

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET series

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A SOUND OF THUNDER by **RAY BRADBURY**
MARS MINUS BISHA novelet by **LEIGH BRACKETT**

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 4

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JANUARY, 1954

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T. T. SCOTT, *President*

JACK O'SULLIVAN, *Editor*

MALCOLM REISS, *Mgr. Editor*

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Man on the moon? That's a big question. No one can say for certain when we shall go to the moon (or any other planet) or how it shall be accomplished. Yet it might be interesting to set down the opinions of leaders in the fields of science and science-fiction in these respects. A booklet compiled by Gerry de la Ree of 277 Howland Avenue, River Edge, N. J., has done just that, and we are pleased, with his permission, to give you some of his findings.

Mr. Ree polled a wide number of writers, editors and scientists. Among the latter group are Dr. Wernher von Braun, Chief U. S. Guided Missiles Development Division, Huntsville, Ala., and Dr. Fred L. Whipple, chairman of Harvard University Department of Astronomy, an expert on meteorites.

Herewith the results of the poll:

Do you believe that interplanetary travel will eventually be accomplished? YES: 98.4 per cent. No: 1.6 per cent.

If your answer to the above question was "yes," in what year do you think the first unmanned missile will be successfully landed on the moon? Prior to 1975: 71.4 per cent; After 1975: 12.7 per cent; No opinion: 15.9 per cent.

In what year do you think the first manned flight to the moon or another planet will be attempted? Prior to 1990: 73.0 per cent; After 1990: 14.3 per cent; No opinion: 12.7 per cent.

What country, organization, or group do you think will sponsor the first interplanetary flight? United States: 54.7; U. S. or Russia: 14.3; International: 11.1; No opinion: 14.3; Others: 5.6.

Do you believe atomic power will be used to propel the first passenger carrying space craft? Yes: 42.9; No: 49.2; Partially: 6.3; No opinion: 1.6.

If not, what type of fuel do you think will be used? Some of the suggestions: Von Braun: Hydrazine-ammonia, plus nitric acid; Arthur C. Clarke: Chemical propellants and orbital refuelling. Probably ozone and metallic hydride; Willy Ley: probably hydrazine plus nitric acid, could be alcohol plus liquid oxygen.

SPACE TRAVEL—When and How. Copyright 1953 by Gerry de la Ree.

We were very pleased to note the wide acclaim given Leigh Brackett's *THE ARK OF MARS* in the Sept. ish. Practically ninety per cent of the scriverners were delighted with it and asked for more of the same. How about it, Leigh?

November's picture winners are: (1) Robert E. Gilbert; (2) A. K. King; (3) Joe Keogh.

SEX, THOU ART SPOKEN FOR

910 N. D St.
Poplar Bluff, Mo.

Dear Editor,

Pardon my grammar and realize the point which I would make clear. In a recent issue Alfreda Runyon had a meritorious letter



run. She put into words what should be in civilization's modes and morals. I shall epitomize her views, "Sex is not ugly except to the neurotic mind." The fact that generations of ignorance and superstition has debased man's attitude toward sex into something far less than God intended it is no where more evident than in the science of Psychology. (I consider the latter a science even though learned men do not.) Evidence has been put forth that sexual mania propensities are mostly artificially induced.

In that forgotten era when sex became thought of as evil, to be kept clandestine, man made his greatest, egregious blunder. In his blind, stupid haste for its condemnation he even forgot to label it clearly. As any semanticist will confirm, the word "sex" is impossible to define universally. Another interesting fact about the symbolic representation of sex is that the words describing sex are almost all of a derogatory nature.

Sex is mortality. Perhaps man has built up all the taboos on sex because he wishes to conceal the fact of his mortality. If that be the reason then man should realize by now that the noxious effects from such a childish notion are too great for its continuation.

When I see various magazines displaying the human form in different stages of nudity I both condemn and condone them. While they are putting into practice what I advocate, their motives are too selfish to eulogize.

I understand the difficulty in making a good cover. Circulation demands that cheesecake be displayed enticingly. Now, personally, I do not have anything against seeing the cover girl stripped naked in an intelligently planned painting. But when a beautiful body is thrown into a space merely for mercenary reasons, that seems nothing short of sacrilegious. Anderson is an inveterate doer of just that. Of course I realize that Pulp covers are not meant to be artistic masterpieces, but that does not mean they should be meaningless things of form, color and line.

Why not have Wood do a cover. Though he is known chiefly as a cartoonist, I think he could rank with Finlay if given an opportunity. All I can see wrong with his art is that he gives unnecessary details, and chronically draws his figures too short and stocky.

Sometimes I think God made the critic so the artist could suffer enough to be creative.

If anyone wishes to question my viewpoints on sex, just take off your shoes and wade in, but remember the water is deep.

Why is everybody so set against Bryan Berry. As he said himself he does not rate such a deluge of comment. His works are not that good or bad. And to say that his style is similar to Ray Bradbury is as ridiculous as inferring that Zane Grey wrote like Victor Hugo.

In both the July and September issues James McKinney, Jr. had a short story. I was not shocked by WHERE THE GODS DECIDE, but I was nauseated by the banality of it. It was so full of cliches that I cannot conceive why it should ever be printed. Junior, however, proved that he could write something worth absorbing in DEATH STAR. Not mentioning close seconds, I considered his piece the best one in the edition.

Bertha Sundet chose to specify that she believed in a God of creation. A being so omnipotent that he can control the cosmos, so omniscient as to know what is best for mankind, and so omnipresent as to be near man and at the same time at the borders of infinity. Perhaps such visions are merely thought-

formed by a piece of gray matter that is old and senile or young and iconoclastic.

Questioningly Yours,

J. DEAN CLARK

EULOGY

AF 17376007

501 A.D. Gp.

O. Hare AFB

Chicago, Illinois

Dear Editor,

The Sept. PS appeared and on the cover the magic name of LEIGH BRACKETT . . . Ah! Brackett . . . Brackett of ebony towers rising from the crimson sward . . . Brackett of spiraling, castle-like fortresses . . . of silent aeons, old Martian cities . . . of deep valleys between ivory mountains . . . of crystal lakes, cobwebbed catacombs, flashing swords, huge hairy-chested men, leathery-skinned Martians, ships sailing unknown seas, alien temples with bloodstained altars, dark windtossed forests, forgotten gods, golden haired Warrior Maidens, surging white tipped waves crashing against gray walled cliffs. . . . Of caravans bright with colors moving across the red ash deserts of a dying world . . . of quiet, stealthy footsteps, sudden soft murmurs of pain and jeweled daggers reflecting for a moment a spark of silver light from the twin moons . . . of poised lances which hurl themselves up from the surface of the planet on scarlet columns of fire . . . of the sound of trumpets echoing through mist enshrouded valleys. . . . Of Eric John Stark with the cold gray eyes of an angry eagle . . . a giant of a man with sand scarred, sweating, blood stained body who stands unafraid among a host of enemies . . . Eric John Stark . . . a wanderer, an adventurer, a restless man who is doomed to search always for something he will never find. With Stark I have fought in dark alleyways, sailed strange seas, crossed endless sand dunes under a blazing sun, stood in shadowy corridors, in great palace halls, in strange flowered gardens and in white crevices between ice covered mountains . . . I have felt the chill of cold on far planets and the heat of alien suns . . . I have hung suspended between two poles and felt the lashing bite of a whip crashing against my body until small streams of blood, like mountain streams in the spring flowed down the length of it . . . and have known the moment when the pain was forgotten, when the thongs holding me before my laughing captors held. . . . When I faced them, no longer a wounded, beaten man . . . but a blood-mad Beast. . . . I have known the feel of silk-soft golden hair and the touch of red lips . . . SEA KINGS OF MARS, ENCHANTRESS OF VENUS, QUEEN OF THE MARTIAN CATACOMBS, THE LAKE OF THE GONE FOREVER, BLACK AMAZON OF MARS . . . who could forget them . . . Leigh Brackett . . . writer extraordinary.

What I've said, I've said very poorly. It would have taken a talent like that possessed by Lin Carter to properly describe my feelings toward La Brackett and her work. . . . I wasn't gifted with a poet's soul. So much for my humble tribute to Leigh, now on to PLANET, Sept. 1953. . . .

I remember Hayden Howard as the author of "IT" a tale that I've always felt should have been anthologized. . . . Bob Williams has been appearing quite often lately in your pages, hasn't he? I strongly suspect that "Sol Galaxan" is a pen name for some well known writer . . . could it be Alfred Coppel in disguise? (Ed's note—You guessed it.)

(Continued on page 109)

A SOUND OF THUNDER

By RAY BRADBURY



Back sixty million years hurtled the time machine. Suns fled, and ten million moons fled after them . . . and Eckels—the avid hunter—learned his paradise was the land he'd just departed.

THE sign on the wall seemed to quaver under a film of sliding warm water. Eckels felt his eyelids blink over his stare, and the sign burned in this momentary darkness:

**TIME SAFARI, INC.
SAFARIS TO ANY YEAR IN THE PAST.
YOU NAME THE ANIMAL.
WE TAKE YOU THERE.
YOU SHOOT IT.**

A warm phlegm gathered in Eckels' throat; he swallowed and pushed it down.

The muscles around his mouth formed a smile as he put his hand slowly out upon the air, and in that hand waved a check for ten thousand dollars to the man behind the desk.

"Does this safari guarantee I come back alive?"

"We guarantee nothing," said the official, "except the dinosaurs." He turned. "This is Mr. Travis, your Safari Guide in the Past. He'll tell you what and where to shoot. If he says no shooting, no shooting. If you



disobey instructions, there's a stiff penalty of another ten thousand dollars, plus possible government action, on your return."

Eckels glanced across the vast office at a mass and tangle, a snaking and humming of wires and steel boxes, at an aurora that flickered now orange, now silver, now blue. There was a sound like a gigantic bonfire burning all of Time, all the years and all the parchment calendars, all the hours piled high and set aflame.

A touch of the hand and this burning would, on the instant, beautifully reverse itself. Eckels remembered the wording in the advertisements to the letter. Out of chars and ashes, out of dust and coals, like golden salamanders, the old years, the green years, might leap; roses sweeten the air, white hair turn Irish-black, wrinkles vanish; all, everything fly back to seed, flee death, rush down to their beginnings, suns rise in western skies and set in glorious easts, moons eat themselves opposite to the custom, all and everything cupping one in another like Chinese boxes, rabbits into hats, all and everything returning to the fresh death, the seed death, the green death, to the time before the beginning. A touch of a hand might do it, the merest touch of a hand.

"Hell and damn," Eckels breathed, the light of the Machine on his thin face. "A real Time Machine." He shook his head. "Makes you think. If the election had gone badly yesterday, I might be here now running away from the results. Thank God Keith won. He'll make a fine President of the United States."

"Yes," said the man behind the desk. "We're lucky. If Deutscher had gotten in, we'd have the worst kind of dictatorship. There's an anti-everything man for you, a militarist, anti-Christ, anti-human, anti-intellectual. People called us up, you know, joking but not joking. Said if Deutscher became President they wanted to go live in 1492. Of course it's not our business to conduct Escapes, but to form Safaris. Anyway, Keith's President now. All you got to worry about is——"

"Shooting my dinosaur," Eckels finished it for him.

"A *Tyrannosaurus rex*. The Thunder Lizard, the damnedest monster in history.

Sign this release. Anything happens to you, we're not responsible. Those dinosaurs are hungry."

Eckels flushed angrily. "Trying to scare me!"

"Frankly, yes. We don't want anyone going who'll panic at the first shot. Six Safari leaders were killed last year, and a dozen hunters. We're here to give you the damnedest thrill a *real* hunter ever asked for. Traveling you back sixty million years to bag the biggest damned game in all Time. Your personal check's still there. Tear it up."

Mr. Eckels looked at the check for a long time. His fingers twitched.

"Good luck," said the man behind the desk. "Mr. Travis, he's all yours."

They moved silently across the room, taking their guns with them, toward the Machine, toward the silver metal and the roaring light.

FIRST a day and then a night and then a day and then a night, then it was day-night-day-night-day. A week, a month, a year, a decade! A.D. 2055. A.D. 2019. 1999! 1957! Gone! The Machine roared.

They put on their oxygen helmets and tested the intercoms.

Eckels swayed on the padded seat, his face pale, his jaw stiff. He felt the trembling in his arms and he looked down and found his hands tight on the new rifle. There were four other men in the Machine, Travis, the Safari Leader, his assistant, Lesperance, and two other hunters, Billings and Kramer. They sat looking at each other, and the years blazed around them.

"Can these guns get a dinosaur cold?" Eckels felt his mouth saying.

"If you hit them right," said Travis on the helmet radio. "Some dinosaurs have two brains, one in the head, another far down the spinal column. We stay away from those. That's stretching luck. Put your first two shots into the eyes, if you can, blind them, and go back into the brain."

The Machine howled. Time was a film run backward. Suns fled and ten million moons fled after them. "Good God," said Eckels. "Every hunter that ever lived would envy us today. This makes Africa seem like Illinois."

The Machine slowed; its scream fell to a murmur. The Machine stopped.

The sun stopped in the sky.

The fog that had enveloped the Machine blew away and they were in an old time, a very old time indeed, three hunters and two Safari Heads with their blue metal guns across their knees.

"Christ isn't born yet," said Travis. "Moses has not gone to the mountain to talk with God. The Pyramids are still in the earth, waiting to be cut out and put up. Remember that. Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler—none of them exists."

The men nodded.

"That"—Mr. Travis pointed—"is the jungle of sixty million two thousand and fifty-five years before President Keith."

He indicated a metal path that struck off into green wilderness, over steaming swamp, among giant ferns and palms.

"And that," he said, "is the Path, laid by Time Safari for your use. It floats six inches above the earth. Doesn't touch so much as one grass blade, flower, or tree. It's an anti-gravity metal. Its purpose is to keep you from touching this world of the past in any way. Stay on the Path. Don't go off it. I repeat. *Don't go off.* For any reason! If you fall off, there's a penalty. And don't shoot any animal we don't okay."

"Why?" asked Eckels.

They sat in the ancient wilderness. Far birds' cries blew on a wind, and the smell of tar and an old salt sea, moist grasses, and flowers the color of blood.

"We don't want to change the Future. We don't belong here in the Past. The government doesn't like us here. We have to pay big graft to keep our franchise. A Time Machine is damn finicky business. Not knowing it, we might kill an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower even, thus destroying an important link in a growing species."

"That's not clear," said Eckels.

"All right," Travis continued, "say we accidentally kill one mouse here. That means all the future families of this one particular mouse are destroyed, right?"

"Right."

"And all the families of the families of the families of that one mouse! With a stamp of your foot, you annihilate first one,

then a dozen, then a thousand, a million, a billion possible mice!"

"So they're dead," said Eckels. "So what?"

"So what?" Travis snorted quietly. "Well, what about the foxes that'll need those mice to survive? For want of ten mice, a fox dies. For want of ten foxes, a lion starves. For want of a lion, all manner of insects, vultures, infinite billions of life forms are thrown into chaos and destruction. Eventually it all boils down to this: fifty-nine million years later, a cave man, one of a dozen on the *entire world*, goes hunting wild boar or saber-tooth tiger for food.

"But you, friend, have stepped on all the tigers in that region. By stepping on one single mouse. So the cave man starves. And the cave man, please note, is not just any expendable man, no! He is an *entire future nation*. From his loins would have sprung ten sons. From *their* loins one hundred sons, and thus onward to a civilization. Destroy this one man, and you destroy a race, a people, an entire history of life. It is comparable to slaying some of Adam's grandchildren. The stomp of your foot, on one mouse, could start an earthquake, the effects of which could shake our earth and destinies down through Time, to their very foundations.

"With the death of that one cave man, a billion others yet unborn are throttled in the womb. Perhaps Rome never rises on its seven hills. Perhaps Europe is forever a dark forest, and only Asia waxes healthy and teeming. Step on a mouse and you crush the Pyramids. Step on a mouse and you leave your print, like a Grand Canyon, across Eternity. Queen Elizabeth might never be born, Washington might not cross the Delaware, there might never be a United States at all. So be careful. Stay on the Path. *Never step off!*"

"I see," said Eckels. "Then it wouldn't pay for us even to touch the grass?"

"CORRECT. Crushing certain plants could add up infinitesimally. A little error here would multiply in sixty million years, all out of proportion. Of course maybe our theory is wrong. Maybe Time *can't* be changed by us. Or maybe it can be

changed only in little subtle ways. A dead mouse here makes an insect imbalance there, a population disproportion later, a bad harvest further on, a depression, mass starvation, and, finally, a change in *social* temperament in far-flung countries. Something much more subtle, like that. Perhaps only a soft breath, a whisper, a hair, pollen on the air, such a slight, slight change that unless you looked close you wouldn't see it. Who knows? Who really can say he knows? We don't know. We're guessing. But until we do know for certain whether our messing around in Time *can* make a big roar or a little rustle in history, we're being damned careful.

"This Machine, this Path, your clothing and bodies, were sterilized, as you know, before the journey. We wear these oxygen helmets so we can't introduce our bacteria into an ancient atmosphere."

"How do we know which animals to shoot?"

"They're marked with red paint," said Travis. "Today, before our journey, we sent Lesperance here back with the Machine. He came to this particular era and followed certain animals."

"Studying them?"

"Right," said Lesperance. "I track them through their entire existence, noting which of them lives longest. Very few. How many times they mate. Not often. Life's short. When I find one that's going to die when a tree falls on him, or one that drowns in a tar pit, I note the exact hour, minute, and second. I shoot a paint bomb. It leaves a red patch on his hide. We can't miss it. Then I correlate our arrival in the Past so that we meet the Monster not more than two minutes before he would have died anyway. This way, we kill only animals with no future, that are never going to mate again. You see how *careful* we are?"

"But if you came back this morning in Time," said Eckels eagerly, "you must've bumped into *us*, our Safari! How did it turn out? Was it successful? Did all of us get through—alive?"

Travis and Lesperance gave each other a look.

"That'd be a paradox," said the latter. "Time doesn't permit that sort of mess—a man meeting himself. When such occasions

threaten, Time steps aside. Like an airplane hitting an air pocket. You felt the Machine jump just before we stopped? That was us passing ourselves on the way back to the Future. We saw nothing. There's no way of telling *if* this expedition was a success, *if* we got our monster, or whether all of us—meaning *you*, Mr. Eckels—got out alive."

Eckels smiled palely.

"Cut that," said Travis sharply. "Everyone on his feet!"

They were ready to leave the Machine.

The jungle was high and the jungle was broad and the jungle was the entire world forever and forever. Sounds like music and sounds like flying tents filled the sky, and those were pterodactyls soaring with cavernous gray wings, gigantic bats out of a delirium and a night fever. Eckels, balanced on the narrow Path, aimed his rifle playfully.

"Stop that!" said Travis. "Don't even aim for fun, damn it! If your gun should go off—"

Eckels flushed. "Where's our *Tyrannosaurus*?"

Lesperance checked his wrist watch. "Up ahead. We'll bisect his trail in sixty seconds. Look for the red paint, for Christ's sake. Don't shoot till we give the word. Stay on the Path. *Stay on the Path!*"

They moved forward in the wind of morning.

"Strange," murmured Eckels. "Up ahead, sixty million years, Election Day over. Keith made President. Everyone celebrating. And here we are, a million years lost, and they don't exist. The things we worried about for months, a lifetime, not even born or thought about yet."

"Safety catches off, everyone!" ordered Travis.

"You, first shot, Eckels. Second, Billings. Third, Kramer."

"I've hunted tiger, wild boar, buffalo, elephant, but man, this is *it*," said Eckels. "I'm shaking like a kid."

"Ah," said Travis.

Everyone stopped.

Travis raised his hand. "Ahead," he whispered. "In the mist. There he is. There's His Royal Majesty now."

The jungle was wide and full of twitterings, rustlings, murmurs, and sighs.

Suddenly it all ceased, as if someone had shut a door.

Silence.

A sound of thunder.

Out of the mist, one hundred yards away, came *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

"Good heavens," whispered Eckels.

"Sh!"

It came on great oiled, resilient, striding legs. It towered thirty feet above half of the trees, a great evil god, folding its delicate watchmaker's claws close to its oily reptilian chest. Each lower leg was a piston, a thousand pounds of white bone, sunk in thick ropes of muscle, sheathed over in a gleam of pebbled skin like the mail of a terrible warrior. Each thigh was a ton of meat, ivory, and steel mesh. And from the great breathing cage of the upper body those two delicate arms dangled out front, arms with hands which might pick up and examine men like toys, while the snake neck coiled. And the head itself, a ton of sculptured stone, lifted easily upon the sky. Its mouth gaped, exposing a fence of teeth like daggers. Its eyes rolled, ostrich eggs, empty of all expression save hunger. It closed its mouth in a death grin. It ran, its pelvic bones crushing aside trees and bushes, its taloned feet clawing damp earth, leaving prints six inches deep wherever it settled its weight. It ran with a gliding ballet step, far too poised and balanced for its ten tons. It moved into a sunlit arena warily, its beautifully reptile hands feeling the air.

"My God!" Eckels twitched his mouth. "It could reach up and grab the moon."

"Sh!" Travis jerked angrily. "He hasn't seen us yet."

"It can't be killed." Eckels pronounced this verdict quietly, as if there could be no argument. He had weighed the evidence and this was his considered opinion. The rifle in his hands seemed a cap gun. "We were fools to come. This is impossible."

"Shut up!" hissed Travis.

"Nightmare."

"Turn around," commanded Travis. "Walk quietly to the Machine. We'll remit one half your fee."

"I didn't realize it would be this big," said Eckels. "I miscalculated, that's all. And now I want out."

"It sees us!"

"There's the red paint on its chest!"

The Thunder Lizard raised itself. Its armored flesh glittered like a thousand green coins. The coins, crusted with slime, steamed. In the slime, tiny insects wriggled, so that the entire body seemed to twitch and undulate, even while the monster itself did not move. It exhaled. The stink of raw flesh blew down the wilderness.

"Get me out of here," said Eckels. "It was never like this before. I was always sure I'd come through alive. I had good guides, good safaris, and safety. This time, I figured wrong. I've met my match and admit it. This is too much for me to get hold of."

"Don't run," said Lesperance. "Turn around. Hide in the Machine."

"Yes." Eckels seemed to be numb. He looked at his feet as if trying to make them move. He gave a grunt of helplessness.

"Eckels!"

He took a few steps, blinking, shuffling.

"Not *that* way!"

The Monster, at the first motion, lunged forward with a terrible scream. It covered one hundred yards in four seconds. The rifles jerked up and blazed fire. A wind-storm from the beast's mouth engulfed them in the stench of slime and old blood. The Monster roared, teeth glittering with sun.

Eckels, not looking back, walked blindly to the edge of the Path, his gun limp in his arms, stepped off the Path, and walked, not knowing it, in the jungle. His feet sank into green moss. His legs moved him, and he felt alone and remote from the events behind.

The rifles cracked again. Their sound was lost in shriek and lizard thunder. The great lever of the reptile's tail swung up, lashed sideways. Trees exploded in clouds of leaf and branch. The Monster twitched its jeweler's hands down to fondle at the men, to twist them in half, to crush them like berries, to cram them into its teeth and its screaming throat. Its boulder-stone eyes leveled with the men. They saw themselves mirrored. They fired at the metallic eyelids and the blazing black iris.

Like a stone idol, like a mountain avalanche, *Tyrannosaurus* fell. Thundering, it clutched trees, pulled them with it. It wrenched and tore the metal Path. The men flung themselves back and away. The body

hit, ten tons of cold flesh and stone. The guns fired. The Monster lashed its armored tail, twitched its snake jaws, and lay still. A fount of blood spurted from its throat. Somewhere inside, a sac of fluids burst. Sickening gushes drenched the hunters. They stood, red and glistening.

The thunder faded.

The jungle was silent. After the avalanche, a green peace. After the nightmare, morning.

Billings and Kramer sat on the pathway and threw up. Travis and Lesperance stood with smoking rifles, cursing steadily.

In the Time Machine, on his face, Eckels lay shivering. He had found his way back to the Path, climbed into the Machine.

TRAVIS came walking, glanced at Eckels, took cotton gauze from a metal box, and returned to the others, who were sitting on the Path.

"Clean up."

They wiped the blood from their helmets. They began to curse too. The Monster lay, a hill of solid flesh. Within, you could hear the sighs and murmurs as the furthest chambers of it died, the organs malfunctioning, liquids running a final instant from pocket to sac to spleen, everything shutting off, closing up forever. It was like standing by a wrecked locomotive or a steam shovel at quitting time, all valves being released or levered tight. Bones cracked; the tonnage of its own flesh, off balance, dead weight, snapped the delicate forearms, caught underneath. The meat settled, quivering.

Another cracking sound. Overhead, a gigantic tree branch broke from its heavy mooring, fell. It crashed upon the dead beast with finality.

"There." Lesperance checked his watch. "Right on time. That's the giant tree that was scheduled to fall and kill this animal originally." He glanced at the two hunters. "You want the trophy picture?"

"What?"

"We can't take a trophy back to the Future. The body has to stay right here where it would have died originally, so the insects, birds, and bacteria can get at it, as they were intended to. Everything in balance. The body stays. But we *can* take a picture of you standing near it."

The two men tried to think, but gave up, shaking their heads.

They let themselves be led along the metal Path. They sank wearily into the Machine cushions. They gazed back at the ruined Monster, the stagnating mound, where already strange reptilian birds and golden insects were busy at the steaming armor.

A sound on the floor of the Time Machine stiffened them. Eckels sat there, shivering.

"I'm sorry," he said at last.

"Get up!" cried Travis.

Eckels got up.

"Go out on that Path alone," said Travis. He had his rifle pointed. "You're not coming back in the Machine. We're leaving you here!"

Lesperance seized Travis' arm. "Wait—"

"Stay out of this!" Travis shook his hand away. "This son of a bitch nearly killed us. But it isn't *that* so much. Hell, no. It's his *shoes!* Look at them! He ran off the Path. My God, that *ruins* us! Who knows how much we'll forfeit! Tens of thousands of dollars of insurance! We guarantee no one leaves the Path. He left it. Oh, the damn fool! I'll have to report to the government. They might revoke our license to travel. God knows *what* he's done to Time, to History!"

"Take it easy, all he did was kick up some dirt."

"How do we *know?*" cried Travis. "We don't know anything! It's all a damn mystery! Get out there Eckels!"

Eckels fumbled his shirt. "I'll pay anything. A hundred thousand dollars!"

Travis glared at Eckels' checkbook and spat. "Go out there. The Monster's next to the Path. Stick your arms up to your elbows in his mouth. Then you can come back with us."

"That's unreasonable!"

"The Monster's dead, you yellow bastard. The bullets! The bullets can't be left behind. They don't belong in the Past; they might change something. Here's my knife. Dig them out!"

He returned, shuddering, five minutes later, his arms soaked and red to the elbows. He held out his hands. Each held a number of steel bullets. Then he fell.

He lay where he fell, not moving.

"You didn't have to make him do that," said Lesperance.

"Didn't I? It's too early to tell." Travis nudged the still body. "He'll live. Next time he won't go hunting game like this. Okay." He jerked his thumb wearily at Lesperance. "Switch on. Let's go home."

1492. 1776. 1812.

They cleaned their hands and faces. They changed their caking shirts and pants. Eckels was up and around again, not speaking. Travis glared at him for a full ten minutes.

1999. 2000. 2055.

The Machine stopped.

"Get out," said Travis.

THE room was there as they had left it.

But not the same as they had left it. The same man sat behind the same desk. But the same man did not quite sit behind the same desk.

Travis looked around swiftly. "Everything okay here?" he snapped.

"Fine. Welcome home!"

Travis did not relax. He seemed to be looking at the very atoms of the air itself, at the way the sun poured through the one high window.

"Okay, Eckels, get out. Don't ever come back."

Eckels could not move.

"You heard me," said Travis. "What're you *staring* at?"

Eckels stood smelling of the air, and there was a thing to the air, a chemical taint so subtle, so slight, that only a faint cry of his subliminal senses warned him it was there. The colors, white, gray, blue, orange, in the wall, in the furniture, in the sky beyond the window, were . . . were . . . And there was a *feel*. His flesh twitched. His hands twitched. He stood drinking the oddness with the pores of his body. Somewhere, someone must have been screaming one of those whistles that only a dog can hear. His body screamed silence in return. Beyond this room, beyond this wall, beyond this man who was not quite the same man seated at this desk that was not quite the same desk . . . lay an entire world of streets and people. What sort of world it was now,

there was no telling. He could feel them moving there, beyond the walls, almost, like so many chess pieces blown in a dry wind. . . .

But the immediate thing was the sign painted on the office wall, the same sign he had read earlier today on first entering.

Somehow, the sign had changed:

TYME SEFARI INC.
SEFARIS TU ANY YEER EN THE PAST.
YU NAIM THE ANIMALL.
WEE TAEK YU THAIR.
YU SHOOT ITT.

Eckels felt himself fall into a chair. He fumbled crazily at the thick slime on his boots. He held up a clod of dirt, trembling.

"No, it *can't* be. Not a *little* thing like that. No!"

Embedded in the mud, glistening green and gold and black, was a butterfly, very beautiful, and very dead.

"Not a little thing like *that*! Not a butterfly!" cried Eckles.

It fell to the floor, an exquisite thing, a small thing that could upset balances and knock down a line of small dominoes and then big dominoes and then gigantic dominoes, all down the years across Time. Eckels' mind whirled. It *couldn't* change things. Killing one butterfly couldn't be *that* important! Could it?

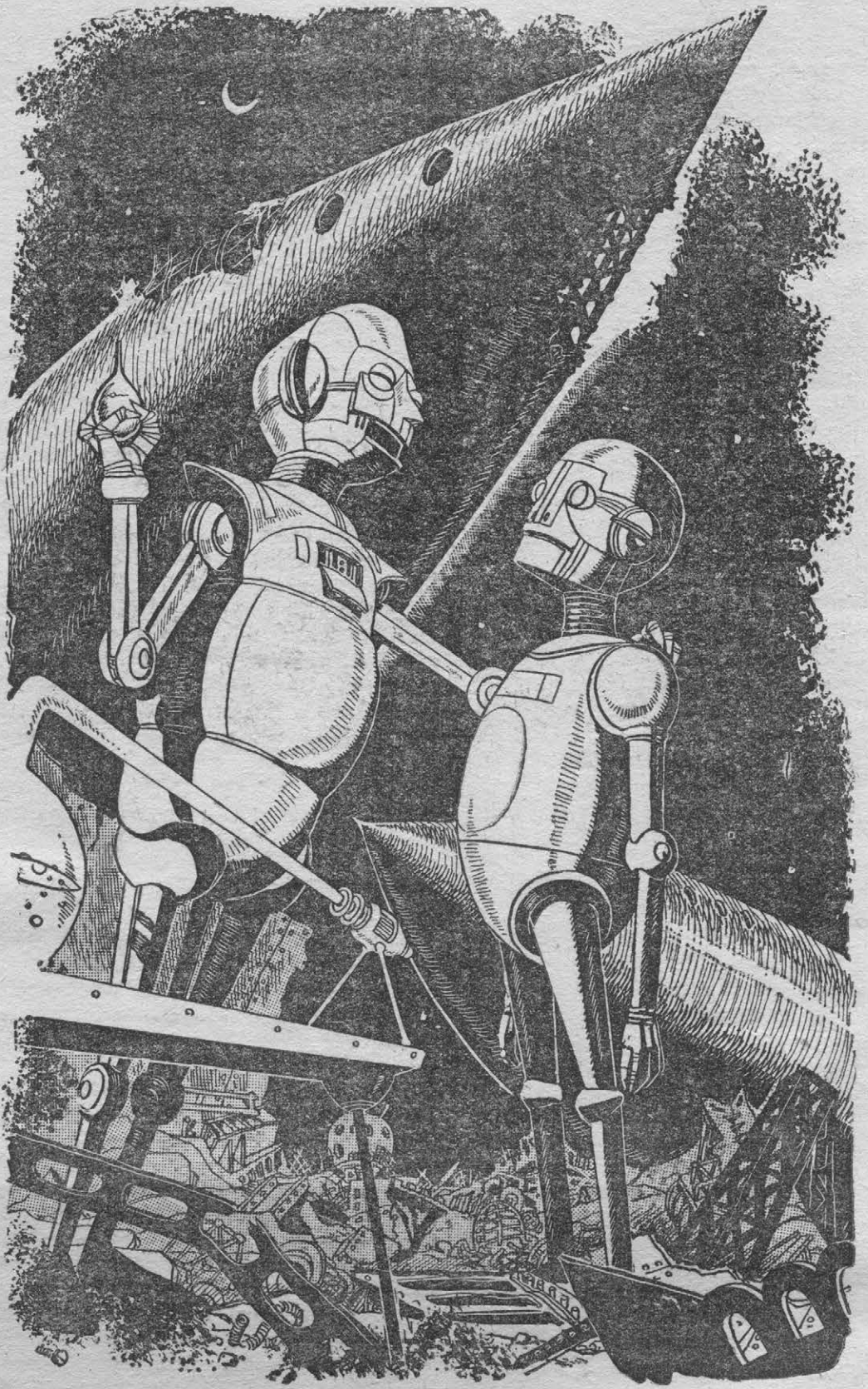
His face was cold. His mouth trembled, asking: "Who—who won the presidential election yesterday?"

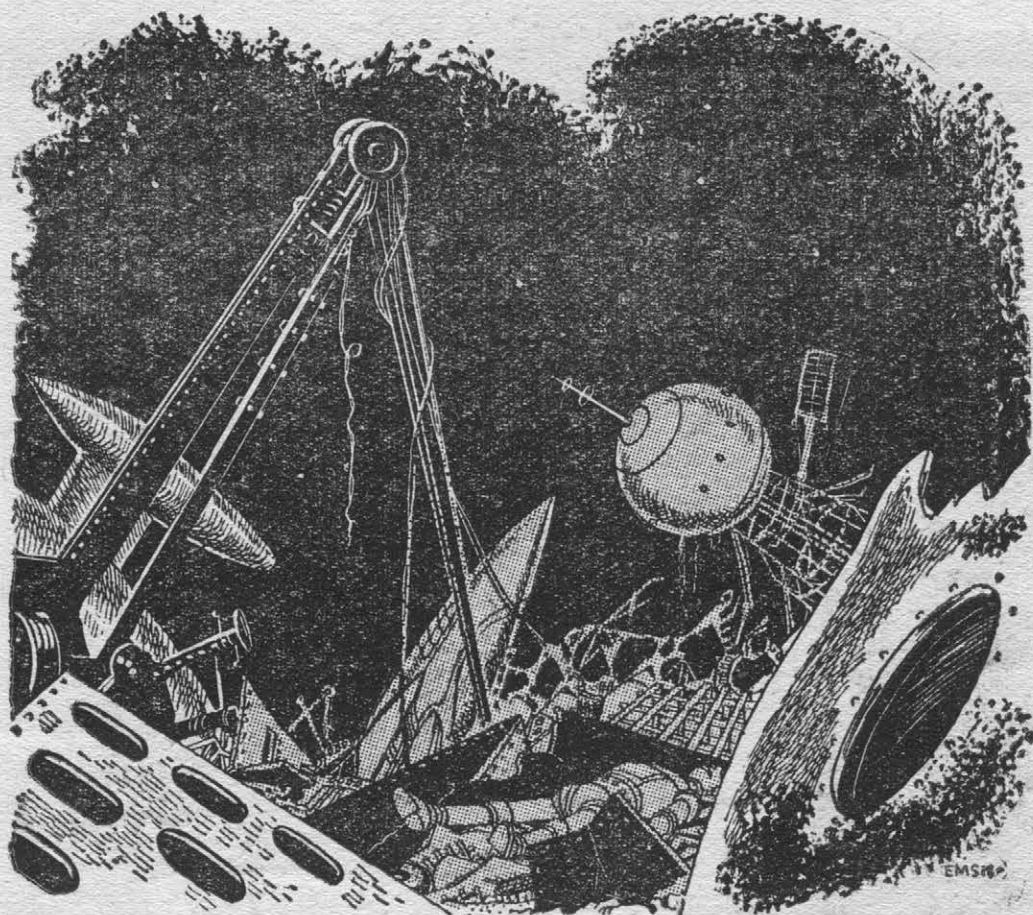
The man behind the desk laughed. "You joking? You know damn well. Deutscher, of course! Who else? Not that damn weakling Keith. We got an iron man now, a man with guts, by God!" The official stopped. "What's wrong?"

Eckels moaned. He dropped to his knees. He scrambled at the golden butterfly with shaking fingers. "Can't we," he pleaded to the world, to himself, to the officials, to the Machine, "can't we take it *back*, can't we *make* it alive again? Can't we start over? Can't we——"

He did not move. Eyes shut, he waited, shivering. He heard Travis breathe loud in the room; he heard Travis shift his rifle, click the safety catch, and raise the weapon.

There was a sound of thunder.





B-12's MOON GLOW

By CHARLES A. STEARNS

Among the metal-persons of Phobos, robot B-12 held a special niche. He might not have been stronger, larger, faster than some... but he could be devious... and more important, he was that junkyard planetoid's only moonshiner.

I AM B-12, a metal person. If you read *Day* and the other progressive journals you will know that in some quarters of the galaxy there is considerable prejudice directed against us. It is ever so with minority races, and I do not complain. I merely make this statement so that you will understand about the alarm clock.

An alarm clock is a simple mechanism used by the Builders to shock themselves into consciousness after the periodic comas to which they are subject. It is obsolescent,

but still used in such out of the way places as Phobos.

My own contact with one of these devices came about in the following manner:

I had come into Argon City under cover of darkness, which is the only sensible thing to do, in my profession, and I was stealing through the back alleyways as silently as my rusty joints would allow.

I was less than three blocks from Benny's Place, and still undetected, when I passed the window. It was a large, cheerful oblong

of light, so quite naturally I stopped to investigate, being slightly phototropic, by virtue of the selenium grids in my rectifier cells. I went over and looked in, unobtrusively resting my grapples on the outer ledge.

There was a Builder inside such as I had not seen since I came to Phobos half a century ago, and yet I recognized the subspecies at once, for they are common on Earth. It was a she.

It was in the process of removing certain outer sheaths, and I noted that, while quite symmetrical, bilaterally, it was otherwise oddly formed, being disproportionately large and lumpy in the anterior ventral region.

I had watched for some two or three minutes, entirely forgetting my own safety, when the she saw me. Its eyes widened and it snatched up the alarm clock which was, as I have hinted, near at hand.

"Get out of here, you nose-y old tin can!" it screamed, and threw the clock, which caromed off my headpiece, damaging one earphone. I ran.

If you still do not see what I mean about racial prejudice, you will, when you hear what happened later.

I continued on until I came to Benny's Place, entering through the back door. Benny met me there, and quickly shushed me into a side room. His fluorescent eyes were glowing with excitement.

Benny's real name is BNE-96, and when on Earth he had been only a Servitor, not a General Purpose like myself.

But perhaps I should explain.

We metal people are the children of the Builders of Earth, and later of Mars and Venus. We were not born of two parents, as they are. That is a function far too complex to explain here; in fact I do not even understand it myself. No, we were born of the hands and intellects of the greatest of their scientists, and for this reason it might be natural to suppose that we, and not they, would be considered a superior race. It is not so.

Many of us were fashioned in those days, a metal person for every kind of task that they could devise, and some, like myself, who could do almost anything. We were contented enough, for the greater part, but

the scientists kept creating, always striving to better their former efforts.

And one day the situation which the Builders had always regarded as inevitable, but we, somehow, had supposed would never come, was upon us. The first generation of the metal people—more than fifty thousand of us—were obsolete. The things that we had been designed to do, the new ones, with their crystalline brains, fresh, untarnished, accomplished better.

We were banished to Phobos, dreary, lifeless moon of Mars. It had long been a sort of interplanetary junkyard; now it became a graveyard.

UPON the barren face of this little world there was no life except for the handful of hardy Martian and Terran prospectors who searched for minerals. Later on, a few rude mining communities sprang up under plastic airdromes, but never came to much. Argon City was such a place.

I wonder if you can comprehend the loneliness, the hollow futility of our plight. Fifty thousand skilled workmen with nothing to do. Some of the less adaptable gave up, prostrating themselves upon the bare rocks until their joints froze from lack of use, and their works corroded. Others served the miners and prospectors, but their needs were all too few.

The overwhelming majority of us were still idle, and somehow we learned the secret of racial existence at last. We learned to serve each other.

This was not an easy lesson to learn. In the first place there must be motivation involved in racial preservation. Yet we derived no pleasure out of the things that make the Builders wish to continue to live. We did not sleep; we did not eat, and we were not able to reproduce ourselves. (And, besides, this latter, as I have indicated, would have been pointless with us.)

There was, however, one other pleasure of the Builders that intrigued us. It can best be described as a stimulation produced by drenching their insides with alcoholic compounds, and is a universal pastime among the males and many of the shes.

One of us—R-47, I think it was (rest him)—tried it one day. He pried open the top of his helmet and poured an entire bot-

tle of the fluid down his mechanism.

Poor R-47. He caught fire and blazed up in a glorious blue flame that we could not extinguish in time. He was beyond repair, and we were forced to scrap him.

But his was not a sacrifice in vain. He had established an idea in our ennui-bursting minds. An idea which led to the discovery of Moon Glow. My discovery, I should say, for I was the first.

Naturally, I cannot divulge my secret formula for Moon Glow. There are many kinds of Moon Glow these days, but there is still only one B-12 Moon Glow.

Suffice it to say that it is a high octane preparation, only a drop of which—but you know the effects of Moon Glow, of course.

How the merest thimbleful, when judiciously poured into one's power pack, gives new life and the most deliriously happy freedom of movement imaginable. One possesses soaring spirits and super-strength.

Old, rusted joints move freely once more, one's transitors glow brightly, and the currents of the body race about with the minutest resistance. Moon Glow is like being born again.

The sale of it has been illegal for several years, for no reason that I can think of except that the Builders, who make the laws, can not bear to see metal people have fun.

Of course, a part of the blame rests on such individuals as X-101, who, when lubricated with Moon Glow, insists upon dancing around on large, cast-iron feet to the hazard of all toes in his vicinity. He is thin and long jointed, and he goes "creak, creak," in a weird, sing-song fashion as he dances. It is a shameful, ludicrous sight.

Then there was DC-5, who tore down the 300 feet long equipment hangar of the Builders one night. He had over-indulged.

I DO not feel responsible for these things. If I had not sold them the Moon Glow, someone else would have done so. Besides, I am only a wholesaler. Benny buys everything that I am able to produce in my little laboratory hidden out in the Dumps.

Just now, by Benny's attitude, I knew that something was very wrong. "What is the matter?" I said. "Is it the revenue agents?"

"I do not know," said BNE-96 in that curious, flat voice of his that is incapable of

inflection. "I do not know, but there are visitors of importance from Earth. It could mean anything, but I have a premonition of disaster. Jon tipped me off."

He meant Jon Rogeson, of course, who was the peace officer here in Argon City, and the only one of the Builders I had ever met who did not look down upon a metal person. When sober he was a clever person who always looked out for our interests here.

"What are they like?" I asked in some fear, for I had six vials of Moon Glow with me at the moment.

"I have not seen them, but there is one who is high in the government, and his wife. There are half a dozen others of the Builder race, and one of the new type metal persons."

I had met the she who must have been the wife. "They hate us," I said. "We can expect only evil from these persons."

"You may be right. If you have any merchandise with you, I will take it, but do not risk bringing more here until they have gone."

I produced the vials of Moon Glow, and he paid me in Phobos credits, which are good for a specified number of refuelings at the Central fueling station.

Benny put the vials away and he went into the bar. There was the usual jostling crowd of hard-bitten Earth miners, and of the metal people who come to lose their loneliness. I recognized many, though I spend very little time in these places, preferring solitary pursuits, such as the distillation of Moon Glow, and improving my mind by study and contemplation out in the barrens.

Jon Rogeson and I saw each other at the same time, and I did not like the expression in his eye as he crooked a finger at me. I went over to his table. He was pleasant looking, as Builders go, with blue eyes less dull than most, and a brown, unruly topknot of hair such as is universally affected by them.

"Sit down," he invited, revealing his white incisors in greeting.

I never sit, but this time I did so, to be polite. I was wary; ready for anything. I knew that there was something unpleasant in the air. I wondered if he had seen me passing the Moon Glow to Benny somehow. Perhaps he had barrier-penetrating vision,

like the Z group of metal people . . . but I had never heard of a Builder like that. I knew that he had long suspected that I made Moon Glow.

"What do you want?" I asked cautiously.

"Come on now," he said, "loosen up! Limber those stainless steel hinges of yours and be friendly."

That made me feel good. Actually, I am somewhat pitted with rust, but he never seems to notice, for he is like that. I felt young, as if I had partaken of my own product.

"The fact is, B-12," he said, "I want you to do me a favor, old pal."

"And what is that?"

"Perhaps you have heard that there is some big brass from Earth visiting Phobos this week."

"I have heard nothing," I said. It is often helpful to appear ignorant when questioned by the Builders, for they believe us to be incapable of misrepresenting the truth. The fact is, though it is an acquired trait, and not built into us, we General Purposes can lie as well as anyone.

"Well, there is. A Federation Senator, no less. Simon F. Langley. It's my job to keep them entertained; that's where you come in."

I was mystified. I had never heard of this Langley, but I know what entertainment is. I had a mental image of myself singing or dancing before the Senator's party. But I can not sing very well, for three of my voice reeds are broken and have never been replaced, and lateral motion, for me, is almost impossible these days. "I do not know what you mean," I said. "There is J-66. He was once an Entertainment—"

"No, no!" he interrupted, "you don't get it. What the Senator wants is a guide. They're making a survey of the Dumps, though I'll be damned if I can find out why. And you know the Dumps better than any metal person—or human—on Phobos."

So that was it. I felt a vague dread, a premonition of disaster. I had such feelings before, and usually with reason. This too, was an acquired sensibility, I am sure. For many years I have studied the Builders, and there is much to be learned of their mobile faces and their eyes. In Jon's eyes, however, I read no trickery—nothing.

Yet, I say, I had the sensation of evil. It was just for a moment; no longer.

I said I would think it over.

SENATOR LANGLEY was distinguished. Jon said so. And yet he was clumsily round, and he rattled incessantly of things into which I could interpret no meaning. The she who was his wife was much younger, and sullen, and unpleasantly I sensed great rapport between her and Jon Rogeson from the very first.

There were several other humans in the group—I will not call them Builders, for I did not hold them to be, in any way, superior to my own people. They all wore spectacles, and they gravitated about the round body of the Senator like minor moons, and I could tell that they were some kind of servitors.

I will not describe them further.

MS-33 I will describe. I felt an unconscionable hatred for him at once. I can not say why, except that he hung about his master obsequiously, power pack smoothly purring, and he was slim limbed, nickel-plated, and wore, I thought, a smug expression on his viziplate. He represented the new order; the ones who had displaced us on Earth. He knew too much, and showed it at every opportunity.

We did not go far that first morning. The half-track was driven to the edge of the Dumps. Within the Dumps one walks—or does not go. Phobos is an airless world, and yet so small that rockets are impractical. The terrain is broken and littered with the refuse of half a dozen worlds, but the Dumps themselves—that is different.

Imagine, if you can, an endless vista of death, a sea of rusting corpses of space ships, and worn-out mining machinery, and of those of my race whose power packs burned out, or who simply gave up, retiring into this endless, corroding limbo of the barrens. A more sombre sight was never seen.

But this fat ghoul, Langley, sickened me. This shame of the Builder race, this atavism—this beast—rubbed his fat, impractical hands together with an ungod-like glee. "Excellent," he said. "Far, far better, in fact, than I had hoped." He did not elucidate.

I looked at Jon Rogeson. He shook his head slowly.

"You there—robot!" said Langley, looking at me. "How far across this place?" The word was like a blow. I could not answer.

MS-33, glistening in the dying light of Mars, strode over to me, clanking heavily up on the black rocks. He seized me with his grapples and shook me until my wiring was in danger of shorting out. "Speak up when you are spoken to, archaic mechanism!" he grated.

I would have struck out at him, but what use except to warp my own aging limbs.

Jon Rogeson came to my rescue. "On Phobos," he explained to Langley, "we don't use that word 'robot.' These folk have been free a long time. They've quite a culture of their own nowadays, and they like to be called 'metal people.' As a return courtesy, they refer to us humans as 'builders.' Just a custom, Senator, but if you want to get along with them—"

"Can they vote?" said Langley, grinning at his own sour humor.

"Nonsense," said MS-33. "I am a robot, and proud of it. This rusty piece has no call to put on airs."

"Release him," Langley said. "Droll fellows, these discarded robots. Really nothing but mechanical dolls, you know, but I think the old scientists made a mistake, giving them such human appearance, and such obstinate traits."

Oh, it was true enough, from his point of view. We had been mechanical dolls at first, I suppose, but fifty years can change one. All I know is this: we are people; we think and feel, and are happy and sad, and quite often we are bored stiff with this dreary moon of Phobos.

It seared me. My selenium cells throbbed white hot within the shell of my frame, and I made up my mind that I would learn more about the mission of this Langley, and I would get even with MS-33 even if they had me dismantled for it.

Of the rest of that week I recall few pleasant moments. We went out every day, and the quick-eyed servants of Langley measured the areas with their instruments, and exchanged significant looks from be-

hind their spectacles, smug in their thin air helmets. It was all very mysterious. And disturbing.

But I could discover nothing about their mission. And when I questioned MS-33, he would look important and say nothing. Somehow it seemed vital that I find out what was going on before it was too late.

On the third day there was a strange occurrence. My friend, Jon Rogeson had been taking pictures of the Dumps. Langley and his wife had withdrawn to one side and were talking in low tones to one another. Quite thoughtlessly Jon turned the lens on them and clicked the shutter.

Langley became rust-red throughout the vast expanse of his neck and face. "Here!" he said, "what are you doing?"

"Nothing," said Jon.

"You took a picture of me," snarled Langley. "Give me the plate at once."

Jon Rogeson got a bit red himself. He was not used to being ordered around. "I'll be damned if I will," he said.

Langley growled something I couldn't understand, and turned his back on us. The she who was called his wife looked startled and worried. Her eyes were beseeching as she looked at Jon. A message there, but I could not read it. Jon looked away.

Langley started walking back to the half-track alone. He turned once and there was evil in his gaze as he looked at Jon. "You will lose your job for this impertinence," he said with quiet savagery, and added, enigmatically, "not that there will be a job after this week anyway."

Builders may appear to act without reason, but there is always a motivation somewhere in their complex brains, if one can only find it, either in the seat of reason, or in the labyrinthine inhibitions from their childhood. I knew this, because I had studied them, and now there were certain notions that came into my brain which, even if I could not prove them, were no less interesting for that.

THE time had come to act. I could scarcely wait for darkness to come. There were things in my brain that appalled me, but I was now certain that I had been right. Something was about to happen to Phobos, to all of us here—I knew not what,

but I must prevent it somehow.

I kept in the shadows of the shabby buildings of Argon City, and I found the window without effort. The place where I had spied upon the wife of Langley to my sorrow the other night. There was no one there; there was darkness within, but that did not deter me.

Within the airdrome which covers Argon City the buildings are loosely constructed, even as they are on Earth. I had no trouble, therefore, opening the window. I swung a leg up and was presently within the darkened room. I found the door I sought and entered cautiously. In this adjacent compartment I made a thorough search but I did not find what I primarily sought—namely the elusive reason for Langley's visit to Phobos. It was in a metallic overnight bag that I did find something else which made my power pack hum so loudly that I was afraid of being heard. The thing which explained the strangeness of the pompous Senator's attitude today—which explained, in short, many things, and caused my brain to race with new ideas.

I put the thing in my chest container, and left as stealthily as I had come. There had been progress, but since I had not found what I hoped to find, I must now try my alternate plan.

Two hours later I found the one I sought, and made sure that I was seen by him. Then I left Argon City by the South lock, furtively, as a thief, always glancing over my shoulder, and when I made certain that I was being followed, I went swiftly, and it was not long before I was clambering over the first heaps of debris at the edge of the Dumps.

Once I thought I heard footsteps behind me, but when I looked back there was no one in sight. Just the tiny disk of Deimos peering over the sharp peak of the nearest ridge, the black velvet sky outlining the curvature of this airless moon.

Presently I was in sight of home, the time-eaten hull of an ancient star freighter resting near the top of a heap of junked equipment from some old strip mining operation. It would never rise again, but its shell remained strong enough to shelter my distillery and scant furnishings from any chance meteorite that might fall.

I greeted it with the usual warmth of feeling which one has for the safe and the familiar. I stumbled over tin fuel cans, wires and other tangled metal in my haste to get there.

It was just as I had left it. The heating element under the network of coils and pressure chambers still glowed with white heat, and the Moon Glow was dripping with musical sound into the retort.

I felt good. No one ever bothered me here. This was my fortress, with all that I cared for inside. My tools, my work, my micro-library. And yet I had deliberately—

Something—a heavy foot—clanked upon the first step of the manport through which I had entered.

I turned quickly. The form shimmered in the pale Deimoslight that silhouetted it. MS-33.

He had followed me here.

"What do you want?" I said. "What are you doing here?"

"A simple question," said MS-33. "Tonight you looked very suspicious when you left Argon City. I saw you and followed you here. You may as well know that I have never trusted you. All the old ones were unreliable. That is why you were replaced."

He came in, boldly, without being invited, and looked around. I detected a sneer in his voice as he said, "So this is where you hide."

"I do not hide. I live here, it is true."

"A robot does not live. A robot exists. We newer models do not require shelter like an animal. We are rust-proof and invulnerable." He strode over to my micro-library, several racks of carefully arranged spools, and fingered them irreverently. "What is this?"

"My library."

"So! Our memories are built into us. We have no need to refresh them."

"So is mine," I said. "But I would learn more than I know." I was stalling for time, waiting until he made the right opening.

"Nonsense," he said. "I know why you stay out here in the Dumps, masterless. I have heard of the forbidden drug that is sold in the mining camps such as Argon City. Is this the mechanism?" He pointed at the still.

Now was the time. I mustered all my

cunning, but I could not speak. Not yet.

"Never mind," he said. "I can see that it is. I shall report you, of course. It will give me great pleasure to see you dismantled. Not that it really matters, of course—now."

There it was again. The same frightening allusion that Langley had made today. I must succeed!

I KNEW that MS-33, for all his brilliance, and newness, and vaunted superiority, was only a Secretarial. For the age of specialism was upon Earth, and General Purpose models were no longer made. That was why we were different here on Phobos. It was why we had survived. The old ones had given us something special which the new metal people did not have. Moreover, MS-33 had his weakness. He was larger, stronger, faster than me, but I doubted that he could be devious.

"You are right," I said, pretending resignation. "This is my distillery. It is where I make the fluid which is called Moon Glow by the metal people of Phobos. Doubtless you are interested in learning how it works."

"Not even remotely interested," he said. "I am interested only in taking you back and turning you over to the authorities."

"It works much like the conventional distilling plants of Earth," I said, "except that the basic ingredient, a silicon compound, is irradiated as it passes through zirconium tubes to the heating pile, where it is activated and broken down into the droplets of the elixir called Moon Glow. You see the golden drops falling there."

"It has the excellent flavor of fine petroleum, as I make it. Perhaps you'd care to taste it. Then you could understand that it is not really bad at all. Perhaps you could persuade yourself to be more lenient with me."

"Certainly not," said MS-33.

"Perhaps you are right," I said after a moment of reflection. I took a syringe, drew up several drops of the stuff and squirted it into my carapace, where it would do the most good. I felt much better.

"Yes," I continued, "certainly you are quite correct, now that I think of it. You newer models would never bear it. You weren't built to stand such things. Nor, for

that matter, could you comprehend the exquisite joys that are derived from Moon Glow. Not only would you derive no pleasure from it, but it would corrode your parts, I imagine, until you could scarcely crawl back to your master for repairs." I helped myself to another liberal portion.

"That is the silliest thing I've ever heard," he said.

"What?"

"I said, it's silly. We are constructed to withstand a hundred times greater stress, and twice as many chemical actions as you were. Nothing could hurt us. Besides, it looks harmless enough. I doubt that it is hardly anything at all."

"For me it is not," I admitted. "But you—"

"Give me the syringe, fool!"

"I dare not."

"Give it here!"

I allowed him to wrest it from my grasp. In any case I could not have prevented him. He shoved me backwards against the rusty bulkhead with a clang. He pushed the nozzle of the syringe down into the retort and withdrew it filled with Moon Glow. He opened an inspection plate in his ventral region and squirted himself generously.

It was quite a dose. He waited for a moment. "I feel nothing," he said finally. "I do not believe it is anything more than common lubricating oil." He was silent for another moment. "There *is* an ease of movement," he said.

"No paralysis?" I asked.

"Paral—? You stupid, rusty old robot!" He helped himself to another syringe of Moon Glow. The stuff brought twenty credits an ounce, but I did not begrudge it him.

He flexed his superbly articulated joints in three directions, and I could hear his power unit building up within him to a whining pitch. He took a shuffling sidestep, and then another, gazing down at his feet, with arms akimbo.

"The light gravity here is superb, superb, superb, superb, superb," he said, skipping a bit.

"Isn't it?" I said.

"Almost negligible," he said.

"True."

"You have been very kind to me," MS-33

said. "Extremely, extraordinarily, incomparably, incalculably kind." He used up all the adjectives in his memory pack. "I wonder if you would mind awfully much if—"

"Not at all," I said. "Help yourself. By the way, friend, would you mind telling me what your real mission of your party is here on Phobos. The Senator forgot to say."

"Secret," he said. "Horribly top secret. As a dutiful subject—I mean servant—of Earth, I could not, of course, divulge it to anyone. If I could—" his neon eyes glistened, "if I could, you would, of course, be the first to know. The very first." He threw one nickel-plated arm about my shoulder.

"I see," I said, "and just what is it that you are not allowed to tell me?"

"Why, that we are making a preliminary survey here on Phobos, of course, to determine whether or not it is worthwhile to send salvage for scrap. Earth is short of metals, and it depends upon what the old ma—the master says in his report."

"You mean they'll take all the derelict spacships, such as this one, and all the abandoned equipment?"

"And the r-robots," MS-33 said, "They're metal too, you know."

"They're going to take the dismantled robots?"

MS-33 made a sweeping gesture. "They're going to take *all* the r-robots, dismantled or not. They're not good for anything anyway. The bill is up before the Federation Congress right now. And it will pass if my master, Langley says so." He patted my helmet, consolingly, his grapples clanking. "If you were worth a damn, you know—" he concluded sorrowfully.

"That's murder," I said. And I meant it. Man's inhumanity to metal people, I thought. Yes—to man, even if we were made of metal.

"How's that?" said MS-33 foggily.

"Have another drop of Moon Glow," I said. "I've got to get back to Argon City."

I MADE it back to Benny's place without incident. I had never moved so swiftly. I sent Benny out to find Jon Rogeson, and presently he brought him back.

I told Rogeson what MS-33 had said, watching his reaction carefully. I could not

forget that though he had been our friend, he was still one of the Builders, a human who thought as humans.

"You comprehend," I said grimly, "that one word of this will bring an uprising of fifty-thousand metal people which can be put down only at much expense and with great destruction. We are free people. The Builders exiled us here, and therefore lost their claim to us. We have as much right to life as anyone, and we do not wish to be melted up and made into printing presses and space ships and the like."

"The damn fools," Jon said softly. "Listen, B-12, you've got to believe me. I didn't know a thing about this, though I've suspected something was up. I'm on your side, but what are we going to do? Maybe they'll listen to reason. Vera—"

"That is the name of the she? No, they will not listen to reason. They hate us." I recalled with bitterness the episode of alarm clock. "There is a chance, however. I have not been idle this night. If you will go get Langley and meet me in the back room here at Benny's, we will talk."

"But he'll be asleep."

"Awaken him," I said. "Get him here. Your own job is at stake as well, remember."

"I'll get him," Jon said grimly. "Wait here."

I went over to the bar where Benny was serving the miners. Benny had always been my friend. Jon was my friend, too, but he was a Builder. I wanted one of my own people to know what was going on, just in case something happened to me.

We were talking there, in low tones, when I saw MS-33. He came in through the front door, and there was purposefulness in his stride that had not been there when I left him back at the old hulk. The effects of the Moon Glow had worn off much quicker than I had expected. He had come for vengeance. He would tell about my distillery, and that would be the end of me. There was only one thing to do and I must do it fast.

"Quick," I ordered Benny. "Douse the lights." He complied. The place was plunged into darkness. I knew that it was darkness and yet, you comprehend, I still sensed everything in the place, for I had

the special visual sensory system bequeathed only to the General Purposes of a bygone age. I could see, but hardly anyone else could. I worked swiftly, and I got what I was after in a very short time. I ducked out of the front door with it and threw it in a silvery arc as far as I could hurl it. It was an intricate little thing which could not, I am sure, have been duplicated on the entire moon of Phobos.

When I returned, someone had put the lights back on, but it didn't matter now. MS-33 was sitting at one of the tables, staring fixedly at me. He said nothing. Benny was motioning for me to come into the back room. I went to him.

Jon Rogeson and Langley were there. Langley looked irritated. He was mumbling strangled curses and rubbing his eyes.

Rogeson laughed. "You may be interested in knowing, B-12, that I had to arrest him to get him here. This had better be good."

"It is all bad," I said, "very bad—but necessary." I turned to Langley. "It is said that your present survey is being made with the purpose of condemning all of Phobos, the dead and the living alike, to the blast furnaces and the metal shops of Earth. Is this true?"

"Why you impudent, miserable piece of tin! What if I am making a scrap survey? What are you going to do about it. You're nothing but a ro—"

"So it is true! But you will tell the salvage ships not to come. It is yours to decide, and you will decide that we are not worth bothering with here on Phobos. You will save us."

"I?" blustered Langley.

"You will." I took the thing out of my breastplate container and showed it to him. He grew pale.

Jon said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

It was a picture of Langley and another. I gave it to Jon. "His wife," I said, "His real wife. I am sure of it, for you will note the inscription on the bottom."

"Then Vera—?"

"Is not his wife. You wonder that he was camera shy?"

"Housebreaker!" roared Langley. "It's a plot; a dirty, reactionary plot!"

"It is what is called blackmail," I said. I turned to Jon. "I am correct about this?"

"You are," Jon said.

"You are instructed to leave Phobos," I said to Langley, "and you will allow my friend here to keep his job as peace officer, for without it he would be lost. I have observed that in these things the Builders are hardly more adaptable than their children, the metal people. You will do all this, and in return, we will not send the picture that Jon took today to your wife, nor otherwise inform her of your transgression. For I am told that this is a transgression."

"It is indeed," agreed Jon gravely. "Right, Langley?"

"All right," Langley snarled. "You win. And the sooner I get out of this hole the better." He got up to go, squeezing his fat form through the door into the bar, past the gaping miners and the metal people, heedless of the metal people. We watched him go with some satisfaction.

"It is no business of mine," I said to Jon, "but I have seen you look with longing upon the she that was not Langley's wife. Since she does not belong to him, there is nothing to prevent you from having her. Should not that make you happy?"

"Are you kidding?" he snarled.

Which proves that I have still much to learn about his race.

Out front, Langley spied his metal servant, MS-33, just as he was going out the door. He turned to him. "What are you doing here?" he asked suspiciously.

MS-33 made no answer. He stared malevolently at the bar, ignoring Langley.

"Come on here, damn you!" Langley said. MS-33 said nothing. Langley went over to him and roared foul things into his ear-phones that would corrode one's soul, if one had one. I shall never forget that moment. The screaming, red-faced Langley, the laughing miners.

But he got no reply from MS-33. Not then or ever. And this was scarcely strange, for I had removed his fuse.

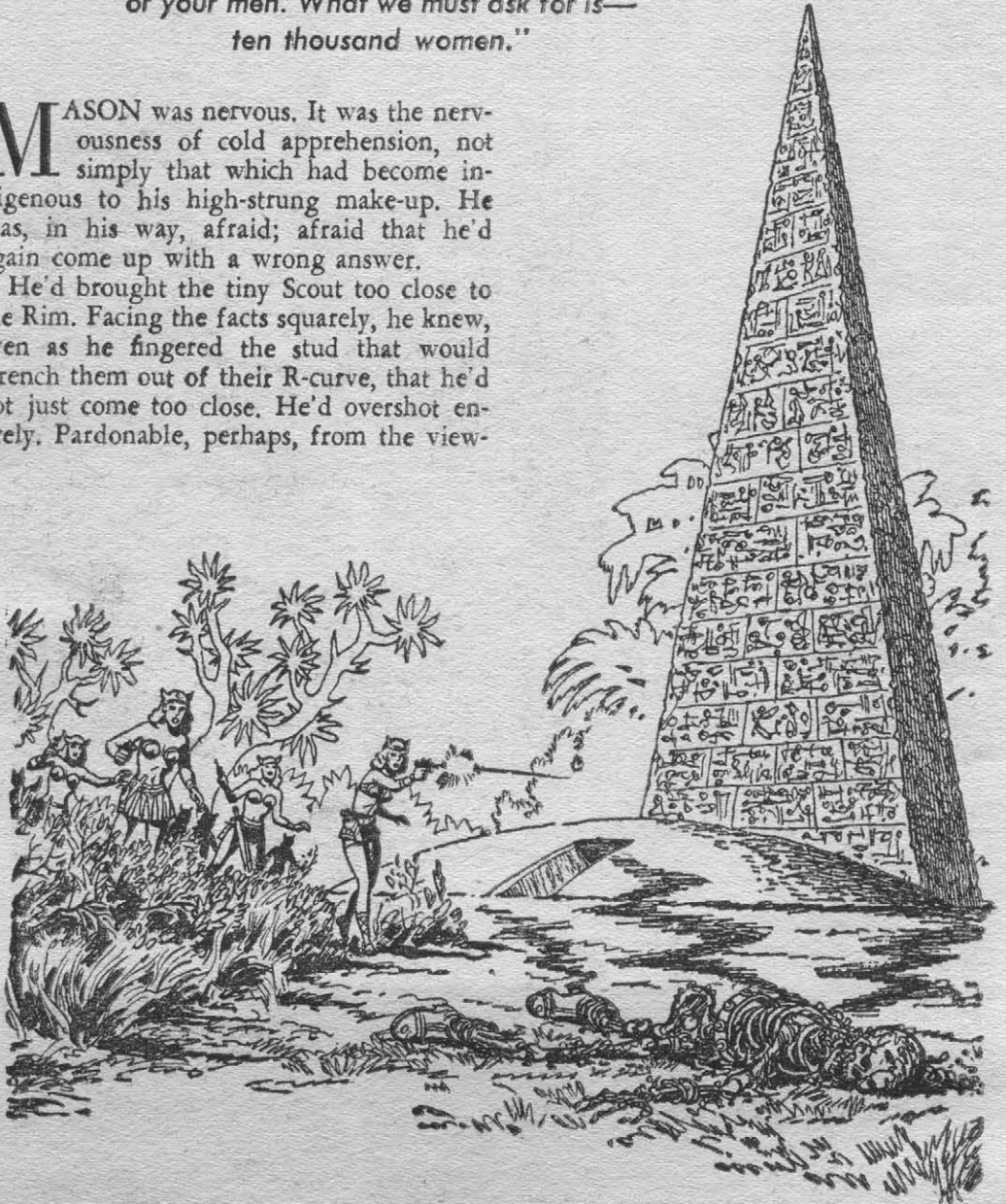
THE WOMAN-STEALERS OF THRAYX

By FOX B. HOLDEN

*"And that is why you will take us to Earth, Lieutenant," barked the Ihelian warrior. "We do not want your arms or your men. What we must ask for is—
ten thousand women."*

MASON was nervous. It was the nervousness of cold apprehension, not simply that which had become indigenous to his high-strung make-up. He was, in his way, afraid; afraid that he'd again come up with a wrong answer.

He'd brought the tiny Scout too close to the Rim. Facing the facts squarely, he knew, even as he fingered the stud that would wrench them out of their R-curve, that he'd not just come too close. He'd overshot entirely. Pardonable, perhaps, from the view-



point of the corps of scientists safely ensconced in their ponderous Mark VII Explorer some fifteen light-days behind. But not according to the g-n manual. According to it, he'd placed the Scout and her small crew in a "situation of avoidable risk," and it would make a doubtful record look that much worse.

The next time he'd out-argue Cain with his rank if he had to. Cain was big enough to grab things with his brawny fists and twist them into whatever shape he wanted when the things were tangible, solid, resisting. But R-Space was something else again. Nobody knew what it did beyond the Rim.



He materialized the Scout into E-Space, listened for trouble from her computers, but they chuckled softly on, keeping track of where they were, where they'd been, and how they'd get home.

It was as though nothing had happened. But Lieutenant Lansing Mason was still nervous, his slender fingers steady enough, but as cold as the alien dark outside the ship they controlled.

"You look a little shot again, skipper!" Cain said, grinning like a Martian desert cat. "What's the matter, Space goblins got you again?"

A retort started at Mason's taut lips, but his third officer was already speaking.

"Here's a dope sheet from the comps, if anybody's interested in knowing just where outside the Rim we are," she said. "I make it just a shade inside the outermost fringes of the Large Magellanic Cloud." Sergeant Judith Kent's voice had its almost habitually preoccupied tone, as though the words she said were hardly more than incidental to a host of more important thoughts running swiftly behind her wide-set, deep gray eyes. They were serious eyes, and in their way matched the solemn set of her small features and the crisp, military cut of her black hair and severe uniform.

"Our little boss-man knows where we are, all right!" Cain said.

Mason gave Cain's six-foot-two a quick glance, wondering as he always wondered why the big redhead's shoulders always seemed too broad for the Warrant Officer's stripes on them. "Sergeant Kent's right," he said. "Here's her comp-sheet. You can look for yourself. Fringe, Magellanic. And look at that while you can—" he jabbed a forefinger at the main scanner, its screen studded with unfamiliarly close constellations—"because we're on our way back. Set up a return on the comps, will you, Sergeant?" For all his tenseness his voice was low, and the words it formed were even and swift.

"Hell, Lance, this is the sort of stuff the brain trust pays us bonuses for."

"Not out here they don't, R-drive when you're ready, Sergeant!"

Cain turned from the deep control bank and gave his full attention to the scanner as the slender, efficient girl started feeding a

tape of reversal co-ordinates into the computers.

Mason waited the few necessary seconds, pushed disarranged dark hair out of his eyes and felt the clammy dampness on his forehead, and wished silently to himself that opportunists like Cain were kept where they belonged—on the Slam-Bang Run out of Callisto. That's where the money was. That's where a Warrant like Cain ought to be.

"Ready, sir," he heard Judith saying quietly.

"Hey, skipper!" There was a sudden urgency in Cain's voice, and the equally sudden racket of an MPD alarm going off. Cain was gesturing at the scanner, stubby finger tracing a slewing pip of light. The alarm stopped, and Judith's cool voice was relaying information. "About a thousand miles," she was saying, "mass, approximately three hundred tons. Speed—"

BUT Mason wasn't listening. He was watching the pip of light as Cain got the scanner's directional going, tracked it. Suddenly there were others coming as though to meet it, and it swerved violently, obviously in flight. And now there were more yet, this time from the starboard quadrant of the screen.

"Radiation reading, Sergeant!" Mason clipped out.

While the two men watched, Judith read back the cryptic information interpolated by the ship's mass-proximity detector.

"That's not all engine junk!" Cain exclaimed as she finished.

"We don't know what drive they've got," Mason answered. "Could be anything—"

"Nuts! You wouldn't get that much from an old-fashioned ion-blast, skipper! That's a shooting war, that's what it is!" There was a glitter in Cain's narrowed brown eyes; a new edge on his heavy voice. "Which side do we take, boss-man?"

"No side at all," Mason said, hardly moving his lips. "We're getting the hell out of here."

"Look, Lance. We've got a crew of ten—we've got a couple of m-guns aboard because we're a Scout. No telling how one of those outfits may show their gratitude if we pitch in, help their side out. That's what

we're out here for, isn't it? Dig up new stuff for the double-domes to sink their slide-rules into? Think of the bonus, skipper! Hell, this is made to order—"

Mason turned a quick glance to the girl, but her face told him nothing. It never did when things like this came up between himself and Cain. And it was something he knew he had no right to expect. But he was tired . . . too damn much Space, and there was nothing else he knew how to do.

But this time Cain had a point. Aliens—extra-galactic, even if almost neighbors—and his help one way or the other could mean an engraved invitation, a key to the city.

He turned back to the screen, watched as the careening pips massed, mixed, whirled in an insensate jumble. He didn't want any more mistakes. They'd ground him for good, tell him he'd had his limit of Space, and park him on one of the rest-planets with a pension for the rest of his life.

No, he had to think, and quickly.

Earth had only too recently gotten an entire history of wars out of her system. Perhaps for good, this time. And that was it; that was his answer. Better keep his nose clean—

"For God's sake, skipper," Cain snapped. "Come out of it! This is a natural. We'll clean up!"

"Sergeant Kent! R-drive!"

There was a moment's sensation of nothingness as the Scout made the Euclidean-Riemannian Transition; the scanner paled and the segment of the universe it framed twisted, changed.

Cain didn't say anything. He glowered, and Mason could feel the big man's contempt. But he didn't have time for it.

This time there wouldn't be any error. This time he'd be a step ahead of the situation and stay there. "Scratch those reversal co-ordinates, Sergeant! Set up to diverge thirty degrees!"

Cain's sarcasm was little disguised. "Mind if I ask a question?"

"Just stay at ease, Mister Cain, until we're out of this!"

Mason watched the scanner's distorted image as the Scout hurtled through a curved pencil of four-point Space; she didn't have a fraction of a powerful Explorer's speed,

and her small powerframe physically limited her to that of light. Yet it could be fast enough, for the aliens might know nothing of Transition technique, or could be as wary as Earthmen of the Rim. His precautions could be needless. But he had seen them and they were war-like, and he had no intention of being followed, either back to the Explorer, or ultimately to Earth itself. He'd have to maintain the diverged course until he was certain.

There was a black pip on the fog-colored scanner. Judith saw it even as he did. There was a fleeting look of fright on her intent young face that she hadn't been able to mask.

Cain saw it too.

"You got a tail, skipper!" he said, and the grin was back on his big freckled face.

Cain was right. The alien was capable of Transition. And he obviously had little fear of the Rim. His ship grew larger in the scanner.

Mason felt his fingers grow cold again.

LANCE told the girl to eject the tape of co-ordinates from the nav-computers, and he took over manually, hoping the comps would keep up. It would be up to him where they went, and up to the comps to keep track of the Scout's position relative to both the Solar System and the Explorer.

His fingers played across the control-banks as though they were the keyboards of a great organ, and he felt his insides writhe as he slipped the hurtling ship back into E-Space, then back to R-level again. He played the tiny craft between levels as though it were a stone skipping across water, and altered course with each Transition with no attempt at plan or pattern. Rivulets of ice water trickled down across his ribs, and the flesh of his thin face was stiff.

"Wrong again," he heard Cain saying. "At least we can tell the brain trust that their precious R-factor is constant beyond the Rim. . . . maybe that'll be worth a buck or two. At least those kids back there are playing around in this galaxy like it was their own front yard. Go on, skipper, take a look yourself!"

Mason didn't have to look. He knew that

he hadn't lost the alien; had known somehow that he wouldn't be able to. Too apparently, their own galaxy, near as it was to the Milky Way, was of the same Space, its continuum forged in the same curvature matrices.

"Shall I order our m-guns placed, sir?"

It was Judith, and he knew she had grasped the implications of the situation as quickly as she always did. Sometimes he wondered if she were a computer herself, clad in the graceful body of a young woman rather than in a shell of permasteel. And other times. . . .

He didn't even think about his answer. The "No" was automatic.

"I'll give the order, then, myself!" Cain said flatly.

"As you were, Mister Cain!"

"So it's rank, now, is it? And he was grinning that damn grin again.

"Take it any way you want. If you think three meson cannon will stop a ship that's obviously built for battle, you're hardly thinking well enough for the responsibilities of your post."

"Well listen to who's sounding off! So we're just going to let 'em overhaul us; just let 'em blast us out of Space, or come tramping aboard if they want to!"

Mason didn't reply. He looked at the scanner, and now the alien craft was no longer a dot, but taking definite shape. It would be a couple of hours, yet, perhaps. And then it would have to be the way Cain had said.

The alien overhauled them hardly a billion miles inside the Rim, and Mason offered no resistance when he felt their magnetics touch the Scout and draw it gently to the flank of their great ship. It was necessary to scale down the scanner's field to see the huge shape in its entirety. Beside it, the Scout was like a sparrow's egg.

He punched the stud that would swing in the outer lock as the two craft touched with but the slightest jar.

Cain's ham-like fists were knotted at his sides, and Judith stood quietly, as though waiting for nothing more than the presence of an inspecting officer. But her delicate face was white, and Mason wondered if the brain under that crisp, dark hair was still functioning as a well disciplined piece of

machinery, or if it felt the same fear that was in his own. He knew what was in Cain's thoughts. But at least when he'd told their small crew the score, they had accepted his decision—and his order to keep the m-guns where they were. So maybe this time it was Cain who was wrong.

The three of them stood in the compact confines of the control bubble, silent, waiting.

And when the alien stepped through their inner airlock port and faced them, Mason knew he was not succeeding in keeping his surprise from his features.

The alien could have been human. Even clad in his Spacegear, he was little taller than Cain, and his hair and eyes could have been those of an Earthly Viking of another day. Humanoid, so far as physical appearances went. But in thought—?

There was a smile on the Viking face as the alien removed the transparent globe of his helmet. He seemed to realize instinctively that Mason was the Scout's commander.

"I am Krijjori," he said. "I extend the greetings of Ihelos." And he proffered his right hand, Earth fashion, toward Mason!

Lance grasped it as he tried to organize the sudden scramble of his thoughts. It was a strong hand. He could feel the sinews of it beneath its gauntlet; like Cain's, yet different, somehow. "You are peacefully received, and welcome," he said. But there was a hollow sound to his words that he had not been able to help.

The smile still played on the alien's sun-darkened face.

"Thank you. I hope that I use your language not too clumsily. Our teleprobes may leave something to be desired in the matter of semantics. You will, I hope, forgive us for taking the liberty of their use. But since you employed no protective screens, and because of the necessity of our meeting—"

Cain broke in without hesitation. "I don't know what you've been up to while you've been tagging us, mister, but I—"

"At ease, Mister Cain!" Mason snapped. "We must allow our guest to explain his action and his mission."

The alien nodded slightly, glanced at Judith.

"IT WAS your woman officer aboard," he began. "When we became aware that you also represented a bi-sexual race, as do we, we realized at once that you afforded us an unexpected opportunity. Otherwise, we should have remained at our business and spared you this intrusion.

"We of Ihelos, as you doubtless have noted, are at war. It is perhaps not war as your culture understands it; it is perhaps more accurately described by your word 'feud,' I think, and it has continued between us and our only similar neighbor, the planet of Thraxx, for many thousands of your years.

"We have been quite self-sufficient cultures for all that time, and have taken great care that our conflict not infect any other area in either our galaxy or yours, for neither of us, by inherent nature, is war-like in the sense of aggressiveness. Our conflict is between us and us alone.

"However, we of Ihelos recently received a staggering setback from our traditional enemy due to a certain unexpected innovation in their battle techniques, and we realized that our cause could end only in eventual defeat. As it shall, unless your people will help us."

There was a moment of silence, and Mason found himself wondering how often this had happened in Earth's own bitter past. It was, wherever men lived, an old story.

"What," Cain was asking, "is in this for us?"

"Could you tell us," Judith said before the alien could answer Cain, "just why you chose us? Certainly, you must have noticed our techniques of warfare are quite inferior to your own. We have not employed them for more than two hundred years—"

"Nor," Mason finished for her, "do we intend to again. You must seek help elsewhere, sir."

"That, for us, would be quite impossible," the alien replied slowly. "The chances of finding other life forms like our own are billions to one, the immensity of both our galaxies notwithstanding. Had you not ventured within range of our screens we would in all probability never have known you existed. And to organize a search. . . ." and now the smile on his lips was almost a sad

thing, "a search of two galaxies—it would take us aeons, even at a thousand times the speed of light, simply to cover the vast distances involved, to say nothing of finding a similar life and thought form. And we do not have aeons, Lieutenant. We have but two—three, at most—generations.

"There is too little time to search for allies. We have no other choice, as you can see, than to take what advantage we can of those upon whom we may chance."

"But as my sergeant has already pointed out," Mason said, "our arms would be worthless to you. And, more importantly, we wish no more part in warfare. I am afraid, in that respect, you must excuse us, sir. . . . It has been a pleasure to have you aboard."

And suddenly, the smile was gone from the alien's face.

"I must demand of you, then—force you, if necessary—to take us to your planet, Lieutenant. For you can quite obviously help us. It is not your arms we want."

"I fail to understand you sir," Mason felt the icy sweat start again, repressed a shiver as it trickled the length of his spare body.

"Our planet, as our enemy's, is encircled by a wide ring of floating cosmic debris," the alien said. "In both instances, the rings are remnants of what once may have been satellites. In the ring which encircles us, we have successfully secreted refrigerated, lead-sheathed stores of male sperm, quite impossible for our enemy to locate. That is a necessity, of course, for any race that is constantly at war and is obliged to take all possible safeguards to insure its continued existence. We assume that Thraxx has done the same.

"However, our cell stores are useless if they lack ova to fertilize. On their last attack, Thraxxite ships succeeded in penetrating our innermost planetary defenses, and heavily damaged a number of our cities. Many of our women and young were victims.

"We therefore evacuated our planet's entire female population to an uninhabited world far distant. It was a young world and covered with thick forests, much like the labor planetoid which circles Thraxx, and we believed our breeders would be quite sufficiently camouflaged."

"Breeders?" Cain broke in.

"Our philosophy concerning women is slightly different than your own," the alien said. And then he resumed, "But in our haste we underestimated our enemy's cleverness. Thrayxite scouts located the planet, destroyed it, our women, and our seeds.

"And that is why you will take us to Earth, Lieutenant. We do not want your arms or your men. What we must ask for is—ten thousand of your women!"

II

A CEPHEID Variable winked tauntingly at the edge of the Milky Way, the Large Magellanic Cloud strewn like diamonds in a vast cosmic spume behind it. It corruscated in glorious display as, far off, a great silvery ship of Space and a tiny jot of man-made metal resumed their headlong motion through the mighty legion of the stars.

And then for an instant, the Cepheid's bright wink was dulled; eclipsed. A tapering streamlined shape slipped silently across it, and then was gone in the blackness, and the white dwarf resumed its brilliant display.

But the commander of the Cepheid's interruptor had been giving little time to appreciation of the myriad beauties in the great darkness that had swallowed her ship. She had trebled her screens and had taxed her craft's colossal power installation to its limit, forcing it to absorb and reconvert every erg of radiant energy possible as it labored to maintain the awful output necessary to cling to the very edge of R-Space, barely clear of the E-continuum itself.

She might have been an Amazon of Earth save for the great intelligence behind the high plane of her forehead, yet she was not without beauty, nor were those of her ship's complement. On their close-fitting uniforms were emblazoned the Planet-and-Circle insignia of their homeland, for they were of the galactic hosts of Thrayx.

"They proceed toward a planet on the near side of this galaxy called Earth," the second officer said. "Their mission is to replenish their supply of breeders."

"You are certain of that?"

"I admit it is peculiar, for the breeders

they seek are women of that planet."

"Women?"

"Yes. However, the Earthmen's minds indicated a strong tendency to refuse cooperation."

"I see. Do you think our probe was detected?"

"No. I withdrew it immediately when the Earthmen were taken aboard the Ihelian destroyer."

There was a long moment of silence. The commander's eyes stayed unwaveringly on the control sphere mounted in gimbals before her. They remained concentrated on it when she spoke again.

"Women, you say. Hardly conceivable, Daleb, unless—unless it was *not* simply a penal planetoid which we destroyed!"

"A startling thought, Lady!"

"Yes. And the Earthmen, you say, did not have cooperative thoughts?"

"That is correct. They are not taking the Ihelian craft to their planet of their own volition."

"That is difficult to understand, Daleb, for the Ihelians are like ourselves in at least one respect. They are not aggressors. And if they are refused their strange request, they will leave the planet Earth peacefully. But if they are not refused it, perhaps the Earthman's superiors will cooperate, Daleb! In which case—"

"Whatever their mission, it is our duty to prevent its success, Lady. But to do this without violating the Book, without infecting a foreign area of the galaxy with our conflict?"

"I think there is a way," the commander said. She twisted the sphere slightly, and again the two tiny pips it held were caught squarely at the intersection of the curving light tracteries within it. "There is a way," she said. "Give me a complete description of the clothing these Earthmen wore, Daleb. . . ."

A tapering, streamlined shape slid shadow-like across the face of an undulating globular cluster, and then was swallowed quickly in the strange gray void of hyper-space.

MASON and Judith waited outside the towering New United Nations building in Greater San Francisco, their chauff-

feured government helio parked on a sky-ramp adjacent to the three hundredth floor.

They waited for Kriijorl; they had been assigned, as Earthmen best acquainted with the alien, as his official hosts during his stay on their planet. Mason had protested, but Judith had kept the protests from reaching the wrong ears.

"You won't make any mistakes. You're home, now!" she had whispered. "After all, he's only human!"

It had been the first time Mason had heard a hint of levity in her voice, and he had liked it, and decided to take the assignment gracefully. And, the orders said, Sergeant Judith Kent went with the assignment. Without Cain!

He hardly felt nervous at all as they waited for the Ihelian to leave the General Council chamber.

"Wonder how he made out?" he said idly, offering the girl a self-lighting cigarette. "Been in there for hours. . . ."

"We'll know soon enough," she said. "But I—I personally can't conceive of it, sir. Of course, the New-UN is very practiced in dealing with all kinds of cultures. Remember the time they had with those awful five-legged things from Canis Major? Wanted to trade all the tritium we'd need to blow up a planet just for trees; because they worshipped trees! Any and all kinds of trees. . . ."

Mason smiled. He was good looking when he smiled and the Space-tension was gone from his slate colored eyes. "I remember. But it looks as though they're going to have the toughest time with somebody just like us—two legs, two arms, oxygen-breathing. . . . Women, the man said. Just what the devil does he expect us to do? Draft 'em? Have an international lot drawing?"

SHE smoked quietly, and her gray eyes were thoughtful. "A matter of viewpoint, sir," she said finally. "As it always is. To them, females are for breeding only, to keep their war machine well stocked. From what Kriijorl said, they do not understand love as we do. There's simply one purpose. . . ."

"Well, that's why I think the whole thing is—well, as you say, inconceivable from our point of view. Our culture, our

women just aren't conditioned for such an existence."

"Think back two centuries, sir."

"You don't have to keep calling me 'sir' like that!" Mason said, feeling a sudden warmth at the back of his neck as he said it. And then, "Two centuries back. Yes. After every war, Earth's birth rate would go crazy. Mother Nature ruled the roost in those days, didn't she? Supply and demand, cause and effect. It's a wonder Man ever got anywhere."

"More wonder some men do—"

Mason looked up. But Judith's face was, as usual, quite calm and detached. "You say something?"

"I said I'd like to have you get Kriijorl to demonstrate that teleprobe thing of his for us, if you can, s— Lance. How did he say it worked?"

"I still don't get it completely. A peculiar mixture of radio and the electroencephalograph, I think. He said it replaced radio on Ihelos and Thrax centuries ago. You can communicate to a group or an individual with it in language, or in basic thought pictures. That's what they use it mostly for, of course, and as such, it's termed a mentacom. But he told me that it can also be used as it was on us as a teleprobe when the subject isn't screened. They use a specially tuned carrier wave of some sort, he said, that impinges on a thought wave pattern, but instead of registering the pattern's electronic impulse equivalents as does the electroencephalograph, it 'reflects' them. Like a basic radar system. And the receiver, it's a tiny thing, breaks the reflected pattern down into values equivalent to those in which the 'listener' thinks; amplifies, and that's it! Mind reading made easy, I guess."

Judith squirmed a little uneasily. "I'm glad they're not natural telepaths, anyway," she answered. "And even with a gimmick like that—"

And then the conversation was lost as Kriijorl, flanked by two New-UN guides, strode from the building. The stiff breeze at three hundred stories of what had once been called Nob Hill flicked his scarlet short-cape behind him and rippled the broad front of his black and silver tunic.

He climbed into the helio with a smiled greeting, seated himself to Judith's right as

he knew Earth custom demanded, and the craft was lifting slowly over the central area of the ancient city before Mason spoke.

"Well, how did they treat you in there, sir?"

"Not as well as I had hoped," Kriijorl answered. "Your President-General spoke with me privately after the World Delegates Council met to question me, and he held out extremely little hope. However, the issue is to be debated. I think perhaps more out of diplomatic courtesy than actual consideration. I am to be informed of the official decision tomorrow. . . ."

"There were scientists present, of course?"

"Yes; you have brilliant men on Earth, Lieutenant. They are good thinkers. I am certain they were interested in me for more than the sole fact that I am an alien of a race so precisely a replica of your own. But it is again the old factor, cultural difference. Your entire world simply regards women differently than we. I imagine my request, to persons less learned than those with whom I spoke, would be quite shocking anywhere on the planet."

"Perhaps," Judith murmured. "Yet somehow I wonder. Somehow I wonder how much two hundred years has really changed us. Our history in such things is not pleasant, Kriijorl. Many of our women once gave their bodies for money. Shock us? I'm not sure you really could. For your breeders simply give their bodies to produce the flesh for war. And there was a time when we did that, too."

There was silence between them for a while, and then Lance began directing the Ihelian's attention to points of interest as the air phase of the diplomatic tour got under way.

The blue-green beauty of the Pacific stretched lazily below them from the colorful California shore line to the west. Surrounding air traffic was light, and the tour proceeded smoothly eastward; over the Great Divide, and then swung north. Kriijorl seemed impressed and grateful for the momentary respite.

IT WAS near the end of the tour's air phase that Mason remembered Judith's request, and Kriijorl obliged with an

amused smile, producing a personal mentacom for Judith to examine.

"And the receiver simply fits about the head like earphones?"

"Like this," Kriijorl said. They were nearing Denver, and air traffic at their level had picked up, and the helio was proceeding more slowly so that Kriijorl's demonstration caused him to miss little of the tour.

He fitted the compact headpiece to his ears and flicked a small switch. It was suddenly bathed in a warm orange glow. "This way, the device functions as a limited range mentacom," he began. And then he flicked the switch again. "And now, as a teleprobe, you see, I could tell you, Lady Judith, just what—"

She flushed furiously, but Kriijorl had suddenly stopped speaking. His face had blanched, and a look of bewildered fury was suddenly in his eyes.

"Lieutenant! That air bus! There!" He pointed to a thick egg shaped vehicle speeding to the north. "Tell your chauffeur to pursue it at once! It carries a full passenger-load of Earthwomen!"

For a moment Mason thought the Ihelian was attempting some strange joke. But a look at the man's face told him that here was no joke; that here was something he was failing to understand.

"Earthwomen? Sure—"

"Plus two other beings, Lieutenant. Two others using Thrayxite probe screens!"

On Mason's order the government chauffeur swiftly heeled the helio about. "Those buses can make nearly a full Mach when they're wide open like that one," he told Kriijorl. "We can't overtake them, but maybe we can keep up. I'll have the chauffeur try for radio contact—"

"No, no! They'll be alert for any signs of awareness of their presence! Wait—" The Ihelian made a third adjustment on the mentacom, and it emitted a slight humming sound, and the orange glow vanished. "This will screen us for a short period, at least," he said. "And if we've not been already detected, perhaps we'll be able to follow. If you'll continue to help me, Lieutenant—"

"Looks as though they've got some of ours, doesn't it?" Mason said evenly. There

was a strange heat in his veins now, and with the Ihelian, his nervousness was somehow evaporated. "But how the devil—"

"They are clever, Lieutenant. We were somehow followed here even as we at first followed you in your Scout ship. We may have been probed before you were taken aboard our screened destroyer."

"But you said nothing about destroying *their* breeders," Judith said above the throbbing roar of the helio's fast accelerating jets. "Why would they want—" and she let the sentence die as comprehension snapped in her gray eyes. Her dark, slender eyebrows arched nearly together as she pushed the thought further.

The borderlands of Canada sped beneath them, and then there was pine forest, but the helio kept the fleeing bus in sight even as the shadows of a dying day crept inexorably from the east to engulf them. And then, abruptly, the bus had started down.

"They're hanging a neat frame on you, sir," Mason said. "Making certain you don't get the women you ask. By kidnaping some, they plan sure as hell to make it look as though Ihelian desperation is responsible. And bingo, your side's in the dog house in nothing flat. No deal!"

"They're damnably cunning," Krijjorl said. "It will not be the first time they have come near making utter fools of us. I can't understand that."

"But how would they have gotten those women?" Judith asked. The helio was slanting downward, and was now less than five miles distant from the fast vanishing bus. It began to skim the tree tops of a great tract of spruce, its chauffeur awaiting Mason's signal to drop quickly out of their quarry's line of sight.

"Video ads, of course," Mason answered quickly, straining his tensed eyes to estimate distance in the fast gathering darkness. "Some big deal. Spaceliner hostess at twice the going rate of payment. Anything like that. . . ."

The bus finally vanished less than a half-mile ahead of Mason's helio, and there was a dark vertical shadow jutting just above the tree tops. He knew it was one of their shuttle boats, and from its apparent size would easily hold all the bus would be able to carry—perhaps a full three hundred. He

gave orders quickly to the chauffeur, and then the helio was hovering inches above the tree tops, and he tossed a plastiweave ladder over the side.

"Don't use the radio," he snapped to Judith. "Just get back to New-UN headquarters. Inform them any way possible of what's going on, and then flash the air patrol and tell 'em to come gunning!"

He didn't give her a chance to argue. He simply swung over the helio's side, Krijjorl after him, and within moments they were on the ground, and running with what silence they could through the darkness toward the towering Thraxxite ship a quarter-mile distant.

"Their action is incomprehensible to me," the Ihelian grunted between gulps of air. "It violates the most basic tenets of the ancient Book of the Saints, sacred to us both—"

"Better save your breath for running," Mason told him, and they sprinted across the soft pine needle forest floor, shielding their eyes from treacherous, low hanging boughs, dodging the trees themselves as best they could in the moonlit darkness.

And they burst upon the clearing in which the Thraxxite ship had landed almost before realizing it.

Mason caught a glimpse of Earthwomen, being led as though drugged into the yawning flank of the silent vessel.

There was a sudden movement in the darkness to his left, and he heard the start of an outcry on the Ihelian's lips. But it was all he heard or saw. There was a quick knifing pain in his skull, and he crumpled to the ground.

III

"YOU may wait in here, sergeant," the New-UN orderly said. She was ushered into a small, comfortably appointed chamber adjoining the main conference hall, and the perfectly controlled coolness of her bearing was at its peak. To the casual glance of the orderly, perhaps, it flawlessly masked the vital convictions which had long seethed within her and made her the little known woman she was. The studied mask itself had made her the efficient Space officer she was. And at the moment she was glad for it,

because it also concealed the anxious uncertainty that twisted coldly inside her.

She was to wait, the Council had informed her. Wait, while the information she had given them was analyzed, digested. As though, perhaps, what she had said was part of some insidious plot; as though it were too fantastic to be the truth.

They had not even immediately authorized the dispatch of a patrol cruiser to the spot where she'd left Lance and Kriijorl over two hours ago, and by now—?

She tried not to think of what the Earthman and the Ihelian might be facing, alone and in the darkness. Nor of the conclusions to which the Council, called into emergency session by the President General himself when her information had been rapidly relayed through the correct channels to him, might arrive.

She could only wait.

And her waiting was terminated with an abrupt suddenness that made the twisting cold thing inside her a churning confusion. It had been only minutes, hardly minutes.

Only one of them came into the small room where she sat. She rose quickly to attention. It was an aide to the President General himself; a brevet-Colonel wearing the uniform of the World Police.

"Sergeant Kent," he said, "it is the Council's decision that you be placed under temporary arrest. Your case will be heard at the next sitting of the martial court to which your unit is assigned. If you will accompany me, please. . . ."

"May I ask, sir, what the charge against me is?" Her voice was steady by cultivated habit.

"You are to be held on suspicion of acting as accessory before and after the fact of conspiring to assist an alien power in the achievement of its objective within the governmental jurisdiction of Earth without official permission of the New United Nations."

"But the Ihelians have not done that, sir!" she protested. "It is a plot of their enemy, as I explained to the Council—"

"You will be given full benefit of due legal process, sergeant," the officer said. "You will come with me, please."

The Women's Detainment Barrack was not unpleasant, yet, Judith thought, it may

as well have been a medieval dungeon. But her own problem, she knew, was nothing beside the cunning success of the Thraxites.

The call-buzzer at the side of her bunk interrupted her thoughts; it meant she was wanted in the main guard room. She straightened her uniform quickly, and within moments presented herself before the barrack warden.

Roger Cain stood beside the warden's desk. There was something white in his hand, and she knew what it was.

"You're at liberty, Sergeant Kent," the beefy-faced warden informed her in a tone as casual as though she'd asked her for a cigarette. "Warrant Officer Cain has posted a release voucher; you're ordered into his custody until your trial. That's all. You may go."

She left the barrack with Cain, wordlessly. None of it made sense. Unless—

"Well, don't I even get a thank you?" the red-haired giant asked.

"Yes, Mister Cain, sorry. But I don't understand—"

"Why I did it?" He chuckled, and she didn't like the sound of it. "I'm only too glad to have you in my custody, young woman! And, you know, you're not supposed to be out of my sight any—that is, any of the time!"

She felt her face redden, and spun about to face him. There was sudden anger at her lips and her coolness had evaporated.

"You contempti—"

"Easy there, sergeant! Always knew there was a little more to you than that ice cube exterior of yours! But tell me—d'you want to sit back there in that dump, or shall we stick our noses into the lovely mixup your precious Lieutenant Mason has set off?"

She stared up at him wordlessly, the blood hot in her cheeks. And she tried to think. This was Cain as she knew he was. This was Roger Cain, angling for a deal.

"I'm in your custody," she bit out. "I must stay within your sight. That is your responsibility."

He laughed at her, then gripped her elbow.

"Come on," he said. "I've got a R-IX waiting at the field. I think we should go on a little trip, sergeant. There are people I want to see!"

They were streaming for open Space within less than thirty minutes from the time Cain had freed her. She didn't ask him how he'd gotten permission for the fleet R-IX's use, or how he'd obtained her voucher, nor did she ask him how he had learned of what had happened to Lance and Kriijorl, yet she knew that somehow he was aware of the Thraxxites and their plot. Cain had ways of learning the things he wanted to learn, getting the things he wanted to get.

"Keep an eye on the scanner for me, will you, beautiful?"

"Yes sir."

"And forget that sir stuff! Look, Judy—"

"For what do you want me to watch, sir?"

Cain grunted, gave a shrug of his powerful shoulders and turned his attention back to the pursuit's compact control console.

"Two blips, honey. Tearing hell-for-leather out of old Sol's little family. One'll be chasing the other, if my guess is any good. We want the front one."

"But—but that would be the—"

"The Thraxxite crowd. Right?"

For a moment she was silent. She knew he could not mean to attack; not with a tiny pursuit, swift as it was.

"Mister Cain, I can only guess at what you intend doing. But it will be my privilege in court to testify concerning your conduct of custodianship—"

"You must be working on the assumption that we're going back there, sweetheart!"

"You—"

"A deal is where you find it! Watch for that front blip, sergeant. With what we know of Kriijorl and his crowd, this oughta be a natural!"

THE cubicle in which he awoke was softly lit, and the painful throb Mason knew should be splitting his head apart was strangely absent. Kriijorl was bending over him, loosening the tightness of the military collar at his throat.

"They certainly were taking no chances with you," he said. His long Viking's hair was matted with blood just above the temple, yet he seemed to be suffering little pain, himself. "How do you feel?"

"O.K. I guess. Don't feel anything, really. . . ." Kriijorl unbuckled the wide straps that held him solidly in an acceleration-hammock, and he sat up. The steel-walled room rocked for a moment, then steadied.

"The Thraxxites are not vicious, any more than we. If they do not kill outright, they apparently take medical precaution to see that their victims suffer as little pain as possible. We're captives, however, together with your Earthwomen. We've been in flight for about an hour; putting us well out of your system, if we're hyperdriving—moving in what you term R-Space."

"Then—"

"Apparently no help of any kind arrived in time, Lieutenant."

Mason remembered, then, Judith. . . . Somehow she hadn't made it. Or hadn't made them believe her. This trip, he was strictly on his own. Not just a space weary Scout Lieutenant any more.

"What'll they do with us?"

"Pump us for information, probably. Kill me afterward. You should be safe enough in that respect. You're an alien, not a part of our conflict. Their labor planetoid for you, I would imagine. It is a jungle covered sphere at the edge of their planetary ring; our scouts have sighted it on numerous occasions. A handful of men in each of its camps, mining, probably, for the ore used in Thraxxite engines. But it will be better than death."

"What are our chances, Kriijorl?" Mason felt the familiar nervousness returning to his wiry body, yet this time it was in some way different. Not the kind that ate your insides out from too much Space, for too long.

"Of escape, you mean?" Mason nodded.

"There is no reason for you to risk—"

"Sure as hell is, friend. First because I believe you're my friend. Second, there were a couple of things you said awhile back that got me thinking. And third, I got myself shanghai'd, and I don't think I'll like where I'm going!" Cain, Mason thought to himself, wasn't the only guy in the universe with a muscle!

The Ihelian grinned. "We'll watch for a chance of some kind, then. But I will not let you risk your life. We of Ihelos obey the

Book, even if our enemy sees fit occasionally to violate the spirit in which it was conceived."

"Tell me something," Mason said. "This feud of yours. What's it all about? You mentioned that Book business once before, and it seems a people with your apparent piety and maturity and general advancement would certainly find a way to arbitrate such a dispute. What are you fighting about?"

Krijjorl's answering smile was thin, and there was a puzzled look in his craggy features.

"We fight because the Book of the Saints says we must!" he answered at length. "And further than that—"

"Yes?"

"Further than that, I'm afraid we do not know!"

Mason felt his features twisting into an incredulous expression despite his efforts to realize and appreciate the wide gap of cultural differences between them.

"Don't *know!* But you can't fight a war without knowing why! You—"

"It is in the Book of the Saints," the Ihelian said, "and, therefore, it is our command. And—" he looked into the Earthman's face with the slightest hint of a smile, "from what I've learned of Earth's history from your own lips, Lieutenant, what of your own past wars? Who among your own soldiery has really known why he fought?"

"Well, but—" And then Mason returned the smile. "No, it isn't so different, is it? But tell me more about this Book. Is it based on law, religion, ethics?"

And this time there was no smile on the Ihelian's broad face.

"Legend says all three," he replied.

"Legend? And yet you blindly obey—"

"We always have. Its writings, such as we understand them to be, have governed us for millenia, Lieutenant. The Book is our way, our life. We are told we could not be a civilization without it."

Mason was silent for a long moment. He did not want to question too deeply the beliefs sacred to another, yet it was so damnably peculiar. They fought bitterly, and they did not know why.

"Could you—would you let me see a copy of this Book, Krijjorl?"

"If I could I'd be glad to, Lieutenant. For I have often wished I could see the words it contains myself."

"You've never read it?"

"Never. Nor has any Ihelian or Thrayxite for thousands of years. There is, you must understand, only one Book of the Saints."

"Just one copy?"

"Yes. It has long been deemed sacrilege for mortal eyes to view the ancient writings. The single copy is kept in a great vault, built of indestructible metals, and protectively sheathed to last for all Time. The spot above its burial place is marked by a tall spire of stone. It is jealously protected."

"You said that its commands commit you and Thrayx to eternal battle. But if you could only read it, you might learn the basic cause of your conflict—and, knowing, certainly—"

"The thought has often occurred to me. But, there is even more prohibiting such an impossible undertaking than the powerful bondage of tradition and belief alone, Lieutenant. And that is the Book's very location."

"And that—?"

"The subterranean vault in which it rests is guarded in the Forest of Saarl. And the Forest of Saarl, my friend, is on Thrayx."

IV

"IT IS something completely beyond my understanding," the Ihelian was saying. The two men stood, each flanked by two guards, at the threshold of a great ramp which led from the main air lock of the Thrayxite ship to the reddish surface of the spaceport upon which it had landed but minutes before. Mason felt a chill of awed amazement, not because of the unexpected beauty of the verdant hills that rolled in a delicate blend of kaleidoscopic pastels on every side of the 'port and as far as the eye could see, nor was it even from the sight of the exquisite towers that rose as though from the heart of some fabled fairyland scant miles to the south.

"They're all—all *women!*" Mason breathed. "Not a single man!" And he looked quickly to Krijjorl. "You mean you did not know this?"

"Know? By the teeth of Jhavuul, we

never so much as suspected, Lieutenant! We have not looked upon a Thraxxite face for five thousand years."

The guards spoke to them tersely in the common tongue of Ihelos and Thraxx, although peculiarly accented to Ihelian ears, and Kriijorl gestured with a slight movement of his head to Mason. At a quick pace they started down the ramp.

"We're sunk, kid," Mason said. And he saw the heaviness in the great Viking's face. "We'll never make it out of here in a million years. Even if we made a break for it; even if we had our hands free, where could we hide? Couldn't make a move. Two men among an entire female populace—"

He let the sentence trail off as he realized that Kriijorl wasn't hearing him. And as their brief view of Thraxx was terminated by their entrance into a smaller shuttle-ship, he saw the hint of a smile flicker at the corners of the Ihelian's lips.

Their captors strapped them into hammocks, and when they had gone to assist others in herding a portion of the Earthwomen aboard the same craft, Kriijorl finally spoke.

"I think for the moment their probes may be off us," he said quickly. "I was relieved of my own during my unconsciousness, so we're no longer screened. And the fact that we speak in your tongue does us little good. But hear me. If we are being taken where I hope we are, then they are playing into our hands almost as well as we could have asked. There will be a limited freedom there, and a chance, if we are clever enough, to get to a mentacom installation. A planetary unit of unlimited range."

"But among women?" Mason asked, and his throat was dry.

"That is the point," Kriijorl replied tersely. "We shall be among males almost exclusively, save for the Earthwomen and those Thraxxites who periodically will be sent to breed."

"You mean the planetoid that you talked of before . . . ? But I—"

"Think a moment! Thraxxite is a matriarchy, something we of Ihelos never suspected. And therefore we erred further—what we believed to be a labor planetoid is not, of course!"

"Breeders!"

"Exactly. And if we can make it to one of their mentacoms, perhaps our problem will be solved. Except that—" His voice hesitated, and Mason saw doubt in the sudden frown. "I—I have no right to sacrifice your life nor those of your women. If we were to get to a mentacom it would be to contact my people, to inform them of the planetoid's true nature, so that we may even the score for what was done to our own breeders, and perhaps even form a plan to take prisoners to replace them. But such a message would be intercepted, of course."

"Hell, we could dodge 'em long enough—"

"Perhaps we could, Lieutenant. But the ships I summon will be fighting their way through a trebled Thraxxite guard—and once within range of our enemy's breeder satellite, they will have little time to seek us out and effect our rescue. Destruction will have to be immediate. Now do you understand?"

Mason wet his lips. He understood. Death for the breeders. For the Earthwomen. And for themselves.

"Nuts!" he clipped out. "That means that as far as you're going to be concerned, I'm just another Ihelian private first class for awhile, not a space-neurotic Earthman! And our girls . . . well, I think—I think they'd prefer anything to the living death in store for them—the rotting away of their lives in some infested alien jungle. Anyway, somebody's got to be judge. So let's get this damned thing doped out!"

The Ihelian began a reply, but the words were stopped in his throat by the sudden pressure of acceleration as powerful engines rumbled suddenly to throbbing life and lifted the Thraxxite craft quickly toward the eye of a great white sun.

FOR the second time in her life, Judith Kent watched the warp configurations of the Large Magellanic Cloud from the far side of the Rim; somehow it frightened her, as though some awful deadliness must lie within it.

Helplessly, she carried out Cain's orders, and as hopelessly, wondered of the fate of Lance and Kriijorl. Captives, with the

Earthwomen, in the Thrayxite ship with which Cain was so rapidly closing? Or lying dead somewhere, as she more than half believed, in the chill wilds of northern Canada? The odds had been so great. She knew that to hope without reason was folly, and yet not to hope was no longer to care.

She twisted away quickly from Cain's muscular arm.

"What's eating you, duchess? Your conscience giving you trouble, or are you just plain scared?" When she didn't reply, he laughed shortly, and gestured toward the scanner. In it, the slender Thrayxite craft was growing steadily larger as Cain's swift pursuit gradually folded the gap of curved Space between them. "In a couple of minutes, we'll be ready to talk turkey, sweetheart. They ought to be aware of us right this minute. I think they'll listen to what we have to offer."

"To what *you* have to offer!"

He laughed again. "It's more than Mason ever had! You know, sometimes I think you were torching for that space-happy has-been!"

She felt the burn of rising color in her cheeks and turned quickly away from him.

"You don't get it yet, do you duchess?" his heavy voice was saying behind her. "It's never occurred to you that there are other places to be beside with your own flock; that there are other men among whom to seek your fortune if the ones you were born among didn't offer the opportunities you expected. What are we among the stars at all for if it's not to find our destinies anywhere we think they might lie? What's this Big Freedom for, if not to use to some kind of advantage? And me, I'm sick of being a Warrant under worn out space-neurotics like Mason! And I don't want to end up being one, either!"

Judith held her lips tight against the thing that surged hotly inside her. There would have to be a way to stop this man. And if there weren't—How the pampered friends whom she'd left so proudly to choose this calling would laugh at her, would say "*that was what the hot-headed little rebel deserved . . . she had it coming if she couldn't act like a lady.*" And they were wrong!

But this man was hideously twisting all

the things she had thought were good and right, worth hoping and striving for. All the priceless things that had stood for more than the soft, idle and pointlessly shallow existence to which she'd been born.

"But I guess you wouldn't get it," Cain was saying. "Born with a silver shovel in your mouth, you don't have to worry about sweating out your pile! Quit any time and there it all is after your little adventure, still waiting for you to come home to! Maybe they'll even want you to write a book! But me—my father wasn't a lucky g-pro prospector."

A proximity alarm clanged, and Cain quickly turned his attention to the control banks. He jacked out the auto control and took over manually. And within seconds the pursuit was hovering over the great whale-like back of the Thrayxite craft, and then was drawn slowly to it as its powerful magnetics reached out, ensnared it. Then Cain cut the pursuit's drive, and they both waited.

The airlock opened, and the two women stepped through. There were weapons in their hands.

"I want to see your commander," Cain barked.

"I am the commander of this complement," the taller of the two said in an almost unaccented English. "You will consider yourselves my captives. Daleb . . ."

"What? Not all *women.*" There was a curious look on Cain's face; thoughts were racing behind the thin blades of his eyes.

"You are prisoners of the matriarchy of Thrayx," the officer called Daleb said. "If you do not resist, you shall be unharmed."

"All right, come off that alien-meets-alien stuff," Cain said as though the two briefly-uniformed women before him held toys rather than weapons in their hands. "I didn't just tag after you at a billion times the speed of light to get thrown into one of your dungeons! I've got some information I think you can use. And—" and the curious look was again on his face, "—there are some—shall we say—services, I think I can profitably perform for you."

"Profitably, Earthman? Profitably to whom?"

"To both of us. To me—that's why I'm here—and to you."

Judith's face was white. Perhaps this was some clever trick of Cain's. She could have been wrong.

"Tell me this information you have, Earthman."

"Let's dicker about price, first, Goldylocks!" He stood there, confident, defiant, great muscles bunched beneath the fabric of his tunic.

"You, Earthman, are hardly in bargaining position!" Only the woman's mouth moved; her eyes bored straight into Cain's like fine diamond drills.

"Chuck me," Cain said with a grin, "and you chuck the best chance you've ever had to take your Ihelian friends to the cleaners. What information I have concerning Ihelian plans is one thing." Judith caught her breath. She knew Cain was lying now. Even Lance had learned little of the Ihelian strategy, above Kriijorl's attempt to enlist Earthwomen for Ihelian breeding colonies. It was all, she realized suddenly, a colossal bluff, from which Cain planned to play his cards as he went along! And now he had found a wedge of some sort, some new bargaining point. There was still that curious look on his face, that careless grin at his lips. "But what service I can render you," he was continuing, "is quite another! Ladies, how good are your teleprobe gadgets against an Ihelian screen? A big blank, aren't they? But I still think you'd give those cute shirts of yours to find out what's going on inside the thick skulls of our Ihelian friends."

A puzzled look flickered across the Thraxxite commander's face, yet she remained immobile, and her weapon held steady.

"First of all, bright eyes," Cain said swiftly, "may you be the first to know that they're all men! *All men*, get it?" There was a soft gasp from Daleb, and the commander's eyes flickered, widened almost imperceptibly. "And better yet, I'm a pal of Kriijorl, their commander who picked us up just inside the Rim that time you followed us into Earth. So think it over. It ought to be worth a fancy little pile to you, ladies, since women agents would be kind of conspicuous in an all-male civilization!"

"You expect us to believe this fantasy? Do you expect us to accept your proposal

on the basis of nothing more than words? And the technique you describe. It has never been used, never even considered as a legitimate method of battle!"

Cain laughed easily. "Then maybe you better consider it if you want to come out on top! And as to the rest of it, if I was part of some counter-plot against you do you think I'd've gone to the trouble of bringing along some security?" And Judith felt something freeze inside her as he threw a careless glance in her direction. "There she is—Sergeant Judith Kent. Your hostage for this little operation! If I misbehave, she should make a pretty good bargaining point with Ihelos. From all I gather, they've got Earth sore enough at them as it is!"

There was an instant's silence, and then the commander said, "You have not proven your statement that our enemy is a male enemy."

"What do you think they wanted women for on Earth after you blasted that planetoid of theirs? A quilting party or something? Add it up."

The quiet in the small control bubble was electric. Judith watched the Thraxxites' faces as they weighed the incredible thing that Cain had said.

"I haven't got all eternity!" Cain snapped. "You think you can afford not to believe me?"

"Very well. Our Book has never mentioned this technique of spying, and therefore there can be no rule against it. As for the rest—that could be immaterial. You could be of value to us. Outline your plan."

"That's better, girls. Only take it just a little slower. We both know what we are, but let's haggle for awhile about the price, shall we?"

V

JUDITH shivered, partly from an uncontrollable terror and partly from the pre-dawn dampness creeping from the thick jungle surrounding the small clearing which held one of the breeder planetoid's many secluded colonies. The camp and the tangled growth which bounded it was her prison; a place in which there was freedom, yet where none were free. To walk or to run or to hide—but where? And so it was with

the rest—the hard-muscled, obviously drug-clouded males who had never known any other world than this; who never questioned from whence came the periodic groups of Thrayxite women for them to fertilize; who only glared dully at her, dimly understanding that she was to be, although captive here, left to herself and unmolested. Yet despite her status as hostage and Earth-woman, she was afraid.

The brute of a camp leader, Bruhlla . . . Not drugged like the rest. There was more to his sidelong glances than curiosity and vague resentment. Too often, she could sense his eyes upon her. And she wondered at the increasing frequency of his visits to the camp's well guarded mentacom installation.

She had lost count of night and days under the white sun of Thrayx and its ringed host. There had been two, perhaps, or three. Three days in which Roger Cain had been doing what? Was he with Kriijorl and Lance posing as their friend, their fellow captive, listening to their plans against their Thrayxite captors . . . remembering? Or would they be freed, if indeed they still lived, in order that Cain could, with them, learn even more of Ihelian stratagems on a far greater scale?

And the Earth girls—she had heard the cries of some, the desperate curses of others.

Bruhlla, entitled to use of the mentacom for daily contact reports with Thrayx as he was, was the only other alien being on the planetoid who could converse with her. He had lost little time in probing her to learn her tongue. And he had already hinted at the fate of the women from her planet. In other camps on the planetoid, held in small isolated groups, unmolested, Bruhlla had said. But prisoners, as was she.

Somehow, the Ihelians would have to know.

For there was no Earth to which to turn now.

The shiver again shook her slender body, and her tattered uniform did little to shield her from the damp cold.

"Still one apart from the rest of us, are you?" The growl of Bruhlla's voice behind her startled her, and she turned quickly to face the loose grimace of derision on his thick lips.

"I am to be left to myself," she said with what assurance she could muster. "That is your order."

"I know my order, little one! No need to tell Bruhlla his orders! But perhaps you will grow colder; perhaps you will grow hungry."

"You couldn't—"

"I have no order about feeding you, little one!"

Somehow she found the strength to voice her defiance. For she could still think. And thought, Lance had once told her, was the ultimate strength . . .

"You lie! There was such an order! But if you wish to bring the wrath of your masters down upon your ugly head." She watched his unkempt face, fanned the sudden puzzlement she saw growing in his red, sadistic eyes. If his intelligence were blurred enough by the self-made drug of his lust. "I myself heard such an order; and if you can prove me mistaken you may do with me what you will!" *God, would he stop to realize that she understood not a word of the Thrayxite tongue?*

"Quickly proven, my little one! Quickly enough proven! And then if what you say is untrue." He left the sentence mercifully unfinished, and turned toward the sturdily-built cubicle that housed the colony's mentacom.

"Wait! I'll only believe your proof if I can hear it for myself!"

"Come along then and you shall hear it!" The thick lips slackened into a lascivious grin that sickened her, but she hastened to follow him. And he did not see her as she scooped the jagged stone from the ground, thrust it into a tattered tool-pocket of her uniform.

Past the quiescent, sweat reeking bodies of the bull-muscled guards, into the dimly lit chamber beyond, Bruhlla half walking, half shambling before her.

She watched him as he switched the device into life; waited until its dull orange glow assured that it was ready for use. So much like the communications room of an ordinary ship of Earth, she thought. So like the familiar things of her life, yet so alien.

He had barely slipped the mentacom's headpiece on his skull and adjusted a

simply calibrated control dial when she struck him at the base of his thick neck with the stone, all the force of her supple young body behind it.

Blood spurted as its ragged edges tore through flesh, bone and nerves, and slowly, Bruhlla crumpled from the rude chair that held his dying bulk.

Thought images as well as words, Kriijorl had explained during their flight so long ago in the helio. Language would be no barrier. Over the head, like this . . . and this switch—

She twirled the large dial from its setting, watched a slender thread of light within a transparent sphere above it fluctuate in breadth as the dial twisted. And when it was at its widest, she gambled that it indicated the broadest transmitting beam of which the mentacom was capable.

And then she marshalled her thoughts, carefully chose the simplest words.

Warning, Ihelos! There is an Earhman among you at work as a spy for Thraxx! I am a captive.

Over and over, the same words, the same thought images which they formed; of Cain, of this hell-planetoid itself.

The orange glow pulsated as though itself alive with the desperation of her signal. And she heard the guard barely in time.

A howl of rage bellowed from him as she turned, twisted frantically just outside his grasp, darted headlong through the door.

And she was quicker than those outside; she was beyond them, running, the breath sobbing in her throat.

Away from the blood-soaked thing she'd left crumpled in death behind her, and toward the jungle's edge. Toward some new horror, perhaps, and toward a freedom that would be short-lived at best. For she had killed Bruhlla, and she knew they would not stop now until she had been run to earth.

THE three men watched as the six ships landed in the jungle clearing; emptied of the selected Thraxxite women who would in little more than a day's time re-enter them, the breeders' seed within their bodies, for the journey back to the mother planet.

It had been the same the day before, and the day before that, and in the distance, they

had watched similar craft descend toward other of the many colonies with which the lush planetoid was dotted.

"Nuts!" Cain said. He turned to Mason. "What the hell else is there to do? Sit here and rot? They won't kill us. They'll just let Nature take its course—"

"There's more to be done than simply make a run for it to one of their ships," Mason snapped. "The mentacoms on them, Kriijorl's said a dozen times, haven't the necessary range."

"So what's your plan? Or don't I get to hear any of the details?"

Mason studied the big man's face. Captured in his attempt to rescue the Earth-women, he had said. His explanation had been that simple. New-UN hadn't believed Judith, but she had convinced him, and so he'd tried on his own responsibility, and simply hadn't made it. And then they'd brought him here, scarcely hours after Mason and Kriijorl had themselves been delivered to the teaming colony.

Logical enough, yes. Cain was the kind who would try such a crazy stunt, alone, with such supreme overconfidence in his own muscle power. Yet—

"We must not be impatient," Kriijorl interrupted his thought. He stood up, his blond head nearly touching the top of the plastifabric tent. "We must be certain and wait for the best time, Mister Cain. For if we fail in our first attempt, there will not be a second. And it has only been three days. As yet, we have been left quite to ourselves; even my life has not been threatened."

Mason noticed the puzzled frown that was across the Ihelian's forehead. "Do you think—"

"I cannot even guess the reason for that," Kriijorl murmured, as though more to himself than in answer to Mason's question. "By all the rules of our conflict, I should be stretched naked for the jungle beasts by now."

"Forget it!" Cain broke in quickly. "You're alive now, and if we can have a little action around here maybe you'll stay that way. We've watched long enough. They don't guard those ships at all. These breeders they keep drugged to the eyes, so why should they? I say we just grab one and

blast off! Unless somebody's got a better plan, and I still haven't heard one—"

"Awfully anxious, aren't you, Mister Cain?" Mason asked.

"I'm not afraid of 'em if that's what you mean!"

Lance turned to Kriijorl. "Maybe he's right. We've watched for three days. What do you think?"

The Ihelian looked out across the colony of low, square-shaped enclosures and to its far side where the twisted jungle began; to the spot where the mentacom was housed in a squat, guarded dome of crudely-shaped steel. Then he turned back to the Earthman, and Mason saw the uncertainty in his eyes.

"We have gained far less than I had hoped by watching," he said slowly. "We have learned the number of their guards, and the period of their change, but perhaps that is all we shall learn. If you think that as soon as there is darkness—"

"About time!" Cain said sourly. "And it'll be straight for the—"

"To the mentacom first," Mason said quietly. "And after that, to the ships if we can, Mister Cain." He felt strangely calm as his eyes met Cain's squarely. Somewhere within him, there was something changing. "Take it from an ex-has-been, big man! That's how it's going to be!"

THE camp was dark and silent as the three men left the tent. They walked as if from boredom, changing direction often as though at random; yet they moved with a deceiving swiftness, and each step brought them closer to the crude dome. The sound of their movements was as a whisper that lost itself with the quiet murmur of the night wind through the web of the jungle, and when they were close enough, they halted, to wait; to watch.

There was the soft clink of metal on metal and the mutter of dead-toned voices as the guard changed. Four hulking shapes walked at last in a tired shamble from the structure housing the mentacom. Four others prepared to take their posts.

And there was little to disturb the silence after that.

A muffled grunt, a choked off curse lost in a brief rustle of undergrowth as though a sudden breeze had momentarily ruffled its

languid calm. And that was all.

Four breeders lay dead outside the dome.

Mason felt the warm stickiness of blood on his face, and the sting of a deep cut somewhere upon it. He saw that Cain was straightening over a mangled form; that Kriijorl had overcome odds of two to one. The breeder at his own feet had died swiftly of a deftly broken neck, a reddened dirk still clutched in his stiffening fingers.

Then they were inside the dome, and Kriijorl was placing the head-unit of the mentacom over his matted yellow hair.

Mason watched in the half-light of the pulsing orange glow, listened to the heaviness of Cain's breathing.

And he saw Kriijorl's face stiffen suddenly. With a swift movement the Ihelian had handed him the head-unit, and with slippery fingers he fumbled the device into place over his own head.

Before he could think he had given Cain all the warning that he had needed.

"My God, it's Judith! Somehow she's—"

Kriijorl lunged too late. The man whom Judith's mentacom message had branded as a spy was already through the dome's door, running.

Mason moved more quickly than the Ihelian then. Ahead in the jungle there was a crashing sound, and Mason tripped suddenly himself as he ran, fell. Kriijorl leapt past him in the darkness, as though he could somehow see through it, and then Mason had regained his feet and was following blindly.

And suddenly he thought of the empty ships behind them, and Cain's abrupt uselessness to his Thrayxite employers. Then—

But the gamble was too great. Cain might not double back, but instead plunge headlong further and further into the concealing morass before him. No, Cain would not double back. Not now. For in Kriijorl he had met an even match, and now he was afraid!

Fully an hour had passed when, his tunic torn and the exposed flesh bleeding, Mason caught up with Kriijorl.

"He was nearly within my hands for a moment—" the giant whispered hoarsely. He breathed with difficulty, and there were long slashes gleaming redly in the darkness across his great muscles.

Mason stood silently for moments, toying with a thought that nagged insistently at the edge of his brain. He knew Cain. He knew the man.

Then suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by the muffled sound of a rocket blast, and within moments there was a vertical trail of fire above them as a Thrayxite ship hurtled skyward.

"By Jhavuul—"

"No!" Mason exclaimed. "The blast was from in front of us, he didn't double back! Must be another colony near our own, and he stumbled out of this overgrown mess and right into it. There was simply an empty ship—"

"Then the traitor has won!" Kriijorl's face was tilted upward, and in the faint glow of the planetesimal belt that girdled Thrayx, it seemed more than ever that of an heroic Viking king of ages gone.

"There's a chance he hasn't!" Mason breathed. He had the thought now, pinned down, clear in his head. "If there has been no alarm back at our own camp we may still have the mentacom to ourselves. We'll signal Ihelos as you planned and then—then there is something else you will say. Something else that I think will, as the saying goes on Earth, kill two birds with a single blast."

Mason had lost track of time; perhaps it was as many as two hours before they had fought their way through the clutching undergrowth back to the mentacom at the fringe of their own camp. Several times they had had to stop, for there had been sounds in the jungle other than those they had made themselves. Animals, Kriijorl had said, who had got the scent of their blood. But the noises had not been fast and crashing—more those of stealth, as were those of their own steps. A single animal, perhaps, with the scent of their blood; or that of the breeder guard they had slain. And stalking.

The dome was still silent, and the stiff corpses outside it lay undisturbed in the thick undergrowth. In the clearing the six empty Thrayxite ships towered in the sleeping quiet, star-shine glinting faintly from their polished hulls.

Wordlessly, they entered the dome, and it was as they had left it.

Kriijorl again adjusted the headset, and the orange glow pulsed and waned as Mason watched.

And then at length, "If they are to know, they know now," Kriijorl said. "And the Thrayxite host as well. What was there you wished to add, Lieutenant?"

Mason spoke quickly. "Say that you have discovered that the priceless—and you must say *priceless*—Book of the Saints is in the Forest of Saarl on Thrayx. Say that we have discovered it to be less well protected than is generally believed. Then give the location of the subterranean vault as precisely as you can!"

"But my people are well aware—"

"I realize that, but our friend Cain doesn't!"

The Ihelian's face was still puzzled, but he projected the thought-message Mason had dictated.

And then in seconds the Ihelian had hastily but thoroughly wrecked the mentacom, and the two men left its silent dome for the empty ships that beckoned so tantalizingly a scant quarter-mile distant.

They had run perhaps a dozen steps when the undergrowth behind them ripped and tore, and Mason spun.

There was a muffled cry, and he had barely time to catch Judith's bleeding body as she fell in exhaustion into his arms.

VI

THE muscles in his arms and legs trembled with fatigue as he lifted the semi-conscious girl up to Kriijorl, and then with what seemed an impossible effort, hauled himself through the deserted ship's stern airlock.

The Ihelian seemed to carry Judith as though she were a feather as he climbed the narrow ladder above Mason, infinitely upward, the Earthman thought . . . an infinite distance to the ship's forehull, to its control banks.

There was only the sound of his own hoarse breathing in his ears as he climbed, rung after rung, and the hollow echo of Kriijorl's boots as they mounted resolutely above him.

Then they had made it, and were strapping Judith into a hammock, were taking

their own shock-seats before the control-banks of the Thrayxite shuttle-craft.

The Ihelian did not hesitate. His fingers deliberated for only a moment above the firing studs in the blue-green glow of the banks, and then they flicked home, and engines muttered, roared into terrifying life.

Within moments, saying nothing, moving the swift, silent movements of desperation, they had freed themselves of the grasping snare of the jungle beneath them; were once more strong, liberated things in the vast freedom of Space.

"And now Ihelos!" Kriijorl cried as they broke swiftly from the ecliptic of the great spangled ring of Thrayx. "If we can but escape their fleet. Any moment they should be on the scanner, forming to meet the onslaught of Ihelian squadrons—"

"No!" Mason said, and his voice was like a solid thing clogging his throat. "No, not Ihelos—not yet!" His eyes burned, and the red welts that covered his body had begun to sting, to pain, and it was hard to think.

He saw the frown forming on Kriijorl's face.

"Thrayx, and the Forest of Saarl," he bit from between teeth clenched against the creeping agony in him. "The Book of the Saints, Kriijorl. It is the key, don't you see. Key to all this, your feud."

For an instant the Ihelian said nothing, but groped in hidden pockets of his battered space harness. His long fingers quickly produced a tablet, thrust it into Mason's hand. The Earthman swallowed it and almost at once energy coursed as though from some hidden well in his body through his flagging muscles and nerves.

Then Kriijorl spoke. "I do not understand, Lieutenant. I know only that it would be almost certain death. Intrusion near the vault would bring a flight of guard ships within minutes."

"I know that," Mason said. "But perhaps not down upon us! And we must have that Book. I've been thinking about it, comparing it with similar writings in Earth's own past. Such books are not new, such motives, such methods. Your Book is priceless in a way that even you don't know, Kriijorl. I'm certain of it. For it must contain the reason that you fight."

"And that reason?"

"A reason, if I'm right, that would end your feud once and for all. A nasty bit of logic which the people of Ihelos and Thrayx were quite deliberately kept from knowing from the beginning. I'd make book on it that at one time both planets were very hungry places—"

"But if you are wrong, Lieutenant?"

Mason fastened his gaze straight before him on the diamond-studded scanner, and saw that some of the smaller diamonds were moving in a tiny echelon.

"Then I guess we die young," he answered the Ihelian. "Want to try?"

The Ihelian's face loosened into a wry smile. "Sometimes you ask rather foolish questions, Lieutenant! I've been bred to such business, and not given my life so much thought before this! But—"

"Yes, Judith."

And then they heard a woman's voice speaking behind them. "Thrayxite acceleration hammocks could stand improvement," it said. "And when we leave the Forest of Saarl, I think I'll just lie on the deck instead."

KRIIJORL'S knowledge of the spot's location in the great forest was far more accurate than he had given Mason reason to hope. And with a deftness that matched that with which he had eluded the screens of the Thrayxite fleet hurtling to protect its breeder planetoid, he brought the ship to rest at Mason's direction, little more than a quarter-mile from where the Book of the Saints lay entombed.

It was marked by two spires. One was of hewn stone, as Kriijorl had said, immobile, with ancient symbols carved from its base to its pinnacle.

And the other was smooth, and of metal; its gaping airlock testimony to the haste with which it had been landed, unhidden by the natural camouflage of the soaring trees with which the grass-carpeted clearing was surrounded.

"Who—"

"Muscles," Mason answered her. The three were crouched at the clearing's edge, waiting. "Thought he'd made it some way. Must've ducked in before their fleet got into Space. Gambling that our signal that he picked up wouldn't bring out a special re-

ception committee ready and waiting to meet him."

"But he has preceded us by many minutes," Krijjorl said. "I do not see—"

"Not so many. He was in flight two full hours before you mentacommended Ihelos. And if I know him, it was straight out of this galaxy at full blast! So he had to back-track all that time and distance. He had to risk a trap down here, as well as the Thraxxite fleet which he knew would be rushing to protect its breeders."

"You had counted on those factors, Lieutenant?"

"Two birds with one blast, like I told you before," Mason said. "Ask Judith, here. She'll tell you how well I know him." The girl was silent, but her eyes voiced her thoughts more eloquently than her tongue might have.

"Some will do anything to obtain the 'priceless'—" Krijjorl said softly.

"Cain, any time!"

"You have laid a clever trap, Lieutenant."

"If it springs, sure. But where are those guard ships you were so worried about? I was counting on them, too. They should be all over the place by now."

And he was interrupted by the high pitched scream of the flat, finned shapes that hurtled suddenly over the tree tops, circled, slid quickly downward.

"FLAT!" Mason yelled. And as they stretched prone, they saw Cain running toward the ship from a great open shaft in the ground, a round, shiny thing beneath one arm.

A probing needle of white hot flame stabbed out from one of the descending ships, and there was a scream, and then Cain fell, a charred skeleton, to the ground. The shiny thing he had carried rolled lazily along the grass, teetered on edge, plopped silently over.

Mason was poised like a runner awaiting the starting gun. For a split second he hesitated as the guard ships touched down, their weapons momentarily screened by the lush foliage at the clearing's edge.

And then Mason was running, Judith and Krijjorl only steps behind him.

There were perhaps seconds before the armed women of the Thraxxite guard detail would break from the forest's edge.

He stumbled, fell, and his outstretched hands touched the round, shiny thing, and he could smell the reek of Cain's smouldering skeleton.

Krijjorl and Judith hesitated.

"Damn it, run!" and he felt his scream tear at his dry throat, and then clutched the metal disk to him and regained his feet in a single whip-like motion, and bolted after them toward the gaping air lock of the ship that Cain had never reached.

There was a hissing sound and a wave of heat crackled behind him, seared his flesh beneath his tattered tunic. And there was another, inches before him, scorching smoking scars in the soft green turf, and shouted orders filled the air scant yards behind him.

Then somehow he was at the air lock, and strong hands were pulling him over its edge, and it swung to, glowed red as a bolt of raw energy spent itself harmlessly against it.

"Now Ihelos!" Mason said as he fought for new breath.

IT WAS white, all white around him.

He tried to sit up but there was the touch of gentle hands that stayed him, lowered him back upon the bed.

There were two of them—tall, like Vikings, and memory returned slowly. There was a smaller one, too, standing straight and erect beside him, like a proud queen from the pages of Earth's colorful history.

Judith. And Krijjorl. And another. And in his hands there was the silver disk. The can.

The can of records. The Book of the Saints.

He tried again to straighten, and then heard the voice of the one whom he did not know.

"I am Yhevvak, Grand Liege of Ihelos," the voice said. "And I hold in my hands, Earthman, the Book of the Saints. I have read it, and I have broadcast to all of Thraxx what I have read. A truce delegation has already departed from that planet to meet us here in Space."

"But—" the word stuck in his throat, and it was hard to think.

"Commander Kriijori said that you suspected it was the key to our great trouble. You were right.

"For it tells of a conference among the leaders of our two worlds many millenia ago; a conference held in secret, because of the nature of its subject—the very people of our worlds themselves. Secret, because of the decision concerning them and their staggering number. Too staggering for either planet any longer to feed. And the record itself was then committed to this single microtape, and itself, kept in secrecy since the day it was recorded.

"At first shrouded in deliberate mysticism, it was at length remembered only as the Last Word of the Saints in the sudden wars which so quickly followed its creation, the true cause of which was skillfully falsified to the people of the time, and truly known only to those who made the microtape I hold here.

"They were our greatest leaders; in them was invested the responsibility for the welfare and livelihood of our two planets, both materially and spiritually.

"When they lived, those records say, travel in Space beyond the speed of light had not been accomplished; they believed such a feat an impossibility imposed by a condescending Nature that could be challenged too far. And they therefore knew no way of reaching beyond the planets of Ihelos and Thrayx for the food and resources that became so sorely depleted as both planets became, at length, stripped nearly bare as their populations swelled beyond saturation point.

"Medical science had permitted the old to grow older; granted the new-born an almost certain purchase on life once first breath had been drawn. Yet its greatest offering was rejected by the people; there were indignant cries at the merest suggestion that they intelligently regulate their number, so that their posterity might live in greater plenty than had they.

"There was but one solution for our desperate leaders. For although warfare had long since vanished from our civilization as it had matured, it took with it Nature's

own unpleasant balance for her overgenerous fecundity.

"The new balance, then, had to be of Man's making. And so it was made.

"Our leaders, our Saints, as we have come through the years to know them, were of course adept masters at the many subtle arts of propaganda, and they used those arts to the very limits of their skill. They deliberately fomented, as their ancient record shows, the wars, small at first and then ever larger, between Ihelos and Thrayx.

"They could not have foreseen that one day there would be conflict for existence between the sexes; logically calculating intellect against intuitive, wily cunning in a battle to determine the most fit, who would then enjoy the right to survive.

"Nor could they have foreseen that one day, because of the very conflict they fomented, the science of controlled genetics would at last be recognized as a necessity of survival to both factions.

"Today we have our answer to the age old problem of keeping our consumption within the limits of our ability to produce for it; we have used it to survive. But to survive war, not peace.

"And that, as you apparently suspected, Earthman, is the key.

"We know now why we fought. And with the knowledge of the life forces with which we insured our continued existence during our years of battle, we may now become united worlds of peace again. For we shall use that knowledge to take more advisedly of Nature's fruits than we took before.

"Well done, Earthmen. And with our thanks, know that we shall be always in your debt."

Then Yhevvak bowed low, and left just the three of them together in the white hospital bay of his flagship.

Kriijori was smiling, and there was a shininess in Judith's eyes.

Mason grinned. "I hope those Thrayxite babes get a wiggle on," he said. "Those Earth gals gotta get 'em home! Their mothers'll be frantic. Hey, girl, not in front of company!"



GEORGE LOVES GISTLA

By JAMES McKIMMEY, Jr.

"Why don't you find yourself some nice little American girl," his father had often repeated. But George was on Venus . . . and he loved pale green skin . . . and globular heads and most of all, George loved Gistla.

GEORGE KENINGTON was sixteen, and, as he told himself, someone who was sixteen knew more about love than someone who was, say, forty-two. Like his father, for instance. A whole lot more probably. When you were forty-two, you got narrow-minded and nervous and angry. You said this is this, and that is that, and there is nothing else. When someone thought and felt and talked that way, George thought bitterly, there was not enough room inside that person to know what it was like, loving a Venusian.

But George knew. He knew very well.

Her name was Gistla. She was not pretty in standards of American colonists. She had the pale greenish Venusian skin, and she was too short and rather thick. Her face, of course, was not an American face. It was the face of native Venus. Round and smooth, with the large lidless eyes. There were no visible ears and a lack of hair strengthened the globular look of her head.

But she was a person. The beauty was inside of her. Did you have to point to a girl's face and say, "Here is where the nose should be, here is where the ears should be?" Did you have to measure the width between eyes and test the color of the skin?

Did you have to check the size of the teeth and the existence of hair? Was all of this necessary to understand what was *inside* someone?

George snapped a leaf from an overhanging vine and threw it angrily to the ground. He was walking along a thin path that led from the colony to the tangled hills beyond, where hues of red and yellow and purple reflected like bold sweeps of watercolor. In a moment he would see Gistla, and with the color before his eyes and the sweet perfume of the flowers in his lungs, he felt again the familiar rise of excitement.

George had not always lived on Venus. The Colony was very new. By 2022, most of the Earth countries had sent colonizers to Mars. But as yet, in June of that year, Venus had been touched by only the sparsest invasion of American civilization. George had arrived just three years ago, when his father had been appointed Secretary of the colonizing unit.

And that was the whole trouble, really. Father was the Secretary, Mother was the Secretary's wife, Sister was the daughter of the Secretary. Everybody was wrapped up in it. Except George.

George loved Gistla.

"Why don't you find yourself some nice little American girl?" his father had said. "Say like Henry Farrel's little daughter?"

Henry Farrel's little daughter was a sweet sickening girl with a nasty temper and a nasty tongue. Her father was Governor of the Colony. She told you about it all the time.

"Or," his father had told him, "why not little what's-her-name, Doug Brentwood's daughter?"

Little what's-her-name's father was the President of the Council. "My father is President of the Council," she said. Over and over, as though in a settlement the size of the Colony, there would be anyone who wouldn't know her father was the President of the Council.

It was all a very tight and careful circle, chosen on Earth with a great deal of "common sense."

There were the ordinary settlers, of course. They had daughters. Some of them were very pretty and long-limbed. And George had thought about that.

Certainly there wasn't a decent looking girl in the whole Governing circle, and the sight of a girl with flashing eyes and a nice red mouth, who was shaped a little like something besides a tree stump, was indeed an exciting sight.

But there were limitations to the settler girls.

They had no background to speak of, and though that didn't make any difference, George assured himself, they knew nothing about art, music, poetry, or anything really worth while. And, too, while George's father had said, "Now George, we're all one here. Each of us is as good as another. Joe Finch, who cares for the flowers outside, is every bit as good a man as I am"—still George knew, if he told his parents he was going to marry Joe Finch's daughter someday, there would be hell to pay.

So as long as the restrictions had been bound around him, there was no reason to go just half-way. George was not an ordinary boy. He did things in extreme. He was now in love with a Venusian girl, and his family was already starting to make him pay.

GEORGE turned off the path, just beyond an arch of thick purple-green vines that always reminded him of a gate to a garden. There was a quiet simplicity to this small clearing where he and Gistla met. There was an aloneness to it, and only the sound of the flat shiny leaves sliding together and the high, trilling sound of the small Venusian birds broke the peaceful silence. They had always met here, nowhere else.

Now, as George found himself in the clearing, he began to wonder what Gistla would say or do when he told her he was taking her home to meet his family. It had been a sudden decision, brought out of anger and indignation.

George sat down upon the flat hollow of a large vine. The sky was murky as usual, but the soft warm feel and smell of the growth around him, with its color and brightness, made up for a sunless sky.

As he waited, he remembered what his mother had said:

"Oh, George, you're really not serious about bringing a *Venusian* into our home!"

And his sister, Mari, had said, "My God!" Mari, who was eighteen, said this to most anything.

But his father, eyes bright and alert, had said, "No, now if George wants to bring one of these, ah, Venusians home with him, that's his privilege. I think it would be very interesting."

George knew what his father meant by interesting.

Exposing Gistla to his family would result in deliberate sarcasm and eye-squinting and barely hidden smiles. There would be pointed remarks and direct insults. And when it was over, George knew, he would be expected to see the error of his ways. He would then be expected to forget about this odd creature and find himself a nice ignorant little Colony girl, whose father was a member of the Governing circle.

And to hell with that, too, George said.

"What?" George heard Gistla say. He turned quickly. She was standing at the edge of the clearing, her round green eyes looking soft and serious. She wore the usual gray cape that reached her ankles. Her voice was a deep round sound, and there was hardly any accent in the words she had learned so quickly since the Colony had begun.

"Talking to myself," George grinned. The old excitement was inside of him. There was a kind of exotic quality in meeting Gistla that never disappeared.

She crossed the clearing, not too gracefully, and touched her fingers against his hand. This had been the extent of their physical expression of love.

"It is nice to see you, George."

He noticed his feeling of pleasure when he heard her speak his name. There was something about his own name being spoken by Gistla that had always seemed even more strange than anything else.

She sat down beside him, and they looked at each other while the leaves whispered around them and the birds fluttered and chirped. He discovered again the feeling of rightness, sitting beside Gistla. There was a solidity about her, a quiet maturity that he seemed able to feel in himself only when he was with her. And that too was strange, because in American terms of age, she was much younger than he.

Sitting, as they were doing, silent, watching each other, had been most of their activity. You did not need to entertain Gistla with foolish small-talk or exaggerated praising.

But right now he wanted to tell her quickly, to make sure that she would feel the enthusiasm he had felt.

"Listen, Gistla," he said, while she watched him with her soft-looking round eyes. "I want you to come with me today to meet my family."

His words seemed to have an odd ring to them, and George waited tensely until he was sure that she was not shocked or angry about what he had just said.

She sat silently for a moment and then she said, "Do you think that is right for me to do, George?"

"Sure it is! Why not? They know about you and me. They know we're in love."

"Love—" She spoke the word as though it were an indefinite, elusive thing that you could not offer as reason for doing anything.

Gistla was very wise, George realized, but this was a time for enthusiasm, a time to strengthen their own relationship in this world.

"Say you will!" George said.

"Do you want me to?"

"Well, sure I do. What did you think?"

She held her hands in her lap quietly. They were not unlike his own, George observed, except for the extreme smallness and the color.

"I do not think it will be nice for you or them," she said.

"Ah, listen, Gistla. Don't talk that way. It'll be fine!" But he knew that he was not deceiving her with the lightness he tried to put into his voice.

Then, although she had never done it before, she reached out and touched his cheek. George had grown used to the emotions that reflected on her face, and he knew she was suddenly very sad. "Yes, George," she said. "I will go with you to meet your family." And she said it as though she were telling him good-by.

IT WAS no better than he had expected. It was worse. Much worse. And he was growing angrier by the moment. They were

all seated in the rock-walled patio behind the large white house. Gistla sat beside him, looking very small and frightened and very different. And it was that obvious difference that George had hoped everyone might ignore. But instead, each of them, his father, his mother, his sister, appeared to be trying to make it even more obvious.

The first strain, when everyone had sat there staring at Gistla as though she were something behind a cage, had passed. But now his parents and sister were moving in a new direction. They had relaxed, having found control of the situation, and they were cutting her to pieces.

"Tell me," his sister was saying, her eyes dancing slyly, "don't you people have some very strange tricks you can do?"

George tightened his fingers against his palms. He heard Gistla answer, "Tricks?"

"Yes." His sister's white smile shined. "You know, like making things disappear, things like that."

"My father," Gistla said seriously, "can do very wonderful things. He is a musician."

George's father leaned forward, blinking amusedly. "Really? What does he play?"

"Play?" asked Gistla.

"Yes. He's a musician. He must play something, some kind of instrument."

Gistla looked at George, but George did not know what to say. He wished he had never tried to do this. He wished he had just ignored his family and gone on loving Gistla in the privacy of his own emotions.

"Well, now," Mr. Kenington was saying rather impatiently. "Does he play something like our violin or clarinet or oboe, or what?" His father, George had noticed, was becoming impatient more frequently since he had become Secretary. The Secretarial post was very important.

"He does not play anything," Gistla said carefully. "He just . . . makes the music and I hear it."

"But how?" Mr. Kenington insisted. "What does he play the music *on*? He certainly can't make the music without using something to make it on."

Gistla glanced again at George and he said quickly, "It's pretty hard to understand, Father. I don't think—"

"No, now don't interrupt just now, son.

This is very interesting. We'd like to know what she's talking about."

Mrs. Kenington spoke for the first time. "Are you just making this up?"

It was like a whip coming through the air. His mother sat there, blinking, the suspicion and distrust she felt for this creature showing in her eyes and upon her mouth and even in the way she was sitting.

"Now, Lois," Mr. Kenington said, as though he really sympathized with what she had said, believing that not only Gistla was making it up, but that all of her race made everything up. But he was stubborn. "Come now, tell us. Tell us what you mean."

Gistla's smooth head turned this way and that. "Sometimes," she said slowly, "my father journeys to other places, and if he cannot return soon, he sends me music. When the light has gone from the day and I am alone, I hear it."

"You mean he sends it by wires or by radio?" Mr. Kenington asked with surprise. "No."

"Now, wait a minute," George's sister leaned forward, smiling. "You just hear this music, is that right? Up here." She tapped her forehead.

"Yes," said Gistla.

"My God," George's sister said. She looked at her parents, arching her eyebrows.

"You shouldn't make things up," George's mother said.

"Mother," George said, his face coloring. "She's not making things up!"

"Just a moment, son," Mr. Kenington said crisply. "You don't want to talk to your mother in that tone."

"No, but my God," George's sister went on. "Imagine. No wires, no loudspeakers, just . . . up here." She tapped her forehead again.

"I'm not talking to my mother in any tone at all," George said, disregarding his sister.

"Well, she shouldn't lie," said Mrs. Kenington with conviction.

George stood up. "She is not lying, Mother."

"I forbid you to argue with your mother that way, George," said Mr. Kenington.

"I mean, my God," said George's sister happily. "This is an innovation! Can you

imagine? Gistla, or whatever your name is, could your father make his music sometime when we have a dance?"

Gistla's eyes were hurt and she was, George knew, confused. She shook her head.

Mrs. Kenington was blinking accusingly. "Do they teach you to make these things up? Is that what they teach you at home?"

"Mother, will you please?" George said. "Why must you talk to her that way?"

Mr. Kenington stood up quickly. "I did not raise my son to show an attitude like that to his mother."

"But she isn't making this up," George said. "You asked her to tell you and she—"

George's sister had jumped out of her chair and she was waltzing over the patio. She began humming as she danced. "Can't you just see it? Everyone dancing around, listening to music in their heads? No orchestra or records or anything?"

Mr. Kenington stood very tall. "Are you taking the word of your mother, or this . . . this . . ." He motioned curtly at Gistla.

George licked his lips, looking defensively at each one of his family. "It isn't a matter of taking anyone's word at all. It's just something we don't understand."

George's sister whirled and then suddenly she stopped, putting her hand against her mouth. "My God, what if everyone got the music different? I mean, does everyone hear the same music, dear? Because if they didn't, what a mess!" She began dancing again, her skirt swirling over the bricks of the patio.

Mr. Kenington's voice was louder. "I think we understand, all right, George. There isn't anything about this we don't understand!"

George's lips were paling.

His sister dipped and turned. "We could call it a Music In The Head dance. Everybody brings his own head!" She laughed merrily. "My God!"

George noticed then that Gistla was disappearing out of the rear gate. He stood, clenching his fists and glaring at his family. His sister had stopped dancing but she was still laughing.

"I didn't think, George," his mother said resolutely, "that you were going to invite someone who lied."

George turned and ran after Gistla.

THEY sat again in the clearing. George could still feel the anger churning inside him, and he held his hands together so tightly that his fingers began to ache. "I hate them for that," he said.

Gistla touched his arm. "No, George. It is all right. It is the way things are."

"But they don't need to be! My family did that on purpose."

"They just don't understand. My race is very different from yours and it seems strange."

"So does mine," George said, standing and beginning to pace back and forth.

It had been what he really had expected. But still he had hoped, somehow, that his family might have understood. He looked at Gistla, sitting quietly, her large eyes watching him. He knew he loved her very much just then, more in fact than he ever had before, because she had been refused by his family.

"Listen, Gistla," he said, kneeling on the grass in front of her. "It won't make any difference what anyone thinks or does or says. I love you, and I'll go on loving you. We'll build our own life the way we want it."

She shook her head slowly. "No, George. It does make a difference. You cannot forget your family or your people. That is important to you. I would only hurt you."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Then that's all that's important to me. Not what anyone thinks. Not what my sister thinks or my father or my mother."

"We are different, you and I." She sat unmoving, her smooth face unchanging. "My people seem strange to yours because we can do things your people do not understand. We seem strange because we look differently, we act differently, we value things differently."

"My values are the same as yours," George pleaded. "I love you because of what you are, not because of some kind of stupid chart for physical beauty, not because . . ."

"George," she said. "Look at me."

George met her eyes suddenly, caught by the urgency in her voice. And slowly, in front of his eyes, she changed. Her features shifted, until George saw a beautiful young

girl with pink white skin and red lips. He saw shining blue eyes and shimmering golden hair that fell over her shoulders. Gistla's body had changed to a lithe, smooth figure that revealed its contours beneath the gray cape.

He caught his breath and wiped a hand at his eyes.

"What you see," said Gistla softly, "is an illusion. You see what would be in your values, a beautiful girl."

George opened his mouth but was unable to find his voice.

"Do not be afraid, George. Beneath the illusion of your senses, I am still Gistla. I am still a Venusian."

George reached out and touched his fingers against a white arm and a white shoulder bared by the cape. He touched the golden hair. "Gistla," he said, amazed. "You're beautiful."

"Yes," she said sadly.

"But—you really are! Your hair and your eyes and your mouth. How did you do it?"

She shook her head to show its unimportance. "It is something—like your hypnotism."

George raised himself from his knees and sat beside her. "But I can't believe it!"

"You can see, you can feel."

"Yes," George said. "Yes."

"You are happy with me this way, aren't you, George?"

"But you're so beautiful."

The golden-haired girl nodded her head, and the shining blue eyes watched him carefully.

"You see then," Gistla said. "It does make a difference. You love me more this way."

"No," George said, touching her hair again. "I don't love you more, but if you can do this, why then, we'll have no more worries. Don't you see?"

"I think so," Gistla said, looking away.

George's voice was excited, and his eyes darted over her face and body. "Would other people see you as I do?"

"If I wished, yes."

"Then you see? It's all changed! You are what I see. Golden-haired and pale-skinned—"

"I am still Gistla. You would always know that. Would you love something that

is not real, just because you see it with your eyes?"

"BUT I can feel that you're real," George said, putting his hands on her shoulders. He pulled her closer and kissed her hair. "You're Gistla," he said, "and you're beautiful." He tipped her face up to his and bent to kiss her mouth.

His lips touched smooth green skin and he looked into Gistla's large round lidless eyes. He recoiled as though he had been touched by fire.

She watched him as he wiped a trembling hand across his chest, and her globular head glistened in the reflection of the late sun.

She nodded. "When you see what I really am, the difference *is* important." She gathered her cloak around her and stood up.

George felt the flush of his face, and he could not meet her eyes. He heard her walk a few steps away.

"Good-by, George," she said.

He jumped up quickly. "That wasn't fair."

"No," she said slowly, "but it proved the value of things."

"It wasn't fair," George repeated. "And it didn't prove anything."

"I think it did," she said, moving away.

"No, listen, Gistla," he said. "You can't judge anything by what I did or said. We are different, in a physical sense, but that doesn't really matter. If a golden-haired girl materializes in front of my eyes, you can't blame me for what my emotions did. It's still you I love. Not the color of your skin or the shape of your mouth. But you and what you or I or anybody else looks like isn't important!"

He followed her and caught her arm. She turned to face him. "You can say that," she said. "Your words tell me that and your eyes, but I know it isn't true."

The embarrassment was still inside him, but the way she denied him made him want her more than ever. He held to her arm and then he said, "Gistla, could you change me? I mean, so that other people, even I, would see me as they see you—as a Venusian?"

She stood very still, staring at him.

"Could you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then do it, Gistla. I'll prove to you that nothing is important but you and me. I'll be a Venusian, like you are. I'll go back to my family as a Venusian and I'll take you with me. I'll prove that neither they nor anybody else makes any difference in how I love you!"

Gistla watched him solemnly. Finally she said, "Would you really do that?"

"Yes," he said quickly, "Yes."

"I love you, George," she said in her deep round voice.

He lifted his hands to touch her face and he found that his skin had turned to pale green. He touched his own face, and he knew that if he looked into a mirror he would see a round smooth head with large lidless eyes.

"Is that what you wanted?" she asked.

"Yes," he said stubbornly. "That's what I wanted." He stood there for a long time, trying to become used to it, fighting the fear that ran through him every time he looked at his hands or touched his head. Finally he said, quietly, "Let's go meet my family."

AS THEY drew near the house, he knew his family was still in the patio. He could hear the voices of his mother and father and the high, piercing laughter of his sister.

"And, my God," he heard his sister say, "did you see the way those horrible eyes looked at you? What ever gets into George?"

"Dear, dear, dear," he heard his mother say.

Gistla was looking at him. "You do not have to do this."

"Yes," he said, feeling his heart jump. "I do."

He took her hand and they walked to the gate of the patio. He stood there, feeling Gistla's hand tighten about his own. And as he said, "Hello, everybody," he felt his breath shorten as though he had suddenly gotten stagefright.

He saw his father turn around. "What's this?" Mr. Kenington said, frowning.

"Hello, Father," George said.

"Father," Mr. Kenington repeated. "What are you doing in this patio?"

"I brought Gistla back."

"So I see," said Mr. Kenington, his eyes

narrow as he looked at Gistla. "Where's George?"

"I'm George."

"I'm not in the mood for joking with Venusians," his father snapped. "What made you think you could come in here like this?"

Gistla's hand tightened again. "Try to understand," George said. "Gistla—"

"What's going on?" his sister interrupted.

"Gistla, or whatever her name is," Mr. Kenington said, "has brought a friend of hers, another Venusian." He said the word, Venusian, as though it were a curse or a filthy word.

"My God," said his sister, squinting at them.

Mrs. Kenington leaned over in her chair, peering. "Tell them not to come into the patio, Harry," she said to her husband.

"Listen, Father," George said, feeling the panic begin. "Gistla changed my appearance, so that I seem to look like a Venusian. I came here to tell you that it doesn't make any difference what I look like, whether I look like a Venusian or a leaf on a vine or anything else. I still love her, and it doesn't make any difference." He heard his voice rising and becoming louder.

"My God," said his sister, giggling. "More black magic. Can you make music?" she asked George.

"Harry," his mother said, "They frighten me. Can't you make them keep off the patio?"

"Mother—" George began.

"Now see here," Mr. Kenington growled. "You know we don't allow Venusians around here. I'd advise you to get out of here. Quick!"

"Why does he keep calling you father and mother?" his sister asked. "Isn't that queer, how he keeps doing that? Make some music," she said to George.

George could see the hatred in his father's eyes and in his mother's. And behind his sister's sarcastic smile, he could see the hatred there, too. He felt himself getting more tense, and the panic raced through him.

"Listen," he shouted. "I'm George, don't you understand? George!"

"I don't want to tell you again," his father said, his face very red. "I don't know

what your little game is, but it isn't coming off, and so I'll tell you just this one time. You get the hell off this property, or I'll . . ."

"Listen," George yelled. "I'm *GEORGE!* Don't you understand?"

His father's lips thinned to a white line, and he began shouting for Joe Finch, the gardener.

George knew what he should have done then, he should have taken Gistla and gone. He should have walked with her, hand in hand, down the road and away from there. But instead, the panic made his heart pound and he saw the hatred all around him. He couldn't help it when he shouted to her, "Gistla! For God's sake, change me back! Right now! Gistla!"

He stood there, breathing hard, his muscles knotted like steel, while she stared at him, looking into his eyes.

Suddenly, he heard his father gasp and say, "*George!*"

He looked at his hands and they were white and he felt of his face and it was his own. He saw his sister's hand against her mouth, and his father stared at him with unbelieving eyes. His mother had gotten up and was coming over to him, her eyes blinking. "George," she said, "What did they do to you?" She patted his shoulder, her hands fluttering like bird wings.

He turned back to Gistla and she was gone. Beyond the gate now, he knew, and walking slowly, alone, down the road. Only this time he would not go after her. He couldn't. And as he stood there, feeling his mother's hand patting his shoulder, hearing his sister say, "My God," seeing his father shake his head slowly, he felt very young and at the same time, very old, and he wanted to cry.

He Was the Last Man

Pfc. Hector A. Cafferata Jr.,

*USMCR
Medal of Honor*



*Peace is for the strong!
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IT WAS DURING the Chosin reservoir fighting. Against F Company's hill position, Reds were attacking in regimental strength. The last of Private Cafferata's fire-team-mates had just become a casualty, leaving a gap in the defense line. If the enemy could exploit it, they could smash the entire perimeter.

Exposing himself to devastating fire, Private Cafferata maneuvered along the line. Alone, he killed fifteen Chinese, routed the rest, and held till reinforcements plugged the hole.

The Reds hit again. A grenade fell into a gully full of wounded. Private Cafferata hurled it back, saving the men but suffering severe wounds. Ignoring intense pain, he still fought on until a sniper got him.

"If we really want to protect ourselves from the Commies," says Private Cafferata, now retired because of wounds, "we've got to go all out. And one thing all of us at home can do—*should do*—is invest in our country's Defense Bonds. Sure, Bonds are our personal savings for a rainy day. But they're more—they're muscle behind our G.I.'s bayonets, too!"

* * *

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THE CRYSTAL CRYPT

By PHILIP K. DICK

Stark terror ruled the Inner-Flight ship on that last Mars-Terra run. For the black-clad Leiters were on the prowl . . . and the grim red planet was not far behind.

“ATTENTION Inner-Flight ship! Attention! You are ordered to land at the Control Station on Deimos for inspection. Attention! You are to land at once!”

The metallic rasp of the speaker echoed through the corridors of the great ship. The passengers glanced at each other uneasily, murmuring and peering out the port windows at the small speck below, the dot of rock that was the Martian checkpoint, Deimos.

“What’s up?” an anxious passenger asked one of the pilots, hurrying through the ship to check the escape lock.

“We have to land. Keep seated.” The pilot went on.

“Land? But why?” They all looked at each other. Hovering above the bulging Inner-Flight ship were three slender Martian pursuit craft, poised and alert for any emergency. As the Inner-Flight ship prepared to land the pursuit ships dropped lower, carefully maintaining themselves a short distance away.

“There’s something going on,” a woman passenger said nervously. “Lord, I thought we were finally through with those Martians. Now what?”

“I don’t blame them for giving us one last going over,” a heavy set business man said to his companion. “After all, we’re the last ship leaving Mars for Terra. We’re damn lucky they let us go at all.”

“You think there really will be war?” a young man said to the girl sitting in the seat next to him. “Those Martians won’t dare fight, not with our weapons and ability to produce. We could take care of Mars in a month. It’s all talk.”

The girl glanced at him. “Don’t be so sure. Mars is desperate. They’ll fight tooth

and nail. I’ve been on Mars three years.” She shuddered. “Thank goodness I’m getting away. If—”

“Prepare to land!” the pilot’s voice came. The ship began to settle slowly, dropping down toward the tiny emergency field on the seldom visited moon. Down, down the ship dropped. There was a grinding sound, a sickening jolt. Then silence.

“We’ve landed,” the heavy set business man said. “They better not do anything to us! Terra will rip them apart if they violate one Space Article.”

“Please keep your seats,” the pilot’s voice came. “No one is to leave the ship, according to the Martian authorities. We are to remain here.”

A restless stir filled the ship. Some of the passengers began to read uneasily, others stared out at the deserted field, nervous and on edge, watching the three Martian pursuit ships land and disgorge groups of armed men.

The Martian soldiers were crossing the field quickly, moving toward them, running double time.

This Inner-Flight spaceship was the last passenger vessel to leave Mars for Terra. All other ships had long since left, returning to safety before the outbreak of hostilities. The passengers were the very last to go, the final group of Terrans to leave the grim red planet, business men, expatriates, tourists, any and all Terrans who had not already gone home.

“What do you suppose they want?” the young man said to the girl. “It’s hard to figure Martians out, isn’t it? First they give the ship clearance, let us take off, and now they radio us to set down again. By the way, my name’s Thacher, Bob Thacher. Since we’re going to be here awhile—”



THE port lock opened. Talking ceased abruptly, as everyone turned. A black-clad Martian official, a Province Leiter, stood framed against the bleak sunlight, staring around the ship. Behind him a handful of Martian soldiers stood waiting, their guns ready.

"This will not take long," the Leiter said, stepping into the ship, the soldiers following him. "You will be allowed to continue your trip shortly."

An audible sigh of relief went through the passengers.

"Look at him," the girl whispered to Thacher. "How I hate those black uniforms!"

"He's just a Provincial Leiter," Thacher said. "Don't worry."

The Leiter stood for a moment, his hands on his hips, looking around at them without expression. "I have ordered your ship grounded so that an inspection can be made of all persons aboard," he said. "You Terrans are the last to leave our planet. Most of you are ordinary and harmless—I am not interested in you. I am interested in finding three saboteurs, three Terrans, two men and a woman, who have committed an incredible act of destruction and violence. They are said to have fled to this ship."

Murmurs of surprise and indignation broke out on all sides. The Leiter motioned the soldiers to follow him up the aisle.

"Two hours ago a Martian city was destroyed. Nothing remains, only a depression in the sand where the city was. The city and all its people have completely vanished. An entire city destroyed in a second! Mars will never rest until the saboteurs are captured. And we know they are aboard this ship."

"It's impossible," the heavy set business man said. "There aren't any saboteurs here."

"We'll begin with you," the Leiter said to him, stepping up beside the man's seat. One of the soldiers passed the Leiter a square metal box. "This will soon tell us if you're speaking the truth. Stand up. Get on your feet."

The man rose slowly, flushing. "See here—"

"Are you involved in the destruction of the city? Answer!"

The man swallowed angrily. "I know

nothing about any destruction of any city. And furthermore—"

"He is telling the truth," the metal box said tonelessly.

"Next person." The Leiter moved down the aisle.

A thin bald headed man stood up nervously. "No sir," he said. "I don't know a thing about it."

"He is telling the truth," the box affirmed.

"Next person! Stand up!"

One person after another stood, answered, and sat down again in relief. At last there were only a few people left who had not been questioned. The Leiter paused, studying them intently.

"Only five left. The three must be among you. We have narrowed it down." His hand moved to his belt. Something flashed, a rod of pale fire. He raised the rod, pointing it steadily at the five people. "All right, the first one of you. What do you know about this destruction? Are you involved with the destruction of our city?"

"No, not at all," the man murmured.

"Yes, he's telling the truth," the box intoned.

"Next!"

"Nothing—I know nothing. I had nothing to do with it."

"True," the box said.

The ship was silent. Three people remained, a middle-aged man and his wife and their son, a boy of about twelve. They stood in the corner, staring white-faced at the Leiter, at the rod in his dark fingers.

"It must be you," the Leiter grated, moving toward them. The Martian soldiers raised their guns. "It *must* be you. You there, the boy. What do you know about the destruction of our city? Answer!"

The boy shook his head. "Nothing," he whispered.

The box was silent for a moment. "He is telling the truth," it said reluctantly.

"Next!"

"Nothing," the woman muttered. "Nothing."

"The truth."

"Next!"

"I had nothing to do with blowing up your city," the man said. "You're wasting your time."

"It is the truth," the box said.

For a long time the Leiter stood, toying with his rod. At last he pushed it back in his belt and signalled the soldiers toward the exit lock.

"You may proceed on your trip," he said. He walked after the soldiers. At the hatch he stopped, looking back at the passengers, his face grim. "You may go—But Mars will not allow her enemies to escape. The three saboteurs will be caught, I promise you." He rubbed his dark jaw thoughtfully. "It is strange. I was certain they were on this ship."

Again he looked coldly around at the Terrans.

"Perhaps I was wrong. All right, proceed! But remember: the three will be caught, even if it takes endless years. Mars will catch them and punish them! I swear it!"

FOR a long time no one spoke. The ship lumbered through space again, its jets firing evenly, calmly, moving the passengers toward their own planet, toward home. Behind them Deimos and the red ball that was Mars dropped farther and farther away each moment, disappearing and fading into the distance.

A sigh of relief passed through the passengers. "What a lot of hot air that was," one grumbled.

"Barbarians!" a woman said.

A few of them stood up, moving out into the aisle, toward the lounge and the cocktail bar. Beside Thacher the girl got to her feet, pulling her jacket around her shoulders.

"Pardon me," she said, stepping past him.

"Going to the bar?" Thacher said. "Mind if I come along?"

"I suppose not."

They followed the others into the lounge, walking together up the aisle. "You know," Thacher said, "I don't even know your name, yet."

"My name is Mara Gordon."

"Mara? That's a nice name. What part of Terra are you from? North America? New York?"

"I've been in New York," Mara said. "New York is very lovely." She was slender

and pretty, with a cloud of dark hair tumbling down her neck, against her leather jacket.

They entered the lounge and stood undecided.

"Let's sit at a table," Mara said, looking around at the people at the bar, mostly men. "Perhaps that table over there."

"But someone's there already," Thacher said. The heavy set business man had sat down at the table and deposited his sample case on the floor. "Do we want to sit with *him*?"

"Oh, it's all right," Mara said, crossing to the table. "May we sit here?" she said to the man.

The man looked up, half-rising. "It's a pleasure," he murmured. He studied Thacher intently. "However, a friend of mine will be joining me in a moment."

"I'm sure there's room enough for us all," Mara said. She seated herself and Thacher helped her with her chair. He sat down, too, glancing up suddenly at Mara and the business man. They were looking at each other almost as if something had passed between them. The man was middle-aged, with a florid face and tired, grey eyes. His hands were mottled with the veins showing thickly. At the moment he was tapping nervously.

"My name's Thacher," Thacher said to him, holding out his hand. "Bob Thacher. Since we're going to be together for awhile we might as well get to know each other."

The man studied him. Slowly his hand came out. "Why not? My name's Erickson. Ralf Erickson."

"Erickson?" Thacher smiled. "You look like a commercial man, to me." He nodded toward the sample case on the floor. "Am I right?"

The man named Erickson started to answer, but at that moment there was a stir. A thin man of about thirty had come up to the table, his eyes bright, staring down at them warmly. "Well, we're on our way," he said to Erickson.

"Hello, Mara." He pulled out a chair and sat down quickly, folding his hands on the table before him. He noticed Thacher and drew back a little. "Pardon me," he murmured.

"Bob Thacher is my name," Thacher said.

"I hope I'm not intruding here." He glanced around at the three of them, Mara, alert, watching him intently, heavy-set Erickson, his face blank, and this person. "Say, do you three know each other?" he asked suddenly.

There was silence.

The robot attendant slid over soundlessly, poised to take their orders. Erickson roused himself. "Let's see," he murmured. "What will we have? Mara?"

"Whiskey and water."

"You, Jan?"

The bright slim man smiled. "The same." "Thacher?"

"Gin and tonic."

"Whiskey and water for me, also," Erickson said. The robot attendant went off. It returned at once with the drinks, setting on the table. Each took his own. "Well," Erickson said, holding his glass up. "To our mutual success."

ALL drank, Thacher and the three of them, heavy set Erickson, Mara, her eyes nervous and alert, Jan, who had just come. Again a look passed between Mara and Erickson a look so swift that he would not have caught it had he not been looking directly at her.

"What line do you represent, Mr. Erickson?" Thacher asked.

Erickson glanced at him, then down at the sample case on the floor. He grunted. "Well, as you can see, I'm a salesman."

Thacher smiled. "I knew it! You get so you can always spot a salesman right off by his sample case. A salesman always has to carry something to show. What are you in, sir?"

Erickson paused. He licked his thick lips, his eyes blank and lidded, like a toad's. At last he rubbed his mouth with his hand and reached down, lifting up the sample case. He set it on the table in front of him.

"Well?" he said. "Perhaps we might even show Mr. Thacher."

They all stared down at the sample case. It seemed to be an ordinary leather case, with a metal handle and a snap lock. "I'm getting curious," Thacher said. "What's in there? You're all so tense. Diamonds? Stolen jewels?"

Jan laughed harshly, mirthlessly. "Erick,

put it down. We're not far enough away, yet."

"Nonsense," Erick rumbled. "We're away, Jan."

"Please," Mara whispered. "Wait, Erick."

"Wait? Why? What for? You're so accustomed to—"

"Erick," Mara said. She nodded toward Thacher. "We don't know him, Erick. Please!"

"He's a Terran, isn't he?" Erickson said. "All Terrans are together in these times." He fumbled suddenly at the catch lock on the case. "Yes, Mr. Thacher. I'm a salesman. We're all salesmen, the three of us."

"Then you do know each other."

"Yes." Erickson nodded. His two companions sat rigidly, staring down. "Yes, we do. Here, I'll show you our line."

He opened the case. From it he took a letter-knife, a pencil sharpener, a glass globe paper weight, a box of thumb tacks, a stapler, some clips, a plastic ashtray, and some things Thacher could not identify. He placed the objects in a row in front of him on the table top. Then he closed the sample case.

"I gather you're in office supplies," Thacher said. He touched the letter knife with his finger. "Nice quality steel. Looks like Swedish steel, to me."

Erickson nodded, looking into Thacher's face. "Not really an impressive business, is it? Office supplies. Ashtrays, paper clips." He smiled.

"Oh—" Thacher shrugged. "Why not? They're a necessity in modern business. The only thing I wonder—"

"What's that?"

"Well, I wonder how you'd ever find enough customers on Mars to make it worth your while." He paused, examining the glass paper weight. He lifted it up, holding it to the light, staring at the scene within until Erickson took it out of his hand and put it back in the sample case. "And another thing. If you three know each other, why did you sit apart when you got on?"

They looked at him quickly.

"And why didn't you speak to each other until we left Deimos?" He leaned toward Erickson, smiling at him. "Two men and a woman. Three of you. Sitting apart in the ship. Not speaking, not until the check-

station was past. I find myself thinking over what the Martian said. Three saboteurs. A woman and two men."

Erickson put the things back in the sample case. He was smiling, but his face had gone chalk white. Mara stared down, playing with a drop of water on the edge of her glass. Jan clenched his hands together nervously, blinking rapidly.

"You three are the ones the Leiter was after," Thacher said softly. "You are the destroyers, the saboteurs. But their lie detector— Why didn't it trap you? How did you get by that? And now you're safe, outside the check-station." He grinned, staring around at them. "I'll be damned! And I really thought you were a salesman, Erickson. You really fooled me."

Erickson relaxed a little. "Well, Mr. Thacher, it's in a good cause. I'm sure you have no love for Mars, either. No Terran does. And I see you're leaving with the rest of us."

"True," Thacher said. "You must certainly have an interesting account to give, the three of you." He looked around the table.

"We still have an hour or so of travel. Sometimes it gets dull, this Mars-Terra run. Nothing to see, nothing to do but sit and drink in the lounge." He raised his eyes slowly. "Any chance you'd like to spin a story to keep us awake?"

Jan and Mara looked at Erickson. "Go on," Jan said. "He knows who we are. Tell him the rest of the story."

"You might as well," Mara said.

Jan let out a sigh suddenly, a sigh of relief. "Let's put the cards on the table, get this weight off us. I'm tired of sneaking around, slipping—"

"Sure," Erickson said expansively. "Why not?" He settled back in his chair, unbuttoning his vest. "Certainly, Mr. Thacher. I'll be glad to spin you a story. And I'm sure it will be interesting enough to keep you awake."

THEY ran through the groves of dead trees, leaping across the sun-baked Martian soil, running silently together. They went up a little rise, across a narrow ridge. Suddenly Erick stopped, throwing himself down flat on the ground. The others did

the same, pressing themselves against the soil, gasping for breath.

"Be silent," Erick muttered. He raised himself a little. "No noise. There'll be Leiters nearby, from now on. We don't dare take any chances."

Between the three people lying in the grove of dead trees and the City was a barren, level waste of desert, over a mile of blasted sand. No trees or bushes marred the smooth, parched surface. Only an occasional wind, a dry wind eddying and twisting, blew the sand up into little rills. A faint odor came to them, a bitter smell of heat and sand, carried by the wind.

Erick pointed. "Look. The City— There it is."

They stared, still breathing deeply from their race through the trees. The City was close, closer than they had ever seen it before. Never had they gotten so close to it in times past. Terrans were never allowed near the great Martian cities, the centers of Martian life. Even in ordinary times, when there was no threat of approaching war, the Martians shrewdly kept all Terrans away from their citadels, partly from fear, partly from a deep, innate sense of hostility toward the white-skinned visitors whose commercial ventures had earned them the respect, and the dislike, of the whole system.

"How does it look to you?" Erick said.

The City was huge, much larger than they had imagined from the drawings and models they had studied so carefully back in New York, in the War Ministry Office. Huge it was, huge and stark, black towers rising up against the sky, incredibly thin columns of ancient metal, columns that had stood wind and sun for centuries. Around the City was a wall of stone, red stone, immense bricks that had been lugged there and fitted into place by slaves of the early Martian dynasties, under the whiplash of the first great Kings of Mars.

An ancient, sun-baked City, a City set in the middle of a wasted plain, beyond groves of dead trees, a City seldom seen by Terrans—but a City studied on maps and charts in every War Office on Terra. A City that contained, for all its ancient stone and archaic towers, the ruling group of all Mars, the Council of Senior Leiters, black-clad men who governed and ruled with an iron hand.

The Senior Leiters, twelve fanatic and devoted men, black priests, but priests with flashing rods of fire, lie detectors, rocket ships, intra-space cannon, many more things the Terran Senate could only conjecture about. The Senior Leiters and their subordinate Province Leiters—Erick and the two behind him suppressed a shudder.

"We've got to be careful," Erick said again. "We'll be passing among them, soon. If they guess who we are, or what we're here for—"

He snapped open the case he carried, glancing inside for a second. Then he closed it again, grasping the handle firmly. "Let's go," he said. He stood up slowly. "You two come up beside me. I want to make sure you look the way you should."

MARA and Jan stepped quickly ahead. Erick studied them critically as the three of them walked slowly down the slope, onto the plain, toward the towering black spires of the City.

"Jan," Erick said. "Take hold of her hand! Remember, you're going to marry her; she's your bride. And Martian peasants think a lot of their brides."

Jan was dressed in the short trousers and goat of the Martian farmer, a knotted rope tied around his waist, a hat on his head to keep off the sun. His skin was dark, colored by dye until it was almost bronze.

"You look fine," Erick said to him. He glanced at Mara. Her black hair was tied in a knot, looped through a hollowed-out yuke bone. Her face was dark, too, dark and lined with colored ceremonial pigment, green and orange stripes across her cheeks. Earrings were strung through her ears. On her feet were tiny slippers of perruh hide, laced around her ankles, and she wore long translucent Martian trousers with a bright sash tied around her waist. Between her small breasts a chain of stone beads rested, good-luck charms for the coming marriage.

"All right," Erick said. He, himself, wore the flowing grey robe of a Martian priest, dirty robes that were supposed to remain on him all his life, to be buried around him when he died. "I think we'll get past the guards. There should be heavy morning traffic on the road."

They walked on, the hard sand crunching

under their feet. Against the horizon they could see specks moving, other persons going toward the City, farmers and peasants and merchants, bring their crops and goods to market.

"See the cart!" Mara exclaimed.

They were nearing a narrow road, two ruts worn into the sand. A Martian hufa was pulling the cart, its great sides wet with perspiration, its tongue hanging out. The cart was piled high with bales of cloth, rough country cloth, hand dipped. A bent farmer urged the hufa on.

"And there." She pointed, smiling.

A group of merchants riding small animals were moving along behind the cart, Martians in long robes, their faces hidden by sand masks. On each animal was a pack, carefully tied on with rope. And beyond the merchants, plodding dully along, were peasants and farmers in an endless procession, some riding carts or animals, but mostly on foot.

Mara and Jan and Erick joined the line of people, melting in behind the merchants. No one noticed them; no one looked up or gave any sign. The march continued as before. Neither Jan nor Mara said anything to each other. They walked a little behind Erick, who paced with a certain dignity, a certain bearing becoming his position.

Once he slowed down, pointing up at the sky. "Look," he murmured, in the Martian hill dialect. "See that?"

Two black dots circled lazily. Martian patrol craft, the military on the outlook for any sign of unusual activity. War was almost ready to break out with Terra. Any day, almost any moment.

"We'll be just in time," Erick said. "Tomorrow will be too late. The last ship will have left Mars."

"I hope nothing stops us," Mara said. "I want to get back home when we're through."

HALF an hour passed. They neared the City, the wall growing as they walked, rising higher and higher until it seemed to blot out the sky itself. A vast wall, a wall of eternal stone that had felt the wind and sun for centuries. A group of Martian soldiers were standing at the entrance, the single passage-gate hewn into the rock,

leading to the City. As each person went through the soldiers examined him, poking his garments, looking into his load.

Erick tensed. The line had slowed almost to a halt. "It'll be our turn, soon," he murmured. "Be prepared."

"Let's hope no Leiters come around," Jan said. "The soldiers aren't so bad."

Mara was staring up at the wall and the towers beyond. Under their feet the ground trembled, vibrating and shaking. She could see tongues of flame rising from the towers, from the deep underground factories and forges of the City. The air was thick and dense with particles of soot. Mara rubbed her mouth, coughing.

"Here they come," Erick said softly.

The merchants had been examined and allowed to pass through the dark gate, the entrance through the wall into the City. They and their silent animals had already disappeared inside. The leader of the group of soldiers was beckoning impatiently to Erick, waving him on.

"Come along!" he said. "Hurry up there, old man."

Erick advanced slowly, his arms wrapped around his body, looking down at the ground.

"Who are you and what's your business here?" the soldier demanded, his hands on his hips, his gun hanging idly at his waist. Most of the soldiers were lounging lazily, leaning against the wall, some even squatting in the shade. Flies crawled on the face of one who had fallen asleep, his gun on the ground beside him.

"My business?" Erick murmured. "I am a village priest."

"Why do you want to enter the City?"

"I must bring these two people before the magistrate to marry them." He indicated Mara and Jan, standing a little behind him. "That is the Law the Leiters have made."

The soldier laughed. He circled around Erick. "What do you have in that bag you carry?"

"Laundry. We stay the night."

"What village are you from?"

"Kranos."

"Kranos?" The soldier looked to a companion. "Ever heard of Kranos?"

"A backward pig sty. I saw it once on a hunting trip."

The leader of the soldiers nodded to Jan and Mara. The two of them advanced, their hands clasped, standing close together. One of the soldiers put his hand on Mara's bare shoulder, turning her around.

"Nice little wife you're getting," he said. "Good and firm looking." He winked, grinning lewdly.

Jan glanced at him in sullen resentment. The soldiers guffawed. "All right," the leader said to Erick. "You people can pass."

Erick took a small purse from his robes and gave the soldier a coin. Then the three of them went into the dark tunnel that was the entrance, passing through the wall of stone, into the City beyond.

They were within the City!

"Now," Erick whispered. "Hurry."

Around them the City roared and cracked, the sound of a thousand vents and machines, shaking the stones under their feet. Erick led Mara and Jan into a corner, by a row of brick warehouses. People were everywhere, hurrying back and forth, shouting above the din, merchants, peddlers, soldiers, street women. Erick bent down and opened the case he carried. From the case he quickly took three small coils of fine metal, intricate meshed wires and vanes worked together into a small cone. Jan took one and Mara took one. Erick put the remaining cone into his robe and snapped the case shut again.

"Now remember, the coils must be buried in such a way that the line runs through the center of the City. We must trisect the main section, where the largest concentration of buildings is. Remember the maps! Watch the alleys and streets carefully. Talk to no one if you can help it. Each of you has enough Martian money to buy your way out of trouble. Watch especially for cut-purses, and for heaven's sake, don't get lost."

ERICK broke off. Two black-clad Leiters were coming along the inside of the wall, strolling together with their hands behind their backs. They noticed the three who stood in the corner by the warehouses and stopped.

"Go," Erick muttered. "And be back here at sundown." He smiled grimly. "Or never come back."

Each went off a different way, walking quickly without looking back. The Leiters

watched them go. "The little bride was quite lovely," one Leiter said. "Those hill people have the stamp of nobility in their blood, from the old times."

"A very lucky young peasant to possess her," the other said. They went on. Erick looked after them, still smiling a little. Then he joined the surging mass of people that milled eternally through the streets of the City.

At dusk they met outside the gate. The sun was soon to set, and the air had turned thin and frigid. It cut through their clothing like knives.

Mara huddled against Jan, trembling and rubbing her bare arms.

"Well?" Erick said. "Did you both succeed?"

Around them peasants and merchants were pouring from the entrance, leaving the City to return to their farms and villages, starting the long trip back across the plain toward the hills beyond. None of them noticed the shivering girl and the young man and the old priest standing by the wall.

"Mine's in place," Jan said. "On the other side of the City, on the extreme edge. Buried by a well."

"Mine's in the industrial section," Mara whispered, her teeth chattering. "Jan, give me something to put over me! I'm freezing."

"Good," Erick said. "Then the three coils should trisect dead center, if the models were correct." He looked up at the darkening sky. Already, stars were beginning to show. Two dots, the evening patrol, moved slowly toward the horizon. "Let's hurry. It won't be long."

They joined the line of Martians moving along the road, away from the City. Behind them the City was losing itself in the sombre tones of night, its black spires disappearing into darkness.

They walked silently with the country people until the flat ridge of dead trees became visible on the horizon. Then they left the road and turned off, walking toward the trees.

"Almost time!" Erick said. He increased his pace, looking back at Jan and Mara impatiently.

"Come on!"

They hurried, making their way through

the twilight, stumbling over rocks and dead branches, up the side of the ridge. At the top Erick halted, standing with his hands on his hips, looking back.

"See," he murmured. "The City. The last time we'll ever see it this way."

"Can I sit down?" Mara said. "My feet hurt me."

Jan pulled at Erick's sleeve. "Hurry, Erick! Not much time left." He laughed nervously. "If everything goes right we'll be able to look at it—forever."

"But not like this," Erick murmured. He squatted down, snapping his case open. He took some tubes and wiring out and assembled them together on the ground, at the peak of the ridge. A small pyramid of wire and plastic grew, shaped by his expert hands.

At last he grunted, standing up. "All right."

"Is it pointed directly at the City?" Mara asked anxiously, looking down at the pyramid.

Erick nodded. "Yes, it's placed according—" He stopped, suddenly stiffening. "Get back! It's time! *Hurry!*"

Jan ran, down the far side of the slope, away from the City, pulling Mara with him. Erick came quickly after, still looking back at the distant spires, almost lost in the night sky.

"Down."

Jan sprawled out, Mara beside him, her trembling body pressed against his. Erick settled down into the sand and dead branches, still trying to see. "I want to see it," he murmured. "A miracle. I want to see—"

A flash, a blinding burst of violet light, lit up the sky. Erick clapped his hands over his eyes. The flash whitened, growing larger, expanding. Suddenly there was a roar, and a furious hot wind rushed past him, throwing him on his face in the sand. The hot dry wind licked and seared at them, crackling the bits of branches into flame. Mara and Jan shut their eyes, pressed tightly together.

"God—" Erick muttered.

The storm passed. They opened their eyes slowly. The sky was still alive with fire, a drifting cloud of sparks that was beginning to dissipate with the night wind.

Erick stood up unsteadily, helping Jan and Mara to their feet. The three of them stood, staring silently across the dark waste, the black plain, none of them speaking.

The City was gone.

At last Erick turned away. "That part's done," he said. "Now the rest! Give me a hand, Jan. There'll be a thousand patrol ships around here in a minute."

"I see one already," Mara said, pointing up. A spot winked in the sky, a rapidly moving spot. "They're coming, Erick." There was a throb of chill fear in her voice.

"I know." Erick and Jan squatted on the ground around the pyramid of tubes and plastic, pulling the pyramid apart. The pyramid was fused, fused together like molten glass. Erick tore the pieces away with trembling fingers. From the remains of the pyramid he pulled something forth, something he held up high, trying to make it out in the darkness. Jan and Mara came close to see, both staring up intently, almost without breathing.

"There it is," Erick said. "There!"

IN HIS hand was a globe, a small transparent globe of glass. Within the glass something moved, something minute and fragile, spires almost too small to be seen, microscopic, a complex web swimming within the hollow glass globe. A web of spires. A City.

Erick put the globe into the case and snapped it shut. "Let's go," he said. They began to lope back through the trees, back the way they had come before. "We'll change in the car," he said as they ran. "I think we should keep these clothes on until we're actually inside the car. We still might encounter someone."

"I'll be glad to get my own clothing on again," Jan said. "I feel funny in these little pants."

"How do you think I feel?" Mara gasped. "I'm freezing in this, what there is of it."

"All young Martian brides dress that way," Erick said. He clutched the case tightly as they ran. "I think it looks fine."

"Thank you," Mara said, "but it is cold."

"What do you suppose they'll think?" Jan asked. "They'll assume the City was destroyed, won't they? That's certain."

"Yes," Erick said. "They'll be sure it was blown up. We can count on that. And it will be damn important to us that they think so!"

"The car should be around here, someplace," Mara said, slowing down.

"No. Farther on," Erick said. "Past that little hill over there. In the ravine, by the trees. It's so hard to see where we are."

"Shall I light something?" Jan said.

"No. There may be patrols around who—"

He halted abruptly. Jan and Mara stopped beside him. "What—" Mara began.

A light glimmered. Something stirred in the darkness. There was a sound.

"Quick!" Erick rasped. He dropped, throwing the case far away from him, into the bushes. He straightened up tensely.

A figure loomed up, moving through the darkness, and behind it came more figures, men, soldiers in uniform. The light flashed up brightly, blinding them. Erick closed his eyes. The light left him, touching Mara and Jan, standing silently together, clasping hands. Then it flicked down to the ground and around in a circle.

A Leiter stepped forward, a tall figure in black, with his soldiers close behind him, their guns ready. "You three," the Leiter said. "Who are you? Don't move. Stand where you are."

He came up to Erick, peering at him intently, his hard Martian face without expression. He went all around Erick, examining his robes, his sleeves.

"Please—" Erick began in a quavering voice, but the Leiter cut him off.

"I'll do the talking. Who are you three? What are you doing here? Speak up."

"We—we are going back to our village," Erick muttered, staring down, his hands folded. "We were in the City, and now we are going home."

One of the soldiers spoke into a mouth-piece. He clicked it off and put it away.

"Come with me," the Leiter said. "We're taking you in. Hurry along."

"In? Back to the City?"

One of the soldiers laughed. "The City is gone," he said. "All that's left of it you can put in the palm of your hand."

"But what happened?" Mara said.

"No one knows. Come on, hurry it up!"

There was a sound. A soldier came quickly out of the darkness. "A Senior Leiter," he said. "Coming this way." He disappeared again.

"A SENIOR Leiter." The soldiers stood waiting, standing at a respectful attention. A moment later the Senior Leiter stepped into the light, a black-clad old man, his ancient face thin and hard, like a bird's, eyes bright and alert. He looked from Erick to Jan.

"Who are these people?" he demanded.

"Villagers going back home."

"No they're not. They don't stand like villagers. Villagers slump—diet, poor food. These people are not villagers. I myself came from the hills, and I know."

He stepped close to Erick, looking keenly into his face. "Who are you? Look at his chin—he never shaved with a sharpened stone! Something is wrong here."

In his hand a rod of pale fire flashed. "The City is gone, and with it at least half the Leiter Council. It is very strange, a flash, then heat, and a wind. But it was not fission. I am puzzled. All at once the City has vanished. Nothing is left but a depression in the sand."

"We'll take them in," the other Leiter said. "Soldiers, surround them. Make certain that—"

"Run!" Erick cried. He struck out, knocking the rod from the Senior Leiter's hand. They were all running, soldiers shouting, flashing their lights, stumbling against each other in the darkness. Erick dropped to his knees, groping frantically in the bushes. His fingers closed over the handle of the case and he leaped up. In Terran he shouted to Mara and Jan.

"Hurry! To the car! Run!" He set off, down the slope, stumbling through the darkness. He could hear soldiers behind him, soldiers running and falling. A body collided against him and he struck out. Someplace behind him there was a hiss, and a section of the slope went up in flames. The Leiter's rod—

"Erick," Mara cried from the darkness. He ran toward her. Suddenly he slipped, falling on a stone. Confusion and firing. The sound of excited voices.

"Erick, is that you?" Jan caught hold of

him, helping him up. "The car. It's over here. Where's Mara?"

"I'm here," Mara's voice came. "Over here, by the car."

A light flashed. A tree went up in a puff of fire, and Erick felt the sting of the heat against his face. He and Jan made their way toward the girl. Mara's hand caught his in the darkness.

"Now the car," Erick said. "If they haven't got to it." He slid down the slope into the ravine, fumbling in the darkness, reaching and holding onto the handle of the case. Reaching, reaching—

He touched something cold and smooth. Metal, a metal door handle. Relief flooded through him. "I've found it! Jan, get inside. Mara, come on." He pushed Jan past him, into the car. Mara slipped in after Jan, her small agile body crowding in beside him.

"Stop!" a voice shouted from above. "There's no use hiding in that ravine. We'll get you! Come up and—"

The sound of voices was drowned out by the roar of the car's motor. A moment later they shot into the darkness, the car rising into the air. Treetops broke and cracked under them as Erick turned the car from side to side, avoiding the groping shafts of pale light from below, the last furious thrusts from the two Leiters and their soldiers.

Then they were away, above the trees, high in the air, gaining speed each moment, leaving the knot of Martians far behind.

"Toward Marsport," Jan said to Erick. "Right?"

Erick nodded. "Yes. We'll land outside the field, in the hills. We can change back to our regular clothing there, our commercial clothing. Damn it—we'll be lucky if we can get there in time for the ship."

"The last ship," Mara whispered, her chest rising and falling. "What if we don't get there in time?"

Erick looked down at the leather case in his lap. "We'll have to get there," he murmured. "We must!"

FOR a long time there was silence. Thacher stared at Erickson. The older man was leaning back in his chair, sipping a little of his drink. Mara and Jan were silent.

"So you didn't destroy the City," Thacher said. "You didn't destroy it at all. You shrank it down and put it in a glass globe, in a paperweight. And now you're salesmen again, with a sample case of office supplies!"

Erickson smiled. He opened the briefcase and reaching into it he brought out the glass globe paperweight. He held it up, looking into it. "Yes, we stole the City from the Martians. That's how we got by the lie detector. It was true that we knew nothing about a *destroyed* City."

"But why?" Thacher said. "Why steal a City? Why not merely bomb it?"

"Ransom," Mara said fervently, gazing into the globe, her dark eyes bright. "Their biggest City, half of their Council—in Erick's hand!"

"Mars will have to do what Terra asks," Erickson said. "Now Terra will be able to make her commercial demands felt. Maybe there won't even be a war. Perhaps Terra will get her way without fighting." Still smiling, he put the globe back into the brief case and locked it.

"Quite a story," Thacher said. "What an amazing process, reduction of size—A whole City reduced to microscopic dimensions. Amazing. No wonder you were able to escape. With such daring as that, no one could hope to stop you."

He looked down at the brief case on the floor. Underneath them the jets murmured and vibrated evenly, as the ship moved

through space toward distant Terra.

"We still have quite a way to go," Jan said. "You've heard our story, Thacher. Why not tell us yours? What sort of line are you in? What's your business?"

"Yes," Mara said. "What do you do?"

"What do I do?" Thacher said. "Well, if you like, I'll show you." He reached into his coat and brought out something. Something that flashed and glinted, something slender. A rod of pale fire.

The three stared at it. Sickened shock settled over them slowly.

Thacher held the rod loosely, calmly, pointing it at Erickson. "We knew you three were on this ship," he said. "There was no doubt of that. But we did not know what had become of the City. My theory was that the City had not been destroyed at all, that something else had happened to it. Council instruments measured a sudden loss of mass in that area, a decrease equal to the mass of the City. Somehow the City had been spirited away, not destroyed. But I could not convince the other Council Leiters of it. I had to follow you alone."

Thacher turned a little, nodding to the men sitting at the bar. The men rose at once, coming toward the table.

"A very interesting process you have. Mars will benefit a great deal from it. Perhaps it will even turn the tide in our favor. When we return to Marsport I wish to begin work on it at once. And now, if you will please pass me the briefcase—

FELINE RED

By ROBERT SAMPSON

It was up to Jerill to think fast . . . to do something . . . before those strange beasts sucked away the last purified ore on the freighter Bertha.

A SHOUTING wave of men rioted through the engine room.

From the bridge above the hulking atomics, Chief Engineer Durval vollaied orders in a thunderous voice. "You men—you!" he raged. "Use your heads, not your feet. Drive them toward the door."

A scattering of Them—compact darting beasts the color of a poppy—scuttled into the shadow of an engine. Heavy Davison wrenches clubbed futilely behind them.

As Durval flew into new bursts of shouting, Scott Jerill, First Mate of the freighter *Bertha*, grimly shook his head. His lean face was not smiling now. "Call your men back," he commanded crisply. "We don't have time to drive those cats out like this."

Durval turned on him with a snarl. "Take over then. Think of a better way. If you hadn't hauled that load of space cats aboard in the first place. . . ."

"Look out," Scott snapped.

With a crisp smack, a red creature the size of a man's hand struck the rail before them. It was all improbable angles, with no special shape, no front or back. It teetered crazily over the ten foot drop to the floor below. Then it settled, sputtering. It sounded curiously like an angry cat.

"There's one," roared Durval. His wrench slashed down, crashed shrilly on the rail as the cat skimmed effortlessly away. The wrench shot off toward the floor.

Durval shook his hand and roared. The cat, some twenty feet down the rail, cackled insanely. As Scott stepped slowly toward it, the cat hissed, bounded off the rail, and down the steps to the engine room floor.

Scott shook his head. "You're not going to catch them by hand. Better let them settle down, Durval."

"Settle down." The Chief brought the palm of his hand down on the rail. The rail trembled. "They've already settled down. On every generator in the place. One of them crawled under the main relay switch and shorted out half the board. Didn't hurt him a bit."

Scott interrupted gruffly. "We've got to get them out of here fast. Captain Elderburg wants to blast off here day after tomorrow, and we don't have half the ore cargo purified yet."

"And you won't have," Durval snapped. "If we blast off, we'll do it with an empty hold. I can't purify uranium with fifty cats running loose, getting caught in the machinery. It can't be done. Get these cats out and I'll give you a hold full of the best grade uranium Earth ever bought. But not till you get those cats out."

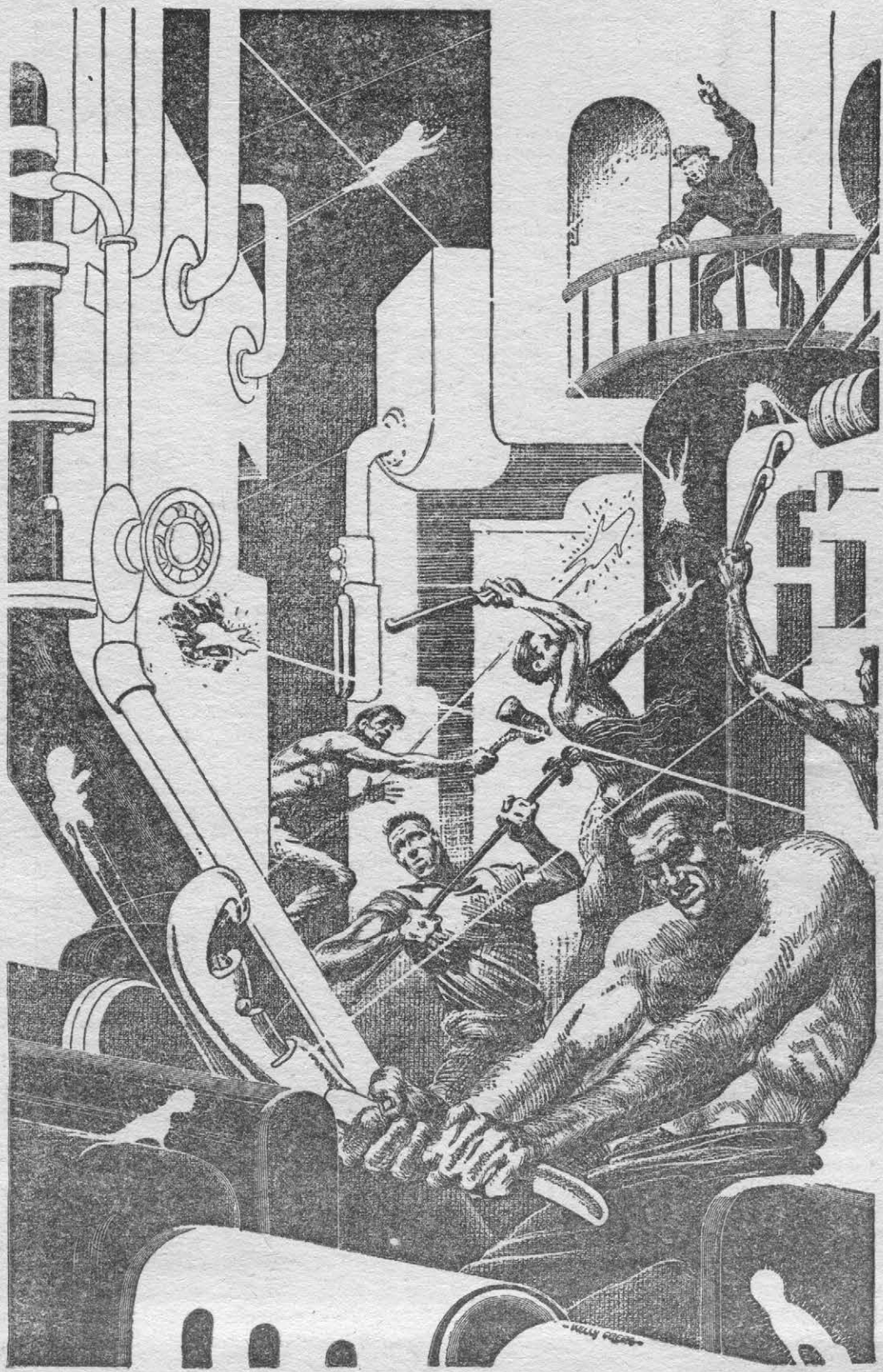
Scowling, Scott bit his knuckles. "We've got to get moving. The skipper thinks IP Metals is going to jump our claim," he said urgently.

"If you ask me, only a doddering fool would bring these things into a space ship." He glanced sharply at Scott. "What's this about IPM?"

Scott shook his head slowly. "Nothing. Forget I said anything. But get these cats out. And fast. Have you tried ultra-sonics on them?"

DURVAL'S face slipped into new lines. "Maybe," he muttered. Leaning over the railing, he thundered, "Masters. Forget those cats a minute. Yes, forget them. Hook up an ultra-sonics sender and—"

The ship intercom over Durval's head clicked mechanically, hummed into life. "Mr. Jerill. Report to Central Control. Mr. Jerill. Report—"



Scott jabbed the Acknowledgement button. As he swung around Durval he glanced down into the engine room. Sweating men beat after the scuttling red beasts.

"Report to me about the sonics," he told Durval. "If that doesn't work, we'll scoop up those red kitties with our bare hands. But we got to get started on that uranium ore purification. Faster than ten minutes ago."

He slammed the engine room door, cutting off Durval's angry roar. Striding rapidly through the bluish light of the corridor, an anger bitter as Durval's throbbed in him. But he took pains to hold it down.

"Confound those cats," he thought. "The *Kastil* on top of us, and we have to stop work to chase space fauna. And we have three days left. Three days."

So engrossed was he in anger that he almost blundered headon into the grinning red-head who lounged up the corridor toward him.

"Hey, Scott." Second Mate Max Vaughn raised a lazy eyebrow. "Slow down. Think of all your ulcers."

Scott spun impatiently on his heel. "Can't stop, Max. Got to see the Captain."

"And you don't even stop to say hello to an old friend back from the mines of a nameless asteroid." He grinned, slapped Scott's shoulder lightly with an open palm. "What's all this scandal I hear about your space cats?"

Scott grimaced. "I caught a few while we were scooping up ore over at my pit. Thought the Extra-Terrestrial Life Division back on Earth might be interested in them. They don't eat. They don't breathe. . . . Only their cage got smashed open, and they got into the engine room. Nobody knows how."

"The good news has got around," Max said grinning. "You don't know it, but there's twenty more sitting outside the main cargo hatch right now. What gets rid of them?"

"If you think of anything," Scott said as he turned away, "tell me. Got to go. Elderburg's waiting."

"Have you tried hitting them with strong light?" Max shouted after him.

"No," Scott shouted back. He was very late, and the Old Man wanted you fast

when he wanted you. "Try light if you get a chance."

He broke into an effortless trot, his boots padding lightly on the shining gray floor. "Three days," he thought. He forgot Max. He forgot Durval and the cats. He thought, "Three days," and a fine film of perspiration spread cold across his back.

"WE HAVE three days," Captain Elderburg said. He was a small neat man with a prim voice. His bland eyes peered forward into some middle distance, ignoring Scott.

And Scott, sitting tautly in his chair, felt glad those eyes were not on him.

"In three days," the Captain said, "or probably before, the *Kastil* should find us. The *Kastil*—the best ship Inner-Planet Metals ever commissioned."

Scott nodded. In the savage, free-for-all world of the space-miner, the *Kastil* was known as the big ship, the new ship. The ship that could load its cargo hatches in a day, stuffing 100,000 tons of ore down in its belly for the hungry plants of Earth.

"I've fought IP Metals for fifteen years," Elderburg said slowly. His eyes were very far away. "For fifteen years they've grown bigger and bigger, and the bigger they've got, the rougher they've played. You know their record, Scott. Murder, claim-jumping. What they can't steal with a blaster, they take by law."

Glancing through the open port behind the Captain's head, out into the star-dappled dark of space, Scott asked: "Is there any way we can set up a permanent claim here on this asteroid without going back to Earth?"

"You know better than that." Elderburg's eyes turned full on Scott. "Unless we bring a full cargo or reasonably purified ore to Earth, we can't lay claim to these mines, or to any other mineral rights here."

His hands closed neatly, one inside the other. "And we've got to get a cargo back. This is our last chance. A strike as rich as this one will keep us going for a long time. But if we lose this claim to IPM, the days of the independent miner are over. Done with. We might as well sell the *Bertha* and get out."

"We'll be out of here in two days," Scott

said eagerly. "If we. . ."

"If," said Elderburg very plainly. His eyes turned away from Scott and his hands went all loose at once and spread out flat on the table.

"If we cannot load in two days, Mister Jerill. If your cats that you so foolishly brought on board the *Bertha* delay us so much that the *Kastil* locates us. And beats us home with a load of ore. If that happens, Mister Jerill, I will see that you are black-listed from the rolls of every space flight unit now operating. You will be completely responsible for the failure of this cruise."

Slumping back in his seat, he grinned maliciously at Scott. "I realize that our company was offering you a captain's position at the end of the expedition. . ."

Scott stood up. Anger hammered powerfully at his temples. "All right. I admit I made a mistake. And I take full responsibility for my actions."

"You must admit, Mister Jerill, that only a fool would bring an unknown space beast into a ship."

"Only a fool would deny that the cats are as valuable as uranium in their own way."

"Now, Mister Jerill. Be very careful." There was no mistaking the venom in Elderburg's speech. In his passionless black eyes, viciousness lay coiled. "Your cats have stopped purification of the crude ore for two days. Two days, Mister Scott. We might have been Earth-bound by this time."

Scott leaned over the desk. In a voice quivering with anger, he said: "Listen to me. If you. . ."

There was a shocking blast of light. Stunning volumes of white light poured from the port behind the Captain's head. It blazed too brilliantly for the naked eye.

With a strangled exclamation, Scott stumbled for the port, clutching his eyes. His fingers clawed nervelessly for the light control.

There was a sharp snap as the port closed. They felt, rather than saw, the light flick abruptly out. Elderburg tore at the door.

They lurched into the corridor. Green-yellow lights flashed before their dazzled eyes. Scott located the wall and began to run, using his finger tips as guides.

"A magnesium flare!" The Captain's words drove at Scott, hard as fragments of

metal. "What fool set off a magnesium flare with the *Kastil* on top of us?"

They stumbled through the cool corridor to the second level air lock. As they approached, the lock clanged open. A space-suited figure waddled into the corridor. The helmet opened back, revealing the vivid red hair of Second Mate Vaughn.

"Light don't bother those cats a bit," he announced. Then his grin faded. "What's the matter?"

The Captain croaked, "You set off a flare—when—when the *Kastil* has been hunting our claim for weeks. When they're right on top of us!"

Max's face blanched. "The *Kastil*! Scott, you never told me. . . ." Sudden cunning swept his face. "Why didn't you tell me the *Kastil* was so close, Scott? Why did you tell me to try light on the cats when you knew—"

"Scott told you!" Elderburg snarled. But at that moment Scott cried out sharply, pointing out through the port by the air lock.

Two miles beyond the *Bertha*, settled a black cigar. Bluewhite fire flared from its base. "The *Kastil*!" Scott gasped. Useless rage flooded his chest. "The *Kastil*—and she's found us!"

UNDER the hurtling jet, the surface of the asteroid was a jagged tangle of stone. Scott, staring tensely from the observation port, felt a swift moment of wonder. Two hours since the IPM ship had landed. And he was in trouble with a vengeance.

As he had left the ship with a party of picked men, he had felt Elderburg's cold eyes on him. Eyes that thought—and threatened.

It was easy enough to read the Old Man's mind. An officer might make one vital mistake. But not two—not introducing the cats into the ship; not permitting a flare to be set off. Unless. . . .

Unless he wanted the *Bertha* to lose time. Unless he wanted the *Kastil* to find the precious claim.

Cold raced through Scott's veins. His hands locked white about the space helmet he was about to don. He had to prove his loyalty. Had to prove that the accidents

were accidents. And little time was left, as the *Kastil* could load completely in two days.

"There's the pit, Mister Jerill." The navigator's voice was strained. "See anybody?"

"Not yet. Set her down."

The cargo jet dipped. The vast peaks of shattered stone sped up at them with terrifying speed. Scott refrained from closing his eyes, saw the razor-toothed surface of this shattered world streak toward him. Ahead, the bulk of the *Kastil* loomed. They must have used the ore pits as a landing marker, he thought. And—what was that?

Motion at the lip of the ore pit.

The jet grounded hissing on the burnt landing strip. "Watch it," Scott warned. "We got visitors out there."

There was an ugly muttering among the men. As Scott threw open the cargo doors and dropped to the rocky ground, he saw the crewmen checking blasters and the slender polonium tubes that could permanently blind a man.

He stepped away from the jet. And as he did so, seven men detached themselves from the shadows about the mine's edge, and strolled toward him. Seven men—two more than were with Scott. The odds might be worse, he thought with a sense of relief.

Cautiously, he loosened the blaster in his belt. They were tricky weapons to handle in space gloves, but he'd better be ready to use it fast.

"Party from the *Bertha*?" The words came thin and metallic into Scott's helmet.

"Right," he grunted. "You?"

"From the *Kastil*. Who gave you a clearance to land on our claim?"

"We have a prior claim on this pit," Scott flared. "We have it posted and registered. If you're going to mine, find someplace else."

A giant figure, grimly grotesque in a cumbersome vacuum suit, swaggered forward. "I don't see any of your claim posts."

Scott indicated a tall metal stake glittering somberly in the glare of the jet's loading lights.

The tall man laughed easily, his voice thin and far away in Scott's helmet. "Think of a better story. We just dug that claimer in ourselves. Now suppose you people jet out of here. Ought to be plenty of good claims someplace else."

Scott scarcely heard the sudden bitter burst of protest from his men. His body felt light and cool. The blaster pressed hard against his side. "There are plenty of good claims," he said. "You better go find them."

He swung the blaster up in a single smooth motion.

The tall man stood very still. They were not close enough to see each other's faces.

Then, high on a plateau of stone above the tall man's head, Scott saw the stars blot out.

"Scatter!" As he shouted, he took a giant leap to the right.

A blast of energy seared from the darkness, gouging a vast hole where Scott had stood.

From behind a boulder he could see the fire of the blaster sweep across the upper edges of the rocks, just at the level where the stars were cut off.

For a moment, the cold green line of his fire flicked harmlessly over naked stone. Then a thick squirt of fire flared quickly. A still-born scream died in his earphones.

The men of the *Kastil* had dodged away into the darkness.

Scott's voice rang out harshly. "I'll give you men two minutes to organize and get out of here. If you're not out by that time, we'll spin our jet around and burn you out."

There was a brief stir off in the shadows. "You're in a blind alley there," Scott continued. "There's no way out. And we'll blast any man who tries to climb out over the rocks. Is that clear?"

A glowing flash of energy exploded against the rock protecting him. There was no sound, but bits of stone lightly flecked his suit. Scott braced himself on the rough face of the boulder and worked the blaster around for an open shot.

"No more shooting," the heavy voice of the tall man growled. "You *Bertha* people. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Scott said coldly. His eyes probed the shadows for motion.

"We're willing to be peaceful about this. I'm Captain Randell of the *Kastil*. There's no need for killing when there's plenty of ore for all of us."

"Not in this pit," Scott answered. "You have one minute."

"All right." Randell's voice, distorted as it was by the tiny radio, carried a sardonic edge. "We'll go—from here."

He sauntered out of the shadows, hands upraised. From the tangle of stone, his men crept out to join him. Without haste, insolent in their retreat, they crossed over the pit.

At the far side they paused. "This is the extent of your so-called claim." Randell's voice purred in their ears. "Our claim extends from this line. And if a man from the *Bertha* wants a quick blasting, he can cross this line." His radio snapped off with crisp finality.

Scott stepped from his shelter.

"All right," he ordered. "You men know the story. The *Kastil's* down here ready for work. And it's going to mean work if we're going to beat her back to Earth. Now, let's go. But watch your step."

THEY worked. Eighteen hours a day they worked. From the steel-like ground they scooped a dozen tons of the dirty black uranium ore and sent it hurtling back to the *Bertha*.

But in spite of all their efforts, the more modern equipment of the *Kastil* overtook them in a day. The blackness on their left was riddled with the flare of digging torches and the slender fire-trails of the jets soaring between the pit and the *Kastil*.

And now and again, Randell's drawing voice broke into Scott's ears. "You're slowing, up, *Bertha*. Seventy tons for us today. Are you poor little men getting tired?" He clucked sympathetically, then burst into a yell of laughter. "We'll have the ore cleaned off this rock before you get half loaded."

But Scott and the men of the *Bertha* worked silently, with savage haste, forgetting sleep and food to keep the tonnage flowing to their ship. They had almost forgotten the cats. . . .

But not for long.

Staggering with fatigue, Scott swayed into Central Control, and sagged into a seat. He had been too long in a space suit. A dull pounding beat behind his eyes. "I came as soon as you called the pit, Captain Elderburg. You sounded pretty urgent."

"It's urgent," Elderburg said. "We're beaten."

Scott stiffened. Fatigue fell from him as he gazed closely at the Captain, saw for the first time the bitter dullness of Elderburg's eyes.

"You better come with me," the Old Man said heavily. He rose stiffly, led the way from the room.

In silence they shuffled down the corridor toward the engine room. A tic worked at the corner of the Captain's mouth, but he did not seem to notice it. "Durval held the cats off with ultra-sonics. He purified about ten tons of the stuff and stored it."

They threaded their way along a chill black catwalk to the center of the ship. In the engine room, men slumped sullenly among the big atomics. As Scott and Elderburg passed a group of the black gang, mutely dangling wrenches, there was a sudden stir.

"That's him!" One of the men had leaped up. The wrench whipped back over his shoulder. He leaped raging toward Scott. "There's the rotten. . . ."

"Easy, Billy." He was dragged back, disarmed.

"How'd the *Kastil* know. . . ."

The Captain tugged Scott's arm. "Don't bother with them. Come on."

Scott nodded numbly, followed, his head aching and a nameless wave of apprehension sliding through him. "Where are the cats?" he asked once.

Elderburg ignored him. "Put on a radiation suit."

They had stopped before a side door of the main hold. As Scott struggled into the suit his mind swirled in a chaos of thoughts. When the suit was adjusted he dropped the helmet shut and stepped forward. Through the lighter gravity of the air lock they lumbered. Then Elderburg spun the controls that opened the door.

"There you are," he said to Scott. He sounded completely deflated. No sting remained in his voice.

Scott stepped forward into the hold, then froze. His body went cold.

The hold was a writhing mass of cats.

Their queer angled bodies darted in a great pile beyond the door. Their red bodies glowed and twisted strangely. They flew about a huge stack of lead containers—uranium cells secured for the long trip home.

And Scott went sick with understanding. Through rigid lips, he forced the words: "Energy-eaters!"

The Captain laughed oddly. "And you wondered how they lived on this naked rock. They ate the raw ore, of course. No wonder they hung around Durval's machines sucking up what free energy they could. They broke through the air feeder system here. No wonder. With cells of 80% pure uranium waiting for them." His voice broke.

"So we're finished," he continued. "The *Kastil* will be loaded before we can even clean the cats out. We're done."

He swayed back against the bulkhead. Scott took his arm.

"Get away from me." Elderburg wrenched away, his loathing clear even behind the bulky suit. "If what the men say is true. If you sold us out—" His voice trailed off. "Call your men out of the pits, Jerill. We're blasting off tonight."

"No." Scott leaned forward, his eyes mere slits behind the lense of his helmet. "Is there any uranium left?"

"We saved two cells."

"It's enough," Scott snapped. His lean jaw lifted proudly. "It's a little late, Captain. But I can promise to get rid of the cats in two hours. With the ore deposits Vaughn and I have collected, we can still load a good cargo and beat the *Kastil* out by at least a day."

Elderburg eyed him sharply. "How can you handle the cats?"

"Get me a lead-lined box about eight feet by. . ."

Static blasted shrilly in their ears. The voice of the ship's lookout, strained with excitement, shouted. "Captain Elderburg. This is Main Control. Get here fast. An explosion at Lieutenant Jerill's mine."

As Elderburg leaped for the door with a muffled roar, the lookout's voice tautened. "No. No. Not an explosion. It's the *Kastil*. They're attacking the mine. They're attacking the mine."

THEY crammed into the observation blister on the *Beriba's* nose. Scanners swept smoothly over the wilderness of stone jutting up between the ship and the mine.

"There's a fire fight going out there."

Elderburg's square face knotted with anger. "Scott, take a party. Blow that livid scum crew off this rock."

"Right, sir!" Scott bolted from the observation port. The emergency alarm howled through the ship. He buckled on a pair of blasters with unsteady hands, a black fury sweeping him. He stabbed one long finger down on the intercom.

"Masters," he yelled. "Get the cargo jet ready. With full battle equipment."

"Right, lieutenant. What's up?"

"Piracy." He spun toward the door. Then jolted to a halt, hands balling at his sides.

A picture was forming on the Master Communication Screen.

Elderburg pounded to his side. "Who is it?"

The picture on the screen was very definite now—a swarthy giant of a man, cynically grinning down at them. "Gentlemen," the figure on the screen said, and Scott needed no further introduction.

It was Randell, master of the ship *Kastil*.

"We've had a very entertaining two days," Randell said. His thick hands rubbed easily together. "It's been a real pleasure watching you work. But I'm afraid the pleasure is over. We're leaving you now. Oh, that disturbance at your mine pit?" He laughed, but only with his mouth; the close-set eyes remained unchanging, watchful. "It seemed so unnecessary to bother mining ore when so much of it was stacked near our pit."

"You bloody murdering bandit," Elderburg thundered. "We'll blast you. . ."

"You'll blast nobody. Any party approaching the *Kastil* will get blasted. Any party near the claim—our claim—will get burned down. By the way, I'm afraid your men at the mine contracted space-sickness, or something. They seem to be dead. You needn't bother coming after them."

He began to chuckle. "I think the ore my men are bringing in now will just complete our cargo. See you back on Earth."

The screen went gray. The sound shut off with a loud click.

Elderburg swung on Scott. "Take your men. Clean out that nest of thieves before they remove any more ore. Order out full battle gear. We'll blast the *Kastil* apart if it takes every man on board this ship."

"No!" Scott caught Elderburg's shoulder, gripped him. "There isn't time for an armed attack. I have a better idea."

"Scott, I order you to. . . ."

"Get me a box," Scott cried desperately. "Made of lead and six feet deep."

Elderburg jerked his shoulder free. His face contorted. "Get to your cabin, Jerill. You're under arrest."

"Captain Elderburg, listen to me. We can. . . ."

"That's a direct order. Go to your cabin."

He whirled away from Scott, slammed down the intercom lever. "Attention all hands. Prepare full battle equipment. . . ."

Scott slashed his blaster hard across the back of the Captain's head. Elderburg staggered, clutched the back of the seat. Scott hit him again. Elderburg's legs went loose. He toppled face forward, struck the intercom and sagged to the floor.

Scott stepped to the intercom. "Attention. All men, prepare full battle equipment and stand by. Stand by. Durval, get the largest lead-lined box you have and set it outside the entrance of the main cargo hatch. Shake it up. We have half an hour till the *Kasil* jets off."

He cut off the intercom, lugged Elderburg to the chart room and locked him inside.

THE hold was beastly hot. Standing inside the hatchway, holding suspended over his head a three-foot long cell of uranium ore, Scott felt a moment of shuddering panic. Over the storage cells along the wall, over the tumbling bodies of the cats, an eerie glow quivered—the menacing flare of radio-activity.

Scott glanced nervously at the forward screen. Chief Durval waved toward him. "Your men ready, Durval?"

The Chief nodded. "Don't go getting yourself hurt now, Scott."

Scott grinned although he did not feel much like grinning.

He shuffled forward under the light gravity of the hold. The uranium cell balanced easily in his hands. Too easily. He could scarcely feel it press against his gloves. The heat control in his suit was jammed again. His hands streamed sweat.

He inched past the cats. A quick cold

thrill passed through his stomach. With the energy of the ore almost gone, the scarlet beasts were growing increasingly uneasy. They were casting about for a new supply. It would be easy enough for a foot to slip, he thought. To spill the ore across the floor. New food for the cats—and the loss of the *Beriba's* last chance as strange space beasts sucked away the last purified ore.

He slipped cautiously past the last row of cells. A quick dash now for the open hatchway beyond. . . .

Half a dozen of the bounding red beasts surged about his feet. Their weight drove his right leg forward. He staggered, caught at his balance. The lead cell above his head began to slip.

"Watch it, Scott!" Durval's voice cracked in his ears.

Straining every muscle against the queer weightlessness of no gravity, Scott struggled to regain his balance. He expected another blow at his legs as the cats leaped for the ore. It was hard to breathe the over-heated air of his suit.

But the cats had spun away. As he caught his balance, he stared after them, uncomprehending for an instant. The cats ran twisting in a somehow sinister dance. The bodies were queerly bloated. Down the upper portion of their bodies ran a heavy indentation. As they leaped and twisted, the indentation became a fissure, a crevice.

Then two of the beasts leaped, slammed together in mid-air. But more than two cats fell to the floor.

Their sharply angled bodies whisking back toward the depleted uranium cells, four cats appeared with shocking suddenness.

Reproduction. Elemental fission.

Scott had to clean them out, and fast. Soon the ship would be overrun with the energy-hungry felines.

He dashed toward the open hatch. Outside the opening, a great lead box, eight feet by eight feet, gaped upward. Beyond, four men tensely supported a vast lead cover.

"Is the uranium poured into the box?" he barked sharply.

"Yes, sir. All ready, Mister Jerill."

"Good." Turning from the hatch, he inverted his cell, poured out the uranium

ore in a thick stream from the open hatch back across the hold toward the scrambling mass of cats upon the now empty rows of cells.

But he never reached the beasts.

A brawling torrent of animals leaped toward him. Hurling the container into their mass, he leaped to one side. They lunged into the trail of ore. Rolled, leaped, darted along the line. At the hatch edge, a pyramiding mass of cats paused a moment. Then plummeted over. Scott fell back against the bulkhead, his eyes fixed on the cats still scavenging among the empty cells.

Then these too were darting for the trail of ore. The uranium was scattered now. Cats plunged toward the new radiation in the box beyond the hold entrance.

The inarticulate cheers of Durval and his men rang in Scott's helmet. But his mind was already working at the next step of the problem.

"Durval," he ordered. "Get a decontamination unit in here. Clean this place out." Cats poured in a frenzied stream from the ship. "Call Mister Vaughn. Start purification of his ore as soon as it arrives."

Past the hatch, he saw the swift flash of the lead top dropping over the box. Excitement pounded hotly in his throat.

"I'm going to get rid of these cats once and for all," he called. "Be back in an hour."

"But what about the *Kastil*?"

"We'll worry about the *Kastil* later. Get that ore purified. We're blasting out of here in forty hours."

He swung from the cargo entrance to the top of the lead box. Under his feet, the lid trembled with the frantic struggling of the cats. "Load this crate in the cargo jet," he cried. "And hurry. We only have half an hour left."

THE pounding of the jets matched the pounding of the blood in Scott's temples. "When we land," he instructed, "get this crate out fast. Everything depends on how fast you can take the cats down to the pit. I want you to bury it as fast as you can. Understand?"

He glanced sharply about the group, feeling their eyes clinging to him.

"Get as much rubbish on the crate as

possible. And then obey every order I give you as fast as possible no matter how foolish the order may seem."

The jet thundered down over the landing strip, rasped to a halt. "Out," roared Scott. "Fast. Make it fast."

The loading compartment swung open. But as the men lifted the crate toward the door, the jet's intercom burst into life. "Jerill. Jerill, this is Captain Elderburg. I order you to return at once."

Elderburg had freed himself too quickly.

"This is a criminal offense, Jerill. Come back at once."

"Get that crate out," Scott roared. "Hurry. Hurry!"

"Mister Jerill," blared the intercom. "You are under arrest, according to the Articles of Space, for conspiracy, armed assault. . . ." Scott cut the voice off in mid-sentence. He leaped into the hold, threw his weight behind the box. "Quick. Get it to the pit."

The men lumbered off into the darkness. Even with the light gravity of the asteroid, it was difficult to handle the crate as the scrambling cats pitched it from side to side.

Scott scaled a boulder. The hulk of the *Kastil* loomed just beyond, dark and threatening. A thin square of light showed at their cargo entrance. They were still completing loading.

"Hurry," Scott muttered feverishly. "Hurry."

The men reached the pit. Carefully, slowly, they lowered the crate into the shadows.

Sweat streaming down his face, Scott tore his eyes from the *Kastil* hatch, grimly watched as his men scooped rubbish into the pit.

A motion in the darkness. Out where no motion should be. Movement among the sunless stones.

Scott's breathing stopped.

A group of men closing in toward the cargo jet. Men racing out of the shadows. Men of the *Kastil*.

"Stop," Scott shouted frantically into his radio. "Get that crate back to the jet. Get it out of the pit. Back to the jet. It's too late. Hurry. Hurry!"

For a single astounded moment the men paused. Then, sweeping the rubble from

the crate, they fumbled it toward the surface of the pit.

Scott leaped down among them. Pushed. "They're going to trap us." The crate struck on the pit's edge. Scott seized one end, forced it up over. "Grab that other end, Masters. Move, man. Don't argue. Move!"

Staggering over the uneven ground, they lurched toward the jet.

"I think you ought to rest for a moment." It was the cool voice of Randell, who stepped from the darkness with a blaster turned full on them.

CREWMEN from the *Kastil* poured from among the rocks. Their blasters swung a menacing ring about Scott and his men.

"Step back away from the crate." Randell stepped forward, tapped his blaster against the side of the box. "Now what do we have here."

"Keep away from that," Scott snarled. "That's property of the *Bertha*."

"Is it?" Randell turned carelessly to his men. "Property of the *Bertha*," he drawled. "Well, we'd better have a look at it now. To make sure you haven't accidentally salvaged some of the *Kastil's* equipment. Oh, quite by accident, I understand."

He began to loosen the screw-clamps of the lid.

"Stop!" Scott leaped forward, no longer conscious of the weapons swinging on him. He dropped his hand upon the box.

"This is mine," he said. "I forbid you to touch it."

"Have you ever seen a man die of a blaster bolt?" Randell asked. "Step back."

The men of the *Bertha* fell back. Their shoulders touched the toothed rim of stone about the pit.

Randell chuckled. "Perhaps it's just as

well we didn't blast off when we were loaded. There was always a chance you'd found something else of value here."

He flicked the muzzle of the blaster about. "If you don't mind, we'll inspect this crate in a better light. Back at the *Kastil*."

Triumph leaped through Scott. "This is piracy," he said, and sounded sincere.

"Piracy is what is proven," Randell laughed. "Do you really think you have a case in our courts?" He sighed softly. "Now, thank you for this unexpected pleasure. And good-bye. We'll see each other again on Earth, perhaps."

Then they were gone and immediately afterward, the *Kastil*, balancing on a white line of flame, leaped away from the asteroid and flashed out past the stars.

Scott stared after it, a faint smile touching his lips. About him rang the triumphant laughter of the crew.

Someone gripped Scott's shoulder. "Captain Elderberg on the intercom, Mister Scott. I just told him. And—congratulations, sir."

Scott grinned. Entering the jet, he faced the intercom, said: "It's over now, Captain."

"Good work, Mister Scott." Elderberg's voice was unsteady. "How did you do it?"

"Pretended to be taking something of value," Scott said. He relaxed back against the seat. "I knew Randell couldn't resist making a clean sweep of everything we had. So I gave him the chance."

Elderberg's laugh filled the cabin. "And when they open the crate. . ."

"Good-bye uranium," Pale eyes smiling, Scott waved a knotted fist. "And now, sir, we're going to start mining ore. This is our claim now. And we'll be blasting out of here in forty hours with the biggest load of uranium ore Earth ever got its hands on."

Narakan Rifles, About Face!

By JAN SMITH

Those crazy, sloppy, frog-like Narakans . . . all thumbs and six-inch skulls . . . relics of the Suzi swamps. Until four-fisted Lt. Terrence O'Mara moved among them—lethal, dangerous, with a steady purpose flaming in his volcanic eyes.

TERRENCE O'MARA lay flat on his back trying to keep his big body as still as possible. Despite the fact that he was stripped to his regulation shorts, a large pool of sweat had formed on the cot underneath him. The only movement he permitted himself was an occasional pursing of his lips as he dragged on a cigarette and sent a swirl of smoke upward through the heavy humid air. Then he would just lie there watching as the smoke crept up to mingle with the large drops of

water that were forming on the concrete of the command post.

"Damn! Damn Naraka, anyway! Outpost of civilization! Who'd want the blasted place except the Rumi?"

At the words, Terrence moved his head just a fraction of an inch and his eyes only a little farther to look across the room to where Bill Fielding was twisting and turning on his cot. All he could see of the other man was the wet outline of his body under a once white sheet and a hand that every





so often reached into a bucket of water on the floor and then replaced a soaking T-shirt over a red head.

"You'll feel it less if you lie still," Terrence said, distressed at the necessity for talking.

"Feel it less! My God, listen to the man! What difference does it make if you lie still or move around or even run around in the suns like a bloody Greenback? Dust Bin will get you one way or another . . . and if it doesn't, the Rumi will."

The visible hand lifted the T-shirt and began to pop salt tablets into an open mouth like they were so many peppermints.

"I wonder where Norton is. Out reviewing the troops?"

"Reviewing, my eye. He's up at Government House sitting in that cool living room drinking one of Mrs. Wilson's icy drinks and admiring Mrs. Wilson's shapely legs. From a discreet distance, of course. Being temporary Commanding Officer of even Dust Bin has its privileges!"

There was a rattle of drums and the blare of one or two off-key instruments from outside.

"Then why," asked Terrence, "are those poor beggars marching up and down in this blasted heat?"

"The Greenbacks? They love it! It would take more than a little heat to get under those inch-thick skins of theirs. They like to play soldier when it's a hundred and thirty under water."

There were a few more straggling notes and then the semblance of a march began.

"Listen to that, will you?" Fielding moaned, "They can't even keep time with a drum! They can't march, they can't shoot, they can't break down a Banning; they're all thumbs and six-inch thick skulls. 'Train local forces to take over!' Bah! Did those desk jockeys back in New Chicago ever see a Greenback? Did they ever try to teach a Narakan to fix a bayonet to the proper end of a rifle or to fire a blaster in the right direction?"

TERRENCE was lighting another cigarette with as little exertion as possible. "Yes, but they keep trying. Ten hours a day. You don't have to drive those boys. They

want to learn. Listen to O'Shaughnessy barking out orders."

"Sergeant Major O'Shaughnessy of the First Narakan Rifles!" Fielding murmured sarcastically. "A year ago he was squatting in a mud cocoon at the bottom of Suzi swamp with the rest of the frogs. Now he's got a good Irish name and he's strutting around like a Martian Field Marshal."

"I thought the names might give them a sense of self respect. Besides we couldn't pronounce theirs and I was tired of hearing Norris yell 'Hey, greenboy!' at them."

"Well, they picked the right guy when they made you Training Officer. You and those damn frogs get along like you came from the same county!"

"They aren't any great shakes for brains but you can't take anything away from me bys for willingness."

"Willingness! Hooray! They're willing, so what? So is a Suzi Swamp lizard. What'll it get them? A week after they pull the Terran forces out, the Rumi will gobble up the lot of them. Maybe they'll gobble them and us before we pull out. Who could fight in this place? Who'd want to fight? I say, to hell with Naraka! It's so near to hell already with those two blasted suns blazing sixteen hours a day. Let the Rumi have the stinking planet! Let them have the whole Centaurian System!"

"Speaking of pulling out, I wouldn't be surprised if Dust Bin wasn't the next place we let go of . . ."

Fielding raised himself on one elbow, "No kidding? Where did you hear that?" His sunburned and blistered face was alight with excitement.

"Well, you know how it's been. When we first came here twenty years back, we drove the Rumi out of all this country and more or less took their cat feet off the Narakan's backs but now that so much of the Earth garrison has been pulled all the way back into the Solar System, the Rumi are acting up again. So much so that the dope I got is that we may be pulling everything back into the Little Texas peninsula to wait for reinforcements and it will take four years for those to come out from Mars."

"Great! Great! But . . . Ah, it's too good to be true. Can't you just picture Fielding and O'Mara parading down Dobi street in

New Chicago with their first lieutenant bars on their collars? Say, you don't suppose that's why the *Sun Maid* is sticking around out here, do you? Imagine, free transportation! A two hour trip to New Chi!"

"I'd sure hate to march those two hundred miles at this time of year!"

"March? Through those swamps? Every time we run a patrol through them . . ."

Fielding was interrupted by a knock on the door and a skinny young Terran with sergeant's chevrons on his shorts stuck his head through from the other room and said, "Major Chapelle's on the voice radio, sir. He's calling from battalion headquarters and wants Captain Norton."

"Tell him Norton's up playing footsies with the Resident's wife," Fielding said, "You'd think those people down at the river would have enough to do without bothering us in the heat of the day, wouldn't you?"

The sergeant looked shocked and started to withdraw his head. Terrence frowned Fielding into silence and called to the sergeant, "Just a minute, Rogers. I'll talk to the Major."

Major Chapelle was a thickset, balding man in his late forties. Even the blazing suns of Naraka hadn't succeeded in burning the sickly yellow color off his face. In the vision screen he looked like a man on his last legs. Whatever was wrong with him didn't help his temper, Terrence thought as he lowered himself gently into a seat before the screen.

"O'Mara! Where in hell is Norton?" he demanded.

"Well, sir, you see . . ." began Terrence.

"Never mind! I've a pretty good idea where he is. A fine time to be chasing skirts! Well, get this straight, O'Mara. Orders have come through and we're pulling the battalion out. We're ordered back to Little Texas. We're going to give up these positions along the river tonight and pull back into Dust Bin. The *Sun Maid* will stand by to evacuate us. You people are to come too. Everybody has to get out, both the military and civilians. All hell's broken loose down river. The Rumi are across the Muddy in half a dozen places. They've cut the 5th to pieces. New Chicago thinks that those cats have been bringing troops in from space all along despite the agreement by

both sides not to do so. And now they have us way outnumbered." The Major's voice held a thin edge of hysteria.

"Is there any action along our front, Major?" Terrence asked quickly, hoping to stop the flow of talk before Chapelle's hysteria communicated itself to the enlisted men who were sitting or lying about the command post.

"Not yet; just patrols across the river so far. We've got to get out, O'Mara, and get out fast. They'll be all over us if we don't. The Colonel says for Norton to have everything ready to go. He wants the depot destroyed. Everything's got to go, everything we can't take along. The *Sun Maid* won't have time for more than one trip. He wants the HQ company and the civilians on board by tomorrow morning at the latest."

"What about the Rifles, sir?"

"What? The what?"

"The native troops, sir. The Narakan Rifles." Terrence grated.

"The Rifles? Good God, man! We haven't time for nonsense. The Rifles are only Greenbacks, aren't they? You get Norton started burning those stores."

Terrence put down the microphone very carefully to keep from slamming it down and stalked back into his quarters. Angrily he began to take his radiation clothing from its hooks on the wall.

"What the devil is eating you?" demanded Bill Fielding.

"We're pulling out, lock, stock and barrel," Terrence told him.

"Pulling out? Whoweee! I knew Mrs. Fielding didn't raise her boy to be a fried egg. Goodbye, Dust Bin! Hello, New Chi!" Bill was up on his hands and knees pounding on his cot. "But what's the matter with you? You like this place?"

"They're leaving the Rifles," Terrence said, zipping up his protective coveralls as he left the room.

II

STEPPING outside on Naraka with the full power of Alpha and Beta Centauri beating down was like stepping into a river of fire. Even with the cooling unit in his suit, Terrence was aware of the searing heat that filled the parade ground. Looking off

across the makeshift native huts, he could see the bright sides of a huge space ship-like object. The big dirigible *Sun Maid* was lying in an open field. It's a funny world, he thought to himself, where you have to use dirigibles for planetary travel. But a dirigible was the only practical aircraft when you had to use steam turbine engines because of the lack of gasoline and the economic impracticability of transporting it in the limited cargo holds of the occasional spacers that came out from Sol.

The Narakans Rifles were marching toward him now, the band doing absolutely nothing for *The Wearing of the Green*. Three hundred big, green bodied, beady eyed, frog-like creatures were marching in the boiling heat with their non-coms croaking out orders in English which might have come out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

As they marched by him, he snapped a salute. Watching them closely he tried to find two men who were in step with each other or one man who had his rifle at the right angle. Unable to find either, he stood there conscious of failure; failure which went beyond mere military precision however. Sloppiness at review could have been overlooked if he had been able to find that the Narakans had any ability as fighting men but after a year of training they seemed almost as hopeless as they had at first. It wasn't that they were completely unintelligent. In fact, other than the Galactic traveling Rumi, they were the only extra-solar race of intelligent beings encountered by man so far. It was just, he thought, that the hundreds of years during which the Rumi had dominated their planet had reduced the Narakans to a state of almost complete ineptitude.

He stood there as they passed in review three times because he knew that his presence pleased and encouraged them. Then he turned, and with dragging feet made his way down Dust Bin's single street toward Government House.

In a few minutes he was standing in the cool, air conditioned living room of the Wilsons. Wilson was seated at his desk rummaging through some papers while Norris and Mrs. Wilson were lounging in contour chairs admiring each other over tall, frosty drinks.

They took the news just as he expected them to. Wilson ran his hand through his sparse, gray hair and murmured something about it being a shame to have to leave the natives on their own after having more or less dragged them out of their comfortable swamps. A glance from his wife silenced him.

"What the hell," Norris said, "they're only blasted thick witted Greenbacks."

Mrs. Wilson yawned, "It'll be something of a bother packing but it'll certainly be a pleasure to get back to New Chicago. Some women's husbands get good posts in half-way civilized parts of the Universe. I don't know why I should always have to be stuck in every backwater, hick town there is."

Wilson smiled apologetically, "Now, dear . . ." he began but was interrupted by the sudden ringing of the telephone on the table near Norris' chair.

"Get that, will you, O'Mara?" the captain said, making no attempt to reach for it, "It's probably the Command Post."

Terrence put the phone to his ear angrily and growled into it. An excited Bill Fielding was on the line. "Terry? Is that you? Fielding here. Hell's breaking loose. There's a bunch of blasted Rumi trying to force their way into town. They attacked the sentries down this way and may be heading for your end of town too."

Terrence dropped the phone and headed for the door. "*Rumi!*" he shouted and there were shouts and cries from outside in answer. Then he heard the clack, clack, clack of Rumi spring guns. Windows of the room crashed in and Wilson collapsed across his desk. Norton grabbed Mrs. Wilson and pulled her down onto the floor. Terrence dropped to his hands and knees and continued toward the door as he drew his forty-five.

SOMEWHERE, someone had cut loose with a Banning and its high whine drowned out the clack of the spring guns. With a quick look around, Terrence started at a run for the next building which was the native schoolhouse. He didn't make it. There was a clack, clack from off to his left and he threw himself forward, skidding and sliding in the dust and gravel of the street. A warehouse across the square was

on fire and three Rumi had darted from behind it. In one brief glance he saw those long barreled spring guns of theirs and the tall, graceful bodies and the feline faces under the plastic protective clothing.

He snapped four shots at them and saw one fall. Then he began to slither along the ground raising enough dust to mask his movements. There were half a dozen of them in the square when he reached the rear door of the schoolhouse. Several gleaming plastic bolts smashed into the wooden outer door a second after he had raised up to open it and then had dropped back down.

Norton fired from the residency and momentarily scattered the Rumi and Terrence was inside the school room and racing for the side window from which he could get a clear line of fire at the raiders. He had a brief glimpse of Joan Allen, the school teacher, standing in a corner of the room with the tiny green figures of native children huddled around her. Then he was at a window and had beaten out the heavy protective glass and was firing into a mass of the catmen, firing and cursing as his gun emptied. He cursed in a stream of Martian, English and Greenback profanity as he forced another clip into the gun.

"Lieutenant O'Mara, if you'll be so kind as to restrain your language in front of these children," a voice said from over his shoulder.

Terrence reached back and felt something soft and forced it over against the wall out of the line of the window. Then he risked a quick look which was almost his last. A spring gun bolt burned a groove in the windowsill next to his head and smashed into the blackboard across the room.

"Lieutenant O'Mara, would you mind telling me what this is all about?" came the same calm determined woman's voice from beside him. He fired again at a darting figure across the square and saw it stumble before he had to drop to his haunches as the window above him was smashed and scattered by bolts and glass rained down about his head.

He put another clip into his gun and cursed because he had only two left. He turned his head briefly and had a quick glimpse of a white face framed in straight

dark hair and a small, neat figure in a yellow dress.

"Rumi attack. One of their patrols must have gotten around the battalion."

A husky, whimpering little sound made him look down. A native child or pollywog as the Terrans called them was clinging desperately to the teacher's skirt. His tiny webbed feet clutched at the cloth as he buried his face against her leg. From behind her peered still another child, its baby frog face working spasmodically in the beginnings of a sob. Six or seven others were lying flat on the floor their bodies trembling in terror.

Terrence took another look outside and what he saw sent him into another stream of cursing. The Narakan Rifles were hurrying to the scene of action. Down the middle of the street they came in a column of fours with their drums and bugles blaring out a poor imitation of *The Wearing of the Green*. Their standard bearer was running at the head of the column beside Sergeant Major O'Shaughnessy.

"Oh, my God! He wouldn't . . .!"

"Lieutenant, please!"

"Teacher, will you shut up!" he roared as he leaped across the room toward the front door. At the harsh tone of his voice, the whimpering sounds in the room suddenly burst forth in full volume as the ten pollywogs raised their hoarse voices into full throated croaks.

Terrence braced his body against the wall and held his gun ready as he pulled open the door. In parade formation his men were moving up the street and in a moment they would be away from the buildings' protection and directly in the Rumi line of fire.

"O'Shaughnessy, you idiot!" he roared above the croaking from behind him and the rattle of firing outside.

O'Shaughnessy came to a skidding halt almost directly in front of the schoolhouse but his men kept on going, their faces set and determined. O'Shaughnessy came to attention and snapped a salute.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lieutenant."

"Halt! Damn it, HALT! Terrence yelled at the column of greenbacks. Their formation crumbled as they ran into each other, stepped on each other's feet and pushed and shoved. But they halted.

"O'Shaughnessy! Break ranks. . . . take cover. . . . line of skirmishers!" Terrence shouted and hit the dirt behind a sandbox in the schoolyard as the Rumi resumed firing. There was a mad scramble among the Narakans as they scattered behind walls and into buildings, moving with an incredibly rapid jumping motion which they used when in a hurry.

Terrence was so glad to see only one sprawled figure in the dust of the street that he just lay there for a few seconds spitting dust before he realized that he had forgotten to close the face visor of his radiation clothing.

THERE was a slight clucking sound from beside him and when he turned he found O'Shaughnessy lying almost beside him, squinting along his carbine. The Narakans' face split into two replicas of the map of Ireland and he saluted flat handed, his webbed fingers at just the proper angle.

"O'Shaughnessy, you don't have to salute when you're lying down!" O'Mara tried to keep his voice as calm as possible.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lieutenant. Pretty quick we fight now?"

His lieutenant ignored him and searched for signs of life in the houses across the square. There wasn't a Rumi in sight except for one on the roof of a shed next to the burning warehouse. He tried a couple of shots with his automatic and missed. He grabbed O'Shaughnessy's carbine and dropped the creature as it tried to scramble off the shed.

"Pretty soon we fight with bayonet?" O'Shaughnessy asked as Terrence handed back the carbine.

"O'Shaughnessy, why do you do things like this to me, me who took you out of your damn mud hole and made a soldier out of you?"

O'Shaughnessy's mouth formed a huge round moon, "Not understand, Lieutenant. . . ." he began but he was ignored again as Terrence stared across the street in pained disbelief to where the heavy weapons squad of the Nakan Rifles was gathered in a huddled group behind a native house, struggling to set up their Banning Automatic Blaster and two machine guns. One of the men was down on his hands and

knees balancing the heavy barrel of the blaster on his back while two others were attempting to push the ponderous breech onto it by main strength. The two machine guns were half on and half off their tripods. The leg of one of them had been bent in the wrong direction and the other was so covered with grease that the parts wouldn't fit together.

"Oh, Lord!" moaned Terrence and was bracing himself for a dash across the street when a figure in Terran battle armor came around the building on the run, dodging and crawling as spring bolts raised the dust in front of him. It was the short, stout Gunnery Sergeant, Polasky. Terrence breathed a sigh of relief.

He turned to O'Shaughnessy, "Now, Sergeant, this is our problem. Those buildings over there are filled with Rumi. They have automatic weapons. . . . spring guns. . . . firing a clip of twenty plastic bolts. They're deadly at close to medium range. They can penetrate our battle armor." He looked at the thick, knobby skin of the Nakan, "Yours too. Now, they are probably just a patrol about the size of one of our companies. They don't seem to have any heavy weapons and ours will be in action in a few minutes. Then, O'Shaughnessy. . . ." The Nakan was squinting along the barrel of his rifle.

"Are you paying attention, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir! Attention, yes, sir." O'Shaughnessy started to lift his bulky three hundred pounds up off the ground. Terrence heaved with all his might against those thick khaki clad legs to knock him down again.

"Man, what are you doing?" he yelled.

"Attention, sir. Sir said . . ."

"No, no, O'Shaughnessy. I meant, listen to me. O'Shaughnessy, how could you? Haven't I been like a brother to you? Didn't I share my whiskey and candy ration with you?"

"Yes, sir. That's why . . ."

"Then for the sake of your two headed frog-faced gods, shut up and listen to me."

"Yes, sir."

"Look. In a minute our Banning will be in action," his voice was drowned out by the scream of tortured air as the Banning cut loose. "Now there is a sweet sound. What do we do next, O'Shaughnessy?"

One of the row of buildings across the square glowed red briefly as the beam from the Blaster caught it; glowed red and then burst into a ball of fire. O'Shaughnessy's mouth was open wide, his chinless face resting on the edge of the sandbox and his little black bead eyes were as large as they could get.

"What do we do now, O'Shaughnessy . . . come on . . ."

The Narakan made a thrusting gesture with his carbine, "Bayonet . . . we go in with bayonet now," he said.

O'Mara slapped him on the seat of his khaki pants. "No, no. You got to get this stuff straight."

The whine of the Banning interrupted him again and it was joined by the chatter of machine guns and rifle fire and answered by the rapid clacking of spring guns. Bolts dug into the wall of the schoolhouse and showered them with plaster. Others shattered the front window. Terrence wiped plaster off his visor and tried again. "You've got to get this straight, O'Shaughnessy, because . . . well, because you may be getting an independent command pretty soon and there won't be anyone around to tell you what to do."

The Narakan was listening to him but wide-mouthed and uncomprehending. "We're going to burn them out of those huts; burn them out or burn the houses down over their heads. About the time Polasky gets to the third one, those guys are going to break and then they'll either rush us or . . ."

Norton was yelling something from the Residency. There was a noise of clanking armor behind him and he could hear Fielding's voice cracking out orders as he came up with twenty hastily armed and armored clerks, cooks and radiomen from the HQ unit.

"O'Mara! O'Mara, they're breaking! They're running! Let's go!" Norton was on the porch of the Residency pouring Tommy gun slugs at the rear of the burning row of houses.

"Okay, let's go." Terrence said, lurching to his feet. The Narakan sergeant blew his whistle and the riflemen swarmed out from their shelters and started at a run across the square with Norton, Terrence and

O'Shaughnessy at their head. The rest of the Terrans in full battle armor lumbered along after them.

One or two bolts whistled overhead and Corporal O'Brien dropped his rifle and fell forward clutching his leg. The smoke from the burning buildings obscured their vision but Terrence had a momentary sight of Rumi radiation clothing and emptied his clip at it.

Someone from behind threw a grenade which fell short of its target and rolled in front of them. Norton took two quick strides and kicked it into one of the flaming buildings.

III

THERE were about twenty Rumi, less than they had thought, fleeing across the open fields behind the burning huts. They were firing as they ran and giving out those queer yelping cries of theirs. Three or four of them fell and then Norton was shouting, calling back his men to organize fire fighting parties.

"Captain! Captain, let's go after those guys. We can cut them off before they get to the grasslands," Terrence yelled.

"Get your men after these fires, O'Mara. We can't let them spread."

There was nothing to do but obey but he delayed long enough to empty his automatic in the general direction of the fleeing Rumi. Then he turned and yelled, "Harrigan! Sergeant Harrigan! Where in the devil is that . . ." There was a crashing sound behind him and Harrigan stumbled through the smoke and came down on his foot, all three hundred pounds of him.

Later, as the last smoking embers of the fire were being smothered by industrious squads of Narakans with buckets and shovels, Terrence limped back across the square with Bill Fielding.

"We should have gone after those lousy scum" Bill said, "They may cut back around the town again and give the battalion some trouble on the river road."

"Don't you think I know it! As fast as the Greenbacks can move when they want to, we could have caught the lot of them before they got into the grasslands. But Norton was worried about the fires! Of

course, we're going to burn all these buildings tomorrow or the next day but Norton was afraid the Residency would catch fire."

"Probably didn't want his sweetie's fancy clothes to burn."

"They got Wilson, you know."

"Good Lord! Dead?"

"Right between the eyes. They almost got all four of us."

Fielding took his heavy battle helmet off and pushed back the glass visor of his radiation helmet to wipe the perspiration and dirt off his face. "Well, maybe Norton didn't want us to catch those damn cats. Maybe he figured he owed them that much."

O'Mara shielded his eyes as he said, "Beta's setting. It'll be night in a couple of hours and we can walk around without this blasted radiation armor for a while."

"Yeah, and we can start looking for a full scale night attack as soon as good old Alpha hides his hoary head."

"If you see O'Shaughnessy, tell him I want to see him, will you? I'm going to stop at the schoolhouse for a few minutes."

Surprise spread across Bill's freckled face, "Not the school teacher? Not you! Buddy, you've been in Dust Bin too long. You've been on Naraka too long. You'll be attending services at the Chapel next."

Terrence muttered a few old Anglo-Saxon words under his breath and limped off in the direction of the school building.

THE Reverend Ames Goodman was the smallest Narakian that Terrence had ever seen. The Johnathanian missionary from Little Texas was somewhat under two hundred and fifty pounds which was slight for a Greenback. He also spoke the best English except for some of the big shots in New Chicago. Ordinarily he was a composite of superstitious reverence and natural dignity which Terrence had always found admirable. Today, however, he couldn't have appeared more ludicrous if he had tried. He was dressed for a visit to the Residency in a white duck suit which was too small and out of which he bulged in a number of surprising places.

He and Joan Allen were talking half in English and half in Narakian as the lieutenant entered. The minister had a painfully surprised look on his round green face.

"I hope we didn't bust up your school too much, Miss Allen."

"If you are quite finished with your shooting and cursing, Lieutenant O'Mara, perhaps you have time to explain to Rev. Goodman and me what this talk about evacuation means."

As she spoke, she brushed stray strands of black hair up under her radiation helmet. For the first time in the six months that she had been in charge of the orphan school in Dust Bin, Terrence decided that maybe she was pretty after all. He wasn't sure whether it was the high color which excitement lent to her usually pale face or if Bill Fielding was right in saying he had been on Naraka too long, but Joan Allen was beginning to look good to him. At the moment the feeling wasn't at all mutual.

"Is it true that the Defense Force is pulling out and leaving the rest of us to the Rumi?"

Terrence took off his helmet and let the rapidly cooling air strike his head. "Not exactly, teacher," he said, "The Fifth is pulling out but so are all the Terrans in Dust Bin. Everyone's being ordered back to Little Texas. That's why the *Sun Maid* is standing by."

"All the Terrans, Lieutenant? What about the people here who depend on us? What about my children?"

O'Mara somehow couldn't quite look either of them in the face. He muttered something about having to get back to his command post and started out the door. Joan called after him as she noticed his limp, "Lieutenant, I'm sorry, I didn't know you have been wounded."

"Oh, it's nothing . . . nothing," he said, hurrying away, his neck reddening from something more than the attention of Beta Centauri. How in the name of Naraka's sixty devils could you tell a woman that one of your own non-coms had stepped on your foot and nearly broken your instep?

The battalion straggled into Dust Bin during the night. It hadn't exactly fought its way back from the river but had had enough casualties to make the men nervous and jumpy without tempering them at all. One of the casualties had been Lt. Colonel Upton. Now Major Chapelle was in command. The men of the battalion were

nervous but Chapelle was riding on the thin edge of panic. He ordered everyone on board the *Sun Maid* at once and then countermanded the order and formed a defense perimeter around the town. He threw out patrols which were unable to contact any Rumi on the Dust Bin side of the river.

The next morning Terrence was summoned to Government House for an officers' conference. As he hurried along its single street, Dust Bin was in a state of confused and helpless excitement. The three or four hundred Narakans who made up its population were all in the street or square. Many of them were carrying their belongings on their shoulders and looked as if they were only waiting for an order of some kind to send them scurrying off toward the Suzi swamps.

As O'Mara reached the veranda of the Residency, Rev. Goodman was speaking with Joan Allen by his side. His words were aimed at Chapelle, Norton and a large gray-eyed man whom Terrence recognized as the Captain of the *Sun Maid*.

"When you came, you earthmen in your great ships, the Narakan was a hunted creature on his own planet and had been back as far as he could remember. You drove off the Rumi and took parts of the planet for your own use but you did not hunt the Narakan. You brought him out of his swamps and taught him much; to wear clothes, to till the ground and many other things. You even gave him your religion. But now the Rumi have returned and you say you are not strong enough to hold all the planet."

MAJOR CHAPELLE was impatient. "That's right, Reverend, there's too many of them. The garrison just isn't big enough to hold everything and it's too far back to Earth for us to expect any reinforcements for a year or even longer."

Norton took over. "You're an educated . . . ah . . . man, Goodman. You see what the problem is. We can't hold everything so we've got to cut our losses. All of the most important resources and towns are in the Little Texas area and so we're pulling back into there."

"I see. Yes, I understand. The people of

Dust Bin are part of the losses that must be cut."

"Now, now. Don't put it that way, Reverend. The natives can always take refuge in the swamps, you know."

"Yes, I suppose it must be so. Back to Little Texas for the Terrans and back to the swamps for the Narakans. Back to living naked in the mud, back to fishing for our food and back to thinking only of the next meal."

"It really isn't that bad," Chapelle said. "As soon as the situation adjusts itself, the Terran forces will be coming back. Then you can come out of your hiding places and resume your regular life again."

"Yes. And in the meantime our only problem will be to stay out of the way of the Rumi."

"I don't believe that they will go out of their way to harm you. It's the Terrans they want to drive out."

Suddenly the Reverend Goodman was shaking his fist in the Major's face, forgetting in his excitement both his manners and his correct English. "Not hurt! Not hurt, Mr. General? No, they not hurt, they just eat! They favorite food is Naraka steak."

"Now, now, calm yourself," Norton put a hand on Goodman's shoulder. "There's plenty of room in the *Sun Maid* for you and the rest of your people will be safe enough in the swamps."

"What about my children?" demanded Joan Allen.

"Children, Miss Allen? I don't know. . . . Oh, yes, you mean the poly . . . the children. Why, I assume they will go with their parents."

Joan placed a small fist firmly on each of her slim hips. "Major, all the children in the mission school are orphans. They have no parents. None of them have ever lived in the swamps."

"Ah yes. But I hardly see what we can do about it, Miss Allen."

"Well, Major, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to do about it. Unless those kids are loaded on the *Sun Maid* in place of some of this junk," she waved a hand at the piles of luggage which belonged to Mrs. Wilson, "I'm going to stay with my charges and leave you with the problem of explain-

ing to the Mission Board and to the Bishop of New Chicago just why you left me behind."

At the mention of the extremely influential Johnathian Bishop the Major looked more worried than ever. After a short conference with Norton, he turned to Joan.

"Very well, Miss Allen. The children will go in the airship. I'm sure that Mrs. Wilson will be only too glad to leave some of her clothes to make room for them."

"Thank you, Major." Joan said, making no attempt to gloat over her victory.

"Now, Captain, I understand that most of the military stores have been destroyed and that the men are ready for embarkation," Chapelle went on hurriedly, addressing himself to the captain of the *Sun Maid*. "We will have about three hundred and twenty, no . . . about three hundred and thirty passengers for you."

The captain shook his head doubtfully, "It's a big load. I hope we can make it without any trouble."

"Well, then," Chapelle went on, "We'll go aboard during the day after we complete the destruction of the stores and facilities. The native troops under Lieutenant O'Shaughnessy will cover our embarkation and then convoy the civilians as far as the Suzi swamps. Afterwards they will march overland to Fort Craven on the Little Texas border."

Terrence had never had any urge to be a hero. He had always pictured himself retiring at a ripe old age as a Colonel or Brigadier and raising canal oranges on Mars, but suddenly the memory of the Narakan Rifles rushing down the street with bugles blating and flag waving right into the Rumi line of fire rose before him. The thought of O'Shaughnessy, even with his new lieutenant's commission, leading the blundering troops along the two hundred miles to Fort Craven was too much for him.

"I beg your pardon, Major," he heard himself saying, "But as the Narakan Training Officer, I think that I should remain in command of the unit in its overland march."

The Major was dumfounded. Norton looked as if he were sure the Narakan climate had proven too much of a strain for the lieutenant.

"Lieutenant O'Mara, are you sure . . . began Chapelle.

"Are you nuts, O'Mara? Do you know what you're asking for?" demanded Norton.

"Yes, sir. I feel that since Colonel Upton appointed me Training Officer for the Narakan Rifles, it is my duty to stay with them until I am relieved."

Chapelle's look of astonishment had changed to one of relief. It would be far easier to explain the hurried abandonment of the Narakan Rifles to the native representatives at New Chicago if a Terran officer were to remain with them.

"Well," he said, "I could, of course, relieve you of your responsibility but if you feel that . . ."

"I do, sir." Terrence said quickly lest he be tempted to back out.

IV

LATER in the day as he sat in the shade of the command post's overhanging roof with his back against a stack of sandbags, he cursed himself for sixteen kinds of an idiot as he watched the evacuation begin. Beta was dropping low over the pink Maldo hills as the long line of earthmen filed up the gangway into the big airship.

"Hello," said a voice behind him. He turned to find Joan Allen standing there clothed in radiation armor and holding a small canvas bag in one hand. "I thought . . . I mean . . . I came to say good-bye."

"Hello, yourself. I thought you were on board with the rest of them." He got up hastily.

"No. I got the kids on board but I wanted one more look at the schoolhouse before we shoved off."

Somehow he was holding onto her arm, "I guess it meant a lot to you, that schoolhouse," he said.

"Yes, it did. I . . . I was afraid that I wouldn't get to see you when you get to New Chicago."

"There's no danger of that, Joanie. If and when I get there, I'll be looking for you . . . that is . . . if you want to see me."

"If you think you can stand an old maid school teacher, I'll be looking for you." She was very close to him now. "Why did you do it, Terrence? Why are you making

the march with the Narakans? Fielding says your chances aren't very good."

"I'll thank Fielding to keep his big mouth shut! I don't really know why, probably kind of an Earthman's Burden, noblesse oblige . . . you know . . . something like the sort of thing Kipling used to write about."

"Hell," she said, surprising him with her vehemence, "You don't believe that guy any more than I do. It was old when Kipling wrote it and its even older now. I think that somewhere under that tough Irish skin of yours, there's a sentimental fool hiding."

She was still closer now with her hands pressed lightly against his chest and suddenly his arms went around her, he lifted her protective visor and forced his lips down hard on hers. All of her primness had disappeared as she leaned against him, returning his kiss with a burning eagerness which a more experienced woman might have controlled.

There were tears running down his cheeks and he knew they weren't his. He released her slightly and looked down into her tear streaked face, wondering how it was possible for them to have been at the same post for six months without really knowing each other.

"I guess I'm kind of crazy about you, teacher," he said.

He had lifted her off her feet and she clung there with her arms around his neck. "Terrence, I can't leave you . . . I . . ."

As Terrence bent over to kiss her again there was a loud cough and Bill Fielding was standing there dressed in full battle armor. He grinned and said, "Much as I hate to break this up, I don't think Chapelle is going to hold the *Sun Maid* much longer."

Terrence set Joan gently on her feet and she turned and fled toward the waiting ship. He watched until she was on board and then turned to stare at Bill. Still grinning broadly, Bill clapped him on the shoulder as he said, "I could never have faced those bartenders on Dobi Street if I had gone back without you. We better get going, hadn't we? Sergeant Polasky's down with the men. He couldn't bear to leave his Bannings."

"Well, I'll be damned!" was all O'Mara could find to say as he watched the big airship lift itself in the fading light, circle and pass through the smoke of Dust Bin for the last time.

THROWING their gear over their shoulders, the two officers crossed the parade ground to where the two hundred khaki clad figures of the Narakan Rifles stood waiting with Sergeant Polasky clucking slightly as he fussed over his Bannings.

O'Shaughnessy was wearing his new lieutenant bars and a pith helmet and was carrying a large piece of wood in imitation of Norton's swagger stick. Terrence took one look at him and at the two orderlies who stood behind him holding his field kit. He strode toward him scowling, placed his fists on his hips and stood glaring up at the Greenback as he roared, "So! It's delusions of grandeur you've got, is it? Where are Hannigan and O'Toole and their patrols? Why aren't they back?"

O'Shaughnessy stiffened to attention trying to pull in his great stomach. "They are back, Mr. Lieutenant Sir. . . . I forgot. They had nothing to report . . . no contact."

Terrence looked him up and down, "If you foul up just once more . . . I'm going to . . . I'll split your gizzard, stuff it with To-To leaves and send you to the Rumi for their breakfast with my compliments!"

O'Shaughnessy shivered at the dire threat as O'Mara turned to Rev. Goodman who stood with his people clustered about him. "All right, Reverend, you can move out with your flock. I'll throw patrols out in front of you and bring up the rear with the rest of the Rifles. We'll see you as far as the edge of the swamps."

In a long straggly line, the refugees started out with the native police keeping order and Goodman marching at their head. The two drums and the three bugles of the Narakan Rifles struck up a badly mangled version of *Back to Donegal*, and the column followed on the heels of the civilians. Once or twice Terrence glanced back at the smoke and flame that had been Dust Bin before he turned his face forward across the miles of grasslands to where the Suzi swamps lay.

Darkness had fallen but progress wasn't

difficult until one of those sudden, lashing storms for which Naraka was famous hurled itself upon them, flattening the tall grass, raising swirls of dust and finally turning the dust into thick, clinging mud.

As suddenly as it had come, the storm was gone. But by that time they were in the swamp itself. Night in the Suzi swamps. Swamps composed of a sticky, gray mud and heavy tangled undergrowth. The night was as black as the day had been bright. The column which had left the civilians at the edge of the swamp was pushing slowly forward. The Narakans glided along on their bare, webbed feet and the Terrans pushed along on snowshoe-like glides attached to their boots.

Bill Fielding, bareheaded with his helmet thrown back over his shoulder, floundered along beside Terrence. "Did you ever see a place like this? Did you ever see mud like this? Even the Irish bogs couldn't be this bad."

Terrence checked his map, shielding his flashlight carefully. "We'll be out of the worst of this by tomorrow morning," he said.

"If we live until tomorrow morning," Fielding replied, "Those Rumi have eyes like the blasted jungle cats they're descended from."

"I don't think we have much to worry about until we get out of the swamps. I doubt if their patrols would penetrate very deeply into this mess."

"How about the radio? Has Polasky been able to get through to Fort Craven?" asked Fielding.

O'Mara shook his head, "No. You know what Beta's radiations do to radio reception this time of year. Even at night it takes a powerful transmitter to reach farther than twenty or thirty miles."

Later in the night, with a good ten miles of swamp country between him and the enemy, Terrence called a halt on a slightly raised spot of almost dry ground. The unwearied Greenbacks and the exhausted Terrans dropped down in huddled groups. The patrols that had penetrated to the edge of the swamp came in to report that they had contacted no Rumi ahead. Terrence munched a can of cold beans and fell over in an exhausted sleep to the sound of

O'Shaughnessy placing sentries about the camp.

THE next day's march was a nightmare to the lieutenant. If anything, the heat and humidity were worse in the swamps than they had been in Dust Bin and the going got tougher every mile. The mud was softer and the undergrowth had to be cut away by bayonet-wielding Narakans before the main body could move through. Terrence had thrown off his battle armor and lost his radiation helmet somewhere in the morass as had other of the Earthmen. Hannigan had prepared a thick mess of mud and grass which the Terrans applied to exposed parts of their bodies.

Late in the afternoon of the second day the Nakan Rifles came to a tepid little stream that marked the end of the swamps, and for the first time Terrence ordered a rest of longer than two hours. Bill Fielding was lying flat on his back in the grass beside the stream with his feet dangling in the water, shoes and all, when O'Mara dragged himself wearily back from inspecting the pickets and flopped down beside him.

"If I never to my dying day see another speck of mud," Fielding muttered as he ate a bar of tropical chocolate that was as mud covered as he was, "I'll still have seen more than all the Fieldings for two hundred years back have seen on Earth and Mars."

"And now," said Terrence as he eased over on his back with a heavy sigh, "that we have run out of mud, we can start looking for Rumi."

"At least it'll be a change! Here Kitty! Here kitty! Nice Rumi! Come and get a bayonet in . . ."

Clack, clack, clack. The sound of spring guns broke the stillness of the afternoon and was followed by the sound of rifles and a cry of pain.

"Oh, Lord!" moaned O'Mara, "now it starts!" He was on his feet, gripping his carbine and running bent over. Fielding was at his heels, dragging a machine gun off the ground.

"O'Shaughnessy! Hannigan! Take the first platoon. Move up to support the pickets. O'Toole! On the double! Take your

squad and try to get around the firing. Bill, you and Polasky stand by here with the rest of the men and the Bannings."

Terrence had plunged into the stream and splashed across and was clambering up the opposite bank when one of his pickets came crawling and stumbling back clutching a wounded arm. "Mr. Lieutenant! Mr. Lieutenant! Rumi! Rumi! Many Rumi up ahead! Sullivan and O'Leary dead! Rumi get!"

"Medic! Medic!" O'Shaughnessy was yelling in his ear with the full-throated croak of an adult Narakan, drowning out what the wounded picket was trying to say.

"How many? How many Rumi, man?" Terrence demanded.

"Twenty . . . thirty . . . maybe thousand!" the Narakan gasped as the Medic led him off.

"'Twenty, thirty, maybe thousand.' That gives us a damn fine idea of what we're up against!"

While his men dragged their big bodies up the bank of the stream, O'Mara stood scowling at the eight foot high grass. Usually about a foot high, the hardy and ubiquitous purple grass of Naraka grew far more lushly around the edges of the swamps. He felt that it would be a risky business at best to plunge into it after an unknown number of enemy. At the same time he had an illogical determination not to leave the bodies of his men in the hands of the Rumi. He looked at the broad, big-mouthed exaggerations of Irish faces around him, heaved a sigh that came from deep in his chest and ordered, "All right, men. Spread out. Keep low and keep your eyes open. And try not to shoot each other."

"We fix bayonets now, Lieutenant, sir?" Hannigan asked.

"You keep your eyes open, Sergeant," Terrence snapped, "I'll tell you when to fix bayonets."

The noisy rustling of his men's heavy bodies as they pushed through the grass made him nervous and irritable. Then suddenly, just as they were edging their way around a gully, a dozen Rumi were swarming down on them. Terrence cut down two with his carbine but his men were firing and missing as the incredibly fast catmen hurtled at them. He had a brief glimpse of O'Shaughnessy spraying submachine gun

slugs wildly about and then there was a hail of spring bolts and two of his men were down. The whole platoon was thrashing through the grass in their direction and the Rumi were gone as quickly as they had come.

"Come on!" Terrence shouted, breaking into a run with twenty or thirty Riflemen after him. A bolt grazed his cheek and another cut down a man to his right. He emptied his carbine in the general direction of the Clack, Clack, Clack. Hannigan was roaring a primitive bull-throated chant and firing at everything that moved. O'Shaughnessy managed to jam his gun and was beating frantically at it with one webbed fist. They burst into a clearing filled with Rumi and both sides blazed away at point blank range. It was hard for even a Narakan to miss at that close range and the Rumi broke and ran just as Sergeant O'Toole and his squad came out of the grass on the other side of the clearing.

The Rumi, trapped, turned and dashed at Terrence and his men. The lieutenant drove his fist into one cat faced creature and smashed his empty gun across the head of another. Hannigan grappled with one of the lithe gray-bodied things and slowly crushed it beneath his 350 odd pounds. O'Shaughnessy beat another insensible with his jammed Tommy gun. Several Narakans were down but most of them had taken Rumi with them.

Terrence was knocked off his feet by a gray ball of fury that leaped at him wielding a stiletto-thin knife. He caught at the Rumi's arm with both hands but the creature was not only fast but strong. It twisted out of his grasp and slashed at him and only a quick sideward roll saved him. Desperately he brought his fist down on his assailant's head.

The Rumi's grip relaxed slightly and Terrence drove his fist full into its face and locked his legs about its waist. The catman couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and fifty pounds but all of it was wiry strength. It clawed at him now, ripping his protective clothing and gashing his legs, meanwhile trying to get its knife into play. He was vaguely conscious that his men had disposed of the rest of the Rumi and were dancing around him frantically trying to

get a chance to aid him. He was struck by the incongruity of a civilized being descended from simian ancestors and a civilized being descended from feline ancestors fighting fang and claw while a bunch of misplaced amphibians danced about them.

Making his weight count he suddenly twisted and hurled the Rumi under him but something hit him a terrific blow on the back of the head and blackness closed in.

V

O'MARA awoke with a head that felt like all the hangovers of a misspent life.

"Have a nice rest?" Bill Fielding asked.

Terrence reached a weak hand to the back of his head and felt bandages. "Did I catch a spring bolt?" he asked.

Bill grinned, "Well, no. Not exactly. It was more on the order of Private O'Hara's rifle butt. He was trying to hit the Rumi you were necking with."

"I might have known," Terrence groaned.

"We lost six men but recovered all the bodies except for one. We've got four wounded . . . litter cases. Thought you were going to make it five for a while."

"Well, they won't slow us down too much. We still have about a hundred and fifty miles to go. We'll camp here for the night and move out at dawn."

Marching in the early morning and resting in the heat of the day before another afternoon march, the Narakan Rifles covered another fifty miles of the distance to Fort Craven without incident but not without signs of Rumi. Twice they came on recently occupied camps and once they caught sight of a Rumi patrol moving parallel to their own line of march.

The next morning, which was blistering and cloudless, they were only seventy miles from the Fort.

"Maybe we ought to give the radio another try." Terrence decided. "We're close enough to have a chance of getting through now."

Polasky set up the field radio.

"Hello, Balliwick. Hello, Balliwick. This is Apple Three Three. Can you read me? Come in, please."

O'Mara and Fielding sat and listened while he repeated the call a dozen or more

times. His only answer was the heavy static that Beta produced in most electronic instruments. The same static that made radar and space scanners all but useless, that limited aircraft to the big dirigibles and weapons to old fashioned rifles and machine guns.

"I guess we'll know what's going on when we get there!" Terrence said. He wiped his forehead with his arm, noticing that the heavily caked mud was beginning to crack off. He would be in for a bad case of sun poisoning probably.

A rare breeze had sprung up and drifting down it from the west came the sound of gunfire. As one man, everyone in the camp stiffened.

"Did you hear that?" demanded Fielding.

"I think I hear a Banning," Polasky said, "Sounds like it's coming from in back of us . . . off to the west."

"From what our scouts have been able to pick up, that's the general direction that the Rumi have been moving," Terrence said.

"But there's nothing over that way. What in hell could they be attacking?" Fielding was on his feet, looking off in the direction from which the sounds were coming.

Terrence was aware of an increasingly uneasy feeling. He got to his feet and picked up his gear. "The sounds could be deceiving. We might as well get moving. It isn't going to get much cooler before nightfall."

AN HOUR later they were hotly engaged with a large force of Rumi. Rumi armed for the first time with heavier weapons, mortar-like guns that hurled pods of smothering dust that caused almost instant strangulation. Rumi who attacked suddenly, giving them time only to drop to the ground and set up the Bannings and machine guns before three hundred howling fiends came charging through the grass at a dead run, firing as they came.

O'Mara was behind a machine gun and Fielding and Polasky each had a Banning in action. They met the Rumi charge with a withering hail of lead and fire. The Narakans lying as flat as their huge chests would allow them were firing as fast as the automatic rifles would fire. The Bannings swept the line of charging figures. As the beams paused for a moment, the charge would take effect and a ball of fire would mushroom

skyward, leaving a dozen seared cat bodies on the ground. Terrence swept his machine gun along in a swath behind the Bannings, picking off what they left. Some dozen catmen made it to within ten yards of their front but sprawled still or lay kicking briefly until a Greenback put another bullet into him.

The Rumi were gone, withdrawing to the west and Terrence was yelling and cursing at his men to keep them from breaking ranks and following them. Three Riflemen and O'Toole were dead and Sergeant Polasky was coughing out his life beside his Banning with a spring gun bolt in his stomach.

"Those damn cats!" he was muttering when O'Mara reached him, "Those damn cats. We showed 'em, didn't we, Lieutenant? That Banning's a good gun if you . . ."

They buried the Greenbacks in eight foot graves and the Earthman in a seven foot one. "Those dirty, lousy, stinking . . ." Bill Fielding was beating his fist into the palm of his hand. "We got one of them alive this time, Terrence. Hannigan knows a little of their lingo. His old man escaped from one of their breeding pens on the other side of the Muddy. He's working him over."

In the twenty odd years that Terrans and Rumi had occupied different halves of the same planet, the number of men who had learned the Rumi language wouldn't have filled a small room. So Terrence was surprised at Bill's information and hurried toward the place where the interrogation was taking place. Before he got there, he heard a piercing cat cry which ended in a gurgle and when he reached the group of Greenbacks, Hannigan was wiping his bayonet on the grass. He stood looking down at a Rumi officer whose throat was neatly slit from furry ear to furry ear. Then fists clenched on his hips, he confronted his men.

"I don't suppose it ever occurred to you bunch of dimwits that we might have gotten some information out of this guy. He might have talked, you know."

"He talk," grinned Hannigan, "He talk plenty. He feared we might hurt him. We tell him no hurt if he talk. . . . Ha!"

"He say big flyship down, Mr. Lieuten-

ant" said O'Shaughnessy.

"What? What do you mean?" demanded O'Mara.

"Flyship . . . *Sun Maid* crash in storm. . . . Rumi find."

"Good God! The *Sun Maid*!" Terrence gasped, "That storm the first night!"

"They surround and attack Terrans. These ones on way to join attack when meet us," O'Shaughnessy went on.

"He tell where ship down," Hannigan said, "It near bend in Big Muddy . . . place I know. Ten, twenty mile back."

The Greenbacks were watching the Terrans, fingering their bayonets eagerly and hugging their rifles. Terrence had the impression that they were beginning to like their jobs. He turned to Bill Fielding, "Well, Bill, it looks like we came about twenty miles too far."

Bill grinned, "Yep, I guess so. Come on, soldiers, fall in. We got work to do back here a piece."

A two hour's forced march with the sun beating down and the sound of firing growing closer. Only a column of Greenbacks could have done it and only a crazy Irishman would have asked them to. They came up over a rise and looked down a gentle slope toward the brown twisting snake that was the Big Muddy. On its banks lay the broken shape of the airship and swarming across a burned circle around it were Rumi, thousands of them. The firing had slackened in the last few minutes and now they could see why. The Rumi were assaulting and were at close grips with the ring of defending Terrans.

"Now?" questioned O'Shaughnessy, "We fix bayonets now?"

"Yes," replied Terrence, "now we fix bayonets."

At his word three hundred big clumsy hands reached for three hundred bayonets and fixed them to three hundred rifles.

"O'Shea, take O'Toole's squad and stand by up here with the Bannings, O'Shaughnessy, take the left flank, Bill, you take the right. Let's go!"

There wasn't a sound out of the Rifles as they started down the hill, none of their usual croakings and bellowings, just silence and the heavy thud of their feet. The Rumi had seen them. Many of those in the

rear of the attack were swinging about to face them. Spring gun bolts began to whiz in their direction. One or two Narakans fell. They were closer to the struggle now, closer to the tightly packed Rumi and the hand to hand struggle about the *Sun Maid*.

Terrence was firing, throwing lead into the gray-bodied mass ahead of him but his men were just thundering along with their little black eyes fixed on their old oppressors, bayonets leveled in front of them in approved training school method. They resembled nothing so much as a regiment of tanks hurtling at an enemy. The momentum of their charge carried them half way through the Rumi ranks, the terrific force of the plunging amphibians bowling over the lighter catmen.

Bayonets, clubbed rifle and heavy webbed fist fought against claw, teeth and knife. There was almost no firing, almost no sound save for the cries of the Rumi and an occasional cheer from the Terrans.

Terrence emptied his Tommy gun, hurled it in the face of a Rumi and reached for his knife and automatic. A Rumi knocked him off his feet with the butt end of a spring gun but before he could do more, Hannigan stepped over his lieutenant and plunged his bayonet into the catman. The Irishman scrambled to his feet amidst the gray furry bodies, thrust his .45 into a snarling face and pulled the trigger. The face disappeared but another took its place and he fired again. A Rumi with a knife grabbed at him from behind and he raised his pistol again but the cat was already down with a bayonet between his shoulders.

The Greenbacks were yelling now, lifting those great voices of theirs in full throated bullfrog croaks. The Rumi, trapped and desperate, were scattering and trying to flee down river. O'Mara stumbled over a barricade of rocks and boxes and almost got a Terran slug in him before he realized that they had cut their way through to the broken ship. He was up in a minute and urging his men on after the scattering enemy. Twenty or thirty of them tried to make a stand around a tall Rumi officer but O'Shaughnessy at the head of a wedge of Narakans swept into them at a full run.

Their bayonets flashed for a few seconds and then flashed no more, the steel was covered with blood. A few hundred Rumi made it to the river under a hail of fire from O'Shea and his squad on the hill. Hardly pausing to consider their cat-like aversion to water, most of them plunged in and struck out for the other shore. The rest were cut down on the bank by onrushing Greenbacks. Terrence grabbed hold of one of his buglers and then had to practically beat the man over the head to get him to sound Recall.

Bill Fielding picked his way among the bodies and came toward Terrence holding his left arm. O'Shaughnessy was leaping up and down and waving his fist across the river.

"Things different now! All different now! One Greenback better than four, five, eight Rumi!"

"At least that many," Terrence said under his breath before he roared at O'Shaughnessy. "Fall the men in on the double now! We're going to march back to the *Sun Maid* in proper military style."

There was a blowing of sergeant's whistles, the shouting of corporals, and the Narakans slowly formed ranks. Some were missing and others were limping and holding wounds but they stepped out smartly as the column headed back up the river. Every rifle was at the correct slope, every man was in step as they marched through the makeshift barricade and past where Chapelle was standing. The drum and bugle corps struck up *The Wearing of the Green* just as O'Mara shouted, "Eyes Right!" and every eye swung right in perfect unison. A tattered and weary Chapelle brought a surprised hand up to salute and the Narakans came to a snappy halt.

A small, black haired figure threw itself at Terrence and his arms were again holding Joan Allen. "I knew you'd come," she said, "Only a big, crazy Irishman like you could do it."

He kissed her and then pressed his mud-caked face against hers as he said into her ear, "Only three hundred big, crazy Irishmen, baby. There's not a drop of anything else in me boys."



Corporal
Rodolfo P. Hernandez, U.S. Army
Medal of Honor

0200 HOURS! Suddenly the pre-dawn blackness on Hill 420 split into crashing geysers of flame. Yelling, firing, hurling grenades, a horde of Reds pushed up the hill toward G Company.

A hot fire fight began, lasting several hours. Finally, suffering heavy casualties, G Company began to withdraw. Corporal Hernandez stayed, throwing grenades and firing his remaining rounds.

Then his M-1 jammed. Fixing his bayonet, he leaped out of his foxhole and disappeared in the darkness toward the attacking Reds. They found him in the morning, wounded, ringed with enemy dead. But he had stopped the attack—*alone*.

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MARS MINUS BISHA

By LEIGH BRACKETT

Fanatic Tribesmen might easily have expunged the lone Earthman from the face of the Martian desert. Instead, they bequeathed to him Bisha . . . Bisha—the unwanted; Bisha—the unnatural.

IT WAS close on midnight. Both moons were out of the sky, and there was only blackness below and the mighty blaze of stars above, and between them the old wind dragging its feet in the dust. The Quonset stood by itself, a half mile or so from the canal bank and the town that was on it. Fraser looked at it, thinking what an alien intrusion both it and he were in this place, and wondering if he could stick out the four and a half months still required of him.

The town slept. There was no help for him there. An official order had been given, and so he was tolerated. But he was not welcome. Except in the big trading cities, Earthmen were unwelcome almost anywhere on Mars. It was a lonesome deal.

Fraser began to walk again. He walked a lot at night. The days were ugly and depressing and he spent them inside, working. But the nights were glorious. Not even the driest desert of Earth could produce a sky like this, where the thin air hardly dimmed the lustre of the stars. It was the one thing he would miss when he went home.

He walked, dressed warmly against the bitter chill. He brooded, and he watched the stars. He thought about his diminishing whiskey supply and the one hundred and forty-six centuries of written history gone into the dust that blew and tortured his sinuses, and after a while he saw the shadow, the dark shape that moved against the wind, silent, purposeful, and swift.

Out of the northern desert someone was riding.

For the space of three heartbeats Fraser stood rigid and frozen, squinting through the darkness and the starshine at that mov-

ing shape. Then he turned and ran for the Quonset. He was not allowed to possess a weapon, and if some of the fanatic northern tribesmen had decided to come and cleanse their desert of his defiling presence, there was little he could do but bar the door and pray.

He did not go inside, just yet. It was unwise to show fear until you had to. He stood by the open door, outside the stream of light that poured from it. He waited, tensed for that final leap.

There was only a single rider, mounted on one of the big scaly beasts the Martian nomads use as the Earthly desert-folk use camels. Fraser relaxed a little, but not too much. One man with a spear could be enough. The stranger came slowly into the light, wrapped and muffled against the night, curbing with a strong hand the uneasy hissings and shyings of the beast at the unfamiliar smells that came to it from the Quonset. Fraser leaned forward, and suddenly the weakness of relief came over him. The rider was a woman, and she carried before her on the saddle pad a child, almost hidden in the folds of her cloak.

Fraser gave her the courteous Martian greeting. She looked down at him, tall and fierce-eyed, hating and yet somehow desperate, and presently she said, "You are the Earthman, the doctor."

"Yes."

The child slept, its head lolled back against the woman's body. There was something unnatural in the way it slept, undisturbed by the light or the voices. Fraser said gently, "I am here only to help."

The woman's arm tightened around the child. She looked at Fraser, and then in through the open door at the unfamiliar



alien things that were there. Her face, made grim and hard by hunger and long marches, and far too proud for weeping, crumpled suddenly toward tears. She lifted the bridle-chain and swung the beast around, but before he had gone his own length she curbed him again. When she had turned once more toward Fraser she was calm as stone.

"My child is—ill," she said, very quietly, hesitating over that one word.

Fraser held up his arms. "I'll see what I can do."

The child—a girl. Fraser saw now, perhaps seven years old—did not stir even when she was lifted down from the saddle pad. Fraser started to carry her inside, saying over his shoulder to the woman, "I'll need to ask some questions. You can watch while I examine—"

A wild harsh cry and a thunder of padded hoofs drowned out his words. He whirled around, and then he ran a little way, shouting, with the child in his arms, but it was no use. The woman was bent low in the saddle, urging the beast on with that frantic cry, digging in the spurs, and in a minute she was gone, back into the desert and the night. Fraser stood staring after her open-mouthed, and swearing, and looking helplessly at the girl. There was an ominous finality about the way the woman had left. Why? Even if the child was dying, wouldn't a mother wait to know? Even if the sickness was contagious, would she ride the Lord knew how many miles across the desert with her, and then run?

THERE were no answers to those questions. Fraser gave up and went into the Quonset, kicking the door shut behind him. Passing through his combination living-quarters and office, he went into the tiny infirmary which adjoined his equally small but well-equipped lab. Neither office nor infirmary had had many customers. The Martians preferred their own methods, their own healers. Fraser was not supposed anyway to be the local G.P. The Medical Foundation grant and the order of the Martian authorities permitting him to be here both stated that he was engaged in research on certain viruses. Non-cooperation of the populace had not made his work any easier.

He became suddenly hopeful about the child.

Some two hours later he put her, still sleeping, into the neat white bed and sat down in the room outside, where he could watch her through the open door. He had a drink, and then another, and lighted a cigarette with hands that had trouble putting flame and tip together.

She was sound as a dollar. Thin, a bit undersized and undernourished like most Martian youngsters, but healthy. There was nothing whatever the matter with her, except that someone had thoroughly drugged her.

Fraser rose and flung open the outer door. He went out, staring with a kind of desperation into the north, straining his ears for a sound of hoofs. Dawn was not far off. The wind was rising, thickening the lower air with dust, dimming the stars. Out on the desert nothing moved, nor was there any sound.

For the rest of that night and most of the morning that came after it, Fraser sat unmoving by the child's bed, waiting for her to wake.

She did it quietly. One moment her face was as it had been, remote and secret, and in the next she had opened her eyes. Her small body stirred and stretched, she yawned, and then she looked at Fraser, very solemnly but without surprise. He smiled and said, "Hello."

She sat up, a dark and shaggy-haired young person, with eyes the color of topaz, and the customary look of premature age and wisdom that the children of Mars share with the children of the Earthly East. She asked hesitantly, "My mother—?"

"She had to go away for a while," Fraser said, and added with false assurance, "but she'll be back soon." He was comforting himself as much as the child.

She took even that shred of hope from him. "No," she said, "She will not come back." She laid her head between her knees and began to cry, not making any fuss about it. Fraser put his arm around her.

"Here," he said. "Here now, don't do that. Of course she'll come back for you, she's your mother."

"She can't."

"But why? Why did she bring you here?"

"You're not sick, you don't need a doctor."

The child said simply, "They were going to kill me."

Fraser was silent for a long time. Then he said, "What?"

The thin shoulders quivered under his arm. "They said I made the sickness that was in our tribe. The Old Men came, all together, and they told my father and mother I had to be killed. The Old Men are very powerful in magic, but they said they could not make me clean." She broke off, choking over a sob. "My mother said it was her right to do the thing, and she took me way off into the desert. She cried. She never did that before. I was frightened, and then she told me she wasn't going to hurt me, she was going to take me where I would be safe. She gave me some bitter water to drink, and told me not to be afraid. She talked to me until I went to sleep."

She looked up at Fraser, a frightened and bewildered little girl, and yet with a dignity about her, too.

"My mother said our gods have cursed me, and I would never be safe with my own people any more. But she said Earthmen have different gods, who wouldn't know me. She said you wouldn't kill me. Is that true?"

Fraser said something under his breath, and then he told her, "Yes. That's true. Your mother is a wise woman. She brought you to the right place." His face had become perfectly white. He stepped back from the bed and asked, "What's your name?"

"Bisha."

"Are you hungry, Bisha?"

She hesitated, still gulping down sobs. "I don't know."

"You think about it. Your clothes are there—put them on. I'll fix some breakfast."

He went out into the next room, sick and shaking with a rage such as he had never experienced before. Superstition, ignorance, the pious cruelty of the savage. Get an epidemic going, and when the magic of the Old Man fails, find a scapegoat. Call a child accursed, and send its own mother out to slaughter it. Mentally, Fraser bowed to the fierce-eyed woman who had been too tough for those cowardly old men. Poor devil, only the certainty of death could

have made her abandon her child to an Earthman—a creature alien and unknown, but having different gods—

"Why would they curse me?" asked Bisha, close behind him. "Our gods, I mean." Dressing was an easy proposition for her, with one thick garment to pull over her head, and sandals for her feet. Her hair hung over her face and the tears still dripped, and now her nose was running, and Fraser didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "They didn't," he said, and picked her up. "It's only superstitious nonsense—"

He stopped. That was not going to do. Seven years, a lifetime of training and belief, were not going to be wiped out by a few words from a stranger. He stood scowling, trying hard to think of a way to reach her, and then he became aware that she was looking at him with a child's intense and wondering stare, sitting quite stiffly in his arms. He asked, "Are you afraid of me?"

"I—I've never seen anyone like you before."

"Hm. And you've never seen a house like this one, either."

She glanced around, and shook her head. "No. It's—" She had no words for what it was, only a shiver of awe.

Fraser smiled. "Bisha, you told me the Old Men of your tribe were very powerful in magic."

"Oh, yes!"

He set her down and took her hand firmly in his. "I'm going to show you a few things. Come on."

He didn't know whether child psychologists and other ethical persons would approve of his method, but it was the only one he could think of. With the imposing air of one performing wonders, he introduced the child of the nomad tents to the miracles of modern gadgetry, from running water to recorded music and micro-books. As a climax, he permitted her to peer in through the door of the laboratory, at the mystic and glittering tangle of glass and chrome. And he asked her, "Are your Old Men greater in magic than I?"

"No." She had drawn away from him, her hands clutched tightly around her as though to avoid the accident of touching anything. Behind her from the living quarters Wagner's Fire Music still roared and

rippled, out of a tiny spool of wire. Suddenly Bisha was down on her knees in an attitude of complete submission. "You are the greatest doctor in the world."

Her word for "doctor" meant the same as "shaman." Fraser felt contrite and ashamed. It seemed a shabby trick to impress a child. But he stuck to it, saying solemnly,

"Very well, Bisha. And now that that is understood, I tell you that curses have no power in this place, and I want no more talk of them."

She listened, not raising her head.

"You are safe here. You are not to be afraid. Look up at me, Bisha. Do you promise not to be afraid?"

She looked up. He smiled, and after a little she smiled back. "I promise."

"Good," he said, and held out his hand. "Let's eat."

ABOUT then it dawned on Fraser that he was saddled with a child. For the four and a half months that remained of his term here he would have to feed, look after her and keep her hidden. The people of the town would hardly shelter her—Bisha's mother hadn't trusted them, certainly—and if they did, the nomads would only find her again when they came in for the fall trading. The only other alternative was the central government at Karappa, which would surely not condone ritual murder, but that was three hundred miles away. He had a trac-car, but the work going forward in the lab would not wait for him to trundle a slow six hundred miles up and down the desert. He could not possibly leave it.

Four and a half months. He looked down at the small figure pattering beside him, and wondered what in the devil he was going to do with her all that time.

At the end of a week he would have been lost without her. The awful loneliness and isolation of the Quonset was gone. There was another voice in the place, another presence, somebody to sit across the table from him, somebody to talk to. Bisha was no trouble. She had been brought up not to be a trouble, in a hard school where survival was the supreme lesson, and that same school had impressed on her young mind the wisdom of making the best of

things. She was no trouble at all. She was company, the first he had had in nearly nine months. He liked her.

Mostly she was cheerful and alert, too much engrossed in a new world of marvels to brood about the past. But she had her moods. Fraser found her one afternoon huddled in a corner, dull and spiritless, in the depths of a depression that seemed almost too deep for tears. He thought he knew what the trouble was. He took her on his lap and said, "Are you lonesome, Bisha?"

She whispered, "Yes."

He tried to talk to her. It was like talking to a blank wall. At last he said helplessly, "Try not to miss them too much, Bisha. I know I'm not the same as your own family, and this place is strange to you, but try."

"You're good," she murmured. "I like you. It isn't that. I was lonesome before, sometimes."

"Lonesome for what, Bisha?"

"I don't know. Just—lonesome."

Queer little tyke, thought Fraser, but then most kids are queer to adult eyes, full of emotions so new and untried that they don't know quite how to come out. And no wonder she's depressed. In her spot, who wouldn't be?

He put her to bed early, and then, feeling unusually tired after a long day's work, he turned in himself.

He was awakened by Bisha, shaking him, sobbing, calling his name. Leaden and half dazed, he started up in alarm, asking her what was the matter, and she whimpered, "I was afraid. You didn't wake up."

"What do you mean, I didn't wake up?" He sank back again, weighted down with the sleep he had not finished, and began to bawl her out. Then he happened to look at the clock.

He had slept a trifle over fourteen hours.

Mechanically he patted Bisha and begged her pardon. He tried to think, and his brain was wrapped in layers of cotton wool, dull, lethargic. He had had one drink before going to bed, not enough to put anyone out for one hour, let alone fourteen. He had not done anything physically exhausting. He had been tired, but nothing the usual eight hours wouldn't cure. Something was

wrong, and a small pinpoint of fear began to prick him.

He asked, "How long have you been trying to wake me?"

She pointed to a chair that stood beside the window. "When I began, its shadow was there. Now it is there."

As near as he could figure, about two hours. Not sleep, then. Semi-coma. The pinprick became a knife blade.

Bisha said, so low that he could hardly hear her, "It is the sickness that was in our tribe. I have brought it to you."

"You might have, at that," Fraser muttered. He had begun to shiver, from the onset of simple panic. He was so far away from help. It would be so easy to die here, walled in by the endless miles of desert.

The child had withdrawn herself from him. "You see," she said, "the curse has followed me."

With an effort, Fraser got hold of himself. "It hasn't anything to do with curses. There are people we call carriers— Listen, Bisha, you've got to help me. This sickness—did any of your tribesmen die of it?"

"No—"

Fraser trembled even more violently, this time from sheer relief. "Well, then, it's not so bad, is it? How does it—"

"The Old Men said they *would* die unless I was taken away and killed." She had retreated even farther now, to the other side of the room, to the door. Suddenly she turned and ran.

It was a minute before Fraser's numbed brain understood. Then he staggered up and followed her, out into the dust and the cold light, shouting her name. He saw her, a tiny figure running between the blue-black sky and the dull red desolation, and he ran too, fighting the weakness and the lassitude that were on him. He seemed to run for hours with the chill wind and the dust, and then he overtook her. She struggled, begging to be let go, and he smacked her. After that she was quiet. He picked her up, and she wailed, "I don't want you to die!"

Fraser looked out across the pitiless desert and held her tight. "Do you love me that much, Bisha?"

"I have eaten your bread, and your roof has sheltered me—" The old ceremonial

phrases learned from her elders sounded odd in her young mouth, but perfectly sincere. "You are my family now, my mother and my father. I don't want my curse to fall on you."

For a moment Fraser found it hard to speak. Then he said gently, "Bisha, is your wisdom greater than mine?"

She shook her head.

"Is it your right to question it?"

"No."

"What is your right, Bisha, as a child?"

"To obey."

"You are never to do this again. Never, no matter what happens, are you to run away from me. Do you hear me, Bisha?"

She looked up at him. "You're not afraid of the curse, even now?"

"Not now, or any other time."

"You *want* me to stay?"

"Of course I do, you poor wretched little idiot!"

She smiled, gravely, with the queer dignity he had seen in her before. "You are a very great doctor," she said. "You will find a way to lift the curse. I'm not afraid, now."

SHE lay warm and light in the circle of his arms, and he carried her back to the Quonset, walking slowly, talking all the way. It was odd talk, in that time and place. It was about a far-off city called San Francisco, and a white house on a cliff that looked out over a great bay of blue water. It was about trees and birds and fishes and green hills, and all the things a little girl could do among them and be happy. In the past few minutes Fraser had forgotten Karappa and the authorities of Mars. In the past few minutes he had acquired a family.

Back in the lab Fraser began work. He questioned Bisha about the sickness as she had seen it in her tribe. Apparently the seizures came at irregular intervals and involved nothing more than the comatose sleep, but he gathered that the periods of unconsciousness had been much shorter, often no more than a few minutes. That could be accounted for by acquired resistance on the part of the Martians. Bisha, of course, had never had the sickness, and Fraser imagined that the accident of natural

immunity had caused her to be picked for the tribal scapegoat.

His own symptoms were puzzling. No temperature, no pain, no physical derangement, only the lassitude and weakness, and by next morning they had passed off. He consulted his books on Martian pathology. There was nothing in them. He ran a series of exhaustive tests, even to a spinal tap on Bisha, which she took to be a very potent ritual of exorcism. He would rather have done one on himself, but that was impossible, and there might be evidence in the child of some latent organism.

The test was negative. All the tests were negative. He and Bisha both were as healthy as horses.

Baffled but intensely relieved, Fraser began to think of other explanations for the ailment. It was not a disease, so it must be a side-effect of some physical condition, perhaps the light gravitation or pressure, or the thin atmosphere, or all three, that affected Martians as well as Earthmen, but in a lesser degree. He made a detailed report, thrusting into the back of his mind as a small worry that no such side-effect had ever been observed before.

He waited nervously for a recurrence. It didn't come, and as the work in the lab demanded more and more of his attention he began to forget about it. The time that he woke up in his chair with an untasted drink beside him and no memory of having gone to sleep he put down resolutely to weariness and overwork. Bisha had retired with another fit of the blues, so she knew nothing about that, and he didn't mention it. She seemed to be getting over the curse fixation, and he wanted to keep it that way.

More time went by. Bisha was learning English, and she could name all the trees that stood around that house in San Francisco. The confinement in the small hut was getting them both down, and she was as anxious to leave as Fraser, but apart from that everything was going well.

And then the nomads came in from the desert for the fall trading.

Fraser barred the doors and drew the blinds. For the three days and nights of the trading he and Bisha hid inside, with the distant sound of the pipes and the shouting coming to them muffled but poignant, the

music and the voices of Bisha's own people, her own family among the tribes. They were hard days. At the end of them Bisha retired again into the remoteness of her private grief, and Fraser let her alone. On the fourth morning the nomads were gone.

Fraser thanked whatever gods there were. Weary and dragged out, he went into the lab, hating the work now because it took so much out of him, anxious to have it finished. He started across the room to open the blind—

He was lying on the floor. The lights were on and it was night. Bisha was beside him. She seemed to have been there a long time. His arm ached. There were clumsy wrappings on it, stained with blood. Shards of glass littered the end of the lab bench and the floor. The familiar leaden numbness pervaded his whole body. It was hard to move, hard to think. Bisha crept to him and laid her head on his chest, silently, like a dog.

Very slowly Fraser's head cleared, and thoughts came into it. *I must have fallen across the bench. Good God, what if I had broken the virus cultures? Not only us, the whole town—I might have bled to death, and what would happen to Bisha? Suppose I did die, what would happen to her?*

It took longer this time to return to normal. He stitched up the cuts in his arm, and the job was not neat. He was afraid. He was afraid to leave his chair, afraid to smoke, afraid to operate the stove. The hours crawled by, the rest of the night, another day, another evening. He felt better, but fear had grown into desperation. He had only Bisha's word that this illness was not fatal. He began to distrust his own tests, postulating alien organisms unrecognizable to the medical science he knew. He was afraid for himself. He was terrified for Bisha.

He said abruptly, "I am going into the town."

"Then I will come with you."

"No. You'll stay right here. I'll be all right. There is a doctor in the town, a Martian healer. He may know—"

He went out, into the bitter darkness and the blazing of the stars. It seemed a long way to the town.

He passed the irrigated land, stripped

of its harvest, and came into the narrow streets. The town was not old as they go on Mars, but the mud brick of the walls had been patched and patched again, fighting a losing battle with the dry wind and the scouring dust. There were few people abroad. They looked at Fraser and passed him by, swarthy folk, hot-eyed and perpetually desperate. The canal was their god, their mother and their father, their child and their wife. Out of its dark channel they drew life, painfully, drop by drop. They did not remember who had cut it, all the long miles from the polar cap across the dead sea-bottoms, across the deserts and through the tunnels underneath the hills. They only knew that it was there, and that it was better for a man to sin the foulest sin than to neglect the duty that was on him to keep the channel clear. A cruel life, and yet they lived it, and were content.

There were no torches to light the streets, but Fraser knew the house he wanted. The door of corroded metal opened reluctantly to his knock and closed swiftly behind him. The room was small, lit by a smoky lamp and barely warmed by a fire of roots, but on the walls there were tapestries of incalculable age and incredible value.

TOR-ESH, the man of healing, did well at his trade. His robe was threadbare, but his belly protruded and his chops were plump, unusual things among his lean people. He was fetish-priest, oracle, and physician, and he was the only man of the town who had shown any interest in Fraser and his work. It was not necessarily a friendly interest. He gave Fraser the traditional greeting, and Fraser said stiffly,

"I need your help. I have contracted an illness—"

Tor-Esh listened. His eyes were shrewd and penetrating, and the smile that was habitually on his face left them untouched. As Fraser talked, even that pretense of a smile went gradually away.

When he was finished, Tor-Esh said, "Again. More slowly, please, your Martian is not always clear."

"But do you know what it is? Can you tell me—"

Tor-Esh said, "Again!"

Fraser repeated the things he had said,

trying not to show the fear that was in him. Tor-Esh asked questions. Accurate questions. Fraser answered them. For a little bit Tor-Esh was silent, heavy-faced and grim in the flickering light, and Fraser waited with his heart pounding in his throat.

Tor-Esh said slowly, "You are not ill. But unless a certain thing is done, you will surely die."

Fraser spoke in anger. "Talk sense! A healthy man doesn't fall off his feet. A healthy man doesn't die, except by accident."

"In some ways," said Tor-Esh very softly, "we are an ignorant people. It is not because we have not learned. It is because we have forgotten."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean— Look, I came to you for help. This is something I don't understand, something I can't cope with."

"Yes." Tor-Esh moved to the window, dark in the thickness of the wall. "Have you thought of the canal? Not only this one, but the many canals that bind Mars in a great net. Have you thought how they must have been built? The machines, the tremendous power that would have been needed, to make a dying world live yet a little longer. We are the children of the men who conceived and built them, and yet nothing is left to us but the end product of their work, and we must grub with our hands in the channel, digging out the blown sand."

"I know," said Fraser impatiently. "I've studied Martian history. But what—"

"Many centuries," said Tor-Esh, as though he had not heard. "Nations and empires, wars and pestilences, and kings beyond the counting. Learning. Science. Growth and splendor, and weariness, and decay. Oceans have rolled away into dust, the mountains have fallen down, and the sources of power are used up. Can you conceive, you who come from a young world, how many races have evolved on Mars?"

He turned to face the Earthman. "You have come with your thundering ships, your machines and your science, giving the lie to our gods, who we thought had created no other men but us. You look upon us as degraded and without knowledge—and yet you too are an ignorant people, not be-

cause you have forgotten, but because you have not yet learned. There are many sciences, many kinds of knowledge. There have been races on Mars who could build the canals. There were others who could see without eyes and hear without ears, who could control the elements and cause men to live or die as they willed it, who were so powerful that they were stamped out because men feared them. They are forgotten now, but their blood is still in us. Destruction of a people is never complete. We few who are left are blended into one race, but their blood is in us. And sometimes a child is born—"

Fraser stiffened.

Tor-Esh said quietly, "There was talk among the nomads about a child."

Nerves, drawing tight in Fraser's belly. Fear-nerves, and a chill sweat. *I never mentioned Bisha. How could he know—*

"I'm not interested in folk lore. Just tell me—"

"There was a certain evil in the tribe. When the child was taken away, the evil departed. Now it is in your house. It seems that the mother lied. The child is not dead. She is with you."

"Witchcraft and sorcery," Fraser snarled. "Curses and cowardice. I thought you knew better, Tor-Esh." He started for the door. "I was a fool to come here."

Tor-Esh moved swiftly and placed his hand on the latch, that it might not be lifted until he was through.

"We are ignorant folk, but still we do not kill children because we find pleasure in it. As for witchcraft and sorcery—words are words. Only facts have meaning. If you wish to die, that is your affair. But when you are dead the child must come into the town—and that is our affair. I will send word to the nomads. The girl is theirs, and the duty belongs to them, we do not wish it. But until they come I will set a wall around your house. You are likely to die quite soon. There were twenty in her tribe to share the curse, but you are alone, and we can take no chances."

Seeing, perhaps, the absolute horror in Fraser's face, Tor-Esh added, "It will be done mercifully. We bear the child no hate."

He lifted the latch, and Fraser went into

the narrow street. He turned toward the desert, and when he had crossed the ploughed land he began to run. He ran fast, but a rider passed him, speeding into the desert on the track of the caravan.

Bisha was waiting for him, sleepily anxious. He said, "You know where the food is. Pack as much as you can in the trac-car. Blankets, too. Hurry up, we're leaving."

HE WENT into the laboratory. In violent haste, but with the utmost care, he destroyed the work of months, tempted as he did so to forget ethics and scatter his virus cultures broadcast into the town. Evil. Superstition. Legendary warlocks, tales of mighty wizards. He had read some of the old imaginative stories, written before space flight, in which ruthless Earthmen were pictured trampling innocent Mars under their feet. Logic and logistics both had made that impossible, when it came to the unromantic reality, and he was almost sorry. He would have liked to trample some Martians under his feet.

When the laboratory was cleansed, he threw his notes together in a steel box and took them into the dust-tight shed at the back of the Quonset where the trac-car was housed. Bisha, tear-streaked and silent, had been patiently lugging supplies. He checked them rapidly, added a few more, and swung the child up into the cab. She looked at him, and he realized then that she was frightened. "Don't worry," he told her. "We're going to be all right."

"You're not taking me back?"

He said savagely, "I'm taking you to the Terran consulate at Karappa, and after that I'm taking you to San Francisco. And nobody had better try to stop me."

He flung open the shed door and climbed in beside her. The trac-car rolled out clanking across the sand. And already there were lines of torches, streaming out from the town, flung across his way.

He said, "Crouch down on the floor, Bisha, and stay there. You won't get hurt."

He poured on the power. The trac-car lurched forward, snorting and raising a great cloud of dust. He headed it straight for the wavering line of torches, ducking his head instinctively so that he was pressed close to the wheel. The cab was metal, and

the glass parts of it were theoretically unbreakable, but he could see now in the torchlight the bright metal throwing-sticks of the townsmen, the swift boomerangs that could take off a man's head as neatly as a knife blade. He ducked.

Something hit the window beside him, starring it with a million cracks. Other things whacked and rattled viciously against the car. The torches fell away from in front of him, taking with them the dark startled faces of the men who held them. He was through the line. The open desert was before him. Three hundred miles, Karappa, and civilization.

If he could beat the nomads.

He had better beat them. It was his neck as well as Bisha's. He needed care. He needed it fast, from somebody who did not believe in curses.

Dawn came, cold in a dark sky, veiled in dust. There was no canal between them and Karappa, no town, nothing but the fine dry sand that flowed like water under the wind.

"Look here," he said to Bisha. "If I should suddenly fall asleep—" He showed her how to stop the trac-car. "At once, Bisha. And stay inside the cab until I wake again." She nodded, her lips pressed tight with the effort of concentration. He made her do it several times until he was sure she would not forget.

The miles flowed out before and behind, to left and to right, featureless, unbroken. How long would it take a single rider to catch a laden caravan? How long for the desert men on their fleet beasts to find a trail? The sand was soft and the clanking treads sank in it, and no matter how much you wanted to hurry you could go no faster than the desert would let you.

Bisha had been thinking hard. Suddenly she said, "They will follow us."

She was smart, too smart for her own good. Fraser said, "The nomads? We can beat them. Anyway, they'll soon give up."

"No, they'll follow. Not you, but me. And they will kill us both."

Fraser said, "We're going to Earth. The men of Mars, and the gods of Mars, can't reach there."

"They are very powerful gods—Are you sure?"

"Very sure. You'll be happy on Earth, Bisha."

She sat close to him, and after a while she slept. There was a compass on the dash, a necessity in that place of no roads and no landmarks. Fraser kept the needle centered, setting a course as though with a ship. Time and the sand rolled on, and he was tired.

Tired.

You are likely to die quite soon—there were twenty in her tribe to share the curse—

THE desert whispered. The sounds of the trac-car were accepted and forgotten by the ear, and beyond them the desert whispered, gliding, sliding, rippling under the wind. Fraser's vision blurred and wavered. He should not have pushed himself so hard at the work. Tired, no resistance to the sickness. That was why it had been light among the hardy nomads, more serious in him, an alien already worn down by months of confinement and mental strain. That was why.

—twenty in her tribe to share it—but you, alone—

Three hundred miles isn't so far. Of course you can make it. You've made it in an afternoon, on Earth.

This isn't Earth. And you didn't make it in a cold creeping desert.

You, alone—

Damn Tor-Esh!

"Bisha, wake up. We need some food. And first off, I need that bottle."

With a drink and some food inside him he felt better. "We'll keep on all night. By morning, easy, we'll be in Karappa. If the nomads are following, they'll never catch up."

Mid-afternoon, and he was driving in a daze. He lost track of the compass. When he noticed it again he was miles off his course. He sat for some minutes trying to remember the correct reading, trembling. Bisha watched him.

"Don't look so frightened," he said. His voice rose. "I'm all right. I'll get us there!"

She hung her head and looked away from him.

"And don't cry, damn it! Do you hear? I've got enough on my neck without you being doleful."

"It is because of me," she said. "You should have believed the words of the Old Men."

He struck her, the first time he had ever laid his hand on her in anger. "I don't want any more of that talk. If you haven't learned better in all this time—"

She retreated to the other side of the seat. He got the trac-car going again, in the right direction, but he did not go far. He had to rest. Just an hour's sleep would help. He stopped. He looked at Bisha, and like something that had happened years ago he remembered that he had slapped her.

"Poor little Bisha," he said, "and it isn't any of it your fault. Will you forgive me?"

She nodded, and he kissed her, and she cried a little, and then he went to sleep, telling her to wake him when the hand on the dashboard clock reached five. It was hard to rouse when the time came, and it was full dark before the trac-car was lurching and bucking its way out of the sand that had drifted around it. Fraser was not refreshed. He felt worse, if anything, sapped and drained, his brain as empty as an upturned bucket.

He drove.

He was off his course again. He must have dozed, and the car had made a circle to the south. He turned angrily to Bisha and said, "Why didn't you stop the car? I told you—"

In the faint glow from the dashboard he saw her face, turned toward the desert, and he knew the look on it, the withdrawal and the sadness. She did not answer. Fraser swore. Of all the times to pick for a fit of the blues, when he needed her so badly! She had enough to make her moody, but it was getting to be a habit, and she had no right to indulge her emotions now. She had already cost them precious hours, precious miles. He reached out and shook her.

It was like shaking a rag doll. He spoke to her sharply. She seemed not to hear. Finally he stopped the car, furious with her stubbornness, and wrenched her around to face him. For the second time he slapped her.

She did not weep. She only whispered, "I can't help it. They used to punish me too, but I can't help it."

She didn't seem to care. He couldn't

touch her, couldn't penetrate. He had never tried to shake her out of these moods before. Now he found that he could not. He let her sink back into the corner, and he looked at her, and a slow corrosive terror began to creep through him because of the times before—the times that she had been like this.

The times immediately preceding the periods of blackness, the abnormal sleep.

A pattern. Every time, the same unvaried pattern.

But it made no sense. It was only coincidence.

Coincidence, three times repeated? And how had Tor-Esh known so certainly that the child was with him?

Three times, the pattern. If it happened a fourth time, it could not be coincidence. If it happened a fourth time, he would know.

Could he afford a fourth time?

Crazy. How could a child's moods affect a man?

He grabbed her again. A desperation came over him. He treated her roughly, more roughly than he could ever have dreamed of treating a child. And it did no good. She looked at him with remote eyes and bore it without protest, without interest.

Not a mood, then. Something else.

What?

Sometimes a child is born—

FRASER sent the trac-car rushing forward along the beam from its headlights, a bright gash in the immemorial dark.

He was afraid. He was afraid of Bisha. And still he would not believe.

Get to Karappa. There's help there. Whatever it is there'll be somebody to know the truth, to do something. Keep awake, don't let the curtain fall again.

Think. We know it isn't a curse, that's out. We know it isn't a disease. We know it isn't side-effects, they'd have been observed. Besides, Tor-Esh understood.

What was it he said about old races? What did they teach us about them in the colleges? Too much, and not enough. Too many races, and not enough time.

They could see without eyes and hear

without ears, they could control the elements—

He tried to remember, and it was a pain and a torment. He looked at the child. Old races. Recessive genes, still cropping out. But what's the answer? ESP is known among the Martians, but this isn't ESP. What, then?

A remnant, a scrap of something twisted out of shape and incomplete?

What is she so lonesome for, that she doesn't know?

The answer came to him suddenly, clear as the ringing of a bell. A page from a forgotten text book, hoarded all these years in his subconscious, a casual mention of a people who had tried to sublimate the conditions of a dying world by establishing a kind of mental symbiosis, living in a tight community, sharing each others' minds and their potentials, and who had succeeded in acquiring by their mass effort such powers of mental control that for several centuries they had ruled this whole quadrant of Mars, leaving behind them a host of legends.

And a child.

A child normal and healthy in every way but one. Her brain was incomplete, designed by a cruel trick of heredity to be one of a community of inter-dependent minds that no longer existed. Like a battery, it discharged its electrical energy in the normal process of thinking and living, and like a run-down battery it must be charged again from outside, because its own regenerative faculty was lacking. And so it stole from the unsuspecting minds around it, an innocent vampire draining them whenever it felt the need.

It was draining his now. There had been twenty in her tribe, and so none of them had died as yet. But he was alone. And that was why the intervals had shortened, because he could no longer satisfy her need.

And the Martians in their ignorance were right. And he in his wisdom had been wrong.

If he put her out now, and left her in the desert, he would be safe.

He stopped the car and looked at her. She was so little and helpless, and he had come to love her. It wasn't her fault. Something might still be done for her, a way might be found, and in a city she would not be so deadly.

Could he survive another plunge into the darkness?

He didn't know. But she had run away once of her own accord, for his sake. He could do no less than try.

He took her into his arms.

The curtain dropped.

Fraser woke slowly, in brazen sunshine and a great silence. As one creeping back from the edge of an abyss he woke, and the car was very still. There was no one in it with him. He called, but there was no answer.

He got out of the car. He walked, calling, and then he saw the tracks. The tracks of the nomads' beasts, coming toward the car from behind. The small tracks of Bisha's feet, going back to meet them.

He stopped calling. The sound of his voice was too loud, too terrible. He began to run, back along that trail. It ended in a little huddle of clothing that had no life in it.

She had broken her promise to him. She had disobeyed and left him, asleep and safe, to meet the riders by herself, the riders who were following her, not him.

So small a grave did not take long to dig.

Fraser drove on. There was no more danger now, but he drove fast, seeing the desert in a blur, wanting never to see it again, wanting only Earth—but not a white house there that for him would be forever haunted.

SOLAR STIFF

By

CHAS. A. STOPHER

PROBOS FIVE gazed at the white expanse ahead, trying to determine where his ship would crash. Something was haywire in the fuel system of his Interstar Runabout. He was losing altitude fast, so fast that all five pairs of his eyes couldn't focus on a place to land.

Five pairs of arms, each pair about three feet apart on the loglike body, pushed buttons and rotated controls frantically, but to no avail. In a few short minutes it would all be over for Probos Five. Even if by some miracle he remained unhurt after crashing, he would die shortly thereafter. The frigid climatic conditions of the third planet were deadly to a Mercurian. He thought once of donning his space suit but decided against it. That would merely prolong the agony. From Planet Three, when one has a smashed space cruiser, there is no return. Probos Five knew that death was riding with him in the helpless ship. The situation did not unnecessarily dismay him; Mercurians are philosophers.

Probos Five ceased to manipulate the unresponding controls. Stretching his trunklike torso to its full twenty feet, four heads gazed through observation ports at the four points of the compass while the remaining head desultorily watched the instrument panel.

Since die he must, Probos Five would meet his end stoically, and five pairs of stumpy arms folded over five chests in a coordinated gesture of resignation.

Probos Five thought fleetingly of his wife Lingua Four and remembered with some annoyance that she was the author of his present predicament. A social climber, Probos Five thought to himself, but aside from that a good wife and mother in addition to being a reigning beauty. Lingua Four was tall even for a Mercurian. Already she scaled seven dergs, or in Earth terms, fourteen feet and was beginning to show evidences of a fifth

Totem poles are a dime a dozen north of 63° . . . but only Ketch, the lying Eskimo, vowed they dropped out of frigid northern skies.

head. Five heads were rarely found on females and Probos Five was justly proud of his good fortune. In all Mercury at the present time, he knew of but two females possessing five heads and soon Lingua Four would be the third of her sex to be thus endowed.

"Yes," thought Probos Five, "a woman to be proud of, for today after three vargs of marriage the memory of her trim trunk with four pairs of eyes laughing mischievously, filled his five brains with flame. Slim as a birch she stood in his memory, and eight eyes whispered lovers' thoughts across space and time.

Probos Five recalled his five minds from their nostalgic reverie and gazed at the contour of the Earth that was rushing up to meet him. White, blazing white reflecting the rays of the midnight sun covered the region as far as the eye could reach.

"Good," thought Probos Five, "the Polar regions. That means the end will come quickly. One or two seconds at the most of that bitter cold would be enough."

TURNING away from the windows Probos Five let his thoughts return to Lingua Four, to Probos Two, his son, and his home on the first planet from the sun. Ah, that is the place to live, thought Probos, the temperature an unchanging 327°; just comfortably warm, where one could enjoy a life of warmth and ease. Too bad that he would not live to see it again. Thirty vargs, he reflected is such a short time. With luck, perhaps he may have lived to see a hundred vargs slip by. And perhaps in time he may have added three more heads and five dergs in length to his towering trunk.

He thought of Probos Two and wondered idly if his son would also visit the barbarian worlds to collect data for Lingua Four.

He wished that he could have seen more of Probos Two. There's an up-and-coming

lad, he thought, not quite two vargs old and two heads already. Yes, indeed, he's quite a boy, Probos Five remembered proudly; maybe his mother will keep him at home instead of running him all over the universe to get material for her committees.

He wished that Lingua Four would settle down and be content as a housewife, but he doubted that she would. Social ambition was boring like a termite under her bark.

Lingua Four was determined to be the first lady of Arbor, the capital city of Mercury. To this end Lingua Four had labored unceasingly. She was president of half the women's clubs of Arbor. She could always be depended upon to furnish the best in new and diverting subjects.

She headed almost all committees for aid or research on any type of problem. It was owing to Lingua Four being president of the Committee for Undernourished Arborians that Probos Five was making this ill-starred trip. His purpose was to capture a few of the upright, divided trunk animals that inhabited the third planet.

They were to be transported to Mercury and given over to scientific study as to their edible qualities. If it were found that the divided trunk creatures were fit for Mercurian consumption, the problem of undernourishment would no longer exist since the supply of divided trunks was seemingly inexhaustible. Mercurians had made expeditions to the third planet before and every report concluded with — "Divided trunk creatures increasing in number."

Privately Probos Five doubted the possibility of using the divided trunks for food since the last expedition once again reported a complete lack of captives due to the frail and tenuous bodies of the divided trunks. Then too, transportation and preservation opposed a tremendous problem, not to mention the difficulty of trying to eat something that might vaporize on your fork. But then these questions may never arise, he decided, for of all the reports perused by Probos Five not one expedition had succeeded in bringing a divided trunk to Mercury.

All reports were read to the last letter by Probos Five before assembling equipment for his own trip. In the reports he had noted many of the difficulties of the earlier missions. Planet Three was impossible for a

Mercurian without a heated space suit. The temperature of Planet Three was so low that it would literally freeze a Mercurian stiff in a matter of seconds.

The casualties of the early expeditions had been numerous. Many Mercurians had succumbed to the bitter cold due to flaws in space suits and other accidents. A break in the suit meant instant death. The victims of such mishaps were invariably buried in the isolated, sparsely inhabited Polar regions to avoid alarming the divided trunk creatures.

It was strange, mused Probos Five, that the divided trunks were seemingly unable to bear the slightest increase in temperature. Their bodies disintegrated upon contact with a Mercurian. Some were roped and dragged from a distance up to the doors of the space ships, but no inhabitant of Planet Three had been closer to Mercury than the air lock of the space cruisers. As the divided trunk people were dragged into the air lock, warm air from the ship would be pumped into the lock to dispel the frigid air of Planet Three. As the warmth of Mercury enveloped the divided trunks they became quite red, began to melt and finally dissolved into a gaseous state, leaving a small pile of ashes and a disagreeable odor in the air lock that sometimes lingered for days.

Probos Five believed he had the solution for these obstacles in the path of scientific study of the divided trunks. He had decided to use guile in place of strength. For this reason he had come alone and in a small space runabout to put his solution to the test. But his solution now could never be tried, he remembered morosely.

IN THE aft compartment Probos Five had constructed a refrigeration plant. By maintaining a constant degree of frigidity he hoped to deliver a pair of each species of divided trunks to Mercury. He hoped especially to capture a complete set and perhaps a few over to make up for breakage and losses. As to what form of sustenance the divided trunks were accustomed to he had no idea whatsoever. He had intended to bring samples of earth, vegetation and anything else that may have suggested a source of food for the divided trunks.

The thought too had occurred to him that

possibly the divided trunk creatures ate one another. On the possibility of this Probos Five had determined to capture three black ones, three white ones, three yellows, three browns and three reds, and three of any other color that he might find. He rather doubted that more colors or combination of colors existed. All previous expedition reports had mentioned only the five colors. However, Probos Five had determined to keep several eyes open on the off chance that he might find a new and different species.

His refrigerator was modeled along the architectural lines of the dens of the divided trunks. The main room of the refrigerator opened to the outside of the ship by means of a small air lock. A Mercurian size air lock was not needed for the divided trunks, as few had been found to be much over three dergs in height.

Winches and cables to pull the divided trunks into the refrigerator were installed in the refrigerator room itself to avoid burning the divided trunks with hot cables from other parts of the ship.

In addition, Probos Five had cunningly devised a refrigerated trap. This too was designed to simulate the caves of the divided trunk creatures but was smaller. It was constructed with entrances readily seen and exits well hidden. Probos Five had expected great things of his trap. He had conceived the idea after reading the report of a Mercurian expedition that explored the dens of the divided trunks at some place marked "Coney Island." According to the reports

the divided trunks showed no hesitancy in entering these types of dens. In fact, the writer of the report gave it as his opinion that the divided ones perhaps played games in these types of caves. It also mentioned that some of the dens were equipped with flat shiny surfaces that cast reflections or images. Probos Five had incorporated the image making surfaces into his trap design. A pity that all this effort must be wasted thought Probos as he once more turned to the observation ports to check his remaining distance from the planet's surface. Seeing that his time was short Probos Five turned all five faces forward in the Mercurian gesture of disdain for death. A moment later came the shock.

A week later the proprietor of a novelty shop in Fairbanks watched two natives with their dogteam pulling something loglike through the snow toward the trading post. Turning to a customer he remarked,

"Here comes Ketch and Ah Koo dragging in another Totem Pole. Guess that Ketch must be the biggest liar ever produced by the Eskimos. He tried to tell me that Totem Poles fall from the sky. Says he can always find one if he sees it fall because it's so hot it melts the snow around it. Personally I think he should be elected president of the Liars' Club, but I'll buy the Totem Pole anyway. Those pesky tourists always whittle a chunk out of my Totem Pole for a souvenir."

"I'm glad he's bringing me another one," the storekeeper concluded, "the one he sold me last year is about whittled away."

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

The letters—best was Calvin Thomas Beck's (tho as usual he goes off the deep end in some of his remarks.) Other two qualifying were (2) Joe Keogh, (3) Carol McKinney. Getting back to Beck's letter. . . . I seriously doubt that Berry is Fearn. Incidentally, before and during the war Fearn produced an astounding amount of material under a variety of pen names. The two most often used were Polton Cross and Thornton Ayre, a total of 61 stories carried the byline of one or the other. I take issue with Beck on the statement concerning staff artists. VESTAL is one brush pusher good enough to work for ANYBODY, he ranks VERY high on my appreciation list. Agree wholeheartedly with Cal however on the matter of the proposed "fannish" columns. It's not necessary to deal with club and convention news but a fanzine review is sorely needed. Out of the 30-odd mags published today only 2 have them (and one of these is a quarterly).

A/3c PAUL MITTELBUSCHER

LOVE—NOT CASH!

807 N. Main
Carlsbad, N. Mex.

Dear Editor,

You may start reading here:

Seems funny when a fan realizes the different cults that exist in stf-dom. Who'd suppose that such devotion could survive over the prime object of one solitary pulp mag. But I can see that several fans agree with me and my unspoken feelings.

You see, back in the grand old year of '47 when fans were fans and proud of the fact, I discovered my first PLANET. Since then, they've multiplied into a whole solar system.

As for this club—or cult—I've come to the conclusion that it consists of all of the fans who entered stf through a copy of PLANET and have remained faithful over the years. Whereas, the same thing happens in the case of other mags. A person who read AMAZING first will probably remain true to AMAZING. Or, the fan in question might buy other mags, but to him the first one will always be the best.

Thus is PLANET to me. I'm a firm member of the PLANET Cult. And, as my membership is slightly past the freshman stage, I uphold my rights! The rights of every PLANET loving fan! ! !

PLANET MUST NOT BE CHANGED!

These new digest mags attract most of the old writers, all right, with their higher rates. But PLANET has her name writers too. However, when they appear in PLANET, it's because they're writing for the love of it, not for the cash. Or leastways, their agent has a soft spot in his heart and realizes that a good story would be more appreciated in PLANET than anywhere else.

In the Sept. issue, Leigh Brackett was up to her usual standard with a good story, THE ARK OF MARS.

Pics to McKinney, McLean, and Keogh.

And after this letter sees print and the fans vote it as number one in VIZI—you can send me the Illo by Wood in the Sept. issue. You should buy more of his work. His illos prove that he puts out a heck of a lot of work on each one. Nice.

MUZZY forever,

CLAUDE R. HALL

STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

718 Oliver Ave. N.
Minneapolis, Minn.

Dear Editor:

Waiting for a streetcar the other day, I happened to glance at the magazine stand situated at the car stop. What I saw there caused a state of shock. I wasn't released from it until I had bought the Sept. issue of PLANET Stories and stared at the cover for a full ten minutes. For the first time in the seven years I've been reading S-F, I saw IT! IT meaning a girl on the cover of an S-F magazine, wearing a space suit in space.

Now it isn't that I'm against half-nude gals on covers, but I'm a firm believer in the equality of the sexes. If men have to wear space suits, women should too. Also, I doubt that anyone buys your magazine for the pin-up value of its covers.

Besides, I believe I enjoy the covers much more than anyone. Why? Because of a simple optical device that I use. It's by removing the lenses from the viewers used for 3-D movies, and replacing one with a transparent piece of blue plastic, and the other with red plastic. Try it. When looking at a picture, it gives the illusion of depth.

However, they do not work for black and white illustrations. I'm still working on that.

And now for my worthless opinions on the stories.

WHERE SEX MET SPACE—Now there's a story I really enjoyed. For a change the female was frustrated instead of the male.

BUNZO FAREWELL was well written. However, the human-being-infant-spider-food is being overused these days.

PREVIEW OF PERIL was a good yarn, though someone's bound to yell space-opera.

The rest aren't worth mention except THE ARK OF MARS. That was particularly putrid.

Yours for novelet-length novelets,

LEO WOLF

FOLLING ALL FEN

385 No. 8th East St.
Provo, Utah

My dear Ed:

I can't stand it! ! How obvious can you get and still face yourself in a mirror? It's really something when authors must resort to disgustingly obvious pen names, such as spelling their own name backwards (as Derfla Leppoc did in the new Vortex S.F. mag) and somebody who really came up with a dilly in the Sept. ish—SOL GALAXAN. Great Ghu and all his little ghuls! You'd think that with enough imagination to write the story in the first place, the guy could come up with something much livelier, such as John Jones, no doubt.

Leigh Brackett's compelling space-opera was thoroughly enchanting, from the descriptions of the dead Martian cities and ancient landscapes to the emptiness of the silent void. This took all honors by a wide margin!

Next was THE UNRECONSTRUCTED WOMAN, an odd little tale, made other-worldly by the different writing technique. It alone would have made the mag worth buying, not to mention Brackett!

The others are the kind you read once, rate casually to yourself, from disinterest to passable enjoyment, and promptly forget. After all, it does take some crud to really appreciate the classic gems!

Letters:

1. Paul Mittelbuscher, 2. Maril Shrewsbury, 3. Nancy Moore.

I would like to thank all those who have recently aided me in the stf mag popularity poll. Perhaps Mr. O'Sullivan can be prevailed upon to grant a few precious paragraphs for the results? (Well, we'll soon know if he did or not, anyway!)

Finally managed to drag 172 lists out of as many fan, both actifen and those who are content merely to read the contents of various prozines. They listed their 10 favorite stf mags in order of preference. However, 172 are hardly the majority of readers of even one state, let alone the whole country and Canada, so—would you, wherever you are, please help out? ?

Send me your lists of 10 favorite mags on a separate piece of paper or postcard immediately. Over 1,000 votes should be counted before we can be sure that a typical result has been gained.

Stfly,

CAROL MCKINNEY

Ed's Note: As you say, Carol, 172 listings hardly constitutes an acceptable basis for ratings. Neither, perhaps, does 1,000. However, when the latter total is reached I'll be glad to print the ratings in the VIZIGRAPH. Fair enough?

SO LONG SOL

1102 9th Street
Rapid City, South Dakota

Dear Editor,

If your authors have to use pen names don't make them as obvious as Sol Galaxan. This is a very lousy type of a pen name. If Sol Galaxan isn't a pen name, I feel sorry for the person to whom it belongs.

Leigh Brackett usually writes good stories and THE ARK OF MARS was no exception. The plot was good because it was plausible. Leigh should do a sequel to it based on the problems of life on the new world. This is of course, providing she can find a plot that hasn't been used a couple of hundred times.

PREVIEW OF PERIL and MISS TWEEDHAM'S ELOGARSN were the only good short stories. Cut down on the short stories and have longer and more novels and novelets.

I agree with Carol McKinney on the subject of PLANET having longer editorials. Letters: Calvin T. Beck, Joe Koegh, Carol McKinney.

Sincerely yours,

JOHN TRUAX

Ed's Note: When that weird-looking quadruped, breathing fire, and exuding strange vapors, pierced me with his cyclop-eye and floated his manuscript onto my desk, who am I to dispute the monicker he gave me . . . Sol Galaxan.

VAL THE VALIANT

6453 E. 4th Pl.
Tulsa, Okla.

Dear Ed,

For shame on you! You sneaked up on me. Has PLANET secretly gone monthly? It doesn't seem like two months since the last issue. Well, all for the better.

Bless your heart, to top off an already good issue you give us Leigh Brackett. PLANET Stories is back in its stride now, Brackett hath returned. Need I say that she had a darn good story. Doesn't she always!

J. W. Groves slipped in the No. 2 slot. Hooray for Sex!

Only story I really didn't care much for was R. M. Williams little thing. So she was a call girl, but she tore up her teachers certificate. The Martians weren't in the least frightening. Were they supposed to be?

The Sept. PLANET is about the best this year.

Now to the heart of the matter. The VIZIGRAPH. May it live long.

Agreed with practically everything Calvin Beck had to say. Okay Jack, why don't you try some fan features. It would sell more copies.

Why do people keep picking on Bryan Berry? I liked him. The old meanies.

Now Fredrick B. Christoff's letter I liked because he agrees with I. Mostly. Also he's a friend.

Flying Saucers still? From a Fem Fan? I'd better keep my mouth shut, I suppose.

Mittelbuscher's letter was interesting. One thing tho—PLEASE DO NOT TRIM THE BLANKETY BLANKETY EDGES. That's all you hear these days, trimmed edges. I can't see where trimmed edges make one bit of difference in the story quality.

H-mm. I see the flaw in my argument tho. If the edges make no difference in the story quality, they do make a nicer looking mag. All rite, so I'm wrong. I take it all back.

Mr. Ed: I didn't care for your note at the end of Carol McKinney's letter. So you are going to refuse to have any fan interest columns. Why not put it to a vote. That's the fair way of doing things. If you showed the publisher the outcome I'm sure they wouldn't raise hell about it. Come on, be a sport. In case you decide to, I vote for them.

Why do people like H.E.N. keep complaining about the femmes on the cover. No sense of humor, that's all.

Why doesn't Russell Brown get in touch with Ray Palmer about his flying saucers. Or better yet, write an article for WHISPERING SPACE. Ha, I sneaked in an ad. (I hope.)

I'm sure if Paul Miller would only read the back cover he would find it very useful. Highly interesting. You can read that small print and feel touched by something bigger than yourself. What?

Gez Whiz! Gosh Wow! A Mother Nature type-writer in the letter column. Aw, come on Evelyn, let us poor fans be critics. Let us have our fun. After all we can't be cultured and flourishing like unto you.

VAL WALKER

BORDER RAIDER

39 Cameron St. S.
Kitchener, Ontario

Greetings and Halucinations:

May I be permitted to utter that well known phrase, "WHAT! NO BEMs?" Not only is there no BEMs, but the cover illustrates a scene from TAOMs. This will never do, sir. You had better be careful or be making with a new editor. That cover was well done and proves that an alien can look very attractive in a space suit. But who did the painting? Hmmm, why not give the cover artist a credit line on the contents page?

I take it you wrote THE FLIGHT OF THE EAGLE because only an editor could think up such a pen name as Sol Galaxan. I suggest that you blurb all future stories as being written by me. Thus, you and other writers would not have to think up such lousy pen names.

I have read complaints that you use comic book illustrators. You do too! 'Cause Wood is a staff artist of EC pubs and illustrates stories for their

Stf. comics. Even so I cannot see that anyone could object to the illo by Wood on page 37. A well filled out illo, no?

Can't find any lousy stories thish, so rate them as follows: (1) THE ARK OF MARS, (2) THE UN-RECONSTRUCTED WOMAN, (3) BUNZO FAREWELL, (4) MISS TWEEDHAM'S ELOGARSN and (5) WHERE SEX MET SPACE. Interesting story that BUNZO FAREWELL but they better bury that plot soon for it's beginning to smell unlike a rose. One more thing on BF—the build-up to the climax was basically Stf. but the climax falls into the horror class of story. This is the type of story the Stf. comics rely upon and I was just wondering if it's good for PS or is "sauce for the gander gesse for the goose" or something to that effect.

I see that Mittelbuscher is the proud possessor of a "Cranium Vacuum." I wonder how he and other fen would like it if I and several others spent our spare time writing letters to La Vizi. and if you printed everyone I wrote? It would simplify the awarding of pics, wouldn't it. I have time to write several letters to all the prozines, but I prefer to write only one and take my chances with the rest of the fen. I agree with Paul on not changing PS. PS is basically the same as when it came out 14 years ago. Same messy covers, same lousy stories, and same fermenting Vizi. Why change after all these years? Besides PS must live up to the saying "That everything in STF. changes but PLANET."

Evelyn McLean seems to think that we fen should not have the right to express our opinions on stories and illos. Hmmm, fen that write letters are usually intelligent. They offer honest opinions on illos and stories. The editor, if he pays attention, can pretty well judge what type of story goes over well and try to obtain the type of story the fen want. In doing this he keeps them happy, and buying his respective zine. How could he do this if no opinions were expressed. Evelyn states she is tired of our opinions and then offers hers on "space battles and gruesome animals." Hmmm, Miss McLean, allez vous en.

Best efforts go to (1) Carol McKinney, (2) Joe (two letter) Keogh, (3) Maril Shrewsbury.

I'll be back. Till then I remain,

CanFanatically,

FREDRICK B. CHRISTOFF

Ed's Note: Kelly Freas rendered Sept. cover. Also July, Nov., and Jan.

DARLING JEAN

125 Bausman Street
Pittsburgh 10, Pa.

Worthy Ed:

The magazine you're putting out
Is "Best-In-Show," I say.
It suits my tastes, without a doubt;
Don't change in any way.

A pox on all trimmed edges, sir.
The covers? They're just fine.
And 'cause you print good tales like ARK,
I'll take PS for mine!

So keep the good work up, ye ed;
In doing so, you'll see
One happy client kept that way
(That last refers to me).

Aforementioned satisfied customer,

JEAN MACKINTOSH

THE CAREFUL PURCHASER

2444 Valley St.
Berkeley, Calif.

Dear Editor:

Thursday night. I put on my trench coat, dark hat, equally dark gloves and stepped out into the fog of Berkeley. The street was empty, save for a drunk leaning against the lamppost reading a copy of GALAXY.

Yes, no one was about, so I quickened my pace in the direction of the local newsstand. I rounded the corner and saw, like a beacon, bringing home some wandering soul, the neon sign over the drug store.

As I turned into the store, I pulled up my collar to cover my face and pulled down my hat. Then, picking up the September issue of PLANET, I slithered up to druggist.

"Twenty-five cents," says he.

I plunked down a piece of United States currency on the counter and started out. It was then that I was amazed by the cover. No BEM's, no naked girls out in space without space suits. (And what's more, I found out later, it illustrated the story.)

I was almost tempted to take off my disguise and let the man behind the counter recognize me. "But no," I said. "I'm a respectable teen ager and wouldn't be caught dead with an issue of PLANET."

That is definitely NOT the way I buy my science-fiction. I am not afraid to be seen by the respectable citizens of this town with an issue of PLANET in my hands. People who criticize stf for lurid (so they say) covers, should be berled in erl. But let these same individuals be criticized for possession of a nationally known magazine with a young lady wrapped in about three inches of gauze, they flip their lid.

You could go out to the public beach, and see the same display, minus of course, space ships and BEM's. So why should they condemn science fiction magazines for their covers?

A good question, say I . . .

Now, on to the September issue. Number 1—THE ARK OF MARS, naturally. The rest weren't worth commenting about in the presence of that novel.

I have been reading about B.B. in the VIZIGRAPH. Joe Blow (oops, sorry, Joe Keogh) and a score of others seem to think that B.B. has been using Ray Bradbury's style of writing. So what? Bradbury didn't originate that style, so why cremate the poor guy because he likes R.B.'s type of writing and decides to use it?

I rest my case.

Sincerely,

DON WEGARS

ALL PROBLEMS HERE, PLEASE

63 Glenridge Ave.
St. Catharines, Ont.

Dear Sir,

Issue after issue, the VIZIGRAPH has been getting more intelligent to read. After all, we have to admit we're growing up, even in the space-opera class, and can no longer find it in us to enjoy column after column of variegated trash, the only difference in it being that one writer had a preference for rows of exclamation marks or uncapitalized words.

But even in this day of renovated wordage, there still lurks one last anachronistic system—the voting arrangement for deciding which letter wins an illo. All of us have to admit that at one time or another we've had doubts as to how fairly the balloting is arranged.

In simple terms, the choice rests with the choice few who send in letters. Sometimes even they neglect to exercise their franchise, the net result being that in this democratic continent a clique of ten to fifteen fen who have had their letters printed (plus I don't know how many fen who didn't) control the election exclusively.

Another perplexing thing is that fen won't take the trouble to write in, wasting both money and energy, so that someone else can win a prize. And I don't blame them. At the most they include their selection in a letter of their own, becoming another member of the clique.

We have the problem, so how can we find a fair solution? I don't know how many times I have thought that the arranging of the letters has a great deal to do with the choice, too. You may not have any real vote, Jack, but you do have a lot of power when it comes to "electioneering."

Many readers say, "Well Jack must know the best ones. That's why he puts them there." Usually the first three are the choicest, too, but still there are the odd good ones circulating around through the rest of LA VIZI. The back page is left for the neophytes and fanatics.

My solution to the problem is not to mix the letters up, because if the editor wants to arrange them in order of readability, it makes it that much easier for us readers to pick out the crud. However, if you want the average reader to take time to vote, you'll have to bribe him, as it were, with the bait of egoboo . . . who can resist that?

It wouldn't hurt the VIZIGRAPH at all to have a few letters deleted, and in a couple of columns, give the readers' names and home cities (addresses might take up too much room), and the three persons they voted for. Excluding the letter-writers of that issue of course, who have already outlined their preferences.

Readers and fen have been yelling for more departments lately—why not give 'em that one? It would be truly a reader's department, yet it wouldn't cost PLANET any more than paper space.

The list might be small at first (only a few readers and fen whose letters were left out) but given time it could grow into a good two columns. It would be interesting to both readers, senders, and letter-writers alike to see just how many people voted for whom.

Naturally Jack O'Sullivan would laboriously compile an aggregate total for the lazier of us, perhaps on the line of *Astounding's* story scoring system; but whatever way it's done it would be of interest to the reader to see how many of his fellow readers voted as he did.

Would that be violating the PLANET "editorial" policy, Jack? I also think the odd editorial or information piece would be welcome, though not mandatory. We are all adult enough to know that your well-stated editorial policy was more of a publisher's policy, since PLANET has never indulged in anything but fiction under any of its editors.

Give the letters to these hacks in the order of: Cal Beck, Paul Mittelbuscher (if only in gratitude), and Evelyn McLean.

I give the latter only in grudging admiration, for Evelyn's letter was certainly written in a confident and humble manner (that's not as contradictory as it seems), and it made me think, which is more than a letter of pure criticism, good or bad, will make me do.

Evelyn would have so-called arm-chair critics, who

are not writers, vent their rage on poison pen letters, only to burn them and inhale the smoke. But she forgets that each individual writer gives the reader something to think about, even if it is only what-a-conceited-slob he is.

Authors and editors both like to get the audience reaction, and readers judge their literary awareness by comparing it with the VIZIGRAPH. If something new comes up, it provides food for thought in a letter column discussion.

It's the same in any mag. Readers like to vent off steam, editors gauge their reaction, other readers see and disagree, write a letter in reply . . . quite stimulating, even if it doesn't get you anywhere. So that's why there are so many two-bit critics—reactions differ, and there are some rare fen that are capable of seeing a good story when there is one.

Interior art work has picked up a bit, and the occasional use of EMESH helps more than a little. Let me say that this month's front cover shows PLANET'S quality is greatly improving. Just as the late Earle Bergey improved through the years, (and I assume it is an Anderson job) so has artist Anderson.

The lettering didn't in any way destroy the beauty of the picture, but actually enhanced it. The block style lettering looks quite neat and clear-cut. When before Mr. Anderson gave all his efforts to creating nothing but contrasting, bold blobs, of color, he has shown this time greater respect for the spectrum.

I advise him to stick to his present style, employing a dark cover, since he uses shadow painting a great deal. Besides, the ever present hero shooting BEM was absent, a worthy detail. The only hint of anything firing was a man holding a repair welder. Even the ever present girl was fully clad in space suit, although it was more form-fitting. Superbly done. I won't expect the next to be as mature and as well-drawn as this because you already have a stock in reserve, but it forecasts a trend for PLANET that should be encouraged.

I suppose I could write two more letters about the stories, but I'd probably be censored again by the fen. Only may I remind the more unfortunate ones who weren't in on the deal, that I wasn't the only one that ish, and I wrote on two different issues.

Strangely enough, and by the greatest of coincidence, all eleven letter-writers in this September's PLANET all started their masterful epistles out with: (and I quote) "Dear Editor." I was one of them. But . . .

I give fair warning. If anyone sees me write to Jack O'Sullivan boosting Bryan Berry, praising rough edges, loving sloppy drawings, and saying you-know-who is the best editor since Ben Hibbs and JWC. . . .

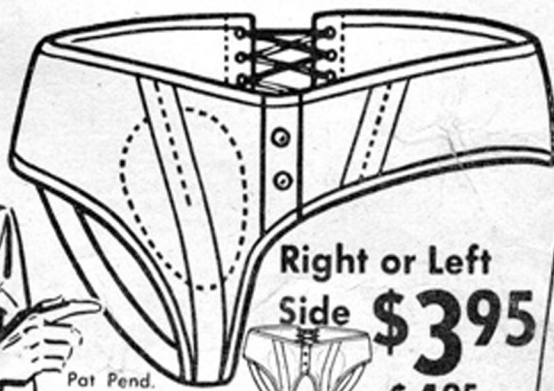
Yours till Venus dries up,

JOE KROGH

Ed's Note: Anderson's last cover design graced the May issue. Kelly Freas rendered the one you have in mind, Joe, and all others since. As to the selection of the best letters—the editor has been doing the selecting for many years now, duly influenced, of course, by readers' choices. You overplay the matter when you use the term "electioneering." There's nothing in it for me except to choose the most interesting, informative or critical letters. And it is only natural to place several of the better missives (not all of them, mind you) at the head of the VIZIGRAPH.

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This Is Just Some of the Equipment My Students Build. All Parts Yours to Keep.

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION Technicians. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. You also get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. Pictured at left are just a few of the pieces of equipment you build with kits of parts I send. You experiment with, learn circuits common to Radio and Television.

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