiff, unmoving on a couch, eyes clouded with thought; his gaunt body could have been that of a Khemrian mummy. Imazu squatted unhappily, carving one of the intricate trinkets with whose making sailors pass dreamy hours. Corun paced like a caged beast, throttled rage mounting in him. Even Perias grew restless and took to padding up and down the antechamber, passing Corun on the way. The man could not help a half smile. He was growing almost fond of the erinye and his honest malevolence, after the intriguing of humans and Xanthi.

Only Chryseis remained calm. She lay curled on her bed like a big beautiful animal, the long silken hair tumbling darkly past her shoulders, a veiled smile on her red lips. And so the day wore on.

It was toward evening that they heard slow footfalls and looked out to see a party of Xanthi coming up the ramp. It was an awesome sight, the huge golden forms moving with deliberation and pride under the shimmering robes that flowed about them. Some were warriors, with saw-edged pikes flashing in their hands, but the one who spoke was plainly a palace official.

"Greeting from Tsathu, king of the Demon Sea, to Shorzon of Achaera," the voice boomed. "You are to feast with the lords of the Xanthi tonight."

"I am honored," bowed the sorcerer. "The woman Chryseis will come with me, for she is equal with me."

"That is permitted," said the Xanthian gravely.

"And we, I suppose, wait here," muttered Corun rebelliously.

"It won't be for long," smiled Chryseis softly. "After tonight, I think it will be safe to tell you what you wish to know."

She had donned banqueting dress carried up with her from the ship, a clinging robe of the light-rippling silk of Hiung-nu, a scarlet cloak that was like a rush of flame from her slim bare shoulders, barbarically massive bracelets and necklaces, a single fire-ruby burning at her white throat. Pearls and silver glittered like dewdrops in her night-black hair. The loveliness of her caught at Corun's throat. He could only stare with dumb longing as she went after Shorzon and the Xanthi.

She turned to wave at him. Her whisper twined around his heart: "Goodnight, beloved."

When they were gone, the erinye padding after them, Imazu gave Corun a rueful look and said, "So now we are out of the story."

"Not yet," answered the Conahurian, still a little dazed.

"Oh, yes, oh, yes. Surely you do not think that we plain sailormen will be asked for our opinions? No, Corun, we are only pieces on Shorzon's board. We've

done our part, and now he will put us back in the box."

"Chryseis said—"

Imazu shook his scarred bald head sadly. "Surely you don't believe a word that black witch utters?"

Corun half drew his sword. "I told you before that I'd hear no word against Chryseis," he said thinly.

"As you will. It doesn't matter, anyway. But be honest, Corun. Strike me down if you will, it doesn't matter now, but try to think. I've known Chryseis longer than you, and I've never known anyone to change their habits overnight—for anyone."

"She said—"

"Oh, I think she likes you, in her own way. You make as handsome and useful a pet as that erinye of hers. But whatever else she is after, it is something for which she would give more than the world and not have a second thought about it."

Corun paced unhappily. "I don't trust Shorzon," he admitted. "I trust him as I would a mad pherax. And anything Tsathu plans is—evil." He glared down the cavernous mouth of the ramp. "If I could only hear what they say!"

"What chance of that? We're under guard, you know."

"Aye, so. But—" Struck with a sudden thought, Corun went over to the window. The rain had ceased outside, but a solid wall of fog and night barred vision. It was breathlessly hot, and he heard the low muttering of thunder in the hidden sky.

THERE WERE VINES growing on the wall, tendrils as thick as a man's leg. The broad leaves hung down over the sill, wet with rain and fog. "I remember the layout of the castle," he said slowly. "It's a warren of tunnels and corridors, but I could find my way to the feasting hall."

"If they caught you, it would be death," said Imazu uneasily.

Corun's grin was bleak. "It will most likely be death anyway," he said. "I think I'll try."

"I'm not as spry as I once was, but—"

"No, no, Imazu, you had best wait

here. Then if anyone comes prying and sees you, he'll think we're both here—maybe."

Corun slipped off tunic and sandals, leaving only his kilt. He hung his sword across his back, put a knife in his belt, and turned toward the window.

"It may be all wrong," he said. "I should trust Chryseis—and I do, Imazu, but they might easily overpower her. And anything is better than this waiting like beasts in a trap."

"The gods be with you, then," said Imazu huskily. He shook a horny fist. "To hell with Shorzon! I've been his thrall too long. I'm with you, friend."

"Thanks." Corun swung out the window. "Good luck to both—to all of us, Imazu."

The fog wrapped around his eyes like a hood. He could barely see the shadowy wall, and he groped with fingers and toes for the vines. One slip, one break, and he would be spattered to red ruin in the courtyard below.

Down and down and down—Twigs clawed at him. The branches were slick in his hands, buried under a smother of leaves. His muscles began to ache with the strain. Several times he slipped and saved himself with a desperate clawing grip.

Something moaned in the night, under the deepening growl of thunder.

He clung to the wall and strained his eyes down. A breath of wind parted the fog briefly into ragged streamers through which winked the savage light of a bolt of lightning, high in the murky sky. Down below was the courtyard. He saw the metallic gleam of scales, guards pacing between the walls.

Slowly, he edged his way across the outjutting tower to the main wall of the castle. Slantwise, he crept over its surface until a slit of blackness loomed before him, another window. He had to squeeze to get through, the stone scraping his skin.

For a moment he stood inside, breathing heavily, the drawn sword in his hand. There was a corridor stretching beyond this room, on into a darkness lit by the ghostly blue fungus-glow. He saw and heard nothing of the Xanthi, but some-

thing scuttled across the floor and crouched in a shadowed corner, watching him.

On noiseless bare feet, he ran down the hall. Fog eddied and curled in the tenebrous length of it, he heard the dripping of water and once a shuddering scream ripped the dank air. He thought he remembered where he was in that labyrinth—left here, and there would be another ramp going down—

A huge golden form loomed around the corner. Before the jaws could open to shout, Corun's sword hissed in a vicious arc and the Xanthian's head leaped from his shoulders. He kicked the flopping body behind a door and sped on his way, panting.

Halfway down the ramp, a narrow entrance gaped, one of the tunnels that riddled the building through its massive walls. Corun slithered down its lightless wet length. It should open on the great chamber and—

Black against the dim blue light of the exit, a motionless form was squatting. Corun groaned inwardly. They had a guard against intruders, then. Best to go back now—no! He snarled soundlessly and bounded forward, clutching the sword in one hand and reaching out with the other.

Fingers rasping across the scaly hide, he hooked the thing's neck into the crook of his elbow and yanked the heavy body back into the tunnel with one enormous wrench. Blind in the darkness, he stabbed into the mouth, driving the point of his sword through flesh and bone into the brain.

The dying monster's claws raked him as he crouched over the body. He reflected grimly that no matter how benevolent the Xanthi might be, he would die for murder if they ever caught him. But he had no great fear of their suddenly becoming tender toward mankind. The bulk of the reptile race was peaceable, actually, but their rulers were relentless.

The tunnel opened on a small balcony halfway up the rearing chamber wall. Corun lay on his belly, peering down over the edge.

THEY SAT at a long table, the lords of the Demon Sea, and he felt a dim

surprise at seeing that they were almost through eating. Had his nightmare journey taken that long? They were talking, and the sound drifted up to his ears.

At the head of the table, Tsathu and his councillors sat on a long ornate couch ablaze with beaten gold. Shorzon and Chryseis were reclining nearby, sipping the bitter yellow wine of the Xanthi. It was strange to hear the hideous hissing and croaking of the reptile language coming from Chryseis' lovely throat.

"—interesting, I am sure," said the king.

"More than that—more than that!" It seemed to Corun that he could almost see the terrible fire in Shorzon's eyes. The wizard leaned forward, shaking with intensity. "You can do it. The Xanthi can conquer Achaera with ease. Your sea cavalry and serpents can smash their ships, your devil-powder can burst their walls into the air, your legions can overrun their land, your wizardry blind and craze them. And the terror you will inspire will force the people to do our bidding."

"Possibly you overrate us," said Tsathu. "It is true that we have great numbers and a strong army, but do not forget that the Xanthi are actually a more peaceful race than man. Your kind is hard and savage, murdering even each other, making war simply for loot or glory or no real reason at all. Until the king-race arose, the Xanthi dwelt quietly on the sea bottom and a few small islands, without wish to harm anyone.

"They have not even the natural capacity for magic possessed, however undeveloped, by all humans. As a result they are much more susceptible to it than men. Thus, when the king-race was born with such powers, they were soon able to control all their people and make themselves the absolute masters of the Xanthi. But we, kings and wizards and lords of the Demon Sea, are all one interbred clan. Without us, the Xanthi power would collapse; they would go back to what they were.

"Even Xanthi science is all of our making. *We*, the king-race, developed the devil-powder and all that we have ever made is stored in the dungeons of this very

building—enough to blow it into the sky."

TSATHU made a grimace which might have been a sardonic smile. "Do not read weakness into that admission," he said. "Even though all the lords who make Xanthian might are gathered in this one room, that power is still immeasurably greater than you can imagine. To show you how helpless you are—your men are locked into the dungeons and your geas has been lifted from their minds."

"Impossible!" gasped Shorzon. "A geas cannot be lifted—"

"But it can. What is it but a compulsion implanted in the brain, so deeply as to supersede all other habits? One mind cannot erase that imposed pattern, but several minds working in concert can do so, and that I and my councillors have done. As of today, your folk are free in soul, hating you for what you made them. You are alone."

The great scaled forms edged closer, menacingly. Corun's fist clenched about his sword. If they harmed Chryseis—

But she said coolly: "It does not matter. Our men were simply to bring us here, nothing else. We can dispense with them. What matters is our plan to impose magic control over Achaera."

"And I cannot yet see what benefit the Xanthi would get of it," said Tsathu impatiently. "Our powers of darkness are so much greater than yours already that—"

"Let us not use words meant to impress the ignorant among ourselves," said Chryseis scornfully. "Every sorcerer knows there is nothing of heaven or hell about magic. It is but the imposition of a pattern on other minds. It creates, by control of the senses, illusions of lycanthropy or whatever else is desired, or it binds the subject by the unbreakable compulsion of a geas. But it is no more than that—one mind reaching through space to create what impressions it wills on another mind. Your devil-powder, or an ordinary sword or ax or fist, is more dangerous—if the fools only knew."

Corun's breath hissed between his teeth. If—if that—O gods, if *that* was the secret of the magicians—!

"As you will," said Tsathu indifferently.

"What matters is that there are more of our minds than your two, and thus we can beat down any attempt you may make against us. So it comes back to the question, why should we help you seize and hold Achaera? What will we gain?"

"I should say nothing of its great wealth," said Shorzon. "But it is true, as you say, that many minds working together are immeasurably more powerful than one—more powerful, even, than the sum of all those minds working separately. I have worked with as many as a dozen slaves, having them concentrate with me, so that I could draw their mind-force through my own brain and use it as my own, and the results have amazed me. Now if the entire population of Achaera were forced to help us, all at one time—"

The Xanthi's eyes glittered and a low murmur rose among them. Shorzon went on, rapidly: "It would be power over the world. Nothing could stand before that massed mental force. With us, skilled sorcerers, to direct, and the soldiers of Xanthi to compel obedience, we could lay a geas on whole nations without even having to be near them. We could span immeasurable gulfs of space and contact minds on those other worlds which philosophers think exist beyond the upper clouds. We could, by thus heightening our own mental powers, think out the very problems of existence, find the deepest secrets of nature, forces beside which your devil-powder would be a spark. Drawing life-energy from other bodies, we would never grow old, we would live forever.

"Tsathu—lords of Xanthi—I offer you a chance to become gods!"

THE STILLNESS was broken only by the muttering and whispering of the Xanthi among themselves. Mist drifted through the raw wet night of the hall. The walls seemed to waver, shift and blur like smoke.

"Why could we not do this in our own nation?" asked Tsathu.

"Because, as you yourself said, the Xanthi do not have the latent mental powers of humans—save for you few who are the masters. It must be mankind who is controlled, with the commoners of your

race as overseers."

"And why could we not kill you and do this ourselves?"

"Because you do not understand humans. The differences are too great. You could never control human thoughts as Chryseis or I could."

Another Xanthian spoke: "But do you realize what this will do to the human race? Your Achaerans will become mindless machines under such control. Drained of life-energy, they will age and die like animals. I doubt that any will live ten seasons."

"What of that?" shrugged Chryseis. "There are other nations nearby to draw on—Conahur, Norriki, Khemri, ultimately the world. We will have centuries, remember—we will never die!"

"And you do not care for your own race at all?"

"It will no longer be our race," said Shorzon. "We will be gods, thinking and living and wielding such powers as they—as we ourselves right now—could never dream. Why, do what you will with our men here, to start. What does it matter?"

"But do not harm the yellow-haired man from Conahur," said Chryseis sharply. "He's mine—forever."

Tsathu sat thinking, like the statue of a Khemrian beast-god cast in shining gold. Slowly, at last, he nodded, and an eerie sigh ran down the long table as the lords of the Xanthi hissed agreement.

"It will be done," said Tsathu.

Corun stumbled back down the tunnel, reckless of discovery, blind and deaf with madness that roared in his skull. Chryseis—Chryseis—Chryseis—

It was not the horror of the scheme, the ruin that it would bring even if it failed, the revelation of how immeasurably powerful were the forces leagued against man. He could have stood that, and braced himself to fight it as long as there was breath in his lungs. But Chryseis—

She had been part of it. She had helped plan it, had coldly condemned her whole race to oblivion. She had lied to him, cheated him, betrayed him, used him, and now she wanted him for a toy, an immortal puppet—Witch! Witch! Witch!

Less human than the erinye at her feet,

than the Xanthi themselves, mad with a cold madness such as he had never thought could be—*Chryseis, Chryseis, Chryseis, I loved you. With all my heart, I loved you.*

There was no hope in him, no longing for anything but the fullest revenge he could take before they hewed him to the ground. Had the old Xanthian wizard foretold he would bring death? Aye, by the mad cruel gods who ruled men's destinies, he would!

He reached the corridor and began to run.

VIII

DOWN A LONG CURVING RAMP that led into a pit of blackness—the dungeons could not be far, they lay this way—

He hugged himself into the shadows as a troop of guards went by. They were talking in their hoarse croaking language, and did not peer into the corners of the labyrinth. When they were past, Corun sped on his way.

The stone walls became rough damp tunnels, hewed out of the living rock under the castle. He groped through a blackness relieved only by the occasional dull glow of fungi. The darkness hissed and rustled with movements; he caught the glimmer of three red eyes watching, and something slithered over his bare feet. A far faint scream quivered down the hollow length of passages. It had shaken him when he was here before, but now—

What mattered? What was important, save to kill as many of the monsters as he could before they overwhelmed him?

The tunnel opened on a great cave whose floor was a pool of oily black water. As he skirted its rim along a narrow slippery ledge, something stirred, a misshapen giant thing darker than the night. It roared hollowly and swam toward him. A wave of foul odor came with it, catching Corun's throat in a sick dizziness.

He swayed on the edge of the pool and the swimmer began to crawl out of it toward him. Corun saw its teeth gleam wetly in the vague blue light, but there were no eyes—it was blind. He retreated

along the ledge toward the farther exit. The ground trembled under the bulk of the creature.

Its jaws clashed shut behind him as he leaped free. Racing down the tunnel, he heard the bellowing of it like dull thunder through the reeking gloom. It wouldn't follow far, but that way of return would be barred to him.

No matter, no matter. He burst out into another open space. It was lit by a dim flickering fire over which crouched three armed Xanthi. Beyond, the red light glimmered on an iron-barred doorway, and behind that there were figures stirring. Men!

Corun bounded across the floor, the sword shrieking in his hand. It whirled down to crash through the skull-bones of one guard. Before he could free it, the other two were on him.

He ducked a murderous pike thrust and slipped close to the wielder, stabbing upward with his dagger. The Xanthian screamed and hugged Corun close to himself, fastening his jaws in the man's shoulder. Corun slashed wildly, ripping open the throat. They tumbled to the ground, locked in each other's arms, raging like beasts. Corun's knife glanced off the Xanthian's ribs and he felt the steel snap over. He got both hands into the clamped jaws, heedless of the fangs, and wrenched. The jawbone cracked as he forced the reptile's mouth open.

He rolled from beneath the still feebly struggling creature and glared around for the third. That one lay in a hacked ruin against the cell; he had backed up too close to the bars, and the men inside still had their weapons.

GASPING, Corun climbed to his feet. An eager baying of fierce voices rolled out from the cell; men gripped the bars and howled in maddened glee.

"Corun— Captain Corun—get us out of here—let us out to rip Shorzon's guts loose—Aaarrgh!"

The Conahurian lurched over to a dead Xanthian at whose waist hung a bundle of keys. His hands shook as he tried them in the lock. When he got the door open, the men were out in a single tide,

He leaned heavily on an Umlothan's arm. "What happened to you?" he asked.

"The devils led us down here and then closed the door on us," snarled the blue man. "Later a group of them in rich dress came down—and suddenly we saw what a slavery we'd been in to Shorzon, suddenly it no longer seemed that obedience to him was the only possible thing—Mwanzi, let me at his throat!"

"You may have that chance," said the pirate. He felt strength returning; he stood erect and faced them in the flickering firelight. Their eyes gleamed back at him out of the shadows, fierce as the metal of their weapons.

"Listen," he said. "We might be able to fight our way out of here, but we'd never escape across the Demon Sea. But I know a way to destroy this whole cursed house and every being in it. If you'll follow me—"

"Aye!" The shout filled the cavern with savage thunder. They shook their weapons in the air, gleam of red-lit steel out of trembling darkness. "Aye!"

Corun picked up his sword and trotted down the nearest passageway. He was bleeding, he saw vaguely, but he felt little pain from it—he was beyond that now. The thing was to find the devil-powder. Tsathu had said it was somewhere down here.

They went along tunnel after winding tunnel, losing all sense of direction in the wet hollow dark. Corun had a sudden nightmare feeling that they might wander down here forever, blundering from cave to empty cave while eternity grayed.

"Where are we going?" asked someone impatiently. "Where are Xanthi to fight?"

"I don't know," snapped Corun.

They came suddenly into another broad cavern, beyond which was another barred door. Four Xanthi stood guard in front of it. They never had a chance—the air was suddenly full of hurled weapons, and they were buried under a pile of edged steel.

Corun searched the bodies but found no keys. In the murk beyond, he could dimly see boxes and barrels reaching into fathomless distances, but the door was held fast. Of course—Tsathu would never

trust his men-at-arms with entrance to the devil-powder.

The corsair snarled and grabbed a bar with both hands. "Pull, men of Umlothu!" he shouted. "Pull!"

They swarmed close, thirty-odd big blue men with the strength of hate in them, clutching the cell bars, grabbing each other's waists, heaving with a force that shrieked through the iron. "Pull!"

The lock burst and they staggered back as the door swung wide. Instantly Corun was inside, ripping open a box and laughing aloud to see the black grains that filled it.

For a wild moment he thought of plunging a brand into the powder and going up in flame and thunder with the castle. Coldness returned—he checked himself and looked around for fuses. His followers would not have permitted him to commit a suicide that involved them. And after all—the longer he lived, the more enemies he'd have a chance to cut down personally.

"I've heard talk of this stuff," said one of the men nervously. "Is it true that setting fire to it releases a demon?"

"Aye." Corun found the long rope-like fuses coiled in a box. He knotted several together and put one end into the powder. The ignition of one container would quickly set off the rest—and the cavern was huge, and filled with many shiploads of sleeping hell.

"If we can fight our way to our ship, and get clear before the fire reaches the powder—" began the Umlothan.

"We can try that, I suppose," said Corun.

He estimated the burning time of his fuse from memories of the use he'd seen the Xanthi make of the devil-powder. Yes, there would be a fair allowance for escape, though he doubted that they would ever reach the strand alive.

He touched a stick from the fire to the end of the fuse. It began to sputter, a red spark creeping along it toward the open box. "Let's go!" shouted Corun.

They pounded along the tunnel, heedless of direction. There should be an upward-leading ramp somewhere—ah! There it was!

Up its length they raced, past levels of the dungeons toward the main floor of the castle. At the end, there was a brighter blue light than they had seen below. Up—up!

Up—and out!

THE CHAMBER was enormous, a pillared immensity reaching to a ceiling hidden in sheer height; rugs and tapestries of the scaled Xanthian weave were strewn about, and their heavy, intricately carved furniture filled it. At the far end stood a towering canopied throne, on which sat a huge golden form. Other shapes stood around it, and there were pikemen lining the walls at rigid attention.

Through the haze of mist and twilight, Corun saw the black robe of Shorzon and the flame-colored cloak of Chryseis. He shrieked an oath and plunged for them.

A horn screamed and the guards sprang from the walls to form a line before the throne. The humans shocked against the Xanthi with a fury that clamored through the building.

Swords and axes began to fly. Corun hewed at the nearest grinning reptile face, felt the sword sink in and roared the war-cry of Conahur. He spitted the monster on his blade, lifted it, and pitchforked it into the ranks of the guards.

Tsathu bellowed and rose to meet him. Suddenly the Xanthian king was not there; it was a tentacled thing from the sea bottom that filled the room, a thing whose bloated dark body reared to the ceiling. Someone screamed—fear locked the battlers into motionlessness.

"Magic!" It was a sneering rattle in Corun's throat. He sprang into the very body of the sea creature.

He felt the shock of striking its solid form, the rasp of its hide against him, the overwhelming poisonous stench of it. One tentacle closed around him. He felt his ribs snapping and the air popping from his burst lungs.

It wasn't real, his mind gasped through the whirling agony. It wasn't real! He plowed grimly ahead, blind in the illusion that swirled around him, striking, striking.

Dimly, through the roaring in his nerves, he felt his blade hit something solid. He bellowed in savage glee and smote again, again, and again. The smashing pressure lifted. He sobbed air into himself and looked with streaming eyes as the giant form dissolved into smoke, into mist, into empty air. It was Tsathu writhing in pain at his feet, Tsathu with his head nearly chopped off. It was only another dying Xanthian.

Corun leaped up onto the throne and looked over the room. The guards and the sailors were still standing in shaken silence. "Kill them!" roared the pirate. "Strike them down!"

Battle closed again with a snarl and a clang of steel. Corun glared around after other Xanthi of the sorcerer breed. There were none in sight; they must prudently have fled into another part of the castle. Well—let them!

But other Xanthi were swarming into the chamber, battle horns were hooting and the guttural reptile voices crying a summons. If the humans were not to be broken by sheer numbers, they'd have to fight their way out soon . . .

And down in the dungeons a single red spark was eating its way toward a box of black powder.

Corun jumped down again to the floor. His sword leaped sideways, cut a Xanthian spine across, bit the tail from another. "To me!" he bawled. "Over here, men of Umlotu!"

The blues heard him and rallied, gathering into compact knots that slashed their way toward where his dripping sword whined and thundered. He never stopped striking; he drove the reptiles before him until they edged away from his advance.

The men formed into one group and Corun led it across the floor in a dash for the looming doorway. A red thought flashed across his brain: Where were Shorzon and Chryseis?

The Xanthi scattered before the desperate human rush. The men came out into a remembered hallway—it led to the outside, Corun recalled. By Breannach Brannor, they might escape yet!

"Corun! Corun, you sea-devil! I knew it was your doing!"

The Conahurian turned to see Imazu bounding toward him with a bloody ax in one hand. Imazu—thank all the gods, Imazu was free!

"I heard a noise of fighting, and the tower guards went off toward it," gasped the Umlothan captain. "So I came too. On the way I met Shorzon and Chryseis."

"What of them?" breathed Corun.

The blue warrior smiled savagely and flung a red thing down at Corun's feet. "There's Shorzon's scheming head. My woman is free!"

"Chryseis—"

Imazu leaned on his ax, panting.

"She launched her erinye at me. I ducked into a room and slammed the door in its face, then came here through another entrance."

Chryseis was loose—"We've got to get clear," said Corun. "The devil-powder is going to go off any time now."

The Xanthi were rallying. They came at the humans in another rush. Corun and Imazu and their best men filled the corridor with a haze of steel, backing down toward the outer portal.

It was a crazy blur of struggle, hewing at faces that wavered out of night, slapping down thrusts and reaching for the life of the enemy. Men fell, and others took their places in the line. Down the corridor they retreated, fighting to get free, and they left a trail of dead.

The end of the passage loomed ahead. And the monstrous iron door was swinging shut.

Chryseis stood in the entrance. A wild storm-wind outside sent her cloak flapping about her, red wings beating in the lightning-shot darkness about the devil's rage of the goddess face.

"Stay here!" she screamed. "Stay here and be cut down, you triple traitor!"

The nearest Umlothan sprang at her. The door clashed shut in his face—they heard the great bolt slam down outside. They were boxed in the end of the hall, and the Xanthi need only shoot them down with arrows.

Down in the dungeons, the fuse burned to its end. A sheet of flame sprang up in the opened box of powder, reaching for the stacks around it.

THE FIRST EXPLOSION CAME as a muffled roar. Corun felt the floor tremble under his feet. Men and Xanthi stood motionless, looking at each other with widening eyes in which a common doom arose.

So it ended. Shorzon and Tsathu and their wizard cohorts would be gone, but Chryseis, mad, lovely Chryseis, was loose, and the gods knew what hell she could brew among the leaderless Xanthi.

The walls groaned as another boom echoed down their length.

Well, death came to every man, and he had not done so badly. Corun began to realize how weary he was; he was bleeding from wounds and breath was raw in his lungs.

The Umlothans hammered on the door in panic. But the twenty or fewer survivors could never break it down.

The devil-powder roared. The floor heaved sickeningly under Corun's feet. He heard the crash of collapsing masonry.

Wait—wait—one chance! One chance, by the gods!

"Be ready to run out when the walls topple," he shouted. "We'll have a little time—"

The Xanthi were fleeing in terror. The humans stood alone, waiting while the explosions rolled and banged around them. Cracks zigzagged across the walls, dust choked the dank air.

Crash!

Corun saw the nearer wall swaying, toppling. The floor lifted and buckled and he fell to the lurching ground. All the world was an insanity of racket and ruin.

The lintel caved in, the portal sagged. Corun leaped for the opening like a pouncing erinye. The men swarmed with it, out through the widening hole while the roof came down behind them.

Someone screamed, a faint lost sound in the grinding fury of sundering stone. Rocks were flying—Corun saw one of them crack a man's head like a melon. Wildly he ran as the outer facade came down.

There was a madness of storm outside, wind screaming to fill the sky, driving solid sheets of rain and hail before it.

The incessant blinding lightning glared in a cold shadowless brilliance, the bawling thunder drowned the roar of exploding devil-powder. They fought out through the courtyard, past the deserted outer gate.

There came a blast which seemed to crack the sky. Corun was knocked down as by a giant's fist. He lay in the mud and saw a pillar of flame lift toward the heavens with the castle fountaining up on its wings. Thunder roared over the earth, shouting to the storm that raged in the heavens.

Corun picked himself up and leaned dizzily against a tree stripped clean by the blast. Rain slanted across the ground, churning the mud beneath his feet, the livid lightning-glare blazing above. Vaguely, through ringing, deafened ears, he heard the wild clamor of the sea. Looking down the cataract which the upward trail had become, he saw the *Briseia* rocking in the wind where she lay on the beach.

He gestured to Imazu, who staggered up to join him. His voice was barely audible over the shouting wind: "Take the men down there. We can't sail in this storm, but make the ship fast, stand guard over her. If I'm not back when the storm is done, start for home."

"Where are you going?" cried the Umlo-tuan.

"I'll be back—maybe. Stay with the ship!"

Corun turned and slogged across the ground toward the jungle.

WEARINESS was gone. He was like a machine running without thought or pain until it burned out. Chryseis would have fled toward high ground, he thought dully.

Behind him, Imazu started forward, then checked himself. Something of the ultimate loneliness that was in Corun must have come to the Umlo-tuan. It was not a mission on which any other man might go. And they had to save the ship. He gestured to his few remaining men and they began the slow climb down to the beach.

The castle was a heap of shattered rock, still moving convulsively as the last few boxes of devil-powder exploded. The rain

boiled down over it, churning through the fragments. Lightning flamed in the berserk heavens.

Corun pushed through underbrush that clutched at his feet and clawed at his skin. The sword was still hanging loosely in one hand, nicked and blunted with battle. He went on mechanically, scarcely noticing the wind-whipped trees that barred his way.

It came to him that he was fighting for Khroman, the thalassocrat of Achaera, ruler by right of conquest over Conahur. But there were worse things than foreign rule, if it was human, and one of the greater evils had fled toward the mountain.

Presently he came out on the bare rocks above the fringe of jungle growth. The rain hammered at him, driven by a wind that screamed like a maddened beast. Thunder boomed and rolled overhead, a roar of doom answering the thud of his heart. The water rushed over his ankles, foaming down toward the sea.

She stood waiting for him atop a high bare hill. Her cloak was drawn tightly about her slender body, but the wind caught at it, whipped and tore it. Her rain-wet hair blew wild.

"Corun," she called under the gale. "Corun."

"I am coming," he said, not caring if she heard him or not. He struggled up to where she stood limned against the sheeted fire in heaven. They faced each other while the storm raged around them.

"Corun—"

She read death in his eyes as he lifted the sword. Her form blurred, the outlines of a monster grew to his eyes.

He laughed bitterly. "I know what your magic is," he said. "You saw me kill Tsathu."

She was human again, human and lovely, a light-footed spirit of the hurricane. Her face was etched white in the lightning-glare.

"Perias!" she screamed.

The erinye crept forth, belly to the ground, tail lashing. Hell glared out of the ice-green eyes. Corun braced himself, sword in hand.

Perias sprang—not straight at the man,

but into the air. His wings caught the wind, whirling him aloft. Twisting in mid-flight, he arrowed down. Corun struck at him. The erinye dodged the blow and one buffeting wingtip caught the man's wrist. The sword fell from Corun's hand. At once the erinye was on him.

Corun fell under that smashing attack. The erinye's fangs gleamed above his throat, the claws sank into his muscles. He flung up an arm and the teeth crunched on it, grinding at the bone.

Corun wrapped his legs in a scissor-lock around the gaunt body, pressing himself too close for the clawed hind feet to disembowel him. His free hand reached out, gouging—he felt an eyeball tear loose, and the erinye opened his mouth in a thin scream. Corun pulled his torn arm free. He struck with a balled fist at the devil-beast and felt his knuckles break under the impact. But bone snapped. Perias' jaw hung suddenly loose.

The erinye sprang back and Corun lurched to hands and knees. Perias edged closer, stiff-legged. Corun stumbled erect and Perias charged. One great wing smashed out, brought the man toppling back to earth. Perias leaped for his exposed belly.

Corun lashed out with both feet. The thud was dull and hollow under the racking thunder. Perias tumbled back and Corun sprang on him. The barbed tail slashed, laying Corun's thigh open. He fell atop the struggling beast and got his free hand on the throat.

The mighty wings threshed, half lifting man and erinye. Corun pulled himself over on the writhing back. He locked legs around the body, arms around the neck, and heaved.

The erinye yowled. His wings clashed together with skull-cracking force, barely missing the head of the man who hugged his back. His tail raked against Corun's back, seeking the vitals. Corun gave another yank. He felt the supple spine bending. Heave!

Perias lifted a brassy scream. The strange dry sound of snapping vertebrae crackled out. Corun rolled away from the thrashing form.

Perias gasped, lifted his broken head,

and looked with filming green eyes at Chryseis where she stood unmoving against the white fire of the sky. Slowly, painfully, he dragged himself toward her. Breath rattled in and out of his blood-filled lungs.

"Perias—" Chryseis bent over to touch the great head. The erinye sighed. His rough tongue licked her feet. Then he shuddered and lay still.

"Perias."

Corun climbed to his feet and stood shaking. There was no strength left in him—it was running out through a dozen yawning wounds. The ground whirled and tilted crazily about him. He saw her standing against the sky and slowly, slowly, he came toward her.

Chryseis picked up a stone and threw it. It seemed to take an immense time, arcing toward him. Some dim corner of his buckling consciousness realized that it would knock him out, that she could then kill him with the sword and escape into the hills.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

The stone crashed against his skull and the world exploded into darkness.

X

HE WOKE UP, SLOWLY AND painfully, and lay for a long time in a state of half-awareness, remembering only confused fragments of battle and despair.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that the storm was dying. Lightning was wan in the sky, and thunder mumbled farewell. The wind had fallen, the rain fell slow and heavy down on him.

He saw her bending over him. The long wet hair tumbled past her face to fall on his breast. He was wrapped in her cloak, and she had ripped bandages from her robe for his hurts.

He tried to move, and could only stir feebly. She laid a hand on his cheek. "Don't," she whispered. "Just lie there, Corun."

His head was on her lap, he realized dimly. His eyes questioned her. She laughed, softly under the falling rain.

"Don't you see?" she said. "Didn't you

think of it? Shorzon's geas was put on me as a child. I was always under his will. Even when he was dead, it was strong enough to drive me along his road.

"But I love you, Corun. I will always love you. My love warred with Shorzon's will even as I tried to kill you. And when I saw you lying there helpless, after such a fight as no man has ever waged since the gods walked the earth—

"I tried to stab you. And I couldn't. Shorzon's geas was broken."

Her hands stroked his hair. "You aren't too badly hurt, Corun. I'll get you down to the ship. With my witch's powers, we can win through any Xanthi who try to stop us—not that I think they will, with their leaders destroyed. We can get safely to Achaera."

She sighed. "I will see that you escape my father's power, Corun. If you will return to the pirate life, I will follow you."

He shook his head. "No," he whispered. "No, I will take service under Khroman,

if he will have me."

"He will," she vowed softly. "He needs strong men. And someday you can be thalassocrat of the empire—"

It wasn't so bad, thought Corun drowsily. Khroman was a good sort. A highly placed Conahurian could gradually ease the burdens of his people until they had full equality with Achaera in a united and peaceful domain.

The menace of the Xanthi was ended. To be on the safe side, Achaera had better make them tributary; an expedition which he, Corun, could lead. After that, there would be enough to keep a man busy. As well as the loveliest and best of women for wife.

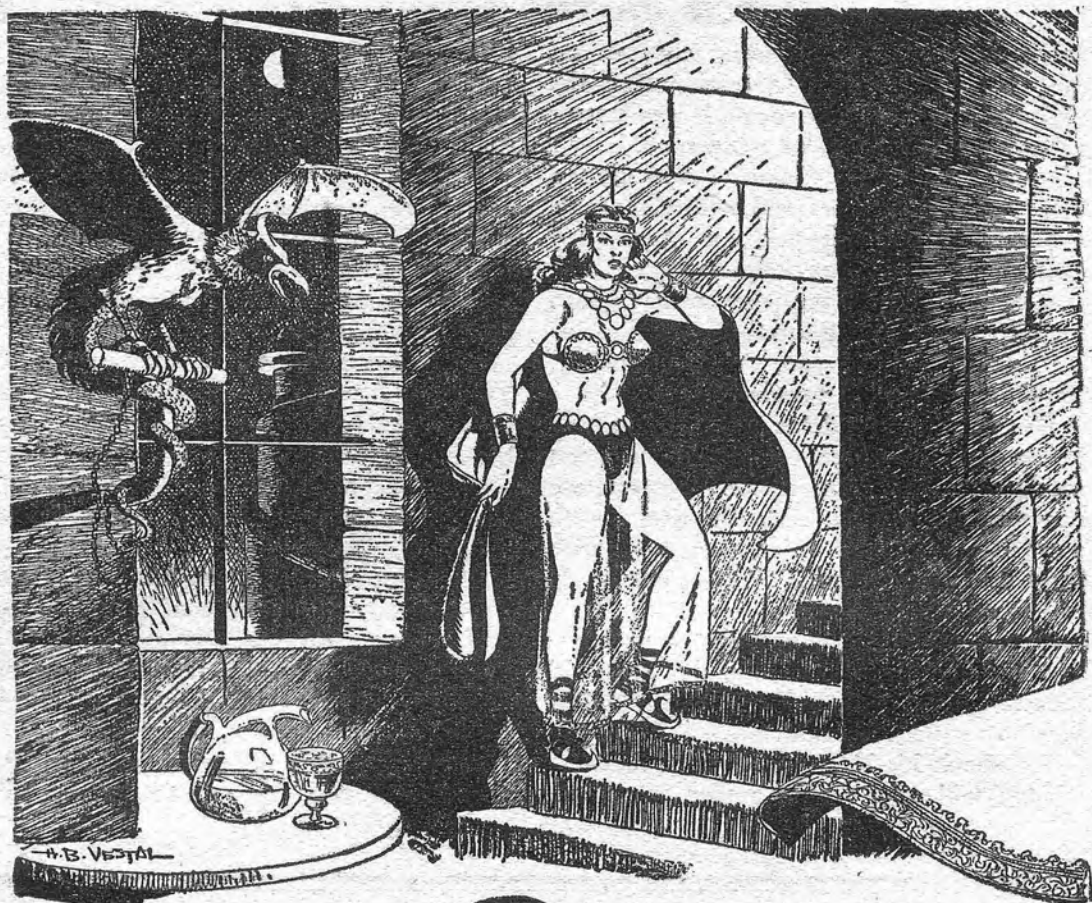
He slept. He did not waken when Imazu led a squad up in search of him. Chryseis laid a finger on her lips and a flash of understanding passed between her and the captain. He nodded, smiling, and clasped her hand with sudden warmth.

They bore the sleeping warrior back through the rain, down to the waiting ship.

● *In the next issue . . .*

- ▶ **A. E. VAN VOGT**
- ▶ **POUL ANDERSON**
- ▶ **LEIGH BRACKETT**
- ▶ **RAYMOND Z. GALLUN**

● *Coming soon . . .* **FREDRIC BROWN, WILLIAM TENN, JAMES BLISH, H. B. FYFE, MARGARET ST. CLAIR**



TIGER by the TAIL

by
POUL ANDERSON

CAPTAIN FLANDRY OPENED his eyes and saw a metal ceiling. Simultaneously, he grew aware of the thrum and quiver which meant he was aboard a spaceship running on ultra-drive.

He sat up with a violence that sent the dregs of alcohol swirling through his head. He'd gone to sleep in a room somewhere in the stews of Catawrayannis, with no prospect or intention of leaving the city

The haughty, horned aliens from the planet Scotha had very well organized intentions of conquering the Terran Empire—and Captain Dominic Flandry, Terra's ace saboteur, suddenly found himself in a strategic position to louse up the works. How? Well, Achilles had a heel . . . and what else could you call a Scothani?



"There's one thing I've wanted to do for a long, long time," said Flandry . . . and did it . . .

for an indefinite time—let alone the planet! Now—

The chilling realization came that he was not aboard a human ship. Humanoid, yes, from the size and design of things, but no vessel ever built within the borders of the Empire, and no foreign make that he knew of.

Even from looking at this one small cabin, he could tell. There were bunks, into one of which he had fitted pretty well, but the sheets and blankets weren't of plastic weave. They seemed—he looked more closely—the sheets seemed to be of some vegetable fiber, the blankets of long bluish-gray hair. There were a couple of chairs and a table in the middle of the room, wooden, and they must have seen better days for they were elaborately hand-carved, and in an intricate interwoven design new to Flandry—and planetary art-forms were a hobby of his. The way and manner in which the metal plating had been laid was another indication, and—

HE SAT DOWN AGAIN, buried his whirling head in his hands, and tried to think. There was a thumping in his head and a vile taste in his mouth which liquor didn't ordinarily leave—at least not the stuff he'd been drinking—and now that he remembered, he'd gotten sleepy much earlier than one would have expected when the girl was so good-looking—

Drugged—oh, no! *Tell me I'm not as stupid as a stereofilm hero! Anything but that!*

But who'd have thought it, who'd have looked for it? Certainly the people and beings on whom he'd been trying to get a lead would never try anything like that. Besides, none of them had been around, he was sure of it. He'd simply been out building part of the elaborate structure of demimonde acquaintances and information which would eventually, by exceedingly indirect routes, lead him to those he was seeking. He'd simply been out having a good time—*quite* a good time, in fact—and—

And now someone from outside the Empire had him. And *now* what?

He got up, a little unsteadily, and looked

around for his clothes. No sign of them. And he'd paid three hundred credits for that outfit, too. He stamped savagely over to the door. It didn't have a photocell attachment; he jerked it open and found himself looking down the muzzle of a blaster.

It was of different design from any he knew, but it was quite unmistakable. Captain Flandry sighed, relaxed his taut muscles, and looked more closely at the guard who held it.

He was humanoid to a high degree, perhaps somewhat stockier than Terrestrial average—and come to think of it, the artificial gravity was a little higher than one gee—and with very white skin, long tawny hair and beard, and oblique violet eyes. His ears were pointed and two small horns grew above his heavy eyebrow ridges, but otherwise he was manlike enough. With civilized clothes and a hooded cloak he could easily pass himself off for human.

Not in the getup he wore, of course, which consisted of a kilt and tunic, shining beryllium-copper cuirass and helmet, buskins over bare legs, and a murderous-looking dirk. As well as a couple of scalps hanging at his belt.

He gestured the prisoner back, and blew a long hollow blast on a horn slung at his side. The wild echoes chased each other down the long corridor, hooting and howling with a primitive clamor that tingled faintly along Captain Flandry's spine.

He thought slowly, while he waited: No intercom, apparently not even speaking tubes laid the whole length of the ship. And household articles of wood and animal and vegetable fibres, and that archaic costume there—They were barbarians, all right. But no tribe that he knew about.

That wasn't too surprising, since the Terrestrial Empire and the half-dozen other civilized states in the known Galaxy ruled over several thousands of intelligent races and had some contact with nobody knew how many thousands more. Many of the others were, of course, still planet-bound, but quite a few tribes along the Imperial borders had mastered a lot of human technology without changing their fundamental outlook on things. Which is what comes

of hiring barbarian mercenaries.

The peripheral tribes were still raiders, menaces to the border planets and merely nuisances to the Empire as a whole. Periodically they were bought off, or played off against each other—or the Empire might even send a punitive expedition out. But if one day a strong barbarian race under a strong leader should form a reliable coalition—then *vae victis!*

A PARTY of Flandry's captors, apparently officers, guardsmen, and a few slaves, came down the corridor. Their leader was tall and powerfully built, with a cold arrogance in his pale-blue eyes that did not hide a calculating intelligence. There was a golden coronet about his head, and the robes that swirled around his big body were rainbow-gorgeous. Flandry recognized some items as having been manufactured within the Empire. Looted, probably.

They came to a halt before him and the leader looked him up and down with a deliberately insulting gaze. To be thus surveyed in the nude could have been badly disconcerting, but Flandry was immune to embarrassment and his answering stare was bland.

The leader spoke at last, in strongly accented but fluent Anglic: "You may as well accept the fact that you are a prisoner, Captain Flandry."

They'd have gone through his pockets, of course. He asked levelly, "Just to satisfy my own curiosity, was that girl in your pay?"

"Of course. I assure you that the Scothani are not the brainless barbarians of popular Terrestrial superstition, though—" a bleak smile—"it is useful to be thought so."

"The Scothani? I don't believe I've had the pleasure—"

"You have probably not heard of us, though we have had some contact with the Empire. We have found it convenient to remain in obscurity, as far as Terra is concerned, until the time is ripe. But—what do you think caused the Alarri to invade you, fifteen years ago?"

Flandry thought back. He had been a boy then, but he had, of course, avidly

followed the news accounts of the terrible fleets that swept in over the marches and attacked Vega itself. Only the hardest fighting at the Battle of Mirzan had broken the Alarri. Yet it turned out that they'd been fleeing still another tribe, a wild and mighty race who had invaded their own system with fire and ruin. It was a common enough occurrence in the turbulent barbarian stars; this one incident had come to the Empire's notice only because the refugees had tried to conquer it in turn. A political upheaval within the Terrestrial domain had prevented closer investigation before the matter had been all but forgotten.

"So you were driving the Alarri before you?" asked Flandry with as close an approximation to the right note of polite interest as he could manage in his present condition.

"Aye. And others. The Scothani have quite a little empire now, out there in the wilderness of the Galaxy. But, since we were never originally contacted by Terrestrials, we have, as I say, remained little known to them."

So—the Scothani had learned their technology from some other race, possibly other barbarians. It was a familiar pattern, Flandry could trace it out in his mind. Spaceships landed on the primitive world, the initial awe of the natives gave way to the realization that the skymen weren't so very different after all—they could be killed like anyone else; traders, students, laborers, mercenary warriors visited the more advanced worlds, brought back knowledge of their science and technology; factories were built, machines produced, and some tribal king used the new power to impose his rule on all his planet; and then, to unite his restless subjects, he had to turn their faces outward, promise plunder and glory if they followed him out to the stars—

Only the Scothani had carried it farther than most. And lying as far from the Imperial border as they did, they could build up a terrible power without the complacent, politics-ridden Empire being more than dimly aware of the fact—until the day when—

Vae victis!

II

"LET US HAVE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING," said the barbarian chief. "You are a prisoner on a warship already light years from Llynathawr, well into the Imperial marches and bound for Scotha itself. You have no chance of rescue, and mercy depends entirely on your own conduct. Adjust it accordingly."

"May I ask why you picked me up?" Flandry's tone was mild.

"You are of noble blood, and a high-ranking officer in the Imperial intelligence service. You may be worth something as a hostage. But primarily we want information."

"But I—"

"I know." The reply was disgusted. "You're very typical of your miserable kind. I've studied the Empire and its decadence long enough to know that. You're just another worthless younger son, given a high-paying sinecure so you can wear a fancy uniform and play soldier. You don't amount to anything."

Flandry let an angry flush go up his cheek. "Look here—"

"It's perfectly obvious," said the barbarian. "You come to Llynathawr to track down certain dangerous conspirators. So you register yourself in the biggest hotel in Catawrayannis as Captain Dominic Flandry of the Imperial Intelligence Service, you strut around in your expensive uniform dropping dark hints about your leads and your activities—and these consist of drinking and gambling and wenching the whole night and sleeping the whole day!" A cold humor gleamed in the blue eyes. "Unless it is your intention that the Empire's enemies shall laugh themselves to death at the spectacle."

"If that's so," began Flandry thinly, "then why—"

"You will know something. You can't help picking up a lot of miscellaneous information in your circles, no matter how hard you try not to. Certainly you know specific things about the organization and activities of your own corps which we would find useful information. We'll squeeze all you know out of you! Then there will be other services you can per-

form, people within the Empire you can contact, documents you can translate for us, perhaps various liaisons you can make—eventually, you may even earn your freedom." The barbarian lifted one big fist. "And in case you wish to hold anything back, remember that the torturers of Scotha know their trade."

"You needn't make melodramatic threats," said Flandry sullenly.

The fist shot out, and Flandry fell to the floor with darkness whirling and roaring through his head. He crawled to hands and knees, blood dripping from his face, and vaguely he heard the voice: "From here on, little man, you are to address me as befits a slave speaking to a crown prince of Scotha."

The Terrestrial staggered to his feet. For a moment his fists clenched. The prince smiled grimly and knocked him down again. Looking up, Flandry saw brawny hands resting on blaster butts—not a chance, not a chance.

Besides, the prince was hardly a sadist. Such brutality was the normal order among the barbarians—and come to think of it, slaves within the Empire could be treated similarly.

And there was the problem of staying alive—

"Yes, sir," he mumbled.

The prince turned on his heel and walked away.

THEY gave him back his clothes, though someone had stripped the gold braid and the medals away. Flandry looked at the soiled, ripped garments and sighed. Tailor-made—!

He surveyed himself in the mirror as he washed and shaved. The face that looked back was wide across the cheekbones, straight-nosed and square-jawed, with carefully waved reddish-brown hair and a mustache trimmed with equal attention. Probably too handsome, he reflected, wiping the blood from under his nose, but he'd been young when he had the plasticosmetician work on him. Maybe when he got out of this mess he should have the face made over to a slightly more rugged pattern to fit his years. He was in his thirties now, after all—getting to be

a big boy, Dominic.

The fundamental bone structure of head and face was his own, however, and so were the eyes—large and bright, with a hint of obliquity, the iris of that curious gray which can seem any color, blue or green or black or gold. And the trim, medium-tall body was genuine too. He hated exercises, but went through a dutiful daily ritual since he needed sinews and coordination for his work—and, too, a man in condition was something to look at among the usually flabby nobles of Terra; he'd found his figure no end of help in making his home leaves pleasant.

Well, can't stand here admiring yourself all day, old fellow. He slipped blouse, pants, and jacket over his silkite undergarments, pulled on the sheening boots, tilted his officer's cap at an angle of well-gauged rakishness, and walked out to meet his new owners.

The Scothani weren't such bad fellows, he soon learned. They were big brawling lusty barbarians, out for adventure and loot and fame as warriors; they had courage and loyalty and a wild streak of sentiment that he liked. But they could also fly into deadly rages, they were casually cruel to anyone that stood in their way, and Flandry acquired a not too high respect for their brains. It would have helped if they'd washed oftener, too.

This warship was one of a dozen which Cerdic, the crown prince, had taken out on a plundering cruise. They'd sacked a good many towns, even some on nominally Imperial planets, and on the way back had sent down a man in a lifeboat to contact Cerdic's agents on Llynathawr, which was notoriously the listening post of this sector of the Empire. In learning that there was something going on which a special agent from Terra had been investigating, Cerdic had ordered him picked up. And that was that.

Now they were homeward bound, their holds stuffed with loot and their heads stuffed with plans for further inroads. It might not have meant much, but—well—Cerdic and his father Penda didn't seem to be just ordinary barbarian chiefs, nor Scothania an ordinary barbarian nation.

Could it be that somewhere out there

among the many stars someone had finally organized a might that could break the Empire? Could the Long Night really be at hand?

Flandry shoved the thought aside. He had too much to do right now. Even his own job at Llynathawr, important as it was, could and would be handled by someone else—though not, he thought a little sadly, with the Flandry touch—and his own immediate worry was here and now. He had to find out the extent of power and ambition of the Scothani; he had to learn their plans and get the information to Terra, and somehow spike them even a little. After that there might be time to save his own hide.

CERDIC had him brought to the captain's cabin. The place was a typical barbarian chief's den, with the heads of wild beasts on the walls and their hides on the floors, old shields and swords hung up in places of honor, a magnificent golden vase stolen from some planet of artists shining in a corner. But there were incongruous modern touches, a microprint reader and many bookrolls from the Empire, astrographic tables and computer, a vodograph. The prince sat in a massive carven chair, a silkite robe flung carelessly over his broad shoulders. He nodded with a certain affability.

"Your first task will be to learn Scothanian," he said without preliminary. "As yet almost none of our people, even nobles, speak Anglic, and there are many who will want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," said Flandry. It was what he would most have desired.

"You had better also start organizing all you know so you can present it coherently," said the prince. "And I, who have lived in the Empire, will be able to check enough of your statements to tell whether you are likely speaking the truth." He smiled mirthlessly. "If there is reason to suspect you are lying, you will be put to the torture. And one of our Sensitives will then get at the truth."

So they had Sensitives, too. Telepaths who could tell whether a being was lying when pain had sufficiently disorganized his mind were as bad as the Empire's hyp-

noprobes.

"I'll tell the truth, sir," he said.

"I suppose so. If you cooperate, you'll find us not an ungrateful people. There will be more wealth than was ever dreamed of when we go into the Empire. There will also be considerable power for such humans as are our liaison with their race."

"Sir," began Flandry, in a tone of weak self-righteousness, "I couldn't think of—"

"Oh, yes, you could," said Cerdic glumly. "I know you humans. I traveled incognito throughout your whole Empire, I was on Terra itself. I posed as one of you, or when convenient as just another of the subject races. I *know* the Empire—its utter decadence, its self-seeking politicians and pleasure-loving mobs, corruption and intrigue everywhere you go, collapse of morals and duty-sense, decline of art into craft and science into stagnancy—you were a great race once, you humans, you were the first to aspire to the stars and we owe you something for that, I suppose. But you're not the race you once were."

The viewpoint was biased, but enough truth lay in it to make Flandry wince. Cerdic went on, his voice rising: "There is a new power growing out beyond your borders, young peoples with the strength and courage and hopefulness of youth, and they'll sweep the rotten fragments of the Empire before them and build something new and better."

Only, thought Flandry, only first comes the Long Night, darkness and death and the end of civilization, the howling peoples in the ruins of our temples and a myriad petty tyrants holding their dreary courts in the shards of the Empire. To say nothing of the decline of good music and good cuisine, taste in clothes and taste in women and conversation as a fine art.

"We've one thing you've lost," said Cerdic, "and I think ultimately that will be the deciding factor. Honestly, Flandry, the Scothani are a race of honest warriors."

"No doubt, sir," said Flandry.

"Oh, we have our evil characters, but they are few and the custom of private challenges soon eliminates them," said Cerdic. "And even their evil is an open and clean thing, greed or lawlessness or something like that; it isn't the bribery and

conspiracy and betrayal of your rotten politicians. And most of us live by our code. It wouldn't occur to a true Scothani to do a dishonorable thing, to break an oath or desert a comrade or lie on his word of honor. Our women aren't running loose making eyes at every man they come across; they're kept properly at home till time for marriage and then they know their place as mothers and houseguiders. Our boys are raised to respect the gods and the king, to fight, and to speak truth. Death is a little thing, Flandry, it comes to everyone in his time and he cannot stay it, but honor lives forever.

"We don't corrupt ourselves. We keep honor at home and root out disgrace with death and torture. We live our code. And that is really why we will win."

Battleships help, thought Flandry. And then, looking into the cold bright eyes: He's a fanatic. But a hell of a smart one. And that kind makes the most dangerous enemy.

Aloud he asked, humbly: "Isn't any stratagem a lie, sir? Your own disguised travels within the Empire—"

"Naturally, certain maneuvers are necessary," said the prince stiffly. "Nor does it matter what one does with regard to alien races. Especially when they have as little honor as Terrestrials."

The good old race-superiority complex, too. Oh, well.

"I tell you this," said Cerdic earnestly, "in the hope that you may think it over and see our cause is just and be with us. We will need many foreigners, especially humans, for liaison and intelligence and other services. You may still accomplish something in a hitherto wasted life."

"I'll think about it, sir," said Flandry, "Then go."

Flandry got.

THE SHIP was a good three weeks en route to Scotha. It took Flandry about two of them to acquire an excellent working knowledge of the language, but he preferred to simulate difficulty and complained that he got lost when talk was too rapid. It was surprising how much odd information you picked up when you were thought not to understand what was being

said. Not anything of great military significance, of course, but general background, stray bits of personal history, attitudes and beliefs—it all went into the neat filing system which was Flandry's memory, to be correlated with whatever else he knew or learned into an astonishingly complete picture.

The Scothani themselves were quite friendly, eager to hear about the fabulous Imperial civilization and to brag of their own wonderful past and future exploits. Since there was obviously nothing he could do, Flandry was under the loosest guard and had virtually the freedom of the ship. He slept and messed with the warriors, swapped bawdy songs and dirty jokes, joined their rough-and-tumble wrestling matches to win surprised respect for his skill, and even became the close friend and confidant of some of the younger males.

The race was addicted to gambling. Flandry learned their games, taught them some of the Empire's, and before the trip's end had won back his stolen finery plus several other outfits and a pleasantly jingling purse. It was—well—he almost hated to take his winnings from these overgrown babies. It just never occurred to them that dice and cards could be made to do tricks.

The picture grew. The barbarian tribes of Scotha were firmly united under the leadership of the Frithian kings, had been for several generations. Theoretically it was an absolute monarchy, though actually all classes except the slaves were free. They had conquered at least a hundred systems outright, contenting themselves with exacting tribute and levies from most of these, and dominated all others within reach. Under Penda's leadership, a dozen similar, smaller barbarian states had already formed a coalition with the avowed purpose of invading the Empire, capturing Terra, destroying the Imperial military forces, and making themselves masters. Few of them thought beyond the plunder to be had, though apparently some of them, like Cerdic, dreamed of maintaining and extending the Imperial domain under their own rule.

They had a formidable fleet—Flandry

couldn't find out its exact size—and its organization and technology seemed far superior to that of most barbarian forces. They had a great industry, mostly slave-manned with the Scothan overlords supervising. They had shrewd leaders, who would wait till one of the Empire's recurring political crises had reduced its fighting strength, and who were extremely well informed about their enemy. It looked—bad!

Especially since they couldn't wait too long. Despite the unequalled prosperity created by industry, tribute, and piracy, all Scotha was straining at the leash, nobles and warriors in the whole coalition foaming to be at the Empire's throat; a whole Galactic sector had been seized by the same savage dream. When they came roaring in—well, you never could tell. The Empire's fighting strength was undoubtedly greater, but could it be mobilized in time? Wouldn't Penda get gleeful help from two or three rival imperia? Couldn't a gang of utterly fearless fanatics plow through the mass of self-seeking officers and indifferent mercenaries that made up most of the Imperial power today?

Might not the Long Night really be at hand?

III

SCOTHA WAS NOT UNLIKE Terra—a little larger, a little farther from its sun, the seas made turbulent by three small close moons. Flandry had a chance to observe it telescopically—the ship didn't have magniscreens—and as they swept in, he saw the mighty disc roll grandly against the Galactic star-blaze and studied the continents with more care than he showed.

The planet was still relatively thinly populated, with great forests and plains standing empty, archaic cities and villages huddling about the steep-walled castles of the nobles. Most of its industry was on other worlds, though the huge military bases were all on Scotha and its moons. There couldn't be more than a billion Scothani all told, estimated Flandry, probably less, and many of them would live elsewhere as overlords of the interstellar do-

main. Which didn't make them less formidable. The witless hordes of humankind were more hindrance than help to the Empire.

Cerdic's fleet broke up, the captains bound for their estates. He took his own vessel to the capital, Iuthagaar, and brought it down in the great yards. After the usual pomp and ceremony of homecoming, he sent for Flandry.

"What is your attitude toward us now?" he asked.

"You are a very likeable people, sir," said the Terrestrial, "and it is as you say—you are a strong and honest race."

"Then you have decided to help us actively?" The voice was cold.

"I really have little choice, sir," shrugged Flandry. "I'll be a prisoner in any case, unless I get to the point of being trusted. The only way to achieve that is to give you my willing assistance."

"And what of your own nation?"

"A man must stay alive, sir. These are turbulent times."

Contempt curled Cerdic's lip. "Somehow I thought better of you," he said. "But you're a human. You could only be expected to betray your oaths for your own gain."

Surprise shook Flandry's voice. "Wasn't this what you wanted, sir?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. Now come along. But not too close—you make me feel a little sick."

They went up to the great gray castle which lifted its windy spires over the city, and presently Flandry found himself granted an audience with the King of Scothania.

It was a huge and dimly lit hall, hung with the banners and shields of old wars and chill despite the fires that blazed along its length. Penda sat at one end, wrapped in furs against the cold, his big body dwarfed by the dragon-carved throne. He had his eldest son's stern manner and bleak eyes, without the prince's bitter intensity—a strong man, thought Flandry, hard and ruthless and able—but perhaps not too bright.

Cerdic had mounted to a seat on his father's right. The queen stood on his left, shivering a little in the damp draft, and

down either wall reached a row of guardsmen. The fire shimmered on their breastplates and helmets and halberds; they seemed figures of legend, but Flandry noticed that each warrior carried a blaster too.

There were others in evidence, several of the younger sons of Penda, grizzled generals and councillors, nobles come for a visit. A few of the latter were of non-Scothan race and did not seem to be meeting exceptional politeness. Then there were the hangers-on, bards and dancers and the rest, and slaves scurrying about. Except for its size—and its menace—it was a typical barbarian court.

FLANDRY bowed the knee as required, but thereafter stood erect and met the king's eye. His position was anomalous, officially Cerdic's captured slave, actually—well, what was he? Or what could he become in time?

Penda asked a few of the more obvious questions, then said slowly: "You will confer with General Nartheof here, head of our intelligence section, and tell him what you know. You may also make suggestions if you like, but remember that false intentions will soon be discovered and punished."

"I will be honest, your majesty."

"Is any Terrestrial honest?" snapped Cerdic.

"I am," said Flandry cheerfully. "As long as I'm paid, I serve faithfully. Since I'm no longer in the Empire's pay, I must perforce look about for a new master."

"I doubt you can be much use," said Penda.

"I think I can, your majesty," answered Flandry boldly. "Even in little things. For instance, this admirably decorated hall is so cold one must wear furs within it, and still the hands are numb. I could easily show a few technicians how to install a radiant heating unit that would make it like summer in here."

Penda lifted his bushy brows. Cerdic fairly snarled: "A Terrestrial trick, that. Shall we become as soft and luxurious as the Imperials, we who hunt vorgari on ski?"

Flandry's eyes, flitting around the room, caught dissatisfied expressions on many faces. Inside, he grinned. The prince's austere ideals weren't very popular with these noble savages. If they only had the nerve to—

It was the queen who spoke. Her soft voice was timid: "Sire, is there any harm in being warm? I—I am always cold these days."

Flandry gave her an appreciative look. He'd already picked up the background of Queen Gunli. She was young, Penda's third wife, and she came from more southerly Scothan lands than Iuthagaar; her folk were somewhat more civilized than the dominant Frithians. She was certainly a knockout, with that dark rippling hair and those huge violet eyes in her pert face. And that figure too—there was a suppressed liveliness in her; he wondered if she had ever cursed the fate that gave her noble blood and thus a political marriage.

For just an instant their eyes crossed. "Be still," said Cerdic.

Gunli's hand fell lightly on Penda's. The king flushed. "Speak not to your queen thus, Cerdic," he said. "In truth this Imperial trick is but a better form of fire, which no one calls unmanly. We will let the Terrestrial make one."

Flandry bowed his most ironical bow. Cocking an eye up at the queen, he caught a twinkle. She knew.

NARTHEOF made a great show of blustering honesty, but there was a shrewd brain behind the hard little eyes that glittered in his hairy face. He leaned back and folded his hands behind his head and gave Flandry a quizzical stare.

"If it is as you say—" he began.

"It is," said the Terrestrial.

"Quite probably. Your statements so far check with what we already know, and we can soon verify much of the rest. If, then, you speak truth, the Imperial organization is fantastically good." He smiled. "As it should be—it conquered the stars, in the old days. But it's no better than the beings who man it, and everyone knows how venial and cowardly the Imperials are today."

Flandry said nothing, but he remembered the gallantry of the Sirian units at Garrapoli and the *dogged courage* of the Valatian Legion and—well, why go on? The haughty Scothani just didn't seem able to realize that a state as absolutely decadent as they imagined the Empire to be wouldn't have endured long enough to be their own enemy.

"We'll have to reorganize everything," said Nartheof. "I don't care whether what you say is true or not, it makes good sense. Our whole setup is outmoded. It's ridiculous, for instance, to give commands according to nobility and blind courage instead of proven intelligence."

"And you assume that the best enlisted man will make the best officer," said Flandry. "It doesn't necessarily follow. A strong and hardy warrior may expect more of his men than they can give. You can't all be supermen."

"Another good point. And we should eliminate swordplay as a requirement; swords are useless today. And we have to train mathematicians to compute trajectories and everything else." Nartheof grimaced. "I hate to think what would have happened if we'd invaded three years ago, as many hotheads wanted to do. We would have inflicted great damage, but that's all."

"You should wait at least another ten or twenty years and really get prepared."

"Can't. The great nobles wouldn't stand for it. Who wants to be duke of a planet when he could be viceroy of a sector? But we have a year or two yet." Nartheof scowled. "I can get my own service whipped into shape, with your help and advice. I have most of the bright lads. But as for some of the other forces—gods, the dunderheads they have in command! I've argued myself hoarse with Nornagast, to no use. The fool just isn't able to see that a space fleet the size of ours must have a special coordinating division equipped with semantic calculators and—The worst of it is, he's a cousin to the king, he ranks me. Not much I can do."

"An accident could happen to Nornagast," murmured Flandry.

"Eh?" Nartheof gasped. "What do you mean?"

"NOTHING," said Flandry lightly. "But just for argument's sake, suppose—well, suppose some good swordsman should pick a quarrel with Nornagast. I don't doubt he has many enemies. If he should unfortunately be killed in the duel, you might be able to get to his majesty immediately after, before anyone else, and persuade him to appoint a more reasonable successor. Of course, you'd have to know in advance that there'd be a duel."

"Of all the treacherous, underhanded—!"

"I haven't done anything but speculate," said Flandry mildly. "However, I might remind you of your own remarks. It's hardly fair that a fool should have command and honor and riches instead of better men who simply happen to be of lower degree. Nor, as you yourself said, is it good for Scothania as a whole."

"I won't hear of any such Terrestrial villainess."

"Of course not. I was just—well, speculating. I can't help it. All Terrestrials have dirty minds. But we did conquer the stars once."

"A man might go far, if only—no!" Nartheof shook himself. "A warrior doesn't bury his hands in muck."

"No. But he might use a pitchfork. Tools don't mind dirt. The man who wields them doesn't even have to know the details—But let's get back to business." Flandry relaxed even more lazily. "Here's a nice little bit of information which only highly placed Imperials know. The Empire has a lot of arsenals and munitions dumps which are guarded by nothing but secrecy. The Emperor doesn't dare trust certain units to guard such sources of power, and he can't spare enough reliable legions to watch them all. So obscure, uninhabited planets are used." Nartheof's eyes were utterly intent now. "I know of only one, but it's a good prospect. An uninhabited, barren system not many parsecs inside the border, the second planet honeycombed with underground works that are crammed with spaceships, atomic bombs, fuel—power enough to wreck a world. A small, swift fleet could get there, take most of the stores, and destroy the rest before the nearest garrison could ever arrive in

defense."

"Is that—true?"

"You can easily find out. If I'm lying, it'll cost you that small unit, that's all—and I assure you I've no desire to be tortured to death."

"Holy gods!" Nartheof quivered. "I've got to tell Cerdic now, right away—"

"You could. Or you might simply go there yourself without telling anyone. If Cerdic knows, he'll be the one to lead the raid. If you went, you'd get the honor—and the power—"

"Cerdic would—not like it."

"Too late then. He could hardly challenge you for so bold and successful a stroke."

"And he is getting too proud of himself—he could stand a little taking down." Nartheof chuckled, a deep vibration in his shaggy breast. "Aye, by Valtam's beard, I'll do it! Give me the figures now—"

Presently the general looked up from the papers and gave Flandry a puzzled stare. "If this is the case, and I believe it is," he said slowly, "it'll be a first-rate catastrophe for the Empire. Why are you with us, human?"

"Maybe I've decided I like your cause a little better," shrugged Flandry. "Maybe I simply want to make the best of my own situation. We Terrestrials are adaptable beasts. But I have enemies here, Nartheof, and I expect to make a few more. I'll need a powerful friend."

"You have one," promised the barbarian. "You're much too useful to me to be killed. And—and—damn it, human, somehow I can't help liking you."

IV

THE DICE RATTLED DOWN onto the table and came to a halt. Prince Torric swore good-naturedly and shoved the pile of coins toward Flandry. "I just can't win," he laughed. "You have the gods with you, human."

For a slave, I'm not doing so badly, thought Flandry. In fact, I'm getting rich. "Fortune favors the weak, highness," he smiled. "The strong don't need luck."

"To Theudagaar with titles," said the

young warrior. He was drunk; wine flushed his open face and spread in puddles on the table before him. "We're too good friends by now, Dominic. Ever since you got my affairs in order—"

"I have a head for figures, and of course Terrestrial education helps—Torrice. But you need money."

"There'll be enough for all when we hold the Empire. I'll have a whole system to rule, you know."

Flandry pretended surprise. "Only a system? After all, a son of King Penda—"

"Cerdic's doing," Torrice scowled blackly. "The dirty avagar persuaded Father that only one—himself, of course—should succeed to the throne. He said no kingdom ever lasted when the sons divided power equally."

"It seems very unfair. And how does he know he's the best?"

"He's the oldest. That's what counts. And he's conceited enough to be sure of it." Torrice gulped another beakerful.

"The Empire has a better arrangement. Succession is by ability alone, among many in a whole group of families."

"Well—the old ways—what can I do?"

"That's hardly warrior's talk, Torrice. Admitting defeat so soon—I thought better of you!"

"But what to do—?"

"There are ways. Cerdic's power, like that of all chiefs, rests on his many supporters and his own household troops. He isn't well liked. It wouldn't be hard to get many of his friends to give allegiance elsewhere."

"But—treachery—would you make a brotherslayer of me?"

"Who said anything about killing? Just—dislodging, let us say. He could always have a system or two to rule, just as he meant to give you."

"But—look, I don't know anything about your sneaking Terrestrial ways. I suppose you mean to dish—disaffect his allies, promise them more than he gives

.. What's that word—bribery?—I don't know a thing about it, Dominic. I couldn't do it."

"You wouldn't have to do it," murmured Flandry. "I could help. What's a

man for, if not to help his friends?"

* * *

Earl Morgaar, who held the conquered Zanthudian planets in fief, was a noble of power and influence beyond his station. He was also notoriously greedy.

He said to Captain Flandry: "Terrestrial, your suggestions about farming out tax-gathering have more than doubled my income. But now the natives are rising in revolt against me, murdering my troops wherever they get a chance and burning their farms rather than pay the levies. What do they do about that in the Empire?"

"Surely, sir, you could crush the rebels with little effort," said Flandry.

"Oh, aye, but dead men don't pay tribute either. Isn't there a better way? My whole domain is falling into chaos."

"Several ways, sir." Flandry sketched a few of them—puppet native committees, propaganda shifting the blame onto some scapegoat, and the rest of it. He did not add that these methods work only when skillfully administered.

"It is well," rumbled the earl at last. His hard gaze searched Flandry's impassively smiling face. "You've made yourself useful to many a Scothian leader since coming here, haven't you? There's that matter of Nartheof—he's a great man now because he captured that Imperial arsenal. And there are others. But it seems much of this gain is at the expense of other Scothani, rather than of the Empire. I still wonder about Nornagast's death—"

"History shows that the prospect of great gain always stirs up internal strife, sir," said Flandry. "It behooves the strong warrior to seize a dominant share of power for himself and so reunite his people against their common enemy. Thus did the early Terrestrial emperors end the civil wars and become the rulers of the then accessible universe."

"Ummm—yes. Gain—power—wealth—aye, some good warrior—"

"Since we are alone, sir," said Flandry, "perhaps I may remark that Scotha itself has seen many changes of dynasty."

"Yes—of course, I took an oath to the king. But suppose, just suppose the best interests of Scothania were served by a

newer and stronger family—”

They were into details of the matter within an hour. Flandry suggested that Prince Kortan would be a valuable ally—but beware of Torric, who had ambitions of his own—

* * *

There was a great feast given at the winter solstice. The town and the palace blazed with light and shouted with music and drunken laughter. Warriors and nobles swirled their finest robes about them and boasted of the ruin they would wreak in the Empire. It was to be noted that the number of alcoholic quarrels leading to bloodshed was unusually high this year, especially among the upper classes.

There were enough dark corners, though. Flandry stood in one, a niche leading to a great open window, and looked over the glittering town lights to the huge white hills that lay silent beyond, under the hurtling moons. Above were the stars, bright with the frosty twinkle of winter; they seemed so near that one could reach a hand up and pluck them from the sky. A cold breeze wandered in from outside. Flandry wrapped his cloak more tightly about him.

A light footfall sounded on the floor. He looked about and saw Gunli the queen. Her tall young form was vague in the shadow, but a shaft of moonlight lit her face with an unearthly radiance. She might have been a lovely girl of Terra, save for the little horns and—well—

These people aren't really human. They look human, but no people of Terra were ever so—simple-minded! Then with an inward grin: But you don't expect a talent for intrigue in women, Terrestrial or Scotthan. So the females of this particular species are quite human enough for anyone's taste.

The cynical mirth faded into an indefinable sadness. He—damn it, he liked Gunli. They had laughed together often in the last few months, and she was honest and warm-hearted and—well, no matter, no matter.

“Why are you here all alone, Dominic?” she asked. Her voice was very quiet, and her eyes seemed huge in the cold pale moonlight.

“It would hardly be prudent for me to join the party,” he answered wryly. “I’d cause too many fights. Half of them out there hate my insides.”

“And the other half can’t do without you,” she smiled. “Well, I’m as glad not to be there myself. These Frithians are savages. At home—” She looked out the window and there were suddenly tears glittering in her eyes.

“Don’t weep, Gunli,” said Flandry softly. “Not tonight. This is the night the sun turns, remember. There is always new hope in a new year.”

“I can’t forget the old years,” she said with a bitterness that shocked him.

Understanding came. He asked quietly: “There was someone else, wasn’t there?”

“Aye. A young knight. But he was of low degree, so they married me off to Penda, who is old and chill. And Jomana was killed in one of Cerdic’s raids—” She turned her head to look at him, and a pathetic attempt at a smile quivered on her lips. “It isn’t Jomana, Dominic. He was very dear to me, but even the deepest wounds heal with time. But I think of all the other young men, and their sweet-hearts—”

“It’s what the men want themselves.”

“But not what the women want. Not to wait and wait and wait till the ships come back, never knowing whether there will only be his shield aboard. Not to rock her baby in her arms and know that in a few years he will be a stiffened corpse on the shores of some unknown planet. Not—well—” She straightened her slim shoulders. “Little I can do about it.”

“You are a very brave and lovely woman, Gunli,” said Flandry. “Your kind has changed history ere this.” And he sang softly a verse he had made in the Scotthan bardic form:

*“So I see you standing,
sorrowful in darkness.
But the moonlight’s broken
by your eyes tear-shining—
moonlight in the maiden’s
magic net of tresses.*

*Gods gave many gifts, but,
Gunli, yours was greatest.”*

Suddenly she was in his arms . . .

* * *

Sviffash of Sithafar was angry. He paced up and down the secret chamber, his tail lashing about his bowed legs, his fanged jaws snapping on the accented Scothanian words that poured out.

"Like a craieex they treat me!" he hissed. "I, king of a planet and an intelligent species, must bow before the dirty barbarian Penda. Our ships have the worst positions in the fighting line and the last chance at loot. The swaggering Scothani on Sithafar treat my people as if they were conquered peasants, not warrior allies. It is not to be endured!"

Flandry remained respectfully silent. He had carefully nursed the reptile king's smoldering resentment along ever since the being had come to Iuthagaar for conference, but he wanted Sviffash to think it was all his own idea.

"By the Dark God, if I had a chance I think I'd go over to the Terran side!" exploded Sviffash. "You say they treat their subjects decently?"

"Aye, we've learned it doesn't pay to be prejudiced about race, your majesty. In fact, many nonhumans hold Terrestrial citizenship. And of course a vassal of the Empire remains free within his own domain, except in certain matters of trade and military force where we must have uniformity. And he has the immeasurable power and wealth of the Empire behind and with him."

"My own nobles would follow gladly enough," said Sviffash. "They'd sooner loot Scothanian than Terrestrial planets, if they didn't fear Penda's revenge."

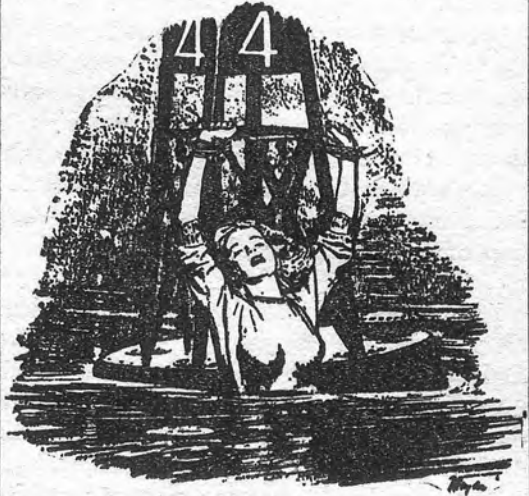
"Many other of Scotha's allies feel likewise, your majesty. And still more would join an uprising just for the sake of the readily available plunder, if only they were sure the revolt would succeed. It is a matter of getting them all together and agreeing—"

"And you have contacts everywhere, Terrestrial. You're like a spinner weaving its web. Of course, if you're caught I shall certainly insist I never had anything to do with you."

"Of course, your majesty."

"But if it works—hah!" The lidless black-eyes glittered and a forked tongue flickered out between the horny lips. "Hah,

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the sack of Scotha!"

"No, your majesty. It is necessary that Scotha be spared. There will be enough wealth to be had on her province planets."

"Why?" The question was cold, emotionless.

"Because you see, your majesty, we will have Scothan allies who will cooperate only on that condition. Some of the power-seeking nobles . . . and then there is a southern nationalist movement which wishes separation from the Frithian north . . . and I may say that it has the secret leadership of the queen herself . . ."

* * *

Flandry's eyes were as chill as his voice: "It will do you no good to kill me, Duke Asdagaar. I have left all the evidence with a reliable person who, if I do not return alive, or if I am killed later, will take it directly to the king and the people."

The Scothan's hands clenched white about the arms of his chair. Impotent rage shivered in his voice: "You devil! You crawling worm!"

"Name-calling is rather silly coming from one of your history," said Flandry. "A parricide, a betrayer of comrades, a breaker of oaths, a mocker of the gods—I have all the evidence, Duke Asdagaar. Some of it is on paper, some is nothing but the names of scattered witnesses and accomplices each of whom knows a little of your career. And a man without honor, on Scotha, is better dead. In fact, he soon will be."

"But how did you learn—?" Hopelessness was coming into the duke's tone; he was beginning to tremble a little.

"I have my ways. For instance, I learned quite a bit by cultivating the acquaintance of your slaves and servants. You high-born forget that the lower classes have eyes and ears, and that they talk among themselves."

"Well—" The words were almost strangled. "What do you want?"

"Help for certain others. You have powerful forces at your disposal—"

* * *

Spring winds blew softly through the garden and stirred the trees to rustling. There was a deep smell of green life about them; a bird was singing somewhere in

the twilight, and the ancient promise of summer stirred in the blood.

Flandry tried to relax in the fragrant evening, but he was too tense—his nerves were drawn into quivering wires and he had grown thin and hollow-eyed. So too had Gunli, but it seemed only to heighten her loveliness; it had more than a hint of the utterly alien and remote now.

"Well, the spaceship is off," said the man. His voice was weary. "Aethagir shouldn't have any trouble getting to Ifri, and he's a clever lad—he'll find a way to deliver my letter to Admiral Walton." He scowled, and a nervous tic began over his left eye. "But the timing is so desperately close. If our forces strike too soon, or too late, it can be ruinous."

"I don't worry about that, Dominic," said Gunli. "You know how to arrange these things."

"I've never handled an empire before, my beautiful. The next several days will be touch and go. And that's why I want you to leave Scotha now. Take a ship and some trusty guards and go to Alagan or Gimli or some other out-of-the-way planet." He smiled with one corner of his mouth. "It would be a bitter victory if you died in it, Gunli."

Her voice was haunted. "I should die. I've betrayed my lord—I am dishonored—"

"You've saved your people—your own southerners, and ultimately all Scotha."

"But the broken oaths—" She began to weep, quietly and hopelessly.

"An oath is only a means to an end. Don't let the means override the end."

"An oath is an oath. But Dominic—it was a choice of standing by Penda or by—you—"

He comforted her as well as he could. And he reflected grimly that he had never before felt himself so thoroughly a skunk.

V

THE BATTLE IN SPACE WAS, to the naked eye, hardly visible—brief flashes of radiation among the swarming stars, occasionally the dark form of a ship slipping by and occulting a wisp of the Milky Way. But Admiral Walton smiled with cold satisfaction at the to-

tality of reports given him by the semantic integrator.

"We're mopping them up," he said. "Our task force has twice their strength, and they're disorganized and demoralized anyway."

"Whom are we fighting?" wondered Chang, the executive officer.

"Don't know for sure. They've split into so many factions you can never tell who it is. But from Flandry's report, I'd say it was—what was that outlandish name now?—Duke Markagrav's fleet. He holds this sector, and is a royalist. But it might be Kelry, who's also anti-Terrestrial—but at war with Markagrav and in revolt against the king."

"Suns and comets and little green asteroids!" breathed Chang. "This Scothanian hegemony seems just to have disintegrated. Chaos! Everybody at war with everybody else, and hell take the hindmost! How'd he do it?"

"I don't know." Walton grinned. "But Flandry's the Empire's ace secret service officer. He works miracles before breakfast. Why, before these barbarians snatched him he was handling the Llynathawr trouble all by himself. And you know how he was doing it? He went there with everything but a big brass band, did a perfect imitation of a political appointee using the case as an excuse to do some high-powered roistering, and worked his way up toward the conspirators through the underworld characters he met in the course of it. They never dreamed he was any kind of danger—as we found out after a whole squad of men had worked for six months to crack the case of his disappearance."

"Then the Scothanians have been holding the equivalent of a whole army—and didn't know it!"

"That's right," nodded Walton. "The biggest mistake they ever made was to kidnap Captain Flandry. They should have played safe and kept some nice harmless cobras for pets!"

IUTHAGAAR was burning. Mobs rioted in the streets and howled with fear and rage and the madness of catastrophe. The remnants of Penda's army had aban-

doned the town and were fleeing northward before the advancing southern rebels. They would be harried by Torric's guerrillas, who in turn were the fragments of a force smashed by Earl Morgaar after Penda was slain by Kortan's assassins. Morgaar himself was dead and his rebels broken by Nartheof—the earl's own band had been riddled by corruption and greed and had fallen apart before the royalists' counterblow.

But Nartheof was dead too, at the hands of Nornagast's vengeful relatives. His own seizure of supreme power and attempt at reorganization had created little but confusion, which grew worse when he was gone. Now the royalists were a beaten force somewhere out in space, savagely attacked by their erstwhile allies, driven off the revolting conquered planets, and swept away before the remorselessly advancing Terrestrial fleet.

The Scothanian empire had fallen into a hundred shards, snapping at each other and trying desperately to retrieve their own with no thought for the whole. Lost in an incomprehensibly complex network of intrigue and betrayal, the great leaders fell, or pulled out of the mess and made hasty peace with Terra. War and anarchy flamed between the stars—but limited war, a petty struggle really. The resources and organization for real war and its attendant destruction just weren't there any more.

A few guards still held the almost-deserted palace, waiting for the Terrestrials to come and end the strife. There was nothing they could do but wait.

Captain Flandry stood at a window and looked over the city. He felt no great elation. Nor was he safe yet. Cerdic was loose somewhere on the planet, and Cerdic had undoubtedly guessed who was responsible.

Gunli came to the human. She was very pale. She hadn't expected Penda's death and it had hurt her. But there was nothing to do now but go through with the business.

"Who would have thought it?" she whispered. "Who would have dreamed we would ever come to this? That mighty Scotha would lie at the conqueror's feet?"

"I would," said Flandry tonelessly.

"Such jerry-built empires as yours never last. Barbarians just don't have the talent and the knowledge to run them. Being only out for plunder, they don't really build.

"Of course, Scotha was especially susceptible to this kind of sabotage. Your much-vaunted honesty was your own undoing. By carefully avoiding any hint of dishonorable actions, you became completely ignorant of the techniques and the preventive measures. Your honor was never more than a latent ability for dishonor. All I had to do, essentially, was to point out to your key men the rewards of betrayal. If they'd been really honest, I'd have died at the first suggestion. Instead—they grabbed at the chance. So it was easy to set them against each other until no one knew whom he could trust—" He smiled humorlessly. "Not many Scot-hani objected to bribery or murder or treachery when it was shown to be to their advantage. I assure you, most Terrestrials would have thought further, been able to see beyond their own noses and realized the ultimate disaster it would bring."

"Still—honor is honor, and I have lost mine and so have all my people." Gunli looked at him with a strange light in her eyes. "Dominic, disgrace can only be wiped out in blood."

He felt a sudden tightening of his nerves and muscles, an awareness of something deadly rising before him. "What do you mean?"

She had lifted the blaster from his holster and skipped out of reach before he could move. "No—stay there!" Her voice was shrill. "Dominic, you are a cunning man. But are you a brave one?"

HE STOOD STILL before the menace of the weapon. "I think—" He groped for words. No, she wasn't crazy. But she wasn't really human, and she had the barbarian's fanatical code in her as well. Easy, easy—or death would spit at him—"I think I took a few chances, Gunli."

"Aye. But you never fought. You haven't stood up man to man and battled as a warrior should." Pain racked her thin lovely

face. She was breathing hard now. "It's for you as well as him, Dominic. He has to have his chance to avenge his father—himself—fallen Scotha—and you have to have a chance too. If you can win, then you are the stronger and have the right—"

Might makes right. It was, after all, the one unbreakable law of Scotha. The old trial by combat, here on a foreign planet many light-years from green Terra—

Cerdic came in. He had a sword in either hand, and there was a savage glee in his bloodshot eyes.

"I let him in, Dominic," said Gunli. She was crying now. "I had to. Penda was my lord—but kill him, kill him!"

With a convulsive movement, she threw the blaster out of the window. Cerdic gave her an inquiring look. Her voice was almost inaudible: "I might not be able to stand it. I might shoot you, Cerdic."

"Thanks!" He ripped the word out, savagely. "I'll deal with you later, traitress. Meanwhile—" A terrible laughter bubbled in his throat—"I'll carve your—friend—into many small pieces. Because who, among the so-civilized Terrestrials, can handle a sword?"

Gunli seemed to collapse. "O gods, O almighty gods—I didn't think of that—"

Suddenly she flung herself on Cerdic, tooth and nail and horns, snatching at his dagger. "Get him, Dominic!" she screamed. "Get him!"

The prince swept one brawny arm out. There was a dull smack and Gunli fell heavily to the floor.

"Now," grinned Cerdic, "choose your weapon!"

Flandry came forward and took one of the slender broadswords. Oddly, he was thinking mostly about the queen, huddled there on the floor. Poor kid, poor kid, she'd been under a greater strain than flesh and nerves were meant to bear. But give her a chance and she'd be all right.

Cerdic's eyes were almost dreamy now. He smiled as he crossed blades. "This will make up for a lot," he said. "Before you die, Terrestrial, you will no longer be a man—"

Steel rang in the great hall. Flandry parried the murderous slash and raked

the prince's cheek. Cerdic roared and plunged at him, his blade weaving a net of death before him. Flandry skipped back, sword ringing on sword, shoulders against the wall.

They stood for an instant, straining blade against blade, sweat rivering off them, and bit by bit the Scothan's greater strength bent Flandry's arm aside. Suddenly the Terrestrial let go, striking out almost in the same moment, and the prince's steel hissed by his face.

He ran back and Cerdic rushed him again. The Scothan was wide open for the simplest stop thrust, but Flandry didn't want to kill him. They closed once more, blades clashing, and the human waited for his chance.

It came, an awkward move, and then one supremely skillful twist—Cerdic's sword went spinning out of his hand and across the room and the prince stood disarmed with Flandry's point at his throat.

For a moment he gaped in utter stupefaction. Flandry laughed harshly and said: "My dear friend, you forget that deliberate archaism is one characteristic of a decadent society. There's hardly a noble in the Empire who hasn't studied *scientific* fencing."

Defeat was neavy in the prince's defiant voice: "Kill me, then. Be done with it."

"There's been too much killing, and you can be too useful." Flandry threw his own weapon aside and cocked his fists. "But there's one thing I've wanted to do for a long, long time."

Despite the Scothan's powerful but clumsy defense, Flandry proceeded to beat the living hell out of him.

"**WE'VE SAVED SCOTHA,** all Scotha," said Flandry. "Think, girl. What would have happened if you'd gone on into the Empire? Even if you'd won—and that was always doubtful, for Terra is mightier than you thought—you'd only have fallen into civil war. You just didn't have the capacity to run an empire—as witness the fact that your own

allies and conquests turned on you the first chance they got. You'd have fought each other over the spoils, greater powers would have moved in, Scotha would have been ripe for sacking—eventually you'd have gone down into Galactic oblivion. The present conflict was really quite small—it took far fewer lives than even a successful invasion of the Empire would have done. And now Terra will bring the peace you longed for, Gunli."

"Aye," she whispered. "Aye, we deserve to be conquered."

"But you aren't," he said. "The south-erners hold Scotha now, and Terra will recognize them as the legal government—with you the queen, Gunli. You'll be another vassal state of the Empire, yes, but with all your freedoms except the liberty to rob and kill other races. And trade with the rest of the Empire will bring you a greater and more enduring prosperity than war ever would.

"I suppose that the Empire is decadent. But there's no reason why it can't someday have a renaissance. When the vigorous new peoples such as yours are guided by the ancient wisdom of Terra, the Galaxy may see its greatest glory."

She smiled at him. It was still a wan smile, but something of her old spirit was returning to her. "I don't think the Empire is so far gone, Dominic," she said. "Not when it has men like you." She took his hands. "And what will you be doing now?"

He met her eyes, and there was a sudden loneliness within him. She—was very beautiful—

But it could never work out. Best to leave now, before a bright memory grew tarnished with the day-to-day clashing of personalities utterly foreign to each other. She would forget him in time, find someone else, and he—well—"I have my work," he said.

They looked up to the bright sky. Far above them, the first of the descending Imperial ships glittered in the sunlight like a falling star.

TASK to LUNA

THE ROCKETS STARTED almost simultaneously. From two widely separated points on the great curving surface of Earth they reached upward and outward—toward the Moon.

It wasn't really so strange a coincidence. Space navigation is governed by mathematics and logic, not politics. The fact that man-carrying spaceships happened to be developed concurrently on two sides of an iron curtain meant little to the Universe. It happened, that's all. And there is a proper time to launch such missiles. When that time came, they were launched.

In a manner of speaking it was a race. A race wherein the prizes were such things as: "gravity gauge" and "surveillance point" and "impregnable launching sites." The contestants were earnest, capable men; each certain that the Moon must not fall into the hands of the opponent. It made a stirring and patriotic picture, vivid with nationalistic fervor. It was thrilling with its taste of high adventure and self-sacrifice. For each rocket pilot it was a personal crusade against the thing he had been raised to regard as *the enemy* . . .

But somehow under the steady, cold scrutiny of the eternal stars, they must have looked a little ridiculous . . . perhaps just a tiny bit tragic, too.

HARSH WAS THE MOON. There was black and there was white. Great jagged cliffs and razor-backed mountains slashed the pocked surface of the crater

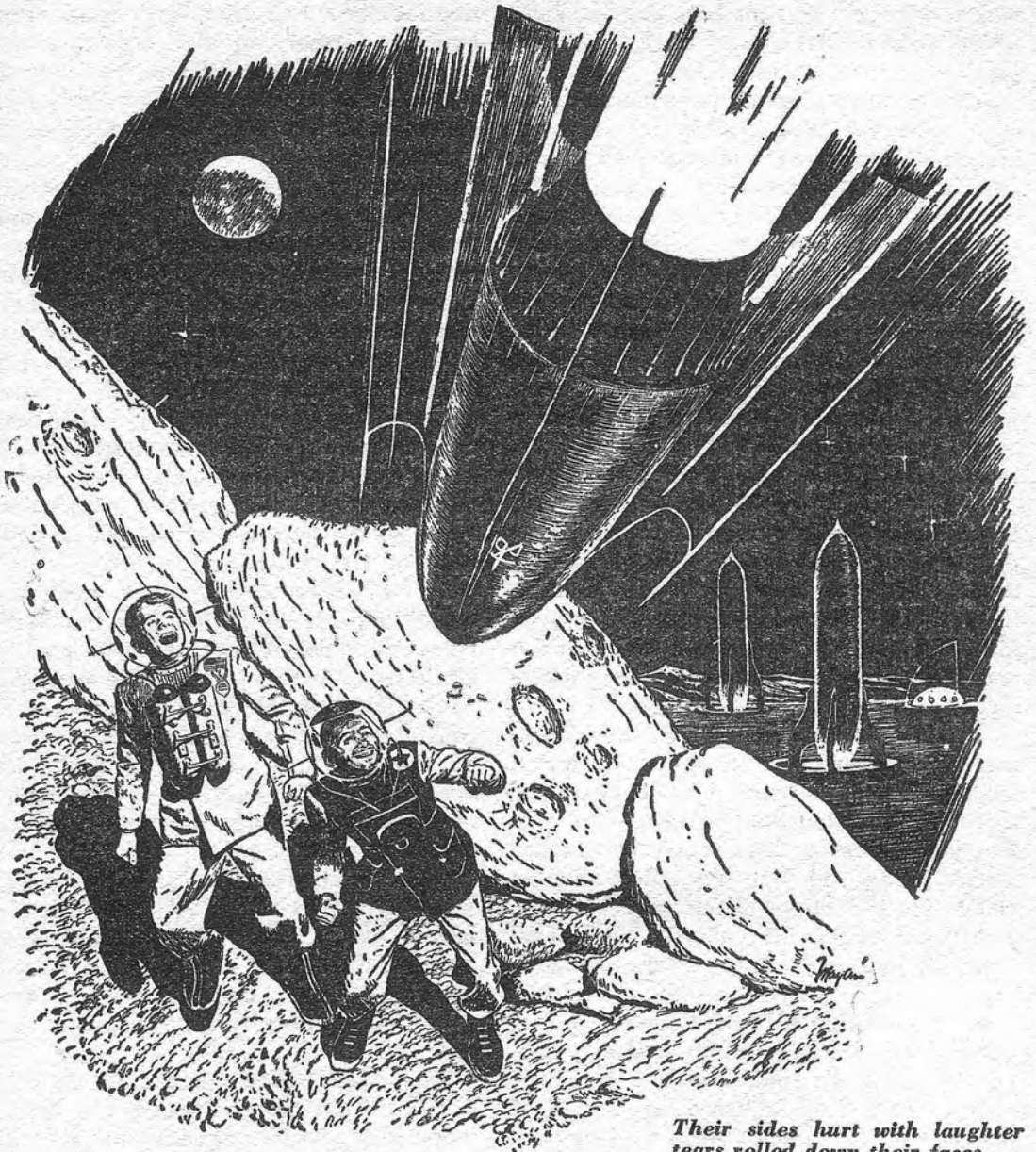
floor, humping themselves at the huge unwinking stars. The sun was a stark disc of fire, incredibly white, hung in the black sky. The shadows were bottomless pools. Within them there was nothing. In the sunlight, the pumice soil glared white.

The Russian rocket had crashed on landing. Randick could see the tiny, buckled shape of it high on the mountain. No doubt the pilot was dead, but he had to be sure. The risks were too great for any unsupported assumptions. He had to go up there and see for himself.

Ponderous in his pressure suit, Randick emerged from the open lock of the Anglo-American rocket. He slogged across the pumice of the crater floor toward the spot where the mountain's sheer talus erupted skyward. If there were no trouble from the Russki, he would return to his own ship and begin setting up the first cell of what would soon be the Anglo-American Moon Base. As soon as he signalled a safe landing and no opposition from the Russian, other rockets would come to add their cells, and presently there would be an atomic rocket pointed dead at the heart of every Russian population center. A rocket each for Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Vladivostok . . .

Randick frowned. It would be a lot simpler if the crash had finished the Russian pilot. He knew the Russians had exactly the same plan for the Moon. Only the rockets would be aimed at Washington, London, Paris, San Francisco. The slight

by ALFRED COPPEL



*Their sides hurt with laughter
tears rolled down their faces . .*

Two rocketships bit into lunar dust. Two men—a Yankee, a Russian — dueled in nightmare shadow and glare, each eager to destroy the Enemy. What cosmic joke made them drop their weapons and die laughing?

weight of the one-man bazooka on Randick's back seemed suddenly very comforting.

Randick knew himself to be on the very edge of known territory. His map showed him that he was in the highest part of the Doerfel Mountains. Behind him lay the two great bowls of Bailly and Schickard, and far to the north he could see, as he climbed higher, the smooth surface of the Mare Humorum. He looked up to the spinelike ridge beyond and slightly above the wreck of the Russian ship. There was a deep pass that slashed like a wound into the backbone of the range. He felt a slight thrill. Beyond that cleft lay . . . mystery. The other side of the Moon.

The sun's rays beat down brutally. Even through the heavily insulated suit Randick could feel their searing touch. All around him stretched a jumbled nightmare of black and white. He was suddenly very glad that he could not see the Earth in the sky. The homesickness would be unbearable.

Randick found himself frowning. He had no time for such thoughts. He was a soldier. He reminded himself that up there in the tangled wreckage of the Russian spaceship there might be another soldier, ready to kill him. Two human beings on the Moon. Each eager to kill. Randick shook his head angrily. He had no right to let his mind dwell on such things . . .

He was within a hundred yards of the wreck when a streak of fire and a soundless blast drove him into the shadows. Pumice showered him from the starshaped depression where the explosive missile had struck. Randick cursed heartily. The Ruski was very much alive, and there wasn't a thing wrong with his eyesight. The shot had been uncomfortably close.

Unslinging his bazooka, Randick began to work his way around behind the Russian rocket. A slight movement among the wreckage caught his trained eye and he launched a projectile at it. It flared wickedly, tearing fragments of metal loose and flinging them fantastic distances down the sheer slope of the ridge. There was no return fire.

Randick broke out of the shadow and

ran for the cover of a large pumicestone boulder farther up the draw. A sun-bright flash of fire spattered the loose soil a dozen feet from him. He slid for the darkness on his belly. That one had been a near thing!

Behind the boulder lay a trench-like depression that sloped away up the draw toward the pass. Randick dropped into it and began to crawl laboriously upward. If he could flank the Ruski he could finish this with one good shot. Another explosion rocked the boulder he had just left. Randick didn't even look back.

He felt his breath rasping in his throat and his body felt hot and sticky inside the bulky pressure suit. Glancing down and to his right, he could see the proudly erect shape of his own rocket far below on the floor of the crater.

It took him almost thirty minutes to reach the edge of the shadow that spilled from the side of the mountain pass. To his left, not ten feet away, was the sudden white glare of the pumice floor. He was well above and almost behind the wreck of the Russian's ship. His flanks were heaving with the exertion of the climb as he searched the buckled mass of the crash for his opponent.

There seemed to be a dark shape wedged in between two twisted bulkheads. It looked like a man. With pounding heart, Randick murmured a prayer and lifted his bazooka, aimed, and pressed the firing stud. The shadow vanished in silent white fire.

The return blast almost knocked him down. For a moment Randick was stunned, wondering foggily where the shot had come from. Then his brain cleared and he realized that the Ruski too had climbed to the pass, leaving Randick to fire at shadows.

Randick cursed himself for his dangerous stupidity. The other must be among those shadowy rocks directly across the bright floor of the pass. He raised his bazooka carefully, searching the Stygian blackness for some sign of movement. His finger curled around the firing stud . . .

OUT OF THE CORNER of his eye he saw the flare. The Russian rocket

erupted in a gout of bluish flame and the whole mountain seemed to rock. Randick stared stupidly at the glowing crater where the ship had been. For just an instant he thought that perhaps a meteorite had struck it, but the explosion had been unquestionably . . . atomic.

The Russian must have been stunned, too. For he moved out into the light, empty-handed, his helmet turned woodenly toward the rapidly cooling lake of magma where his space ship had been.

They both saw the bright arc of fire that raced up from beyond the ridge and curved down gracefully toward the floor of the crater far below. Openmouthed, Randick watched his ship vanish into flame and he felt the vague tremor of the ground under him as the shock rumbled across the face of the Moon.

The Russian rocket was gone. The Anglo-American rocket was gone. Moon-Base was gone before it had ever been.

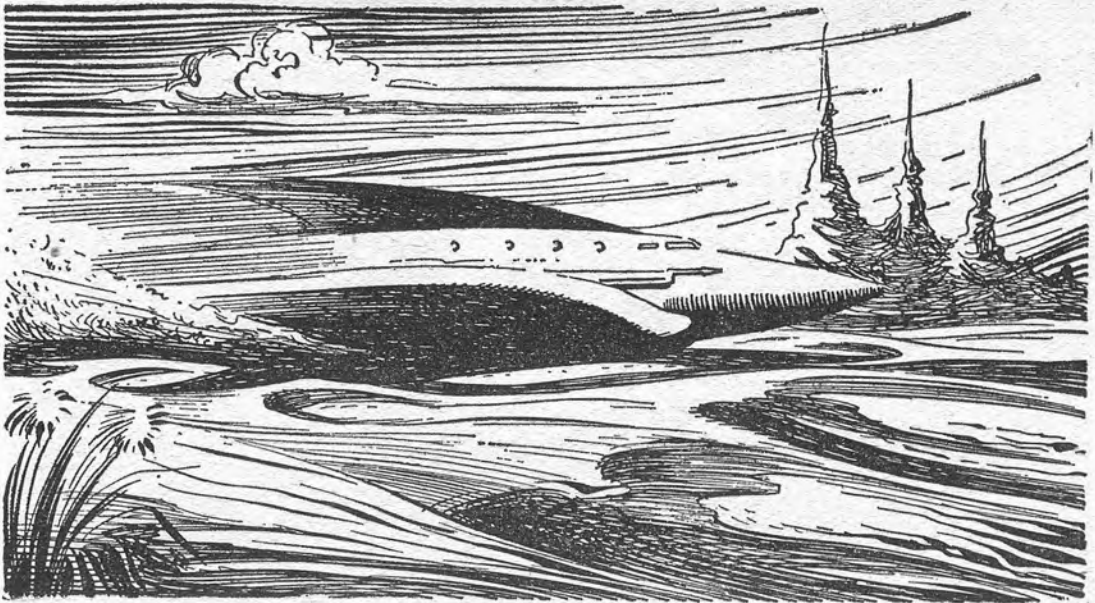
The weapon fell from Randick's hand, and he stepped unsteadily into the light toward the Russian. Suddenly human com-

panionship was very, very important. Panicky terror was plucking at his throat.

The two men stumbled toward each other across the pass cut deep into the jagged back of the Doerfel mountains. As one they turned and looked out across the vast expanse of the Moon's hidden face.

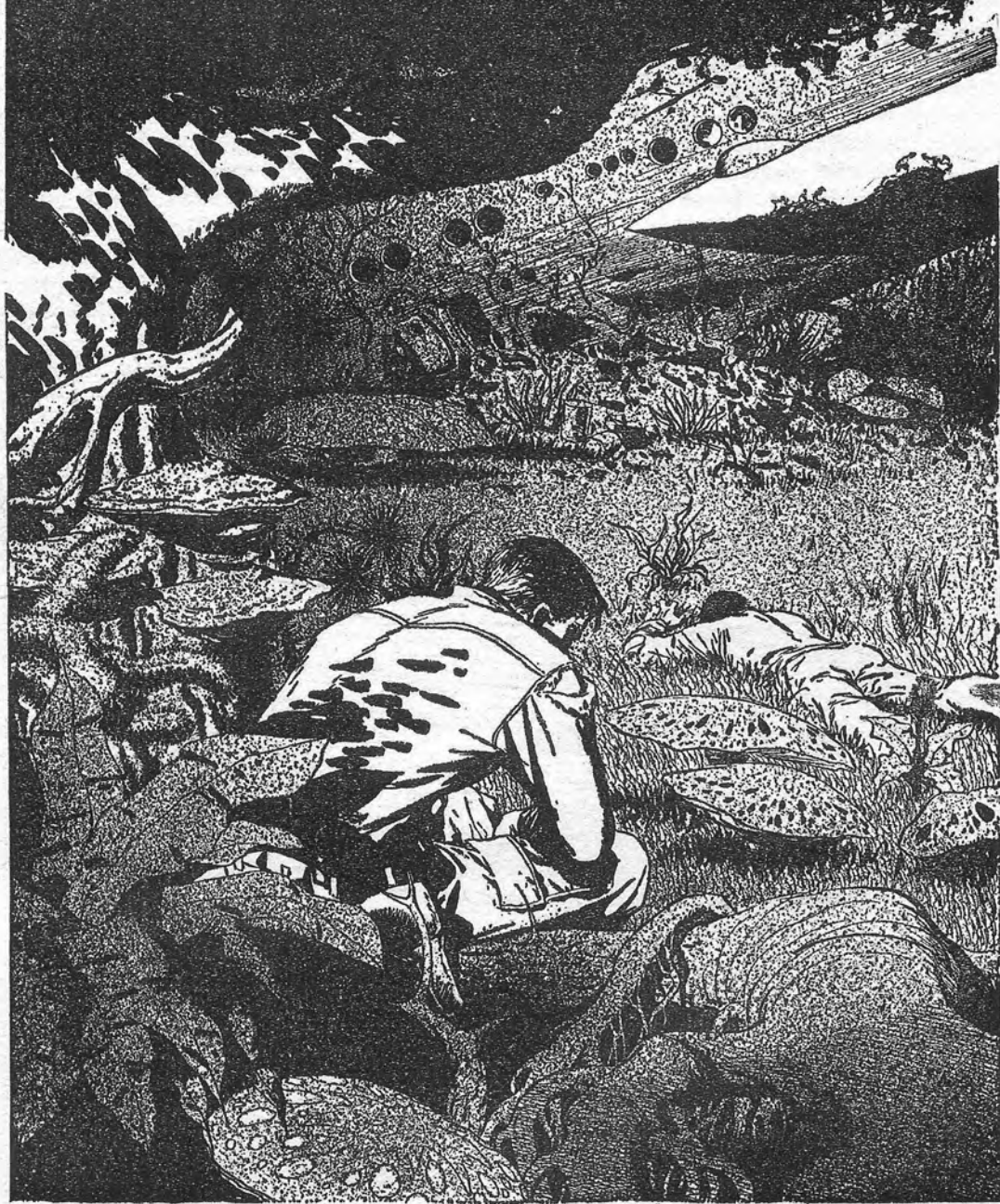
They were soldiers. They knew an invasion base when they saw one. As far as the eye could see, lines of sleek mammoth spaceships of unknown design stretched away into the distance. The face of the vast unnamed *mare* was covered with them.

Suddenly Randick felt himself beginning to giggle. He tried to stop, but the laughter welled up inside of him, echoing wildly within his confining helmet. He could see that the Russian was laughing too, white teeth gleaming behind the plexiglass faceplate. They laughed until they gasped. Their sides hurt with laughter, tears rolled down their faces. They were arm in arm and still laughing when the third rocket arced down on them from out of the black and star-flecked sky.



POISON PLANET

... It was only a muffled gun-shot, deep in the rank, fetid jungles of Venus—a single bullet from the gun of the gaunt, blazing-eyed man called Heinie. But it plunged the crew of the VENUS I into a Hell from which there was no return...



by WILLIAM
OBERFIELD



CAPTAIN JAMES McBRIDE didn't know exactly what to make of it at first. The first Earthmen ever to set foot on Venus, he and his crew had come armed to the teeth, fully prepared to fight wild elephants, giant tigers, prehistoric monsters or anything an imaginative mind might dream up.

When they found evidence of absolutely no danger at all they stood around with their heavy weapons and felt mighty foolish. The only signs of animal life were the small creatures that scampered right up to the men and chattered at them, unafraid, and birds more evident by sound than by sight. There were no trails made by giant animals, no heavy, frightening sounds in the jungle about them. Only a misty, drowsing calm.

The mist was always there, they were to find out later, steaming up from the wet ground by day and condensing in a blanket of life-giving water by night. Otherwise, Venus resembled mildly tropical Earth without storm and tempest. The lack of these made one think of thunder and lightning as some unseen, unknown entity bound to Earth alone in chains of gravity.

The only really unpleasant note was the condition of the ship in which they had come. The underside was a mass of twisted steel and buckled plates, where it had come down considerably harder than it had ever been intended to come down. It was something that could never take to space again, even if the "H" tanks hadn't been torn loose to gush out their contents.

Communication with Earth was out. A transmitter small enough to fit the ship and yet powerful enough to breach millions of miles of space, as well as penetrate two atmospheres, just wasn't made. The expedition was on its own.

The orders were conditional. If possible, they were to set up an outpost on Venus, as others had done several years before on Mars. Consisting mainly of scientists, the crew was to find out all it could about the new world. In one year the second ship would follow, bringing engineers and laborers. The scientists were to have, by that time, the information required to

form the first colony quickly, wisely, and safely.

If confronted with insurmountable obstacles, they were to return at once to Earth with whatever information they might have as to the nature of the obstacles.

McBride grinned in spite of his regret over the loss of his ship and looked at the wreckage. That sort of made the orders unconditional.

Things could have been worse, he thought. Not one of the ten men in the expedition had been lost or even badly injured. And, Venus being the land of plenty that it had turned out to be, it was beginning to look as if the stay here would be a pleasant one.

He was just starting to get some of his old spunk back when Jeff Flaunders came up to him with a worried frown on his face.

Because of the limited space aboard the ship, Flaunders was a combination of several men, as were most of the others. Specially trained for the expedition, he handled anything that went under the heading of botany, biology or zoology.

Now he was looking worried.

"You look a lot like bad news," McBride said as Flaunders drew near. "Might have known there'd be a catch to this world."

"More than a catch," Flaunders said. "I hope none of the men has eaten anything native to Venus."

McBride shook his head. "They haven't if they've followed orders. I told them not to touch anything until you had made a report." He looked at the other questioningly. "Poison?"

"We brought twelve white rats and two monkeys along for experimental purposes," Flaunders said. "Now we have only six rats. Each of the others we fed a different kind of native fruit or meat. That was about five hours ago. In the past hour they've gone into convulsions one after another. Seemed to go blind, too. Died within minutes."

"You tried it on just the six rats and not the monkeys?" McBride asked, and got a nod from Flaunders. "Then that's just six things tested. Maybe something

edible will turn up yet."

"Small chance." Flaunders was positive. "Thompson used a little of his chemistry and found a substance he couldn't identify, not only in the stuff we fed the rats but in twenty-some other plants. He even found it in the flesh of the animals we caught. That makes it pretty certain that it will be found in everything. When the rats died we pegged that substance as the poison.

"What to do about it is another question. Since it's entirely new to us it would probably take years to find a way to neutralize it, and it plays such an integral part in the structure of everything on Venus that we'd have one sweet time trying to completely draw it out. Anyway, a lot of needed lab equipment was smashed in the wreck. That makes it even more of a problem."

McBride listened, frowned and rubbed his cheek. "In other words, we might as well give up any idea of living off the fat of the land."

"That's about the size of it," Flaunders agreed. "Our best bet, the way things stand now, would be to try and have a garden going before our supply of food runs out."

"Check," said McBride. "But the seed was brought along just in case the soil and climate should prove suitable for planting. What do you make of that?"

"Climate ought to be just about perfect," Flaunders grunted. "As to the soil, Thompson and I will check on that right away."

IN ANOTHER DAY a few things had been learned. There was now no doubt about the poisonous nature of Venus. The infuriating thing about it was that the creatures native to Venus thrived about them on food that would put out the lights for good for any Earth-born animal.

But that was not quite so hard to take when they found that the soil was suitable for Earth crops. That left nothing to get excited about.

So they thought, until Venus turned stubborn.

No one knew exactly how stubborn Venus could get until the garden location

was being cleared of weeds. They had gone over about fifty feet of the clearing, working earnestly and not bothering to look back, when one of the men—a lanky individual called Henry Higgins—turned to look back, put one grimy fist on his hip, hunched his shoulders, stuck out his chin and hollered, "Damn!"

The others turned and looked surprised. Not that Higgins' well-known exaggerative ways any longer surprised them, but what Higgins was looking at might surprise anyone, including the botanist in Flaunders.

The eight-or-ten feet of ground directly behind the men was clear of weeds. But at the far edge of this cleared space little green shoots were thrusting inquisitive noses above the ground. Beyond these were one-inch plants, then two-inch, and four and six and eight, on up. They formed a slope up to the edge of the clearing.

"Damn!" Higgins said again, and tossed away his spade.

Someone laughed uncertainly. The others scratched their heads, cast blank stares at one another and forgot how to keep their mouths closed.

"Just what in blazes do you make of that?" McBride asked of Flaunders.

Flaunders could be quite an optimist when he wanted to; he was one of those rare persons who seem to grow stronger with each failure. At least on the surface.

"Only what I see," he replied, not willing to show consternation. "Amazingly rapid growth, but they're still only weeds. It's just going to take a little applied science."

"Maybe." McBride didn't like it. "But I've done a little farming in my time; know what it is to worry a chunk of farmland out of the raw. And the nature of Earth is dead compared to this."

"Bunk!" Flaunders scoffed. "Work, certainly. But we'll be eating fresh corn in two months!"

McBride looked around, seeing little you wouldn't see on Earth. What's wrong with me? he thought. It's my place to keep the spirits of the men up, not to dampen them. Flaunders is right, of course. This stuff is still only vegetation, even if it is styled after Jack's beanstalk. Jack chopped down

the beanstalk and killed the giant. Our giant is the threat of starvation, but killing it is still a matter of stalk-chopping. If Jack could do it so can we.

IT STARTED OUT like that. Two weeks of hacking and digging, of specially prepared weed-killer and the aid of every trick known to science, and there was a strip of dark, rich ground all ready for planting. It looked like things were really beginning to roll. They did roll. Right up against a blank wall.

A few days after the planting, Flaunders was looking at a handful of black spider-things and swearing under his breath. The shriveled spider-things were seeds brought from Earth. They were shot through with hairlike roots, and that was the strange thing. It was strange because the roots were not their own.

It took several more days for Flaunders to understand. When he did he took on an attitude faintly remindful of a cornered rat. In a spot, but frustrated to fighting anger. The ship had contained enough food for only about two months to begin with, and more than two weeks had now come out of that. Starvation was becoming a very real possibility in his mind.

"We're up against something big," he said, peeved with himself for having to admit it. "We're fighting millions of years of evolution."

McBride sensed something disturbing in the other's voice. Maybe a trace of fear. "What do you mean?" he said.

Flaunders enlarged. "A very long time ago a war started here on Venus. It was a war among plants. You find the same thing on Earth, too, but not on this scale. There must have been certain 'aggressive' plants which threatened to force out all others. The others, in order to survive, had to evolve into something even more deadly to other plants. Once started, it had to keep going. Now, after millions of years, they've evolved into things capable of vicious little tricks you'd never be able to count.

"What happened to our seeds is one of them. Some of the roots extend into microscopic threads hardly more than streaks of single molecules. You can't dig

them out and they escape all the ordinary weed-fighting methods. One of their cute little tricks is to attach themselves to other plants and seeds and absorb them, strangely enough not harming their own species. Add to that the rapid growth, almost comparable to the motion of the minute hand of a clock, and planting anything from Earth among them is something like throwing a housecat into a den of wild lions."

"A very pretty picture," McBride groaned. "We can't go back to Earth for a year, everything on Venus is poison and we have less than two months' supply of food. Now you as much as admit that there will be no garden. I'm suddenly getting a headache."

"I didn't say we had failed," Flaunders said sharply. "I'm never going to. By thunder, we'll beat this hellhole if it takes every minute of our time!"

That was a sane enough statement. They had the seeds and they had the soil. With good health and the will to work, what was to stop them?

Only weeds.

"ONLY WEEDS," McBride said ten weeks later. "They couldn't be responsible for this! Ten weeks of breaking our backs and losing our minds, and you can't even tell that we've done anything. It must be a nightmare!"

Flaunders was a man all washed out, a man badly stung. How hard for an optimist to face defeat!

"Ten years," he said reflectively. "That's what it seems like. Thirteen since we crashed. Lucky number."

"A week since we've had anything to eat," said McBride. "Or has it been two? Anyway, it's too late to think about a garden. And if you and Thompson can't find a way to make this stuff fit to eat—" There was no need to complete that sentence.

Flaunders said nothing, seemingly absorbed in thought.

"Why don't you stop trying?" McBride said suddenly.

Flaunders looked up as if he thought he hadn't heard right. "Why in the world should I do that?"

"Because as long as you try the rest of us have hope." McBride's sunken cheeks burned red. He was somehow ashamed of his thoughts, but still determined to voice them. "Without that hope we wouldn't go on waiting and starving. There wouldn't be anything to wait for. Maybe there isn't anyway. Do you actually think there is any hope?"

Flaunders stared for a moment, considering the suicide tendency behind McBride's words. He turned away, hardly disturbed by the morbid idea. "I don't really know," he replied at last. "I don't even think any more. I just keep going like an automaton, not hoping and not giving up. That's my responsibility. Mine and Thompson's. Maybe we will find a way and maybe not. The only thing to do is to keep dogging it till we drop."

"No need to blame yourself for that," McBride said. "God knows you tried. With all the generators of this and that, the sprayers and fires and wires strung all over, we looked like we were fighting a real war instead of one against plants."

Flaunders snorted. "A hell of a lot of good it did. We destroyed the weeds and the properties of the soil with them. By the time we reactivated the soil the weed seeds had come on the wind. Same thing all over again. How much good did the hothouse do us, even with all the filters? Nearly microscopic seed came in on our clothing, in our hair. I'd rather fight elephants or pre-historic monsters. At least they're big enough to see and slow enough to cope with."

These were two skeletons, speaking of starvation under a tree loaded down with plump, ripe fruit, watching small animals scamper. The easy way out was all around them. They thought about it.

All together there had been ten men. Now ten skeletons. Now ten scarecrows with faces unshaven and dirty, with clothing hanging in tattered strips and extra holes punched in belts. They were slowly starving to death in the Garden of Paradise, in the land of plenty. And nothing, you would think, could be worse than that.

But there was something worse. It came shortly. The real Hell started with a gun.

5—Planet—January

THE GAUNT MEN were sitting around in a circle, pow-wow fashion, pretending to work out an answer and all feeling that there wasn't any, when McBride noticed Heinie, the cook, handling his automatic. It wasn't the mere fact that he was handling the weapon that deserved notice. It was the way he was handling it.

Heinie sat with a faraway look in his eye that was now glistening and now lack-luster, fondling the gun in a way that suggested something. Black words not spoken, but safety off, a damp brow and moody reflections.

"Heinie," said McBride. "Anything wrong?"

Heinie's eyes came back from that far place with a start. He laughed bitterly. "Anything wrong! Two weeks without a damned thing to eat, and the man wants to know if anything's wrong!"

No respect for rank now. No more tin-soldier discipline. What penalty can you impose upon a man mere days from death?

"You'd better put away the gun, Heinie."

Heinie stared back at McBride with a sort of thoughtful defiance. He didn't put away the gun.

"Then hand it over," McBride said, and started getting up.

"Stay where you are! All of you!"

Heinie's sunken eyes were suddenly glaring at the others over the muzzle of his gun. The others settled back, a little afraid but not caring much.

"As cook," Heinie was saying, "it's my place to prepare meals. I haven't been doing my job. Now I'm going to."

"Don't let it get you down, man," McBride cautioned. "It's not your fault if we haven't—"

"Listen to me!" Heinie cut in sharply. "I happened to be in the Navy when I was only a kid, and three other guys and myself were once in a fix a lot like this. Only we were adrift on the open sea in a life-raft. Three of us kept from starving to death, but we had to draw straws to do it. The one who got the short one—well, I've been having nightmares about it ever since. God! We didn't even have

a fire—”

His voice trailed off, his eyes drawing inward with some shocking memory. McBride edged toward him.

“Hold it!” Heinie ordered, coming out of the daze.

McBride stopped, half inclined not to. He wavered, drew back, and decided to try and argue it out.

“You’re—sick,” he said. “Say you do kill one of us; do you think you could go through that ‘life-raft thing’ again? Do you actually think any of us, starving or not, could bring ourselves to do what you suggest?”

“I’m not going to go through it,” said Heinie. “But if I could be around to collect, I’d lay you ten to one that you will.”

McBride shook his head negatively. “Stop being foolish. You need a rest.”

Heinie did it then. He did it quickly, before anyone had a chance to stop him. He jerked the muzzle of the automatic up to his own temple.

“So long, suckers!” he shouted, and pulled the trigger.

THE LOUD REPORT made the silence that followed seem even more silent. The men who had come to their feet stood like statues of a mad sculptor, watching the black hole turn red and gush. Then it came, dawning in their eyes. The hungry, frightened, hopeful fascination, the impact of conflicting thoughts. It grew stronger and burned in the sunken eyes of these dead men who wanted to live. There was no mistaking the intent, no mistaking the *desire*.

McBride saw it and understood. “Good Lord, no!” he said. He tried to keep saying it, thinking it.

But he was as near death as the others. The mutual thought bloomed in his mind like some evil flower. It made him tremble. Sweat suddenly stung his eyes, ran into his mouth.

Food! Slow miserable death on one side and food on the other! A chance to live a little longer. Maybe Flaunders would find something in another week, and one meal might make the difference between seeing that and not seeing it. One wanted

to live! You couldn’t bring Heinie back anyway, so why not live? Heinie had wanted it that way. A human is an animal as much as a pig or a cow. A chance to live, to hope again!

Some part of his mind screamed at him. “Cannibal!”

“The only chance!” cried another part.

“Vulture!” said the soul-part with unnerving keening. “Will you have loin? Or perhaps the rump?”

His flesh prickled, the sweat flowed in streams. Unheard murmurings distorted his mind.

“Only this once, for a little more time! —Maggot! Dungworm!— Only another week and maybe the Venus II, months ahead of time—Fool! Not a chance! Die now, quickly!—No, no, no! Still some hope! Never give up. Never say die! Oh, God, Heinie! Why did you suggest it?”

Gibbering conflict, a trend to insanity. The voices inside beat his brain against his temple and raged. The civilized man went to his knees and drew back. The beast man thumped his chest and screamed.

“Alright!” McBride shouted, wondering why his voice sounded so angry, why his face felt distorted. He drew his feelings within himself. His voice grew flat and quiet with bitter irony.

“Alright,” he said. “Go ahead. Undress the main course.”

WHEN THE MEAL ENDED the Hell came. Full stomachs restore sanity. The beast man lay down, well fed and sleeping, to leave the civilized man awake with his thoughts. A new kind of Hell, this one that started with a gun. You could see the fires of it burning the face of every man.

Like the extra-animated Henry Higgins, He sat with unnaturally red cheeks puffed out beneath his beard, eyes glassy wet, looking at McBride as if harboring some question too awful to ask. There was something of the frightened, wild animal about him as his eyes left McBride and jerked around from one face to another. Then he was up and awkwardly running in among the trees.

The men got up from the rough table

that had been set up outside the ship. They got up and went away, slinking, like a sex maniac leaving the scene of his crime when his reason returns and he knows his insanity. They went away by themselves—those not too sick to walk—and hid from one another.

But a man can't hide from himself. That was the Hell. This was not a life-raft on the open sea, every man told himself. This was a green, smiling world with the smell of flowers on the air, with plenty of glistening, tempting fruit growing wild and enough game to make an Indian hunter call it the Happy Hunting Ground. Like a camping trip back on Earth. Like a picnic where you get drunk and start eating and then sober up with the smell of blood in your nostrils to find yourself chewing the hair off the detached leg or arm of your best friend.

What did every man tell himself? That it wouldn't happen again, ever, this terrible thing. When they found the strength and courage to go back and clean up the remains of a meal, knowing it to be the remains of a meal, when they had put what was left of Heinie in a hole and covered it with dirt and set up a stone marker, they promised one another it would never ever happen again.

The next day they put it on paper, in black and white. An agreement. On the third day they thought about it, and on the fourth day they began wondering why they had done it. And on the fifth day—

On the fifth day they found Thompson, the chemist, hanging from a tree a short distance from the ship. Quite dead, of course, and no one had to ask why he had done it.

Hunger madness walked among the men. They took Thompson down from the tree. Hunger madness whispered in their ears. They listened.

McBride took out the agreement and looked at it, having heard the tempter's whisper. He didn't think much. It hurt him to think. But something that had been done once—

He looked at the men and saw an inescapable vise tightening. He looked at himself and saw the same. At his feet fell the small fragments of the agreement.

THE CREEPING HELL closed in. The real Hell that had started with a gun. Could these any longer think of themselves as men? After the second time the change starts. It gets a little easier. All you have to do is keep from looking at anyone. It's nice to live. With life there's hope. Don't get cheated.

What happened one day surprised no one. Eight of the ten remained, two gone. Thompson had been gone for days. The hunger returned. The pendulum swung back. The beast man shoved out any remaining noble thought and screamed for food. The addict returns to his drug, the pervert to his revolting deed . . . As mad as these, the starving.

Nor was McBride surprised when he found himself holding a little stick. He wasn't greatly disturbed when it turned out to be the short one. Sympathy from the others? Not a bit. Only a sort of brooding resignation. And hunger. Always hunger.

"Flanders," McBride said. "Where's Flanders?"

"Don't worry," the one who had passed the straws said. "He took his chance with us. Been working like a madman since Thompson went. He wouldn't stop, so I took the straws in to him."

"I don't care about that," McBride informed. "But I've known him since we were kids. Just felt that I'd like to—well—maybe it's better this way." He started slowly away.

"Where you going?" someone said suspiciously.

McBride looked at the man with a feeling part disgust, part pity and a little of something unexplainable. He almost laughed.

"I'm not depriving you of your next meal," he said. "I just feel like being alone for this."

He walked slowly on, taking his thoughts with him. What was the purpose in all this? All a monotonous cycle, constantly repeated. From the torture of starvation to the torture of the shame and bitter self-accusation that makes one despise himself, back to the starvation. Men slowly becoming something lower than pigs, and knowing it all too well. A satisfying of

the body at the expense of decency, even of sanity. A Hell within souls.

And all for what purpose? To live? For how long, and in what hideous way? There would be only one lonely and sick man left long before help could come. What would that last man do? Go completely mad and try to devour himself? Like the two snakes who met one sunny afternoon and decided to swallow one another. Each took hold of the tail of the other and both swallowed and swallowed until nothing at all remained. There was no purpose. No purpose or reason at all.

A SHORT DISTANCE back among the trees McBride halted and looked back. There were bushes between the men and himself. This was it. He drew his automatic.

Strange, he thought. I don't feel at all like I should about this. It's just like routine procedure, something you do every day. I actually think I'm glad I came out with the short straw.

He even thought coolly about the best way to do it. The heart? Not sure enough. The brain, like Heinie? A little better, but what if there should be a nervous twitch at the wrong time and a deflection caused by the bone of the skull?

A babble of voices came to him as if from a great distance, through his thoughts. Excited voices. But he was in a world of his own, now. All the others were behind him, cut off.

Safety off, he put the muzzle of the automatic into his mouth and aimed it sharply upward. The most efficient way, probably. His finger tightened.

He heard the deafening report and felt the recoil jerk his arm down. Somewhere he had heard that a man killed instantly by a gun never lives to hear the report. It puzzled him. Why didn't he fall? Why could he still see the green tangle of Venus and hear sounds?

There was a ringing in his ears and a sickening shimmer before his eyes. His shocked mind refused to come back to things for a moment. Who were these laughing, crying, shouting skeletons whirling about him with their dirty beards and red-rimmed eyes?

"It's Flaunders," someone shouted. "He's done it!"

"Done it," McBride repeated dumbly. "Done what?"

Then Flaunders was shaking him by the shoulders and grinning. "Come out of it, man! You're safe; we all are, now! There's no need for any more of this—gluttony! Don't you understand? I've won! I know how to treat the fruit, even the edible animals of this world, so we can eat them and they won't hurt us a bit!"

McBride tried to call order to mind, starting from the beginning. He looked dazedly at the gun in his hand.

Flaunders laughed. "Don't look so surprised to be alive. One of the men hit your arm just in time. You missed death by an inch."

It was all too much at one time, a skirling confusion.

"That what you said about beating the poison," McBride said. "Are you sure? It's not just something on paper, something not proven?"

"Lord, no," Flaunders said, fighting down an urge to shout. "I had it worked out yesterday, but it still had to be tested and the white rats and two monkeys we brought along for experimental purposes were gone. So I went out last night and gathered some fruit and treated it and tried it on myself. Just look at me and you have your answer. I feel fine."

Still dazed, still not quite understanding how everything had happened, McBride started back toward the ship with the others. But one thing he knew. Venus had been beaten!

THE MEAL was all day in the preparing. The eating was a gala event, a banquet, a roaring party. It lasted two hours.

There wasn't any wolfing down. When you have been starving for weeks you just don't start off that way. You take a small bite and wait until you are sure it is safely down. Then you take another small bite and wait again. If you keep doing that you have a chance of holding what you eat.

They didn't mind. This food was not the kind you had to force yourself to

chew on, like—some other things.

There were little animals looking something like rabbits, but tasting more like chicken, fried golden brown. There were oranges that tasted like nothing of Earth and apples that reminded you of paw-paws in fall. Seven different kinds of meat there were, and it seemed like a hundred different kinds of fruits and nuts and herbs. There was even a juice that proved mildly intoxicating. All a little different, but all delightfully, temptingly good!

"We'll be eating like this every day!" Flaunders said. "Maybe we can even set up a bar, with fruit-juice drinks and wine and even invent a new kind of beer. Big, foamy schooners of beer on Venus! Won't the work crew be surprised when they get here!"

They let it run away with them. It went to their heads. The warmth of intoxication, the feel of stomachs filling out. All the things long missing now returning in full force, all at one time. Almost it was too much. Almost death from excessive joy.

They went on and on like that, the most happy men ever. They wanted it to go on for ever, but the feast had started late and it ended late. After the two hours they felt like sleeping. In fact, they felt a more relentless urge to sleep than they ever had before.

The result of a full stomach, they supposed, or the aftermath of months of hardship let in by the sudden relaxation. It certainly wasn't a matter of choice. Who wanted to sleep at a time like this, a time for staying up all night and celebrating? But the sandman said no, and right now he had the advantage.

One by one they yawned, stretched and drifted off to bed like carefree children, and to hell with cleaning up. That could wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow! It was wonderful to have one to think about. Tomorrow was a golden day.

The last to turn in was Captain McBride, just as sleepy but not so carefree. He alone, perhaps, was not completely satisfied. Underneath the powerful urge to sleep was a question, and that question needed answering. Or did it? In one way

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it didn't really matter. He went in and found his bed in the darkness and decided to forget the question.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER McBride lay awake. The great urge to sleep was still there, but sleep wouldn't come. No, that was not it exactly. He wouldn't let it come. He was fighting it. The question wouldn't go away, and it really did need answering after all.

Moving around quietly in the darkness he made sure that the men were sleeping. Then he returned to the bed next to his, the one in which Flaunders slept.

"Flaunders," he said softly.

The question grew in his mind. "Flaunders," he called more urgently. He jostled the quiet form.

"What's wrong?" said Flaunders, half asleep.

"Nothing exactly. I want to talk a bit."

"Better sleep. The time is—"

"Go on," McBride said intently.

Flaunders fought himself awake. "Nothing. Half asleep. Didn't know what I was saying. What do you want?"

McBride lay down on his own bed, hardly able to keep his eyes open. "Maybe I want to talk about the Garden of Eden, about the pair who were told that a certain fruit was death to them, and about a serpent who told them it wasn't."

Flaunders said nothing.

"Must have been quite a persuader, that serpent," McBride went on in dream talk. "Up until this morning I guess I might have welcomed such a one, and I don't think I was alone in feeling that way. Men were never intended to live the way we were living. We really didn't want to live if we had to live that way. We only convinced ourselves that we did. We were caught in a hellish vise and each of us knew it, underneath. So a talking serpent who could convince us that the fruit of

Venus was not poison might not have been such a bad idea."

"Why talk about that?" said Flaunders, like a man talking in his sleep. "It's over. We've beaten Venus."

McBride tried to open his eyes. It was too much trouble. His own words seemed to him like someone else talking, far away and unreal. There was a feeling like being detached from one's body.

"Beaten Venus, yes," he said. "But I'm wondering how. I keep thinking how this kind of poison acts. Probably affect us as it did the rats and monkeys. Takes four or five hours to act, and it hasn't been three since we started eating. Was it only chance that your treatment of the food took all day and had to be extended up to the last moment before serving? It wasn't even sampled before three hours ago. And so I wonder."

Flaunders's voice seemed to come out of a deep well. "Let's get some sleep."

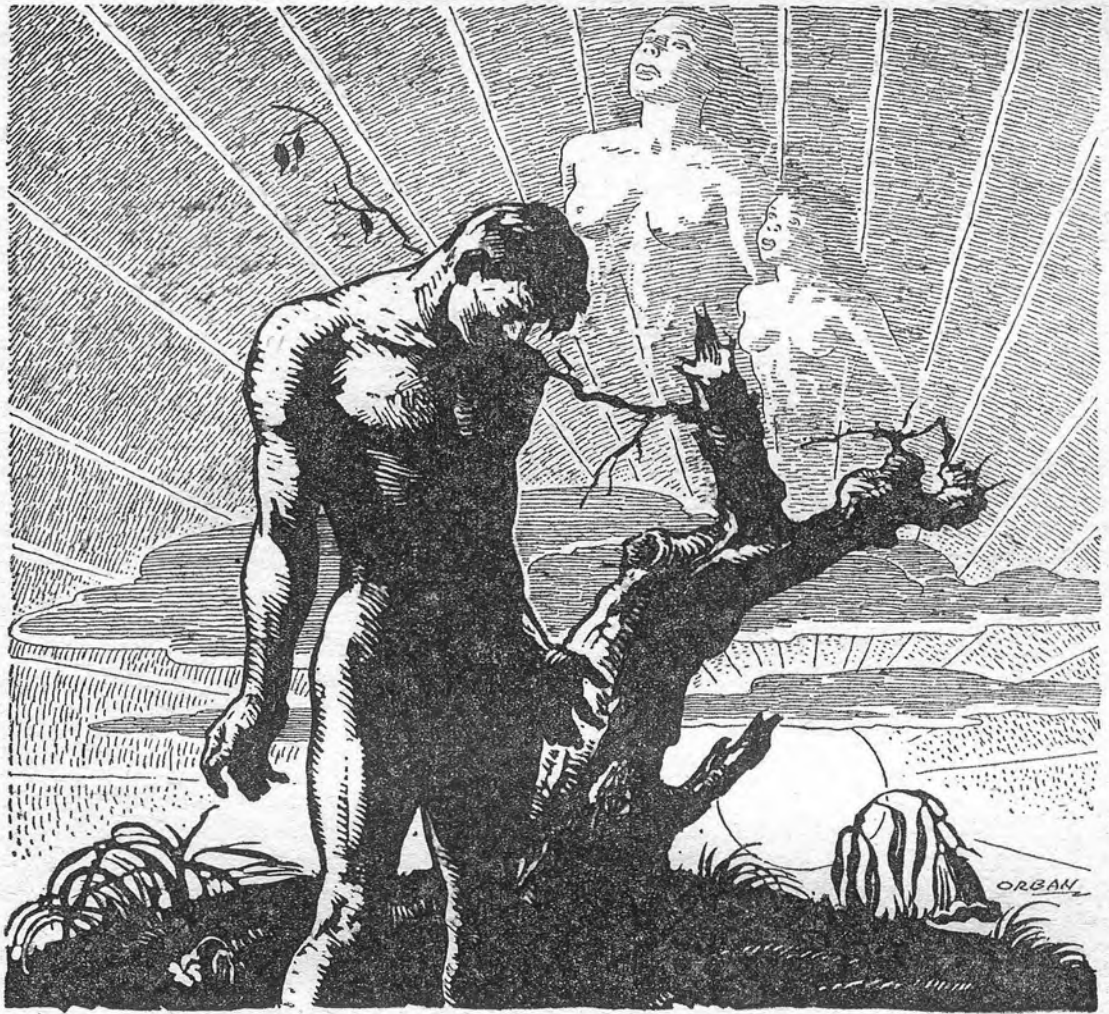
McBride's voice almost matched it. "Not yet. I haven't mentioned about the medical supplies we brought along. Even drugs. It would have been simple for the welcome serpent to treat the food with something to deaden pain, to make us sleep through it."

His voice trailed off in sleep, his thoughts drifting away with the night. Still the question wouldn't go away. It forced him partly awake. He didn't even realize how little of a question it was now. His body was a chunk of lead, not able to move. To speak required almost more effort than he could muster.

"Flaunders. You didn't. It's just fatigue, letdown after strain. I know you won't lie if I ask you. All I want is to hear you say you didn't."

Flaunders wouldn't have tried to move if he could. He lay on his back with his hands folded on his chest. Appropriate.

"Goodnight," he said.



Guest Expert

by Allen K. Lang

Earth had a problem . . . and the Martian visitor had a very deadly means of solving it . . .

"I'M ONLY HERE TO HELP you," said the man from Mars. "You've proved that," the Secretary admitted. "In the six weeks that you've been here, you've wiped out rabies, measles, and the common cold: but sir, this latest proposal of yours is blasphemous!"

The man from Mars waved an appendage in the direction of the Secretary's desk, atop which a newspaper was lying

open. "After reading what that paper has to say can you still doubt that what I propose is necessary?"

The young man in uniform crossed the room and picked up the newspaper. He read the headlines aloud, bitterly: "INDIAN FAMINE ARMY STORMS NEW DELHI"; "TASMAN REPUBLIC BIDS FOR PLACE IN SUN"; "PLAGUE DECIMATES LOWER NILE."

"You could end that plague." The Assistant's voice was accusing.

"I could, of course. The battles and the starvation would still be with you, though. Why do you persist in treating the symptoms instead of the sickness? I am an objective observer, far enough away from your problems to see them clearly, something which no human can ever hope to do. You Earthlings suffer war and famine and plague for one reason only: that there are four and eight-tenths billion of you living on an Earth which can feed only about two and a half billion of you well. Gentlemen, the population of your planet must be reduced by one-half if your race is to survive."

"Couldn't we send our surplus population to Mars, or to Venus?" the Assistant asked.

The man from Mars winced. "The sands of Mars can't support cactuses, much less fields of wheat and rice and corn. Venus is a solid sea of formaldehyde solution." He glanced around to each of the three men in the room. "To you, my scheme may seem heartless. But would it be more cruel to kill millions now than to allow billions to die in continual war in the next thousand years? Do you remember your last such war? The Ukrainian wheatlands scorched to desert by the thermonuclears? New England swept by epidemics of anthrax and tularemia? All China tortured by starvation and the hundred nagging sicknesses that follow hunger?"

"Yes, I remember." The Secretary rolled his pen between his fingers, staring at it. "How do you intend to—liquidate—the excess two billions?"

"I can't explain it to you; you lack the basic knowledge. It will be quick and painless though, I promise. Then Earth will see peace and hope; a new start!"

"I couldn't take all the responsibility for this decision upon myself," the Secretary said. He glanced hopefully toward the Assistant and the young man in uniform. Their eyes flinched away.

"You might take a vote," suggested the

man from Mars. He picked up the Secretary's scratch pad and ripped off three sheets of paper. "Just mark *Yes* or *No*. I will respect your decision: after all, I'm only here to help you."

The Secretary stared at the slip of paper lying on his desk. He glanced toward the other two humans for encouragement; but the Assistant was staring at the wall across the room, and the young man in uniform was silently contemplating the carpet at his feet.

Convulsively the Secretary scooped the paper toward him and scribbled his vote. Folding the paper, he looked demandingly toward his two companions. The young man in uniform looked up, then turned to hold his paper against the wall as he wrote his decision. The Assistant remained seated, holding the paper on top of a book while he lettered out his vote.

The man from Mars collected the three ballots, unfolded them, and read the three votes. "It's two to one," he announced. He crushed the papers into small, white pellets and tossed them out the open window. "What I have to do will be finished by noon tomorrow."

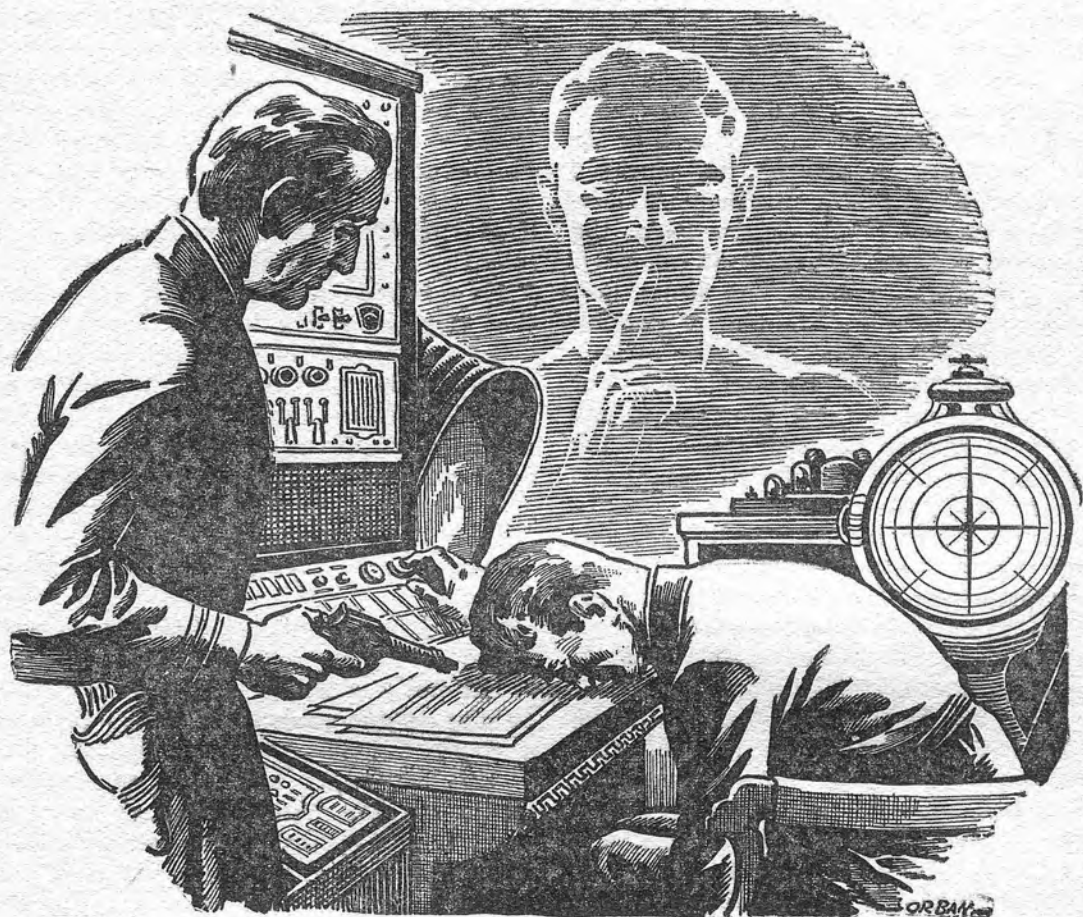
The man from Mars left the room, closing the door very softly behind him. The other three sat silent a moment and then got up and left without looking one another in the face.

THE NEXT DAY the Secretary and the Assistant sat in the office, staring at the clock above the door. At twelve-o-seven the door slammed open for the young man in uniform.

"Is it done?" the Assistant asked.

"Done? Of course, it's done!" The young man in uniform leaned against the door and shook with spasmodic laughter. "Now there's food enough and room enough for everyone. The man from Mars promised to solve our population problem. He did. At twelve noon, Eastern Daylight Saving Time, every woman and girl on Earth dropped dead."

The Vibro-spacedrive was powerful, efficient, perfect—almost. It had one bad habit, and a mystery. The habit: It often exploded, which everybody knew. The mystery: McCall was to know that, too . . . one terrible day in deep space, near the flaming jaws of the Sun . . .



■ safety margin

A SHORT STORY

By

J. T.

M'INTOSH

LAST MAN ABOARD THE *IONIC II* was the Engineer. It was not until a tall, unhurried figure started the long walk from the control tower that the curiosity of the crew was satisfied. They knew him. He was Jeff Bremner, a slow-speaking oldster who had made many trips on the *Ionic II* and as far as they were concerned could make many more.

Engineers were attached to no particular ship or run; they were government officials, and not really engineers. Some of them were cordially and automatically hated on any ship they boarded. They were, in theory at any rate, in supreme command in space, and not every man could take a job like that and look pleasant. Bremner was one who could. He could talk and he could listen. He could give advice if asked without sending in little notes at the end of the journey: "Second Officer Smith revealed astonishing ignorance of points 10 and 29 of the Spaceman's Code," or "Spaceman J. Brown appears to have had time since the completion of his training to develop a certain laxity in his application of the section on discipline." He would help out in an emergency without reporting coldly on the inefficiency or insufficiency of the ship's complement. And if there was some fault he had to report, he would satisfy himself that the fault, if unchecked, was liable to recur before he did so.

So there was friendliness and some relief in the crew's greetings as Bremner came aboard. Discipline on the *Ionic II* was easy, normally. The ship was one of the seven run by the small Sapphire Line, in which it was a tradition that directors made some allowance for management, management was not harsh with captains, captains kept crew on a loose rein, and crew didn't bother themselves too much. Essential standards were maintained, but what was regarded as essential was the spirit and not the letter of various codes of laws. Men who had been warned that for the duration of the run to Venus and back they might have to obey the letter and not the spirit for a change relaxed gratefully from the time that the keenest-sighted among them recognized the thin figure of Bremner across the field.

"Hallo, Jeff," said Captain Hofmeyer, stretching out his hand. "I thought you were on leave."

"I was," Bremner replied, "but it was put back. Again." He grinned, not a young grin, but with the resignation of an old man who was not as old or tired as he pretended.

"Mmm," said Hofmeyer cautiously.

"You wouldn't like to say whom you replaced?"

"Watson. And if you don't take that expression off your face I'll describe it in my report."

BREMNER FOLLOWED the captain and his second officer to the control room, not as if he owned the ship, but like a passenger there on sufferance. Perhaps, he reflected, he was too easy-going. No, certainly he was. But one couldn't be vigilant and unapproachable on a hundred trips for the sake of a situation which might arise on the hundred and first.

He glanced casually at the papers. If they did not satisfy him, he had power even yet, with all the passengers and cargo aboard, and the official take-off time twenty seconds off, to stop the trip. But the papers were all right. They always were on the Sapphire Line. It was on smaller lines—and one or two bigger ones—that real vigilance was needed.

"Going to ground us?" asked Hofmeyer.

"What do you think? Any reason why I should?"

Hofmeyer grinned and shook his head, turning to the bank of controls. He was a young captain, Hofmeyer. Perhaps too young. He hadn't had years as a subordinate to give him stability. There had never been a blemish on his record, which was in a way unfortunate for him, for he had never had a chance to learn by his own mistakes. He was like a car driver who had never been in a skid or an accident, who had never seen death for himself or others if he could not pull up in ten yards, who had never known brakes or steering or engine to fail. When the emergency came at last, he might be able to handle it. Nobody knew. Bremner hoped he would. Bremner had seen Hofmeyer's wife once or twice—a grand girl, the kind of girl Hofmeyer with his invariable good luck or good judgment would have married.

McCall, the second officer, was of a different stamp. He was twenty years older than Hofmeyer, very little younger than Bremner himself. To McCall everything had gone wrong. Bremner knew the space-

men he traveled with, and these two as well as any. Over thirty years since Jim McCall had been set to pass out of training school with the best record of his year. Then, on his last month before grading, emergency had forced him into temporary command of a ship in a dangerous situation. It was tough luck on any trainee. He had not done badly, and there was every attempt to make allowance for him. But he could not be given top grading, and that was the pattern for the next thirty years of his career. He had married at the same age as Hofmeyer, but his wife had left him two years later.

Strangely enough, Bremner knew of no closer friendship than between the two men. Other officers came and went, but no ship ever reached space with a berth for one and not for the other. For ten years, in various capacities, but always some two steps apart, they had traveled space together.

The first officer came in with the astrogation correlates. Merson was a man utterly without capacity for anger or ambition. He had reached his position because he had done well enough to be put there. If promotion were not in some measure automatic, Merson would still be a space-hand.

"Mr. Bremner?" said Merson, holding out the calculations interrogatively. He hadn't known Bremner long enough for familiarity. Bremner nodded the papers away.

"They've been checked, I suppose?" he said.

"Hereditry should be all right," Merson replied. "They come from a long line of astrogators."

Bremner grinned. "Is that new, or have you cracked it before?"

"He nearly broke it on the run in," murmured Hofmeyer.

HOFMEYER TOOK THE SHIP up gently on the rockets. Then when it was a thousand feet off the ground he stabbed the vibrodrive and held it until the bell rang. Bremner frowned. Ten seconds' coasting, then the drive went on again. This time Hofmeyer just missed the bell, but there could only have been

a split second in it. As if to show that he could get closer than that, the third time Hofmeyer got an instant more of drive, and still beat the bell. Then Hofmeyer switched to automatic, and the ship built up velocity in five-second bursts.

"Mr. Merson," said Bremner. "And Mr. McCall. I'd like to speak to the captain for a moment."

They hesitated. No single man could be left in control—not even an Engineer. Two officers had to stay at control, or, rarely, one officer and the Engineer. But they knew, and Hofmeyer knew, what Bremner wanted. Hofmeyer had been asking for it. And even Bremner had to give it to him. McCall and Merson went out silently.

"I know," said Hofmeyer cheerfully. "But it's safe. You get a mind like a chronometer after a bit—up to ten seconds anyway. I've never had less than two seconds to spare."

"Sometimes," said Bremner carefully, "a man can lose two seconds. He can remember something important he's forgotten. Someone can speak to him. He can lose his balance or get sudden cramp. A hundred things can happen to prevent him touching a button until it's too late."

"But if he can lose two seconds he can lose three."

"It's not just one and half times as unlikely. It's far more than that. Hofmeyer, don't think I'm just making pettifogging objections. You know what happens if the drive's on too long. Chain reaction. Easy to start and absolutely impossible to stop. For a hundred years we've been trying to find some safe way of destroying the affected part, so that even if the drive was on too long it would be possible to annihilate the whole mechanism and the reaction with it. It can't be done. We only spread the reaction more quickly. Your trouble, Hofmeyer, is that you know no harm can result so long as the drive is cut within 9.54 seconds. You know it doesn't matter, as far as the safety of the ship is concerned, whether it's two seconds or 9.53. So, like an experienced operator in any other sphere, you want to work right to the limit. But remember all the unlikely things that can't be expected on

one trip, but might happen once in two hundred. The button sticks. If you've left three seconds, you've time to cut out the drive with the lever. Anything less, and that's the end of you and the ship."

Hofmeyer had sobered. "All right, Jeff. I know. But in my own defense, that's the first time since I left training school that I kept on drive until the bell rang. What I don't understand is, why do they leave it to human error? Why not make it impossible for the drive to be kept on more than nine seconds? It would be easy enough."

"There's several reasons, and the main one is that every pilot would then rely too much on the safety device. He couldn't help it. He'd know it no longer depended on him. Another reason is that in the end it's safer to trust human beings in a matter like this than machines. Clocks stop, relays wear, wires break or lose their insulation. Maybe you don't know it, but fifty years before you were born the kind of device you mention was tried out. The report was unfavorable. The machine didn't give the safety margin that a human being knowing what could happen does."

"Another thing—just for curiosity. And don't knock my head off if I should know the answer. Why use a button that has to be pushed twice? Wouldn't it be better if it had to be held down? Then if the captain suddenly dropped dead his finger would come off the button."

"There's more difference of opinion about that. The reason it's as is, is that it's supposed to be quicker pressing down than withdrawing pressure, physiologically."

"Well, isn't it?"

"Yes, but there's also the fact that when you press a button it has to go right in and make contact before it has any effect. If you're taking your finger off, contact is broken from the instant the button is allowed to move. But that's not the sort of thing that's likely to matter much. The main thing is simply that pilots must take care."

"All right, Jeff. I suppose I needed that. Are you going to report me?"

"Not if I have your promise—a personal promise to me, nothing to do with

the Spaceman's Code—that you'll take six seconds as your mark."

"It's done. I suppose, though you won't tell me about it, that even the 9.54 figure allows a certain margin of safety which you boys are keeping to yourselves?"

"It's a reasonable assumption," Bremner admitted. "But get this, Hofmeyer. Don't go thinking it's safe to wait for the bell, and then a bit. The margin's been made as small as it reasonably can be—for remember, no one wants to waste the drive. You can call the others back now."

Merson and McCall showed their quality by making no indication that they knew their captain had been on the carpet. They were a good trio, Bremner thought.

IT WENT ON being a nice trip, right to the moment when McCall had his first suspicion of the astrogation correlates. Merson and he were in the control-room with the Engineer at the time.

"Get them to run the whole thing again," Merson suggested. "They'll swear at you, particularly when the same figures come out again, but astrogators have things too easy anyway."

McCall looked at Bremner for permission to leave only the two of them in control. The Engineer nodded. He wasn't worried about the calculations. He had been in space a long time, and he could see nothing wrong with the course. They were cutting close to the sun to intercept the orbit of Venus, but they were at full velocity and looked as if they could be a lot closer without having to worry.

McCall was gone a long time. He brought Hofmeyer back with him. Merson and the Engineer looked up, disturbed now.

"I don't know whether we can get clear," said McCall grimly, "but we're going to have to try."

He explained what had happened, in detail. A junior astrogator had run the calculation. It had looked all right to the second astrogation officer, and he had passed it to his chief. The chief knew it was passed by two good men and that it was supposed to be checked by one of the senior officers. He looked at it, did

a neat little calculation in his head and was satisfied, thinking the disagreement was only what might be expected from his approximations, no more, no less.

"And I did the same," said Merson. "Probably got the same answer."

Hofmeyer cut out the automatic drive and eased the ship round—in six-second bursts, Bremner noticed. Then he went back to automatic. He had done all he could before they had worked out a new course.

They all worked on it independently, the three officers and the Engineer. Part of the blame was his. No authority said he had to check astrogation correlates—only that he should see that it was done. On perhaps fifty out of a hundred and fifty or so trips, long and short, he had worked the whole thing out, painstakingly, without calculators. He had never found a tenth-place decimal mistake. Once he thought he had, and an astrogator, concealing his glee, had demonstrated the error in his mathematics.

Hofmeyer consulted charts and passed them on to the others. He got his result first, and waited patiently while the others completed their calculations.

They coincided exactly. The ship was too close to the sun already. To turn it further than Hofmeyer had done would give the sun a greater pull. What they wanted was more power to put into the existing curve. And they didn't have it. The vibrodrive could be operated to give them over nine seconds at a time, and with a glance at the Engineer, Hofmeyer proceeded to do just that, waiting deliberately each time after the bell rang for what seemed an interminable time. But it was still not enough.

Bremner looked at the three of them. "Leave me," he said. "I'll take over."

"We can't," Hofmeyer remarked quietly.

An Engineer had power of life and death, but no individual, not even an Engineer, could be left in sole control. Bremner thought of argument, but it would take too long.

"Very well," he said. "Leave me with McCall."

There was nothing to show the thought behind that, the fact that the instant be-

fore he spoke he had not known whether he had been about to say Hofmeyer, Merson or McCall.

MERSON and Hofmeyer didn't argue. The Engineer must have some plan, and the longer they waited the less likely it would be to be effective. Silently, they left.

"Take over," said Bremner. "Switch on."

The drive was silent. There were scores of warning devices to show that it was on, but only the lights and buzzers and dials showed it. McCall watched them and waited well over nine seconds. Space officers got so that they didn't need clocks for anything up to ten seconds. They could feel when the drive had to go off, with increasing urgency as 9.54 approached. Hofmeyer was good, but in emergency McCall was little behind him. When he moved his finger at least 9.3 seconds had elapsed.

"No!" exclaimed Bremner. "Leave it!"

Habit was too strong. McCall cut the drive as usual.

"Put it on and leave it," said the Engineer.

McCall looked at him to make sure he had not suddenly gone mad, and did as he was told.

"There's a very big safety margin, then," he murmured. The drive went on for ten seconds, twenty seconds, a minute.

"The whole thing is safety margin," said Bremner. "It's strange how easy it is to get a white lie accepted as plain truth. There's one in psychology too—know it? Everyone knows no one can be hypnotized into doing something his conscious mind abhors—psychologists teach it. And it's simply not true. My theory, though I haven't looked into history to check it, is that some early psychologist, Janet or Charcot, maybe, saw that hypnosis was liable to be outlawed. So he invented that—safety margin, if you like. Everybody believed it, because it was a nice thing to believe. And whenever it occurred to anyone that there ought to be strict control of hypnosis, someone was sure to say, 'But no one can be hypnotized

into . . . ? And everyone relaxed."

"You mean the vibrodrive can be used . . . indefinitely?" McCall asked. "There's no chain reaction?" His face showed the effort it took to believe it. If you believe for forty years that petrol is inflammable, it is a shock when you learn at last that petrol won't burn under any circumstances. "But the ships that have been lost . . . ?"

"Some of them never existed. We created them on paper, as necessary reminders. The rest disappeared for other reasons, some of which we don't know; but it was convenient to put them all down to the same cause. We were grateful for these losses, in a way. Sooner or later someone would realize that no one had ever known a spaceman who was lost, if we relied solely on the paper losses. But when every loss was put down to carelessness with the vibrodrive, every spaceman knew someone who had died in a blowup."

"But why?"

BREMNER was studying the dials on the board. "You'd only have to think for a moment to see that." The extra power had done the job. Bremner sighed. "The vibrodrive is the most terrible weapon ever invented—if it can be used continuously and if there's no limit to the power that can be put into it. Think of it. A fort could be made the armature in a drive that's no drive. It goes on and on, hour after hour. And no one knows anything about it until the fort itself begins to spin. Or a directional drive can be set to an area on a planet maybe a thousand miles square. The force isn't strong enough to move a thing in the area—but after a while storms disrupt it and gales bring everything to a standstill. Or if you really want to start something, you turn your drive on the sun. Or tune it to a thought waveband. You can stop all radio communication, kill thousands at a time, and there's no defense."

Bremner fixed the second engineer with a significant gaze. "And remember," he

said softly, "that these are only the things anyone can think of offhand, without really trying. What uses, could be discovered for the vibrodrive as a weapon in war are beyond all our imaginings.

"So, long ago, scientists and governments got together. They couldn't stop or outlaw the drive. Too many people knew too much about it by that time. All they could do was create a fairy story that might save civilization until it knew better. They had to blow up a few ships then, sacrifices to the good of the greatest number. But they got this myth established. They fixed things so that anyone who started experimenting with the idea that there need be no chain reaction would be betrayed at once, not by high-minded men who cared for the future of humanity, but by any man who wanted to keep his own skin whole. And it's worked."

McCall darted a glance at him, suddenly uneasy. "But you must keep this secret," he muttered.

Bremner smiled. He answered the unspoken question obliquely. "I might get you made an Engineer," he said softly. "There's always that out."

McCall sighed with relief.

"You can cut the drive now," said Bremner.

It had been a hard decision. Hofmeyer—careless, lucky, easy-going. Merson—reliable up to a point, and then utterly irresponsible. McCall—disappointed but not soured, trustworthy but not brilliant.

Bremner watched McCall at the control board, and then suddenly moved. McCall slumped over the board, and the Engineer put the little flat gun back in his pocket.

Yes, it had been a hard decision. It was hardly just that McCall should have to die for the error of others, partly Bremner's own. But life seldom was just. He moved to the door. McCall would be stated to have died from heart failure, and the doctor's examination would show just that.

"Hofmeyer—Merson," he called. "I'm afraid something has happened to McCall."

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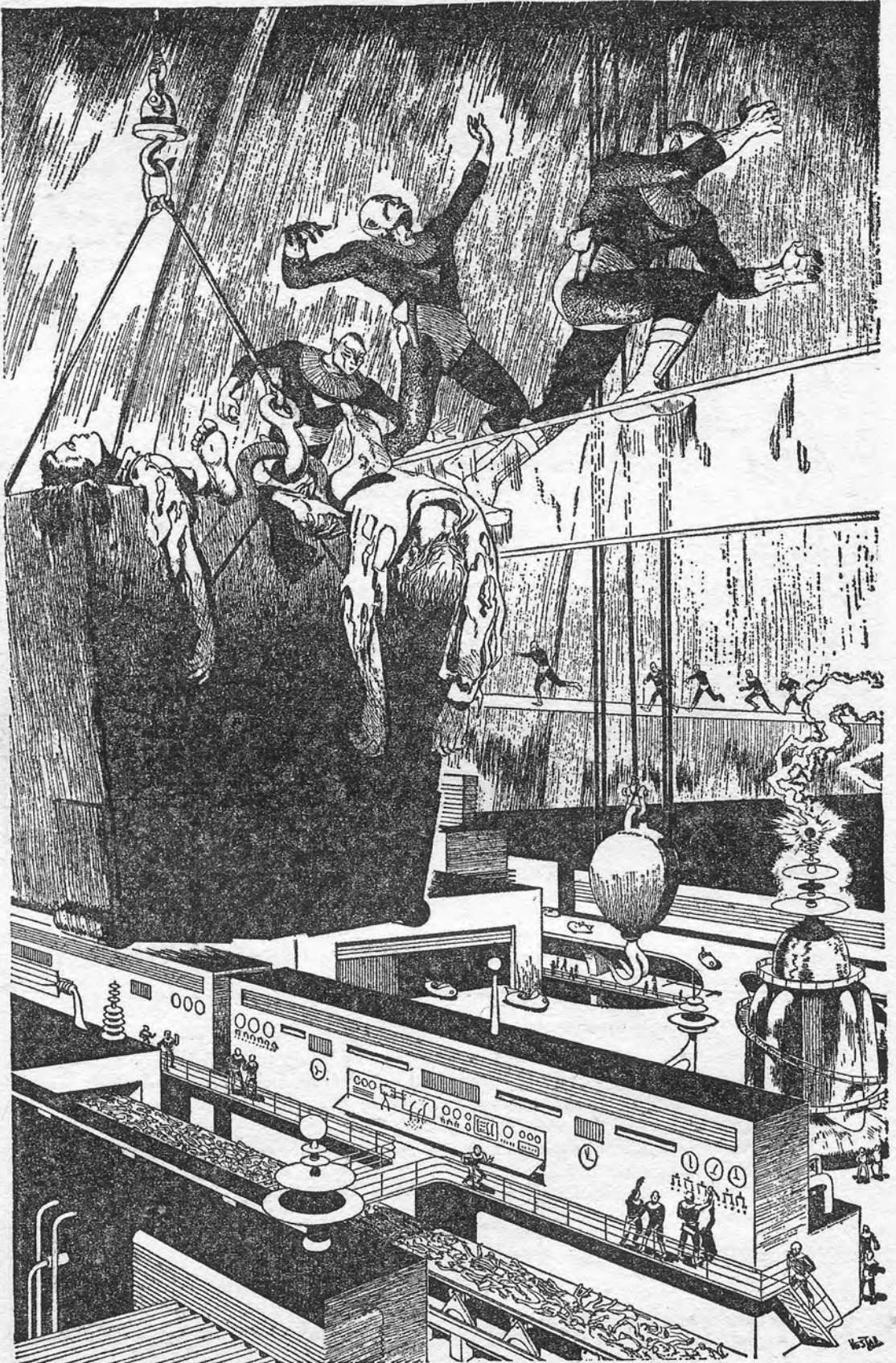
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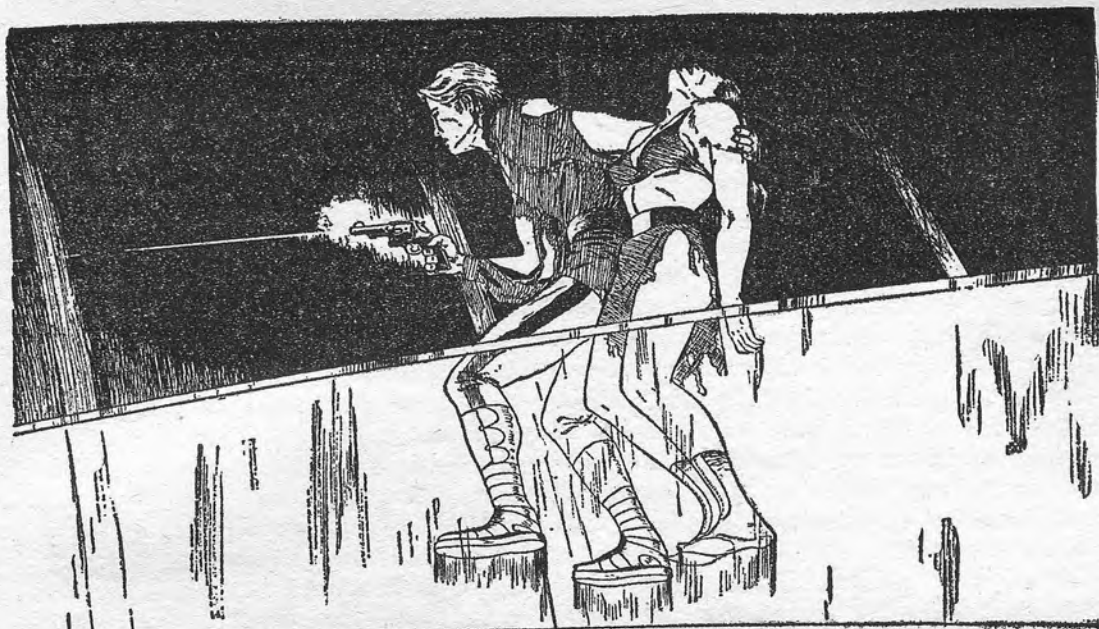
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Danton fired seven times . . . after that he stopped, because the gun was empty . . .



Three tough, cynical fighting-men of Earth—Danton, Keith, Van Ness—rose from their tomb of forgetfulness . . . to find themselves space-wrecked on Mars, the last hope of mankind against the evil and immortal Oligarchs. It was weird, incredible, it was a horrible dream . . . but it was real. Or was it?

MARTIAN NIGHTMARE

a novelet by BRYCE WALTON

HIS NAME WAS BURTON.

John R. Burton.

He was as happy as anyone could expect to be. His wife loved him and he loved his wife. Their children were very well adjusted, as was everyone of course in the New World system.

Burton worked ten hours a week in a coal mine, though the job was merely one demanding the overseeing of machines. The rest of the week was one of leisure devoted to gardening, hobbies, play, music. There was no more hate, no violence, no feelings of insecurity. It wasn't that everyone loved everyone else particularly. It was just that no one was afraid of the future anymore.

Sometimes though, Burton had bad dreams. Sometimes they were very bad. In these dreams it seemed that he was somebody else. Someone who—

But after he woke up he never remembered the dreams, so, he thought, maybe they didn't matter.

Burton guessed that what he was in the dreams was too horrible to remember.

DANTON sat in the chair before the control bank and stared at his hands until they seemed to stop shaking. It had been a long, long way to Mars. A long, long time in which to think.

Of, for example, who had he been for the last hundred years? He had been someone, someone with a name, a job, a ritual, a wife, kids, everything. A valuable worker, a nice round peg in one of countless millions of nice round holes. Who and what you had been for the past hundred years was certainly a question that could bother you, he thought.

He glanced at Keith and Van Ness. It wasn't bothering them now. They had been two other people for a century also—but they weren't bothered now. They had passed out cold on pre-New World bourbon.

They had better snap out of it, Danton thought a little desperately. The ship had about reached Mars. They had better get up from there.

His hands started shaking again. He got a cigarette lighted and the opiate stuff crawling in his throat. He closed his eyes.

For an instant it felt better, hiding in there behind the darkness of his closed lids. But then the thoughts came faster, like schools of irritated fish.

A final war like the last one, destructive beyond memory anyway, was one most of the survivors had been more than happy to forget. They had welcomed reconditioning, the moving into the PLAN, into the New World system of non-violence. People became, largely, depending on the amount of reconditioning necessary, someone else. You can't change solidly laid foundations of thought and still be the same person.

So it was a New World. In it the people were New. Everything starting over again from scratch. A small decentralized population. Beneficent leaders, masters of psychology. No weapons, not even in museums, no conception of war, no fears of tomorrow. There were no enemies on Earth. In fact, the mind was conditioned so that the concept of an enemy was impossible. Outer space was merely a region of lovely stars on clear nights.

Of the few New System soldiers left, most were willing to be reconditioned. Three of them hadn't been willing. Richard Danton, Don Keith, Dwight Van Ness. They had degenerated into drunken pariahs, people without a group with which to identify themselves, lonely, lost, aging and ailing. Finally they did accept reconditioning. Not because they wanted to. But because they had to or go completely insane. Seers, Secretary of Social Security, said this was bad, but that they might be able to bring about an adjustment. It would be difficult, he said, because of involuntary conditioning, but he would see what he could do.

Evidently he had done all right. Danton couldn't remember the subsequent hundred years. But he had been someone. They had blotted him out, fixed him up with another name, twisted ganglia, altered synapsis, probed lobotomy here and there. Everything went, name, identity, the entire business inside and out.

But all the time, Richard Danton had been there, a pattern. A circuit disconnected. When they had needed him, they had merely twisted ganglia back, altered

synopsis, probed lobotomy again. And after a hundred years here he was again, resurrected, like a ghost. And when they were done with him, after his assignment was finished, he would go back into the grave, and that someone else would go on living.

But maybe not this time. Maybe not again. This could be a dangerous assignment for him and Keith and Van Ness. They might never get back to earth, and that might be all right—for them.

He would rather die fighting, as a soldier, than keep on living as someone else, someone he didn't even know.

According to Seers there was a chance that the final war had not been quite so final. The Oligarch Council had evidently escaped earth in secretly constructed spaceships, destined for Mars. If they had actually gotten to Mars, and had survived, they were there still, and it would be only a matter of time until they returned to Earth and destroyed it.

Other factors made it even more complicated. Earth couldn't defend itself, for one thing. It had no weapons. It had no human being capable of manning a weapon if it had one. Seers had said that the sanity of the world depended on absolute secrecy. The population was never to know anything at all, never to suspect that they might be threatened. Such knowledge, Seers said, would destroy the New System. The people weren't psychologically capable of receiving knowledge of insecurity, not for a long time yet.

But what bothered Danton was—*who have I been for the last hundred years?*

KEITH was crawling across the floor, gasping at an oxygen inhalor. The small, thin-faced and cynical soldier got up and sat down. He grinned. "Are we in Valhalla yet, Captain?"

"You still take this whole thing as a joke, Keith?"

"The psyche boys are good," Keith said. "Plenty good. And I still say this is just delusion they're feeding us, on suggestion tape, after good shots of hypnosene."

"Why would they do that?"

"They tried to recondition us, make

good little workers out of us. But it didn't take. We don't remember, sure—but that's no sign we were successfully changed. I say we weren't. I got it all figured out, Captain. They're killing us. Mercifully, of course, making us die happy. But we're dying just the same, dying in a dream. A dream of soldiering, of heroics, of sacrifice and high honor. Just the way we'd want it. And instead of waking up, we'll really die, in the line of duty. Like a good soldier should."

"But—"

"I'm not blaming them. I think it's a fine idea. For one thing, we aren't sure it's not really happening, so we'll have to accept it as truth. It's the real thing any way you look at it." Danton saw the grin fade slowly across the mask of Keith's face. "Are we really here, Captain?"

Danton peered into the scope again. "Yes," he whispered.

"Mars, the god of war," Keith said, "awaits his favorite sons."

A big dull reddish ball, like an eyeball, a blood-shot eye. The cone of its giant shadow streaming out, a quadrant of the heavens. And then all at once, as if the eye were closing, it darkened except where the sun splattered down on its far half, a pool of sickly light radiating outward into dissipating orange and brown.

Danton thought of the Oligarchs down there, or what remained of them. The Oligarchs and the slaves they would have brought with them in their ships. In a hundred years they could have multiplied considerably. And the Oligarchs themselves, the last of the old world type of faithless human madness—essentially amoral, no empathy, tremendous egotism—filled with the old ideas of class superiority. They destroyed with utter casualness. What advanced stage had their paranoid culture reached in a century? It wasn't something one wanted to think about.

The planet was reaching up like a clenched red fist. He felt the impulse to duck. Sweat ran down his face, itched along his ribs. A hundred years was a long time to be someone else, and now Danton was wondering if he dared trust

himself anymore as a soldier. His hands moved again over the controls.

The wrecked Oligarch ship had been found off the Mindanao Deeps by a sub-sea exploring party, brought up, reconditioned, studied. There were records and documents in it, and from these Seers made his decision. He brought back Danton. In secret, of course; send them to out of living graves. They were trained, made into astrogators, cosmologists. Everything in absolute secrecy, of course. And after the ship blasted off for Mars, only the three of them and Seers retained any knowledge that there had been a ship at all. The reconditioners had fixed that up. Those who had found it, the scientists who had studied it, no one remembered a thing.

"Find out what you can, then come back," Seers had said. "Don't fight. If you fight, you might never come back. We would never know then what to do. We can prepare ships like this one, Danton. In secret, of course, send them to Mars. But we don't want to take a chance like that unless we have to. If activity like that ever leaked out to the people, that would be the end of the New System. A sudden blast of insecurity would wreck our delicately balanced new order."

It was a fine ship, Danton thought. The Oligarchs knew machines. They worshiped them. The ship was also a monstrous arsenal, a hurtling fountain of destruction, loaded with hydrogen bombs and something called a proton cannon that could curl a planet up in space like a moth in a flame.

Power, death, throbbing around him, hot and terrible . . . the ordnance console key inches from his fingertips. Keith had said he didn't want to go back to Earth. Not and face all that business again. Why not let go, blast, die right here when the attack came? That was a soldier's way!

"I'm going to throw her into an orbit," Danton said.

He saw the weird swirling light of the moons then, the moons of Mars, as the ship slowed in its orbit. Heavy cloud-banks drifting low in colossal valleys. And then he saw the ships. Three of

them rising like giant silver beetles.

HE DIDN'T KNOW whether he deliberately bungled and failed to lift the ship out of its orbit in time, or whether—but psychologically there weren't such things as accidental blunders. Anyway, now it was too late. Maybe everyone on earth would be wiped out because of it, but Danton blundered, moved too slowly. From the ships a white cloud of released energy flashed, blinded, billowed. His ship bucked and swerved and lurched.

Keith whispered tensely, "I'll take that ordnance, Captain. *I'll take it!*"

Van Ness weaved upright, sucking at an oxygen capsule, mumbling.

Danton said, "They're not firing now. They're curious, maybe. Let them get in close. They'll come in, try to identify us. It must have just occurred to them that this is one of their old ships. Then we fire, clear our course, and run."

"Run, run, get your gun!" Van Ness mumbled.

Danton swung the view-plate. The ships hovered behind, slightly above, coasting, waiting, watching. Danton laughed aloud. For a hundred years he had been dead. Now he was alive. Really alive. His fingers were hot and wet as he gripped the T-bar, and he saw that the ships were improved types. He couldn't escape back to earth now, even if he wanted to. And he didn't have time now to figure out whether he wanted to or not. It was too late now for thinking. He preferred it that way. He said, "They're coming in close now. Keith, this is it!"

Keith nestled into the ordnance chair like a bird. His body was tight with anticipated pleasure. His fingers hooked, spread, began to tremble individually. Death was there, all around.

Without looking up, seemingly without reason, he asked, "You were engaged to marry a very pretty girl when the war ended, weren't you, Captain? Someone named Mara?"

Danton hadn't forgotten. "That's right. I couldn't explain it to her—why I wouldn't be reconditioned. She married someone else. A cybernetics engineer, named George."

"The hell with them, all of them!" Keith said. "You wouldn't want to go back there. That's what they all think about us, Captain. While they need us we're great guys, and afterwards—don't touch. No, Captain, whether this is delusion or the real thing, this is how we were meant to go. We're lucky, Captain!"

Keith manipulated the ordnance keys. Danton's eyes went blind before the incredible flash of kinetic energy release. His eyes closed. Music, lifting, whirling round and round and he was rocking with gentle joyous softness in a cradle of death . . .

But Danton got his hands up against the darkness, held on to it, pushed it this way and that, got it away from his eyes. He crawled back into the chair, blinked into the viewer. He didn't see the ships now, anywhere. Only the great clenched fist of the war-world, the red world, rushing up, growing with a silent onrushing fury, looming, broadening.

Keith's fingers dug into Danton's shoulder. "I got 'em, Captain! Burned them out like ants on a hot plate. They burned so beautiful . . ."

The ship had suffered from the repercussion; nothing responded right. Danton shoved more intensifier units into the stern tubes, straightened her a little with a couple of bursts from the steering jets, then power-dived with the tubes roaring.

He fought the controls. The numbness, the roaring, the intolerable rising temperature of the walls. Fighting for some sort of balance to get the ship hurtling in at least a low-level orbit. The walls quivered, then the whining, sighing, falling through a dense sea of twisting vapor.

Danton watched the altimeter, the power gauges, manipulated the power-tube stops. His body was an unfeeling, unconscious circuit of responses. Somehow he got the ship at vertical. The plate brought the landscape up to him, presented it to him like the unveiling work of a mad artist. Up-pushing violence of mountain walls, a valley, forest, dense alien looking stuff, thick and high and entangled and phosphorescent with a pinkish glow drifting like the reflection of a vast roaring furnace.

And—a senseless glimpse of something archaic, too primitive to be real. Only a glimpse, so that immediately after, he decided he must have seen something else. A long trail of armored cars. Amtracs, it seemed, bristling with ancient types of guns. Armored cars. Amtracs. A few hundred years ago they had had them in Earth museums.

The ship roared and shook. The scream of metal penetrated Danton's skull, became part of an iron ball grinding in his head . . .

No sentience possessed him now, no mind, no body, no hate or joy or hope or confused indecision about his twisted motivations. He thought simply, death possesses me.

BUT DEATH was only nearby. Life was a powertube, dimming to a dull yellow, flickering dangerously. Movement was without real substance. Shapes, voices vague and distant. He heard Van Ness and Keith talking once. Someone yelled. There was the burning sigh of the electronic rifles they had evidently been able to salvage.

The light brightened slowly. He sat up. Keith and Van Ness stood beside him. Clothing torn, faces scratched and bleeding. Keith's mouth was tight, his jaw muscles rigid and pale. He turned, held his rifle steady. Van Ness wanted to know if Danton felt all right now, anything else wrong besides the knock on the head.

Danton said he didn't know. "I thought it would be cold here." He was sweating. The air was muggy, quiet. The lake was huge before him, the mountains beyond it gigantic and blue-misted. The lake was glassy and still. Behind him was thick forest, reddish leaves, high trees, thickly entangled, odd flowers, shadows. A feeling of things alive—but of a cautious kind of living. Little eyes waiting and watching in the bushes, on the fringes.

"Out of this valley, on the desert, it would be plenty cold," Keith said.

Danton asked then, "What happened?"

Keith watched the forest warily. "We hit the lake out there, had to swim in."

"So now what?" Van Ness wanted to know.

"We still have a kind of advantage," Danton said. "They don't know who we are, or where. They know nothing."

"Neither do we," Keith said. "There's a chance Seers was wrong about the Oligarchs. Maybe their culture has changed. Maybe they don't intend to attack Earth."

"Their ego couldn't stand to forget their defeat," Danton said. "They had a highly advanced technology that could conceivably control any environment, rather than the other way round. In some ways they were ahead of the rest of the world."

Keith grinned. "That's right, Captain. You're so right."

Danton looked Keith in the eyes. "You mentioned earlier, something about sometimes thinking you should be an Oligarch. You really feel that way, Keith?"

"Why not? We didn't have a choice whose side we would fight on. We were conditioned from the time we were old enough to think, and we fought the Oligarchs for fifty years. Three-quarters of the world's population rubbed out. And then we had a world that didn't want us—unless we were three other people. We fought to destroy the old values, help build a new society. But let's face it, Captain—those old values we destroyed were our own! We helped destroy our own kind of world. So what does it mean? It means we should have fought *for* the Oligarchs, and that we really sympathize with them. Their system is a war system, probably still is. With them, there would always be a place for a fighting man. A soldier among the Oligarchs could expect honor and privilege."

Danton had nothing to say. He had thought in a similar way more than once.

Van Ness said. "Wrong, Keith. We've committed ourselves, and now we have to go on to the end of the road."

The words drifted with the wind across the glassy lake. You walked along the road, Danton thought, while the road was visible and you walked it to the end. And neither road nor the end was your own choice. Maybe the only glory was in walking it bravely. But maybe, as Keith had said, they had been on the wrong road. The Oligarchs, had they conquered, would have always provided an honorable place

for a soldier. Banners, flags, women, the rise of battle fever, the ecstatic explosions of power, the enemy dead.

Keith fired once into the forest wall. A shape fluttered away over the tops of the trees, then fell, crying at first, then screaming like a woman. "We've been followed by those things for about a mile along the shore edge," Keith said. "They don't seem friendly. They're intelligent. Big, with wings, and old-style weapons. Very old. Explosive powder stuff."

"Martians," said Van Ness.

DANTON said, "I caught a look at some human beings just before we hit the lake. Maybe I was seeing things that weren't, but there seemed to be ancient amtracs, old-style cannon, marching men."

Keith nodded. "This whole business is crazy. A highly advanced technology with spaceships in the air—and centuries-old amtracs and gun-powder on the ground! If this is all a dream and we're really on earth in a psyche-cell, somebody's got a devil of an imagination!"

An explosion, then the whine of steel missiles sent the three on their stomachs among the small sharp shells. Danton raked the forest with flash-gun fire.

Finally Danton said. "We have to move."

"Without a plan of action?" Keith said.

"No. Our plan is the same. Find out all we can and return to Earth. Seers has to know. He doesn't want to prepare a secret attack unit to send up here unless he's absolutely sure it's necessary."

"Even if we live long enough to find out something, how do we get back to Earth? By teleportation?"

"We'll have to get a ship, or try," Danton said.

The sound of explosions drifted to them, the flat reverberating roar of bombs. Van Ness looked to the right and said, "That way. And not so far either."

* * *

Ten miles from the lake, the three crawled into the dense brush beside the trail. They could hear now the approach of laboring gasoline motors, the shouts of men. Danton waited. He waited tensely,

as though somewhere inside of him was a knowledge of what he waited for.

The moons moved across the high valley. The light was clear, still, with a reddish cast. Purple shadows bent and swayed in the slight and cooler wind. Through the odd light, a column of wheezing amtracs came. Broad wheels grinding, coughing engines, voices murmuring, bodies wearily slogging, humans, weary ghosts.

Van Ness whispered, "Looks as though they're in retreat."

Danton nodded. Van Ness said, "The wounded, the dead and the dying. I guess you could say we've come home again."

Danton slowly licked his lips. The fifty-years war against the Oligarchs hadn't been like this. His war had been swift and clean and shiny as the metal cities that went with the bright hot flames of atomic fission. Now the smells of sweating men drifted to him, the smell of blood and of death.

Weary, white-faced, shabbily-uniformed men filing by. Many hobbled, wounded, swinging along in a freakish dance. Crude stretchers carrying others, somewhat resentfully. Amtracs hauled still others, some wounded, others dying, some already dead. The sounds of bombardment edged nearer through the moonlight. The column moved faster. And Danton noticed then that the women were there, uniformed, hardly distinguishable from the men.

The ground jarred. Projectiles screamed. An amtrac rose up in a blossoming cone, fell apart, metal shining and bodies disintegrating. A small detachment swung in squarely toward Danton's position. The three men faded back into deeper concealment.

A tired, thickly-bearded line-officer barked an order. "Thomas! Renin! Take the bodies away at once. According to the map, there's a disposal mart half a mile east!"

The torn bodies were rolled onto stretchers and carried into the shadows.

Danton thought: some pestilence probably. They have to get rid of the bodies fast. But why under the stress of immediate attack?

The line-officer was saying, "Men.

We've been under constant attack for eighty-five days. Our survival depends on orderly retreat until we combine forces with Rudolph's Second Army."

A woman stopped walking. Her face was streaked with dirt. She yelled, "Why doesn't the Power give us some real weapons? With a real power gun we could kill every Redbird that—"

The line-officer brought his revolver up, fired. The back of the woman's head exploded as the flattened bullet came out. The officer's face twitched. "Barrows! Select a man, take her to the disposal mart."
"Yes, sir."

After the body was gone, Danton stared dazedly at the spot where the woman had fallen. The officer was saying, "Any reference to the Powers other than that necessitated by duty and reverence, is punished immediately by execution." Then the officer sat down and looked blankly into the moonlight. That was a quotation from a manual, Danton thought. But the officer—hadn't meant it. He hadn't wanted to shoot the woman. That might be very important to consider.

Presently the officer stood up. "Men. The Redbirds will follow up this bombardment with a winged attack. They always do when the moons are right. We'll remain hidden along the trail and take them as they come in. They've never learned the strategy of ambush. Make ready for the attack. Be alert!"

DANTON MOTIONED and the three of them retreated slowly, as silently as possible. They had crawled probably a hundred yards when the attack came.

The Redbirds were red. They also might be considered birds, with a reptilian dominance. Their wingspread was enormous, and their bodies were very nearly human to look at—with an alien deviation that made them seem grotesque when they really weren't grotesque at all. In a way they were beautiful. Red feathers and gold-flecked eyes.

And then the air was torn apart. Explosions, rushing bodies, breaking wings, burning feathers and singeing flesh and hissing screams. The moonlight fluttered with winged shadows.

"This is real war," Danton heard Van Ness yell. "Hand to hand. The real thing."

Danton couldn't see either Van Ness or Keith. He fought, firing wildly at shadows and substance. The real thing. It was strange, he thought, but in that fifty years of the bloodiest war, the most destructive in history—he'd never killed anything hand to hand. It had been coldly impersonal, that war. A million here, a million there. Nine million at once. And nothing remaining except charred craters. No bodies around. No one crying either. Nothing at all. But this—

Van Ness's fading scream chopped down like hot steel. Danton couldn't fire, afraid of burning Van Ness, who was being lifted up by a Redbird. Van Ness was gone almost before Danton realized that he was being carried up and away over the tree tops.

Danton crawled around in the flame-blasted clearing. His rifle was gone. The Redbird's powerful wings had slammed it into shadows and brush. He looked for Keith.

Keith!

He didn't find Keith either.

He lay still, very still. Several soldiers were poking around in the tangled debris of bodies and blood and torn brush. It was so still all at once. No sounds at all except the hard breathing of men. No wings thrashing, or screams penetrating.

Danton played dead. He was surprised at how easy it was.

He recognized the officer's voice. "Load everything that looks human in a couple of amtracs and drag them to the disposal mart."

"Yes, sir."

Motors idling. Men lifting and grunting and cursing. Danton opened his eyes just a little, stared upward into the broad river of sky far up between the mountains:

"How many casualties?"

"Not bad. We lost a quarter maybe. We probably burned down a thousand Redbirds."

"Where do they all come from? We'll never kill them all. They keep coming and they'll always keep coming."

"They're supposed to come from across

the white desert. We'll never find out. Anyone striking out across that desert never comes back."

The officer. "On the double, men!"

"Why does it go on?"

"Who knows?"

"Will we win?"

"No one can win. The Redbirds will keep coming. We keep killing!"

"The Powers are happy though. Fifty bodies to the marts. Counting yesterday's casualties, that's over three hundred to the marts since this battle started."

"And how many since the war started?"

"Who knows? When wasn't there a war, pal? What the hell would a guy do around here if there wasn't a war on?"

Danton felt hands on his ankles and wrists. He forced limpness down his body and felt himself tossed among the dead. He was hardly noticed at all, dead or otherwise. His uniform was torn, covered with blood and dirt until it looked like any other uniform; He must look pretty bad to be taken for dead.

Swarms of insects, drawn by the blood, settled in clouds. The amtrac jerked forward. Danton saw the drivers sitting up there like gray plaster figurines. One of the men started to mumble a song, a kind of chant, more like a dirge.

"Shut up! You'll get us shot!"

"Borkan's back there. He can't hear."

Danton listened. His stomach went hollow and icy at the song. It was old. It was full of ghosts, ghost treads, and ghost shadows marching out of the past, out of the present.

*"The men of the tattered battalion,
which fights 'till it stumbles and dies,
Dazed with the scream of the battle,
the din and damned glare and the
cries,*

*The men with the broken heads backward,
and the blood running out of
their eyes!"*

"Shut up!"

*"The Powers have all of the music,
the glory and color and gold;
Ours be a handful of ashes, a bountiful
mouthful of mould."*

"Shut up, I tell you! We'll be shot! If you—"

"Of the maimed, of the halt and the blind in the rain and the cold—"

The song faded slowly, died out. It seemed to die of weariness, to run down. And Danton kept on hearing it—circling mournfully through his head like swirling muddy water round a stake.

One thing he was seeing now, graphically so that he would never forget: Wars weren't all the same. Sometimes fighting men hated war. He had known only the swift clean war, the septic war, a gigantic street-cleaning machine with a ray gun in front and a rotary brush in the back, with individuals turned abruptly into the earth from which they had come, and no one knowing the difference.

But in different times and places, wars could be different.

THE AMTRAC STOPPED. "Let's get 'em out of here!"

Danton was thrown up, over, out and down, and other forms fell around him. He heard a moan from something not quite dead. Metal clanged. Machinery whirred. He thought of the mart, disposal mart. He thought of dropping through a hole maybe into a pit of fire, or into a vat of something. All through him as from an intravenous injection—horror.

He looked. A mound of metal, as though a bald giant had been buried up to his eyebrows. Metal corroded with green slime. And there, an opening appearing as heavy metal doors slid open. A rail-car with a spherical truck bed emerging from the opening and waiting with an eery suggestion of eager sentience in its cold metal.

The men throwing the bodies into the railcar.

"What happens to them?"

"Who knows? No one ever hears of them again. Morlan mentioned it the other day. He said the Powers demand sacrifice, like gods maybe. I'm not superstitious or anything, but—"

"Why not? Something's taking care of us, making us move around, dance on

the invisible wires. Maybe the Powers are gods. Why not? They're supposed to live forever. Never grow old."

"Push the button! Push it! Get them out of here. Wait, here's another one."

Danton felt himself plunging, striking, rolling among the other dead logs. He didn't move. Some of the horror was dissolving, because this whole disposal system was too elaborate. There was something basic and symptomatic about it, and Danton felt that it was a key. Van Ness and Keith were gone. He couldn't think about them now. Their disappearance had seemed so very final. He was alone. He still had his duty, and he was curious. He wanted to find out what he could, although the idea of somehow getting a ship and returning to Earth with what information he could garner was no longer part of his thoughts. You could take advantage of the impossible if it happened perhaps. You couldn't anticipate it as a basis for action.

But he was still curious, and that was part of his duty. The Oligarchs, the Powers, seemed interested in gathering in the blossoms of death from the fields. Very interested. One of these soldiers had said the Powers would be happy. Surely then the bodies wouldn't simply go into a vat or a flame.

"Here she goes!"

Darkness. Silent movement whirring, rapidly accelerating speed, hot wind sighing dry past his face. The body of the dead girl, her body tight up against him in the darkness, moved a little. She sighed brokenly.

Danton felt around, found the belt, holster, ancient revolver he had spotted earlier. He removed it, buckled it around his own waist. He was careful not to raise his head. Above him, close, he felt a ceiling rushing back.

Feeling the girl beside him, the girl soldier, still alive somehow, he thought of Mara who had found him unbearable because he still had the mind of a soldier and had refused to be reconditioned. She had grown to hate him—no, not hate, revulsion. It was natural. She had been reconditioned to hate anything suggesting violence.

Well, that was long ago and far away. Further away than long ago.

The car slowed, tilted. Doors slid open and a soft blue radiance filtered through. Danton clung to the metal and stared down a gleaming metal chute. He began to hear incoherent sounds coming out of his own throat, uncontrollably, as the car tilted further. He grabbed desperately, hung on as the car dumped its load into the chute, down, down into a giant pit. The pit was surrounded with high mesh walls and a steel rail. And behind the rail a circular walkway, with panels, or doors, spaced at regular intervals. Maybe a hundred or more doors.

And cranes, cranes lifting metal mouths full of the squirming mass in the pit, lifting them to the railing and onto moving belts that carried them through the walls and out of sight.

To what? *God, to what?* Danton thought.

DANTON clung frantically to the empty car. Sweat made a stream down his chest, though the pit was refrigerated. Cold. The metal was frosted, it shone like ice. And in the pit some of the bodies moved and made sounds. The girl soldier. She got to her knees.

Danton tried to crawl back, back up the slippery metal of the railcar. He sought darkness back there, a place to hide. Then he stopped trying and felt his fingers loosening as he watched the girl. Her face was unrecognizable behind a mask of blood and dirt. But she was standing up now. She raised one hand. She looked up at the many expressionless doors.

The strength with which she forced the keening death-song from her body was not the strength of her body. It came from someplace else. From outside, from memory, from a last defiance that could no longer suffer punishment, from the buried ghosts of thousands of years that had died.

*"You sing of the great clean guns,
that belch forth death at will.
Oh, but the wailing mothers, the lifeless forms and still!"*

Danton's hands let go, and he slid down the chute.

*"... sing the songs of the billowing
flags, the bugles that cry before.
Oh, but the skeletons flapping rags,
the lips that speak no more."*

He scarcely felt the bodies under him. He looked at the woman singing and he listened.

*"... sing the clash of bayonets and
sabres that flash and hew,
Will you sing of maimed ones, too,
who die and die anew?"*

Danton stumbled. He reached her side.

*"Sing of feted generals who bring
the victory home.
Oh... but the broken bodies that
drip like honey-comb!"*

Danton touched her shoulder. Her uniform hung in tatters. A line of red ran down her torn arm. She sank to her knees. He could barely hear the last two lines of her song.

*"... sing of hearts triumphant,
long ranks of marching men.
And will you sing of the shadowy
hosts that never march again?"*

He lifted her and stood, holding her like a child. Now her eyes were closed. She would have a pretty face, he thought. The army uniform cap fell away and her hair tumbled down over his hand and arm like red dust. Her lips moved. She whispered: "No one hears. No one—ever hears."

"I hear you," Danton said.

But you don't hear me, he thought. Her body was limp. She's dead, he thought.

The crane dipped, steel jaws champing, steel-thewed neck stiff and superior, now lifting.

Danton put the girl down, leaped, caught the metal lips, clung as the crane lifted, swung, caught the rail, pulled himself over onto the walkway. His breath

was hot and his lungs burned.

He slid the ancient revolver free and examined it quickly. Its mechanism was simple enough. He twirled the cylinder, removed the safety catch. Doors? Where did they go? None of the doors seemed inclined to tell him; nothing moved around him except the crane and the conveyor belt.

He walked round the circular way once, came back. It would seem that he must crawl onto the belt to escape the pit. That would take him—somewhere. It seemed that he was destined to follow the dead wherever the dead went in this place where the dead seemed to have lost the last faint tinge of dignity or honor.

Silently, simultaneously, the doors slid open. A man was born from the darkness of each black rectangle. Bronze giant men in tunics that glittered like finely woven metallic silk. There was some variation, yet they were amazingly alike, expressionless, cold, removed. Far removed.

Danton heard the conveyor belt moving softly, swiftly behind him, carrying its macabre load. The revolver felt heavy in his hand. Then, from somewhere, a voice crackled in the pit like ice shifting.

"Bring this soldier to the Council Room."

A man's voice, without any particular characteristic other than one of detachment. It might have been the voice of a machine, or something on a tape.

Danton fired seven times. After that he stopped because the gun was empty of cartridges. Each time he fired, a man fell soundlessly, without dramatics, calmly. Each time, the man next in line stepped forward to receive the next bullet. After the last bullet was gone, three other men lifted the fallen bodies and placed them on the conveyor belt. Five others surrounded Danton. They did not touch him. If the episode had had any emotional significance at all for these men, Danton hadn't seen it. Further resistance was futile; the firing of the revolver had been only token defiance anyway.

Danton felt the refrigerated air of the pit clinging to him as the men marched him down a long tubular hall walled in dull metal.

THE ROOM was large, metal-vaulted, brittle. Mesh grid screens surrounded him at a distance, and the useless revolver hung cold and damp in his hands. Three men and three women sat behind a half-moon of bright silver suspended from the high ceiling by shimmering strands of silver, like very fine wire.

As architecture, the things he had seen were the final stage in constructivism. An elimination of the sense of weight and solidity of traditional forms. Everywhere were space constructions of metal sheets, glass, plastic, beams of angular light, some vaguely related to human figures, largely as abstracts of geometrical shapes, technological forms.

Environment and people were each a balanced projection of the other. The general effect was one of machine-like precision, brittle coldness in which man and machine had reached emotionless synthesis.

One of the men said, "Rhone, will you question this?"

The woman's voice was musical, but without warmth, like a nicely constructed music-box. "What is your name?"

He did not answer.

"You should answer, soldier. Voluntarily. I can assure you that we have ways to force your mind to give up all of its secrets."

She waited. He did not answer.

"Your actions have been peculiar, soldier. We are interested."

Danton thought fast. They had spaceships. Three of them he had seen, the three they no longer had, thanks to Keith. If he admitted being from Earth it would certainly incite immediate reprisal, and Seers wasn't ready. He wouldn't be ready for a long time. He would never be ready to receive an attack from Mars. His idea was to send a secret force to attack Mars, so that the New World populace would never know about it.

A well-planned series of lies, elaborate, complex, provoking. Find out facts. Try to postpone or avert any immediate attack on Earth. Reduce things to as individual a level as possible. He had one advantage: from his observations to this point, the Oligarch culture seemed not to have

changed its basic pattern. Evolution had merely moved that pattern forward a hundred years, solidified its static essence. Cold efficiency, egomania, class superiority—the system supported by scientific method and a fanatical, one-track dogma based on paranoia.

He had fought this force a long time. He thought he understood it.

"Your name, soldier. Your unit and rank."

"Danton West," he said. He remembered the line-officer's words, a quick frame of reference. "Captain. Second Army. That was a while back. More lately of the Revolutionary Forces."

"Revolutionary—"

Danton saw their expressions alter, almost imperceptibly, but alter they did under the masks. When that fifty-years war had ended, none of the central ruling clique, the Oligarch Council, had been found. And one thing seemed incredible to Danton as he stood there:

These three men and women seemed to be the same individuals who had made up that Oligarch Council on Earth a hundred years before.

That was logical enough. Except—

They hadn't aged at all. There had been no sign of change.

That soldier back there had said, "... *They're supposed to live forever. They never grow old.*"

"That is impossible, of course," the woman Rhone said. "Now—explain your uniform. It is unorthodox. In fact it is a duplication of the uniforms worn by officers of a certain army of another time and place of which you should know nothing. Can you explain this?"

"I can and will. We do know about those certain armies in another time and place. A hundred years ago. Earth. You think we have forgotten?"

SILENCE. The woman's eyes widened, only slightly, though a tremendous inner emotional surge was obvious. One of the men leaned forward. Danton was relieved. He felt a bit more secure, seeing even this slight degree of individuality and emotion. There was the psychological effect, he knew, of feeling a subtle lessen-

ing of the unification of forces against him.

They hadn't aged, he thought. The same ones, without grayness, without wrinkles, without any sign of physical degeneration.

The woman said, not to him, voicing her thoughts, "Impossible. No one beyond the Walls can possibly know of the past. We took great pains to assure that—Mars is the only world they have ever known, the only world that ever was. Our world."

"We know," Danton said. "Others know too. The Revolutionists know. I'm telling you this much because nothing you can do can stop it. It's developed too far. Revolt. Did you think it would ever be stamped out?"

Beneath the masks, Danton could see concern, incredulous concern. Maybe they had thought they had set up an impervious regime. And maybe they actually had. But there was doubt here. Just enough of a doubt to play upon. One thing he knew, and that was that there was resentment out there beyond the Walls, whatever the Walls were, and those songs, hopeless as they were, had been songs of revolt against oppression. The germ was out there . . .

"You have a choice," the woman said. "Tell us everything you know. That, or suffer the kind of pain we cannot describe to you, a kind you will find out for yourself."

He could imagine. The Oligarchs had been efficient at everything. That had been their god—efficiency, mastery of the machines, the maintenance forever of the master-elite over the rabble.

Like an amoeba, the social forces of the world had split, the old values solidifying, the new values pulling away, coming back again, overrunning, defeating. But the Oligarchs had fled and here they had developed their particular systems to some final state.

Whatever they had waiting for him, to open his mind, it would be efficient.

She said, "You entered our Walls voluntarily. Why?"

She said it as though it were totally inconceivable that anyone beyond the Walls should seek to enter voluntarily. Maybe it was inconceivable.

"Curiosity," Danton said. He managed

to smile at each of them in turn. "There have been so many rumors growing old, becoming legends and myths. I came in to find out for myself."

"You do not expect to escape?"

Danton shrugged. "I don't care one way or the other. I had hoped to remain here." He waited. He thought. Finally he added, "I had hoped to become one of you."

"What?" one of the men said in a whisper.

The man on Rhone's right said, "A curious type. Obviously he has insight. One might almost think—"

The woman said, "We can speculate later, if we have to, Weisser. Right now we are interested in facts. Facts!"

She kept looking into Danton's eyes. Her own eyes had a curious green quality. She was beautiful, of course, physically. No one had ever denied the physical beauty of the Oligarchs. Hereditary physical beauty was important to them. They developed it by selective breeding and—no one had figured out by what other means.

There was the indication of an edge to the woman's voice now. "Three of our ships vanished. Do you know anything about those ships, soldier?"

Danton smiled. "Yes," he said, and paused for perhaps five seconds. "We destroyed them."

The silence then was longer than five seconds. It was very long. It lengthened until it was painfully heavy. The woman's voice was a whisper. "How could the rabble do that? It isn't true, of course. It couldn't be true."

"You'll never find the ships," Danton said. "There aren't any ships now. We blew them to pieces. Our scientists did it. I don't know where the scientists and their secret laboratories are. I don't know too much about the inner workings of the revolt. But I know some things you might find very valuable."

"But, Weisser, it is impossible, isn't it?"

"Of course. The man is obviously lying. They couldn't possibly have evolved any such weapon. They couldn't even have developed the concept of revolt. Their cultural patterns, their attitudes and hereditary capabilities are set. They can't change."

"Then how do we classify this soldier?"

"Why bother? Some sort of crazy deviant. We put him under the Scanners now, then dispose of him. His body has some value."

The woman said, "There still remains the question of what happened to our ships."

Danton thought: the Oligarch Council operates on a strictly top-down principle. Who is the extreme top? The woman, Rhone? Or the man, Weisser? One of them certainly. That might be important to know.

Danton dipped into the small supply packet at his waist, lifted a food-capsule to his mouth. He looked first at Weisser, then at the woman. "I can tell you a lot. And if you don't find out what is happening out there very soon, you'll be destroyed. Like those ships. I'll bargain with you. Let me remain here, enjoy certain privileges I've thought about often when I was crawling around out there in the mud. Show me what you have here, let me understand. For that, I'll give you valuable information you need to survive."

Weisser said coldly, "We—bargain with a mongrel?"

"This capsule is poison, and it isn't partial to blue-blood," Danton said easily. "A few seconds after putting it into my mouth, I'll be dead. I'll be silent then. I can tell you how the ships were destroyed, the weapons used, some things about the planned revolt. If I don't tell you, you'll never find out. And if you don't find out what is happening out there in a short time, it will be too late—for you."

The woman pointed. "Take that door out, soldier. Perhaps you'll be contacted later."

Danton smiled. "Don't wait too long. You don't have much time, beautiful."

A CORRIDOR led into a circular room, one section paneled entirely in glass. Furnishings were suspended at odd angles, the concepts of an odd structural art, from various lengths of silver strands. He stood there, then tried the door. He couldn't open it. He was locked in. He felt eyes on him.

Later he turned, moved back until he

was facing the door through which he had entered. He kept the food capsule near his mouth as the door opened and she stood there looking at him strangely.

Then she strode toward him, long slim legs and an easy imperious stride. The metallic-silk skirt that came half-way to her knees tinkled like a thousand infinitely tiny bells.

She said, "The records have been checked. One of our ships failed to get out of Earth's atmosphere when we came here a century ago. We had assumed the ship had burned up. It has been suggested that you are from Earth, that you found that ship. It would be odd if you were one of the Equalitarian soldiers who fought against us a hundred years ago."

Danton shrugged. Self control was difficult now. He had to resist an urge to reach out, put his fingers around her throat. She seemed weaponless, and it could be accomplished rapidly enough. There would be a great deal of personal satisfaction. But he still clung to the shreds of his duty. His duty to Seers, to Earth millions who could so easily die under the bombs of an enemy they had never been allowed to know even existed. Or was that the real reason? *Maybe I don't really want to kill her.*

"Think whatever you wish. I've told you the facts. I know nothing about such a ship. If you believe such a fantastic idea, then where is this ship now?"

"You'll answer that," she said. She moved nearer, nearer than necessary for conversation. How ageless and smooth her face was, he thought. Smooth and pale. And her eyes like exotic books, concealing strange and terrible secrets.

He shrugged again. "It doesn't matter much to me," he said. "My offer still stands. Take it or leave it. As I said, this capsule will kill me in seconds. After that the troubles are all yours. You won't be able to escape. Those mongrels out there, as you call them, they don't need Earth. They have minds of their own."

"That's impossible! They're mongrels."

"You think you have them set solidly and forever in a static mould, just the way you want them? The perfect slavery—culturally molded, so they don't even realize

they're slaves. That's the idea? It isn't working out that way. They're human, with minds too complex—they can never be wholly predictable. Of course you could send an agent to Earth to find out. It would reduce the odds against us."

"Us? But you've asked to become one of the Oligarchs."

"Yes. I would prefer that, frankly. But it isn't too important. I'm interested in your system for only one reason—because you never grow old. You will notice that I am growing old, hair graying, wrinkles creeping in around my eyes. I don't like that. To be ageless like you, I would bargain."

"You seem so sure of yourself. I almost believe you."

"I am sure of myself. The mongrels can manage a successful revolt. But with the information I can give you, you could put down that revolt. I can't say about the next revolt, or the one after that, or any of the revolts that will go on as long as there are men who have minds for figuring out reasons for revolting. If you try to force the information from me, I'll take the poison."

"Would you really do that?"

He nodded.

"We could go out there and get the information directly from the mongrels."

"From them, you would find out nothing. The mongrels don't know anything. Only the leaders know, the scientists, the secret underground. You would never find them. The revolt is latent in every man beyond these walls, in every man and woman and child. The leaders know how to bring out that latent desire to revolt, when the time comes. There will be adequate weapons, too. Like the ones those three ships were blasted with."

He touched her throat. He felt the stirring of the pulse. A flush rose to her cheeks. "Show me why you haven't grown old during this last hundred years, Rhone, as I have."

Her face was near his. He could see the trembling in her lips, the enigmatic brightness of her eyes. "You're attractive," she whispered. "And that's odd, that a mongrel could be attractive."

"There are differences among the mon-

grels," Danton said. He moved his hands down her arms. She shivered a little. "And maybe there's a need in you that makes me seem something I'm not."

"That may be, yes. Maybe it isn't so easy to live forever. We have all you would think anyone would want here. But there are so few of us. And the men—always the same, with faces the same and walks the same and—"

"Then you really are the same Rhone, the Oligarch of a century ago?"

"Yes."

"And it's true, you never grow old?"

"It's true. We won't grow any older. And we'll never die."

She looked into his eyes and the seconds went by and time dissolved around Danton. And he thought: the lies I have told here—are they really a conscious effort to deceive? Do I really want, unconsciously, to become an Oligarch? Why not? He had wondered about it before. Immortality. A system depending on eternal warfare for its existence. Was this not his system after all?

"Come," she said, and took his arm. "I'll show you. You interest me. You're a diversion, soldier. I'll show you what we are."

THEY SAT in a small spherical car. It made no noise. It slid silently over the smooth floor by working a simple lever around. It darted like a silver beetle. First she took him back to a place he remembered well. The Pit.

She didn't seem to see things actually. She talked with a calm detachment, and sometimes her thoughts seemed far away. Danton's thoughts weren't far away.

She was saying, "The war goes on outside the walls. Their culture is one of war, and that is all they know. We established it that way. We intend to keep it that way. You see this is the Pit; here the bodies come, the ones who have died. Here the bodies are sorted roughly onto the conveyor belts which take them to the Dismembering Wards."

The car whirred them away. The next station, gleaming white rooms, shining and sterile. Danton felt the perspiration streaming down his throat.

Electronic machinery examined the bodies, mechanical hands removed them from the conveyor belts with deft selectivity, deposited them on wheeled, white slabs.

"You will notice," Rhone said calmly, "that the bodies have come through an antiseptic room, and their clothing dissolved. Now they are ready for dismembering."

Men in white moved silently down the line and did their work with sharp, quick strokes. Scalpels and tiny whirring saws and the bodies slowly dwindling into isolated parts. There was no blood, no mess, everything was efficient and thorough and clean.

"The usable body-parts are selected here," Rhone said. "Notice the departments along the walls by each slab? They are refrigerated. They contain separate sections for each of the salvaged body-parts that are worth preserving."

Behind glass in the walls, Danton saw neatly placed parts of the bodies. Hearts, fingers, hands, legs, feet, bone sections, eyes and interior organs. Kidneys, spleens, livers, carefully preserved, neatly arranged and labeled and waiting.

Danton slowly licked his lips. Her voice seemed far away now, droning like an insect on a lazy day far from anywhere, and the endless length of that room seemed dust-mantled and still, so still, he thought, and unreal; but it was real.

"From here, any part of a human body can be replaced by our surgeons. Here is the source of our immortality. When any body organ becomes worn, it is replaced. We are stocking our body-banks, soldier. As you can see."

Danton could see. What he saw was blurring a little though, and his legs seemed numb when he tried to move them.

"Why does it affect you so?" she was asking him then, and he turned and looked at her.

"Why?"

He didn't really know, or else his brain wasn't functioning at the moment. Why? It was beyond horror. It was alien, and yet why should it be alien? As a soldier, why should he find it disturbing? He had been conditioned, and his conditioning had

allowed him to destroy millions by pressing buttons, by directing missiles he never saw in flight to a target he never saw dissolve in a great white-hot flame.

Here it was planned, and here death had some transcendental meaning.

"There's one more thing for you to see," she said.

A dimly-lighted series of chambers. She pointed them out. Refrigerated banks. As far as Danton could see, the long chambers were lined with huge banks. Each filled with spare body-parts.

"You see the pattern now, soldier? We started with a select group. From among the Oligarchs only the elite of the elite was selected to come here to Mars. There are fifty of us now, as there were fifty then. No children, of course. Why complicate things?"

"Our slaves out there know nothing except that they must fight the Redbirds. Theirs is a war society. We arranged it and we've perpetuated it, and now it's the only life they know—unless your story of a revolt is true, of course, which I can hardly believe. They have only the crudest weapons. The kind of weapons we fought with on earth, soldier, left little for body-salvage, did they? We feel we've found the only way of being immortal. Why does it affect you like this, soldier? Doesn't it seem logical and fair to you?"

DANTON didn't say anything. He couldn't. His throat was dry and his blood hammered past his temples. She was putting the question to him, all right; and in a way it was the same question he had asked himself more than once. To an efficiently conditioned soldier class, killing was an end in itself. Why not go on from there, carry it out to its final denominator?

"The brain never wears out," she was saying, "the only damage possible to it is due to the wearing out of supplementary body-parts, and they are seldom used to such a point. And even parts of the brain can be replaced. We have blood banks, of course. We cannot die of natural causes. If death comes from any kind of violence or accident, we can bring that body to life again.

"We are storing up reserve body-parts to keep us strong and un-aging for as long as one would care to imagine. When we are ready, of course, we shall return to Earth. We have kept that in mind, naturally. We are almost ready now to return. On Earth, of course, the same system will be established—but there our system will of necessity be slightly different. Perhaps wars will not necessarily go on unceasingly. There will be breathing spells . . . it won't matter particularly to us."

She looked at Danton closely. "First we shall wipe out most of the population. We only need a small stabilized population to provide for us."

"What about the Redbirds?" Danton said. His voice sounded weak. It was weak. "This is their planet, doesn't—"

"Their bodies are too alien," she said. "They can't be of any benefit to us. Except, of course, they provide conflict for the mongrels."

Danton closed his eyes. There was no more confusion. He knew now where the road led if you stayed on it to its end. It ended here with bodies stacked up in refrigerators. It ended with the cancellation of all human values, except the values of the fifty select—and they were no longer human in any familiar sense.

He felt sick, very sick. It might be embarrassing, he was so sick. He said, "I don't feel very well. Maybe I could rest here for a few minutes?"

She laughed. She stopped laughing, and Danton heard the sound of doors sliding and the approach of softly moving feet. Two Oligarchs—Guards, evidently, for each wore a flash-gun at his side. And between them—

Danton didn't quite believe what he saw, and if what he saw was true, he didn't know whether to be glad or not. Keith and Van Ness. The latter was terribly wounded, his face a red smear, blood soaking his side. And Keith—Keith, Danton had decided, was a dangerous man.

One of the Oligarchs said, "We brought them directly to you, on Weisser's orders. Weisser talked to them, then sent them down here. He said that you would know—"

She raised her hand and the Oligarch guard stopped talking. Danton looked at Keith's rigid, white face. Keith's lips thinned back over his teeth as he grinned at Danton. "Captain," he said. "I guess you beat me to the punch. I see you're already on friendly terms."

Van Ness moaned softly and fell to his knees. He stared sightlessly from his broken face.

Danton said, "I thought you two were gone for good."

"So did we," Keith said. "But the Redbirds dropped us over a tower, down a chute. I don't know why."

Rhone said, "The Redbirds fight for us too. We pay them. For every body they bring to us, they receive pay. A kind of drug."

She stared from Danton to Keith, then at Van Ness. "You three seem to know one another. I'll find out from Weisser." She started to tune in the communicator on her wrist. Keith stopped her. "Don't bother," he said. "I've already talked to Weisser. This man here has been lying. I'll tell you the truth."

Danton had been afraid of this. "Keith! Don't tell them anything!" But he knew somehow that his own game was over. It had never had a chance. Even without Keith's selling out, it wouldn't have had a chance. It was walking the road bravely that counted, anyway . . .

Keith said, "I'm talking, and I'll be glad to talk."

Danton shouted, "Keith! Don't do it. Don't tell them anything. You don't realize what they are!"

"It doesn't matter," Keith said, "what they are. I've been on the wrong side. Maybe I was always an Oligarch, and it's probably the same with you, only you're just too stupid to admit it. You think I want to go back to Earth, even if we had a chance to do it, which we'll never have? I hate Earth, and maybe I always have hated it—the way the New Order remade it! It's sane! Everyone an angel, filled to the hair roots with the milk of human kindness. We found it no place for us. Weisser says he'll take me in. I know where I belong!"

7—Planet—January

RHONE STOOD UP in the car, looking into Danton's face. "It's true then. The three of you are from Earth. I thought they were planning a culture down there that couldn't possibly be aggressive. How could they have sent you?"

Danton's eyes went from face to face, round the immediate area of the vast chamber. Keith was grinning thinly, watching him narrowly. This was it, and there seemed nothing to do but to go down fighting in the classic vein. A futile gesture, but what else?

He said, "It was done in secret. Only we three and one other knew about the flight." Tell the truth. It might keep them from invading Earth for a while. If they thought Earth had an army they would strike before Earth grew any stronger. The truth might keep them quiescent for a while longer. "The new social system there, it has no conception of warfare or violence. You wouldn't understand it. And they wouldn't understand you, not now."

"You used our ship to get here," she said. "That would indicate that you have no ships of your own there?"

Danton nodded. Keith laughed, a thin high laughter. He moved toward Rhone. He dropped to one knee and raised his hands to her. "They have no armaments, no ships. Psychologically they have no power to resist. Weisser said I could become one of you."

Danton pushed Rhone from the car. He shoved the control lever and the car whirled violently, slammed into the foremost Oligarch guard, sent him spinning across the metal floor. The car swerved again, struck down the other guard. Danton jumped free, ripped the weapon from the man's waist. The guard was groaning and his hands were sliding about vaguely over the floor.

The hand-gun was familiar. It was similar to the flash-guns used by the guards on Earth a century before; there would have been no need to have altered that weapon.

Keith ran at him, kicked out, and Danton fired. Keith went to his knees and looked at Danton dully and then fell forward. He rolled over and lay there, grinning blankly at nothing at all.

Deliberately, without feeling anything, Danton burned the life out of the two Oligarchs who had lain stunned where they fell. As he spun back, the woman stood stiffly almost up against him. He had expected her to attempt to run away.

She said softly, "I know what it is now. It's because you're human. It's human to grow older. It's human to die. Maybe we have the wrong idea, or maybe we've approached it wrong, I don't know. It doesn't matter now. I—"

He pressed the flash-gun toward her. She didn't seem to notice the gun. She continued to look at his face, into his eyes, searching, for something he couldn't tell what, and he didn't care.

"Did you know you have gray eyes," she whispered, "and that they deepen, get darker and darker?"

"No."

"No. No one ever told you."

Mara had told him. He barely remembered that time when she had told him.

She put her slightly opened mouth against his lips and pulled him closer.

He pulled the trigger. Her body quivered as though from the kiss, and then he stepped away and she fell at his feet. He wasn't thinking now. There was no time for that. He lifted her, carried her toward one of the refrigerated banks. Her skin had turned a mottled ugly color and her eyes were open and rigid. Quite suddenly her eyes moved up into her head, and ugly groups of purple little veins appeared underneath the skin.

He put her on the frosty floor of the huge bank. Around her, like some hideous garnishing, were eyes that looked at her accusingly. He dragged the two Oligarch guards and Keith's corpse into another bank, slammed the heavy door. Van Ness groaned and Danton lifted him into the car.

"I can't see," Van Ness whispered. "I can't see. I'm dying."

"Hang on," Danton said. "Only fifty Oligarchs, understand, Van? Forty seven now. Maybe less if those seven I shot down in the pit didn't all recover. Maybe we can get some more of them, Van!"

"I'm dying," Van Ness whispered. "I can't see."

DANTON toiled the car. As he approached doors in the long tubular halls, the doors opened automatically, closed again behind. There were turns, drops, risings, more doors, other halls.

He stopped the car. Lost, alone, somewhere. Only fifty of them—no, forty-seven now at most. They wouldn't have too large a structure here. Somewhere there would have to be a central power source. If he could find such a power unit, strike at the heart—

He shook Van Ness. He felt for the heart. It was still beating. Van Ness moaned, "I'm dying. If I could see—"

"Do you know what I'm saying, Van? Can you hear me?"

"Yes . . . sure I can hear you."

"Listen to me. We're in the Oligarch's fortress. I don't know how big it is. But it seems to be one unified structure. There has to be a central power source here. You were an engineering expert. Where would it be? Van, listen. There are only a handful of Oligarchs here now. We stand a slim chance . . ."

"But I can't see—"

"I can see."

"Yes—a central power source. I remember the words to an old song, Captain. You know, soldiering used to be a great sport. There was one about a chocolate soldier with a uniform so pretty . . ."

"Van Ness!"

"Yes."

"Where would they build that central power room? Up? Down?"

"Down."

He started the car moving. Oddly curving and angling corridors bending with geometrical precision. He saw an elevator door and he pressed the button; the door opened and he drove the car into it. Down, fast, sickeningly fast.

"Bottom . . . clear down," Van Ness mumbled. "Start from there. I can't see—"

Danton kept the elevator dropping and then it stopped. He hadn't stopped it.

He stepped to the side as the door slid open. He hit the entering Oligarch, hit him with a short hard blow in the solar plexus and when the man gasped and bent forward, Danton brought his knee up. Bone and cartilage crunched. The

man slewed to one side, and Danton hit him again and the man smashed into the wall and slid down toward the floor.

"I can't see," Van Ness said. "But what I hear has a sweet sound."

Danton dragged the Oligarch up, held him against the wall. The man sagged and lifted his hands to protect his face. His lips were torn, his nose bleeding. He stared dazedly at Danton, his eyes filled with terror, shock.

"Wha—" he started to say something. Danton pushed his flash-gun into the man's middle. And the Oligarch screamed. Danton's voice chopped into the scream.

"I'm going to kill you," Danton said. "Unless you tell me what I want to know. Tell me where the power rooms are, the central power units."

The man shook his head, no.

Danton moved the gun around, pressed the stud. Burning flesh, and the Oligarch jerked away and fell twitching on the floor, his left leg charred from the knee down. He sat and stared at the leg, and he started whimpering. He reached down with his fingers, then drew them back again.

"Tell me," Danton said. "Or what's left of you, even the body parts from your banks won't put back together again."

The Oligarch murmured, and he had changed his mind.

THE OLIGARCH led them into the gigantic room, then collapsed. Danton killed him where he lay. Danton recognized some of the equipment, though he was no nucleonics or electronics expert as Van Ness had been. "Listen to this, Van. Listen to me!"

"Yes . . ."

Danton told what he saw. He was Van Ness' eyes. The generators, huge oscilloscopes, vacuumtube voltmeters, electronic power-supply panels, rolls and skeins of hook-up wire, shielding of every color, size and shape, panel plates, huge racks of glowing tubes, elaborate transceivers, long solid surfaces of gleaming bakelite, color-indexed files of resistors and capacitances . . .

Van Ness told Danton what to do. Van Ness took a long time to say a few

words, and after that he didn't seem to be able to say anything else. He didn't move either. Danton released the force of the flash-gun, left the gun in the position Van Ness had indicated, its beam burning deep into the heart of the complicated soul of the Oligarch fortress.

He would have taken Van Ness with him, but Van Ness wasn't interested anymore. He was dead. Danton left him. He would remember Van Ness alive as long as he was capable of remembering anything. Van Ness as clay he had already forgotten.

He ran toward the elevator. As it whirred upward, he felt the reverberation, the trembling, the beginnings of a low deadly murmuring. The elevator continued to rise smoothly, carrying Danton and the car, but Danton felt a giddy swaying like that of an earthquake.

A social system strictly of the top-down variety. But in the final analysis, the top wasn't the mind of Rhone or of Weisser. It was something above both of them, above the Oligarchs. Machines. And above the machines, generators and switches and volts and tubes.

The electronic interdependence was going insane within the fortress, like the intricate cellular structure of a mind within a skull.

In a hall somewhere in a catacomb of metal, Danton sat in the car, wondering which way to go, wondering if it would make any difference now, feeling the fortress above, below, all around him, breaking apart.

What about the Oligarch spaceships? Perhaps they were someplace else, away from here, and they would survive the destruction of the fortress. And maybe one or two or three Oligarchs would also survive. Even one ship, one Oligarch, returning to Earth, would be one too many.

He was looking at the far door as it slid open and a car sped through, skimming along the polished metal floor frantically, desperately. The occupant of the car, a woman, took no notice of Danton. Her face was damp and pale with fear as her car sped past. Her machines were forsaking her. Her efficiency, her gadgets and the tremendous power that had existed

for so long at her fingertips, were disintegrating, and she appeared to be disintegrating with them.

She would be intent only on escape, of course, not realizing that without her machines, she was doomed. But she might find a temporary escape from the death around her, the metal walls of the gigantic coffin.

Van Ness was gone. And Keith—convinced that soldiering was an end in itself, rather than a means to an end—had found the inevitable end for a soldier.

Danton wondered about that. He knew one thing—that the test was yet to come for him. He was not sure yet that Keith had not been right . . .

He followed the woman through a door into a chamber. It was a nice room, Danton thought. A great deal of pleasure had drifted through this room, and in it, time had probably never meant anything. Perfumed incense. Music, drifting, still rising from somewhere, pneumatic couches—but underneath something was cracking open, veins and arteries of power choking, blocked off; but the power had to go somewhere; short-circuit, the madness of a great machine-mind.

The woman had opened a panel, and beyond her, Danton could see the Martian afternoon. He had never seen a Martian afternoon before. It was beautiful, he thought, though he was hardly in a position to study or appreciate it properly. Then he saw what she was doing—the woman was escaping out the panel. There must be some way she was planning to get safely to the ground outside. It seemed to be a long way down.

But she wasn't worried about that.

She jumped. She looked back at Danton, her face pale and twisted, then she jumped. Danton ran, looked out. He looked out just in time to see her body hit. It was too far down for anyone to go that way. Her body bounced a little.

INSANE, Danton thought. They had each become such component parts of the bigger machine that very likely they were all going crazy now, right along with the machine. And the machine wasn't going to last much longer either, insane

or otherwise. It was beginning to quiver, to shake and shudder, and its metal skin was beginning to groan and twist. Its metal joints were grinding together, its skein nerves wrenching and singing.

Danton looked around hurriedly. He saw the wires again, everything suspended by wires, shiny and strong. He gave a heavy table slab—legless, of course, a suspended disc of metal—he gave it a tremendous shove and it began to swing to and fro; it made a heavy pendulum, swinging wider and wider, and it began to crash into other suspended things, into chairs and into weird sculpture, crashing through structural images and distorted faces of metal. It made a sound like off-key bells bonging and clanging.

Wires finally snapped with a whine and Danton felt the hot sharpness as a strand cut across his arm, sinking in like the slash of a knife. He pushed the table slab to the wall, against the window. He managed to get several strands of the wire tied together by complicated knot designs. He yanked down an ornamental drape that seemed to have a swirling life of its own, made sheaths for his hands from finely-woven metallic cloth, and looped the wire three times around the metal sheathing.

He slid down toward the ground. It was further down than it had seemed from above. The wind was high and cold and strong. He began to sway dangerously and the wind threatened to tear him from the wire.

He glanced upward. The structure of the Oligarchs was huge, a shining silver metal thing of coldness rising up out of bare rocks. It was built on the side of a cliff, very high, and very far below was a valley. Perhaps it was the valley in which he had landed . . . no, that must have been far away from here. He saw no lake. But, of course, the valley itself stretched windingly away further than he could see.

He ran out of wire. He managed to lift his weight with one arm enough to unwrap the wire coils from the other. That gave him another three feet. He dropped. Pain came from a wrenched ankle and the shock of the weight on his

bones. But he hit running and he kept on running.

For somehow, though he had killed her, she was alive.

Just before dropping he had seen her, running away from the Oligarch tower. Running along a steel walkway. A fine-mesh railing separated the walkway from a sheer drop of at least a thousand feet. It was Rhone. She was running fast, too. Very fast.

He ran hard. He didn't feel the pain in his ankle. He couldn't afford to feel anything now except urgency. The cold thin air burned.

She stopped and he stopped too, flattening against the hard rust-colored rock. She was pushing a lever or something; whatever it was it got results. A silver nose projected outward from the cliff, slanting slightly upward; it blossomed out as though someone were blowing a silver bubble from stone. Out and out. It stopped.

It was a spaceship, all right. Danton figured that the power shut-off had prevented her from reaching the ship from a subterranean route. Evidently rigged for such an emergency, the wall of the cliff could also summon the ship out into the open, prepare it for blasting off from a cradle cut down into the cliff like a giant cannon barrel.

When the outer door in the side of the ship opened, Rhone ran for it. Danton was right behind her. She heard him just as she went through and into the air-lock. She turned, her mouth opened, and then he struck her with his shoulder, carried her on through the inner air-lock door and into the tubular corridor leading forward into the control room.

He dragged her forward with him as the doors closed behind him. The controls were the same in principle as those of the ship he had brought from Earth. Once set, they were automatic. He strapped Rhone in the shock-seat at the side. He strapped himself into the chair before the control panel . . .

SEERS, Secretary of Social Security, was a fat man with a serious round slate-gray face. He looked at Danton

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thoughtfully, waited. Outside the office of Sociology Section in New World Square, the sky was a soft and promising blue.

Finally Seers said, "Well, Danton, what happened then?"

Danton shrugged. "First I dropped enough atomic fire to finish destroying the Oligarch fortress completely, and to get any ships that might have been left inside the mountain. There's nothing there now but a big black crater. I don't think there will ever be any need to worry about the Oligarchs anymore. I landed the ship in the Pacific in as isolated a spot as I could find—midway between New Zealand and Cape Horn. Then I contacted you by short wave. And here I am and here you are. And I guess that's all there is."

"Why did you bring Rhone back?"

"I had no choice," Danton said. "I guess when I killed her and put her in the refrigeration bank, that saved her life. Some surgeon did a quick job on her." Danton leaned toward Seers. "If all of it, or any of it, really happened."

"What makes you think it didn't?"

"For one thing, I'm back here alive, an impossible mission accomplished. For another—I—well, this time I *want* to be reconditioned."

"Your experience has changed your outlook, Danton?"

"Considerably. I—want to be changed. I want to be someone else, anything else. I've seen things too horrible to remember anyway. I'd rather forget everything. It could all have been delusion, hallucination rigged up in your psyche-labs. As Keith said—you boys are good at that sort of thing. If that's how it was—it was good therapy. There's a doubt in my mind, you see. It *might* have happened, and just the bare possibility that it did happen is enough to make me gladly volunteer for reconditioning."

Seers nodded. "I'm very glad you're approaching it this way. It will make the processing easier to perform, and the new personality easier to maintain. We probably will never need your kind again, Danton. Now that the Oligarchs are gone, the last threat to our new system is gone with them. The chance of some other intelligent life-form being in the universe at all is remote, and the further chance that they would take aggressive action against Earth makes the whole thing something we can logically ignore."

"That's fine," Danton said.

"You've seen where the psychology of war would lead, inevitably. If you can justify killing human beings at all, the final result is bound to be, in some form or another, what you saw on Mars."

"If I actually saw it. If I was on Mars at all."

Seers signaled through the intercom. A door opened. Rhone stood there, a tablet in her hand, and a pencil. She sat down and crossed attractive legs. Very attractive legs, Danton thought.

"Miss Tannon, this is Richard Danton. Mr. Danton, my new secretary, Miss Tannon."

She nodded, turned her nose down once more, very business-like, into the tablet.

Danton thought, It's Rhone all right. A reconditioned Rhone. They must be good at their reconditioning to change an

Oligarch mind into that of an efficient secretary. Danton said, "What about the others up there on Mars?"

"We'll take care of them, peacefully of course," Seers said. "We have plenty of time. We won't bring them back. We will set up our new system there."

Danton listened to Seers' dictation. "To Chief Psyche-adjustment Administrator. From Seers, Department of Social Security. Subject: Voluntary reconditioning of Richard Danton. To take place at once under the jurisdiction of . . ."

There was more. Danton didn't hear it . . . and later they injected something into his veins and he sat there, feeling Richard Danton dying, for the last time, going away. Richard Danton, fading out, all around him bit by bit, cell by cell, dying, never to awaken again. And remembering what he had experienced on Mars, Danton thought: It's as good a reward as anyone could ask. Goodbye, Richard Danton. It was nice knowing you, but Goodbye . . .

HIS NAME WAS BURTON.

John R. Burton.

He was as happy as anyone could expect to be. His wife loved him and he loved his wife. Their children were very well adjusted, as was everyone of course in the New World System.

Burton worked ten hours a week in a coal mine, though the job was merely one demanding the overseeing of machines. The rest of the week was one of leisure devoted to gardening, hobbies, play, music. There was no more hate, no violence, no feelings of insecurity. It wasn't that everyone loved everyone else particularly. It was just that no one was afraid of the future anymore.

And Burton was no longer bothered by bad dreams either, and so he was what one might consider perfectly happy, perfectly adjusted.

The perfect happiness of one who does not remember.

(Continued from page 2)

P.S. Who has back issues for sale or trade? PLANET STORIES back issues, I mean.

SAVED FROM INSANITY?

Rochester, Indiana

DEAR TRAITOR:

Don't take that too seriously; you may turn out all right after all. I hope!

What am I talking about? (*Dear Vizifans: At this point, I upped with my blue pencil and assisted a goodly chunk of reader DeWeese's sage syntax into the wastebasket... and the next fan who sends us a five page letter may expect to have it returned to him, lightly sprinkled with various deadly bacilli. Three pages at the outside, pul-leez!—Ed.*)

Now, on to ye Vizigraph. And there I'd like to register a big fat gripe. Who was the jerk responsible for chucking the old illo? I don't think it was you, Jelly Bean, as it disappeared long before you arrived. But can't you do something about getting it back? The one being used now is slightly revolting. And besides, I liked the original, the one you've used ever since the first Vizigraph. The cut certainly wasn't lost, I hope? Like what happened to one of the competimgags? Oh, well, just try and get it back. (*Did, and got it. Good idea.—Ed.*)

Egad! An English prof in La Viz. Could it be that Sneary's deathless prose brought him in? Incidentally, wonder what Sam would give me for this effort. Last year in my English class, I took a couple B's because, so said ye prof, my handwriting, which I had to use, was so rotten.

Well, hooray for Mr. Drinkwater (Rodric Cadwaller Drinkwater???? Good Heavens! is that a name? I had heard of such things but I never thot they were anything other than a hoomer writer's half-hearted attempt at hoomer.) He saved me from slow insanity. I had been trying to figure out ever since I read that letter about the half-life of uranium why a small piece of uranium would disintegrate completely in such-and-such a time if it had already been half-disintegrated in the past, while another small piece, never before disintegrated, would take twice that long. (Oh, Mr. Drinkwater, I didn't know you were listening! I'm sorry! Your name is beautiful. That is, I have heard worse—donno where, but I have.)

I suppose I should vote for the "letters." I don't gotta do all three, I hope? Anahoo, I'll give first to James Stewart for his first paragraph. Reeceelllllll cute. And his first effort? James, boy, meet another first-effort-in-PS-16-year-old. You (he, dear ed?) (*Who? What's going on here?—Ed.*) sound like you are interested more than somewhat in astronomy. So'm I. In fact, I think that my interest in astronomy led me to start reading stf (Muh first mag was PLANET nearly seven years ago, with Hankutt's EYES OF THAR). Well, enough of that revolting drivell.

Oh, yes, stories. You do run a few of those things, don't you? Vellll, I'll give first spot to your new discovery, Liddell. But just what goes? I'd still like to know what the he . . . heck the "pool" and "mountain" was all about. All I got from it was that all the real tough guys that dropped dead on Venus were made into *d'vahnyans*. But where did the pool come from in the first place, huh? And what sort of a critter

was the monster that guarded it? I always thot that stf stories were supposed to end with a logical, scientific explanation and only fantasies left things like the origin of the main thing in the story unexplained. And this little tale could stand a sequel, if only to explain where the pool, etc. came from.

And of course, second comes MITKEY RIDES AGAIN. It wasn't quite as good as the original (which I read only last winter in a second-hand mag) but still quite a thing. Pore Mitkey! Won't he and Minnie ever get to keep their intelligence? Couldn't be that there'll be another, something like MITKEY RIDES AGAIN ONCE MORE YET? I think we could all take it very easily. Only how come Lynch didn't illustrate it as he did the original? This Mayan is something of a stinker as far as art goes. Oh, Gad! A boner. Mayan didn't dun it. Vestal did. Well, he is the same, only a little worse. (*YOU DIDN'T LIKE VESTAL'S STARMOUSE ILLUSTRATIONS? . . . oh, well . . . Ed.*)

I bin thinkin' it over. Second place in letters goes to Hapke. He agrees with me about your hack, Goo'fur him.

Back to the stories. Now comes CARGO TO CALLISTO. Cute (Okay, so it's overworked. I substitute) Nice (Still no good?) Off-trail (Uuh?) Small and agreeable(?) little tale. Joe was a rather stupid little stinker, tho, wasn't he? Took him an awful long time to realize what was going on.

Next there's a tie. SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS & MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA. Neither one had much of a plot, both had unusually horrible blurb. "... fearless ace of Terrestrial G2" ... "... stood at the brink of the vast amphitheatre . . ." How droopy can you get? That former sounds like a fugitive from Hang-dog Strongheart, Infallible, Invincible Hero of the Spaceways. The guy that writes such junk should be taken out and strung up by his typing finger. The latter, the story, not the blurb, was too obvious. I suppose it was supposed to be a surprise ending, but anyone who has graduated from high-school, even grade-school, should know that that would be a negative number and that it's impossible to find the square root of a negative number.

Coppel's offering was pretty good, but I put it way down here because of his awful epilogue. "These two lived in memory . . . as Adam and Eve." Now I'd just like to know who didn't figure that out before they were half way through? The names, Aram, Deve, Santane, The Serpent, were dead giveaways. Then that business about the third planet being paradise, and last, but by no means least, the fifth planet being bombarded into our asteroid belt. If he had just come right out and said that this was humanity's ancient past, I could have forgiven him; but trying to make it into a "surprise" ending cooked his lousy little goose. He should stick to his hack, which he is very good at, second only in his Martian tales to la Brackett. (Get G. F. Fox and Brackett back!!).

Last, and by all means, least, is FINAL MISSION. That is sub-standard for the magazine, so far below the usual MacDonald as to be next to impossible. If he had continued and made it into a novel, it might have been something. They could have gone on out into space and found out what that thing they had seen beyond Antares was. Now that would have made a story. As it was, it was just a prologue to a novel or novelette.

Now, the cover: Izzat green gink the hero or the BEM? And how come his face is green while his hands are brownish? Or is that the effect of his helmet? And where's hers? Very good despite all that. This Anderson is very, very good, cover or interior. Get more of him.

Oh, no! Don't tell me, after all this work, that this epistle is too late? Ah'll just shoot mahself, that's what. Shoot mahself a bird for dinner, that is. (Okay, okay, boys, I'll go quietly. Put away the nets and strait-jacket.)

I go now. Hello.

EUGENE DEWESE

SHOES AND STF

Portland, Oregon

DEAR JEROME:

Hmm... well, well... so my letter made the grade, eh? Very good. Name in print and all that. A thrill. One might quibble that the page upon which it appeared was not too well inked, nor was the paper of superlative quality—too, the K in Kyne had a faulty serif—however, one will not bleat about such trifles, but will instead express gratitude for one of the heartiest yaks one has had in several months, namely: "... something he disagreed with ate him." Oh, you Bix!... you devil... what must you be like with the women! (Arf!—Ed.)

Anyhoo, to the stories.

CARRY ME HOME: Liddell, as I said in my last letter, is one corking beautiful writer, and I mean *writer*, quite apart from the very excellent quality of his science-fiction thought. The man knows people; he knows words; he explores one with the other with a depth and—if I may use the term—a tenderness most uncommon in the pulps. CARRY ME HOME is on all counts one of the best jobs I've encountered in the commercial field, stf or no. More, more—forgive me for sounding like a 'ittle fan—MORE!

THE LAST TWO ALIVE! Sound enough opera; I presume, however, that you intend to improve the quality of your lead stuff as you deplete your predecessor's back-log? Opera can be somewhat more cerebral than this and still zip along at an action-packed rate, as witness anything van Vogt has ever written.

MITKEY: not up to the original, but what could be? Entertaining, worth reading. Illustrations very good.

MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA: a clever if elementary plot, well handled and quite well written.

SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS: Hah! Hah again! A double twist and a really obnoxious Holmesian slob for a hero. A good parody indeed.

FINAL MISSION: a quiet, unusual little tale; Ma Donald had a nice idea and tied it up with his familiar dexterity. Pathos and a sour taste, followed by a warming of the heart.

CARGO TO CALLISTO: this, sir, is doubtlessly something left over from PS's old regime. Though the writing was in places top-notch the total worth of the story was disappointingly far less than that of the same author's superb THE CROWDED COLONY in the last issue.

DIANETICS: Well, if it's as good as Ron and the boys claim, it most certainly is an earth-shaker. Yes, I've bought the book, I'm reading it; I intend to thoroughly investigate. Anyone would be an idiot not to do at least that.

Forrest J. Ackerman, I say with what respect may be due, is one of the *cutest* damn things in all

Fandom. Ah-hah-hah-ha-ha-ho-ho-ho-hee-hee-hee-ee.

As you see above, I am now in Portland, which I managed to finagle and which makes me very happy, for, when not selling shoes, I shall be able to attend the Norwescon. For Ackerman's benefit, I am six-foot three.

Yours truly,

RAOUL D. KYNE

UNWILLING WINNER

24 Kensington Ave.
Jersey City 4, N. J.

DEAR JERRY:

Three things generally make me rather casual in my regard for PS. One is the arbitrary two-pages length, double-spaced, of this letter; another is that, if any of my letters were ever good enough, I should have to tell you that I have absolutely no use, need, nor desire for illustration originals. The third is that PLANET does not lift me to immortal altitudes of ecstasy.

To me, thud-and-blunder stf is nothing to rave about. But I do not denounce thud-and-blunder; for various reasons, I'm glad we got it! Your competitors, which I read with oxygen mask conveniently handy, sometimes do attain high altitudes—but more often, alas, the result is more in the nature of chemical warfare. And while PLANET never promises to plant me in the clouds, it usually does provide a quiet hammock's hour or two in the shade of a cool back porch. I would as soon speak against T&B stf as denounce comic books, movie serials, and western horse-operas. Or beer.

Like to add Sam to this flot and jet, since his (Merwin's) mags made the same mistake in spelling Isaac Asimov's name as yours. May I suggest that, just for the sheer hell of it, both you and Sam enter a pact to make the name "Azimov" a house pseudonym? (*There'd be plenty hell, all right... I don't know about Sam, but Isaac can lick me any day of the week—Ed.*) Or maybe I should start using the pseudonym, "Joe Azimov," hmmm? Surely, the greatest compliment is to imitate!

Fred Brown could make something big of this Mitkey character. It would probably be necessary for Mitkey to renounce his rodent's happy existence and, at the same time, renounce human idiosyncrasies which don't apply to him—a fine study in individualism that would bring sweat and curses from any author trying to write it. But it would probably be good, thoughtful satire.

This dianetics deal has me muttering dark mutterings. So maybe it's good. So maybe it isn't good. So maybe it would seem to be good, but—

Without plunging into Hubbardisms, it seems that this dianetic therapy soups up the mental cylinders by boring out the demon-circuits. Demon-circuits like the guy who's afraid of dogs because his first dog scared him, such "dogs" also referring to poverty, sex, racial and religious prejudices, what-have-we. The thesis is that it all starts before birth and proceeds developing with growth and balls up our thinking processes more and more as we grow older. The therapy claims to go back to the beginning and erase the entire demon-circuits by attacking their source. This is my terminology, of course; not Hubbard's.

Now, if it does, it certainly ought to soup up our mental ability. But is it good to lose those

demon-circuits, even though they do hamper us? I recall combat vets who had a slight inclination to belly into the gutter when a Rocket "88" went buzz-z-zing past, when they got back and walked down the home-town street. Certainly a lunatic impulse, from a civilian point of view. But suppose they go back into combat and that thing buzz-z-zing past ain't no Oldsmobile? And how many other demon-circuits are there that, while purely lunatic and mentally hampering most of the time, have kept the human species in existence through moments of real danger? Have dianetics' "clears" lost some vital survival factor? Danger often comes with such an emotional shock that even the most efficient analytical thinking would have a tough time coping with it. And what's *never* dangerous?

What we may have, here, is a new definition of the "fittest" who survive!

JOE GIBSON

WICKHAM ON DIANETICS...

19 W. 27th Street
New York 1, N. Y.

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

I am afraid that this letter will run longer than the limit you request, but since the subject is dianetics, perhaps you won't mind. I'll promise, at least, *not* to go over Mr. Hubbard's book point for point, but to confine myself pretty strictly to the points raised in James Blish's brief piece in the Nov. issue.

I dislike to pick a fight with Mr. Blish, whose science-fiction I like, but it happens that when he talks about psychiatric theory he is entering a field about which I know something, and I just don't like some of the things he says. I'm not in sympathy with encouraging this dianetics craze. It's obvious that Mr. Blish is being quite cautious, and that he hasn't endorsed dianetics in his article; but just the fact that his article isn't obviously damning will be enough to encourage Joe Dope to take his wife, his dog, and all the fans for miles around into dianetic therapy. These are my criticisms, then:

(1) Dianetics is *not* a science. It is obvious from Hubbard's book that Hubbard has only a dim notion of what constitutes a science; he thinks that if a thing works consistently, then it's a science, and that's that. Unfortunately, true sciences don't work on the principle of statistical successes. In the field of medicine in particular, there are so many imponderables that it is seldom possible to say whether the therapy cured the patient or whether he cured himself. (Witness the sudden collapse of the histamine theory of the common cold). Three hundred people is a ridiculously small series of cases, even statistically considered; and have all these "cures" been followed for five years to make sure they don't relapse? The answer is *No*; and you needn't take my word for it. Call the Hubbard Dianetic Research Foundation and ask *them*.

Furthermore, in order to say with reasonable certainty whether or not a mental patient has been "cured," you have to have a reasonable definition of what constitutes a cure. It's not enough to say that a "clear" has no engrams, so long as there is doubt whether or not there is such a thing as an "engram." Even in the field of psychosomatic disease, "cures" usually consist simply of a change of symptoms. People have been hypnotically "cured" of arthritis; that is, the arthritis has gone away

for quite a long time—but something subtler and more serious usually appears in place of the arthritis. (And the "cures" relapse.)

In the case of dianetic therapy, there is always the possibility that what is happening is simply the creation of an overmastering obsessional system, which replaces the patient's other neuroses—to his apparent benefit, but to his lasting damage insofar as his contact with reality is concerned. To be blunt about it, Hubbard would be unable to detect this, because (a) he lacks knowledge of previous disciplines, and (b) he has the same neurosis—he invented it! (Of course one doesn't "invent" a neurotic condition, but one can supply the details.)

The "experiments" which Hubbard has asked laymen to perform upon each other are not experiments; they are just dabbling. No layman is equipped to tell the differences between a simple question and a hypnotic suggestion—Hubbard himself seems to think of hypnotism exclusively in terms of trances and tricks, whereas hypnotic suggestions may be given to wide-awake people without the suggestor being aware of what he is doing—nor could a layman tell anything about the truth or falsity of Hubbard's hypotheses by what some patient told him in therapy. About the most worthless thing in any branch of medicine, including psychotherapy, is the testimony of the patient, who is always more than anxious to be "cured" by any damn thing that is handed him. (Hence the quacks who make money by giving people sugar pills—which sometimes *do* "cure" the patient.)

(2) I can add, from my own experiences, that Mr. Blish is right in saying that the phenomena described by Hubbard do appear, that they appear in the order in which Hubbard says they appear, and that they do seem to produce *subjective changes* in the patient. This proves nothing whatsoever. The very first thing that happens to a patient, when he changes methods of psychotherapy, is that his symptoms change, too. I wonder whether or not Mr. Blish has worked on any patients who have *not* read Mr. Hubbard's book? If Mr. Blish has read it, surely his wife has, and I suppose you have too. Has it occurred to any of you that the book itself—whatever its intention—offers the patient a blue-print of how he *ought* to react in dianetic therapy, and that therefore a patient in therapy will *need*, for his own sanity, to react as described? Harry Stack Sullivan observed some time back that there is an enormous drive toward mental health in everyone, which accounts for the reason why patients in *any* psychotherapy improve somewhat, and why *all* forms of psychotherapy—including faith healing—produce some "cures." Any help that is offered is gladly accepted and cooperation extended, except by some psychotics. Have any of you people worked on any cases who have no knowledge of dianetic theory?

(3) I have to object also to Mr. Blish's implication, at the beginning of his article, that nobody up to Mr. Hubbard knew anything about the operation of the mind. Mr. Hubbard would like you to think that this is so, but it isn't. *Nothing whatsoever*—I underline that for heavy emphasis—in dianetics is at all new to psychotherapy. The recombination of the elements is new; but the elements are not. Mr. Hubbard's theory of the "reduction" of engrams is Freud's abreaction; Mr. Hubbard's theory of Life Force is findable in Jung and Bergson; Mr. Hubbard's apparently sensational theory of somatic recording comes from the studies of the anxiety neurosis, particu-

larly from Mrs. Greenacre's survey of anxiety-like somatic reactions in the unborn child; Mr. Hubbard's experimental recovery of material from "unconscious" periods was duplicated at the beginning of this century by Breuer; Mr. Hubbard's emphasis upon the integrity of the patient is Jungian; Mr. Hubbard's (and Mr. Campbell's) general and specific analogues of the mind to a computing machine are the intellectual property of Dr. Norbert Weiner; and so on. Such identifications may be "hobson-jobsonism" to Mr. Campbell, but it is hard to dismiss them, if you know something about the material, with that swear-word.

(4) I object to Mr. Blish's identification of Hermitage House as "the publisher of a number of books... universally acknowledged to be serious contributions to the field." It's no such thing. It is a publisher of surveys, most of them slanted for the layman. It does publish works by a number of reputable people, but none of these works are original contributions to psychotherapy; they are simply historical summaries, collations, eclectic books. If you're in any doubt about this, consult Hermitage's own book list. I'll award you a large pink lollipop for every book on that list that you find that is *not* simply a survey of previous work in some part of the field.

My own advice—not that you asked for it—is that you, Mr. Blish, and your readers take dianetics with a large salt pill. So far, there is not a single shred of real evidence for it—and the layman is not the least bit obligated to prove Mr. Hubbard's claims for him. Let him prove them for himself, if he can. Maybe he even can—at least, it's high time he started trying!

Yrs., &c.,

AL WICKHAM

... BLSH ON DIANETICS

New York, N. Y.

DEAR JERRY:

Mr. Wickham's letter seems to me to consist largely of indisputable facts, some of which are relevant, and some of which are not.

I'm perfectly willing to agree that dianetics is not a science, in the sense that Mr. Wickham is using that word. As he himself has pointed out (by accident, perhaps?) not even medicine is a science in this sense; only mathematical sciences such as physics are, properly speaking, "sciences." While I'll admit that I was—strictly speaking—wrong in referring to dianetics as a "science," I must argue that all the healing arts are based, largely, upon the principles of statistical successes. Exact knowledge, in Mr. Wickham's sense, does not exist in any branch of medicine yet.

But Mr. Wickham is right in saying that 300 cases is too small a series to establish a really good case for dianetics; he is right in saying that the cures claimed by dianetics have been inadequately followed, considering what claims have been made for dianetics; indeed, he might have gone on to remark that even these 300 cases seem to have been rather sloppily run—otherwise the Foundation would be much more willing to show us some of its case-records than it has proven itself to be. Hubbard and his friends seem to have been in a tearing hurry to get their therapy to the public, and in my opinion their haste was excessive.

I have to hand, just today, a form letter from Donald Rogers—who is the Foundation's research director—which seems to indicate that the Founda-

tion is now convinced of the need for better evidence and is compiling such evidence. We'll have to wait and see whether or not it actually comes through with it. Rogers seems to have a far better understanding of what constitutes real evidence than Hubbard does, which is a hopeful sign.

No, I have no real experience with patients who have *not* read Hubbard's book. The one such patient with whom I have worked appeared to respond according to H(oyle)ubbard, but I was unable to pursue the experiment to anything like proper confirmation.

I disagree with Mr. Wickham's statement that *nothing whatsoever* in dianetics, except the mixture, is new to psychotherapy. It's true, for instance, that the problem of prenatal somatic recording is *foreshadowed* in the work of Mrs. Greenacre (and, much more importantly, in the work of Otto Rank, whom Mr. Wickham does not mention) but no-one prior to Hubbard has centered the sources of major mental disturbances in the prenatal area. As for new principles: No-one prior to Hubbard has claimed that physical pain is the one source of all psychic disturbance. No-one prior to Hubbard has claimed that the semantic content of pain-experience is the sole determinator of the nature of the subsequent disturbance. No-one prior to Hubbard has claimed that the actions of concepts upon the mind to produce illness are wholly literal—if homonymic—and never symbolic.

It remains to be proven whether or not these principles are valid, but I don't think any of them are findable in previous psychotherapies, as Mr. Wickham implies. I'd like to add, though, that many of the concepts and tests which Hubbard claims to be his alone are not his intellectual property; and that I think one of the most disturbing things about dianetic theory to date is Hubbard's apparent desire to palm off his many indebtednesses as his own discoveries. This does not in itself make Hubbard's theories invalid, but it does make one realize that Hubbard himself is no saner than the rest of us, and emphasizes Mr. Wickham's point that dianetics is not a science—and that Hubbard can't yet be described as a scientist.

Freud didn't behave very much like a scientist, either. It would have been nice had Hubbard learned something from Freud's procedural mistakes, but he didn't, and we shall have to swallow that down with regret and continue to investigate. I continue to think Hubbard's theories largely reasonable, logical, and provable, but certainly Hubbard's claim that they are *already* proven is a false claim. In this respect dianetics reminds me overpoweringly of orgone therapy: full of claims about scientific evidences and proofs, but shifty and evasive when the proofs are asked for.

Mr. Wickham's characterization of Hermitage House seems to come from the book list on the back of the dust-jacket for Hubbard's book. He should investigate Hermitage's complete list. Hermitage, incidentally, did not publish Hubbard's book without some investigation of the claims—an inadequate investigation, but not an uninformed one.

Mr. Gibson's points, being purely hypothetical, don't have quite the same air of urgency as Mr. Wickham's; after all, before we discuss what might or might not be the characteristics of clears, we have to be sure that there is such a thing as a clear. I think his questions could best be answered by a re-reading of Hubbard's book, which plainly

explains the difference between a demon-circuit and a training pattern. There is virtually no likelihood, to use his example, that an avoiding-reaction to the noise of the buzz-bomb would be engrammic, in most cases. Not all automatic reactions are engrammic, by any means. As for the *elan vitale*, it is Hubbard's claim that dianetic therapy increases the amount of it available to the organism as a whole, rather than the other way around.

As for Mr. Wickham's advice: I second it, third it, and endorse it all the way up the line to the power where *e* approaches infinity. Certainly one must take dianetics with a large salt pill—the bigger, the better. It is unproven. I would add also: NO ONE WITHOUT EXTENSIVE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE AND AN EXACT KNOWLEDGE OF SCIENTIFIC METHOD SHOULD EXPERIMENT WITH DIANETICS. No one should accept, on faith, Hubbard's statement that amateur psychotherapy, on Hubbard's principles or any other principles, is undangerous. Hubbard has not yet proven this to be so, and until he proves it, the risk is serious.

Here I am with Mr. Wickham 100%. Leave dianetic experimentation to Hubbard. The burden of proof lies on him. I have terminated my own experiments in this field, and I urge anyone else who has been tempted by Hubbard's claims to do the same. The theory of dianetics appears to be sound, and backed by virtually all of the research done by previous workers, BUT IT MAY NEVERTHELESS BE TOTALLY AND DISASTROUSLY WRONG.

I don't think Hubbard is wrong, but that's nothing but a belief on my part, backed by a very small amount of evidence, too small to be conclusive. I think PLANET's readers should read Hubbard's book, for, despite its faults, it's a remarkable job and already part of the significant history of psychotherapy; and PLANET's readers are science-fiction fans, and can be depended upon to be critical.

To be critical—when one is reading Reich, or Hubbard, or Velikovsky, or Frank Scully, or any other would-be revolutionary—means that one must ask over and over again:

Where is the evidence?

Where is the evidence?

WHERE IS THE EVIDENCE?

No hoax, program, special pleading, myth-system, delusion, crank notion, or partial "science" can stand up under that one question.

JAMES BLISH

TALE OF THE TURTLE

35 Sterling Road
Harrison, New York

DEAR JERRY BUILT PENCIL PUSHER:

When the courier that "Neither rain nor sleet, etc." finally got around to delivering your latest bundle of joy I was pleasantly surprised, nay, dumbfounded; you've set a precedent... the picture on the cover is actually from one of the stories!! Come now, what caused such an upheaval? However my enthusiasm was soon dampened. After slavering my leisurely way through the ish I looked at the blurb; alas, just where does Mr. Coppel explode a sun?

Well, not being smart enough (see, I even admit it!) to think up something unusual I'll just run down the stories, although some are pretty rundown already.

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Iss vun uf der pest, most orichonal sdories I half effer read! Hang on to this guy Brown. Subject him to the inth rite of coercion if you have to, but get some more of Mitkey!

(2) SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS; I just can't think of one blamed comment!

(3) THE LAST TWO ALIVE; For cryin' out loud, what a title! I've read stories and *stories* but I am yet to see another such dead giveaway. Why not call it "To This End" or somethin'? A good, well executed theme like this certainly deserves an ambiguous title.

(4) FINAL MISSION; Subtitled, Ooo How Confusin', or, How to Become a Candidate for the Wozy Ward in Won Easy Lesson.

(5) CARGO TO CALLISTO; So-so.

(6) CARRY ME HOME; Oh well, he can't do it every time. Either the whole darn thing was pretty obvious or I have almighty keen perception (yeah, that's what I think too).

(7) MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA; Somebody open a window!!

Since I can't read the artists' chicken tracks the best pics. are pages 57, 77 and 61 in that order.

I hope that chunk on Dianetics wasn't just a passin' idea. I would like more factual squibs like that; I might even get'um education (parish forbid!).

Although I really would like an original (hint, hint) I think Happy Boy Hapke has done it again. If he's found a kindred soul in you (ha, imagine, an editor with a soul) I've found one in him (ye Gods, shades of the Three Musketeers!); he's got a sense of humor (And what is so rare as a sense of humor, Then if ever come perfect jokes, Etc.).

Give number two to Mr. Badler and his BEM. Oh yes, Methuselah—oops, I mean Mr. Gibson. The guy to whom you refer (wow!) (*Nu?—Ed.*) was one David Bushnell, BUT, you've got some details crocked up:

(1) The submarine could surface at will; it didn't have to be hauled up.

(2) The propeller was in front, not in back.

(3) The mine was carried on the back and attached by a wood screw to the ship. It was not carried on top and attached by hooks.

(4) The Turtle was sunk while makin' a second attack on the British ships, under its own power and not while being moved to a new base.

And now, having made myself extremely popular with Mr. J. G. (is there a bodyguard in the house?) I'll quit ramblin' on (my, don't you look happy about it!).

Goom-bye please,

JAMES STEWART

ONE—TWO

762 Broadway
Somerville 44
Massachusetts

DEAR JERRY:

Concerning C. Stewart Metchette's speculations on the origin of "Kalgan" as the name of a planet:

I did not consciously borrow Doc Smith's name. When I wrote "The Mule" in 1945, I needed a name for a planet. It was wartime and there was a large map of the Far East on the wall. Kalgan was on the map. It is the name of a sizable city in the province of Chahar (Inner Mongolia), which is located about one hundred miles northwest of Peking. It sounded like a good name, so I used it.

Concerning Mitchell M. Badler's speculations on the presumed identity of Mr. Coppel and myself:

Sorry, but Mr. Coppel is not me. Except for one extremely short piece long, long ago, I have never used a pseudonym. And thank you, Mr. Badler, for your kind words about the Foundation stories.

Very truly yours,

ISAAC ASIMOV

THIS GUY IS NOTS!

203 Robin Street
Dunkirk, New York

DEAR JB:

I am not going to say, "Congratulations on the new, bi-monthly PLANET!" I am not going to say that PS has improved 103% since you took over. And I am certainly not going to say that I enjoy your parenthetical comments very much. Nor am I going to suggest politely, or otherwise, that you kill Anderson. I won't ask where Bradbury was this issue, either. As a matter of fact, I won't even tell you that this is only my second letter to a prozine.

Then why am I writing this?

I'm not going to tell you.

Yours,

DAVID ENGLISH

(All right, dammit... then I won't PRINT IT!—Ed.)

HEY, HAYAKAWA!

Box 442
Athens, Georgia

MY DEAR J. B.:

I found much pleasure in reading Vizigraph in the Fall PS. This is the first copy of PLANET STORIES I have bought. The reason is that though I have long been an SF reader, I am so repelled by the covers on many of the lurid pulps that I am ashamed to be seen on the street with them under my arm. So the ones I willingly buy are the more restfully appareled. I shall, however, undergo the same ordeal when your next appears.

Maybe one might shed a little light on how things are defined. I seem to have rung in on the tail of a hot controversy about defining SF, but I have a strong impression that the contenders have been defining *extensionally*. This consists in looking over a group of individual items, trying to abstract from them their common features, then framing a definition from those abstracted features. This is the most common way of doing it, and most usually comes to grief. The alternative (and generally preferable) method is to define *intensionally*. This is simply saying that the class which you are trying to define is "that class which consists of item 1, item 2, item 3... etc." It shifts the point of view from the contemplation of glorious abstractions to the problem of whether this or that questionable example is rightly included in the class. This leaves it all a matter of custom and individual opinion, which is less soul-searching than the other method, but leaves the problem right where it belongs, and saves a lot of paper.

Extensional definition is lots of fun, but fundamentally no good. *Man*, for example, can be defined only intensionally.

I vote a large and conspicuous monument to STRANGE EXODUS as among the best and most original SF I have seen in a long time. And a small, ugly negative monument to Coppel's VALKYR. Let's keep Wagner out of this. Also.

why make an interplanetary* dark ages story, when the same could have been done with three counties in Old England and a real warlock! The only thing in it that might have been SF was the power drives in the space ships. Use horses alone, drop the galactic setting, and have a story that stays within bounds. But don't publish it in PS.

Sincerely,

H. E. CALKINS

P. S. It amuses me that I symbolize Abernathy's strange creatures as "flatulent worms"! Aesthetic? (Nay, ethereal—Ed.)

EMANATION FROM TONAWANDA

119 Ward Road
North Tonawanda, New York

DEAR JERRY:

The November issue of PLANET STORIES was a pleasant surprise; most of the stories were very readable (unless you happen to be Chinese or Afgan). The last two issues were sadly lacking in this respect, I fear; but enough of that. Let us hope that such travesties as REBEL OF VALKYR are gone forever.

Oh-oh. I spoke too soon. I see that Coppel is still present—"Adam and Eve" tales have been popping up quite a bit of late after a merciful interment, and THE LAST TWO ALIVE! is the worst; (the one in SS—or was it TWS?—was the best of that type I've yet read). Let us have no more, please.

The MITKEY sequel was fairly good, but obviously written on demand (if it wasn't, that statement is going to make me look awfully silly). (Ja, so . . . now go look in a mirror—Ed.) However, I enjoyed it (something is wrong with my typing, and I can only pray it will straighten out). (Amen—Ed.)

CARRY ME HOME reminded me of Brackett, which is about the highest praise I can think to give the author. Let us have no nonsense about Venus bearing (it should be "being") a desert-world with a formaldehyde atmosphere and little or no water; stories such as this (and DEATH-BY-RAIN, which I also enjoyed) ignore those "facts"—and it will never be certain what exists thereon till man bridges the distance to Venus and looks for himself.

SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS was a very cute tale; that final sentence almost caught me off-guard. The unexpected always makes a good tale. CARGO TO CALLISTO was average PLANET; not particularly bad, but not particularly good either. MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA was a bit too ingenious; everything was obvious from the moment that minus square root was brought into the picture. FINAL MISSION was a fair atmosphere story, not quite up to MacDonald's usual par, but the third-best in the issue, behind MITKEY in second and CARRY ME HOME (I don't get the title, but it sounds as if it should have some atmospheric meaning) in first.

I have seen no one whose Martian stories compare to Burroughs'. Stewart said "shades of Burroughs." Six months ago I would have jumped on him, but now I am mellow with old age (huh?). However, let it be said that ERB is still the master of adventure; and that since I enjoyed his Martian stories and didn't enjoy those of Coppel, something must be wrong with

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RUSH THIS COUPON NOW!

Coppel. (Of course, *nothing* could possibly be wrong with me.) (*Looked in that mirror yet?—Ed.*) Some of ERB's early MARTIAN tales are slightly hacky nowadays, but they were the first long stories (first short ones too, for all I know) he tried; and they were written in the style of the times. In CHESSMEN OF MARS he came close to writing real literature, and usually in his stories you will find subtle satire of something or other—the communistic doctrine, for instance (the Green Men were ruled by a form of communism—common ownership of everything).

Enough of that.

Pics—Gibson, Stewart, and Izic Azimof, (*YIPE! Sorry, Isaac—Ed.*) for a cute little letter (Claude Held says: "Coppel is Asomiv [oooo, that was accidental!]") Is this true? If it is, I can see why he doesn't want it known; if I had written that trash, I wouldn't publicize it either.)

Is this what we call suspense advertising?—SHANADU! (*Yos... it's also what we call free advertising—KLUEGSTE DU!—Ed.*) Don't ask what it means; you will learn soon enough. I have more, also; two names: Wayne Keller and Edward Chapman. Since the only connection between them is that they emanate from North Tonawanda, don't waste your brains trying to figure them out. Just wait two months more.

You aren't perfect yet, and I suppose you are well aware of that (and have an eye on the fate of PLP). However, PLANET begins to climb once more.

Cordially,

W. PAUL GANLEY

P.S. Some time ago a girl from Pennsylvania (I think) wrote me asking for the address of the Vizigraph, to which she wanted to write; then she wrote again asking for information about FAN-FARE, my fanzine. I do not like to lose a customer; but I did lose her address. Apparently I'd copied wrong, for it (the letter) was returned by the postal department. I am sorry, and if she sees this and is still interested in FAN-FARE, will she please write a card....

PUT THAT SOFA DOWN!

133a Twist Street,
Hillbrow,
Johannesburg,
Trasvaal,
South Africa.

DEAR ED:

I've been trying for years now to bolster up enough courage to write to La Vizi and at last it's bolstered (the courage, I mean). You'll excuse this letter if it's too late for the September ish., but where I am it's darned hard to collar a copy of any kind of American mag and when you do manage to get one it's years old (literally). But this month I was lucky. After much wheedling, pleading, threatening and grovelling I managed to extract, from my favourite bookseller, a copy of PLANET... Fall issue, whatever that is. It says 1950 on the cover so I figure it can't be too old. I won't try to classify the stories because I don't want a headache, but here's what I think of them:

REBEL OF VALKYR: Okay for an adventure mag... you should have run it in ACTION STORIES.

DEATH WISH: Maybe I caught Bradbury at a bad time, but 'twere't so hot.

THE CROWDED COLONY: I liked this one.
THE SKY IS FALLING: Not Too Bad.
MEEM: St. Clair's blubbering... 'nuff said.
STAR SHIP: Another adventure story, but well written.

STRANGE EXODUS: Best in the mag.

PATCH: No comment.

Everyone seems to comment on the covers so why not me? Duh... er... Editor... What is the babe doing? Or is that a stupid question? Don't answer that. It looks to me, judging from what she is holding in her hand, like she's testing out the propulsion powers of a flying saucer; I could be wrong, though. I don't know whether to congratulate you or sympathize with you on becoming the editor of P.S. Anyway, you can choose which one of these sentiments you prefer. (*May I mix them?—Ed.*)

Looking up my back numbers of PLANET it seems that it's usually here that people moan about untrimmed edges. Well, don't faint, but... I LIKE 'em. Now let me see... oh, yes, illustrations; I'm going to be difficult here—they're ALL lousy.

How'm I doin' for space? Oh well, I'll squeeze a little more in anyway.

It seems that whenever I pick up a Stf mag I find Sneary in the letter column. It wouldn't be so bad if his typewriter could spell properly.

And here's Lin Carter, too. There's one thing that's always puzzled me here—it's... er... now don't bite a piece out of the horsehair sofa, Lin, but—are you a him or a her? There! I've said it! I can feel the walls trembling already, not to mention me. Anyway, I agree with everything he/she says. That calm you down a bit, Lin?

I'm thinking of writing a book called "English for the Moron," for the benefit of unfortunate people like Al Leverentz.

Hah! You squashed Mr. Sigler nicely, ed.

I'll bet Bruce Hapke is still laughing over your little poem; I am.

I see I have someone who agrees with me on Bradbury. Shake, Mr. Pryor.

Now, just in case this letter finds its way into La Vizi, I wish to state here and now that I came into the world before Ramon Navarro or Van Johnson hit the screen so you can leave my name alone. I think I've overstepped my space, so... Mind if I write again?

Tah Muchly,

RAMON VAN RENSBURG

WELL, LIN... WHAT ARE YOU?

Box 493,
Lynn Haven, Fla.

DEAR BIX:

One veddy nice issue this time, me friend. In fact, surprisingly good! I like the new type, the new headings, and the contents-page setup is very welcome. Mr. Editor, you're making a good start, in this reader's not-so-humble opinion!

And the stories were slightly better than average, if I may add a little more praise. REBEL OF VALKYR, tho just another of legions of pseudo-ERB adventures, had a vivid and colorful style that was eminently readable. The character of Keiron (or was it Kieron? I'm attending the Lynhvention in Lynn Haven and don't have my copy to refer to) was adequately developed. The style reminded me—this is pretty far-fetched I fear—of a sort of cross between

Brackett and Isaac Asimov. The mentions of Kalgan, and the quotes from "Essays on Galactic History" strengthened the Asimovian air, Good yarn, tho, and a nice fresh twist on the ending that saved it from the They All Lived Happily Ever After rut.

I was frankly disappointed in Poul Anderson's first story for you. That boy is one of the better in the new crop of authors, and I've seen several astonishingly good yarns with his by-line. But this one seemed as if he was abandoning his usual style in an attempt to write at your usual level—which I am not belittling or anything, don't get me wrong—and in doing so turned out the very conventional and totally uninteresting story STAR SHIP. There was not a shred of originality in the thing. Still, I hope you can get some more stuff from him. Fine writer, and every writer of his caliber has the right to an occasional fluff.

The Bradbury offering this ish was middlin' good. Slightly better plot than usual for Brad, and of course his regular superlative style that makes anything sound good. Not a bad story at all.

Of the others, none seem exceptionally outstanding. THE CROWDED COLONY had an incredibly clever twist to it. Albeit, a twist that was very hard to swallow. Mr. Drexel has Ideas.

Letters were quite interesting, this time. Nis tu see sumthen frum sNeary agin. And I have refrained so far from letting out any war-whoops of hysterical joy over the new bi-monthly schedule not without straining. That's swell news, wunnerful, but it's been so long a quarterly pub it won't seem like the same ole PeeEss. Besides, now I can't be leisurely about getting my letters in like I usta.

For the letter prizes: Douglas Creighton with an extremely good letter (and whose opinions on Bradbury I share. O for another Brat story!); Sneary, as ever entertaining; and Ed Cox. Modesty forbids my casting a vote for Carter's witty and casual letter. O to be able to write a quiet, entertaining little missive like that!

Well, reckon I'll call this a letter. I hope—but I have my doubts—that this gets in under the wire. I am a trifle late getting it in, but that's a convention for you. Try to—go on, just try—get any private work done with such scintillating wits as Shelby Vick or Harry B. Moore breathing down your neck and holding fascinating discussions anent Fandom and the True Literature within ear-shot.

Thanks for an, all things considered, pretty good issue, my friend. Mr. Bixby, I'll be looking forward to other such issues under your Aegis.

Lincerely,

Lin Carter, The Sage of St. Pete.
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A FIRST LETTER!**

309 East 18th Street
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DEAR BIX:

My fingers tremble hesitantly above the waiting keys, my lower lip quivers with suppressed fear; a voice within me born of caution shrieks, "Stop man, stop. You'll regret it!" and another, born of urgency whispers, "Go on, go on." Why,

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you ask, is this letter such a catastrophic step in my life? Well, I'll tell you, (*italics maestro, if you please*) *this is my first letter to a prozine*. When Ackerman was a pup, this was a fact to be heralded by 16 point type and the letter read something like, "DearsirIamonly12yearsoldandI havebeenreadingyourmagazinesincekindergartenandIthinkthatitisjustgingerpeachyandswell." But today there is an evil, cruel menace waiting to pounce upon fans who are so unwise as to have their names printed in a widely-circulated magazine; it is the spirit of organized fandom. As soon as the issue containing this letter hits the stands a horde of demons will swoop down to the newsstands and, with many a fiendish giggle, will copy down every name printed therein. Within a few short weeks my mailbox shall spew forth free sample copies of fanzines like—The Science-Fiction Appleknocker, Fantasy Atheist, Blue Goon, Sanitary Science Stories, and Racy Robot Romances. With these I shall receive invitations to join the Cecil B. Dusenbury Appreciation Club, The National Fantasy Nudists League, The East Overshoe Science Fiction Association, The Cosmic Cowboys, The National STF Correspondence and Knitting Society, etc. (*And, most famous of them all, "The Universal Zipperoo—Always on the Fly!"—Ed.*) And why do I sit here hacking out this crud when I could be out gambolling (that's *gambol*, wise-guy!) in the sun?

On to the Nov. PLANET, armed only with a Flitgun:

Cover—okay, so I'm a shnook, I like it. Anderson is one of the top cover artists in the S-F—or any other pulp field. His action is solid, and undeniably eye-catching, his women are most definitely attractive, his tone is lush, and his color looks as fresh as though it had been applied directly from the tube. Anderson's been restricted by house requirements and regulations; a few other S-F mags have the same regulations, and look at the messes their covers are!

CARRY ME HOME—wow! You'll go down in history, Bix, as the man who discovered Liddell. Mr. Liddell possesses a rare combination of skill, freshness, color, action, emotion, and intelligence. This story combines fantasy and science-fiction without hybridizing either, and most important, it's an allegory. Those beautiful names—d'vahnyan, ll'ghirae. The man's great, let's have a lot more of him!

THE LAST TWO ALIVE—the lead novel is getting more respectable all the time. I rather enjoyed this one, and nobody can say that the ending was unfounded in the earlier parts of the story.

MITKEY RIDES AGAIN—cute, and lived up to its predecessor. Brown leaves himself wide open for another sequel, though.

SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS—and MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA—both nice, the former nosing the latter out because of its double-twist ending and its protagonist.

FINAL MISSION—the whole story was given in the blurb, which speaks well for neither.

CARGO TO CALLISTO—pretty punk. The

plot is hackneyed and the handling is hack. The line that especially got me was the one that went something like, "You could tell she was a Martian by her arching eyebrows and thin nose." Hah! Sure, humanoid races on other planets are not only possible, but probable... only remember, humanoid means, *like* a human! Mars has less than 1/2 Earth's gravity, consequently a Martian humanoid would be at least half our height. (*How's that again?—Ed.*) Besides, an Earth-Mars marriage is as likely as a man mating with a cobra and being blessed with an ostrich! An even more glaring error appeared in St. Clair's story of two issues back, MEEM; briefly, St. Clair proposed a race of neuters and females, and a small rodent-like animal which was the functional male of the race. Fine! But how do those rodent-like animals (meems) reproduce? Or perhaps those talented Vaudrians are capable of giving birth to neuters, females, and meems. These flaws are always killjoys no matter how good the story may be. Back to your story, Drex, what really burned me was your using the old Ed Hamilton trick of having Mercurians, Venerians, Terrans, and Martians working together. If H. Sapiens can't even get along with other members of his own race, how the hell is he going to make friends with alien species?—Now that everybody knows who Jerome Drexel Bixby *really* is, I suppose that you'll have to get a new pen name; like—oh—Robert A. Heinlein.

Rocketship X-M—Acky's reviews are always somewhat putrid; this one was no exception. 4E took the picture too seriously; I saw it and thought it was immensely humorous! It was especially clever of the writer-director to have the crew take along rifles and guns on a lunar expedition.

DIANETICS—I'm getting damned fed up with the big mouths who keep yapping against it without trying it out. Sure, I believe in it, the same way I believe in electricity.

I'm mighty glad to see FEATURE FLASH back; let's have fotos to go with the copy.

ART—is steadily improving with Vestal's great Starmouse pix. Mayan is good technically, but uninventive; his rockets and extraterrestrials are stinko. McWilliams is good. Please try to get Schneeman on the staff.

Squawks—very few, just get rid of that obnoxious mast-head by Murph Anderson; I'm sure Vestal could do a better job.

Well, that's it; PLANET is undergoing a renaissance, and you've already discovered one truly great author. You have two choices open to you, Bix; keep it up, or quit while you're ahead.

auf widdershins,

HENRY W. CHABOT

PLANET REGRETS

The Milton L. Coe story, scheduled for this issue and mentioned on the cover, was squeezed out at the last moment. It will be run soon.

See you all Jan. 1st . . .

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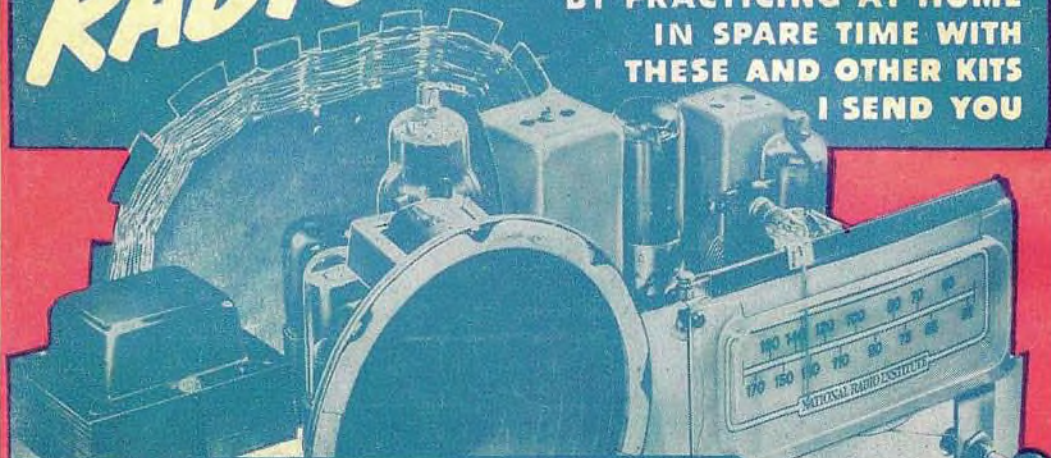
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