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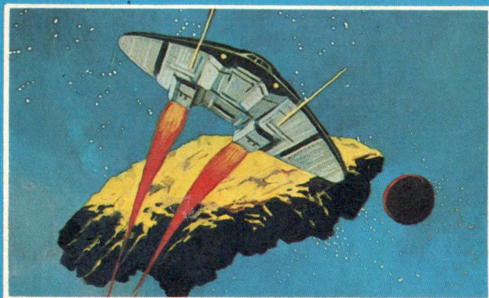
ISAAC ASIMOV

PRESENTS

THE GREAT SF STORIES

5

(1943)



EDITED BY ISAAC ASIMOV
AND MARTIN H. GREENBERG

In the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Algis Budrys describes this Asimov series as “just exactly what it say it to be.” Discussing the background of the golden age of magazine SF, the 1940s, he called it “a time when a young pantheon of highly intelligent and as it turns out remarkably talented amateurs had been recruited by a Promethean editor named John W. Campbell, Jr.

“They were busy inventing a new professionalism whose imperatives toward excellence still drive even the youngest, latest neophyte in the field. More important, they were writing the fundamental stories, laying down the ideas and exploring the modes that now lies at the core of contemporary science fiction. The field has gone farther and wider since then, and in literary terms it has gone deeper, but there is no way it could go deeper in the things that count most in art—the boundless creative confidence that comes from being at the heart of a time of major discovery.”

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ISAAC ASIMOV

Presents

**THE GREAT
SCIENCE
FICTION
STORIES**

Volume 5, 1943

**Edited by
*Isaac Asimov and
Martin H. Greenberg***

DAW BOOKS, INC.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, PUBLISHER

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1943 Introduction

In the world outside reality, things continued to improve, at least at the macro-level. In January, German forces began their slow and costly withdrawal from the Soviet Union as General Paulus surrendered his army at Stalingrad on the 31st after suffering staggering losses the previous week, and the German retreat continued all through the winter as the Soviets took back Kharkov on St. Valentine's Day. The German position in North Africa also continued to deteriorate, and Hitler replaced Rommel with General von Arnim as head of the Afrika Korps. The Allied advance in North Africa steamed ahead, and Tunis was retaken on May 7, the German army in Tunisia surrendering on May 12. On April 20th, German troops massacred the few remaining fighters in the Warsaw ghetto, and moved the others to concentration camps.

Meanwhile, the Royal Air Force stepped up its attacks on Germany, striking the Ruhr dams on May 17. In July, the Germans made a major attempt to stabilize their crumbling position in the east with a sizable counterattack at Kursk, which culminated in the largest armored battle of the war—it bought Germany some time, but little more. To the southwest, the Allies landed in Sicily on July 10 and had occupied Palermo by the 23rd, three days before Mussolini fell before an aroused Italian people. The long-awaited invasion of Italy began on September 3rd—by October 13, a newly formed Italian government had declared war on Germany. As the year drew to a close, Soviet forces were again advancing across their homeland, recapturing Kiev on November 6, while the “Big Three”—Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill—planned the defeat of Germany at the Teheran Conference in late November.

In the Pacific, the year began with the final defeat of Japanese forces on Guadalcanal, with the American advance

continuing slowly, either driving the Japanese off of their island strongholds or bypassing the more strongly defended ones. U.S. troops landed on the Solomons at Bougainville on November 1, as the desperately fighting Japanese began to fall back.

On November 19 the British fascist leader Oswald Mosley was released from prison.

During 1943 Frank Sinatra became a star, and despite some ups and downs is still one today. The New York Yankees defeated the St. Louis Cardinals four games to one to become baseball champions of the world (if not the galaxy), avenging their defeat of the previous year. Dylan Thomas published *New Poems*, while Dmitri Shostakovich composed his *Eighth Symphony*.

Penicillin was used to treat a variety of diseases. *Oklahoma* by Rodgers and Hammerstein was a big hit on Broadway. Henry Moore sculpted "Madonna and Child" and Count Fleet won the Kentucky Derby. Lieutenant (J.G.) J. R. Hunt found time to win the United States Tennis Championship—the great Pauline Betz won the women's title. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Jane Eyre* were two of the big film hits of the year.

Henry Green published *Caught*, while the first Liberty Ships were launched under the auspices of Henry Kaiser. Some things did not change—Joe Louis was still the Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World, and the Washington Redskins repeated as National Football League champions. Some things did not change *officially*—the world record for the mile run was still the 4:06.4 set by Sydney Wooderson in 1937, but the international body in charge of the records had been unable to meet since late 1938 and the current mark had been broken several times, including a 4:02.6 by Arne Anderson of Sweden.

Walter Lippmann published *U.S. Foreign Policy* while Jacques Maritain published *Christianity and Democracy*. Waksman and Schatz discovered streptomycin. The Professional Golf Association Championship was called because of war.

Death took Beatrice Webb and Sergei Rachmaninov.

Mel Brooks was still Melvin Kaminsky.

In the real world it was another good year, despite the fact

that most of the writers and fans were in the armed forces or otherwise engaged.

The news was not *completely* good. *Astonishing Stories* folded in April, and the beloved *Unknown Worlds* published its last issue in October—it instantly became a legend.

But wonderous things were happening in the real world: Fritz Leiber published *Gather Darkness*. *Donovan's Brain* by Curt Siodmak and *The Lost Traveller* by Ruthven Todd appeared, as did *Judgement Night* by C. L. Moore, *The Book of Ptath* by A. E. van Vogt, and *Perelandra* by C. L. Lewis. Some of these were magazine serials which would not see book publication for many years. Donald A. Wollheim broke new ground with *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction*, the first paperback sf anthology. And James H. Schmitz made his maiden voyage into reality in August with "Greenface."

Death took Stephen Vincent Benét, A. Merritt, and *The Spider*.

But distant wings were beating as Joe Haldeman, Christopher Priest, James Baen, Mick Farren, Robert M. Philmus, Cecelia Holland, Chris Boyce, and Ian Watson were born.

Let us travel back to that honored year of 1943 and enjoy the best stories that the real world bequeathed to us.

THE CAVE

Astounding,

January

by P. Schuyler Miller (1912-1974)

P. Schuyler Miller was a quiet man who was also one of the most powerful figures in science fiction from 1951 until his death. His power (which he never abused) derived from the fact that he was the book reviewer for Astounding during those years, and as such helped to define the "classics" of the field. During the 1930s and early 1940s he was a steady and capable contributor of stories to the sf magazines, although he only published one collection of his stories—The Titan (1952), now difficult to find. He also coauthored Genus Homo (1950) with L. Sprague de Camp.

"The Cave" is a story about Mars, a familiar enough subject, here treated in a unique, sweeping fashion that makes it one of the most unusual of the best stories of 1943.

(The influence of John W. Campbell is clear here. He would not allow the traditional views of Mars in the magazine. The Mars of Edgar Rice Burroughs or, for that matter, Ray Bradbury, was not welcome. He wanted the astronomical Mars and he got it from, among others, P. Schuyler Miller, who was a geologist by training. Of course, our knowledge of Mars has advanced enormously in the four decades since this story appeared and (alas) if the story were written today we could not have intelligent Martians featured. Nevertheless, the point made is a clear and poignant one, and is fitting considering that the story was written, and published, in the middle of World War II—I.A.)

The cave measured less than a hundred feet from end to end. It opened at the base of a limestone ridge which rose like a giant, rounded fin out of the desert. Its mouth was a flat oval, a shallow alcove scoured out of the soft stone by wind and sand. Near one end a smooth-walled tunnel sloped gently back into the ridge. Twenty feet from the entrance it turned sharply to the right and in a few feet swung back to the left, paralleling its original course. Here it leveled out into a broad, flat channel not more than four feet high. This was the main chamber of the cave.

The big room, like the rest of the cave, had been leached out of the limestone by running water, long before. The water had followed a less resistant seam in the rock, dissolving out a passage whose low ceiling rose and fell a little with irregularities in the harder stratum overhead, whose floor was flat and water-polished in spots and in others buried under a fine yellow clay. A little past the midpoint, the room opened out into a kind of inverted funnel in which a tall man could stand erect, a tapering chimney which quickly dwindled to a shaft barely big enough to admit a man's hand. Here the floor of the cave was lower and the walls, which had drawn together until they were less than ten feet apart, were ribbed and terraced with flowstone.

Beyond the chimney the ceiling dropped suddenly to within a few inches of the floor. By lying flat on his face and squirming along between the uneven layers of rock a thin man might have entered here. After measuring his length perhaps three times he would have been able to raise himself on one elbow and twist into a sitting position, his back against the end wall of the cave and his head and shoulders wedged into a crevice which cut across the main passage at right angles. This crevice lay directly under the highest part of the ridge and vanished into darkness above and on either side. Water must at one time have flowed through it, for the harder silicious layers in the limestone stood out on the walls in low relief like fine ruled lines drawn in sooty black. Not even air stirred in it now.

Twenty feet in the winding entry—six or eight feet at the bend—another thirty to the chimney and fifteen or twenty more to the back wall; it was a small cave. It was also very old.

The limestone of which the ridge was formed was perhaps the oldest exposed rock on the surface of that small old world. It had been laid down in fairly deep water at a time when there were seas where there were only deserts now. There had been life in those seas; where wind or water had worn away the softer lime, their fossil bodies stood out from the surface of the gray stone. There were fluted shells like glistening black trumpets—swarms of tiny big-eyed things with fantastically shaped armor and many sprawling arms—long ropes of delicate, saw-edged weed whose fossil tissues were still stained a dull purple—occasionally fragments of some larger thing like an armored, blunt-headed fish. They had been alive, swarming and breeding in the shallow sea, when Earth was no more than a scabbed-over globe of slowly jelling flame.

The cave itself was very old. It had been made by running water, and it was a long time since there was much water on the dying world. Water, sour with soil acids leached from the black humus of a forest floor, had seeped down into the network of joint-planes which intersected the flat-lying limestone beds, eating away the soft stone, widening cracks into crannies and crannies into high-arched rooms, rushing along the harder strata and tunneling through the softer ones, eventually bursting out into the open again at the base of a mossy ledge and babbling away over the rocks to join a brook, a river, or the sea.

Millions of years had passed since there were rivers and seas on Mars.

Things change slowly underground. After a cave has died—after the sources of moisture which created it have shifted or dried up—it may lie without changing for centuries. A man may set his foot in the clay of its floor and go away, and another man may come a hundred or a thousand or ten thousand years afterward and see his footprint there, as fresh as though it had been made yesterday. A man may write on the ceiling with the smoke of a torch, and if there is still a little life in the cave and moisture in the rock, what he has written will gradually film over with clear stone and last forever. Rock may fall from the ceiling and bury portions of the floor, or seal off some rooms completely. Water may return and wash away what has been written or coat it with

slime. But if a cave has died—if water has ceased to flow and its walls and ceilings are dry—things seldom change.

Most of the planet's surface had been desert for more millions of years than anyone has yet estimated. From the mouth of the cave its dunes and stony ridges stretched away like crimson ripples left on a beach after a wave has passed. They were dust rather than sand: red, ferric dust ground ever finer by the action of grain against grain, milling over and over through the centuries. It lay in a deep drift in the alcove and spilled down into the opening of the cave; it carpeted the first twenty-foot passage as with a strip of red velvet, and a little of it passed around the angle in the tunnel into the short cross-passage. Only the very finest powder, well nigh impalpable, hung in the still air long enough to pass the second bend and reach the big room. Enough had passed to lay a thin, rusty mantle over every horizontal surface in the cave. Even in the black silt at the very back of the cave, where the air never stirred, there was a soft red bloom on the yellow flowstone.

The cave was old. Animals had sheltered in it. There were trails trodden into the dry clay, close to the walls, made before the clay had dried. There was no dust on these places—animals still followed them when they needed to. There was a mass of draggled, shredded stalks and leaves from some desert plant, packed into the cranny behind a fallen rock and used as a nest. There were little piles of excreta, mostly the chitinous shells of insectlike creatures and the indigestible cellulose of certain plants. Under the chimney the ceiling was blackened by smoke, and there were shards of charcoal and burned bone mixed with the dust of the floor. There were places where the clay had been chipped and dug away to give more headroom, or to make a flat place where a bowl could be set down. There were other signs as well.

The *grak* reached the cave a little after dawn. He had been running all night, and as the sun rose he had seen the shadow of the ridge drawn in a long black line across the crimson dunes, and turned toward it. He ran with the tireless lope of the desert people, his splayed feet sinking only a little way into the soft dust where a man of his weight would have floundered ankle deep.

He was a young male, taller than most of his kind, better muscled and fatter. His fur was sleek and thick, jet black

with a pattern of rich brown. The colors in his cheek patches were fresh and bright, and his round black eyes shone like discs of polished coal.

He had been a hunter for less than one season. His tribe was one of the marauding bands which summered in the northern oases, raiding down into the lowlands in winter when the dry plateau became too cold and bare even for their hardy breed. It had fared better than most, for it had had little contact with man. The *grak* carried a knife which he had made for himself out of an eight-inch bar of beryllium copper, taken in his first raid. It was the only human thing he owned. Its hilt was of bone, intricately carved with the clan symbols of his father-line; its burnished blade was honed to a wicked double edge. It was the finest knife any of the desert folk had ever seen, and he had had to fight for it more than once. The desert tribes retained the old skills of metal working which the softer-living pastoral greenlanders had forgotten, and his tribe, the *Begar*, were among the best of the dryland smiths.

He wore the knife tucked into the short kilt of plaited leather which was his only garment. The Old One of his father-line had given it to him on the day he became a hunter and could no longer run naked like a cub. It was soft and pliable with long wear and oiled to a mahogany brown almost as dark and rich as his own chest patterns. There were black stains on it which he knew were blood, for the Old One had been one of the fiercest slayers of his line and the kilt had come down to him from an even greater warrior in his own youth. The very pattern in which the thin strips of *zek* hide were woven had lost its meaning, though it undoubtedly had been and still was of great virtue.

It was cold in the shadow of the ridge, and the *grak's* long fur fluffed out automatically to provide extra insulation. He looked like a big black owl as he stood scanning the western sky, sniffing the wind with his beaklike nose. There was a tawny band low on the horizon, brightening as the sun rose. He had smelled a storm early in the night, for he had all the uncanny weather-wiseness of his race and was sensitive to every subtle change in the quality of the atmosphere. He had started for the nearest arm of the greenlands, intending to claim the hospitality of the first village he could find, but the storm front was moving faster than he could run. He had seen the ridge only just in time.

He had recognized the place as he approached, though he had never seen it and none of his tribe had visited this part of the desert for many seasons. Such landmarks were part of the education of every dryland cub, and until they had become thoroughly ingrained in his wrinkled young brain he could not hope to pass the hunter's tests and win a hunter's rights. The cave was where he had known it would be, and he chuckled softly with satisfaction as he saw the weathered symbol carved in the stone over the opening. The desert people had long ago discarded the art of writing, having no use for it, but the meaning of certain signs had been passed down as a very practical part of their lore. This was a cave which the *grak's* own forefathers had used and marked.

He studied the signs in the dust around the entrance of the cave. He was not the first to seek shelter there. The feathery membranes of his nose unfolded from their horny sheath, recording the faint scents which still hung in the thin air. They confirmed what his eyes had told him. The cave was occupied.

The wind was rising fast. Red dust devils whirled ahead of the advancing wall of cloud. Red plumes were streaming from the summit of every dune. Making the sign of peace-coming, the *grak* stooped and entered the cave. Beyond the second bend in the passage was darkness which not even his owl's eyes, accustomed to the desert nights, could penetrate. However, he did not need to see. The sensitive organs of touch which were buried in the gaudy skin of his cheek patches picked up infinitesimal vibrations in the still air and told him accurately where there were obstacles. His ears were pricked for the slightest sound. His nose picked up a mixture of odors—his own characteristic scent, the dry and slightly musty smell of the cave itself, and the scents of the other creatures with which he would have to share it.

He identified them, one by one. There were four or five small desert creatures which had more to fear from him than he from them. There was one reptilian thing which under other circumstances might be dangerous, and which still might be if the peace were broken. And there was a *zek*.

The carnivore was as big and nearly as intelligent as the tribesman himself. Its kind waged perpetual war on the flocks of the greenland people, and rarely visited the oases, but when one did wander into the desert it was the most dreaded

enemy of the dryland tribes. It stole their cubs from beside their very campfires and attacked full-grown hunters with impunity. Its mottled pelt was the choicest prize a hunter could bring back as proof of his prowess. To some of the more barbaric tribes of the north it was more than just a beast—it was His emissary.

A sudden gust from the passage at his back told the *grak* that the storm was breaking. In a matter of minutes the air would be unbreathable outside. Softly, so as not to arouse the savage beast's suspicions, he began to murmur the ritual of the peace. His fingers were on the hilt of his knife as he began, but as the purring syllables went out into the hollow darkness, his nostrils told him that the fear odor was diminishing. Somewhere in the dark a horny paw scuffed on the dry clay and there was an instant reek of terror from some of the smaller things, but the *zek* made no sign. It was satisfied to keep the peace. Moving cautiously, the *grak* found a hollow in the wall near the entry and sat down to wait, squatting with his knees tucked up close under his furry belly, the hard rock at his back. The knife he laid on the floor beside his hand where it would be ready if he needed it. For a time his senses remained keyed to fever pitch, but gradually his tenseness eased. They were all *grekka* here—all living things, united in the common battle for existence against a cruel and malignant Nature. They knew the law and the brotherhood, and they would keep the truce as long as the storm lasted. Gradually the nictitating lids slipped across his open eyes and he sank into a half-sleep.

Harrigan blundered into the cave by pure luck. He knew nothing about Mars or its deserts except what the Company put in its handbook, and that was damn little. He was a big man and a strong man, born in the mountains with a more than ordinary tolerance for altitude, and he had had to spend less than a week in the dome before they shifted him to the new post in the eastern Sabaeus. He did what he was told and no more than he was told, laid away his pay every week in anticipation of one almighty spree when they brought him in at the next opposition, and had nothing but contempt for the native Martians. *Grekka* they were called, and that was all he knew or cared about them. To him they looked like animals and they were animals, in spite of the fact that they could talk and build houses and kept herds of peg-legged

monstrosities which seemed to serve as cattle. Hell—parrots could talk and ants keep cattle!

Harrigan had been a miner on Earth. He was that here, but he couldn't get used to the idea that plants could be more valuable than all the copper and tungsten and carnotite in the world. The desert and its barren red hills nagged at him, and whenever he could get time off he explored them. The fact that he found only rocks and sand did nothing to extinguish his sullen conviction that there was treasure incalculable here somewhere if only the damned natives would talk or the Company would listen to a man who knew minerals better than the big shots knew the swing of their secretaries' hips.

The fact was, of course, as the Company knew very well, that Martian mineral deposits had been exhausted by a native Martian civilization pursuing its inevitable way to an inevitable end at a time when Adam and Eva probably had tails. That the descendants of that civilization were still alive, even on a basis of complete savagery, spoke volumes for the stamina of the native race. Such arguments, however, would have meant less than nothing to a man of Harrigan's type. There were mines on Earth. There were mines on the moon. Hell—there were mines on Mars!

This time he had overstayed his luck. To him the low yellow wall of cloud on the western horizon was only a distant range of hills which he might some day visit and where he might find wealth enough to set him up in liquor for the rest of his life. He had spent the night in the cab of his sand car, and it was not until the clouds were a sullen precipice towering halfway up the sky that he understood what he was heading into. He swung around and headed back, but by then it was too late.

When the storm hit it was like night. The air was a semi-solid mass through which the sand car wallowed blindly with only its instrument board to show where it was going. Dust swiftly clogged the air intake, and he had to take out the filters, put on his mask, and hope for the best. It didn't come. In seconds the air inside the cab was a reddish mist and dust was settling like fine red pepper on every exposed surface. The wind seized the squat machine and rocked it like a skiff in a typhoon, but Harrigan could only hang on, peer red-eyed through dust-coated goggles at his dust-covered instruments, and wonder where he was.

The floundering car climbed painfully to the top of a monster dune, pushed its blunt snout out and over the steep leading edge, slewed violently around, and started down. Harrigan yanked despairingly at the steering levers; they were packed tight with dust and refused to move. He did not see the ridge until the car smashed head on into it. There was a despairing gurgle from the engine, a last clatter of broken bearings, and the car stopped. At once sand began to pile up behind and around it, and Harrigan, picking himself up off the floor of the cab, saw that if he didn't get out fast he would be buried where he sat.

He struggled out on the lee side of the car into a gale that bit into him like an icy knife. He could not see the car when he had taken one step away from it. The dust drove through every seam and patch of his clothes and filtered in around the edges of his mask. It was sucked into his mouth and nose and gritted under his swollen eyelids. It was everywhere, and in no time it would smother him.

The car was lost, though he was probably less than ten feet from it. The wind screamed past him in unholy glee, tearing at every loose flap on his coat, chilling him to the bone. He took half a dozen blundering steps, knee-deep in the soft dust, stumbled, and came down on his knees at the foot of the cliff. His outthrust hands met solid rock. He struggled forward on his knees and peered at it through crusted goggles. It was limestone, and where there was limestone there might be a cave. Foot by foot he felt his way along the uneven surface of the ridge until suddenly it dropped away in front of him; he staggered forward, and fell on his hands and knees in the entrance of the cave.

His head had clipped the low overhang as he fell and it was a minute or two before he realized where he was. Almost automatically, then, he crawled ahead until his skull rammed hard into another wall. He sat gingerly back on his heels and clawed at his mask. It was completely plugged with dust and utterly useless. He lifted it off his face and took a slow breath. There was dust in the air—plenty of it—but he could breathe.

He groped about him in the pitch dark, found an opening in the right-hand wall, and crawled in. Almost immediately there was another sharp turn and the passage suddenly opened out on either side and left him crouching at the entrance of what he knew must be a good-sized room.

Harrigan knew caves too well to take chances with them. What lay ahead might be a room or it might be a pit dropping to some lower level. He had a feeling that it was big. He found the corner where the left-hand wall swung back, moved up against it, moistened his lips with a thick, dry tongue, and shouted:

"Hoy!"

The echo rattled back at him like gunfire. The place was big, but not too big. What he needed now was water and a light.

He had both. Dust had worked in around the stopper of his canteen until he could barely start the threads, but one last savage twist of his powerful fingers did the trick. There wasn't much left. He let a few drops trickle over his tongue and down his throat, wiped the caked dust off the threads with a finger, and screwed the cap back on. These storms lasted for days sometimes, and it was all the water in the world as far as he was concerned.

Light came next. Harrigan had spent too much time underground to be afraid of the dark, but it was plain common sense to want to see what you were getting into. Harrigan hated mysteries. If he knew what he was facing he could fight his way through anything, but he hated blind fumbling and he hated the dark.

Enough water had evaporated from the open canteen in the minute or two he had had the cap off appreciably to raise the moisture content of the cave—at least for the Martians. To their acute senses it was the equivalent of a heavy fog. A few feet away in the blackness the *grak* awoke with a start. Farther back in the cave one of the small animals stirred eagerly. And the *zek* sneezed.

Harrigan's blundering approach had roused the occupants of the cave, and every eye, ear, and nose had been trained on him when he appeared. One rodentlike creature made a panicky rush as it got his scent, only to freeze in terror as it nearly bumped into the *zek*. The peace, for the moment, was suspended—a new factor had entered the situation and a new equilibrium must be reached. They quietly awaited developments.

Harrigan had missed all this preliminary activity in his efforts to find out where he was, rub the dust out of his eyes, and get a few drops of water down his parched gullet. But

when the *zek* sneezed, the sudden sound was like an explosion in his ears. In the dead silence which followed he could clearly hear the sound of quiet breathing. It was close to him, and it came from more than one place. He had to have a light!

There should have been a torch in the pocket of his coverall. There wasn't. He had lost it or left it in the car. He had a lighter, though. He ripped feverishly at the zipper of his coverall. It slid open a few inches with a sound like the crackle of lightning and jammed. Sweat dripping from his forehead, he sat back on his heels and fumbled for his gun, but there was no movement from the things in the dark. Slowly and softly he slipped two fingers into his pocket and found the lighter. Leveling the gun at the blank blackness in front of him he lifted the lighter above his head and flipped off the cap.

The burst of yellow flame was dazzling. Then he saw their eyes—dozens of little sparks of green and red fire staring out of the dark. As his own eyes adjusted he saw the *grak*, huddled like a woolly black gargoyle in his corner. The Martian's huge round eyes were watching him blankly, his grinning mouth was slightly open over a saw-edged line of teeth, and his pointed ears were spread wide to catch every sound. His beaklike, shining nose and bright red cheek patches gave him the look of a partly plucked owl. He had a wicked-looking knife in his spidery fingers.

Harrigan's gaze flickered around the circle of watching beasts. He knew nothing of Martian animals, except for the few domesticated creatures the greenlanders kept, and they made a weird assortment. They were mostly small, ratty things with big eyes and feathery antennae in place of noses. Some of them were furred and some had horny or scaly armor. All of them were variously decorated with fantastic collections of colored splotches, crinkled horns, and faceted spines which presumably were attractive to themselves or their mates. At the far end of the cave, curled up in a bed of dry grass, was a lean splotched thing almost as big as the little native which stared at him with malevolent red eyes set close together over a grinning, crocodilian snout. As he eyed it, it yawned hideously and dropped its head on its crossed forepaws—paws like naked, taloned hands. It narrowed its eyes to crimson slits and studied him insolently from under

the pallid lids. It looked nasty, and his fingers closed purposefully over the butt of his gun.

The *grak's* cackle of protest stopped him. The only word he could make out was *bella*—peace. He knew that because he had a woman named Bella back in New York, or he had had before he signed on with the Company. Besides, it was part of the spiel you were supposed to rattle off every time you talked to one of the damned little rats. It was all the Martian he knew, so he spat it out, keeping one eye on the other beast.

This was the first man the *grak* had ever seen. It was a monstrous-looking thing, wrapped in layer after layer of finely plaited fabric which must have taken his mates many years to weave, even if their clumsy fingers were as deft as those of the greenlanders, who occasionally did such things. A thrilling philosophical problem was teasing the *grak's* young brain. Was or was not this man of the *grekka*?

To a native Martian the term *grekka* means literally "living things." Any creature native to the planet is a *grak*; all of them, separately or collectively, are *grekka*. The first men to come in contact with the native race heard the word used to designate the Martians themselves and assumed that it was the Martian equivalent of "men." Graziani, of course, as an anthropologist of note, immediately realized the truth of the matter—the situation is duplicated again and again among human aborigines—but the label stuck. Nor did that matter too much, for *grekka* did include the natives and made perfectly good sense when it was used as men proceeded to use it. What did matter was that the word was also the key to the whole elaborate structure of Martian psychology.

Millions of years of unceasing struggle with the forces of an inclement environment on a swiftly maturing and rapidly dying planet have ingrained in the native Martian race, greenlanders and drylanders alike, the fundamental concept that Nature is their undying enemy. Life for them is a bitter fight against overwhelming odds, with an invisible foe who will use every possible means to grind out the little spark of ego in each round, furry Martian skull. You find it in the oldest legends: always the wily native hero is outwitting—there is no other word for it—the evil purposes of the personified, malignant Universe.

Grekka is the ultimate expression of this grim philosophy.

In the battle for life all living things—all *grekka*—are brothers. No Martian would ever dispute the theory of evolution—it is the very core of his existence that all beasts are brothers. That is a somewhat oversimplified statement of the fact, for from there on *grekka* becomes entangled in the most elaborate maze of qualifications and exceptions which a once highly civilized race has been able to devise over a period of millions of years. Your native Martian, drylander or greenlander, will help his brother beast whenever the latter is clearly losing out in a battle with Nature, but there are certain things which the individual is supposed to be able to do for himself if he is not to give unholy satisfaction to Him—the Great Evil One—the personification of the universal doom which pours unending misfortune on all *grekka* alike.

The distinction is one of those things which no logician will ever be able to work out. It is one thing for the desert tribes and something else for the lowlanders. The *Begar* will draw the line at something which is a sacred duty of every *Gorub*, in spite of the fact that the two tribes have lived side by side on a more or less friendly basis for generations. One clan—even one father-line—may and must act in ways which no other clan on Mars may duplicate without eternally losing a varying number of points in its game with Him and His aides.

What puzzled the young *grak* of the cave was whether man—specifically Harrigan—was *grekka*. If he was, he was an innate member of the brotherhood of living things and subject to its laws. If he wasn't, then he could only be a personification or extension of the inimical First Principle Himself, and hence an inherent enemy. Since the time of Graziani and the Flemming expedition every Martian native, individual by individual and tribe by tribe, has had to make this decision for himself, and by it govern his further relations with humanity. The *Begar* had had too little contact with mankind to have needed to make such a decision as a tribe. Now the young *grak* decided to reserve judgment, keep his eyes open, and let the man prove himself by his further actions.

Harrigan, of course, knew absolutely nothing of all this. It would probably not have mattered if he had. What some damned animal thought about the Universe was nothing to him.

For a moment there had been death in the air. Now the

tension was vanishing. The smaller animals were settling down again, the little *grak* grinning and nodding as he squatted down in the corner. Only the *zek's* slitted eyes were still studying him with cold indifference. The damned nightmare was curled up in the one place in the cave where a man could stand up! Harrigan gave it eye for eye, and all the little furry and scaly creatures lifted their heads and watched them while the *grak* blinked worriedly. They could all smell the hostility between the two. The *zek* yawned again, showing an evil double line of knife-edged fangs and a leprous white gullet, and flexed the mighty muscles which lay like slabs of molded steel across its massive shoulders. Harrigan sat glumly down where he was, his back against the cold stone, his gun on the floor beside him, the lighter wedged into a crack in the rock between his feet.

Outside the storm was at its height. The faroff screaming of the wind echoed and re-echoed in the big room. Puffs of red dust drifted in out of the darkness, and the flame of the lighter wavered and danced. In the occasional lulls, the only sound in the cave was steady breathing. Every eye, Harrigan knew, was on him. He was the intruder here, and they were wary of him. Let 'em be! A man was something to *be* afraid of on this damned little dried-up world!

He glowered back at them, making up malicious fantasies about their probable habits. There were plenty of fancy stories going the rounds about how these Martians went at things. He grinned sardonically at the little *grak* as he recalled one particularly outrageous libel. The *grak* smiled reassuringly back at him. This man was a hideous travesty of a thing, but he was keeping the peace.

Harrigan sized up the cave. It wasn't a bad hole as caves went. It was dry, the angle in the passage kept the dust out, and it was big enough so a man could stretch. With a fire and water he could last as long as the storm would.

There had been a fire, he noticed, under the chimney at the far end of the cave. There was soot on the ceiling, and the rock had the crumbled look of burned limestone. It was too close to the big beast for comfort, though. That was a wicked-looking brute if there ever was one. Better leave him be—but if he tried to start anything, James Aloysius Harrigan would show him who was tough!

A gust stronger than any that had come before bent the thin flame of the lighter far over, drawing it out into a feeble

yellow thread. Harrigan bent quickly and sheltered it with his cupped palms. It seemed smaller and duller than when he had first lit it. He picked up the lighter and shook it close to his ear. It was almost dry! He snapped down the cap.

The darkness which fell was stifling. The invisible walls of the cave seemed to be closing in on him, compressing the thin air, making it hard to breathe. The dust got into his nose and throat. It had a dry metallic taste. Iron in it. It shriveled the membranes of his throat like alum. He cleared his throat noisily and ran his tongue over his thick lips. What he needed was a drink. Just a couple of drops. He unscrewed the canteen and lifted it to his lips.

Somewhere in the blackness something moved. It made only the very smallest sound—the tick of a claw on the rock—but he heard it. Instantly he was on the alert. So that was their game! Well, let 'em come! They were as blind as he was in this hole, and he had yet to see the day when any animal could outsmart him!

He set the canteen carefully down behind a block of stone. It would be safer there if there was a scrap, and it might hit against something and give him away if he carried it. Shifting his gun to his left hand, he began cautiously to work his way along the wall, stopping every few inches to listen. He could hear nothing, but the rhythmic, ghostly whisper of the creatures' breathing. Whatever it was that had moved, it was quiet now.

His fingers found the first of the slabs of fallen limestone which lay half buried in the clay along the right-hand wall. They reached almost to the chimney, but about fifteen feet from where he had been sitting there was a break in the line, and the wall dropped back into a shallow alcove no more than two feet high. In there he would have solid rock on all sides of him, and he would be directly opposite the pile of dried weeds in which the *zek* was lying. He would have a clear shot at the ugly brute between two of the fallen blocks.

His groping hand came down on something cold and scaly that wriggled hastily away under the rocks. There was an answering squeal of terror and a patter of scampering feet as panic-stricken little creatures scattered in front of him. Something as heavy as a cat landed on his back and clung there, chattering madly. He batted at it and knocked it to the floor.

Then, only a few feet ahead in the darkness, he heard the stealthy click of claw on stone again. The *zek!*

He had to have light! It was suicide to face that monster in pitch blackness! He had slipped the lighter back into the outside pocket of his coverall. He fumbled for it. It was gone!

The panic went out of Harrigan in a flash. He sat back on his heels and curled his fingers lovingly around the butt of his gun. The tougher things got, the better he liked them. The lighter must have dropped out of his open pocket; he could find it when he needed it by going back over the ground he had just covered. It wasn't lost. But he didn't need it. The dark was his protection, not his enemy. They couldn't see him in the dark.

He dropped back on all fours. Everything was quiet again. He'd hear them if they tried anything. He was almost at the alcove, and then they'd have to blast to get at him. He could pick 'em off one by one if they tried to get in.

The clay was hard as brick and full of little chunks of broken stone that gouged at his knees, even through the heavy suit. The roof was lower, too; he had to get down on his elbows and hitch along, almost flat on his face.

His heart was thumping like mad. He was working too hard in this thin air. He rolled over on his side, his back against one of the big blocks, and stared into the blackness. Another few feet and he could lie down and wait for them. He needed time out. He had to have a clear head. He cursed his stupidity in not bringing an oxygen flask from the car. One shot of that stuff and he'd be ready to take 'em on all at once, barehanded!

As he started on again something tinkled on the stone beside him. He groped for it: it was the lighter. It had been in his back pocket. Damn fool—letting the darkness rattle him! Animals were all afraid of fire. He could smoke 'em out any time he wanted to. He was boss of this cave! A grin of satisfaction spread over his grimy face as he shuffled along on knees and elbows through the dust.

One big slab almost blocked the hole he was looking for. It was a tight squeeze, but he wriggled through and found plenty of room behind it. He felt for the crack between the blocks that was opposite the nest, slid his gun cautiously into position, and flashed the lighter. Now!

The nest was empty.

With a curse Harrigan rolled to the other opening. The

flame of the lighter showed him the far end of the cave—the *grak* crouching wide-eyed in his niche—the black arch of the entrance—and the *zek*!

The thing had slipped past him in the dark. It stood where he had been sitting a moment ago, by the entrance. It stared back at him over its shoulder—a hideous thing like a giant reptile-snouted weasel, mottled with leprous gray. It grinned at him, its red eyes mocking, then stretched out a handlike paw and picked up his canteen!

Harrigan's first shots spattered against the rock above the monster's head; the light blinded him. His next clipped through the coarse mane on the back of its thick neck. His last was fired point-blank into its snarling face. Then the lighter went spinning away across the floor and talons like steel clamps closed on his arm.

The rocks saved him then. The thing had him by the arm, but his body was protected. He still had the gun; he twisted around in the beast's grim grasp and emptied it into the darkness. Its grip loosened and he snatched his arm free. It was bleeding where the *zek's* claws had bitten into the flesh. Then, through the crack on his right, he saw a sheet of white flame go up as the lighter touched the powder-dry mass of weeds in the beast's nest.

The cave was lit up as bright as day. Harrigan saw the *zek*, blood streaming from a ragged wound in its broad chest, its face a bloody mask of fury. One shot had plowed a long furrow across the side of his head. It gathered its powerful hind legs under it, seized a corner of the great block which barred the opening with paws like human hands, and pulled. The muscles stood out in knotted ropes on its arms and shoulders as it worried at the massive stone. Then the packed clay at its base crumbled and the great block slowly tipped. The way was open. His sanctuary had become a trap.

There was one way out. Harrigan took it. Desperately he lunged forward, out of the cranny straight into the thing's arms. He clamped both hands over its narrow lower jaw and forced its slavering snout straight back with all the power of his own broad back. It rose on its haunches, hugging him to it, then toppled over, dragging him with it into the open, raking at him with its cruel hind claws. He set his jaw and felt his arm stiffen and straighten as the evil head was driven back—back. As through a red mist he saw the *grak's* owl eyes staring at him over the monster's shoulder—saw the cop-

perly gleam of firelight on a shining knife. He felt the *zek* shudder as the keen blade was driven home in its back. It began to cough—great racking coughs that shook its whole frame. Its arms tightened convulsively about him and its claws clenched in his back as the copper knife drove home again and again. Then, slowly, they began to loosen. The beast was dead.

The burning weeds had dimmed to a dull flicker. The dust that had been stirred up in their struggle hung like a red veil in the air. Harrigan lay staring up through it at the little native, sucking the thin air painfully into his tortured lungs. The damned little rat had saved his life! He wiped the blood and dust off his face with his sleeve and got slowly to his feet. He had to stoop to clear the ceiling. That knife—that was a man's weapon. Wonder where the *grak* got it—

He took one step toward the *grak*. Before he could take another the knife went smoothly into his belly, just under the breastbone, driving upward to the heart.

Squatting in the darkness, listening to the distant murmur of the storm, the *grak* wondered what would have happened in the cave if the man had not come there. The *zek* had been a treacherous ally: sooner or later it might have broken the peace. Once its blood-rage had been aroused it had, of course, been necessary to kill it. But if the man had not come that necessity might have been averted.

The man had been very clever. The *grak* had been almost certain that he was what he pretended to be. But as always there was one thing—one very little thing—to betray him. He did not know the law of water.

In every doubtful situation, the *grak* reflected smugly, there was some trivial matter in which the Source of Evil or His emissaries would reveal themselves. Some one thing in which the true *grak* was clearly distinguishable from the forces of Nature against which he must forever fight. One must be quick to see such discrepancies—and quick to act on them.

The matter of water lay at the very root of the law by which all *grekka*—all living things—existed. It was the thing which all must have, which none, under the law, could withhold from another. Without it there could be no life. With it every living thing was given strength to battle on against the eternal foe.

The man had brought water to the cave. Under the law all

grekka must share in it according to their need. But when the *zek* had gone to take its share, the man had tried to kill it. By that small thing he revealed himself—no *grak*, but one of His evil things. So he had died. So, once more, was victory won for the brotherhood of living things against the Universe.

He would make a song about this thing, and sing it by the fires of his tribe. He would cut a sign in the stone over the entrance of the cave, after the storm was over, so that others who came there would know of it. And the cave itself, where his forefathers had come and lit their fires, would keep the bodies of the *zek* and the man thus, side by side, as witness forever.

THE HALFLING

Astounding Stories,

February

by Leigh Brackett (1915-1978)

Leigh Brackett, along with C. L. Moore, was one of the premier women authors in science fiction in the 1940s. She wrote high-quality space opera and sword and sorcery, including such novels as Shadow Over Mars (1951), People of the Talisman (1964), and Sword of Rhiannon (1953), all of which appeared in the sf magazines in the 1940s or early 1950s. Her most important book is the subdued yet powerful The Long Tomorrow (1955), one of the finest post-holocaust novels ever written. A noted Hollywood screenwriter (she completed the first draft of the screenplay for The Empire Strikes Back just before her death), she achieved commercial success with her Book of Skaith trilogy in the 1970s.

"The Halfling" is representative of her forties work at its best.

(I was always enthusiastic about Leigh, both literarily and personally. My clearest memory of her, in fact, is that of seeing her once at a convention and racing happily toward her (I was younger in those faroff days, though of course I am essentially ageless), shouting, "Leigh! Leigh!" When I got to her, I threw my arms around her waist and lifted her into the air and whirled her around. (She was no lightweight but, as I said, I was younger in those faroff days.) As a gesture of affection, it was delightful and I'm sure Leigh appreciated it in a theoretical sense. Not in a practical sense, however,

for in manhandling her thus, I threw her back out (unintentionally, of course) and she had to hobble through the rest of the convention.—I.A.)

Chapter I

Primitive Venus

I was watching the sunset. It was something pretty special in the line of California sunsets, and it made my feel swell, being the first one I'd seen in about nine years. The pitch was in the flatlands between Culver City and Venice, and I could smell the sea. I was born in a little dump at Venice, Cal., and I've never found any smell like the clean cold salt of the Pacific—not anywhere in the solar system.

I was standing alone, off to one side of the grounds. The usual noises of a carnival around feeding time were being made behind me, and the hammer gang was pinning the last of the tents down tight. But I wasn't thinking about Jade Green's Interplanetary Carnival, The Wonders of the Seven Worlds Alive Before Your Eyes.

I was remembering John Damien Greene running barefoot on a wet beach, fishing for perch off the end of a jetty, and dreaming big dreams. I was wondering where John Damien Greene had gone, taking his dreams with him, because now I could hardly remember what they were.

Somebody said softly from behind me, "Mr. Greene?"

I quit thinking about John Damien Greene. It was that kind of voice—sweet, silky, guaranteed to make you forget your own name. I turned around.

She matched her voice, all right. She stood about five-three on her bronze heels, and her eyes were more purple than the hills of Malibu. She had a funny little button of a nose and a pink mouth, smiling just enough to show her even white teeth. The bronze metal-cloth dress she wore hugged a chassis with no flaws in it anywhere. I tried to find some.

She dropped her head, so I could see the way the last of the sunlight tangled in her gold-brown hair.

"They said you were Mr. Greene. If I've made a mistake. . . ."

She had an accent, just enough to be fascinating.

I said, "I'm Greene. Something I can do for you?" I still couldn't find anything wrong with her, but I kept looking just the same. My blood pressure had gone up to about three hundred.

It's hard to describe a girl like that. You can say she's five-three and beautiful, but you can't pass on the odd little tilt of her eyes and the way her mouth looks, or the something that just comes out of her like light out of a lamp, and hooks into you so you know you'll never be rid of it, not if you live to be a thousand.

She said, "Yes. You can give me a job. I'm a dancer."

I shook my head. "Sorry, miss. I got a dancer."

Her face had a look of steel down under the soft kittenish roundness. "I'm not just talking," she said. "I need a job so I can eat. I'm a good dancer. I'm the best dancer you ever saw anywhere. Look me over."

That's all I had been doing. I guess I was staring by then. You don't expect fluffy dolls like that to have so much iron in them. She wasn't bragging. She was just telling me.

"I still have a dancer," I told her, "a green-eyed Martian babe who is plenty good, and who would tear my head off, and yours too, if I hired you."

"Oh," she said. "Sorry. I thought you bossed this carnival." She let me think about that, and then grinned. "Let me show you."

She was close enough so I could smell the faint, spicy perfume she wore. But she'd stopped me from being just a guy chinning with a pretty girl. Right then I was Jade Greene, the carny boss-man, with scars on my knuckles and an ugly puss, and a show to keep running.

Strictly Siwash, that show, but my baby—mine to feed and paint and fuel. If this kid had something Sindi didn't have, something to drag in the cash customers—well, Sindi would have to take it and like it. Besides, Sindi was getting so she thought she owned me.

The girl was watching my face. She didn't say anything more, or even move. I scowled at her.

"You'd have to sign up for the whole tour. I'm blasting off next Monday for Venus, and then Mars, and maybe into the Asteroids."

"I don't care. Anything to be able to eat. Anything to—"

She stopped right there and bent her head again, and suddenly I could see tears on her thick brown lashes.

I said, "Okay. Come over to the coach tent and we'll have a look."

Me, I was tempted to sign her for what was wrapped up in that bronze cloth—but business is business. I couldn't take on any left-footed ponies.

She said shakily, "You don't soften up very easily, do you?" We started across the lot toward the main gate. The night was coming down cool and fresh. Off to the left, clear back to the curving deep-purple barrier of the hills, the slim white spires of Culver, Westwood, Beverly Hills, and Hollywood were beginning to show a rainbow splash of color under their floodlights.

Everything was clean, new, and graceful. Only the thin fog and the smell of the sea were old.

We were close to the gate, stumbling a little in the dusk of the afterglow. Suddenly a shadow came tearing out from between the tents.

It went erratically in lithe, noiseless bounds, and it was somehow not human though it went on two feet. The girl caught her breath and shrank in against me. The shadow went around us three times like a crazy thing, and then stopped.

There was something eerie about the sudden stillness. The hair crawled on the back of my neck. I opened my mouth angrily.

The shadow stretched itself toward the darkening sky and let go a wail like Lucifer falling from Heaven.

I cursed. The carny lights came on, slamming a circle of blue-white glare against the night.

"Laska, come here!" I yelled.

The girl screamed.

I put my arm around her. "It's all right," I said, and then, "Come here, you misbegotten Thing! You're on a sleigh ride again."

There were more things I wanted to say, but the girl cramped my style. Laska slunk in toward us. I didn't blame her for yelping. Laska wasn't pretty.

He wasn't much taller than the girl, and looked shorter because he was drooping. He wore a pair of tight dark trunks and nothing else except the cross-shaped mane of fine blue-gray fur that went across his shoulders and down his back, from the peak between his eyes to his long tail. He was drag-

ging the tail, and the tip of it was twitching. There was more of the soft fur on his chest and forearms, and a fringe of it down his lank belly.

I grabbed him by the scruff and shook him. "I ought to boot your ribs in! We got a show in less than two hours."

He looked up at me. The pupils of his yellow-green eyes were closed to thin hairlines, but they were flat and cold with hatred. The glaring lights showed me the wet whiteness of his pointed teeth and the raspy pinkness of his tongue.

"Let me go. Let me go, you human!" His voice was hoarse and accented.

"I'll let you go." I cuffed him across the face. "I'll let you go to the immigration authorities. You wouldn't like that, would you? You wouldn't even have coffee to hop up on when you died."

The sharp claws came out of his fingers and toes, flexed hungrily and went back in again.

I dropped him.

"Go on back inside. Find the croaker and tell him to straighten you out. I don't give a damn what you do on your own time, but you miss out on one more show and I'll take your job and call the I-men. Get it?"

"I get it," said Laska sullenly, and curled his red tongue over his teeth. He shot his flat, cold glance at the girl and went away, not making any sound at all.

The girl shivered and drew away from me. "What was—that?"

"Cat-man from Callisto. My prize performer. They're pretty rare."

"I—I've heard of them. They evolved from a cat ancestor instead of an ape, like we did."

"That's putting it crudely, but it's close enough. I've got a carload of critters like that, geeks from all over the system. They ain't human, and they don't fit with animals either. Moth-men, lizard-men, guys with wings and guys with six arms and antennae. They all followed evolutionary tracks peculiar to their particular hunks of planet, only they stopped before they got where they were going. The Callistan kitties are the aristocrats of the bunch. They've got an I. Q. higher than a lot of humans, and wouldn't spit on the other half-lings."

"Poor things," she said softly. "You didn't have to be so cruel to him."

I laughed. "That What's-it would as soon claw my insides out as look at me—or any other human, including you—just on general principles. That's why Immigration hates to let 'em in even on a work permit. And when he's hopped up on coffee. . . ."

"Coffee? I thought I must have heard wrong."

"Nope. The caffeine in Earthly coffee berries works just like coke or hashish for 'em. Venusian coffee hits 'em so hard they go nuts and then die, but our own kind just keeps 'em going. It's only the hoppy ones you ever find in a show like this. They get started on coffee and they have to have it no matter what they have to do to get it."

She shuddered a little. "You said something about dying."

"Yeah. If he's ever deported back to Callisto his people will tear him apart. They're a clannish bunch. I guess the first humans on Callisto weren't very tactful, or else they just hate us because we're something they're not and never can be. Anyway, their tribal law forbids them to have anything to do with us except killing. Nobody knows much about 'em, but I hear they have a nice friendly religion, something like the old-time Thugs and their Kali worship."

I paused, and then said uncomfortably, "Sorry I had to rough him up in front of you. But he's got to be kept in line."

She nodded. We didn't say anything after that. We went in past the main box and along between the burglars readying up their layouts—Martian *getak*, Venusian *shalil* and the game the Mercurian hillmen play with human skulls. Crooked? Sure—but suckers like to be fooled, and a guy has to make a living.

I couldn't take my eyes off the girl. I thought, *if she dances the way she walks. . . .*

She didn't look much at the big three-dimensional natural-color pictures advertising the geek show. We went by the brute top, and suddenly all hell broke loose inside of it. I've got a fair assortment of animals from all over. They make pretty funny noises when they get started, and they were started now.

They were nervous, unhappy noises. I heard prisoners yammering in the Lunar cell blocks once, and that was the way this sounded—strong, living things shut up in cages and tearing their hearts out with it—hate, fear, and longing like you never thought about. It turned you cold.

The girl looked scared. I put my arm around her again, not minding it at all. Just then Tiny came out of the brute top.

Tiny is a Venusian deep-jungle man, about two sizes smaller than the Empire State Building, and the best zooman I ever had, drunk or sober. Right now he was mad.

"I tell that Laska stay 'way from here," he yelled. "My kids smell him. You listen!"

I didn't have to listen. His "kids" could have been heard halfway to New York. Laska had been expressly forbidden to go near the brute top because the smell of him set the beasts crazy. Whether they were calling to him one animal to another, or scared of him as something unnatural, we didn't know. The other halflings were pretty good about it, but Laska liked to start trouble just for the hell of it.

I said, "Laska's hopped again. I sent him to the croaker. You get the kids quiet again, and then send one of the punks over to the crumb castle and tell the cook I said if he ever gives Laska a teaspoonful of coffee again without my say-so I'll fry him in his own grease."

Tiny nodded his huge pale head and vanished, cursing. I said to the girl, "Still want to be a carny?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Anything, as long as you serve food!"

"That's a pretty accent you got. What is it?"

"Just about everything. I was born on a ship between Earth and Mars, and I've lived all over. My father was in the diplomatic corps."

I said, "Oh. Well, here's the place. Go to it."

Sindi was sitting cross-legged on the stage, sipping *thil* and listening to sad Martian music on the juke box behind the screen of faded Martian tapestry. She looked up and saw us, and she didn't like what she saw.

She got up. She was a Low-Canaler, built light and wiry, and she moved like a cat. She had long emerald eyes and black hair with little bells braided in it, and clusters of tiny bells in her ears. She was wearing the skin of a Martian sand-leopard, no more clothes than the law forced her to wear. She was something to look at, and she had a disposition like three yards of barbed wire.

I said, "Hi, Sindi. This kid wants a tryout. Climb down, huh?"

Sindi looked the kid over. She smiled and climbed down

and put her hand on my arm. She sounded like a shower of rain when she moved, and her nails bit into me, hard.

I said between my teeth, "What music do you want, kid?"

"My name's Laura—Laura Darrow." Her eyes were very big and very purple. "Do you have Enhali's *Primitive Venus*?"

Not more than half a dozen dancers in the system can do justice to that collection of tribal music. Some of it's subhuman and so savage it scares you. We use it for mood music, to draw the crowd.

I started to protest, but Sindi smiled and tinkled her head back. "Of course. Put it on, Jade."

I shrugged and went in and fiddled with the juke box. When I came out Laura Darrow was up on the stage and we had an audience. Sindi must have passed the high sign. I shoved my way through a bunch of Venusian lizard-men and sat down. There were three or four little moth-people from Phobos roosting up on the braces so their delicate wings wouldn't get damaged in the crush.

The music started. Laura kicked off her shoes and danced.

I don't think I breathed all the time she was on the stage. I don't remember anyone else breathing, either. We just sat and stared, sweating with nervous ecstasy, shivering occasionally, with the music beating and crying and surging over us.

The girl wasn't human. She was sunlight, quicksilver, a leaf riding the wind—but nothing human, nothing tied down to muscles and gravity and flesh. She was—oh, hell, there aren't any words. She was the music.

When she was through we sat there a long time, perfectly still. Then the Venusians, human and half-human, let go a yell and the audience came to and tore up the seats.

In the middle of it Sindi looked at me with deadly green eyes and said, "I suppose she's hired."

"Yeah. But it doesn't have anything to do with you, baby."

"Listen, Jade. This suitcase outfit isn't big enough for two of us. Besides, she's got you hooked, and she can have you."

"She hasn't got me hooked. Anyway, so what? You don't own me."

"No. And you don't owe me, either."

"I got a contract."

She told me what I could do with my contract.

I yelled, "What do you want me to do, throw her out on her ear? With that talent?"

"Talent!" snarled Sindi. "She's not talented. She's a freak."

"Just like a dame. Why can't you be a good loser?"

She explained why. A lot of it didn't make sense, and none of it was printable. Presently she went out, leaving me sore and a little uneasy. We had quite a few Martians with the outfit. She could make trouble.

Oh, hell! Just another dame sore because she was out-classed. Artistic temperament, plus jealousy. So what? Let her try something. I could handle it. I'd handled people before.

I jammed my way up to the stage. Laura was being mobbed. She looked scared—some of the halfings are enough to give a tough guy nightmares—and she was crying.

I said, "Relax, honey. You're in." I knew that Sindi was telling the truth. I was hooked. I was so hooked it scared me, but I wouldn't have wiggled off if I could.

She sagged down in my arms and said, "Please, I'm hungry."

I half carried her out, with the moth-people fluttering their gorgeous wings around our heads and praising her in their soft, furry little voices.

I fed her in my own quarters. She shuddered when I poured her coffee and refused it, saying she didn't think she'd ever enjoy it again. She took tea instead. She was hungry, all right. I thought she'd never stop eating.

Finally I said, "The pay's forty credits, and found."

She nodded.

I said gently, "You can tell me. What's wrong?"

She gave me a wide, purple stare. "What do you mean?"

"A dancer like you could write her own ticket anywhere, and not for the kind of peanuts I can pay you. You're in a jam."

She looked at the table and locked her fingers together. Their long pink nails glistened.

She whispered, "It isn't anything bad. Just a—a passport difficulty. I told you I was born in space. The records got lost somehow, and living the way we did—well, I had to come to Earth in a hurry, and I couldn't prove my citizenship, so I came without it. Now I can't get back to Venus where my money is, and I can't stay here. That's why I wanted so badly to get a job with you. You're going out, and you can take me."

I knew how to do that, all right. I said, "You must have a

big reason to take the risk you did. If you're caught it means the Luna cell blocks for a long time before they deport you."

She shivered. "It was a personal matter. It delayed me a while. I—was too late."

I said, "Sure. I'm sorry." I took her to her tent, left her there and went out to get the show running, cursing Sindi. I stopped cursing and stared when I passed the coach tent. She was there, and giving.

She stuck out her tongue at me and I went on.

That evening I hired the punk, just a scrawny kid with a white face, who said he was hungry and needed work. I gave him to Tiny, to help out in the brute top.

Chapter II

Voice of Terror

We played in luck that week. Some gilded darling of the screen showed up with somebody else's husband who wasn't quite divorced yet, and we got a lot of free publicity in the papers and over the air. Laura wnet on the second night and brought down the house. We turned 'em away for the first time in history. The only thing that worried me was Sindi. She wouldn't speak to me, only smile at me along her green eyes as though she knew a lot she wasn't telling and not any of it nice. I tried to keep an eye on her, just in case.

For five days I walked a tightrope between heaven and hell. Everybody on the pitch knew I was a dead duck where Laura was concerned. I suppose they got a good laugh out of it—me, Jade Greene the carny boss, knocked softer than a cup custard by a girl young enough to be my daughter, a girl from a good family, a girl with talent that put her so far beyond my lousy dog-and-pony show. . . .

I knew all that. It didn't do any good. I couldn't keep away from her. She was so little and lovely; she walked like music; her purple eyes had a tilt to them that kept you looking, and her mouth—

I kissed it on the fifth night, out back of the coach tent when the show was over. It was dark there; we were all alone, and the faint spicy breath of her came to me through the thin salt fog. I kissed her.

Her mouth answered mine. Then she wrenched away, sud-

denly, with a queer fury. I let her go. She was shuddering, and breathing hard.

I said, "I'm sorry."

"It isn't that. Oh, Jade, I—" She stopped. I could hear the breath sobbing in her throat. Then she turned and ran away, and the sound of her weeping came back to me through the dark.

I went to my quarters and got out a bottle. After the first shot I just sat staring at it with my head in my hands. I haven't any idea how long I sat there. It seemed like forever. I only know that the pitch was dark, sound asleep under a pall of fog, when Sindi screamed.

I didn't know it was Sindi then. The scream didn't have any personality. It was the voice of terror and final pain, and it was far beyond anything human.

I got my gun out of the table drawer. I remember my palm was slippery with cold sweat. I went outside, catching up the big flashlight kept for emergencies near the tent flap. It was very dark out there, very still, and yet not quiet. There was something behind the darkness and the silence, hiding in them, breathing softly and waiting.

The pitch began to wake up. The stir and rustle spread out from the scream like ripples from a stone, and over in the brute top a Martian sand-cat began to wail, thin and feral, like an echo of death.

I went along between the tents, walking fast and silent. I felt sick, and the skin of my back twitched; my face began to ache from being drawn tight. The torch beam shook a little in my hand.

I found her back of the coach tent, not far from where I'd kissed Laura. She was lying on her face, huddled up, like a brown island in a red sea. The little bells were still in her ears.

I walked in her blood and knelt down in it and put my hand on her shoulder. I thought she was dead, but the bells tinkled faintly, like something far away on another star. I tried to turn her over.

She gasped, "Don't." It wasn't a voice. It was hardly a breath, but I could hear it. I can still hear it. I took my hand away.

"Sindi—"

A little wash of sound from the bells, like rain far off—"You fool," she whispered. "The stage. Jade, the stage—"

She stopped. The croaker came from somewhere behind me and knocked me out of the way, but I knew it was no use. I knew Sindi had stopped for good.

Humans and halflings were jammed in all round, staring, whispering, some of them screaming a little. The brute top had gone crazy. They smelt blood and death on the night wind, and they wanted to be free and a part of it.

"Claws," the croaker said. "Something clawed her. Her throat—"

I said, "Yeah. Shut up." I turned around. The punk was standing there, the white-faced kid, staring at Sindi's body with eyes glistening like shiny brown marbles.

"You," I said. "Go back to Tiny and tell him to make sure all his kids are there. . . . All the roustabouts and every man that can handle a gun or a tent stake, get armed as fast as you can and stand by. . . . Mike, take whatever you need and guard the gate. Don't let anybody or anything in or out without permission from me, in person. Everybody else get inside somewhere and stay there. I'm going to call the police."

The punk was still there, looking from Sindi's body to me and around the circle of faces. I yelled at him. He went away then, fast. The crowd started to break up.

Laura Darrow came out of it and took my arm.

She had on a dark blue dressing gown and her hair was loose around her face. She had the dewy look of being freshly washed, and she breathed perfume. I shook her off. "Look out," I said. "I'm all—blood."

I could feel it on my shoes, soaking through the thin stuff of my trouser legs. My stomach rose up under my throat. I closed my eyes and held it down, and all the time Laura's voice was soothing me. She hadn't let go of my arm. I could feel her fingers. They were cold, and too tight. Even then, I loved her so much I ached with it.

"Jade," she said. "Jade, darling. Please—I'm so frightened."

That helped. I put my arm around her and we started back toward my place and the phone. Nobody had thought to put the big lights on yet, and my torchbeam cut a fuzzy tunnel through the fog.

"I couldn't sleep very well," Laura said suddenly. "I was lying in my tent thinking, and a little while before she

screamed I thought I heard something—something like a big cat, padding.”

The thing that had been in the back of my mind came out yelling. I hadn't seen Laska in the crowd around Sindi. If Laska had got hold of some coffee behind the cook's back. . . .

I said, “You were probably mistaken.”

“No. Jade.”

“Yeah?” It was dark between the tents. I wished somebody would turn the lights on. I wished I hadn't forgotten to tell them to. I wished they'd shut up their overall obligato of gabbling, so I could hear. . . .

“Jade. I couldn't sleep because I was thinking—”

Then she screamed.

He came out of a dark tunnel between two storage tents. He was going almost on all fours, his head flattened forward, his hands held in a little to his belly. His claws were out. They were wet and red, and his hands were wet and red, and his feet. His yellow-green eyes had a crazy shine to them, the pupils slitted against the light. His lips were peeled back from his teeth. They glittered, and there was froth between them—Laska coked to hell and gone!

He didn't say anything. He made noises, but they weren't speech and they weren't sane. They weren't anything but horrible. He sprang.

I pushed Laura behind me. I could see the marks his claws made in the dirt, and the ridging of his muscles with the jump. I brought up my gun and fired, three shots.

The heavy slugs nearly tore him in two, but they didn't stop him. He let go a mad animal scream and hit me, slashing. I went part way down, firing again, but Laska was still going. His hind feet clawed into my hip and thigh, using me as something to push off from. He wanted the girl.

She had backed off, yelling bloody murder. I could hear feet running, a lot of them, and people shouting. The lights came on. I twisted around and got Laska by the mane of fur on his backbone and then by the scruff. He was suddenly a very heavy weight. I think he was dead when I put the fifth bullet through his skull.

I let him drop.

I said, “Laura, are you all right?” I saw her brown hair and her big purple eyes like dark stars in her white face. She

was saying something, but I couldn't hear what it was. I said, "You ought to faint, or something," and laughed.

But it was me, Jade Greene, that did the fainting.

I came out of it too soon. The croaker was still working on my leg. I called him everything I could think of in every language I knew, out of the half of my mouth that wasn't taped shut. He was a heavy man, with a belly and a dirty chin.

He laughed and said, "You'll live. That critter damn near took half your face off, but with your style of beauty it won't matter much. Just take it easy a while until you make some more blood."

I said, "The hell with that. I got work to do." After a while he gave in and helped me get dressed. The holes in my leg weren't too deep, and the face wasn't working anyway. I poured some Scotch in to help out the blood shortage, and managed to get over to the office.

I walked pretty well.

That was largely because Laura let me lean on her. She'd waited outside my tent all that time. There were drops of fog caught in her hair. She cried a little and laughed a little and held me how wonderful I was, and helped me along with her small vibrant self. Pretty soon I began to feel like a kid waking up from a nightmare into a room full of sunshine.

The law had arrived when we got to the office. There wasn't any trouble. Sindi's torn body and the crazy cat-man added up, and the Venusian cook put the lid on it. He always took a thermos of coffee to bed with him, so he'd have it first thing when he woke up—Venusian coffee, with enough caffeine in it to stand an Earthman on his head. Enough to finish off a Callistan cat-man. Somebody had swiped it when he wasn't looking. They found the thermos in Laska's quarters.

The show went on. Mobs came to gawk at the place where the killing had happened. I took it easy for one day, lolling in a shiny golden cloud with Laura holding my head.

Along about sundown she said, "I'll have to get ready for the show."

"Yeah. Saturday's a big night. Tomorrow we tear down, and then Monday we head out for Venus. You'll feel happier then?"

"Yes. I'll feel safe." She put her head down over mine. Her hair was like warm silk. I put my hands up on her throat. It was firm and alive, and it made my hands burn.

She whispered, "Jade, I—" A big hot tear splashed down on my face, and then she was gone.

I say still, hot and shivering like a man with swamp fever, thinking, *Maybe*. . . .

Maybe Laura wouldn't leave the show when we got to Venus. Maybe-I could make her not want to. Maybe it wasn't too late for dreaming, a dream that John Damein Greene had never had, sitting in a puddle of water at the end of a jetty stringer and fishing for perch.

Crazy, getting ideas like that about a girl like Laura. Crazy like cutting your own throat. Oh, hell. A man never really grows up, not past believing that maybe miracles still happen.

It was nice dreaming for a while.

It was a nice night, too, full of stars and the clean, cool ocean breeze, when Tiny came over to tell me they'd found the punk dead in a pile of straw with his throat torn out, and the Martian sand-cat loose.

Chapter III

Carnival of Death

We jammed our way through the mob on the midway. Lots of people having fun, lots of kids yelling and getting sick on Mercurian *jitsi*-beans and bottled Venusian fruit juice. Nobody knew about the killing. Tiny had had the cat rounded up and caged before it could get outside the brute top, which had not yet opened for business.

The punk was dead, all right—dead as Sindi, and in the same way. His twisted face was not much whiter than I remembered it, the closed eyelids faintly blue. He lay almost under the sand-cat's cage.

The cat paced, jittery and snarling. There was blood on all its six paws. The cages and pens and pressure tanks seethed nastily all around me, held down and quiet by Tiny's wranglers.

I said, "What happened?"

Tiny lifted his gargantuan shoulders. "Dunno. Everything quiet. Even no yell, like Sindi. Punk kid all lonesome over here behind cages. Nobody see; nobody hear. Only Mars kitty waltz out on main aisle, scare hell out of everybody. We catch, and then find punk, like you see."

I turned around wearily. "Call the cops again and report

the accident. Keep the rubes out of here until they pick up the body." I shivered. I'm superstitious, like all carnies.

They come in threes—always in threes. Sindi, the punk—what next?

Tiny sighed. "Poor punk. So peaceful, like sleeper with shut eye."

"Yeah." I started away. I limped six paces and stopped and limped back again.

I said, "That's funny. Guys that die violent aren't tidy about their eyes, except in the movies."

I leaned over. I didn't quite know why, then. I do now. You can't beat that three-time jinx. One way or another, it gets you.

I pushed back one thin, waxy eyelid. After a while I pushed back the other. Tiny breathed heavily over my shoulder. Neither of us said anything. The animals whimpered and yawned and paced.

I closed his eyes again and went through his pockets. I didn't find what I was looking for. I got up very slowly, like an old man. I felt like an old man. I felt dead, deader than the white-faced kid.

I said, "His eyes were brown."

Tiny stared at me. He started to speak, but I stopped him. "Call Homicide, Tiny. Put a guard on the body. And send men with guns. . . ."

I told him where to send them. Then I went back across the midway.

A couple of Europeans with wiry little bodies and a twenty-foot wing-spread were doing Immelmans over the geek top, and on the bally stand in front of it two guys with six hands apiece and four eyes on movable stalks were juggling. Laura was out in front of the coach tent, giving the rubes a come-on.

I went around behind the tent, around where I'd kissed her, around where Sindi had died with the bells in her ears like a wash of distant rain.

I lifted up the flap and went in.

The tent was empty except for the man that tends the juke box. He put out his cigarette in a hurry and said, "Hi, Boss," as though that would make me forget he'd been smoking. I didn't give a damn if he set the place on fire with a blowtorch. The air had the warm, musty smell that tents have. En-

hali's *Primitive Venus* was crying out of the juke box with a rhythm like thrown spears.

I pulled the stage master, and then the whites. They glared on the bare boards, naked as death and just as yielding.

I stood there a long time.

After a while the man behind me said uneasily, "Boss, what—"

"Shut up. I'm listening."

Little bells, and a voice that was pain made vocal.

"Go out front," I said. "Send Laura Darrow in here. Then tell the rubes there won't be a show here tonight."

I heard his breath suck in, and then catch. He went away down the aisle.

I got a cigarette out and lit it very carefully, broke the match in two and stepped on it. Then I turned around.

Laura came down the aisle. Her gold-brown hair was caught in a web of brilliants. She wore a sheath-tight thing of sea-green metal scales, with a short skirt swirling around her white thighs, and sandals of the shiny scales with no heels to them. She moved with the music, part of it, wild with it, a way I'd never seen a woman move before.

She was beautiful. There aren't any words. She was—beauty.

She stopped. She looked at my face and I could see the quivering tightness flow up across her white skin, up her throat and over her mouth, and catch her breath and hold it. The music wailed and throbbed on the still, warm air.

I said, "Take off your shoes, Laura. Take off your shoes and dance."

She moved then, still with the beat of the savage drums, but not thinking about it. She drew in upon herself, a shrinking and tightening of muscles, a preparation.

She said, "You know."

I nodded. "You shouldn't have closed his eyes. I might never have noticed. I might never have remembered that the kid had brown eyes. He was just a punk. Nobody paid much attention. He might just as well have had purple eyes—like yours."

"He stole them from me." Her voice came sharp under the music. It had a hiss and a wail in it I'd never heard before, and the accent was harsher. "While I was in your tent, Jade.

I found out when I went to dress. He was an I-man. I found his badge inside his clothes and took it."

Purple eyes looking at me—purple eyes as phony as the eyes on the dead boy. Contact lenses painted purple to hide what was underneath.

"Too bad you carried an extra pair, Laura, in case of breakage."

"He put them in his eyes, so he couldn't lose them or break them or have them stolen, until he could report. He threw away the little suction cup. I couldn't find it. I couldn't get the shells off his eyeballs. All I could do was close his eyes and hope—"

"And let the sand-cat out of his cage to walk through the blood." My voice was coming out all by itself. It hurt. The words felt as though they had fishhooks on them, but I couldn't stop saying them.

"You almost got by with it, Laura. Just like you got by with Sindi. She got in your way, didn't she? She was jealous and she was a dancer. She knew that no true human could dance like you dance. She said so. She said you were a freak."

That word hit her like my fist. She showed me her teeth, white, even teeth that I knew now were as phony as her eyes. I didn't want to see her change, but I couldn't stop looking, couldn't stop.

I said, "Sindi gave you away before she died, only I was too dumb to know what she meant. She said, 'The stage.'"

I think we both looked, down at the stark boards under the stark lights, looked at the scratches on them where Laura had danced barefoot that first time and left the marks of her claws on the wood.

She nodded, a slow, feral weaving of the head.

"Sindi was too curious. She searched my tent. She found nothing, but she left her scent, just as the young man did today. I followed her back here in the dark and saw her looking at the stage by the light of matches. I can move in the dark, Jade, very quickly and quietly. The cook tent is only a few yards back of this one, and Laska's quarters close beyond that. I smelt the cook's coffee. It was easy for me to steal it and slip it through the tent flap by Laska's cot, and wake him with the touch of my claws on his face. I knew he couldn't help drinking it. I was back here before Sindi came out of the tent to go and tell you what she'd found."

She made a soft purring sound under the wicked music.

"Laska smelt the blood and walked in it, as I meant him to do. I thought he'd die before he found us—or me—because I knew he'd find my scent in the air of his quarters and know who it was, and what it was. My perfume had worn too thin by then to hide it from his nose."

I felt the sullen pain of the claw marks on my face and leg. Laska, crazy with caffeine and dying with it, knowing he was dying and wanting with all the strength of his drugged brain to get at the creature who had killed him. He'd wanted Laura that night, not me. I was just something to claw out of the way.

I wished I hadn't stopped him.

I said, "Why? All you wanted was Laska. Why didn't you kill him?"

The shining claws flexed out of her fingertips, under the phony plastic nails—very sharp, very hungry.

She said huskily, "My tribe sent me to avenge its honor. I have been trained carefully. There are others like me, tracking down the renegades, the dope-ridden creatures like Laska who sell our race for human money. He was not to die quickly. He was not to die without knowing. He was not to die without being given the chance to redeem himself by dying bravely."

"But I was not to be caught. I cost my people time and effort, and I am not easily replaced. I have killed seven renegades, Jade. I was to escape. So I wanted to wait until we were out in space."

She stopped. The music hammered in my temples, and inside I was dead and dried up and crumbled away.

I said, "What would you have done in space?"

I knew the answer. She gave it to me, very simply, very quietly.

"I would have destroyed your whole filthy carnival by means of a little bomb in the jet timers, and gone away in one of the lifeboats."

I nodded. My head felt as heavy as Mount Whitney, and as lifeless. "But Sindi didn't give you time. Your life came first. And if it hadn't been for the punk. . . ."

No, not just a punk—an Immigration man. Somewhere Laura had slipped, or else her luck was just out. A white-faced youngster, doing his job quietly in the shadows, and dying without a cry. I started to climb down off the stage.

She backed off. The music screamed and stopped, leaving a silence like the feel of a suddenly stopped heart.

Laura whispered, "Jade, will you believe something if I tell you?"

"I love you, Jade." She was still backing off down the aisle, not making any sound. "I deserve to die for that. I'm going to die. I think you're going to kill me, Jade. But when you do, remember that those tears I shed—were real."

She turned and ran, out onto the midway. I was close. I had caught her hair. It came free, leaving me standing alone just inside the tent, staring stupidly.

I had men out there, waiting. I thought she couldn't get through. But she did. She went like a wisp of cloud on a gale, using the rubes as a shield. We didn't want a panic. We let her go, and we lost her.

I say we let her go. We couldn't help it. She wasn't bothering about being human then. She was all cat, just a noiseless blur of speed. We couldn't shoot without hurting people, and our human muscles were too slow to follow her.

I knew Tiny had men at the gates and all around the pitch, anywhere that she could possibly get out. I wasn't worried. She was caught, and pretty soon the police would come. We'd have to be careful, careful as all hell not to start one of those hideous, trampling panics that can wreck a pitch in a matter of minutes.

All we had to do was watch until the show was over and the rubes were gone. Guard the gates and keep her in, and then round her up. She was caught. She couldn't get away. Laura Darrow. . . .

I wondered what her name was, back on Callisto. I wondered what she looked like when she let the cross-shaped mane grow thick along her back and shoulders. I wondered what color her fur was. I wondered why I had ever been born.

I went back to my place and got my gun and then went out into the crowd again. The show was in full swing; lots of people having fun, lots of kids crazy with excitement; lights and laughter and music—and a guy out in front of the brute top splitting his throat telling the crowd that something was wrong with the lighting system and it would be a while before they could see the animals.

A while before the cops would have got what they wanted and cleaned up the mess under the sand-cat's cage.

The squad cars would be coming in a few minutes. There wasn't anything to do but wait. She was caught. She couldn't escape.

The one thing we didn't think about was that she wouldn't try to.

A Mercurian cave-tiger screamed. The Ionian quags took it up in their deep, rusty voices, and then the others chimed in, whistling, roaring, squealing, shrieking, and doing things there aren't any names for. I stopped, and gradually everybody on the pitch stopped and listened.

For a long moment you could hear the silence along the midway and in the tents. People not breathing, people with a sudden glassy shine of fear in their eyes and a cold tightening of the skin that comes from way back beyond humanity. Then the muttering started, low and uneasy, the prelude to panic.

I fought my way to the nearest bally stand and climbed on it. There were shots, sounding small and futile under the brute howl.

I yelled, "Hey, everybody! Listen! There's nothing wrong. One of the cats is sick, that's all. There's nothing wrong. Enjoy yourselves."

I wanted to tell them to get the hell out, but I knew they'd kill themselves if they started. Somebody started music going again, loud and silly. It cracked the icy lid that was tightening down. People began to relax and laugh nervously and talk too loudly. I got down and ran for the brute top.

Tiny met me at the tent flap. His face was just a white blur. I grabbed him and said, "For God's sake, can't you keep them quiet?"

"She's in there, Boss—like shadow. No hear, no see. One man dead. She let my kids out. She—"

More shots from inside, and a brute scream of pain. Tiny groaned.

"My kids! No lights, Boss. She wreck 'em."

I said, "Keep 'em inside. Get lights from somewhere. There's a blizzard brewing on the pitch. If that mob gets started."

I went inside. There were torchbeams spearing the dark, men sweating and cursing, a smell of hot, wild bodies and the sweetness of fresh blood.

Somebody poked his head inside the flap and yelled, "The cops are here!"

I yelled back, "Tell 'em to clear the grounds if they can, without starting trouble. Tell—"

Somebody screamed. There was a sudden spangle of lights in the high darkness, balls of crimson and green and vicious yellow tumbling toward us, spots of death no bigger than your fist—the stinging fireflies of Ganymede. Laura had opened their case.

We scattered, fighting the fireflies. Somewhere a cage went over with a crash. Bodies thrashed, and feet padded on the packed earth—and somewhere above the noise was a voice that was sweet and silky and wild, crying out to the beasts and being answered.

I knew then why the brute top went crazy when Laska was around. It was kinship, not fear. She talked to them, and they understood.

I called her name.

Her voice came down to me out of the hot dark, human and painful with tears. "Jade! Jade, get out; go somewhere safe!"

"Laura, don't do this! For God's sake—"

"Your God, or mine? Our God forbids us to know humans except to kill. How, if we kept men as you kept Laska?"

"Laura!"

"Get out! I'm going to kill as many as I can before I'm taken. I'm turning the animals loose on the pitch. Go somewhere safe!"

I fired at the sound of her voice.

She said softly, "Not yet, Jade. Maybe not at all."

I beat off a bunch of fireflies hunting for me with their poisoned stings. Cage doors banged open. Wild throats coughed and roared, and suddenly the whole side wall of the tent fell down, cut free at the top, and there wasn't any way to keep the beasts inside any more.

A long mob scream went up from outside, and the panic was on.

I could hear Tiny bellowing, sending his men out with ropes and nets and guns. Some huge, squealing thing blundered around in the dark, went past me close enough to touch, and charged through the front opening, bringing part

of the top down. I was close enough behind it so that I got free.

I climbed up on the remains of the bally stand. There was plenty of light outside—blue-white, glaring light, to show me the packed mass of people screaming and swaying between the tents, trampling toward the exits, to show me a horde of creatures sweeping down on them, caged beasts free to kill, and led by a lithe and leaping figure in shining green.

I couldn't see her clearly. Perhaps I didn't want to. Even then she moved in beauty, like wild music—and she had a tail.

I never saw a worse panic, not even the time a bunch of Nahali swamp-edgers clemmed our pitch when I was a pony punk with Triangle.

The morgues were going to be full that night.

Tiny's men were between the bulk of the mob and the animals. The beasts had had to come around from the far side of the tent, giving them barely time to get set. They gave the critters all they had, but it wasn't enough.

Laura was leading them. I heard her voice crying out above all that din. The animals scattered off sideways between the tents. One Martian sand-cat was dead, one quag kicking its life out, and that was all. They hadn't touched Laura, and she was gone.

I fought back, away from the mob, back into a temporarily empty space behind a tent. I got out my whistle and blew it, the rallying call. A snake-headed kibi from Titan sneaked up and tried to rip me open with its double-pointed tail. I fed it three soft-nosed slugs, and then there were half a dozen little moth-people bouncing in the air over my head, squeaking with fear and shining their great eyes at me.

I told them what I wanted. While I was yelling the Europeans swooped in on their wide wings and listened.

I said finally, "Did any of you see which way *she* went?"

"That way." One of the mothlings pointed back across the midway. I called two of the Europeans. The mothlings went tumbling away to spread my orders, and the bird-men picked me up and carried me across, over the crowd.

The animals were nagging at their flanks, pulling them down in a kind of mad ecstasy. There was a thin salt fog, and blood on the night wind, and the cage doors were open at last.

They set me down and went to do what I told them. I went alone among the swaying tents.

All this hadn't taken five minutes. Things like that move fast. By the time the Europeans were out of sight the mothlings were back, spotting prowling beasts and rolling above them in the air to guide men to them—men and geeks.

Geeks with armor-plated backs and six arms, carrying tear-gas guns and nets; lizard-men, fast and powerful, armed with their own teeth and claws and whatever they could pick up; spider-people, spinning sticky lassos out of their own bodies; the Europeans, dive-bombing the quags with tear gas.

The geeks saved the day for us. They saved lives, and the reputation of their kind, and the carnival. Without them, God only knows how many would have died on the pitch. I saw the mothlings dive into the thick of the mob and pick up fallen children and carry them to safety. Three of them died, doing that.

I went on, alone.

I was beyond the mob, beyond the fringe of animals. I was remembering Laura's voice saying, "Not yet, Jade. Maybe not at all." I was thinking of the walls being down and all California free outside. I was hearing the mob yell and the crash of broken tents, and the screams of people dying—my people, human people, with the claws bred out of them.

I was thinking—

Guns slamming and brute throats shrieking, wings beating fast against the hot hard glare, feet pounding on packed earth. I walked in silence, a private silence built around me like a shell. . . .

Four big cats slunk out of the shadows by the tent. There was enough light left to show me their eyes and their teeth, and the hungry licking of their tongues.

Laura's voice came through the canvas, tremulous but no softer nor more yielding than the blue barrel of my gun.

"I'm going away, Jade. At first I didn't think there was any way, but there is. Don't try to stop me. Please don't try."

I could have gone and tried to find a cop. I could have called men or half-men from their jobs to help me. I didn't. I don't know that I could have made anybody hear me, and anyway they had enough to do. This was my job.

My job, my carnival, my heart.

I walked toward the tent flap, watching the cats.

They slunk a little aside, belly down, making hoarse, whimpering noises. One was a six-legged Martian sand-cat, about the size of an Earthly leopard. Two were from Venus, the fierce white beauties of the high plateaus. The fourth was a Mercurian cave-cat, carrying its twenty-foot body on eight powerful legs and switching a tail that had bone barbs on it.

Laura called to them. I don't know whether she said words in their language, or whether her voice was just a bridge for thought transference, one cat brain to another. Anyway, they understood.

"Jade, they won't touch you if you go."

I fired.

One of the white Venusians took the slug between the eyes and dropped without a whimper. Its mate let go a sobbing shriek and came for me, with the other two beside it.

I snapped a shot at the Martian. I went over kicking, and I dived aside, rolling. The white Venusian shot over me, so close its hind claws tore my shirt. I put a slug in its belly. It just yowled and dug its toes in and came for me again. Out of the tail of my eye I saw the dying Martian tangle with the Mercurian, just because it happened to be the nearest moving object.

I kicked the Venusian in the face. The pain must have blinded it just enough to make its aim bad. On the second jump its forepaws came down on the outer edges of my deltoids, gashing them but not tearing them out. The cat's mouth was open clear to its stomach.

I should have died right then. I don't know why I didn't, except that I didn't care much if I did. It's the guys that want to live that get it, seems like. The ones that don't care go on forever.

I got a lot of hot bad breath in my face and five parallel gashes in back, where its hind feet hit me when I rolled up. I kicked it in the belly. Its teeth snapped a half inch short of my nose, and then I got my gun up under its jaw and that was that. I had four shots left.

I rolled the body off and turned. The Martian cat was dead. The Mercurian stood over it, watching me with its four pale, hot eyes, twitching its barbed tail.

Laura stood watching us.

She looked just like she had the first time I saw her. Soft gold-brown hair and purple eyes with a little tilt to them, and

a soft pink mouth. She was wearing the bronze metal-cloth dress and the bronze slippers, and there was still nothing wrong with the way she was put together. She glinted dully in the dim light, warm bronze glints.

She was crying, but there was no softness in her tears.

The cat flicked its eyes at her and made a nervous, eager whine. She spoke to it, and it sank to its belly, not wanting to.

Laura said, "I'm going, Jade."

"No."

I raised my gun hand. The big cat rose with it. She was beyond the cat. I could shoot the cat, but a Mercurian lives a long time after it's shot.

"Throw down your gun, Jade, and let me go."

I didn't care if the cat killed me. I didn't care if Death took me off piggy-back right then. I suppose I was crazy. Maybe I was just numb. I don't know. I was looking at Laura, and choking on my own heart.

I said, "No."

Just a whisper of sound in her throat, and the cat sprang. It reared up on its four hind feet and clawed at me with its four front ones. Only I wasn't where it thought I was. I knew it was going to jump and I faded—not far, I'm no superman—just far enough so its claws raked me without gutting me. It snapped its head down to bite.

I slammed it hard across the nose with my gun. It hurt, enough to make it wince, enough to fuddle it just for a split second. I jammed the muzzle into its nearest eye and fired.

Laura was going off between the tents, fast, with her head down, just a pretty girl, mingling with the mob streaming off the pitch. Who'd notice her, except maybe to whistle.

I didn't have time to get away. I dropped down flat on my belly and let the cat fall on top of me. I only wanted to live a couple of seconds longer. After that, the hell with it!

The cat was doing a lot of screaming and thrashing. I was between two sets of legs. The paws came close enough to touch me, clawing up the dirt. I huddled up small, hoping it wouldn't notice me there under its belly. Everything seemed to be happening very slowly, with a cold precision. I steadied my right hand on my left wrist.

I shot Laura three times, carefully, between the shoulders.

The cat stopped thrashing. Its weight crushed me. I knew it was dead. I knew I'd done something that even experienced

hunters don't do in nine cases out of ten. My first bullet had found the way into the cat's little brain and killed it.

It wasn't going to kill me. I pulled myself out from under it. The pitch was almost quiet now, the mob gone, the animals mostly under control. I kicked the dead cat. It had died too soon.

My gun was empty. I remember I clicked the hammer twice. I got more bullets out of my pocket, but my fingers wouldn't hold them and I couldn't see to load. I threw the gun away.

I walked away in the thin, cold fog, down toward the distant beat of the sea.

MIMSY WERE THE BOROGOVES

Astounding,

February

**by Lewis Padgett
(Henry Kuttner, 1914-1958, and
C. L. Moore, 1911-)**

Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore are undoubtedly the most successful husband-and-wife writing team in the history of science fiction. Although they produced memorable solo efforts before their marriage in 1940, their best work was that produced in collaboration—indeed, it was impossible to ascertain who wrote what no matter what by-line their stories carried—they did not even know themselves, and we are going to treat all the stories by them in this series as collaborations, although we will make educated guesses about authorship in a few cases. Their contributions to science fiction were varied and many, and in a real sense they dominated the sf of the 1943 to 1947 period, at least in the magazines.

The first of five stories by them in this book, "Mimsy Were the Borogoves," is a genuine classic, combining impressive internal logic, a tragic perspective, and magical "gifts" from the future. The story also has some profound things to say about the nature and complexity of the gap that always seems to exist between generations.

(I certainly can't quarrel with Marty's view that Kuttner and Moore were the most successful husband-and-wife writing team in science fiction. There

have been others, of course; Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm are perhaps the most prominent contemporary example, although I don't believe they collaborate. As a personal touch, my wife, Janet Jeppson, has published two science fiction novels and several shorter pieces. If she hadn't gotten started so late in life (being a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst is time-consuming both in training and the practice) why, who knows, we might have given them all a run for their money.—I.A.)

There's no use trying to describe either Unthahorsten or his surroundings, because, for one thing, a good many million years has passed and, for another, Unthahorsten wasn't on Earth, technically speaking. He was doing the equivalent of standing in the equivalent of a laboratory. He was preparing to test his time machine.

Having turned on the power, Unthahorsten suddenly realized that the Box was empty. Which wouldn't do at all. The device needed a control, a three-dimensional solid which would react to the conditions of another age. Otherwise Unthahorsten couldn't tell, on the machine's return, where and when it had been. Whereas a solid in the Box would automatically be subject to the entropy and cosmic-ray bombardment of the other era, and the Unthahorsten could measure the changes, both qualitative and quantitative, when the machine returned. The Calculators could then get to work and, presently, tell Unthahorsten that the Box had briefly visited A.D. 1,000,000, A.D. 1000 or A.D. I, as the case might be.

Not that it mattered, except to Unthahorsten. But he was childish in many respects.

There was little time to waste. The Box was beginning to flow and shiver. Unthahorsten stared around wildly, fled into the next glossatch and groped in a storage bin there. He came up with an armful of peculiar-looking stuff. Uh-huh. Some of the discarded toys of his son Snowen, which the boy had brought with him when he had passed over from Earth, after mastering the necessary technique. Well, Snowen needed this junk no longer. He was conditioned, and had put away childish things. Besides, though Unthahorsten's wife kept the toys for sentimental reasons, the experiment was more important.

Unthahorsten left the glossatch and dumped the assortment into the Box, slamming the cover shut before the warning signal flashed. The Box went away. The manner of its departure hurt Unthahorsten's eyes.

He waited.

And he waited.

Eventually he gave up and built another time machine, with identical results. Snowden hadn't been annoyed by the loss of his old toys, nor had Snowden's mother, so Unthahorsten cleaned out the bin and dumped the remainder of his son's childhood relics in the second time machine's Box.

According to his calculations, this one should have appeared on Earth in the latter part of the nineteenth century, A.D. If that actually occurred, the device remained there.

Disgusted, Unthahorsten decided to make no more time machines. But the mischief had been done. There were two of them, and the first. . . .

Scott Paradine found it while he was playing hooky from the Glendale Grammar School. There was a geography test that day, and Scott saw no sense in memorizing place names—which, in the nineteen-forties, was a fairly sensible theory. Besides, it was the sort of warm spring day, with a touch of coolness in the breeze, which invited a boy to lie down in a field and stare at the occasional clouds till he fell asleep. Nuts to geography! Scott dozed.

About noon he got hungry, so his stocky legs carried him to a nearby store. There he invested his small hoard with penurious care and a sublime disregard for his gastric juices. He went down by the creek to feed.

Having finished his supply of cheese, chocolate, and cookies, and having drained the soda-pop bottle to its dregs, Scott caught tadpoles and studied them with a certain amount of scientific curiosity. He did not persevere. Something tumbled down the bank and thudded into the muddy ground near the water, so Scott, with a wary glance around, hurried to investigate.

It was a box. It was, in fact, the Box. The gadgetry hitched to it meant little to Scott, though he wondered why it was so fused and burned. He pondered. With his jackknife he pried and probed, his tongue sticking out from a corner of his mouth—Hm-m-m. Nobody was around. Where had the box

come from? Somebody must have left it here, and sliding soil had dislodged it from its precarious perch.

"That's a helix," Scott decided, quite erroneously. It was helical, but it wasn't a helix, because of the dimensional warp involved. Had the thing been a model airplane, no matter how complicated, it would have held few mysteries to Scott. As it was, a problem was posed. Something told Scott that the device was a lot more complicated than the spring motor he had deftly dismantled last Friday.

But no boy has ever left a box unopened, unless forcibly dragged away. Scott probed deeper. The angles on this thing were funny. Short circuit, probably. That was why—uh! The knife slipped. Scott sucked his thumb and gave vent to experienced blasphemy.

Maybe it was a music box.

Scott shouldn't have felt depressed. The gadgetry would have given Einstein a headache and driven Steinmetz raving mad. The trouble was, of course, that the box had not yet completely entered the space-time continuum where Scott existed, and therefore it could not be opened—at any rate, not till Scott used a convenient rock to hammer the helical non-helix into a more convenient position.

He hammered it, in fact, from its contact point with the fourth dimension, releasing the space-time torsion it had been maintaining. There was a brittle snap. The box jarred slightly, and lay motionless, no longer only partially in existence. Scott opened it easily now.

The soft, woven helmet was the first thing that caught his eye, but he discarded that without much interest. It was just a cap. Next, he lifted a square, transparent crystal block, small enough to cup in his palm—much too small to contain the maze of apparatus within it. In a moment Scott had solved the problem. The crystal was a sort of magnifying glass, vastly enlarging the things inside the block. Strange things they were, too. Miniature people, for example.

They moved. Like clockwork automatons, though much more smoothly. It was rather like watching a play. Scott was interested in their costumes, but fascinated by their actions. The tiny people were deftly building a house. Scott wished it would catch fire, so he could see the people put it out.

Flames licked up from the half-completed structure. The

automatons, with a great deal of odd apparatus, extinguished the blaze.

It didn't take Scott long to catch on. But he was a little worried. The manikins would obey his thoughts. By the time he discovered that, he was frightened and threw the cube from him.

Halfway up the bank, he reconsidered and returned. The crystal lay partly in the water, shining in the sun. It was a toy; Scott sensed that, with the unerring instinct of a child. But he didn't pick it up immediately. Instead, he returned to the box and investigated its remaining contents.

He found some really remarkable gadgets. The afternoon passed all too quickly. Scott finally put the toys back in the box and lugged it home, grunting and puffing. He was quite red-faced by the time he arrived at the kitchen door.

His find he hid at the back of a closet in his room upstairs. The crystal cube he slipped into his pocket, which already bulged with string, a coil of wire, two pennies, a wad of tin-foil, a grimy defense stamp and a chunk of feldspar. Emma, Scott's two-year-old sister, waddled unsteadily in from the hall and said hello.

"Hello, Slug," Scott nodded, from his altitude of seven years and some months. He patronized Emma shockingly, but she didn't know the difference. Small, plump and wide-eyed, she flopped down on the carpet and stared dolefully at her shoes.

"Tie 'em, Scotty, please?"

"Sap," Scott told her kindly, but knotted the laces. "Dinner ready yet?"

Emma nodded.

"Let's see your hands." For a wonder they were reasonably clean, though probably not aseptic. Scott regarded his own paws thoughtfully and, grimacing, went to the bathroom, where he made a sketchy toilet. The tadpoles had left traces.

Dennis Paradine and his wife, Jane, were having a cocktail before dinner, downstairs in the living room. He was a youngish, middle-aged man with soft gray hair and a thin, prim-mouthed face; he taught philosophy at the university. Jane was small, neat, dark, and very pretty. She sipped her Martini and said: "New shoes. Like 'em?"

"Here's to crime," Paradine muttered absently. "Huh?"

Shoes? Not now. Wait till I've finished this. I had a bad day."

"Exams?"

"Yeah. Flaming youth aspiring toward manhood. I hope they die. In considerable agony. *Insh' Allah!*"

"I want the olive," Jane requested.

"I know," Paradine said despondently. "It's been years since I've tasted one myself. In a Martini, I mean. Even if I put six of 'em in your glass, you're still not satisfied."

"I want yours. Blood brotherhood. Symbolism. That's why."

Paradine regarded his wife balefully and crossed his long legs. "You sound like one of my students."

"Like that hussy Betty Dawson, perhaps?" Jane unsheathed her nails. "Does she still leer at you in that offensive way?"

"She does. The child is a neat psychological problem. Luckily she isn't mine. If she were—" Paradine nodded significantly. "Sex consciousness and too many movies. I suppose she still thinks she can get a passing grade by showing me her knees. Which are, by the way, rather bony."

Jane adjusted her skirt with an air of complacent pride. Paradine uncoiled himself and poured fresh Martinis. "Candidly, I don't see the point of teaching those apes philosophy. They're all at the wrong age. Their habit patterns, their methods of thinking, are already laid down. They're horribly conservative, not that they'd admit it. The only people who can understand philosophy are mature adults or kids like Emma and Scotty."

"Well, don't enroll Scotty in your course," Jane requested. "He isn't ready to be a *Philosophiae Doctor*. I hold no brief for a child genius, especially when it's my son."

"Scotty would probably be better at it than Betty Dawson," Paradine grunted.

"'He died an enfeebled old dotard at five'," Jane quoted dreamily. "I want your olive."

"Here. By the way, I like the shoes."

"Thank you. Here's Rosalie. Dinner?"

"It's all ready, Miz Pa'dine," said Rosalie, hovering. "I'll call Miss Emma 'n' Mista' Scotty."

"I'll get 'em." Paradine put his head into the next room and roared, "Kids! Come and get it!"

Small feet scuttered down the stairs. Scott dashed into view, scrubbed and shining, a rebellious cowlick aimed at the

zenith. Emma pursued, levering herself carefully down the steps. Halfway, she gave up the attempt to descend upright and reversed, finishing the task monkey-fashion, her small behind giving an impression of marvelous diligence upon the work in hand. Paradine watched, fascinated by the spectacle, till he was hurled back by the impact of his son's body.

"Hi, Dad!" Scott shrieked.

Paradine recovered himself and regarded Scott with dignity. "Hi, yourself. Help me in to dinner. You've dislocated at least one of my hip joints."

But Scott was already tearing into the next room, where he stepped on Jane's new shoes in an ecstasy of affection, burred an apology, and rushed off to find his place at the dinner table. Paradine cocked up an eyebrow as he followed, Emma's pudgy hand desperately gripping his forefinger.

"Wonder what the young devil's been up to."

"No good, probably," Jane sighed. "Hello, darling. Let's see your ears."

"They're *clean*. Mickey licked 'em."

"Well, that Airedale's tongue is far cleaner than your ears," Jane pondered, making a brief examination. "Still, as long as you can hear, the dirt's only superficial."

"Fisshul?"

"Just a little, that means." Jane dragged her daughter to the table and inserted her legs into a high chair. Only lately had Emma graduated to the dignity of dining with the rest of the family, and she was, as Paradine remarked, all eaten up with pride by the prospect. Only babies spilled food, Emma had been told. As a result, she took such painstaking care in conveying her spoon to her mouth that Paradine got the jitters whenever he watched.

"A conveyor belt would be the thing for Emma," he suggested, pulling out a chair for Jane. "Small buckets of spinach arriving at her face at stated intervals."

Dinner proceeded uneventfully until Paradine happened to glance at Scott's plate. "Hello, there. Sick? Been stuffing yourself at lunch?"

Scott thoughtfully examined the food still left before him. "I've had all I need, Dad," he explained.

"You usually eat all you can hold, and a great deal more," Paradine said. "I know growing boys need several tons of foodstuff a day, but you're below par tonight. Feel O.K.?"

"Uh-huh. Honest, I've had all I need."

"All you want?"

"Sure. I eat different."

"Something they taught you at school?" Jane inquired.

Scott shook his head solemnly.

"Nobody taught me. I found it out myself. I use spit."

"Try again," Paradine suggested. "It's the wrong word."

"Uh—s-saliva. Hm-m-m?"

"Uh-huh. More pepsin? Is there pepsin in the salivary juices, Jane? I forget."

"There's poison in mine," Jane remarked. "Rosalie's left lumps in the mashed potatoes again."

But Paradine was interested. "You mean you're getting everything possible out of your food—no wastage—and eating less?"

Scott thought that over. "I guess so. It's not just the sp—saliva. I sort of measure how much to put in my mouth at once, and what stuff to mix up. I dunno. I just do it."

"Hm-m-m," said Paradine, making a note to check up later. "Rather a revolutionary idea." Kids often get screwy notions, but this one might not be so far off the beam. He pursed his lips. "Eventually I suppose people will eat quite differently—I mean the way they eat, as well as what. What they eat, I mean. Jane, our son shows signs of becoming a genius."

"Oh?"

"It's a rather good point in dietetics he just made. Did you figure it out yourself, Scott?"

"Sure," the boy said, and really believed it.

"Where'd you get the idea?"

"Oh, I—" Scott wriggled. "I dunno. It doesn't mean much, I guess."

Paradine was unreasonably disappointed. "But surely—"

"S-s-s-spit!" Emma shrieked, overcome by a sudden fit of badness. "*Spit!*" She attempted to demonstrate, but succeeded only in dribbling into her bib.

With a resigned air Jane rescued and reproved her daughter, while Paradine eyed Scott with rather puzzled interest. But it was not till after dinner, in the living room, that anything further happened.

"Any homework?"

"N-no," Scott said, flushing guiltily. To cover his embarrassment he took from his pocket a gadget he had found in

the box, and began to unfold it. The result resembled a tesseract, strung with beads. Paradine didn't see it at first, but Emma did. She wanted to play with it.

"No. Lay off, Slug," Scott ordered. "You can watch me." He fumbled with the beads, making soft, interested noises. Emma extended a fat forefinger and yelped.

"Scotty," Paradine said warningly.

"I didn't hurt her."

"Bit me. It did," Emma mourned.

Paradine looked up. He frowned, staring. What in—

"Is that an abacus?" he asked. "Let's see it, please."

Somewhat unwillingly, Scott brought the gadget across to his father's chair. Paradine blinked. The "abacus," unfolded, was more than a foot square, composed of thin, rigid wires that interlocked here and there. On the wires the colored beads were strung. They could be slid back and forth, and from one support to another, even at the points of jointure. But—a pierced bead couldn't cross *interlocking* wires.

So, apparently, they weren't pierced. Paradine looked closer. Each small sphere had a deep groove running around it, so that it could be revolved and slid along the wire at the same time. Paradine tried to pull one free. It clung as though magnetically. Iron? It looked more like plastic.

The framework itself—Paradine wasn't a mathematician. But the angles formed by the wires were vaguely shocking, in their ridiculous lack of Euclidean logic. They were a maze. Perhaps that's what the gadget was—a puzzle.

"Where'd you get this?"

"Uncle Harry gave it to me," Scott said, on the spur of the moment. "Last Sunday, when he came over." Uncle Harry was out of town, a circumstance Scott well knew. At the age of seven, a boy soon learns that the vagaries of adults follow a certain definite pattern, and that they are fussy about the donors of gifts. Moreover, Uncle Harry would not return for several weeks; the expiration of that period was unimaginable to Scott, or, at least, the fact that his lie would ultimately be discovered meant less to him than the advantages of being allowed to keep the toy.

Paradine found himself growing slightly confused as he attempted to manipulate the beads. The angles were vaguely illogical. It was like a puzzle. This red bead, if slid along *this* wire to *that* junction, should reach *there*—but it didn't. A

maze, odd, but no doubt instructive. Paradine had a well-founded feeling that he'd have no patience with the thing himself.

Scott did, however, retiring to a corner and sliding beads around with much fumbling and grunting. The beads *did* sting, when Scott chose the wrong ones or tried to slide them in the wrong direction. At last he crowed exultantly.

"I did it, Dad!"

"Eh? What? Let's see." The device looked exactly the same to Paradine, but Scott pointed and beamed.

"I made it disappear."

"It's still there."

"That blue bead. It's gone now."

Paradine didn't believe that, so he merely snorted. Scott puzzled over the framework again. He experimented. This time there were no shocks, even slight. The abacus had showed him the correct method. Now it was up to him to do it on his own. The bizarre angles of the wires seemed a little less confusing now, somehow.

It was a most instructive toy—

It worked, Scott thought, rather like the crystal cube. Reminded of that gadget, he took it from his pocket and relinquished the abacus to Emma, who was struck dumb with joy. She fell to work sliding the beads, this time without protesting against the shocks—which, indeed were very minor—and, being imitative, she managed to make a bead disappear almost as quickly as had Scott. The blue bead reappeared—but Scott didn't notice. He had thoughtfully retired into an angle of the chesterfield and an overstuffed chair and amused himself with the cube.

There were the little people inside the thing, tiny manikins much enlarged by the magnifying properties of the crystal. They moved, all right. They built a house. It caught fire, with realistic-seeming flames, and the little people stood by waiting. Scott puffed urgently. "Put it *out*!"

But nothing happened. Where was that queer fire engine, with revolving arms, that had appeared before? Here it was. It came sailing into the picture and stopped. Scott urged it on.

This was fun. The little people really did what Scott told them, inside of his head. If he made a mistake, they waited till he'd found the right way. They even posed new problems for him.

The cube, too, was a most instructive toy. It was teaching Scott, with alarming rapidity—and teaching him very entertainingly. But it gave him no really new knowledge as yet. He wasn't ready. Later . . . later. . . .

Emma grew tired of the abacus and went in search of Scott. She couldn't find him, even in his room, but once there the contents of the closet intrigued her. She discovered the box. It contained treasure-trove—a doll, which Scott had already noticed but discarded with a sneer. Squealing, Emma brought the doll downstairs, squatted in the middle of the floor and began to take it apart.

"Darling! What's that?"

"Mr. Bear!"

Obviously it wasn't Mr. Bear, who was blind, earless, but comforting in his soft fatness. But all dolls were named Mr. Bear to Emma.

Jane Paradine hesitated. "Did you take that from some other little girl?"

"I didn't. She's mine."

Scott came out from his hiding place, thrusting the cube into his pocket. "Uh—that's from Uncle Harry."

"Did Uncle Harry give that to you, Emma?"

"He gave it to me for Emma," Scott put in hastily, adding another stone to his foundation of deceit. "Last Sunday."

"You'll break it, dear."

Emma brought the doll to her mother. "She comes apart. See?"

"Oh? It—ugh!" Jane sucked in her breath. Paradine looked up quickly.

"What's up?"

She brought the doll over to him, hesitated and then went into the dining room, giving Paradine a significant glance. He followed, closing the door. Jane had already placed the doll on the cleared table.

"This isn't very nice is it, Denny?"

"Hm-m-m." It was rather unpleasant, at first glance. One might have expected an anatomical dummy in a medical school, but a child's doll . . .

The thing came apart in sections—skin, muscles, organs—miniature but quite perfect, as far as Paradine could see. He was interested. "Dunno. Such things haven't the same connotations to a kid."

"Look at that liver. Is it a liver?"

"Sure. Say, I—this is funny."

"What?"

"It isn't anatomically perfect, after all." Paradine pulled up a chair. "The digestive tract's too short. No large intestine. No appendix, either."

"Should Emma have a thing like this?"

"I wouldn't mind having it myself," Paradine said. "Where on earth did Harry pick it up? No, I don't see any harm in it. Adults are conditioned to react unpleasantly to innards. Kids don't. They figure they're solid inside, like a potato. Emma can get a sound working knowledge of physiology from this doll."

"But what are those? Nerves?"

"No, these are the nerves. Arteries here; veins here. Funny sort of aorta." Paradine looked baffled. "That—what's Latin for network, anyway, huh? *Rita? Rata?*"

"*Rales*," Jane suggested at random.

"That's a sort of breathing," Paradine said crushingly. "I can't figure out what this luminous network of stuff is. It goes all through the body, like nerves."

"Blood."

"Nope. Not circulatory, not neural. Funny! It seems to be hooked up with the lungs."

They became engrossed, puzzling over the strange doll. It was made with remarkable perfection of detail, and that in itself was strange, in view of the physiological variation from the norm. "Wait'll I get that Gould," Paradine said, and presently was comparing the doll with anatomical charts. He learned little, except to increase his bafflement.

But it was more fun than a jigsaw puzzle.

Meanwhile, in the adjoining room, Emma was sliding the beads to and fro in the abacus. The motions didn't seem so strange now. Even when the beads vanished. She could almost follow that new direction—almost. . . .

Scott panted, staring into the crystal cube and mentally directing, with many false starts, the building of a structure somewhat more complicated than the one which had been destroyed by fire. He, too, was learning—being conditioned. . . .

Paradine's mistake, from a completely anthropomorphic standpoint, was that he didn't get rid of the toys instantly. He did not realize their significance, and, by the time he did, the

progression of circumstances had got well under way. Uncle Harry remained out of town, so Paradine couldn't check with him. Too, the midterm exams were on, which meant arduous mental effort and complete exhaustion at night; and Jane was slightly ill for a week or so. Emma and Scott had free rein with the toys.

"What," Scott asked his father one evening, "is a wabe, Dad?"

"Wave?"

He hesitated. "I—don't *think* so. Isn't 'wabe' right?"

"'Wabe' is Scot for 'web.' That it?"

"I don't see how," Scott muttered, and wandered off, scowling, to amuse himself with the abacus. He was able to handle it quite deftly now. But, with the instinct of children for avoiding interruption, he and Emma usually played with the toys in private. Not obviously, of course—but the more intricate experiments were never performed under the eye of an adult.

Scott was learning fast. What he now saw in the crystal cube had little relationship to the original simple problems. But they were fascinatingly technical. Had Scott realized that his education was being guided and supervised—though merely mechanically—he would probably have lost interest. As it was, his initiative was never quashed.

Abacus, cube, doll and other toys the children found in the box. . . .

Neither Paradine nor Jane guessed how much of an effect the contents of the time machine were having on the kids. How could they? Youngsters are instinctive dramatists, for purposes of self-protection. They have not yet fitted themselves to the exigencies—to them partially inexplicable—of a mature world. Moreover, their lives are complicated by human variables. They are told by one person that playing in the mud is permissible, but that, in their excavations, they must not uproot flowers or small trees. Another adult vetoes mud *per se*. The Ten Commandments are not carved on stone—they vary; and the children are helplessly dependent on the caprice of those who give them birth and feed and clothe them. And tyrannize. The young animal does not resent that benevolent tyranny, for it is an essential part of nature. He is, however, an individualist, and maintains his integrity by a subtle, passive fight.

Under the eyes of an adult he changes. Like an actor on

stage, when he remembers, he strives to please, and also to attract attention to himself. Such attempts are not unknown to maturity. But adults are less obvious—to other adults.

It is difficult to admit that children lack subtlety. Children are different from mature animals because they think in another way. We can more or less easily pierce the pretenses they set up, but they can do the same to us. Ruthlessly a child can destroy the pretenses of an adult. Inconoclasism is a child's prerogative.

Foppishness, for example. The amenities of social intercourse, exaggerated not quite to absurdity. The gigolo. . . .

"Such *savoir-faire*! Such punctilious courtesy!" The dowager and the blonde young thing are often impressed. Men have less pleasant comments to make. But the child goes to the root of the matter.

"You're *silly*!"

How can an immature human being understand the complicated system of social relationships? He can't. To him, an exaggeration of natural courtesy is silly. In his functional structure of life patterns, it is rococo. He is an egotistic little animal who cannot visualize himself in the position of another—certainly not an adult. A self-contained, almost perfect natural unit, his wants supplied by others, the child is much like a unicellular creature floating in the bloodstream, nutriment carried to him, waste products carried away.

From the standpoint of logic, a child is rather horribly perfect. A baby must be even more perfect, but so alien to an adult that only superficial standards of comparison apply. The thought processes of an infant are completely unimaginable. But babies think, even before birth. In the womb they move and sleep, not entirely through instinct. We are conditioned to react rather peculiarly to the idea that a nearly viable embryo may think. We are surprised, shocked into laughter and repelled. Nothing human is alien.

But a baby is not human. An embryo is far less human.

That, perhaps, was why Emma learned more from the toys than did Scott. He could communicate his thoughts, of course; Emma could not, except in cryptic fragments. The matter of the scrawls, for example.

Give a young child pencil and paper, and he will draw something which looks different to him than to an adult. The absurd scribbles have little resemblance to a fire engine, but it

Perhaps Paradine and Jane had evinced too much interest in the toys. Emma and Scott took to keeping them hidden, playing with them only in private. They never did it overtly, but with a certain unobtrusive caution. Nevertheless, Jane especially was somewhat troubled.

She spoke to Paradine about it one evening. "That doll Harry gave Emma."

"Yeah?"

"I was downtown today and tried to find out where it came from. No soap."

"Maybe Harry bought it in New York."

Jane was unconvinced. "I asked them about the other things, too. They showed me their stock—Johnson's is a big store, you know. But there's nothing like Emma's abacus."

"Hm-m-m." Paradine wasn't much interested. They had tickets for a show that night, and it was getting late. So the subject was dropped for the nonce.

Later it cropped up again, when a neighbor telephoned Jane.

"Scotty's never been like that, Denny. Mrs. Burns said he frightened the devil out of her Francis."

"Francis? A little fat bully of a punk, isn't he? Like his father. I broke Burns's nose for him once, when we were sophomores."

"Stop boasting and listen," Jane said, mixing a highball. "Scott showed Francis something that scared him. Hadn't you better—"

"I suppose so." Paradine listened. Noises in the next room told him the whereabouts of his son. "Scotty!"

"Bang," Scott said, and appeared smiling. "I killed 'em all. Space pirates. You want me, Dad?"

"Yes. If you don't mind leaving the space pirates unburied for a few minutes. What did you do to Francis Burns?"

Scott's blue eyes reflected incredible candor. "Huh?"

"Try hard. You can remember, I'm sure."

"Uh. Oh, that. I didn't do nothing."

"Anything," Jane corrected absently.

"Anything. Honest. I just let him look into my television set, and it—it scared him."

"Television set?"

Scott produced the crystal cube. "It isn't really that. See?"

Paradine examined the gadget, startled by the magnifica-

tion. All he could see, though, was a maze of meaningless colored designs.

"Uncle Harry—"

Paradine reached for the telephone. Scott gulped. "Is—is Uncle Harry back in town?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I gotta take a bath." Scott headed for the door. Paradine met Jane's gaze and nodded significantly.

Harry was home, but disclaimed all knowledge of the peculiar toys. Rather grimly, Paradine requested Scott to bring down from his room all of the playthings. Finally they lay in a row on the table—cube, abacus, doll, helmet-like cap, several other mysterious contraptions. Scott was cross-examined. He lied valiantly for a time, but broke down at last and bawled, hiccuping his confession.

"Get the box these things came in," Paradine ordered. "Then head for bed."

"Are you—*hup!*—gonna punish me, Daddy?"

"For playing hooky and lying, yes. You know the rules. No more shows for two weeks. No sodas in the same period."

Scott gulped. "You gonna keep my things?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well—g'night, Daddy. G'night, Mom."

After the small figure had gone upstairs, Paradine dragged a chair to the table and carefully scrutinized the box. He poked thoughtfully at the focused gadgetry. Jane watched.

"What is it, Denny?"

"Dunno. Who'd leave a box of toys down by the creek?"

"It might have fallen out of a car."

"Not at that point. The road doesn't hit the creek north of the railroad trestle. Empty lots—nothing else." Paradine lit a cigarette. "Drink, honey?"

"I'll fix it." Jane went to work, her eyes troubled. She brought Paradine a glass and stood behind him, ruffling his hair with her fingers. "Is anything wrong?"

"Of course not. Only—where did these toys come from?"

"Johnson's didn't know, and they get their stock from New York."

"I've been checking up, too," Paradine admitted. "That doll"—he poked it—"rather worried me. Custom jobs, maybe, but I wish I knew who'd made 'em."

"A psychologist? That abacus—don't they give people tests with such things?"

Paradine snapped his fingers. "Right! And say, there's a guy going to speak at the university next week, fellow named Holloway, who's a child psychologist. He's a big shot, with quite a reputation. He might know something about it."

"Holloway? I don't—"

"Rex Holloway. He's—hm-m-m! He doesn't live far from here. Do you suppose he might have had these things made himself?"

Jane was examining the abacus. She grimaced and drew back. "If he did, I don't like him. But see if you can find out, Denny."

Paradine nodded. "I shall."

He drank his highball, frowning. He was vaguely worried. But he wasn't scared—yet.

Rex Holloway was a fat, shiny man, with a bald head and thick spectacles, above which his thick, black brows lay like bushy caterpillars. Paradine brought him home to dinner one night a week later. Holloway did not appear to watch the children, but nothing they did or said was lost on him. His gray eyes, shrewd and bright, missed little.

The toys fascinated him. In the living room the three adults gathered around the table, where the playthings had been placed. Holloway studied them carefully as he listened to what Jane and Paradine had to say. At last he broke his silence.

"I'm glad I came here tonight. But not completely. This is very disturbing, you know."

"Eh?" Paradine stared, and Jane's face showed her consternation. Holloway's next words did not calm them.

"We are dealing with madness."

He smiled at the shocked looks they gave him. "All children are mad, from an adult viewpoint. Ever read Hughes's *High Wind in Jamaica*?"

"I've got it." Paradine secured the little book from its shelf. Holloway extended a hand, took the book and flipped the pages till he had found the place he wanted. He read aloud:

Babies, of course, are not human—they are animals, and have a very ancient and ramified culture, as cats have, and fishes, and even snakes; the same in kind as these, but

much more complicated and vivid, since babies are, after all, one of the most developed species of the lower vertebrates. In short, babies have minds which work in terms and categories of their own, which cannot be translated into the terms and categories of the human mind.

Jane tried to take that calmly, but couldn't. "You don't mean that Emma—"

"Could you think like your daughter?" Holloway asked. "Listen: 'One can no more think like a baby than one can think like a bee.'"

Paradine mixed drinks. Over his shoulder he said, "You're theorizing quite a bit, aren't you? As I get it, you're implying that babies have a culture of their own, even a high standard of intelligence."

"Not necessarily. There's no yardstick, you see. All I say is that babies think in other ways than we do. Not necessarily *better*—that's a question of relative values. But with a different matter of extension." He sought for words, grimacing.

"Fantasy," Paradine said, rather rudely but annoyed because of Emma. "Babies don't have different senses from ours."

"Who said they did?" Holloway demanded. "They use their minds in a different way, that's all. But it's quite enough!"

"I'm trying to understand," Jane said slowly. "All I can think of is my Mixmaster. It can whip up batter and potatoes, but it can squeeze oranges, too."

"Something like that. The brain's a colloid, a very complicated machine. We don't know much about its potentialities. We don't even know how much it can grasp. But it *is* known that the mind becomes conditioned as the human animal matures. It follows certain familiar theorems, and all thought thereafter is pretty well based on patterns taken for granted. Look at this." Holloway touched the abacus. "Have you experimented with it?"

"A little," Paradine said.

"But not much, eh?"

"Well—"

"Why not?"

"It's pointless," Paradine complained. "Even a puzzle has to have some logic. But those crazy angles—"

"Your mind has been conditioned to Euclid," Holloway said. "So this—thing—bores us, and seems pointless. But a

child knows nothing of Euclid. A different sort of geometry from ours wouldn't impress him as being illogical. He believes what he sees."

"Are you trying to tell me that this gadget's got a fourth-dimensional extension?" Paradine demanded.

"Not visually, anyway," Holloway denied. "All I say is that our minds, conditioned to Euclid, can see nothing in this but an illogical tangle of wires. But a child—especially a baby—might see more. Not at first. It'd be a puzzle, of course. Only a child wouldn't be handicapped by too many preconceived ideas."

"Hardening of the thought arteries," Jane interjected.

Paradine was not convinced. "Then a baby could work calculus better than Einstein? No, I don't mean that. I can see your point, more or less clearly. Only—"

"Well, look. Let's suppose there are two kinds of geometry; we'll limit it, for the sake of the example. Our kind, Euclidean, and another, we'll call x . X hasn't much relationship to Euclid. It's based on different theorems. Two and two needn't equal four in it; they could equal y^2 , or they might not even *equal*. A baby's mind is not yet conditioned, except by certain questionable factors of heredity and environment. Start the infant on Euclid—"

"Poor kid," Jane said.

Holloway shot her a quick glance. "The basis of Euclid. Alphabet blocks. Math, geometry, algebra—they come much later. We're familiar with that development. On the other hand, start the baby with the basic principles of our x logic."

"Blocks? What kind?"

Holloway looked at the abacus. "It wouldn't make much sense to us. But we've been conditioned to Euclid."

Paradine poured himself a stiff shot of whisky. "That's pretty awful. You're not limiting to math."

"Right! I'm not limiting it at all. How can I? I'm not conditioned to x logic."

"There's the answer," Jane said, with a sigh of relief. "Who is? It'd take such a person to make the sort of toys you apparently think these are."

Holloway nodded, his eyes, behind the thick lenses, blinking. "Such people may exist."

"Where?"

"They might prefer to keep hidden."

"Supermen?"

"I wish I knew. You see, Paradine, we've got yardstick trouble again. By our standards these people might seem super-dupers in certain respects. In others they might seem moronic. It's not a quantitative difference; it's qualitative. They *think* different. And I'm sure we can do things they can't."

"Maybe they wouldn't want to," Jane said.

Paradine tapped the fused gadgetry on the box. "What about this? It implies—"

"A purpose, sure."

"Transportation?"

"One thinks of that first. If so, the box might have come from anywhere."

"Where—things are—*different*?" Paradine asked slowly.

"Exactly. In space, or even time. I don't know; I'm a psychologist. Unfortunately I'm conditioned to Euclid, too."

"Funny place it must be," Jane said. "Denny, get rid of those toys."

"I intend to."

Holloway picked up the crystal cube. "Did you question the children much?"

Paradine said, "Yeah. Scott said there were people in that cube when he first looked. I asked him what was in it now."

"What did he say?" The psychologist's eyes widened.

"He said they were building a place. His exact words. I asked him who—people? But he couldn't explain."

"No, I suppose not," Holloway muttered. "It must be progressive. How long have the children had these toys?"

"About three months, I guess."

"Time enough. The perfect toy, you see, is both instructive and mechanical. It should do things, to interest a child, and it should teach, preferably unobtrusively. Simple problems at first. Later—"

"X logic," Jane said, white-faced.

Paradine cursed under his breath. "Emma and Scott are perfectly normal!"

"Do you know how their minds work—now?"

Holloway didn't pursue the thought. He fingered the doll. "It would be interesting to know the conditions of the place where these things came from. Induction doesn't help a great deal, though. Too many factors are missing. We can't visualize a world based on the *x* factor—environment adjusted to minds thinking in *x* patterns. This luminous network inside

the doll. It could be anything. It could exist inside us, though we haven't discovered it yet. When we find the right stain—" He shrugged. "What do you make of this?"

It was a crimson globe, two inches in diameter, with a protruding knob upon its surface.

"What could anyone make of it?"

"Scott? Emma?"

"I hadn't even seen it till about three weeks ago. Then Emma started to play with it." Paradine nibbled his lip. "After that, Scott got interested."

"Just what do they do?"

"Hold it up in front of them and move it back and forth. No particular pattern of motion."

"No Euclidean pattern," Holloway corrected. "At first they couldn't understand the toy's purpose. They had to be educated up to it."

"That's horrible," Jane said.

"Not to them. Emma is probably quicker at understanding *x* than is Scott, for her mind isn't yet conditioned to this environment."

Paradine said, "But I can remember plenty of things I did as a child. Even as a baby."

"Well?"

"Was I—mad then?"

"The things you don't remember are the criterion of your madness," Holloway retorted. "But I use the word 'madness' purely as a convenient symbol for the variation from the known human norm. The arbitrary standard of sanity."

Jane put down her glass. "You've said that induction was difficult, Mr. Holloway. But it seems to me you're making a great deal of it from very little. After all, these toys—"

"I *am* a psychologist, and I've specialized in children. I'm not a layman. These toys mean a great deal to me, chiefly because they mean so little."

"You might be wrong."

"Well, I rather hope I am. I'd like to examine the children."

Jane rose in arms. "How?"

After Holloway had explained, she nodded, though still a bit hesitantly. "Well, that's all right. But they're not guinea pigs."

The psychologist patted the air with a plump hand. "My dear girl! I'm not a Frankenstein. To me the individual is the

prime factor—naturally, since I work with minds. If there's anything wrong with the youngsters, I want to cure them."

Paradine put down his cigarette and slowly watched blue smoke spiral up, wavering in an unfelt draught. "Can you give a prognosis?"

"I'll try. That's all I can say. If the undeveloped minds have been turned into the x channel, it's necessary to divert them back. I'm not saying that's the wisest thing to do, but it probably is from our standards. After all, Emma and Scott will have to live in this world."

"Yeah. Yeah. I can't believe there's much wrong. They seem about average, thoroughly normal."

"Superficially they may seem so. They've no reason for acting abnormally, have they? And how can you tell if they—think differently?"

"I'll call 'em," Paradine said.

"Make it informal, then. I don't want them to be on guard."

Jane nodded toward the toys. Holloway said, "Leave the stuff there, eh?"

But the psychologist, after Emma and Scott were summoned, made no immediate move toward direct questioning. He managed to draw Scott unobtrusively into the conversation, dropping key words now and then. Nothing so obvious as a word-association test; cooperation is necessary for that.

The most interesting development occurred when Holloway took up the abacus. "Mind showing me how this works?"

Scott hesitated. "Yes, sir. Like this." He slid a bead deftly through the maze, in a tangled course, so swiftly that no one was quite sure whether or not it ultimately vanished. It might have been merely legerdemain. Then, again—

Holloway tried. Scott watched, wrinkling his nose.

"That's right?"

"Uh-huh. It's gotta go *there*."

"Here? Why?"

"Well, that's the only way to make it work."

But Holloway was conditioned to Euclid. There was no apparent reason why the bead should slide from this particular wire to the other. It looked like a random factor. Also, Holloway suddenly noticed, this wasn't the path the bead had taken previously, when Scott had worked the puzzle. At least, as well as he could tell.

"Will you show me again?"

Scott did, and twice more, on request. Holloway blinked through his glasses. Random, yes. And a variable. Scott moved the bead along a different course each time.

Somehow, none of the adults could tell whether or not the bead vanished. If they had expected to see it disappear, their reactions might have been different.

In the end nothing was solved. Holloway, as he said good night, seemed ill at ease.

"May I come again?"

"I wish you would," Jane told him. "Any time. You still think—"

He nodded. "The children's minds are not reacting normally. They're not dull at all, but I've the most extraordinary impression that they arrive at conclusions in a way we don't understand. As though they used algebra while we used geometry. The same conclusion, but a different method of reaching it."

"What about the toys?" Paradine asked suddenly.

"Keep them out of the way. I'd like to borrow them, if I may."

That night Paradine slept badly. Holloway's parallel had been ill chosen. It led to disturbing theories. The x factor. . . . The children were using the equivalent of algebraic reasoning, while adults used geometry.

Fair enough. Only. . . .

Algebra can give you answers that geometry cannot, since there are certain terms and symbols which cannot be expressed geometrically. Suppose x logic showed conclusions inconceivable to an adult mind.

"Damn!" Paradine whispered. Jane stirred beside him.

"Dear? Can't you sleep either?"

"No." He got up and went into the next room. Emma slept peacefully as a cherub, her fat arm curled around Mr. Bear. Through the open doorway Paradine could see Scott's dark head motionless on the pillow.

Jane was beside him. He slipped his arm around her.

"Poor little people," she murmured. "And Holloway called them mad. I think we're the ones who are crazy, Dennis."

"Uh-huh. We've got jitters."

Scott stirred in his sleep. Without awakening, he called what was obviously a question, though it did not seem to be

in any particular language. Emma gave a little mewling cry that changed pitch sharply.

She had not wakened. The children lay without stirring.

But, Paradine thought, with a sudden sickness in his middle, it was exactly as though Scott had asked Emma something, and she had replied.

Had their minds changed so that even—sleep was different to them?

He thrust the thought away. "You'll catch cold. Let's get back to bed. Want a drink?"

"I think I do," Jane said, watching Emma. Her hand reached out blindly toward the child; she drew it back. "Come on. We'll wake the kids."

They drank a little brandy together, but said nothing. Jane cried in her sleep, later.

Scott was not awake, but his mind worked in slow, careful building. Thus—

"They'll take the toys away. The fat man—listava dangerous, maybe. But the Ghoric direction won't show—evankrus dun hasn't them. Intransdection—bright and shiny. Emma. She's more khopranik-high now than—I still don't see how to—thavarar lixery dist. . . ."

A little of Scott's thoughts could still be understood. But Emma had become conditioned to x much faster.

She was thinking, too.

Not like an adult or a child. Not even like a human being. Except, perhaps, a human being of a type shockingly unfamiliar to genus *Homo*.

Sometimes, Scott himself had difficulty in following her thoughts.

If it had not been for Holloway, life might have settled back into an almost normal routine. The toys were no longer active reminders. Emma still enjoyed her dolls and sandpile, with a thoroughly explicable delight. Scott was satisfied with baseball and his chemical set. They did everything other children did, and evinced few, if any, flashes of abnormality. But Holloway seemed to be an alarmist.

He was having the toys tested, with rather idiotic results. He drew endless charts and diagrams, corresponded with mathematicians, engineers, and other psychologists, and went quietly crazy trying to find rhyme or reason in the construction of the gadgets. The box itself, with its cryptic machinery,

told nothing. Fusing had melted too much of the stuff into slag. But the toys. . . .

It was the random element that baffled investigation. Even that was a matter of semantics. For Holloway was convinced that it wasn't really random. There just weren't enough known factors. No adult could work the abacus, for example. And Holloway thoughtfully refrained from letting a child play with the thing.

The crystal cube was similarly cryptic. It showed a mad pattern of colors, which sometimes moved. In this it resembled a kaleidoscope. But the shifting of balance and gravity didn't affect it. Again the random factor.

Or, rather, the unknown. The x pattern. Eventually, Paradine and Jane slipped back into something like complacency, with a feeling that the children had been cured of their mental quirk, now that the contributing cause had been removed. Certain of the actions of Emma and Scott gave them every reason to quit worrying.

For the kids enjoyed swimming, hiking, movies, games, the normal functional toys of this particular time-sector. It was true that they failed to master certain rather puzzling mechanical devices which involved some calculation. A three-dimensional jigsaw globe Paradine had picked up, for example. But he found that difficult himself.

Once in a while there were lapses. Scott was hiking with his father one Saturday afternoon, and the two had paused at the summit of a hill. Beneath them a rather lovely valley was spread.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Paradine remarked.

Scott examined the scene gravely. "It's all wrong," he said.

"Eh?"

"I dunno."

"What's wrong about it?"

"Gee." Scott lapsed into puzzled silence. "I dunno."

The children had missed their toys, but not for long. Emma recovered first, though Scott still moped. He held unintelligible conversations with his sister, and studied meaningless scrawls she drew on paper he supplied. It was almost as though he were consulting her, anent difficult problems beyond his grasp.

If Emma understood more, Scott had more real intelligence, and manipulatory skill as well. He built a gadget with

his Meccano set, but was dissatisfied. The apparent cause of his dissatisfaction was exactly why Paradine was relieved when he viewed the structure. It was the sort of thing a normal boy would make, vaguely reminiscent of a cubistic ship.

It was a bit too normal to please Scott. He asked Emma more questions, though in private. She thought for a time, and then made more scrawls, with an awkward clutched pencil.

"Can you read that stuff?" Jane asked her son one morning.

"Not read it, exactly. I can tell what she means. Not all the time, but mostly."

"Is it writing?"

"N-no. It doesn't mean what it *looks* like."

"Symbolism," Paradine suggested over his coffee.

Jane looked at him, her eyes widening. "Denny—"

He winked and shook his head. Later, when they were alone, he said, "Don't let Holloway upset you. I'm not implying that the kids are corresponding in an unknown tongue. If Emma draws a squiggle and says it's a flower, that's an arbitrary rule—Scott remembers that. Next time she draws the same sort of squiggle, or tries to—well!"

"Sure," Jane said doubtfully. "Have you noticed Scott's been doing a lot of reading lately?"

"I noticed. Nothing unusual, though. No Kant or Spinoza."

"He browses, that's all."

"Well, so did I, at his age," Paradine said, and went off to his morning classes. He lunched with Holloway, which was becoming a daily habit, and spoke of Emma's literary endeavors.

"Was I right about symbolism, Rex?"

The psychologist nodded. "Quite right. Our own language is nothing but arbitrary symbolism now. At least in its application. Look here." On his napkin he drew a very narrow ellipse. "What's that?"

"You mean what does it represent?"

"Yes. What does it suggest to you? It could be a crude representation of—what?"

"Plenty of things," Paradine said. "Rim of a glass. A fried egg. A loaf of French bread. A cigar."

Holloway added a little triangle to his drawing, apex joined to one end of the ellipse. He looked up at Paradine.

"A fish," the latter said instantly.

"Our familiar symbol for a fish. Even without fins, eyes or mouth, it's recognizable, because we've been conditioned to identify this particular shape with our mental picture of a fish. The basis of a rebus. A symbol, to us, means a lot more than what we actually see on paper. What's in your mind when you look at this sketch?"

"Why—a fish."

"Keep going. What do you visualize? Everything!"

"Scales," Paradine said slowly, looking into space. "Water. Foam. A fish's eyes. The fins. The colors."

"So the symbol represents a lot more than just the abstract idea *fish*. Note the connotation's that of a noun, not a verb. It's harder to express actions by symbolism, you know. Anyway—reverse the process. Suppose you want to make a symbol for some concrete noun, say *bird*. Draw it."

Paradine drew two connected arcs, concavities down.

"The lowest common denominator," Holloway nodded. "The natural tendency is to simplify. Especially when a child is seeing something for the first time and has few standards of comparison. He tries to identify the new thing with what's already familiar to him. Ever notice how a child draws the ocean?" He didn't wait for an answer; he went on.

"A series of jagged points. Like the oscillating line on a seismograph. When I first saw the Pacific, I was about three. I remember it pretty clearly. It looked—tilted. A flat plain, slanted at an angle. The waves were regular triangles, apex upward. Now, I didn't *see* them stylized that way, but later, remembering, I had to find some familiar standard of comparison. Which is the only way of getting any conception of an entirely new thing. The average child tries to draw these regular triangles, but his coordination's poor. He gets a seismograph pattern."

"All of which means what?"

"A child sees the ocean. He stylizes it. He draws a certain definite pattern, symbolic, to him, of the sea. Emma's scrawls may be symbols, too. I don't mean that the world looks different to her—brighter, perhaps, and sharper, more vivid and with a slackening of perception above her eye level. What I do mean is that her thought processes are different, that she translates what she sees into abnormal symbols."

"You still believe—"

"Yes, I do. Her mind has been conditioned unusually. It may be that she breaks down what she sees into simple, obvi-

ous patterns—and realizes a significance to those patterns that we can't understand. Like the abacus. She saw a pattern in that, though to us it was completely random."

Paradine abruptly decided to taper off these luncheon engagements with Holloway. The man was an alarmist. His theories were growing more fantastic than ever, and he dragged in anything, applicable or not, that would support them.

Rather sardonically he said, "Do you mean Emma's communicating with Scott in an unknown language?"

"In symbols for which she hasn't any words. I'm sure Scott understands a great deal of those—scrawls. To him, an isosceles triangle may represent any factor, though probably a concrete noun. Would a man who knew nothing of chemistry understand what H₂O meant? Would he realize that the symbol could evoke a picture of the ocean?"

Paradine didn't answer. Instead, he mentioned to Holloway Scott's curious remark that the landscape, from the hill, had looked all wrong. A moment later, he was inclined to regret his impulse, for the psychologist was off again.

"Scott's thought patterns are building up to a sum that doesn't equal this world. Perhaps he's subconsciously expecting to see the world where those toys came from."

Paradine stopped listening. Enough was enough. The kids were getting along all right, and the only remaining disturbing factor was Holloway himself. That night, however, Scott evinced an interest, later significant, in eels.

There was nothing apparently harmful in natural history. Paradine explained about eels.

"But where do they lay their eggs? Or do they?"

"That's still a mystery. Their spawning grounds are unknown. Maybe the Sargasso Sea, or the deeps, where the pressure can help them force the young out of their bodies."

"Funny," Scott said, thinking deeply.

"Salmon do the same thing, more or less. They go up rivers to spawn." Paradine went into detail. Scott was fascinated.

"But that's *right*, Dad. They're born in the river, and when they learn how to swim, they go down to the sea. And they come back to lay their eggs, huh?"

"Right."

"Only they wouldn't *come* back," Scott pondered. "They'd just send their eggs—"

"It'd take a very long ovipositor," Paradine said, and vouchsafed some well-chosen remarks upon oviparity.

His son wasn't entirely satisfied. Flowers, he contended, sent their seeds long distances.

"They don't guide them. Not many find fertile soil."

"Flowers haven't got brains, though. Dad, why do people live *here*?"

"Glendale?"

"No—*here*. This whole place. It isn't all there is, I bet."

"Do you mean the other planets?"

Scott was hesitant. "This is only—part of the big place. It's like the river where the salmon go. Why don't people go on down to the ocean when they grow up?"

Paradine realized that Scott was speaking figuratively. He felt a brief chill. The—ocean?

The young of the species are not conditioned to live in the more complete world of their parents. Having developed sufficiently, they enter that world. Later they breed. The fertilized eggs are buried in the sand, far up the river, where later they hatch.

And they learn. Instinct alone is fatally slow. Especially in the case of a specialized genus, unable to cope even with this world, unable to feed or drink or survive, unless someone has foresightedly provided for those needs.

The young, fed and tended, would survive. There would be incubators and robots. They would survive, but they would not know how to swim downstream, to the vaster world of the ocean.

So they must be taught. They must be trained and conditioned in many ways.

Painlessly, subtly, unobtrusively. Children love toys that do things, and if those toys teach at the same time. . . .

In the latter half of the nineteenth century an Englishman sat on a grassy bank near a stream. A very small girl lay near him, staring up at the sky. She had discarded a curious toy with which she had been playing, and now was murmuring a wordless little song, to which the man listened with half an ear.

"What was that, my dear?" he asked at last.

"Just something I made up, Uncle Charles."

"Sing it again." He pulled out a notebook.

The girl obeyed.

"Does it mean anything?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes. Like the stories I tell you, you know."

"They're wonderful stories, dear."

"And you'll put them in a book someday?"

"Yes, but I must change them quite a lot, or no one would understand. But I don't think I'll change your little song."

"You mustn't. If you did, it wouldn't mean anything."

"I won't change that stanza, anyway," he promised. "Just what does it mean?"

"It's the way out, I think," the girl said doubtfully. "I'm not sure yet. My magic toys told me."

"I wish I knew what London shop sold these marvelous toys!"

"Mama bought them for me. She's dead. Papa doesn't care."

She lied. She had found the toys in a box one day, as she played by the Thames. And they were indeed wonderful.

Her little song—Uncle Charles thought it didn't mean anything. (He wasn't her real uncle, she parenthesized. But he was nice.) The song meant a great deal. It was the way. Presently she would do what it said, and then. . . .

But she was already too old. She never found the way.

Paradine had dropped Holloway. Jane had taken a dislike to him, naturally enough, since what she wanted most of all was to have her fears calmed. Since Scott and Emma acted normally now, Jane felt satisfied. It was partly wishful thinking, to which Paradine could not entirely subscribe.

Scott kept bringing gadgets to Emma for her approval. Usually she'd shake her head. Sometimes she would look doubtful. Very occasionally she would signify agreement. Then there would be an hour of laborious, crazy scribbling on scraps of notepaper, and Scott, after studying the notations, would arrange and rearrange his rocks, bits of machinery, candle ends and assorted junk. Each day the maid cleaned them away, and each day Scott began again.

He condescended to explain a little to his puzzled father, who could see no rhyme or reason in the game.

"But why this pebble right here?"

"It's hard and round, Dad. It *belongs* there."

"So is this one hard and round."

"Well, that's got vaseline on it. When you get that far, you can't see just a hard, round thing."

"What comes next? This candle?"

Scott looked disgusted. "That's toward the end. The iron ring's next."

It was, Paradine thought, like a scout trail through the woods, markers in a labyrinth. But here again was the random factor. Logic halted—familiar logic—at Scott's motives in arranging the junk as he did.

Paradine went out. Over his shoulder he saw Scott pull a crumpled piece of paper and a pencil from his pocket and head for Emma, who was squatted in a corner thinking things over.

Well. . . .

Jane was lunching with Uncle Harry, and, on this hot Sunday afternoon, there was little to do but read the papers. Paradine settled himself in the coolest place he could find, with a Collins, and lost himself in the comic strips.

An hour later a clatter of feet upstairs roused him from his doze. Scott's voice was crying exultantly, "This is it, Slug! Come on!"

Paradine stood up quickly, frowning. As he went into the hall the telephone began to ring. Jane had promised to call. . . .

His hand was on the receiver when Emma's faint voice squealed with excitement. Paradine grimaced. What the devil was going on upstairs?

Scott shrieked, "Look out! This way!"

Paradine, his mouth working, his nerves ridiculously tense, forgot the phone and raced up the stairs. The door of Scott's room was open.

The children were vanishing.

They went in fragments, like thick smoke in a wind, or like movement in a distorting mirror. Hand in hand they went, in a direction Paradine could not understand, and as he blinked there on the threshold, they were gone.

"Emma!" he said, dry-throated. "*Scotty!*"

On the carpet lay a pattern of markers, pebbles, an iron ring—junk. A random pattern. A crumpled sheet of paper blew towards Paradine.

He picked it up automatically.

"Kids. Where are you? Don't hide—*Emma! SCOTTY!*"

Downstairs the telephone stopped its shrill, monotonous ringing. Paradine looked at the paper he held.

It was a leaf torn from a book. There were interlineations and marginal notes, in Emma's meaningless scrawl. A stanza of verse had been so underlined and scribbled over that it was almost illegible, but Paradine was thoroughly familiar with *Through the Looking Glass*. His memory gave him the words—

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

Idiotically he thought: Humpty Dumpty explained it. A wabe is the plot of grass around a sundial. A sundial. Time. It has something to do with time. A long time ago Scotty asked me what a wabe was. Symbolism.

'Twas brillig . . .

A perfect mathematical formula, giving all the conditions, in symbolism the children had finally understood. The junk on the floor. The toves had to be made slithy—vase-line?—and they had to be placed in a certain relationship, so that they'd gyre and gimble.

Lunacy!

But it had not been lunacy to Emma and Scott. They thought differently. They used *x* logic. Those notes Emma had made on the page—she'd translated Carroll's words into symbols both she and Scott could understand.

The random factor had made sense to the children. They had fulfilled the conditions of the time-span equation. *And the mome raths outgrabe. . . .*

Paradine made a rather ghastly little sound, deep in his throat. He looked at the crazy pattern on the carpet. If he could follow it, as the kids had done— But he couldn't. The pattern was senseless. The random factor defeated him. He was conditioned to Euclid.

Even if he went insane, he still couldn't do it. It would be the wrong kind of lunacy.

His mind had stopped working now. But in a moment the stasis of incredulous horror would pass—Paradine crumpled

the page in his fingers. "Emma! Scotty!" he called in a dead voice, as though he could expect no response.

Sunlight slanted through the open windows, brightening the golden pelt of Mr. Bear. Downstairs the ringing of the telephone began again.

by Anthony Boucher (1911-1968)

"Anthony Boucher" was the name used by William Anthony Parker White for most of his science fiction and fantasy stories, mystery novels and shorts, and mystery criticism. He employed the name "H. H. Holmes" for much of his excellent sf criticism for both the Chicago Sun Times and The New York Tribune in the fifties and early sixties, as well as for two mystery novels. A man of great wisdom and wit, he is best known in the sf field as the founding coeditor (with the late J. Francis McComas) of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction and as the author of a number of outstanding sf and fantasy stories.

"Q.U.R.," which appeared as by "Holmes," is one of the earliest treatments of a robot which exists in other than humanoid form, an innovative as well as an outstanding story.

(I have somehow developed the notion that I have a patent on robot stories or, at the very least, that no one's robots, either in reality or fiction, are allowed to deviate from the Three Laws of Robotics. That's just fantasy on my part but it's a harmless fantasy, I hope. In any case, my robots are not usuform and I have on occasion argued vehemently against usuformity. However, I always liked Tony Boucher so much (who didn't?) that I wouldn't have dreamed of arguing with him. If he wants to infringe on my patent rights, why let him, say I. And if you're wondering what usuformity is, read the story.—I.A.)

It's got so the young sprouts nowadays seem never to have heard of androids. Oh, they look at them in museums and they read the references to them in the literature of the time, but they never seem to realize how essential a part of life androids once were, how our whole civilization, in fact, depended on them. And when you say you got your start in life as troubleshooter for an android factory, they look at you as though you'd worked in two-dimensional shows way back before the sollies, as though you ought to be in a museum yourself.

Now I'll admit I'm no infant. I'll never see a hundred again. But I'm no antique either. And I think it's a crying shame that the rising generation is so completely out of touch with the last century. Not that I ever intended to be writing my memoirs; I didn't exactly construct my life to that end. But somebody's got to tell the real story of what androids meant and how they ceased to mean it. And I'm the man to tell it, because I'm the man who discovered Dugg Quinby.

Yes, I said Quinby. Dugglesmarther H. Quinby, the Q. in Q. U. R. The man who made your life run the way it does today. And I found him.

That summer was a hell of a season for a trouble shooter for androids. There was nothing but trouble. My five-hour day stretched to eight, and even ten and twelve while I dashed all over New Washington checking on one android after another that had cracked up. And maybe you know how hot the Metropolitan District gets in summer, even worse than the rest of Oklahoma.

Because my job wasn't one that you could carry on comfortably in conditioned buildings and streets, it meant going outside and topside and everywhere that a robot might work. We called the androids robots then. We hadn't conceived of any kind of robot that wasn't an android or at least a naturoid of some sort.

And these breakdowns were striking everywhere, hitting robots in every line of activity. Even the Martoids and Veneroids that some ex-colonists fancied for servants. It would be an arm that went limp or a leg that crumpled up or a tentacle that collapsed. Sometimes mental trouble, too, slight indications of a tendency toward insubordination, even a sort of mania that wasn't supposed to be in their makeup. And the

thing kept spreading and getting worse. Any manifestation like this among living beings, and you'd think of an epidemic. But what germ could attack tempered duralite?

The worst of it was there was nothing wrong with them. Nothing that I could find, and to me that meant plain nothing. You don't get to be head troubleshooter of Robinc if anything can get past you. And the second worst was that it was hitting my own staff. I had had six robots under me—plenty to cover the usual normal amount of trouble. Now I had two, and I needed forty.

So all in all I wasn't happy that afternoon. It didn't make me any happier to see a crowd in front of the Sunspot engaged in the merry pastime of Venusian-baiting. It was never safe for one of the little green fellows to venture out of the Venusian ghetto; this sport was way too common a spectacle.

They'd got his vapor inhalator away from him. That was all there was to the game, but that was enough. No extra-physical torment was needed. There the poor giller lay on the sidewalk, sprawled and gasping like a fish out of water, which he practically was. The men—factory executives mostly, and a few office foremen—made a circle around him and laughed. There was supposed to be something hilariously funny about the struggles of a giller drowning in air, though I never could see it myself.

Oh, they'd give him back his inhalator just in time. They never killed them off; the few Venusians around had their uses, particularly for repair work on the Veneroid robots that were used under water. But meanwhile there'd be some fun.

Despite the heat of the day, I shuddered a little. Then I crossed to the other side of the street. I couldn't watch the game. But I turned back when I heard one loud shout of fury.

That was when I found Dugg Quinby. That shout was the only sound he made. He was ragingly silent as he plowed through that mass of men, found the biggest of them, snatched the inhalator away from him, and restored it to its gasping owner. But there was noise enough from the others.

Ever try to take a bone from a dog? Or a cigar from a Martian mountaineer? Well, this was worse. Those boys objected to having their fun spoiled, and they expressed their objection forcibly.

I liked this young blond giant that had plowed in there. I

liked him because his action had asked me what I was doing crossing over to the other side of the street, and I didn't have an answer. The only way even to try to answer was to cross back.

Androids or Q. U. R., single-drive space ships or modern multiples, one thing that doesn't change much is a brawl, and this was a good one. I don't know who delivered the right that met my chin as I waded in, and I don't know who it was meant for, but it was just what I needed. Not straight enough to do more than daze me for a minute, but just hard enough to rouse my fighting spirit to the point of the hell with anything but finding targets for my knuckles. I avenged the Venusian, I avenged the blond youth, I avenged the heat of the day and the plague of the robots. I avenged my job and my corns and the hangover I had two weeks ago.

The first detail that comes clear is sitting inside the Sunspot I don't know how much later. The blond boy was with me, and so was one of the factory men. We all seemed to be the best of friends, and there wasn't any telling whose blood was which.

Guzub was beaming at us. When you know your Martians pretty well you learn that that trick of shutting the middle eye is a beam. "You zure bolished 'em ub, boys," he gurgled.

The factory man felt of his neck and decided his head was still there. "Guzub," he declared, "I've learned a lesson: From now on any green giller is safe around me."

"That'z the zbird," Guzub glurked. "Avder all, we're all beings, ain'd we? Now, wad'll id be?"

Guzub was hurt when the blond youth ordered milk, but delighted when the factory man said he'd have a Three Planet with a double shot of margil. I'm no teetotaler, but I don't go for these strong drinks; I stuck to my usual straight whiskey.

We exchanged names while we waited. Mike Warren, the factory man was; and the other—but then I tipped that off already. That was Quimby. They both knew me by name.

"So you're with Robinc," Mike said. "I want to have a talk with you about that sometime. My brother-in-law's got a new use for a robot that could make somebody, including me, a pile of credits, and I can't get a hearing any place."

"Glad to," I said, not paying too much attention. Every-

body's got a new use for a robot, just like writers tell me everybody's got a swell idea for a solly.

Dugg Quinby had been staring straight ahead of him and not listening. Now he said, "What I don't see is why."

"Well," Mike began, "it seems like he was stuck once on the lunar desert and—"

"Uh-huh. Not that. What I don't see is why Venusians. Why we act that way about them, I mean. After all, they're more or less like us. They're featherless bipeds, pretty much on our general model. And we treat them like they weren't even beings. While Martians are a different shape of life altogether, but we don't have ghettos for them or Martian-baiting."

"That's just it," said Mike. "The gillers are too much like us. They're like a cartoon of us. We see them, and they're like a dirty joke on humans, and we see red. I mean," he added hastily, his hand rubbing his neck, "that's the way I used to feel. I was just trying to explain."

"Nuts," I said. "It's all a matter of historical parallel. We licked the pants—which they don't wear—off the Venusians in the First War of Conquest, so we feel we can push 'em around. The Second War of Conquest went sour on us and damned near put an end to the Empire and the race to boot, so we've got a healthy respect for the Martians." I looked over at the bartender, his tentacles industriously plying an impressive array of bottles and a gleaming duralite shaker. "We only persecute the ones it's safe to persecute."

Quinby frowned. "It's bad enough to do what no being ought to do, but to do it only when you know you can get away with it—I've been reading," he announced abruptly, as though it were a challenge to another fight.

Mike grunted. "Sollies and telecasts are enough for a man, I always say. You get to reading and you get mixed up."

"Do you think you aren't mixed up without it? Do you think you aren't all mixed up? If people would only try to look at things straight—"

"What have you been reading?" I asked.

"Old stuff. Dating, oh I guess, a millennium or so back. There were people then that used to write a lot about the Brotherhood of Man. They said good things. And it all means something to us now if you translate it into the Brotherhood of Beings. Man is unified now, but what's the result? The doctrine of Terrene Supremacy."

Guzub brought the drinks and we forked out our credits. When he heard the phrase "Terrene Supremacy" his left eyelid went into that little quiver that is the Martian expression of polite incredulity but he said nothing.

Quinby picked up his milk. "It's all because nobody looks at things straight. Everybody looks around the corners of his own prejudices. If you look at a problem straight, there isn't a problem. That's what I'm trying to do," he said with that earnestness you never come back to after youth. "I'm trying to train myself to look straight."

"So there isn't a problem. No problems at all." I thought of the day I'd had and the jobs still ahead of me and I snorted. And then I had an idea and calmly, between swallows of whiskey, changed the course of terrene civilization. "I've got problems," I asserted. "How'd you like to look straight at them? Are you working now?"

"I'm in my free-lance period," he said. "I've finished technical college and I'm not due for my final occupation analysis for another year."

"All right," I said. "How's about it?"

Slowly he nodded.

"If you can look," said Mike, wobbling his neck, "as straight as you can hit—"

I was back in my office when the call came from the spaceport. I'd seen Thuringer's face red before, but never purple. He had trouble speaking, but he finally sputtered out, "Somebody did a lousy job of sterilization on your new assistant's parents."

"What seems to be the trouble?" I asked in my soothingest manner.

"Trouble! The man's lunatic stock. Not a doubt. When you see what he's done to—" He shuddered. He reached out to switch the ike-range, but changed his mind. "Uh-huh. Come over here and see it for yourself. You wouldn't believe it. But come quick, before I go and apply for sterilization myself."

We had a special private tube to the space port; they used so many of our robots. It took me less than five minutes to get there. A robot parked my bus and another robot took me up in the lift. It was a relief to see two in good working order, though I noticed that the second one showed signs of incipient limpness in his left arm. Since he ran the lift with his

right, it didn't really matter, but Robinc had principles of perfection.

Thuringer's robot secretary said, "Tower room," and I went on up. The spaceport manager scanned me and gave the click that meant the beam was on. The tower door opened as I walked in.

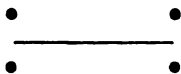
I don't know what I'd expected to see. I couldn't imagine what would get the hard-boiled Thuringer into such a blasting dither. This had been the first job that I'd tried Quinby out on, and a routine piece of work it was, or should have been Routine, that is, in these damnable times. The robot which operated the signal tower had gone limp in the legs and one arm. He'd been quoted as saying some pretty strange things on the beam, too. Backsass to pilots and insubordinate mutterings.

The first thing I saw was a neat pile of scrap in the middle of the room. Some of it looked like robot parts. The next thing I saw was Thuringer, who had gone from purple to a kind of rosy black. "It's getting me!" he burst out. "I sit here and watch it and I'm going mad! Do something, man! Then go out and annihilate your assistant, but do something first!"

I looked where he pointed. I'd been in this tower control room before. The panel had a mike and an ike, a speaker and a viewer, and a set of directional lights. In front of it there used to be a chair where the robot sat, talking on the beam and watching the indicators.

Now there was no chair. And no robot. There was a table, and on the table was a box. And from that box there extended one arm, which was alive. That arm punched regularly and correctly at the lights, and out of the box there issued the familiar guiding voice.

I walked around and got a gander at the front of the box. It had eyes and a mouth and a couple of holes that it took me a minute to spot as ear holes. It was like a line with two dots above and two below it, so:



It was like no face that ever was in nature, but it could obviously see and hear and talk.

Thuringer moaned. "And that's what you call a repair job!"

My beautiful robot! Your A-1-A Double Prime All-Utility Extra-Quality De-Luxe Model! Nothing of him left but this"—he pointed at the box—"and this"—he gestured sadly at the scrap heap.

I looked a long time at the box and I scratched my head. "He works, doesn't he?"

"Works? What? Oh, works."

"You've been here watching him. He pushes the right lights? He gets messages right, He gives the right instructions?"

"Oh yes. I suppose so. Yes, he works all right. But damn it, man, he's not a robot any more. You've ruined him."

The box interrupted its beam work. "Ruined hell," it said in the same toneless voice. "I never felt so good since I was animated. Thanks, boss."

Thuringer goggled. I started to leave the room.

"Where are you going? Are you going to make this right? I demand another A-1-A Double Prime at once, you understand. And I trust you'll kill that assistant."

"Kill him? I'm going to kiss him."

"Why, you—" He'd picked up quite a vocabulary when he ran the space port at Venusberg. "I'll see that you're fired from Robinc tomorrow!"

"I quit today," I said. "One minute ago."

That was the birth of Q. U. R.

I found Quinby at the next place on the list I'd given him. This was a job repairing a household servant—one of the Class B androids with a pretty finish, but not up to commercial specifications.

I gawped when I saw the servant. Instead of two arms he had four tentacles, which he was flexing intently.

Quinby was packing away his repair kit. He looked up at me, smiling. "It was very simple," he said. "He'd seen Martoid robots at work, and he realized that flexible tentacles would be much more useful than jointed arms for housework. The more he brooded about it, the clumsier his arms got. But it's all right now, isn't it?"

"Fine, boss," said the servant. He seemed to be reveling in the free pleasure of those tentacles.

"There were some Martoid spares in the kit," Quinby explained, "and when I switched the circuit a little—"

"Have you stopped," I interposed, "to think what that

housewife is going to say when she comes home and finds her servant waving Martoid tentacles at her?"

"Why, no. You think she'd—"

"Look at it straight," I said. "She's going to join the procession demanding that I be fired from Robinc. But don't let it worry you. Robinc's nothing to us. From now on we're ourselves. We're Us Incorporated. Come on back to the Sunspot and we'll thrash this out."

"Thanks, boss," the semi-Martoid called after us, happily writhing.

I recklessly ordered a Three Planet. This was an occasion. Quinby stuck to milk. Guzub shrugged—that is, he wrinkled his skin where shoulders might have been on his circular body—and said, "You loog abby, boys. Good news?"

I nodded. "Best yet, Guzub. You're dishing 'em up for an historic occasion. Make a note."

"Lazd dime you zelebrade izdorig oggazion," said Guzub resignedly, "you breag zevendy-vour glazzes. Wy zhould I maig a node?"

"This is different, Guz. Now," I said to Quinby, "tell me how you got this unbelievable idea of repair?"

"Why, isn't it obvious?" he asked simply. "When Zwergenhaus invented the first robot, he wasn't thinking functionally. He was trying to make a mechanical man. He did, and he made a good job of it. But that's silly. Man isn't a functionally useful animal. There's very little he can do himself. What's made him top dog is that he can invent and use tools to do what needs doing. But why make his mechanical servants as helplessly constructed as he is?"

"Almost every robot, except perhaps a few like farmhands, does only one or two things and does those things constantly. All right. Shape them so that they can best do just those things, with no part left over. Give them a brain, eyes and ears to receive commands, and whatever organs they need for their work.

"There's the source of your whole robot epidemic. They were all burdened down with things they didn't need—legs when their job was a sedentary one, two arms when they used only one—or else, like my house servant, their organs were designed to imitate man's rather than to be ideally functional. Result: the unused waste parts atrophied, and the robots became physically sick, sometimes mentally as well because

they were tortured by unrealized potentialities. It was simple enough, once you looked at it straight."

The drinks came. I went at the Three Planets cautiously. You know the formula: one part Terrene rum—170 proof—one part Venusian margil, and a dash or so of Martian vuzd. It's smooth and murderous. I'd never tasted one as smooth as this of Guzub's, and I feared it'd be that much the more murderous.

"You know something of the history of motor-transportation?" Quinby went on. "Look at the twentieth-century models in the museum sometime. See how long they kept trying to make a horseless carriage look like a carriage for horses. We've been making the same mistake—trying to make a manless body look like the bodies of men."

"Son," I said—he was maybe five or ten years younger than I was—"there's something in this looking-straight business of yours. There's so much, in fact, that I wonder if even you realize how much. Are you aware that if we go at this right we can damned near wipe Robinc out of existence?"

He choked on his milk. "You mean," he ventured, slowly and dreamily, "we could—"

"But it can't be done overnight. People are used to android robots. It's the only kind they ever think of. They'll be scared of your unhuman-looking contraptions, just like Thuringer was scared. We've got to build into this gradually. Lots of publicity. Lots of promotion. Articles, lectures, debates. Give 'em a name. A good name. Keep robots; that's common domain, I read somewhere, because it comes out of a play written a long time ago in some dialect of Old Slavic. Quinby's Something Robots—"

"Functionoid?"

"Sounds too much like fungoid. Don't like. Let me see—" I took some more Three Planets. "I've got it. Usuform. Quinby's Usuform Robots. Q.U.R."

Quinby grinned. "I like it. But shouldn't it be your name too?"

"Me, I'll take a cut on the credits. I don't like my name much. Now what we ought to do is introduce it with a new robot. One that can do something no android in the Robinc stock can tackle—"

Guzub called my name. "Man ere looking vor you."

It was Mike. "Hi, mister," he said. "I was wondering did

you maybe have a minute to listen to my brother-in-law's idea. You remember, about that new kind of robot—"

"Hey, Guzub," I yelled. "Two more Three Planets."

"Make it three," said Quinby quietly.

We talked all the rest of that night. When the Sunspot closed at twenty-three—we were going through one of our cyclic periods of blue laws then—we moved to my apartment and kept at it until we fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, scattered over my furniture.

Quinby's one drink—he stopped there—was just enough to stimulate him to seeing straighter than ever. He took something under one minute to visualize completely the possibilities of Mike's contribution.

This brother-in-law was a folklore hobbyist, and had been reading up on the ancient notion of dowsing. He had realized at once that there could have been no particular virtue in the forked witch-hazel rod which was supposed to locate water in the earth, but that certain individuals must have been able to perceive that water in some *n*th-sensory manner, communicating this reaction subconsciously to the rod in their hands.

To train that *n*th sense in a human being was probably impossible; it was most likely the result of a chance mutation. But you could attempt to develop it in a robot brain by experimentation with the patterns of the sense-perception tracks; and he had succeeded. He could equip a robot with a brain that would infallibly register the presence of water, and he was working on the further possibilities of oil and other mineral deposits. There wasn't any need to stress the invaluability of such a robot to an exploring party.

"All right," Quinby said. "What does such a robot need beside his brain and his sense organs? A means of locomotion and a means of marking the spots he finds. He'll be used chiefly in rough desert country, so a caterpillar tread will be far more useful to him than legs that can trip and stumble. The best kind of markers—lasting and easy to spot—would be metal spikes. He could, I suppose, carry those and have an arm designed as a pile driver; but . . . yes, look, this is best: Supposing he lays them?"

"Lays them?" I repeated vaguely.

"Yes. When his water sense registers maximum intensity—that is, when he's right over a hidden spring—there'll be a

sort of sphincter reaction, and *plop*, he'll lay a sharp spike, driving it into the ground."

It was perfect. It would be a cheap robot to make—just a box on treads, the box containing the brain, the sense organs, and a supply of spikes. Maybe later in a more elaborate model he could be fed crude metal and make his own spikes. There'd be a decided demand for him, and nothing of Robinc's could compete. An exploring party could simply send him out for the day, then later go over the clear track left by his treads and drill wherever he had laid a spike. And the pure functionalism of him would be the first step in our campaign to accustom the public to Quinby's Usuform Robots.

Then the ideas came thick and fast. We had among us figured out at least seventy-three applications in which usu-forms could beat androids, before our eyes inevitably folded up on us.

I woke up with three sensations: First, a firm resolve to stick to whiskey and leave Three Planetses to the Martians that invented them. Second, and practically obliterating this discomfort, a thrill of anticipation at the wonders that lay ahead of us, like a kid that wakes up and knows today's his birthday. But third, and uncomfortably gnawing at the back of this pleasure, the thought that there was something wrong, something we'd overlooked.

Quinby was fixing up a real cooked breakfast. He insisted that this was an occasion too noble for swallowing a few concentrates, and he'd rumaged in my freezing storeroom to find what he called "honest food." It was good eating, but this gnawing thought kept pestering me. At last I excused myself and went into the library. I found the book I wanted: *Planetary Civil Code. Volume 34. Robots*. I put it in the projector and ran it rapidly over the screen, till I located the paragraph I half remembered.

That gnawing was all too well founded. I remembered now. The theory'd always been that this paragraph went into the Code because only Robinc controlled the use of the factor that guaranteed the robots against endangering any intelligent beings, but I've always suspected that there were other elements at work. Even Council Members get their paws greased sometimes.

The paragraph read:

259: All robots except those in the military employ of the Empire shall be constructed according to the patents held by Robots, Inc, sometimes known as Robinc. Any robot constructed in violation of this section shall be destroyed at once, and all those concerned in constructing him shall be sterilized and segregated.

I read this aloud to the breakfast party. It didn't add to the cheer of the occasion.

"I knew it was too good to be true," Mike grunted. "I can just see Robinc leasing its patents to the boys that'll put it out of business."

"But our being great business successes isn't what's important," Quinby protested. "Do we really want . . . could any being of good will really want to become like the heads of Robinc?"

"I do," said Mike honestly.

"What's important is what this can do: Cure this present robot epidemic, conserve raw materials in robot building, make possible a new and simpler and more sensible life for everybody. Why can't we let Robinc take over the idea?"

"Look," I said patiently. "Quite aside from the unworthy ambitions that Mike and I may hold, what'll happen if we do? What has always happened when a big company buys out a new method when they've got a billion credits sunk in the old? It gets buried and is never heard of again."

"That's right," Quinby sighed. "Robinc would simply strangle it."

"All right. Now look at it straight and say what is going to become of Quinby's Usuform Robots."

"Well," he said simply, "there's only one solution. Change the code."

I groaned. "That's all, huh? Just that. Change the code. And how do you propose to go about that?"

"See the Head of the Council. Explain to him what our idea means to the world—to the system. He's a good man. He'll see us through."

"Dugg," I said, "when you look at things straight I never know whether you're going to see an amazing truth or the most amazing nonsense that ever was. Sure the Head's a good man. If he could do it without breaking too many political commitments, I think he might help out on an idea as big as this. But how to get to see him when—"

"My brother-in-law tried once," Mike contributed. "He got kind of too persistent. That's how come he's in the hospital now. Hey," he broke off. "Where you going?"

"Come on, Dugg," I said. "Mike, you spend the day looking around the city for a likely factory site. We'll meet you around seventeen at the Sunspot. Quinby and I are going to see the Head of the Council."

We met the first guard about a mile from the office. "Robinc Repair," I said, and waved my card. After all, I assuaged Quinby's conscience, I hadn't actually resigned yet. "Want to check the Head's robot."

The guard nodded. "He's expecting you."

It hadn't been even a long shot. With robots in the state they were in, it was practically a certainty that one of those in direct attendance on the Head would need repair. The gag got us through a mile of guards, some robot, some—more than usual since all the trouble—human, and at last into the presence of the Head himself.

The white teeth gleamed in the black face in that friendly grin so familiar in telecasts. "I've received you in person," he said, "because the repair of this robot is such a confidential matter."

"What are his duties?" I asked.

"He is my private decoder. It is most important that I should have his services again as soon as possible."

"And what's the matter with him?"

"Partly what I gather is, by now, almost the usual thing. Paralysis of the legs. But partly more than that: He keeps talking to himself. Babbling nonsense."

Quinby spoke up. "Just what is he supposed to do?"

The Head frowned. "Assistants bring him every coded or ciphered dispatch. His brain was especially constructed for cryptanalysis. He breaks them down, writes out the clear, and drops it into a pneumatic chute which goes to a locked compartment in my desk."

"He uses books?"

"For some of the codes. The ciphers are entirely brain-mechanics."

Quinby nodded. "Can do. Bring us to him."

The robot was saying to himself, "This is the ponderous time of the decadence of the synaptic reflexes when all curmudgeons wonkle in the withering wallabies."

Quinby looked after the departing Head. "Some time," he said, "we're going to see a Venusian as Interplanetary Head."

I snorted.

"Don't laugh. Why, not ten centuries ago people would have snorted just like that at the idea of a Black as Head on this planet. Such narrow stupidity seems fantastic to us now. Our own prejudices will seem just as comical to our great-great-grandchildren."

The robot said, "Over the larking lunar syllogisms lopes the chariot of funereal ellipses."

Quinby went to work. After a minute—I was beginning to catch on to this seeing-straight business myself—I saw what he was doing and helped.

This robot needed nothing but the ability to read, to transcribe deciphered messages, and to handle papers and books. His legs had atrophied—that was in line with the other cases. But he was unusual in that he was the rare thing: a robot who had no need at all for communication by speech. He had the power of speech and was never called upon to exercise it; result, he had broken down into this fantastic babbling of nonsense, just to get some exercise of his futile power.

When Quinby had finished, the robot consisted only of his essential cryptanalytic brain, eyes, one arm, and the writer. This last was now a part of the robot's hookup; so that instead of using his hands to transcribe the message, he thought it directly into the writer. He had everything he needed, and nothing more. His last words before we severed the speech connection were, "The runcible rhythm of ravenous raisins rolled through the rookery rambling and raving." His first words when the direct connection with the writer was established were, "This feels good. Thanks, boss."

I went to fetch the Head. "I want to warn you," I explained to him, "you may be a little surprised by what you see. But please look at it without preconceptions."

He was startled and silent. He took it well; he didn't blow up hysterically like Thuringer. But he stared at the new thing for a long time without saying a word. Then he took a paper from his pocket and laid it on the decoding table. The eyes looked at it. The arm reached out for a book and opened it. Then a message began to appear on the writer. The Head snatched it up before it went into the tube, read it, and nodded.

"It works," he said slowly. "But it's not a robot any more. It's . . . it's just a decoding machine."

"A robot," I quoted, "is any machine equipped with a Zwergenhaus brain and capable of independent action upon the orders or subject to the guidance of an intelligent being. Planetary Code, paragraph num—"

"But it looks so—"

"It works," I cut in. "And it won't get paralysis of the legs and it won't ever go mad and babble about wonkling curmudgeons. Because, you see, it's a usuform robot." And I hastily sketched out the Quinby project.

The Head listened attentively. Occasionally he flashed his white grin, especially when I explained why we could not turn the notion over to Robinc. When I was through, he paused a moment and then said at last, "It's a fine idea you have there. A great idea. But the difficulties are great, too. I don't need to recount the history of robots to you," he said, proceeding to do so. "How Zwergenhaus's discovery lay dormant for a century and a half because no one dared upset the economic system by developing it. How the Second War of Conquest so nearly depopulated the earth that the use of robot labor became not only possible but necessary. How our society is now so firmly based on it that the lowest laboring rank possible to a being is foreman. The Empire is based on robots; robots are Robinc. We can't fight Robinc."

"Robinc is slowly using up all our resources of metallic and radioactive ore, isn't it?" Quinby asked.

"Perhaps. Scaremongers can produce statistics—"

"And our usuforms will use only a fraction of what Robinc's androids need."

"A good point. An important one. You have convinced me that android robots are a prime example of conspicuous waste, and this epidemic shows that they are moreover dangerous. But I cannot attempt to fight Robinc now. My position—I shall be frank, gentlemen—my position is too precarious. I have problems of my own."

"Try Quinby," I said. "I had a problem and tried him, and he saw through it at once."

"Saw through it," the Head observed, "to a far vaster and more difficult problem beyond. Besides, I am not sure if my problem lies in his field. It deals with the question of how to mix a Three Planets cocktail."

The excitement of our enterprise had made me forget my

head. Now it began throbbing again at the memory. "A Three Planets?"

The Head hesitated. "Gentlemen," he said at last, "I ask your pledge of the utmost secrecy."

He got it.

"And even with that I cannot give you too many details. But you know that the Empire holds certain mining rights in certain districts of Mars—I dare not be more specific. These rights are essential to maintain our stocks of raw materials. And they are held only on lease, by an agreement which must be renewed quinquennially. It has heretofore been renewed as a matter of course, but the recent rise of the Planetary Party in Mars, which advocates the abolition of all interplanetary contact, makes this coming renewal a highly doubtful matter. Within the next three days I am to confer here with a certain high Martian dignitary, traveling incognito. Upon the result of that conference our lease depends."

"And the Three Planets?" I asked. "Does the Planetary Party want to abolish them as a matter of principle?"

"Probably," he smiled. "But this high individual is not a party member, and is devoted to Three Planets. He hates to travel, because only on Mars, he claims, is the drink ever mixed correctly. If I could brighten his trip here by offering him one perfect Three Planets—"

"Guzub!" I cried. "The bartender at the Sunspot. He's a Martian and the drink is his specialty."

"I know," the Head agreed sadly. "Dza . . . the individual in question once said that your Guzub was the only being on this planet who knew how. Everyone else puts in too much or too little vuzd. But Guzub is an exiled member of the Varjinian Loyalists. He hates everything that the present regime represents. He would never consent to perform his masterpiece for my guest."

"You could order one at the Sunspot and have it sent here by special—"

"You know that a Three Planets must be drunk within thirty seconds of mixing for the first sip to have its ideal flavor."

"Then—"

"All right," Quinby said. "You let us know when your honored guest arrives, and we'll have a Three Planets for him."

The Head looked doubtful. "If you think you can—A bad one might be more dangerous than none—"

"And if we do," I interposed hastily, "you'll reconsider this business of the usuform robots?"

"If this mining deal goes through satisfactorily, I should be strong enough to contemplate facing Robinc."

"Then you'll get your Three Planets," I said calmly, wondering what Quinby had seen straight now.

We met Mike at the Sunspot as arranged. He was drinking a Three Planets. "This is good," he announced. "This has spacedrive and zoomf to it. You get it other places and—"

"I know," I said. "Find a site?"

"A honey. Wait'll I—"

"Hold it. We've got to know have we got anything to go on it. Guzub! One Three Planets."

We watched entranced as he mixed the potion. "Get exactly what he does," Quinby had said. "Then construct a usuform bartender who'll be infallible. It'll satisfy the Martian envoy and at the same time remind the Head of why we're helping him out."

But all we saw was a glittering swirl of tentacles. First a flash as each tentacle picked up its burden—one the shaker, one the lid, one the glass, and three others the bottles of rum, margil, and vuzd. Then a sort of spasm that shook all Guzub's round body as the exact amount of each liquid went in, and finally a gorgeous pinwheel effect of shaking and pouring.

Guzub handed me my drink, and I knew as much as I had before.

By the time I'd finished it, I had courage. "Guzub," I said, "this is wonderful."

"Zure," Guzub glurked. "Always I maig id wondervul."

"Nobody else can make 'em like you, Guz. But tell me. How much vuzd do you put in?"

Guzub made his kind of a shrug. "I dell you, boys, I dunno. Zome dime maybe I wadge myzelv and zee. I juzd go zo! I dunno how mudj."

"Give me another one. Let's see you watch yourself."

"Businezz is good by you, you dring zo many Blanedz? O Gay, ere goes."

But the whirl stopped in the middle. There was Guzub, all his eyes focused sadly on the characteristic green corkscrew-shaped bottle of vuzd. Twice he started to move that tentacle, then drew it back. At last he made a dash with it.

"Exactly two drops," Quinby whispered.

Guzub handed over the drink unhappily. "Dry id," he said.

I did. It was terrible. Too little vuzd, so that you could taste both the heavy sweetness of the rum and the acrid harshness of the margil. I said so.

"I know, boys. Wen I zdob do wadge, id bothers me. No gan do."

I gupled the drink. "Mix up another without watching. Maybe we can tell."

This one was perfect. And we could see nothing.

The next time he "wadged." He used precisely four and a half drops of vuzd. You tasted nothing but the tart decay of the vuzd itself.

The next time—

But my memory gets a little vague after that. Like I said, I'm a whiskey drinker. And four Three Planetses in quick succession—I'm told the party went on till closing hour at twenty-three, after which Guzub accepted Quinby's invitation to come on and mix for us at my apartment. I wouldn't know. All I remember is one point where I found a foot in my face. I bit it, decided it wasn't mine, and stopped worrying about it. Or about anything.

I'm told that I slept thirty-six hours after that party—a whole day and more simply vanished out of my existence. I woke up feeling about twelve and spry for my age, but it took me a while to reconstruct what had been going on.

I was just beginning to get it straightened out when Quinby came in. His first words were, "How would you like a Three Planets?"

I suddenly felt like two hundred and twelve, and on an off day at that. Not until I'd packed away a superman-size breakfast did he dare repeat the offer. By then I felt brave. "O. K.," I said. "But with a whiskey chaser."

I took one sip and said, "Where's Guzub? I didn't know he was staying here too."

"He isn't."

"But this Three Planets— It's perfect. It's the McCoy. And Guzub—"

Quinby opened a door. There sat the first original Quinby Usuform—no remake of a Robinc model, but a brand new creation. Quinby said, "Three Planets," and he went into action. He had tentacles, and the motions were exactly like

Guzub's except that he was himself the shaker. He poured the liquids into his maw, joggled about, and then poured them out of a hollow hoselike tentacle.

The televisior jangled. Quinby hastily shifted the ike so as to miss the usuform barkeep, as I answered. The screen showed the Head himself. He'd been there before on telecasts, but this was the real thing.

He didn't waste time. "Tonight, nineteen thirty," he said. "I don't need to explain?"

"We'll be there," I choked out.

A special diplomatic messenger brought the pass to admit the two of us and "one robot or robotlike machine" to the Council building. I was thankful for that alternative phrase; I didn't want to have to argue with each guard about the technical legal definition of a robot. We were installed in a small room directly off the Head's private reception room. It was soundproofed and there was no window; no chance of our picking up interplanetary secrets of diplomacy. And there was a bar.

A dream of a bar, a rhapsody of a bar. The vuzd, the rum, the margil were all of brands that you hear about and brood about but never think to see in a lifetime. And there was whiskey of the same caliber.

We had hardly set out usuform facing the bar when a servant came in. He was an android. He said. "The Head says now."

Quinby asked me, "Do you want one?"

I shook my head and selected a bottle of whiskey.

"Two Three Planetses," Quinby said.

The tentacles flickered, the shaker-body joggled, the hose-tentacle poured. The android took the tray from our usuform. He looked at him with something as close to a mixture of fear, hatred, and envy as his eye cells could express. He went out with the tray.

I turned to Quinby. "We've been busy getting ready for this party ever since I woke up. I still don't understand how you made him into another Guzub."

There was a click and the room was no longer soundproof. The Head was allowing us to hear the reception of our creation. First his voice came, quiet, reserved and suave. "I think your magnitude would enjoy this insignificant drink. I

have been to some slight pains to see that it was worthy of your magnitude's discriminating taste."

There was silence. Then the faintest sound of a sip, a pause, and an exhalation. We could almost hear the Head holding his breath.

"Bervegd!" a deep voice boomed—which since no Martian has ever yet learned to pronounce a voiceless consonant, means a verdict of "Perfect!"

"I am glad that your magnitude is pleased."

"Bleased is doo mild a word, my dear Ead. And now thad you ave zo delighdvully welgomed me—"

The sound went dead again.

"He liked it, huh?" said Guzub II. "You boys want some, maybe?"

"No thanks," said Quinby. "I wonder if I should have given him a Martian accent—they are the best living bartenders. Perhaps when we get that model into mass production—"

I took a gleefully long swig of whiskey. Its mild warmth felt soothing after memories of last night's Three Planetses. "Look," I said. "We have just pulled off the trick that ought to net us a change in the code and a future as the great revolutionists of robot design. I feel like . . . hell, like Ley landing on the moon. And you sit there with nothing on your mind but a bartender's accent."

"Why not?" Quinby asked. "What is there to do in life but find what you're good for and do it best you can?"

He had me there. And I began to have some slight inklings of the trouble ahead with a genius who had commercial ideas and the conscience of an other-worldly saint. I said, "All right. I won't ask you to kill this bottle with me, and in return I expect you not to interfere with my assassinating it. But as to what you're good for—how did you duplicate Guzub?"

"Oh that. That was simple—"

"—when you looked at it straight," I ended.

"Yes." That was another thing about Quinby; he never knew if he was being ribbed. "Yes. I got one of those new electronic cameras—you know, one thousand exposures per second. Hard to find at that time of night, but we made it."

"We?"

"You helped me. You kept the man from overcharging me. Or maybe you don't remember? So we took pictures of Guzub making a Three Planets, and I could construct this

one to do it exactly right down to the thousandth of a second. The proper proportion of vuzd, in case you're interested, works out to three-point-six-five-four-seven-eight-two-three drops. It's done with a flip of the third joint of the tentacle on the down beat. It didn't seem right to use Guzub to make a robot that would compete with him and probably drive him out of business; so we've promised him a generous pension from the royalties on usuform barkeeps."

"We?" I said again, more feebly.

"You drew up the agreement."

I didn't argue. It was fair enough. A good businessman would have slipped Guzub a fiver for posing for pictures and then said the hell with him. But I was beginning to see that running Q.U.R. was not going to be just good business.

When the Head finally came in, he didn't need to say a word, though he said plenty. I've never seen that white grin flash quite so cheerfully. That was enough; the empire had its Martian leases, and Q. U. R. was a fact.

When I read back over this story, I can see there's one thing wrong. That's about the giller. I met Dugg Quinby, and you met him through me, in the act of rescuing a Venusian from a giller-baiting mob. By all the rights of storytelling, the green being should have vowed everlasting gratitude to his rescuer, and at some point in our troubles he should have showed up and made everything fine for us.

That's how it should have been. In actual fact the giller grabbed his inhalator and vanished without so much as a "thank you." If anybody helped us, it was Mike, who had been our most vigorous enemy in the battle.

Which means, I think, that seeing straight can work with things and robots, but not with beings, because no being is really straight, not even to himself.

Except maybe Dugg Quinby.

CLASH BY NIGHT

Astounding,

March

**by Lawrence O'Donnell
(Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore)**

There is considerable debate about the authorship of this powerful story, with some sources claiming that Kuttner did this one alone, while others claim that it was a collaboration. What matters most is that "Clash By Night" is an important novella, one of the most convincing treatments of an undersea civilization in science fiction. The Kuttners (possibly Henry alone) produced a memorable sequel in 1947, "Fury," also in Astounding. The "O'Donnell" name was used sparingly on their work, another example being "Vintage Season" in the September, 1946 Astounding.

(All Mars has lost since 1943 are its canals and the dreams of an intelligent civilization (or the dead remnants of one) upon it. Venus lost its ocean, its relatively mild climate, its relatively benign atmosphere, its status as our younger near-twin sister. For some fifteen years after "Clash By Night" appeared, it was still possible to write of Venus's oceans and I published Lucky Starr and the Oceans of Venus in 1954. But then came microwave astronomy and planetary probes and Venus was revealed to be bone-dry, nearly red-hot, and buried under a dense atmosphere of carbon dioxide, which was in turn under a cloud layer of dilute sulfuric acid. But the dream is remembered and "Clash by Night" is one of its best expressions—I.A.)

Introduction

A half mile beneath the shallow Venusian Sea the black impervium dome that protects Montana Keep rests frowningly on the bottom. Within the Keep is carnival, for the Montanans celebrate the four-hundred-year anniversary of Earthman's landing on Venus. Under the great dome that houses the city all is light and color and gaiety. Masked men and women, bright in celoflex and silks, wander through the broad streets, laughing, drinking, the strong native wines of Venus. The sea bottom has been combed, like the hydroponic tanks, for rare delicacies to grace the tables of the nobles.

Through the festival grim shadows stalk, men whose faces mark them unmistakably as members of a Free Company. Their finery cannot disguise that stamp, hard-won through years of battle. Under the domino masks their mouths are hard and harsh. Unlike the undersea dwellers, their skins are burned black with the ultraviolet rays that filter through the cloud layer of Venus. They are skeletons at the feast. They are respected but resented. They are Free Companions—

We are on Venus, nine hundred years ago, beneath the Sea of Shoals, not much north of the equator. But there is a wide range in time and space. All over the cloud planet the underwater Keeps are dotted, and life will not change for many centuries. Looking back, as we do now, from the civilized days of the thirty-fourth century, it is too easy to regard the men of the Keeps as savages, groping, stupid, and brutal. The Free Companies have long since vanished. The islands and continents of Venus have been tamed, and there is no war.

But in periods of transition, of desperate rivalry, there is always war. The Keeps fought among themselves, each striving to draw the fangs of the others of depriving them of their reserves of korium, the power source of the day. Students of that era find pleasure in sifting the legends and winnowing out the basic social and geopolitical truths. It is fairly well known that only one factor saved the Keeps from annihilating one another—the gentlemen's agreement that left war to the warriors, and allowed the undersea cities to develop their science and social cultures. That particular compromise was, perhaps, inevitable. And it caused the organization of the Free Companies, the roving bands of mercenaries, highly

trained for their duties, who hired themselves out to fight for whatever Keeps were attacked or wished to attack.

Ap Townn, in his monumental "Cycle of Venus," tells the saga through symbolic legends. Many historians have recorded the sober truth, which, unfortunately, seems often Mars-dry. But it is not generally realized that the Free Companions were almost directly responsible for our present high culture. War, because of them, was not permitted to usurp the place of peacetime social and scientific work. Fighting was highly specialized, and, because of technical advances, manpower was no longer important. Each band of Free Companions numbered a few thousand, seldom more.

It was a strange, lonely life they must have led, shut out from the normal life of the Keeps. They were vestigian but necessary, like the fangs of the marsupians who eventually evolved into *Homo sapiens*. But without those warriors, the Keeps would have been plunged completely into total war, with fatally destructive results.

Harsh, gallant, indomitable, serving the god of battles so that it might be destroyed—working toward their own obliteration—the Free Companies roar down the pages of history, the banner of Mars streaming above them in the misty air of Venus. They were doomed as Tyrannosaur Rex was doomed, and they fought on as he did, serving, in their strange way, the shape of Minerva that stood behind Mars.

Now they are gone. We can learn much by studying the place they held in the Undersea Period. For, because of them, civilization rose again to the heights it had once reached on Earth, and far beyond.

*"These lords shall light the mystery
Of mastery or victory,
And these ride high in history,
But these shall not return."*

The Free Companions hold their place in interplanetary literature. They are a legend now, archaic and strange. For they were fighters, and war has gone with unification. But we can understand them a little more than could the people of the Keeps.

This story, built on legends and fact, is about a typical warrior of the period—Captain Brian Scott of Doone's Free Companions. He may never have existed—

I.

*O, it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, go away";
But it's "Thank you, Mr. Atkins," when the band begins to
play,*

*The band begins to play, my boys, the band begins to play—
O, it's "Thank you, Mr. Atkins," when the band begins to play.*

—R. Kipling circa 1900

Scott drank stinging uisqueplus and glowered across the smoky tavern. He was a hard, stocky man, with thick gray-shot brown hair and the scar of an old wound crinkling his chin. He was thirty-odd, looking like the veteran he was, and he had sense enough to wear a plain suit of blue celoflex, rather than the garish silks and rainbow fabrics that were all around him.

Outside, through the transparent walls, a laughing throng was carried to and fro along the movable ways. But in the tavern it was silent, except for the low voice of a harpman as he chanted some old ballad, accompanying himself on his complicated instrument. The song came to an end. There was scattered applause, and from the hot-box overhead the blaring music of an orchestra burst out. Instantly the restraint was gone. In the booths and at the bar men and women began to laugh and talk with casual unrestraint. Couples were dancing now.

The girl beside Scott, a slim, tan-skinned figure with glossy black ringlets cascading to her shoulders, turned inquiring eyes to him.

"Want to, Brian?"

Scott's mouth twisted in a wry grimace. "Suppose so, Jeana. Eh?" He rose, and she came gracefully into his arms. Brian did not dance too well, but what he lacked in practice he made up in integration. Jeana's heart-shaped face, with its high cheekbones and vividly crimson lips, lifted to him.

"Forget Bienne. He's just trying to ride you."

Scott glanced toward a distant booth, where two girls sat with a man—Commander Fredric Bienne of the Doones. He was a gaunt, tall, bitter-faced man, his regular features twisted into a perpetual sneer, his eyes somber under heavy dark brows. He was pointing, now, toward the couple on the floor.

"I know," Scott said. "He's doing it, too. Well, the hell with him. So I'm a captain now and he's still a commander. That's tough. Next time he'll obey orders and not send his ship out of the line, trying to ram."

"That was it, eh?" Jeana asked. "I wasn't sure. There's plenty of talk."

"There always is. Oh, Bienne's hated me for years. I reciprocate. We simply don't get on together. Never did. Every time I got a promotion, he chewed his nails. Figured he had a longer service record than I had, and deserved to move up faster. But he's too much of an individualist—at the wrong times."

"He's drinking a lot," Jeana said.

"Let him. Three months we've been in Montana Keep. The boys get tired of inaction—being treated like this." Scott nodded toward the door, where a Free Companion was arguing with the keeper. "No noncoms allowed in here. Well, the devil with it."

They could not hear the conversation above the hubbub, but its importance was evident. Presently the soldier shrugged, his mouth forming a curse, and departed. A fat man in scarlet silks shouted encouragement.

"—want any . . . Companions here!"

Scott saw Commander Bienne, his eyes half closed, get up and walk toward the fat man's booth. His shoulder moved in an imperceptible shrug. The hell with civilians, anyhow. Serve the lug right if Bienne smashed his greasy face. And that seemed the probable outcome. For the fat man was accompanied by a girl, and obviously wasn't going to back down, though Bienne, standing too close to him, was saying something insulting, apparently.

The auxiliary hot-box snapped some quick syllables, lost in the general tumult. But Scott's trained ear caught the words. He nodded to Jeana, made a significant clicking noise with his tongue, and said, "This is it."

She, too, had heard. She let Scott go. He headed toward the fat man's booth just in time to see the beginning of a brawl. The civilian, red as a turkey cock, had struck out suddenly, landing purely by accident on Bienne's gaunt cheek. The commander, grinning tightly, stepped back a pace, his fist clenching. Scott caught the other's arm.

"Hold it, commander."

Bienne swung around, glaring. "What business is it of yours? Let—"

The fat man, seeing his opponent's attention distracted, acquired more courage and came in swinging. Scott reached past Bienne, planted his open hand in the civilian's face, and pushed hard. The fat man almost fell backward on his table.

As he rebounded, he saw a gun in Scott's hand. The captain said curtly, "Tend to your knitting, mister."

The civilian licked his lips, hesitated, and sat down. Under his breath he muttered something about too-damn-cocky Free Companions.

Bienne was trying to break free, ready to swing on the captain. Scott holstered his gun. "Orders," he told the other, jerking his head toward the hot-box. "Get it?"

"—mobilization. Doonemen report to headquarters. Captain Scott to Administration. Immediate mobilization—"

"Oh," Bienne said, though he still scowled. "O.K. I'll take over. There was time for me to take a crack at that louse, though."

"You know what instant mobilization means," Scott grunted. "We may have to leave at an instant's notice. Orders, commander."

Bienne saluted halfheartedly and turned away. Scott went back to his own booth. Jeana had already gathered her purse and gloves and was applying lip juice.

She met his eyes calmly enough.

"I'll be at the apartment, Brian. Luck."

He kissed her briefly, conscious of a surging excitement at the prospect of a new venture. Jeana understood his emotion. She gave him a quick, wry smile, touched his hair lightly, and rose. They went out into the gay tumult of the ways.

Perfumed wind blew into Scott's face. He wrinkled his nose disgustedly. During carnival seasons the Keeps were less pleasant to the Free Companions than otherwise; they felt more keenly the gulf that lay between them and the undersea dwellers. Scott pushed his way through the crowd and took Jeana across the ways to the center fast-speed strip. They found seats.

At a clover-leaf intersection Scott left the girl, heading toward Administration, the cluster of taller buildings in the city's center. The technical and political headquarters were centered here, except for the laboratories, which were in the

suburbs near the base of the Dome. There were a few small test-domes a mile or so distant from the city, but these were used only for more precarious experiments. Glancing up, Scott was reminded of the catastrophe that had unified science into something like a free-masonry. Above him, hanging without gravity over a central plaza, was the globe of the Earth, half shrouded by the folds of a black plastic pall. In every Keep on Venus there was a similar ever-present reminder of the lost mother planet.

Scott's gaze went up farther, to the Dome, as though he could penetrate the impervium and the mile-deep layer of water and the clouded atmosphere to the white star that hung in space, one quarter as brilliant as the sun. A star—all that remained of Earth, since atomic power had been unleashed there two centuries ago. The scourge had spread like flame, melting continents and leveling mountains. In the libraries there were wire-tape pictorial records of the Holocaust. A religious cult—Men of the New Judgment—had sprung up, and advocated the complete destruction of science; followers of that dogma still existed here and there. But the cult's teeth had been drawn when technicians unified, outlawing experiments with atomic power forever, making use of that force punishable by death, and permitting no one to join their society without taking the Minervan Oath.

“—to work for the ultimate good of mankind . . . taking all precaution against harming humanity and science . . . requiring permission from those in authority before undertaking any experiment involving peril to the race . . . remembering always the extent of the trust placed in us and remembering forever the death of the mother planet through misuse of knowledge—”

The Earth. A strange sort of world it must have been, Scott thought. Sunlight, for one thing, unfiltered by the cloud layer. In the old days, there had been few unexplored areas left on Earth. But here on Venus, where the continents had not yet been conquered—there was no need, of course, since everything necessary to life could be produced under the Domes—here on Venus, there was still a frontier. In the Keeps, a highly specialized social culture. Above the surface, a primeval world, where only the Free Companions had their fortresses and navies—the navies for fighting, the forts to house the technicians who provided the latter-day sinews of war, science instead of money. The Keeps tolerated visits

from the Free Companions, but would not offer them headquarters, so violent the feeling, so sharp the schism, in the public mind, between war and cultural progress.

Under Scott's feet the sliding way turned into an escalator, carrying him into the Administration Building. He stepped to another way which took him to a lift, and, a moment or two later, was facing the door-curtain bearing the face of President Dane Crosby of Montana Keep.

Crosby's voice said, "Come in, captain," and Scott brushed through the curtain, finding himself in a medium-sized room with muraled walls and a great window overlooking the city. Crosby, a white-haired, thin figure in blue silks, was at his desk. He looked like a tired old clerk out of Dickens, Scott thought suddenly, entirely undistinguished and ordinary. Yet Crosby was one of the greatest socio-politicians on Venus.

Cinc Rhys, leader of Doone's Free Companions, was sitting in a relaxer, the apparent antithesis of Crosby. All the moisture in Rhys's body seemed to have been sucked out of him years ago by ultraviolet actinic, leaving a mummy of brown leather and whipcord sinew. There was no softness in the man. His smile was a grimace. Muscles lay like wire under the swarthy cheeks.

Scott saluted. Rhys waved him to a relaxer. The look of subdued eagerness in the cinc's eyes was significant—an eagle poising himself, smelling blood. Crosby sensed that, and a wry grin showed on his pale face.

"Every man to his trade," he remarked, semi-ironically. "I suppose I'd be bored stiff if I had too long a vacation. But you'll have quite a battle on your hands this time, Cinc Rhys."

Scott's stocky body tensed automatically. Rhys glanced at him.

"Virginia Keep is attacking, captain. They've hired the Helldivers—Flynn's outfit."

There was a pause. Both Free Companions were anxious to discuss the angles, but unwilling to do so in the presence of a civilian, even the president of Montana Keep. Crosby rose.

"The money settlement's satisfactory, then?"

Rhys nodded. "Yes, that's all right. I expect the battle will take place in a couple of days. In the neighborhood of Venus Deep, at a tough guess."

"Good. I've a favor to ask, so if you'll excuse me for a few

minutes, I'll—" He left the sentence unfinished and went out through the door-curtain. Rhys offered Scott a cigarette.

"You get the implications, captain—the Helldivers?"

"Yes, sir. Thanks. We can't do it alone."

"Right. We're short on manpower and armament both. And the Helldivers recently merged with O'Brian's Legion, after O'Brien was killed in that polar scrap. They're a strong outfit, plenty strong. Then they've got their specialty—submarine attack. I'd say we'll have to use H-plan 7."

Scott closed his eyes, remembering the files. Each Free Company kept up-to-date plans of attack suited to the merits of every other Company of Venus. Frequently revised as new advances were made, as groups merged, and as the balance of power changed on each side, the plans were so detailed that they could be carried into action at literally a moment's notice. H-plan 7, Scott recalled, involved enlisting the aid of the Mob, a small but well-organized band of Free Companions led by Cinc Tom Mendez.

"Right," Scott said. "Can you get him?"

"I think so. We haven't agreed yet on the bonus. I've been teltaudioing him on a tight beam, but he keeps putting me off—waiting till the last moment, when he can dictate his own terms."

"What's he asking, sir?"

"Fifty thousand cash and a fifty-percent cut on the loot."

"I'd say thirty percent would be about right."

Rhys nodded. "I've offered him thirty-five. I may send you to his fort—carte blanche. We can get another Company, but Mendex has got beautiful sub-detectors—which would come in handy against the Helldivers. Maybe I can settle things by audio. If not, you'll have to fly over to Mendez and buy his services, at less than fifty per if you can."

Scott rubbed the old scar on his chin with a callused forefinger. "Meantime Commander Bienne's in charge of mobilization. When—"

"I teltaudioed our fort. Air transports are on the way now."

"It'll be quite a scrap," Scott said, and the eyes of the two men met in perfect understanding. Rhys chuckled dryly.

"And good profits. Virginia Keep has a big supply of korium . . . dunno how much, but plenty."

"What started the fracas this time?"

"The usual thing, I suppose," Rhys said uninterestedly.

"Imperialism. Somebody in Virginia Keep worked out a new plan for annexing the rest of the Keeps. Same as usual."

They stood up as the door-curtain swung back, admitting President Crosby, another man, and a girl. The man looked young, his boyish face not yet toughened under actinic burn. The girl was lovely in the manner of a plastic figurine, lit from within by vibrant life. Her blond hair was cropped in the prevalent mode, and her eyes, Scott saw, were an unusual shade of green. She was more than merely pretty—she was instantly exciting.

Crosby said, "My niece, Ilene Kane—and my nephew, Norman Kane." He performed introductions, and they found seats.

"What about drinks?" Ilene suggested. "This is rather revoltingly formal. The fight hasn't started yet, after all."

Crosby shook his head at her. "You weren't invited here anyway. Don't try to turn this into a party—there isn't too much time, under the circumstances."

"O.K.," Ilene murmured. "I can wait." She eyed Scott interestedly.

Norman Kane broke in. "I'd like to join Doone's Free Companions, sir. I've already applied, but now that there's a battle coming up, I hate to wait till my application's approved. So I thought—"

Crosby looked at Cinc Rhys. "A personal favor, but the decision's up to you. My nephew's a misfit—a romanticist. Never liked the life of a Keep. A year ago he went off and joined Starling's outfit."

Rhys raised an eyebrow. "That gang? It's not a recommendation, Kane. They're not even classed as Free Companions. More like a band of guerrillas, and entirely without ethics. There've even been rumors they're messing around with atomic power."

Crosby looked startled. "I hadn't heard that."

"It's no more than a rumor. If it's ever proved, the Free Companions—all of them—will get together and smash Starling in a hurry."

Norman Kane looked slightly uncomfortable. "I suppose I was rather a fool. But I wanted to get in the fighting game, and Starling's group appealed to me—"

The cinc made a sound in his throat. "They would. Swash-buckling romanticists, with no idea of what war means. They've

not more than a dozen technicians. And they've no discipline—it's like a pirate outfit. War today, Kane, isn't won by romantic animals dashing at forlorn hopes. The modern soldier is a tactician who knows how to think, integrate, and obey. If you join our Company, you'll have to forget what you learned with Starling."

"Will you take me, sir?"

"I think it would be unwise. You need the training course."

"I've had experience—"

Crosby said, "It would be a favor, Cinc Rhys, if you'd skip the red tape. I'd appreciate it. Since my nephew wants to be a soldier, I'd much prefer to see him with the Doones."

Rhys shrugged. "Very well. Captain Scott will give you your orders, Kane. Remember that discipline is vitally important to us."

The boy tried to force back a delighted grin. "Thank you, sir."

"Captain—"

Scott rose and nodded to Kane. They went out together. In the anteroom was a telaudio set, and Scott called the Doone's local headquarters in Montana Keep. An integrator answered, his face looking inquiringly from the screen.

"Captain Scott calling, subject induction."

"Yes, sir. Ready to record."

Scott drew Kane forward. "Photosnap this man. He'll report to headquarters immediately. Name, Norman Kane. Enlist him without training course—special orders from Cinc Rhys."

"Acknowledged, sir."

Scott broke the connection. Kane couldn't quite repress his grin.

"All right," the captain grunted, a sympathetic gleam in his eyes. "That fixes it. They'll put you in command. What's your specialty."

"Flutterboats, sir."

"Good. One more thing. Don't forget what Cinc Rhys said, Kane. Discipline is damned important, and you may not have realized that yet. This isn't a cloak-and-sword war. There are no Charges of Light Brigades. No grandstand plays—that stuff went out with the Crusades. Just obey orders, and you'll have no trouble. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir." Kane saluted and strode out with a per-

ceptible swagger. Scott grinned. The kid would have *that* knocked out of him pretty soon.

A voice at his side made him turn quickly. Ilene Kane was standing there, slim and lovely in her celoflex gown.

"You seem pretty human after all, captain," she said. "I heard what you told Norman."

Scott shrugged. "I did that for his own good—and the good of the Company. One man off the beam can cause plenty of trouble, Mistress Kane."

"I envy Norman," she said. "It must be a fascinating life you lead. I'd like it—for a while. Not for long. I'm one of the useless offshoots of this civilization, not much good for anything. So I've perfected one talent."

"What's that?"

"Oh, hedonism, I suppose you'd call it. I enjoy myself. It's not often too boring. But I'm a bit bored now. I'd like to talk to you, captain."

"Well, I'm listening," Scott said.

Ilene Kane made a small grimace. "Wrong semantic term. I'd like to get inside of you psychologically. But painlessly. Dinner and dancing. Can do?"

"There's no time," Scott told her. "We may get our orders any moment." He wasn't sure he wanted to go out with this girl of the Keeps, though there was definitely a subtle fascination for him, an appeal he could not analyze. She typified the most pleasurable part of a world he did not know. The other facets of that world could not impinge on him; geopolitics or nonmilitary science held no appeal, were too alien. But all worlds touch at one point—pleasure. Scott could understand the relaxations of the undersea groups, as he could not understand or feel sympathy for their work or their social impulses.

Cinc Rhys came through the door-curtain, his eyes narrowed. "I've some telaudioing to do, captain," he said. Scott knew what implications the words held: the incipient bargain with Cinc Mendez. He nodded.

"Yes, sir. Shall I report to headquarters?"

Rhys's harsh face seemed to relax suddenly as he looked from Ilene to Scott. "You're free till dawn. I won't need you till then, but report to me at six a.m. No doubt you've a few details to clean up."

"Very well, sir." Scott watched Rhys go out. The cinc had meant Jeana, of course. But Ilene did not know that.

"So?" she asked. "Do I get a turn-down? You might buy me a drink, anyway."

There was plenty of time. Scott said, "It'll be a pleasure," and Ilene linked her arm with his. They took the dropper to ground level.

As they came out on one of the ways, Ilene turned her head and caught Scott's glance. "I forgot something, captain. You may have a previous engagement. I didn't realize—"

"There's nothing," he said. "Nothing important."

It was true; he felt a mild gratitude toward Jeana at the realization. His relationship with her was the peculiar one rendered advisable by his career. Free-marriage was the word for it; Jeana was neither his wife nor his mistress, but something midway between. The Free Companions had no firmly grounded foundation for social life; in the Keeps they were visitors, and in their coastal forts they were—well, soldiers. One would no more bring a woman to a fort than aboard a ship of the line. So the women of the Free Companions lived in the Keeps, moving from one to another as their men did; and because of the ever-present shadow of death, ties were purposely left loose. Jeana and Scott had been free-married for five years now. Neither made demands on the other. No one expected fidelity of a Free Companion. Soldiers lived under such iron disciplines that when they were released, during the brief peacetimes, the pendulum often swung far in the opposite direction.

To Scott, Ilene Kane was a key that might unlock the doors of the Keep—doors that opened to a world of which he was not a part, and which he could not quite understand.

II

*I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.
—Housman*

There were nuances, Scott found, which he had never known existed. A hedonist like Ilene devoted her life to such nuances; they were her career. Such minor matters as making the powerful, insipid moonflower cocktails more palatable by filtering them through lime-soaked sugar held between the teeth. Scott was a uisqueplus man, having the average soldier's contempt for what he termed hydroponic drinks, but the

cocktails Ilene suggested were quite as effective as acrid, burning amber uisqueplus. She taught him, that night, such tricks as pausing between glasses to sniff lightly at happy-gas, to mingle sensual excitement with mental by trying the amusement rides designed to give one the violent physical intoxication of breathless speed. Nuances all, which only a girl with Ilene's background could know. She was not representative of Keep life. As she had said, she was an offshoot, a casual and useless flower on the great vine that struck up inexorably to the skies, its strength in its tough, reaching tendrils—scientists and technicians and socio-politicians. She was doomed in her own way, as Scott was in his. The undersea folk served Minerva; Scott served Mars; and Ilene served Aphrodite—not purely the sexual goddess, but the patron of arts and pleasure. Between Scott and Ilene was the difference between Wagner and Strauss; the difference between crashing chords and tinkling arpeggios. In both was a muted bitter-sweet sadness, seldom realized by either. But that undertone was brought out by their contact. The sense of dim hopelessness in each responded to the other.

It was carnival, but neither Ilene nor Scott wore masks. Their faces were masks enough, and both had been trained to reserve, though in different ways. Scott's hard mouth kept its tight grimness even when he smiled. And Ilene's smiles came so often that they were meaningless.

Through her, Scott was able to understand more of the undersea life than he had ever done before. She was for him a catalyst. A tacit understanding grew between them, not needing words. Both realized that, in the course of progress, they would eventually die out. Mankind tolerated them because that was necessary for a little time. Each responded differently. Scott served Mars; he served actively; and the girl, who was passive, was attracted by the antithesis.

Scott's drunkenness struck psychically deep. He did not show it. His stiff silver-brown hair was not disarranged, and his hard, burned face was impassive as ever. But when his brown eyes met Ilene's green ones a spark of—something—met between them.

Color and light and sound. They began to form a pattern now, were not quite meaningless to Scott. They were, long past midnight, sitting in an Olympus, which was a private cosmos. The walls of the room in which they were seemed nonexistent. The gusty tides of gray, faintly luminous clouds

seemed to drive chaotically past them, and, dimly, they could hear the muffled screaming of an artificial wind. They had the isolation of the gods.

And the Earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep— That was, of course, the theory of the Olympus room. No one existed, no world existed, outside of the chamber; values automatically shifted, and inhibitions seemed absurd.

Scott relaxed on a translucent cushion like a cloud. Beside him, Ilene lifted the bit of a happy-gas tube to his nostrils. He shook his head.

"Not now, Ilene."

She let the tube slide back into its reel. "Nor I. Too much of anything is unsatisfactory, Brian. There should always be something untasted, some anticipation left—You have that. I haven't."

"How?"

"Pleasures—well, there's a limit. There's a limit to human endurance. And eventually I build up a resistance psychically, as I do physically, to everything. With you, there's always the last adventure. You never know when death will come. You can't plan. Plans are dull; it's the unexpected that's important."

Scott shook his head slightly. "Death isn't important either. It's an automatic cancellation of values. Or, rather—" He hesitated, seeking words. "In this life you can plan, you can work out values, because they're all based on certain conditions. On—let's say—arithmetic. Death is a change to a different plane of conditions, quite unknown. Arithmetical rules don't apply as such to geometry."

"You think death has its rules?"

"It may be a lack of rules, Ilene. One lives realizing that life is subject to death; civilization is based on that. That's why civilization concentrates on the race instead of the individual. Social self-preservation."

She looked at him gravely. "I didn't think a Free Companion could theorize that way."

Scott closed his eyes, relaxing. "The Keeps know nothing about Free Companions. They don't want to. We're men. Intelligent men. Our technicians are as great as the scientists under the Domes."

"But they work for war."

"War's necessary," Scott said. "Now, anyway."

"How did you get into it? Should I ask?"

He laughed a little at that. "Oh, I've no dark secrets in my past. I'm not a runaway murderer. One—drifts. I was born in Australia Keep. My father was a tech, but my grandfather had been a soldier. I guess it was in my blood. I tried various trades and professions. Meaningless. I wanted something that . . . hell, I don't know. Something, maybe, that needs all of a man. Fighting does. It's like a religion. Those cultists—Men of the New Judgment—they're fanatics, but you can see that their religion is the only thing that matters to them."

"Bearded, dirty men with twisted minds, though."

"It happens to be a religion based on false premises. There are others, appealing to different types. But religion was too passive for me, in these days."

Ilene examined his harsh face. "You'd have preferred the church militant—the Knights of Malta, fighting Saracens."

"I suppose. I had no values. Anyhow, I'm a fighter."

"Just how important is it to you? The Free Companions?"

Scott opened his eyes and grinned at the girl. He looked unexpectedly boyish.

"Damn little, really. It has emotional appeal. Intellectually, I know that it's a huge fake. Always has been. As absurd as the Men of the New Judgment. Fighting's doomed. So we've no real purpose. I suppose most of us know there's no future for the Free Companions. In a few hundred years—well!"

"And still you go on. Why? It isn't money."

"No. There is a . . . a drunkenness to it. The ancient Norsemen had their berserker madness. We have something similar. To a Dooneman, his group is father, mother, child, and God Almighty. He fights the other Free Companions when he's paid to do so, but he doesn't hate the others. They serve the same toppling idol. And it *is* toppling, Ilene. Each battle we win or lose brings us closer to the end. We fight to protect the culture that eventually will wipe us out. The Keeps—when they finally unify, will they need a military arm? I can see the trend. If war were an essential part of civilization, each Keep would maintain its own military. But they shut us out—a necessary evil. If they would end war now!" Scott's fist unconsciously clenched. "So many men would find happier places in Venus—undersea. But as long as the Free Companions exist, there'll be new recruits."

Ilene sipped her cocktail, watching the gray chaos of clouds flow like a tide around them. In the dimly luminous light Scott's face seemed like dark stone, flecks of brightness showing in his eyes. She touched his hand gently.

"You're a soldier, Brian. You wouldn't change."

His laugh was intensely bitter. "Like hell I wouldn't, Mistress Ilene Kane! Do you think fighting's just pulling a trigger? I'm a military strategist. That took ten years. Harder cramming than I'd have had in a Keep Tech-Institute. I have to know everything about war from trajectories to mass psychology. This is the greatest science the System has ever known, and the most useless. Because war will die in a few centuries at most. Ilene—you've never seen a Free Company's fort. It's science, marvelous science, aimed at military ends only. We have our psych-specialists. We have our engineers, who plan everything from ordnance to the frictional quotient on flutterboats. We have the foundries and mills. Each fortress is a city made for war, as the Keeps are made for social progress."

"As complicated as that?"

"Beautifully complicated and beautifully useless. There are so many of us who realize that. Oh, we fight—it's a poison. We worship the Company—that is an emotional poison. But we live only during wartime. It's an incomplete life. Men in the Keeps have full lives; they have their work, and their relaxations are geared to fit them. We don't fit."

"Not all the undersea races," Ilene said. "There's always the fringe that doesn't fit. At least you have a *raison d'être*. You're a soldier. I can't make a lifework out of pleasure. But there's nothing else for me."

Scott's fingers tightened on hers. "You're the product of a civilization, at least. I'm left out."

"With you, Brian, it might be better. For a while. I don't think it would last for long."

"It might."

"You think so now. It's quite a horrible thing, feeling yourself a shadow."

"I know."

"I want you, Brian," Ilene said, turning to face him. "I want you to come to Montana Keep and stay here. Until our experiment fails. I think it'll fail presently. But, perhaps, not for some time. I need your strength. I can show you how to get the most out of this sort of life—how to enter into it.

True hedonism. You can give me—companionship perhaps. For me the companionship of hedonists who know nothing else isn't enough."

Scott was silent. Ilene watched him for a while.

"Is war so important?" she asked at last.

"No," he said, "it isn't at all. It's a balloon. And it's empty, I know that. Honor of the regiment!" Scott laughed. "I'm not hesitating, really. I've been shut out for a long time. A social unit shouldn't be founded on an obviously doomed fallacy. Men and women are important, nothing else, I suppose."

"Men and women—or the race?"

"Not the race," he said with abrupt violence. "Damn the race! It's done nothing for me. I can fit myself into a new life. Not necessarily hedonism. I'm an expert in several lines; I have to be. I can find work in Montana Keep."

"If you like. I've never tried. I'm more of a fatalist, I suppose. But . . . what about it, Brian?"

Her eyes were almost luminous, like shining emerald, in the ghostly light.

"Yes," Scott said. "I'll come back. To stay."

Ilene said, "Come back? Why not stay now?"

"Because I'm a complete fool, I guess. I'm a key man, and Cinc Rhys needs me just now."

"Is it Rhys or the Company?"

Scott smiled crookedly. "Not the Company. It's just a job I have to do. When I think how many years I've been slaving, pretending absurdities were important, knowing that I was bowing to a straw dummy—*No!* I want your life—the sort of life I didn't know could exist in the Keeps. I'll be back, Ilene. It's something more important than love. Separately we're halves. Together we may be a complete whole."

She didn't answer. Her eyes were steady on Scott's. He kissed her.

Before morning bell he was back in the apartment. Jeana had already packed the necessary light equipment. She was asleep, her dark hair cascading over the pillow, and Scott did not waken her. Quietly he shaved, showered, and dressed. A heavy, waiting silence seemed to fill the city like a cup brimmed with stillness.

As he emerged from the bathroom, buttoning his tunic, he saw the table had been let down and two places set at it.

Jeana came in, wearing a cool morning frock. She set cups down and poured coffee.

"Morning, soldier," she said. "You've time for this, haven't you?"

"Uh-huh." Scott kissed her, a bit hesitantly. Up till this moment, the breaking with Jeana had seemed easy enough. She would raise no objections. That was the chief reason for free-marriage. However—

She was sitting in the relaxer, sweetening the coffee, opening a fresh celopack of cigarettes. "Hung over?"

"No. I vitamized. Feel pretty good." Most bars had a vitaminizing chamber to nullify the effects of too much stimulant. Scott was, in fact, feeling fresh and keenly alert. He was wondering how to broach the subject of Ilene to Jeana.

She saved him the trouble.

"If it's a girl, Brian, just take it easy. No use doing anything till this war's over. How long will it take?"

"Oh, not long. A week at most. One battle may settle it, you know. The girl—"

"She's not a Keep girl."

"Yes."

Jeana looked up, startled. "You're crazy."

"I started to tell you," Scott said impatiently. "It isn't just—her. I'm sick of the Doones. I'm going to quit."

"Hm-m-m. Like that?"

"Like that."

Jeana shook her head. "Keep women aren't tough."

"They don't need to be. Their men aren't soldiers."

"Have it your own way. I'll wait till you get back. Maybe I've got a hunch. You see, Brian, we've been together for five years. We fit. Not because of anything like philosophy or psychology—it's a lot more personal. It's just us. As man and woman, we get along comfortably. There's love, too. Those close emotional feelings are more important, really, than the long view. You can get excited about futures, but you can't live them."

Scott shrugged. "Could be I'm starting to forget about futures. Concentrating on Brian Scott."

"More coffee . . . there. Well, for five years now I've gone with you from Keep to Keep, waiting every time you went off to war, wondering if you'd come back, knowing that I was just a part of your life, but—I sometimes thought—the most important part. Soldiering's seventy-five percent. I'm the

other quarter. I think you need that quarter—you need the whole thing, in that proportion, actually. You could find another woman, but she'd have to be willing to take twenty-five percent."

Scott didn't answer. Jeana blew smoke through her nostrils.

"O.K., Brian. I'll wait."

"It isn't the girl so much. She happens to fit into the pattern of what I want. You—"

"I'd never be able to fit that pattern," Jeana said softly. "The Free Companions need women who are willing to be soldiers' wives. Freewives, if you like. Chiefly it's a matter of not being too demanding. But there are other things. No, Brian. Even if you want that, I couldn't make myself over into one of the Keep people. It wouldn't be me. I wouldn't respect myself, living a life that'd be false to me; and you wouldn't like me that way either. I couldn't and wouldn't change. I'll have to stay as I am. A soldier's wife. As long as you're a Dooneman, you'll need me. But if *you* change—" She didn't finish.

Scott lit a cigarette, scowling. "It's hard to know, exactly."

"I may not understand you, but I don't ask questions and I don't try to change you. As long as you want that, you can have it from me. I've nothing else to offer you. It's enough for a Free Companion. It's not enough—or too much—for a Keep-dweller."

"I'll miss you," he said.

"That'll depend, too. I'll miss you." Under the table her fingers writhed together, but her face did not change. "It's getting late. Here, let me check your chronometer." Jeana leaned across the table, lifted Scott's wrist, and compared his watch with the central-time clock on the wall. "O.K. On your way, soldier."

Scott stood up, tightening his belt. He bent to kiss Jeana, and, though she began to turn her face away, after a moment she raised her lips to his.

They didn't speak. Scott went out quickly, and the girl sat motionless, the cigarette smoldering out unheeded between her fingers. Somehow it did not matter so much, now, that Brian was leaving her for another woman and another life. As always, the one thing of real importance was that he was going into danger.

Guard him from harm, she thought, not knowing that she was praying. *Guard him from harm!*

And now there would be silence, and waiting. That, at least, had not changed. Her eyes turned to the clock.

Already the minutes were longer.

III.

'E's the kind of a giddy harumfrodite—soldier an' sailor tool
—Kipling

Commander Bienne was superintending the embarkation of the last Dooneman when Scott arrived at headquarters. He saluted the captain briskly, apparently untired by his night's work of handling the transportation routine.

"All checked, sir."

Scott nodded. "Good. Is Cinc Rhys here?"

"He just arrived." Bienne nodded toward a door-curtain. As Scott moved away, the other followed.

"What's up, commander?"

Bienne pitched his voice low. "Bronson's laid up with endemic fever." He forgot to say "sir." "He was to handle the left wing of the fleet. I'd appreciate that job."

"I'll see if I can do it."

Bienne's lips tightened, but he said nothing more. He turned back to his men, and Scott went on into the cinc's office. Rhys was at the telaudio. He looked up, his eyes narrowed.

"Morning, captain. I've just heard from Mendez."

"Yes, sir?"

"He's still holding out for a fifty-percent cut on the korium ransom from Virginia Keep. You'll have to see him. Try and get the Mob for less than fifty if you can. Telaudio me from Mendez's fort."

"Check, sir."

"Another thing. Bronson's in sick bay."

"I heard that. If I may suggest Commander Bienne to take his place at left-wing command—"

But Cinc Rhys raised his hand. "Not this time. We can't afford individualism. The commander tried to play a lone hand in the last war. You know we can't risk it till he's back in line—thinking of the Doones instead of Fredric Bienne."

"He's a good man, sir. A fine strategist."

"But not yet a good integrating factor. Perhaps next time. Put Commander Geer on the left wing. Keep Bienne with

you. He needs discipline. And—take a flitterboat to Mendez.”

“Not a plane?”

“One of the technicians just finished a new tight-beam camouflager for communications. I’m having it installed immediately on all our planes and gliders. Use the boat; it isn’t far to the Mob’s fort—that long peninsula on the coast of Southern Hell.”

Even on the charts that continent was named Hell—for obvious reasons. Heat was only one of them. And, even with the best equipment, a party exploring the jungle there would soon find itself suffering the tortures of the damned. On the land of Venus, flora and fauna combined diabolically to make the place uninhabitable to Earthmen. Many of the plants even exhaled poisonous gases. Only the protected coastal forts of the Free Companies could exist—and that was because they *were* forts.

Cinc Rhys frowned at Scott. “We’ll use H-plan 7 if we can get the Mob. Otherwise we’ll have to fall back on another outfit, and I don’t want to do that. The Helldivers have too many subs, and we haven’t enough detectors. So do your damnedest.”

Scott saluted. “I’ll do that, sir.” Rhys waved him away, and he went out into the next room, finding Commander Bienne alone. The officer turned an inquiring look toward him.

“Sorry,” Scott said. “Geer gets the left-wing command this time.”

Bienne’s sour face turned dark red. “I’m sorry I didn’t take a crack at you before mobilization,” he said. “You hate competition, don’t you?”

Scott’s nostrils flared. “If it had been up to me, you’d have got that command, Bienne.”

“Sure. I’ll bet. All right, captain. Where’s my bunk? A flitterboat?”

“You’ll be on right wing, with me. Control ship *Flintlock*.”

“With you. Under you, you mean,” Bienne said tightly. His eyes were blazing. “Yeah.”

Scott’s dark cheeks were flushed too. “Orders, commander,” he snapped. “Get me a flitterboat pilot. I’m going topside.”

Without a word Bienne turned to the telaudio. Scott, a tight, furious knot in his stomach, stamped out of headquarters, trying to fight down his anger. Bienne was a jackass. A lot he cared about the Doones—

Scott caught himself and grinned sheepishly. Well, he cared little about the Doones himself. But while he was in the Company, discipline was important—integration with the smoothly running fighting machine. No place for individualism. One thing he and Bienne had in common; neither had any sentiment about the Company.

He took a lift to the ceiling of the Dome. Beneath him Montana Keep dropped away, shrinking to doll size. Somewhere down there, he thought, was Ilene. He'd be back. Perhaps this war would be a short one—not that they were ever much longer than a week, except in unusual cases when a Company developed new strategies.

He was conducted through an air lock into a bubble, a tough, transparent sphere with a central vertical core through which the cable ran. Except for Scott, the bubble was empty. After a moment it started up with a slight jar. Gradually the water outside the curving walls changed from black to deep green, and thence to translucent chartreuse. Sea creatures were visible, but they were nothing new to Scott; he scarcely saw them.

The bubble broke surface. Since air pressure had been constant, there was no possibility of the bends, and Scott opened the panel and stepped out on one of the buoyant floats that dotted the water above Montana Keep. A few sightseers crowded into the chamber he had left, and presently it was drawn down, out of sight.

In the distance Free Companions were embarking from a larger float in an air ferry. Scott glanced up with a weather eye. No storm, he saw, though the ceiling was, as usual, torn and twisted into boiling currents by the winds. He remembered, suddenly, that the battle would probably take place over Venus Deep. That would make it somewhat harder for the gliders—there would be few of the thermals found, for instance, above the Sea of Shallows here.

A flitterboat, low, fast, and beautifully maneuverable, shot in toward the quay. The pilot flipped back the overhead shell and saluted Scott. It was Norman Kane, looking shipshape in his tight-fitting gray uniform, and apparently ready to grin at the slightest provocation.

Scott jumped lightly down into the craft and seated himself beside the pilot. Kane drew the transparent shell back over them. He looked at Scott.

"Orders, captain?"

"Know where the Mob's fort is? Good. Head there. Fast."

Kane shot the flitterboat out from the float with a curtain of v-shaped spray rising from the bow. Drawing little water, maneuverable, incredibly fast, these tiny craft were invaluable in naval battle. It was difficult to hit one, they moved so fast. They had no armor to slow them down. They carried high-explosive bullets fired from smaller-caliber guns, and were, as a rule, two-man craft. They complemented the heavier ordnance of the battlewagons and destroyers.

Scott handed Kane a cigarette. The boy hesitated.

"We're not under fire," the captain chuckled. "Discipline clamps down during a battle, but it's O.K. for you to have a smoke with me. Here!" He lit the white tube for Kane.

"Thanks, sir. I guess I'm a bit—over-anxious?"

"Well, war has its rules. Not many, but they mustn't be broken." Both men were silent for a while, watching the blank gray surface of the ocean ahead. A transport plane passed them, flying low.

"Is Ilene Kane your sister?" Scott asked presently.

Kane nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Thought so. If she'd been a man, I imagine she'd have been a Free Companion."

The boy shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. She doesn't have the—I don't know. She'd consider it too much effort. She doesn't like discipline."

"Do you?"

"It's fighting that's important to me. Sir." That was an afterthought. "Winning, really."

"You can lose a battle even though you win it," Scott said rather somberly.

"Well, I'd rather be a Free Companion than do anything else I know of. Not that I've had much experience—"

"You've had experience of war with Starling's outfit, but you probably learned some dangerous stuff at the same time. War isn't swashbuckling piracy these days. If the Doones tried to win battles by that sort of thing, there'd be no more Doones in a week or so."

"But—" Kane hesitated. "Isn't that sort of thing rather necessary? Taking blind chances, I mean—"

"There are desperate chances," Scott told him, "but there are no blind chances in war—not to a good soldier. When I was green in the service, I ran a cruiser out of the line to ram. I was demoted, for a very good reason. The enemy ship

I rammed wasn't as important to the enemy as our cruiser was to us. If I'd stayed on course, I'd have helped sink three or four ships instead of disabling one and putting my cruiser out of action. It's the great god integration we worship, Kane. It's much more important now than it ever was on Earth, because the military has consolidated. Army, navy, air, under-sea—they're all part of one organization now. I suppose the only important change was in the air."

"Gliders, you mean? I knew powered planes couldn't be used in battle."

"Not in the atmosphere of Venus," Scott agreed. "Once powered planes get up in the cloud strata, they're fighting crosscurrents and pockets so much they've got no time to do accurate firing. If they're armored, they're slow. If they're light, detectors can spot them and anti-aircraft can smash them. Unpowered gliders are valuable not for bombing but for directing attacks. They get into the clouds, stay hidden, and use infrared telecameras which are broadcast on a tight beam back to the control ships. They're the eyes of the fleet. They can tell us—*White water ahead, Kane! Swerve!*"

The pilot had already seen the ominous boiling froth foaming out in front of the bow. Instinctively he swung the flutterboat in a wrenching turn. The craft heeled sidewise, throwing its occupants almost out of their seats.

"Sea beast?" Scott asked, and answered his own question. "No, not with those spouts. It's volcanic. And it's spreading fast."

"I can circle it, sir," Kane suggested.

Scott shook his head. "Too dangerous. Backtrack."

Obediently the boy sent the flutterboat racing out of the area of danger. Scott had been right about the extent of the danger; the boiling turmoil was widening almost faster than the tiny ship could flee. Suddenly the line of white water caught up with them. The flutterboat jounced like a chip, the wheel being nearly torn from Kane's grip. Scott reached over and helped steady it. Even with two men handling the wheel, there was a possibility that it might wrench itself free. Steam rose in veils beyond the transparent shell. The water had turned a scummy brown under the froth.

Kane jammed on the power. The flutterboat sprang forward like a ricocheting bullet, dancing over the surface of the seething waves. Once they plunged head-on into a swell, and

a screaming of outraged metal vibrated through the craft. Kane, tight-lipped, instantly slammed in the auxiliary, cutting out the smashed motor unit. Then, unexpectedly, they were in clear water, cutting back toward Montana Keep.

Scott grinned. "Nice handling. Lucky you didn't try to circle. We'd never have made it."

"Yes, sir." Kane took a deep breath. His eyes were bright with excitement.

"Circle now. Here." He thrust a lighted cigarette between the boy's lips. "You'll be a good Dooneman, Kane. Your reactions are good and fast."

"Thanks, sir."

Scott smoked silently for a while. He glanced toward the north, but, with the poor visibility, he could not make out the towering range of volcanic peaks that were the backbone of Southern Hell. Venus was a comparatively young planet, the internal fires still bursting forth unexpectedly. Which was why no forts were ever built on islands—they had an unhappy habit of disappearing without warning!

The flitterboat rode hard, at this speed, despite the insulating system of springs and shocks absorbers. After a ride in one of these "spankers"—the irreverent name the soldiers had for them—a man needed arnica if not a chiropractor. Scott shifted his weight on the soft air cushions under him, which felt like cement.

Under his breath he hummed:

*"It ain't the 'eavy 'aulin' that 'urts the 'orses' 'oofs,
It's the 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer on the 'ard 'ighway!"*

The flitterboat scooted on, surrounded by monotonous sea and cloud, till finally the rampart of the coast grew before the bow, bursting suddenly from the fog-veiled horizon. Scott glanced at his chronometer and sighed with relief. They had made good time, in spite of the slight delay caused by the subsea volcano.

The fortress of the Mob was a huge metal and stone castle on the tip of the peninsula. The narrow strip that separated it from the mainland had been cleared, and the pockmarks of shell craters showed where guns had driven back onslaughts from the jungle—the reptilian, ferocious giants of Venus, partially intelligent but absolutely untractable because of the gulf that existed between their methods of thinking and the cul-

ture of mankind. Overtures had been made often enough; but it had been found that the reptile-folk were better left alone. They would not parley. They were blindly bestial savages, with whom it was impossible to make truce. They stayed in the jungle, emerging only to hurl furious attacks at the forts—attacks doomed to failure, since fang and talon were matched against lead-jacketed bullet and high explosive.

As the flitterboat shot in to a jetty, Scott kept his eyes straight ahead—it was not considered good form for a Free Companion to seem too curious when visiting the fort of another Company. Several men were on the quay, apparently waiting for him. They saluted as Scott stepped out of the boat.

He gave his name and rank. A corporal stepped forward.

"Cinc Mendez is expecting you, sir. Cinc Rhys telaudioed an hour or so back. If you'll come this way—"

"All right, corporal. My pilot—"

"He'll be taken care of, sir. A rubdown and a drink, perhaps, after a spanker ride."

Scott nodded and followed the other into the bastion that thrust out from the overhanging wall of the fort. The sea gate was open, and he walked swiftly through the courtyard in the corporal's wake, passing a door-curtain, mounting an escalator, and finding himself, presently, before another curtain that bore the face of Cinc Mendez, plump, hoglike, and bald as a bullet.

Entering, he saw Mendez himself at the head of a long table, where nearly a dozen officers of the Mob were also seated. In person Mendez was somewhat more prepossessing than in effigy. He looked like a boar rather than a pig—a fighter, not a gourmand. His sharp black eyes seemed to drive into Scott with the impact of a physical blow.

He stood up, his officers following suit. "Sit down, captain. There's a place at the foot of the table. No reflections on rank, but I prefer to be face to face with the man I'm dealing with. But first—you just arrived? If you'd like a quick rubdown, we'll be glad to wait."

Scott took his place. "Thank you, no, Cinc Mendez. I'd prefer not to lose time."

"Then we'll waste none on introductions. However, you can probably stand a drink." He spoke to the orderly at the door, and presently a filled glass stood at Scott's elbow.

His quick gaze ran along the rows of faces. Good soldiers, he thought—tough, well trained, and experienced. They had been under fire. A small outfit, the Mob, but a powerful one.

Cinc Mendez sipped his own drink. "To business. The Doonemen wish to hire our help in fighting the Helldivers. Virginia Keep has bought the services of the Helldivers to attack Montana Keep." He enumerated on stubby fingers. "You offer us fifty thousand cash and thirty-five percent of the korium ransom. So?"

"That's correct."

"We ask fifty percent."

"It's high. The Doones have superior manpower and equipment."

"To us, not to the Helldivers. Besides, the percentage is contingent. If we should lose, we get only the cash payment."

Scott nodded. "That's correct, but the only real danger from the Helldivers is their submarine corps. The Doones have plenty of surface and air equipment. We might lick the Helldivers without you."

"I don't think so." Mendez shook his bald head. "They have some new underwater torpedoes that make hash out of heavy armor plate. But we have new sub-detectors. We can blast the Helldivers' subs for you before they get within torpedo range."

Scott said bluntly, "You've been stalling, Cinc Mendez. We're not that bad off. If we can't get you, we'll find another outfit."

"With sub-detectors?"

"Yardley's Company is good at undersea work."

A major near the head of the table spoke up. "That's true, sir. They have suicide subs—not too dependable, but they have them."

Cinc Mendez wiped his bald head with his palms in a slow circular motion. "Hm-m-m. Well, captain, I don't know. Yardley's Company isn't as good as ours for this job."

"All right," Scott said, "I've *carte blanche*. We don't know how much korium Virginia Keep has in her vaults. How would this proposition strike you: the Mob gets fifty percent of the korium ransom up to a quarter of a million; thirty-five percent above that."

"Forty-five."

"Forty, above a quarter of a million; forty-five below that sum."

"Gentlemen?" Cinc Mendez asked, looking down the table. "Your vote?"

There were several ayes, and a scattering of nays. Mendez shrugged.

"Then I have the deciding vote. Very well. We get forty-five percent of the Virginia Keep ransom up to a quarter of a million; forty percent on any amount above that. Agreed. We'll drink to it."

Orderlies served drinks. As Mendez rose, the others followed his example. The cinc nodded to Scott.

"Will you propose a toast, captain?"

"With pleasure. Nelson's toast, then—a willing foe and sea room!"

They drank to that, as Free Companions had always drunk that toast on the eve of battle. As they seated themselves once more, Mendez said, "Major Matson, please telaudio Cinc Rhys and arrange details. We must know his plans."

"Yes, sir."

Mendez glanced at Scott. "Now how else may I serve you?"

"Nothing else. I'll get back to our fort. Details can be worked out on the telaudio, on tight beam."

"If you're going back in that flutterboat," Mendez said sardonically, "I strongly advise a rubdown. There's time to spare, now we've come to an agreement."

Scott hesitated. "Very well. I'm . . . uh . . . starting to ache." He stood up. "Oh, one thing I forgot. We've heard rumors that Starling's outfit is using atomic power."

Mendez's mouth twisted into a grimace of distaste. "Hadn't heard that. Know anything about it, gentlemen?"

Heads were shaken. One officer said, "I've heard a little talk about it, but only talk, so far."

Mendez said, "After this war, we'll investigate further. If there's truth in the story, we'll join you, of course, in mopping up the Starlings. No court-martial is necessary for *that* crime!"

"Thanks. I'll get in touch with other Companies and see what they've heard. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

He saluted and went out, exaltation flaming within him. The bargain had been a good one—for the Doonemen badly needed the Mob's help against the Helldivers. Cinc Rhys would be satisfied with the arrangement.

An orderly took him to the baths, where a rubdown relaxed his aching muscles. Presently he was on the quay again, climbing into the flitterboat. A glance behind him showed that the gears of war were beginning to grind. There was little he could see, but men were moving about through the courtyard with purposeful strides, to the shops, to administration, to the laboratories. The battlewagons were anchored down the coast, Scott knew, in a protected bay, but they would soon move out to their rendezvous with the Doones.

Kane, at the controls of the flitterboat, said, "They repaired the auxiliary unit for us, sir."

"Courtesies of the trade." Scott lifted a friendly hand to the men on the quay as the boat slid toward open water. "The Doone fort, now. Know it?"

"Yes, sir. Are . . . are the Mob fighting with us, if I may ask?"

"They are. And they're a grand lot of fighters. You're going to see action, Kane. When you hear battle stations next, it's going to mean one of the sweetest scraps that happened on Venus. Push down that throttle—we're in a hurry!"

The flitterboat raced southwest at top speed, its course marked by the flying V of spray.

"One last fight," Scott thought to himself. "I'm glad it's going to be a good one."

IV.

We eat and drink our own damnation.

—The Book of Common Prayer

The motor failed when they were about eight miles from the Doone fort.

It was a catastrophe rather than a merely a failure. The overstrained and overheated engine, running at top speed, blew back. The previous accident, at the subsea volcano, had brought out hidden flaws in the alloy which the Mob's repairmen had failed to detect when they replaced the smashed single unit. Sheer luck had the flitterboat poised on a swell when the crack-up happened. The engine blew out and down, ripping the bow to shreds. Had they been bow-deep, the blast would have been unfortunate for Scott and the pilot—more so than it was.

They were perhaps a half mile from the shore. Scott was

deafened by the explosion and simultaneously saw the horizon swinging in a drunken swoop. The boat turned turtle, the shell smacking into water with a loud cracking sound. But the plastic held. Both men were tangled together on what had been their ceiling, sliding forward as the flitterboat began to sink bow first. Steam sizzled from the ruined engine.

Kane managed to touch one of the emergency buttons. The shell was, of course, jammed, but a few of the segments slid aside, admitting a gush of acrid sea water. For a moment they struggled there, fighting the cross-currents till the air had been displaced. Scott, peering through cloudy green gloom, saw Kane's dark shadow twist and kick out through a gap. He followed.

Beneath him the black bulk of the boat dropped slowly and was gone. His head broke surface, and he gasped for breath, shaking droplets from his lashes and glancing around. Where was Kane?

The boy appeared, his helmet gone, sleek hair plastered to his forehead. Scott caught his eye and pulled the trigger on his life vest, the inflatable undergarment which was always worn under the blouse on sea duty. As chemicals mixed, light gas rushed into the vest, lifting Scott higher in the water. He felt the collar cushion inflate against the back of his head—the skull-fitting pillow that allowed shipwrecked men to float and rest without danger of drowning in their sleep. But he had no need for this now.

Kane, he saw, had triggered his own life vest. Scott hurled himself up, searching for signs of life. There weren't any. The gray-green sea lay desolate to the misty horizon. A half mile away was a mottled chartreuse wall that marked the jungle. Above and beyond that dim sulphurous red lit the clouds.

Scott got out his leaf-bladed smatchet, gesturing for Kane to do the same. The boy did not seem worried. No doubt this was merely an exciting adventure for him, Scott thought wryly. Oh, well.

Gripping the smatchet between his teeth, the captain began to swim shoreward. Kane kept at his side. Once Scott warned his companion to stillness and bent forward, burying his face in the water and peering down at a great dim shadow that coiled away and was gone—a sea snake, but, luckily, not hungry. The oceans of Venus were perilous with teeming, ferocious life. Precautions were fairly useless. When a man

was once in the water, it was up to him to get out of it as rapidly as possible.

Scott touched a small cylinder attached to his belt and felt bubbles rushing against his palm. He was slightly relieved. When he had inflated the vest, this tube of compressed gas had automatically begun to release, sending out a foul-smelling vapor that permeated the water for some distance around. The principle was that of the skunk adjusted to the environment of the squid, and dangerous undersea life was supposed to be driven away by the Mellison tubes; but it didn't work with carrion eaters like the snakes. Scott averted his nose. The gadgets were named Mellison tubes, but the men called them Stinkers, a far more appropriate term.

Tides on Venus are unpredictable. The clouded planet has no moon, but it is closer to the sun than Earth. As a rule the tides are mild, except during volcanic activity, when tidal waves sweep the shores. Scott, keeping a weather eye out for danger, rode the waves in toward the beach, searching the strip of dull blackness for signs of life.

Nothing.

He scrambled out at last, shaking himself like a dog, and instantly changed the clip in his automatic for high explosive. The weapon, of course, was watertight—a necessity on Venus. As Kane sat down with a grunt and deflated his vest, Scott stood eyeing the wall of jungle thirty feet away. It stopped there abruptly, for nothing could grow on black sand.

The rush and whisper of the waves made the only sound. Most of the trees were liana-like, eking out a precarious existence, as the saying went, by taking in each other's washing. The moment one of them showed signs of solidity, it was immediately assailed by parasitic vines flinging themselves madly upward to reach the filtered sunlight of Venus. The leaves did not begin for thirty feet above the ground; they made a regular roof up there, lying like crazy shingles, and would have shut out all light had they not been of light translucent green. Whitish tendrils crawled like reaching serpents from tree to tree; tentacles of vegetable octopi. There were two types of Venusian fauna: the giants who could crash through the forest, and the supple, small ground-dwellers—insects and reptiles mostly—who depended on poison sacs for self-protection. Neither kind was pleasant company.

There were flying creatures, too, but these lived in the up-

per strata, among the leaves. And there were ambiguous horrors that lived in the deep mud and the stagnant pools under the forest, but no one knew much about these.

"Well," Scott said, "that's that."

Kane nodded. "I guess I should have checked the motors."

"You wouldn't have found anything. Latent flaws—it would have taken black night to bring 'em out. Just one of those things. Keep your gas mask handy, now. If we get anywhere near poison flowers and the wind's blowing this way, we're apt to keep over like that." Scott opened a water-proof wallet and took out a strip of sensitized litmus, which he clipped to his wrist. "If this turns blue, that means gas, even if we don't smell it."

"Yes, sir. What now?"

"We-el—the boat's gone. We can't telaudio for help." Scott fingered the blade of his smatchet and slipped it into the belt sheath. "We head for the fort. Eight miles. Two hours, if we can stick to the beach and if we don't run into trouble. More than that if Signal Rock's ahead of us, because we'll have to detour inland in that case." He drew out a collapsible single-lens telescope and looked southwest along the shore. "Uh-huh. We detour."

A breath of sickening sweetness gusted down from the jungle roof. From above, Scott knew, the forest looked surprisingly lovely. It always reminded him of an antique candlewick spread he had once bought Jeana—immense rainbow flowers scattered over a background of pale green. Even among the flora competition was keen; the plants vied in producing colors and scents that would attract the winged carriers of pollen.

There would always be frontiers, Scott thought. But they might remain unconquered for a long time, here on Venus. The Keeps were enough for the undersea folk; they were self-sustaining. And the Free Companions had no need to carve out empires on the continents. They were fighters, not agrarians. Land hunger was no longer a part of the race. It might come again, but not in the time of the Keeps.

The jungles of Venus held secrets he would never know. Men can conquer lands from the air, but they cannot hold them by that method. It would take a long, slow period of encroachment, during which the forest and all it represented would be driven back, step by painful step—and that be-

longed to a day to come, a time Scott would not know. The savage world would be tamed. But not now—not yet.

At the moment it was untamed and very dangerous. Scott stripped off his tunic and wrung water from it. His clothing would not dry in this saturated air, despite the winds. His trousers clung to him stickily, clammy coldness in their folds.

"Ready, Kane?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let's go."

They went southwest, along the beach, at a steady, easy lope that devoured miles. Speed and alertness were necessary in equal proportion. From time to time Scott scanned the sea with his telescope, hoping to sight a vessel. He saw nothing. The ships would be in harbor, readying for the battle, and planes would be grounded for installation of the new telaudio device Cinc Rhys had mentioned.

Signal Rock loomed ahead, an outthrust crag with eroded, unscalable sides towering two hundred feet and more. The black strip of sand ended there. From the rock there was a straight drop into deep water, cut up by a turmoil of currents. It was impossible to take the sea detour; there was nothing else for it but to swerve inland, a dangerous but inevitable course. Scott postponed the plunge as long as possible, till the scarp of Signal Rock, jet black with leprous silvery patches on its surface, barred the way. With a quizzical look at Kane he turned sharply to his right and headed for the jungle.

"Half a mile of forest equals a hundred miles of beach hiking," he remarked.

"That bad, sir? I've never tackled it."

"Nobody does, unless they have to. Keep your eyes open and your gun ready. Don't wade through water, even when you can see bottom. There are some little devils that are pretty nearly transparent—vampire fish. If a few of those fasten on you, you'll need a transfusion in less than a minute. I wish the volcanoes would kick up a racket. The beasties generally lie low when that happens."

Under a tree Scott stopped, seeking a straight, long limb. It took a while to find a suitable one, in that tangle of coiling lianas, but finally he succeeded, using his smatchet blade to hack himself a light five-foot pole. Kane at his heels, he moved on into the gathering gloom.

"We may be stalked," he told the boy. "Don't forget to guard the rear."

The sand had given place to sticky whitish mud that plastered the men to their calves before a few moments had passed. A patina of slickness seemed to overlay the ground. The grass was colored so much like the mud itself that it was practically invisible, except by its added slipperiness. Scott slowly advanced, keeping close to the wall of rock on his left where the tangle was not so thick. Nevertheless he had to use the smatchet more than once to cut a passage through vines.

He stopped, raising his hand, and the squelch of Kane's feet in the mud paused. Silently Scott pointed. Ahead of them in the cliff base was the mouth of a burrow.

The captain bent down, found a small stone, and threw it toward the den. He waited, one hand lightly on his gun, ready to see something flash out of that burrow and race toward them. In the utter silence a new sound made itself heard—tiny goblin drums, erratic and resonant in a faraway fashion. Water, dropping from leaf to leaf, in the soaked jungle ceiling above them. *Tink, tink, tink-tink, tink, tink-tink*—

"O.K.," Scott said quietly. "Watch it, though." He went on, gun drawn, till they were level with the mouth of the burrow. "Turn, Kane. Keep your eye on it till I tell you to stop." He gripped the boy's arm and guided him, holstering his own weapon. The pole, till now held between biceps and body, slipped into his hand. He used it to probe the slick surface of the mud ahead. Sinkhole and quicksands were frequent, and so were traps, camouflaged pits built by mud-wolves—which, of course, were not wolves, and belonged to no known genus. On Venus, the fauna had more subdivisions than on old Earth, and lines of demarcation more subtle.

"All right now."

Kane, sighing with relief, turned his face forward again. "What was it?"

"You never know what may come out of those holes," Scott told him. "They come fast, and they're usually poisonous. So you can't take chances with the critters. Slow down here. I don't like the looks of that patch ahead."

Clearings were unusual in the forest. There was one here, twenty feet wide, slightly saucer-shaped. Scott gingerly extended the pole and probed. A faint ripple shook the white mud, and almost before it had appeared the captain had

unholstered his pistol and was blasting shot after shot at the movement.

"Shoot, Kane!" he snapped. "Quick! Shoot at it!"

Kane obeyed, though he had to guess at his target. Mud geysered up, suddenly crimson-stained. Scott, still firing, gripped the boy's arm and ran him back at a breakneck pace.

The echoes died. Once more the distant elfin drums whispered through the green gloom.

"We got it," Scott said, after a pause.

"We did?" the other asked blankly. "What—"

"Mud-wolf, I think. The only way to kill those things is to get 'em before they get out of the mud. They're fast and they die hard. However—" He warily went forward. There was nothing to see. The mud had collapsed into a deeper saucer, but the holes blasted by the high-x bullets had filled in. Here and there were traces of thready crimson.

"Never a dull moment," Scott remarked. His crooked grin eased the tension. Kane chuckled and followed the captain's example in replacing his half-used clip with a full one.

The narrow spine of Signal Rock extended inland for a quarter mile before it became scalable. They reached that point finally, helping each other climb, and finding themselves, at the summit, still well below the leafy ceiling of the trees. The black surface of the rock was painfully hot, stinging their palms as they climbed, and even striking through their shoe soles.

"Halfway point, captain?"

"Yeah. But don't let that cheer you. It doesn't get any better till we hit the beach again. We'll probably need some fever shots when we reach the fort, just in case. Oh-oh. Mask, Kane, quick." Scott lifted his arm. On his wrist the band of litmus had turned blue.

With trained accuracy they donned the respirators. Scott felt a faint stinging on his exposed skin, but that wasn't serious. Still, it would be painful later. He beckoned to Kane, slid down the face of the rock, used the pole to test the mud below, and jumped lightly. He dropped in the sticky whiteness and rolled over hastily, plastering himself from head to foot. Kane did the same. Mud wouldn't neutralize the poison flowers' gas, but it would absorb most of it before it reached the skin.

Scott headed toward the beach, a grotesque figure. Mud

dripped on the eye plate, and he scrubbed it away with a handful of white grass. He used the pole constantly to test the footing ahead.

Nevertheless the mud betrayed him. The pole broke through suddenly, and as Scott automatically threw his weight back, the ground fell away under his feet. He had time for a crazy feeling of relief that this was quicksand, not a mud-wolf's den, and then the clinging, treacherous stuff had sucked him down knee-deep. He fell back, keeping his grip on the pole and swinging the other end in an arc toward Kane.

The boy seized it in both hands and threw himself flat. His foot hooked over an exposed root. Scott, craning his neck at a painfully awkward angle and trying to see through the mud-smeared vision plates, kept a rattrap grip on his end of the pole, hoping its slickness would not slip through his fingers.

He was drawn down farther, and then Kane's anchorage began to help. The boy tried to pull the pole toward him, hand over hand. Scott shook his head. He was a good deal stronger than Kane, and the latter would need all his strength to keep a tight grip on the pole.

Something stirred in the shadows behind Kane. Scott instinctively let go with one hand, and, with the other, got out his gun. It had a sealed mechanism, so the mud hadn't harmed the firing, and the muzzle had a one-way trap. He fired at the movement behind Kane, heard a muffled tumult, and waited till it had died. The boy, after a startled look behind him, had not stirred.

After that, rescue was comparatively easy. Scott simply climbed along the pole, spreading his weight over the surface of the quicksand. The really tough part was pulling his legs free of that deadly grip. Scott had to rest for five minutes after that.

But he got out. That was the important thing.

Kane pointed inquiringly into the bushes where the creature had been shot, but Scott shook his head. The nature of the beast wasn't a question worth deciding, as long as it was apparently *hors de combat*. Readjusting his mask, Scott turned toward the beach, circling the quicksand, and Kane kept at his heels.

Their luck had changed. They reached the shore with no further difficulty and collapsed on the black sand to rest.

Presently Scott used a litmus, saw that the gas had dissipated, and removed his mask. He took a deep breath.

"Thanks, Kane," he said. "You can take a dip now if you want to wash off that mud. But stay close inshore. No, don't strip. There's no time."

The mud clung like glue and the black sand scratched like pumice. Still, Scott felt a good deal cleaner after a few minutes in the surf, while Kane stayed on guard. Slightly refreshed, they resumed the march.

An hour later a convoy plane, testing, sighted them, telaudioed the fort, and a flutterboat came racing out to pick them up. What Scott appreciated most of all was the stiff shot of uisqueplus the pilot gave him.

Yeah. It was a dog's life, all right!

He passed the flask to Kane.

Presently the fort loomed ahead, guarding Doone Harbor. Large as the landlocked bay was, it could scarcely accommodate the fleet. Scott watched the activity visible with an approving eye. The flutterboat rounded the sea wall, built for protection against tidal waves, and shot toward a jetty. Its almost inaudible motor died; the shell swung back.

Scott got out, beckoning to an orderly.

"Yes, sir?"

"See that this soldier gets what he needs. We've been in the jungle."

The man didn't whistle sympathetically, but his mouth pursed. He saluted and helped Kane climb out of the flutterboat. As Scott hurried along the quay, he could hear an outburst of friendly profanity from the men on the dock, gathering around Kane.

He nodded imperceptibly. The boy would make a good Free Companion—always granted that he could stand the gaff under fire. That was the acid test. Discipline was tightened then to the snapping point. If it snapped—well, the human factor always remained a variable, in spite of all the psychologists could do.

He went directly to his quarters, switching on the telaudio to call Cinc Rhys. The cinc's seamed, leathery face resolved itself on the screen.

"Captain Scott reporting for duty, sir."

Rhys looked at him sharply. "What happened?"

"Flutterboat crack-up. Had to make it in here on foot."

The cinc called on his God in a mild voice. "Glad you made it. Any accident?"

"No, sir. The pilot's unharmed, too. I'm ready to take over, after I've cleaned up."

"Better take a rejuvenation—you probably need it. Everything's going like clockwork. You did a good job with Mendez—a better bargain than I'd hoped for. I've been talking with him on the telaudio, integrating our forces. We'll go into that later, though. Clean up and then make general inspection."

"Check, sir."

Rhys clicked off. Scott turned to face his orderly.

"Hello, Briggs. Help me off with these duds. You'll probably have to cut 'em off."

"Glad to see you back, sir. I don't think it'll be necessary to cut—" Blunt fingers flew deftly over zippers and clasps. "You were in the jungle?"

Scott grinned wryly. "Do I look as if I'd been gliding?"

"Not all the way, sir—no."

Briggs was like an old bulldog—one of those men who proved the truth of the saying: "Old soldiers never die, they only fade away." Briggs could have been pensioned off ten years ago, but he hadn't wanted that. There was always a place for old soldiers in the Free Companies, even those who were unskilled. Some became technicians; others, military instructors; the rest, orderlies. The forts were their homes. Had they retired to one of the Keeps, they would have died for lack of interests.

Briggs, now—he had never risen above the ranks, and knew nothing of military strategy, ordnance, or anything except plain fighting. But he had been a Dooneman for forty years, twenty-five of them on active service. He was sixty-odd now, his squat figure slightly stooped like an elderly bear, his ugly face masked with scar tissue.

"All right. Start the shower, will you?"

Briggs stumped off, and Scott, stripped of his filthy, sodden garments, followed. He luxuriated under the stinging spray, first hot soapy water, then alcomix, and after that plain water, first hot, then cold. That was the last task he had to do himself. Briggs took over, as Scott relaxed on the slab, dropping lotion into the captain's burning eyes, giving him a deft but murderous rubdown, combining osteopathic and chiropractic treatment, adjusting revitalizing lamps, and

measuring a hypo shot to nullify fatigue toxins. When the orderly was finished, Scott was ready to resume his duties with a clear brain and a refreshed body.

Briggs appeared with fresh clothing. "I'll have the old uniform cleaned, sir. No use throwing it away."

"You can't clean that," Scott remarked, slipping into a singlet. "Not after I rolled in mud. But suit yourself. I won't be needing it for long."

The orderly's fingers, buttoning Scott's tunic, stopped briefly and then resumed their motion. "Is that so, sir?"

"Yeah. I'm taking out discharge papers."

"Another Company, sir?"

"Don't get on your high horse," Scott told the orderly. "It's not that. What would you do if it were? Court-martial me yourself and shoot me at sunrise?"

"No, sir. Begging your pardon, sir, I'd just think you were crazy."

"Why I stand you only the Lord knows," Scott remarked. "You're too damn independent. There's no room for new ideas in that plastic skull of yours. You're the quintessence of dogmatism."

Briggs nodded. "Probably, sir. When a man's lived by one set of rules for as long as I have, and those rules work out, I suppose he might get dogmatic."

"Forty years for you—about twelve for me."

"You came up fast, captain. You'll be cinc here yet."

"That's what you think."

"You're next in line after Cinc Rhys."

"But I'll be out of the Doones," Scott pointed out. "Keep that under your belt, Briggs."

The orderly grunted. "Can't see it, sir. If you don't join another Company, where'll you go?"

"Ever heard of the Keeps?"

Briggs permitted himself a respectful snort. "Sure. They're fine for a binge, but—"

"I'm going to live in one. Montana Keep."

"The Keeps were built with men and machines. I helped at the building of Doone fort. Blood's mixed with the plastic here. We had to hold back the jungle while the technicians were working. Eight months, sir, and never a day passed without some sort of attack. And attacks always meant casualties then. We had only breastworks. The ships laid down a

barrage, but barrages aren't impassable. That was a fight, captain."

Scott thrust out a leg so that Briggs could lace his boots. "And a damn good one. I know." He looked down at the orderly's baldish, brown head where white hairs straggled.

"You know, but you weren't there, captain. I was. First we dynamited. We cleared a half circle where we could dig in behind breastworks. Behind us were the techs, throwing up a plastic wall as fast as they could. The guns were brought in on barges. Lying offshore were the battlewagons. We could hear the shells go whistling over our heads—it sounded pretty good, because we knew things were O.K. as long as the barrage kept up. But it couldn't be kept up day and night. The jungle broke through. For months the smell of blood hung here, and that drew the enemy."

"But you held them off."

"Sure, we did. Addison Doone was cinc then—he'd formed the Company years before, but we hadn't a fort. Doone fought with us. Saved my life once, in fact. Anyhow—we got the fort built, or rather the techs did. I won't forget the kick I got out of it when the first big gun blasted off from the wall behind us. There was a lot to do after that, but when that shell was fired, we knew we'd done the job."

Scott nodded. "You feel a proprietary interest in the fort, I guess."

Briggs looked puzzled. "The fort? Why, that doesn't mean much, captain. There are lots of forts. It's something more than that; I don't quite know what it is. It's seeing the fleet out there—breaking in the rookies—giving the old toasts at mess—knowing that—" He stopped, at a loss.

Scott's lips twisted wryly. "You don't really know, do you, Briggs?"

"Know what, sir?"

"Why you stay here. Why you can't believe I'd quit."

Briggs gave a little shrug. "Well—it's the Doones," he said. "That's all, captain. It's just that."

"And what the devil will it matter, in a few hundred years?"

"I suppose it won't. No, sir. But it isn't our business to think about that. We're Doonemen, that's all."

Scott didn't answer. He could easily have pointed out the fallacy of Briggs's argument, but what was the use? He stood up, the orderly whisking invisible dust off his tunic.

"All set, sir. Shipshape."

"Check, Briggs. Well, I've one more scrap, anyhow. I'll bring you back a souvenir, eh?"

The orderly saluted, grinning. Scott went out, feeling good. Inwardly he was chuckling rather sardonically at the false values he was supposed to take seriously. Of course many men had died when Doone fort had been built. But did that, in itself, make a tradition? What good was the fort? In a few centuries it would have outlived its usefulness. Then it would be a relic of the past. Civilization moved on, and, these days, civilization merely tolerated the military.

So—what was the use? Sentiment needed a valid reason for its existence. The Free Companions fought, bitterly, doggedly, with insane valor, in order to destroy themselves. The ancient motives for war had vanished.

What was the use? All over Venus the lights of the great forts were going out—and, this time, they would never be lit again—not in a thousand lifetimes!

V.

*And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

—Arnold circa 1870

The fort was a completely self-contained unit, military rather than social. There was no need for any agrarian development, since a state of complete siege never existed. Food could be brought in from the Keeps by water and air.

But military production was important, and, in the life of the fort, the techs played an important part, from the experimental physicist to the spot welder. There were always replacements to be made, for, in battle, there were always casualties. And it was necessary to keep the weapons up-to-date, continually striving to perfect new ones. But strategy and armament were of equal importance. An outnumbered fleet had been known to conquer a stronger one by the use of practical psychology.

Scott found Commander Bienne at the docks, watching the launching of a new sub. Apparently Bienne hadn't yet got over his anger, for he turned a scowling, somber face to the captain as he saluted.

"Hello, commander," Scott said. "I'm making inspection. Are you free?"

Bienne nodded. "There's not much to do."

"Well—routine. We got that sub finished just in time, eh?"

"Yes." Bienne couldn't repress his pleasure at sight of the trim, sleek vessel beginning to slide down the ways. Scott, too, felt his pulses heighten as the sub slipped into the water, raising a mighty splash, and then settling down to a smooth, steady riding on the waves. He looked out to where the great battlewagons stood at anchor, twelve of them, gray-green monsters of plated metal. Each of them carried launching equipment for gliders, but the collapsible aircraft were stowed away out of sight as yet. Smaller destroyers lay like lean-flanked wolves among the battleships. There were two fast carriers, loaded with gliders and flutterboats. There were torpedo boats and one low-riding monitor, impregnable, powerfully armed, but slow. Only a direct hit could disable a monitor, but the behemoths had their disadvantages. The battle was usually over before they lumbered into sight. Like all monitors, this one—the *Armageddon*—was constructed on the principle of a razorback hog, covered, except for the firing ports, by a tureen-shaped shield, strongly braced from within. The *Armageddon* was divided into groups of compartments and had several auxiliary engines, so that, unlike the legendary *Rover*, when a monitor died, it did *not* die all over. It was, in effect, a dinosaur. You could blow off the monster's head, and it would continue to fight with talons and lashing tail. Its heavy guns made up in mobility for the giant's unwieldiness—but the trouble was to get the monitor into battle. It was painfully slow.

Scott scowled. "We're fighting over Venus Deep, eh?"

"Yes," Bienne nodded. "That still goes. The Helldivers are already heading toward Montana Keep, and we'll intercept them over the Deep."

"When's zero hour?"

"Midnight tonight."

Scott closed his eyes, visualizing their course on a mental chart. Not so good. When battle was joined near island groups, it was sometimes possible for a monitor to slip up under cover of the islets, but that trick wouldn't work now. Too bad—for the Helldivers were a strong outfit, more so since their recent merger with O'Brien's Legion. Even with the

Mob to help, the outcome of the scrap would be anyone's guess. The *Armageddon* might be the decisive factor.

"I wonder—" Scott said. "No. It'd be impossible."

"What?"

"Camouflaging the *Armageddon*. If the Helldivers see the monitor coming, they'll lead the fight away from it, faster than that tub can follow. I was thinking we might get her into the battle without the enemy realizing it."

"She's camouflaged now."

"Paint, that's all. She can be spotted. I had some screwy idea about disguising her as an island or a dead whale."

"She's too big for a whale and floating islands look a bit suspicious."

"Yeah. But if we *could* slip the *Armageddon* in without scaring off the enemy— Hm-m-m. Monitors have a habit of turning turtle, don't they?"

"Right. They're top-heavy. But a monitor can't fight upside down. It's not such a bright idea, captain." Briefly Bienne's sunken eyes gleamed with sneering mockery. Scott grunted and turned away.

"All right. Let's take a look around."

The fleet was shipshape. Scott went to the shops. He learned that several new hulls were under way, but would not be completed by zero hour. With Bienne, he continued to the laboratory offices. Nothing new. No slip-ups; no surprises. The machine was running smoothly.

By the time inspection was completed, Scott had an idea. He told Bienne to carry on and went to find Cinc Rhys. The cinc was in his office, just clicking off the teleaudio as Scott appeared.

"That was Mendez," Rhys said. "The Mob's meeting our fleet a hundred miles off the coast. They'll be under our orders, of course. A good man, Mendez, but I don't entirely trust him."

"You're not thinking of a double cross, sir?"

Cinc Rhys made disparaging noises. "Brutus is an honorable man. No, he'll stick to his bargain. But I wouldn't cut cards with Mendez. As a Free Companion, he's trustworthy. Personally—Well, how do things look?"

"Very good, sir. I've an idea about the *Armageddon*."

"I wish I had," Rhys said frankly. "We can't get that

damned scow into the battle in any way I can figure out. The Helldivers will see it coming, and lead the fight away."

"I'm thinking of camouflage."

"A monitor's a monitor. It's unmistakable. You can't make it look like anything else."

"With one exception, sir. You can make it look like a disabled monitor."

Rhys sat back, giving Scott a startled glance. "That's interesting. Go on."

"Look here, sir." The captain used a stylo to sketch the outline of a monitor on a convenient pad. "Above the surface, the *Armageddon*'s dome-shaped. Below, it's a bit different, chiefly because of a keel. Why can't we put a fake superstructure on the monitor—build a false keel on it, so it'll seem capsized?"

"It's possible."

"Everybody knows a monitor's weak spot—that it turns turtle under fire sometimes. If the Helldivers saw an apparently capsized *Armageddon* drifting toward them, they'd naturally figure the tub was disabled."

"It's crazy," Rhys said. "One of those crazy ideas that might work." He used the local telaudio to issue crisp orders. "Got it? Good. Get the *Armageddon* under way as soon as the equipment's aboard. Alterations will be made at sea. We can't waste time. If we had them made in the yards, she'd never catch up with the fleet."

The cinc broke the connection, his seamed, leathery face twisting into a grin. "I hope it works. We'll see."

He snapped his fingers. "Almost forgot. President Crosby's nephew—Kane?—he was with you when you cracked up, wasn't he? I've been wondering whether I should have waived training for him. How did he show up in the jungle?"

"Quite well," Scott said. "I had my eye on him. He'll make a good soldier."

Rhys looked keenly at the captain. "What about discipline? I felt that was his weak spot."

"I've no complaint to make."

"So. Well, maybe. Starling's outfit is bad training for anyone—especially a raw kid. Speaking of Starling, did Cinc Mendez know anything about his using atomic power?"

"No, sir. If Starling's doing that, he's keeping it plenty quiet."

"We'll investigate after the battle. Can't afford that sort of

thing—we don't want another holocaust. It was bad enough to lose Earth. It decimated the race. If it happened again, it'd wipe the race out."

"I don't think there's much danger of that. On Earth, it was the big atomic-power stations that got out of control. At worst, Starling can't have more than hand weapons."

"True. You can't blow up a world with those. But you know the law—no atomic power on Venus."

Scott nodded.

"Well, that's all." Rhys waved him away. "Clear weather."

Which, on this perpetually clouded world, had a tinge of irony.

After mess Scott returned to his quarters for a smoke and a brief rest. He waved away Briggs's suggestion of a rubdown and sent the orderly to the commissary for fresh tobacco. "Be sure to get Twenty Star," he cautioned. "I don't want that green hydroponic cabbage."

"I know the brand, sir." Briggs looked hurt and departed. Scott settled back in his relaxer, sighing.

Zero hour at twelve. The last zero hour he'd ever know. All through the day he had been conscious that he was fulfilling his duties for the last time.

His mind went back to Montana Keep. He was living again those other-worldly moments in the cloud-wrapped Olympus with Ilene. Curiously, he found it difficult to visualize the girl's features. Perhaps she was a symbol—her appearance did not matter. Yet she was very lovely.

In a different way from Jeana. Scott glanced at Jeana's picture on the desk, three-dimensional and tinted after life. By pressing a button on the frame, he could have given it sound and motion. He leaned forward and touched the tiny stud. In the depths of the picture the figure of Jeana stirred, smiling. The red lips parted.

Her voice, though soft, was quite natural.

"Hello, Brian," the recording said. "Wish I were with you now. Here's a present, darling." The image blew him a kiss, and then faded back to immobility.

Scott sighed again. Jeana was a comfortable sort of person. But—Oh, hell! She wasn't willing to change. Very likely she couldn't. Ilene perhaps was equally dogmatic, but she represented the life of the Keeps—and that was what Scott wanted now.

It was an artificial life Ilene lived, but she was honest about it. She knew its values were false. At least she didn't pretend, like the Free Companions, that there were ideals worth dying for. Scott remembered Briggs. The fact that men had been killed during the building of Doone fort meant a lot to the old orderly. He never asked himself—*why?* Why had they died? Why was Doone fort built in the first place? For war. And war was doomed.

One had to believe in an ideal before devoting one's life to it. One had to feel he was helping the ideal to survive—watering the plant with his blood so eventually it would come to flower. The red flower of Mars had long since blown. How did that old poem go?

*One thing is certain, and the rest is lies;
The flower that once has blown forever dies.*

It was true. But the Free Companions blindly pretended that the flower was still in blazing scarlet bloom, refusing to admit that even the roots were withered and useless, scarcely able now to suck up the blood sacrificed to its hopeless thirst.

New flowers bloomed; new buds opened. But in the Keeps, not in the great doomed forts. It was the winter cycle, and, as the last season's blossoms faded, the buds of the next stirred into life. Life questing and intolerant. Life that fed on the rotting petals of the rose of war.

But the pretense went on, in the coastal forts that guarded the Keeps. Scott made a grimace of distaste. Blind, stupid folly! He was a man first, not a soldier. And man is essentially a hedonist, whether he identifies himself with the race or not.

Scott could not. He was not part of the undersea culture, and he could never be. But he could lose himself in the hedonistic backwash of the Keeps, the froth that always overlies any social unit. With Ilene, he could, at least, seek happiness, without the bitter self-mockery he had known for so long. Mockery at his own emotional weaknesses in which he did not believe.

Ilene was honest. She knew she was damned, because unluckily she had intelligence.

So—Scott thought—they would make a good pair.

Scott looked up as Commander Bienne came into the

room. Bienne's sour, mahogany face was flushed deep red under the bronze. His lids were heavy over angry eyes. He swung the door-curtain shut after him and stood rocking on his heels, glowering at Scott.

He called Scott something unprintable.

The captain rose, an icy knot of fury in his stomach. Very softly he said, "You're drunk, Bienne. Get out. Get back to your quarters."

"Sure—you little tinhorn soldier. You like to give orders, don't you? You like to chisel, too. The way you chiseled me out of that left-wing command today. I'm pretty sick of it, Captain Brian Scott."

"Don't be a damned fool! I don't like you personally any more than you like me, but that's got nothing to do with the Company. I recommended you for that command."

"You lie," Bienne said, swaying. "And I hate your guts."

Scott went pale, the scar on his cheek flaming red. Bienne came forward. He wasn't too drunk to coordinate. His fist lashed out suddenly and connected agonizingly with Scott's molar.

The captain's reach was less than Bienne's. He ducked inside of the next swing and carefully smashed a blow home on the point of the other's jaw. Bienne was driven back, crashing against the wall and sliding down in a limp heap, his head lolling forward.

Scott, rubbing his knuckles, looked down, considering. Presently he knelt and made a quick examination. A knock-out, that was all.

Oh, well.

Briggs appeared, showing no surprise at sight of Bienne's motionless body. The perfect orderly walked across to the table and began to refill the humidor with the tobacco he had brought.

Scott almost chuckled.

"Briggs."

"Yes, sir?"

"Commander Bienne's had a slight accident. He—slipped. Hit his chin on something. He's a bit tight, too. Fix him up, will you?"

"With pleasure, sir." Briggs hoisted Bienne's body across his brawny shoulders.

"Zero hour's at twelve. The commander must be aboard the *Flintlock* by then. And sober. Can do?"

"Certainly, sir," Briggs said, and went out.

Scott returned to his chair, filling his pipe. He should have confined Bienne to his quarters, of course. But—well, this was a personal matter. One could afford to stretch a point, especially since Bienne was a valuable man to have aboard during action. Scott vaguely hoped the commander would get his thick head blown off.

After a time he tapped the dottle from his pipe and went off for a final inspection.

At midnight the fleet hoisted anchor.

By dawn the Doones were nearing the Venus Deep.

The ships of the Mob had already joined them, seven battleships, and assorted cruisers, destroyers, and one carrier. No monitor. The mob didn't own one — it had capsized two months before, and was still undergoing repairs.

The combined fleets sailed in crescent formation, the left wing, commanded by Scott, composed of his own ship, the *Flintlock*, and the *Arquebus*, the *Arrow*, and the *Misericordia*, all Doone battlewagons. There were two Mob ships with him, the *Navaho* and the *Zuni*, the latter commanded by Cinc Mendez. Scott had one carrier with him, the other being at right wing. Besides these, there were the lighter craft.

In the center were the battleships *Arbalest*, *Lance*, *Gatling*, and *Mace*, as well as three of Mendez's. Cinc Rhys was aboard the *Lance*, controlling operations. The camouflaged monitor *Armageddon* was puffing away valiantly far behind, well out of sight in the mists.

Scott was in his control room, surrounded by telaudio screens and switchboards. Six operators were perched on stools before the controls, ready to jump to action when orders came through their earphones. In the din of battle spoken commands often went unheard, which was why Scott wore a hush-mike strapped to his chest.

His eyes roved over the semicircle of screens before him.

"Any report from the gliders yet?"

"No, sir."

"Get me air-spotting command."

One of the screens flamed to life; a face snapped into view on it.

"Report."

"Nothing yet, captain. Wait." There was a distant thunder.

"Detectors clamped on a telaudio tight-beam directly overhead."

"Enemy glider in the clouds?"

"Apparently. It's out of the focus now."

"Try to relocate it."

A lot of good that would do. Motored planes could easily be detected overhead, but a glider was another matter. The only way to spot one was by clamping a detector focus directly on the glider's telaudio beam—worse than a needle in a haystack. Luckily the crates didn't carry bombs.

"Report coming in, sir. One of our gliders."

Another screen showed a face. "Pilot reporting, sir. Located enemy."

"Good. Switch in the telaudio, infra. What sector?"

"V.D. eight hundred seven northwest twenty-one."

Scott said into his hush-mike, "Get Cinc Rhys and Commander Geer on tight-beam. And Cinc Mendez."

Three more screens lit up, showing the faces of the three officers.

"Cut in the pilot."

Somewhere over Venus Deep the glider pilot was arcing his plane through the cloud-layer, the automatic telaudio-camera, lensed to infrared, penetrating the murk and revealing the ocean below. On the screen ships showed, driving forward in battle formation.

Scott recognized and enumerated them mentally. The *Orion*, the *Sirius*, the *Vega*, the *Polaris*—uh-huh. Lighter ships. Plenty of them. The scanner swept on.

Cinc Rhys said, "We're outnumbered badly. Cinc Mendez, are your sub-detectors in operation?"

"They are. Nothing yet."

"We'll join battle in half an hour, I judge. We've located them, and they've no doubt located us."

"Check."

The screens blanked out. Scott settled back, alertly at ease. Nothing to do now but wait, keeping ready for the unexpected. The *Orion* and the *Vega* were the Helldivers' biggest battleships, larger than anything in the line of the Doones—or the Mob. Cinc Flynn was no doubt aboard the *Orion*. The Helldivers owned a monitor, but it had not showed on the infrared aerial scanner. Probably the behemoth wouldn't even show up in time for the battle.

But even without the monitor, the Helldivers had an overwhelming surface display. Moreover, their undersea fleet was an important factor. The sub-detectors of Cinc Mendez might—probably would—cut down the odds. But possibly not enough.

The *Armageddon*, Scott thought, might be the point of decision, the ultimate argument. And, as yet, the camouflaged monitor was lumbering through the waves far in the wake of the Doones.

Commander Bienne appeared on a screen. He had frozen into a disciplined, trained robot, personal animosities forgotten for the time. Active duty did that to a man.

Scott expected nothing different, however, and his voice was completely impersonal as he acknowledged Bienne's call.

"The flitterboats are ready to go, captain."

"Send them out in fifteen minutes. Relay to left wing, all ships carrying flitters."

"Check."

For a while there was silence. A booming explosion brought Scott to instant alertness. He glanced up at the screens.

A new face appeared. "Helldivers opening up. Testing for range. They must have gliders overhead. We can't spot 'em."

"Get the men under cover. Send up a test barrage. Prepare to return fire. Contact our pilots over the Helldivers."

It was beginning now—the incessant, racking thunder that would continue till the last shot was fired. Scott cut in to Cinc Rhys as the latter signaled.

"Reporting, sir."

"Harry the enemy. We can't do much yet. Change to R-8 formation."

Cinc Mendez said, "We've got three enemy subs. Our detectors are turned up to high pitch."

"Limit the range so our subs will be outside the sphere of influence."

"Already did that. The enemy's using magnetic depth charges, laying an undersea barrage as they advance."

"I'll talk to the sub command." Rhys cut off. Scott listened to the increasing fury of explosions. He could not yet hear the distinctive *clap-clap* of heat rays, but the quarters were not yet close enough for those undependable, though powerful, weapons. It took time for a heat ray to warm up, and

during that period a well-aimed bullet could smash the projector lens.

"Casualty, sir. Direct hit aboard destroyer *Bayonet*."

"Extent of damage?"

"Not disabled. Complete report later."

After a while a glider pilot came in on the beam.

"Shell landed on the *Polaris*, sir."

"Use the scanner."

It showed the Helldivers' battlewagon, part of the superstructure carried away, but obviously still in fighting trim. Scott nodded. Both sides were getting the range now. The hazy clouds still hid each fleet from the other, but they were nearing.

The sound of artillery increased. Problems of trajectory were increased by the violent winds of Venus, but accurate aiming was possible. Scott nodded grimly as a crash shook the *Flintlock*.

They were getting it now. Here, in the brain of the ship, he was as close to the battle as any member of a firing crew. The screens were his eyes.

They had the advantage of being able to use infrared, so that Scott, buried here, could see more than he could have on deck, with his naked eye. Something loomed out of the murk and Scott's breath stopped before he recognized the lines of the Doone battlewagon *Misericordia*. She was off course. The captain used his hush-mike to snap a quick reprimand.

Flitterboats were going out now, speedy hornets that would harry the enemy fleet. In one of them, Scott remembered, was Norman Kane. He thought of Ilene and thrust the thought back, out of his mind. No time for that now.

Battle stations allowed no time for wool gathering.

The distant vanguard of the Helldivers came into sight on the screens. Cinc Mendez called.

"Eleven more subs. One got through. Seems to be near the *Flintlock*. Drop depth bombs."

Scott nodded and obeyed. Shuddering concussions shook the ship. Presently a report came in: fuel slick to starboard.

Good. A few well-placed torpedoes could do a lot of damage.

The *Flintlock* heeled incessantly under the action of the heavy guns. Heat rays were lancing out. The big ships could not easily avoid the searing blasts that could melt solid metal,

but the flitterboats, dancing around like angry insects, sent a rain of bullets at the projectors. But even that took integration. The rays themselves were invisible, and could only be traced from their targets. The camera crews were working overtime, snapping shots of the enemy ships, tracing the rays' points of origin, and teleradioing the information to the flitterboats.

"Helldivers' *Rigel* out of action."

On the screen the big destroyer swung around, bow pointing forward. She was going to ram. Scott snapped orders. The *Flintlock* went hard over, guns pouring death into the doomed *Rigel*.

The ships passed, so close that men on the *Flintlock's* decks could see the destroyer lurching through the haze. Scott judged her course and tried desperately to get Mendez. There was a delay.

"QM—QM—emergency! Get the *Zuni*!"

"Here she answers, sir."

Scott snapped, "Change course, QM. Destroyer *Rigel* bearing down on you."

"Check." The screen blanked. Scott used a scanner. He groaned at the sight. The *Zuni* was swinging fast, but the *Rigel* was too close—too damned close.

She rammed.

Scott said, "Hell." That put the *Zuni* out of action. He reported to Cinc Rhys.

"All right, captain. Continue R-8 formation."

Mendez appeared on a screen. "Captain Scott. We're disabled. I'm coming aboard. Have to direct sub-strafig operations. Can you give me a control board?"

"Yes, sir. Land at Port Sector 7."

Hidden in the mist, the fleets swept on in parallel courses, the big battlewagons keeping steady formation, pouring heat rays and shells across the gap. The lighter ships strayed out of line at times, but the flitterboats swarmed like midges, dog-fighting when they were not harrying the larger craft. Gliders were useless now, at such close quarters.

The thunder crashed and boomed. Shudders rocked the *Flintlock*.

"Hit on Helldivers' *Orion*. Hit on *Sirius*."

"Hit on Mob ship *Apache*."

"Four more enemy subs destroyed."

"Doone sub X-16 fails to report."

"Helldivers' *Polaris* seems disabled."

"Send out auxiliary flitterboats, units nine and twenty."

Cinc Mendez came in, breathing hard. Scott waved him to an auxiliary control unit seat.

"Hit on *Lance*. Wait a minute. Cinc Rhys a casualty, sir."

Scott froze. "Details."

"One moment—Dead, sir."

"Very well," Scott said after a moment. "I'm assuming command. Pass it along."

He caught a sidelong glance from Mendez. When a Company's cinc was killed, one of two things happened—promotion of a new cinc, or a merger with another Company. In this case Scott was required, by his rank, to assume temporarily the fleet's command. Later, at the Doone fort, there would be a meeting and a final decision.

He scarcely thought of that now. Rhys dead! Tough, unemotional old Rhys, killed in action. Rhys had a free-wife in some Keep. Scott remembered. The Company would pension her. Scott had never seen the woman. Oddly, he wondered what she was like. The question had never occurred to him before.

The screens were flashing. Double duty now—or triple. Scott forgot everything else in directing the battle.

It was like first-stage anesthesia—it was difficult to judge time. It might have been an hour or six since the battle had started. Or less than an hour, for that matter.

"Destroyer disabled. Cruiser disabled. Three enemy subs out of action—"

It went on, endlessly. At the auxiliaries Mendez was directing sub-strafting operations. Where in hell's the *Armageddon*, Scott thought. The fight would be over before that overgrown tortoise arrived.

Abruptly a screen flashed QM. The lean, beak-nosed face of Cinc Flynn of the Helldivers showed.

"Calling Doone command."

"Acknowledging," Scott said. "Captain Scott, emergency command."

Why was Flynn calling? Enemy fleets in action never communicated, except to surrender.

Flynn said curtly, "You're using atomic power. Explanation, please."

Mendez jerked around. Scott felt a tight band around his stomach.

"Done without my knowledge or approval, of course, Cinc Flynn. My apologies. Details?"

"One of your flitterboats fired an atomic-powered pistol at the *Orion*."

"Damage?"

"One seven-unit gun disabled."

"One of ours, of the same caliber, will be taken out of action immediately. Further details, sir?"

"Use your scanner, captain, on Sector Mobile 18 south *Orion*. Your apology is accepted. The incident will be erased from our records."

Flynn clicked off. Scott used the scanner, catching a Doone flitterboat in its focus. He used the enlarger.

The little boat was fleeing from enemy fire, racing back toward the Doone fleet, heading directly toward the *Flintlock*, Scott saw. Through the transparent shell he saw the bombardier slumped motionless, his head blown half off. The pilot, still gripping an atomic-fire pistol in one hand, was Norman Kane. Blood streaked his boyish, strained face.

So Starling's outfit did have atomic power, then. Kane must have smuggled the weapon out with him when he left. And, in the excitement of battle, he had used it against the enemy.

Scott said coldly, "Gun crews starboard. Flitterboat Z-19-4. Blast it."

Almost immediately a shell burst near the little craft. On the screen Kane looked up, startled by his own side firing upon him. Comprehension showed on his face. He swung the flitterboat off course, zigzagging, trying desperately to dodge the barrage.

Scott watched, his lips grimly tight. The flitterboat exploded in a rain of spray and debris.

Automatic court-martial.

After the battle, the Companies would band together and smash Starling's outfit.

Meanwhile, this was action. Scott returned to his screens, erasing the incident from his mind.

Very gradually, the balance of power was increasing with the Helldivers. Both sides were losing ships, put out of action rather than sunk, and Scott thought more and more often of

the monitor *Armageddon*. She could turn the battle now. But she was still far astern.

Scott never felt the explosion that wrecked the control room. His senses blacked out without warning.

He could not have been unconscious for long. When he opened his eyes, he stared up at a shambles. He seemed to be the only man left alive. But it could not have been a direct hit, or he would not have survived either.

He was lying on his back, pinned down by a heavy crossbeam. But no bones were broken. Blind, incredible luck had helped him there. The brunt of the damage had been borne by the operators. They were dead, Scott saw at a glance.

He tried to crawl out from under the beam, but that was impossible. In the thunder of battle his voice could not be heard.

There was a movement across the room, halfway to the door. Cinc Mendez stumbled up and stared around, blinking. Red smeared his plump cheeks.

He saw Scott and stood, rocking back and forth, staring.

Then he put his hand on the butt of his pistol.

Scott could very easily read the other's mind. If the Doone captain died now, the chances were that Mendez could merge with the Doones and assume control. The politico-military balance lay that way.

If Scott lived, it was probable that he would be elected cinc.

It was, therefore, decidedly to Mendez's advantage to kill the imprisoned man.

A shadow crossed the doorway. Mendez, his back to the newcomer, did not see Commander Bienne halt on the threshold, scowling at the tableau. Scott knew that Bienne understood the situation as well as he himself did. The commander realized that in a very few moments Mendez would draw his gun and fire.

Scott waited. The cinc's fingers tightened on his gun butt.

Bienne, grinning crookedly, said, "I thought that shell had finished you, sir. Guess it's hard to kill a Dooneman."

Mendez took his hand off the gun, instantly regaining his poise. He turned to Bienne.

"I'm glad you're here, commander. It'll probably take both of us to move that beam."

"Shall we try, sir?"

Between the two of them, they managed to shift the weight off Scott's torso. Briefly the latter's eyes met Bienne's. There was still no friendliness in them, but there was a look of wry self-mockery.

Bienne hadn't saved Scott's life, exactly. It was, rather, a question of being a Dooneman. For Bienne was, first of all, a soldier, and a member of the Free Company.

Scott tested his limbs; they worked.

"How long was I out, commander?"

"Ten minutes, sir. The *Armageddon's* in sight."

"Good. Are the Helldivers veering off?"

Bienne shook his head. "So far they're not suspicious."

Scott grunted and made his way to the door, the others at his heels. Mendez said, "We'll need another control ship."

"All right. The *Arquebus*. Commander, take over here. Cinc Mendez—"

A flitterboat took them to the *Arquebus*, which was still in good fighting trim. The monitor *Armageddon*, Scott saw, was rolling helplessly in the trough of the waves. In accordance with the battle plan, the Doone ships were leading the Helldivers toward the apparently capsized giant. The technicians had done a good job; the false keel looked shockingly convincing.

Aboard the *Arquebus*, Scott took over, giving Mendez the auxiliary control for his substrafters. The Cinc beamed at Scott over his shoulder.

"Wait till that monitor opens up, captain."

"Yeah . . . we're in bad shape, though."

Neither man mentioned the incident that was in both their minds. It was tacitly forgotten—the only thing to do now.

Guns were still bellowing. The Helldivers were pouring their fire into the Doone formation, and they were winning. Scott scowled at the screens. If he waited too long, it would be just too bad.

Presently he put a beam on the *Armageddon*. She was in a beautiful position now, midway between two of the Helldivers' largest battleships.

"Unmask. Open fire."

Firing ports opened on the monitor. The sea titan's huge guns snouted into view. Almost simultaneously they blasted, the thunder drowning out the noise of the lighter guns.

"All Doone ships attack," Scott said. "Plan R-7."

This was it. *This was it!*

The Doones raced in to the kill. Blasting, bellowing, shouting, the guns tried to make themselves heard above the roaring of the monitor. They could not succeed, but that savage, invincible onslaught won the battle.

It was nearly impossible to maneuver a monitor into battle formation, but, once that was accomplished, the only thing that could stop the monster was atomic power.

But the Helldivers fought on, trying strategic formation. They could not succeed. The big battlewagons could not get out of range of the *Armageddon's* guns. And that meant—

Cinc Flynn's face showed on the screen.

"Capitulation, sir. Cease firing."

Scott gave orders. The roar of the guns died into humming, incredible silence.

"You gave us a great battle, cinc."

"Thanks. So did you. Your strategy with the monitor was excellent."

So—that was that. Scott felt something go limp inside of him. Flynn's routine words were meaningless; Scott was drained of the vital excitement that had kept him going till now.

The rest was pure formula.

Token depth charges would be dropped over Virginia Keep. They would not harm the Dome, but they were the rule. There would be the ransom, paid always by the Keep which backed the losing side. A supply of korium, or its negotiable equivalent. The Doone treasury would be swelled. Part of the money would go into replacements and new keels. The life of the forts would go on.

Alone at the rail of the *Arquebus*, heading for Virginia Keep, Scott watched slow darkness change the clouds from pearl to gray, and then to invisibility. He was alone in the night. The wash of waves came up to him softly as the *Arquebus* rushed to her destination, three hundred miles away.

Warm yellow lights gleamed from ports behind him, but he did not turn. This, he thought, was like the cloud-wrapped Olympus in Montana Keep, where he had promised Ilene—many things.

Yet there was a difference. In an Olympus a man was like a god, shut away completely from the living world. Here, in the unbroken dark, there was no sense of alienage. Nothing

could be seen—Venus has no moon, and the clouds hid the stars. And the seas are not phosphorescent.

Beneath these waters stand the Keeps, Scott thought. They hold the future. Such battles as were fought today are fought so that the Keeps may not be destroyed.

And men will sacrifice. Men have always sacrificed, for a social organization or a military unit. Man must create his own ideal. "If there had been no God, man would have created Him."

Bienne had sacrificed today, in a queer, twisted way of loyalty to his fetish. Yet Bienne still hated him, Scott knew.

The Doones meant nothing. Their idea was a false one. Yet, because men were faithful to that ideal, civilization would rise again from the guarded Keeps. A civilization that would forget its doomed guardians, the watchers of the seas of Venus, the Free Companions yelling their mad, futile battle cry as they drove on—as this ship was driving—into a night that would have no dawn.

Ilene.

Jeana.

It was no such simple choice. It was, in fact, no real choice at all. For Scott knew, very definitely, that he could never, as long as he lived, believe wholeheartedly in the Free Companions. Always a sardonic devil deep within him would be laughing in bitter self-mockery.

The whisper of the waves drifted up.

It wasn't sensible. It was sentimental, crazy, stupid, sloppy thinking.

But Scott knew, now, that he wasn't going back to Ilene.

He was a fool.

But he was a soldier.

EXILE

Super Science Stories,

May

by Edmond Hamilton (1904-1977)

The husband of Leigh Brackett (they edited excellent Best of . . . books of each other's work shortly before their deaths), Edmond Hamilton first appeared in the science fiction/fantasy field with "The Monster-God of Mamurth" in 1926, making him one of the longest-lasting of the first generation of sf writers. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he got better with age. His early reputation was built on a series of spectacular space operas (he was known as "World-Saver Hamilton" for a while) featuring his "Instellar Patrol" characters. He also wrote a great many of the "Captain Future" series in the 1940s.

However, Hamilton was capable of more thoughtful work, such as "What's It Like Out There?" (1952), The Star Kings (1949), and The Haunted Stars (1960). The Best of Edmond Hamilton (1977) is a wonderful collection.

"Exile is short, sweet, and quite profound.

(This is Ed Hamilton's first appearance in this series, but that is because his great years came before 1939. In my anthology Before the Golden Age, which dealt with the years from 1931 to 1938, three of his stories were included. Had I been able to include novels as well, there would have been even more. His The Universe Wreckers was one of the delights of my childhood. It embarrassed me that when I finally met him, I had become better known than he was. It struck me as

lèse majesté. He was a gentle, self-possessed soul, though, and he didn't seem to mind.—I.A.)

I wish now that we hadn't got to talking about science fiction that night! If we hadn't, I wouldn't be haunted now by that queer, impossible story which can't ever be proved or disproved.

But the four of us were all professional writers of fantastic stories, and I suppose shop talk was inevitable. Yet, we'd kept off it through dinner and the drinks afterward. Madison had outlined his hunting trip with gusto, and then Brazell started a discussion of the Dodgers' chances. And then I had to turn the conversation to fantasy.

I didn't mean to do it. But I'd had an extra Scotch, and that always makes me feel analytical. And I got to feeling amused by the perfect way in which we four resembled a quartet of normal, ordinary people.

"Protective coloration, that's what it is," I announced. "How hard we work at the business of acting like ordinary good guys!"

Brazell looked at me, somewhat annoyed by the interruption. "What are you talking about?"

"About us," I answered. "What a wonderful imitation of solid, satisfied citizens we put up! But we're not satisfied, you know—none of us. We're violently dissatisfied with the Earth, and all its works, and that's why we spend our lives dreaming up one imaginary world after another."

"I suppose the little matter of getting paid for it has nothing to do with it?" Brazell asked skeptically.

"Sure it has," I admitted. "But we all dreamed up our impossible worlds and peoples long before we ever wrote a line, didn't we? From back in childhood, even? It's because we don't feel at home here."

Madison snorted. "We'd feel a lot less at home on some of the worlds we write about."

Then Carrick, the fourth of our party, broke into the conversation. He'd been sitting over his drink in his usual silent way, brooding, paying no attention to us.

He was a queer chap, in most ways. We didn't know him very well, but we liked him and admired his stories. He'd done some wonderful tales of an imaginary planet—all carefully worked out.

He told Madison, "That happened to me."

"What happened to you?" Madison asked.

"What you were suggesting—I once wrote about an imaginary world and then had to live on it," Carrick answered.

Madison laughed. "I hope it was a more livable place than the lurid planets on which I set my own yarns."

But Carrick was unsmiling. He murmured, "I'd have made it a lot different—if I'd known I was ever going to live on it."

Brazell, with a significant glance at Carrick's empty glass winked at us and then asked blandly, "Let's hear about it, Carrick."

Carrick kept looking dully down at his empty glass, turning it slowly in his fingers as he talked. He paused every few words.

"It happened just after I'd moved next to the big power station. It sounds like a noisy place, but actually it was very quiet out there on the edge of the city. And I had to have quiet, if I was to produce stories.

"I got right to work on a new series I was starting, the stories of which were all to be laid on the same imaginary world. I began by working out the detailed physical appearance of that world, as well as the universe that was its background. I spent the whole day concentrating on that. And, as I finished, something in my mind went *click!*

"That queer, brief mental sensation felt oddly like a sudden *crystallization*. I stood there, wondering if I was going crazy. For I had a sudden strong conviction that it meant that the universe and world I had been dreaming up all day had suddenly crystallized into physical existence somewhere.

"Naturally, I brushed aside the eerie thought and went out and forgot about it. But the next day, the thing happened again. I had spent most of that second day working up the inhabitants of my story world. I'd made them definitely human, but had decided against making them too civilized—for that would exclude the conflict and violence that must form my story.

"So, I'd made my imaginary world a world whose people were still only half-civilized. I figured out all their cruelties and superstitions. I mentally built up their colorful barbaric cities. And just as I was through—that *click!* echoed sharply in my mind.

"It startled me badly, this second time. For now I felt

more strongly than before that queer conviction, that my day's dreaming had crystallized into solid reality. I knew it was insane to think that, yet it was an incredible certainty in my mind. I couldn't get rid of it.

"I tried to reason the thing out so that I could dismiss that crazy conviction. If my imagining a world and universe had actually created them, where were they? Certainly not in my own cosmos. It couldn't hold two universes—each completely different from the other.

"But maybe that world and universe of my imagining had crystallized into reality in another and empty cosmos? A cosmos lying in a different dimension from my own? One which had contained only free atoms, formless matter that had not taken on shape until my concentrated thought had somehow stirred it into the forms I dreamed?

"I reasoned along like that, in the queer, dreamlike way in which you apply the rules of logic to impossibilities. How did it come that my imaginings had never crystallized into reality before, but had only just begun to do so? Well, there was a plausible explanation for that. It was the big power station nearby. Some unfathomable freak of energy radiated from it was focusing my concentrated imaginings, as super-amplified force, upon an empty cosmos where they stirred formless matter into the shapes I dreamed.

"Did I believe that? No, I didn't believe it—but I knew it. There is quite a difference between knowledge and belief, as someone said who once pointed out that all men know they will die and none of them believe it. It was like that with me. I realized it was not possible that my imaginary world had come into physical being in a different dimensional cosmos, yet at the same time I was strangely convinced that it had.

"A thought occurred to me that amused and interested me. What if I imagined *myself* in that other world? Would I, too, become physically real in it? I tried it. I sat at my desk, imagining myself as one of the millions of persons in that imaginary world, dreaming up a whole soberly realistic background and family and history for myself over there. And my mind said *click!*"

Carrick paused, still looking down at the empty glass that he twirled slowly between his fingers.

Madison prompted him. "And of course you woke up there, and a beautiful girl was leaning over you, and you asked, 'Where am I?'"

"It wasn't like that," Carrick said dully. "It wasn't like that at all. I woke up in that other world, yes. But it wasn't like a real awakening. I was just suddenly in it.

"I was still myself. But I was the myself I had imagined in that other world. That other me had always lived in it—and so had his ancestors before him. I had worked all that out, you see.

"And I was just as real to myself, in that imaginary world I had created, as I had been in my own. That was the worst part of it. Everything in that half-civilized world was so utterly, commonplacely real."

He paused again. "It was queer, at first. I walked out into the streets of those barbaric cities, and looked into the people's faces, and I felt like shouting aloud, 'I imagined you all! You had no existence until I dreamed of you!'

"But I didn't do that. They wouldn't have believed me. To them, I was just an insignificant single member of their race. How could they guess that they and their traditions of long history, their world and their universe, had all been suddenly brought into being by my imagination?

"After my first excitement ebbed, I didn't like the place. I had made it too barbaric. The savage violences and cruelties that had seemed so attractive as material for a story, were ugly and repulsive at first hand. I wanted nothing but to get back to my own world.

"And I couldn't get back! There just wasn't any way. I had had a vague idea that I could imagine myself back into my own world as I had imagined myself into this other one. But it didn't work that way. The freak force that had wrought the miracle didn't work two ways.

"I had a pretty bad time when I realized that I was trapped in that ugly, squalid, barbarian world. I felt like killing myself at first. But I didn't. A man can adapt himself to anything. I adapted myself the best I could to the world I had created."

"What did you do there? What was your position, I mean?" Brazell asked.

Carrick shrugged. "I don't know the crafts or skills of that world I'd brought into being. I had only my own skill—that of story telling."

I began to grin. "You don't mean to say that you started writing fantastic stories?"

He nodded soberly. "I had to. It was all I could do. I wrote stories about my own real world. To those other people my tales were wild imagination—and they liked them."

We chuckled. But Carrick was deadly serious.

Madison humored him to the end. "And how did you finally get back home from that other world you'd created?"

"I never did get back home," Carrick said with a heavy sigh.

"Oh, come now," Madison protested lightly. "It's obvious that you got back some time."

Carrick shook his head somberly as he rose to leave.

"No, I never got back home," he said soberly. "I'm still here."

DAYMARE

Thrilling Wonder Stories,

Fall

by Fredric Brown (1906-1972)

Frederic Brown was one of the finest craftsmen who ever worked the commercial magazine markets. He was a major figure in the mystery genre, the author of such important works as The Fabulous Clipjoint, The Screaming Mimi, and The Lenient Beast. In science fiction his reputation as the master of the short-short story is richly deserved although he was generally excellent at all lengths, his stories usually combining sardonic wit with clever ideas. His story "Arend" (see Volume 6 of this series) is included in The Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

"Daymare" is one of his longest less-than-novel-length sf works and one of his best.

(There have been a number of mystery writers who have tried their hand at science fiction. John D. MacDonald is one, for instance. Even Mickey Spillane who (from my point of view) wrote deplorable mysteries, managed to write at least one deplorable piece of science fiction that I recall. And some science fiction writers have tried their hand at mysteries: Robert Bloch, Barry Malzberg and (in a whisper) I myself. However, I always thought the perfect fusion was Fredric Brown. All the others were either mystery writers who could do science fiction, or science fiction writers who could do mysteries. Fred was the one guy who managed to straddle the two genres well-balanced. I could never decide which was his prime talent, which second-

ary. He did both equally well and, apparently, with equal pleasure.—I.A.)

CHAPTER ONE: FIVE-WAY CORPSE

It started out like a simple case of murder. That was bad enough in itself, because it was the first murder during the five years Rod Caquer had been Lieutenant of Police in Sector Three of Callisto.

Sector Three was proud of that record, or had been until the record became a dead duck.

But before the thing was over, nobody would have been happier than Rod Caquer if it had stayed a simple case of murder—without cosmic repercussions.

Events began to happen when Rod Caquer's buzzer made him look up at the visiscreen.

There he saw the image of Barr Maxon, Regent of Sector Three.

"Morning, Regent," Caquer said pleasantly. "Nice speech you made last night on the—"

Maxon cut him short. "Thanks, Caquer," he said. "You know Willem Deem?"

"The book-and-reel shop proprietor? Yes, slightly."

"He's dead," announced Maxon. "It seems to be murder. You better go there."

His image clicked off the screen before Caquer could ask any questions. But the questions could wait anyway. He was already on his feet and buckling on his shortsword.

Murder on Callisto? It did not seem possible, but if it had really happened he should get there quickly. Very quickly, if he was to have time for a look at the body before they took it to the incinerator.

On Callisto, bodies are never held for more than an hour after death because of the hylra spores which, in minute quantity, are always present in the thinnish atmosphere. They are harmless, of course, to live tissue, but they tremendously accelerate the rate of putrefaction in dead animal matter of any sort.

Dr. Skidder, the Medico-in-Chief, was coming out the front door of the book-and-reel shop when Lieutenant Caquer arrived there, breathless.

The medico jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. "Better

hurry if you want a look," he said to Caquer. "They're taking it out the back way. But I've examined—"

Caquer ran on past him and caught the white-uniformed utility men at the back door of the shop.

"Hi, boys, let me take a look," Caquer cried as he peeled back the sheet that covered the thing on the stretcher.

It made him feel a bit sickish, but there was not any doubt of the identity of the corpse or the cause of death. He had hoped against hope that it would turn out to have been an accidental death after all. But the skull had been cleaved down to the eyebrows—a blow struck by a strong man with a heavy sword.

"Better let us hurry, Lieutenant. It's almost an hour since they found him."

Caquer's nose confirmed it, and he put the sheet back quickly and let the utility men go on to their gleaming white truck parked just outside the door.

He walked back into the shop, thoughtfully, and looked around. Everything seemed in order. The long shelves of cel-luwrapped merchandise were neat and orderly. The row of booths along the other side, some equipped with an enlarger for book customers and the others with projectors for those who were interested in the microfilms, were all empty and undisturbed.

A little crowd of curious persons was gathered outside the door, but Brager, one of the policemen, was keeping them out of the shop.

"Hey, Brager," said Caquer, and the patrolman came in and closed the door behind him.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Know anything about this? Who found him, and when, and so on?"

"I did, almost an hour ago. I was walking by on my beat when I heard the shot."

Caquer looked at him blankly.

"The shot?" he repeated.

"Yeah. I ran in and there he was dead and nobody around. I knew nobody had come out the front way, so I ran to the back and there wasn't anybody in sight from the back door. So I came back and put in the call."

"To whom? Why didn't you call me direct, Brager?"

"Sorry, Lieutenant, but I was excited and I pushed the wrong button and got the Regent. I told him somebody had

shot Deem and he said stay on guard and he'd call the Medico and the utility boys and you."

In that order? Caquer wondered. Apparently, because Caquer had been the last one to get there.

But he brushed that aside for the more important question—the matter of Brager having heard a shot. That did not make sense, unless—no, that was absurd, too. If Willem Deem had been shot, the Medico would not have split his skull as part of the autopsy.

"What do you mean by a shot, Brager?" Caquer asked. "An old-fashioned explosive weapon?"

"Yeah," said Brager. "Didn't you see the body? A hole right over the heart. A bullet-hole, I guess. I never saw one before. I didn't know there was a gun on Callisto. They were outlawed even before the blasters were."

Caquer nodded slowly.

"You—you didn't see evidence of any other—uh—wound?" he persisted.

"Earth, no. Why would there be any other wound? A hole through a man's heart's enough to kill him, isn't it?"

"Where did Dr. Skidder go when he left here?" Caquer inquired. "Did he say?"

"Yeah, he said you would be wanting his report so he'd go back to his office and wait till you came around or called him. What do you want to do, Lieutenant?"

Caquer thought a moment.

"Go next door and use the visiphone there, Brager—I'll be busy on this one," Caquer at last told the policeman. "Get three more men, and the four of you canvass this block and question everyone."

"You mean whether they saw anybody run out the back way, and if they heard the shot, and that sort of thing?" asked Brager.

"Yes. Also anything they may know about Deem, or who might have had a reason to—to shoot him."

Brager saluted, and left.

Caquer got Dr. Skidder on the visiphone. "Hello, Doctor," he said. "Let's have it."

"Nothing but what met the eye, Rod. Blaster, of course. Close range."

Lieutenant Rod Caquer steadied himself. "Say that again, Medico."

"What's the matter," jibed Skidder. "Never see a blaster

death before? Guess you wouldn't have at that, Rod, you're too young. But fifty years ago when I was a student, we got them once in a while."

"Just how did it kill him?"

Dr. Skidder looked surprised. "Oh, you didn't catch up with the clearance men then. I thought you'd seen it. Left shoulder, burned all the skin and flesh off and charred the bone. Actual death was from shock—the blast didn't hit a vital area. Not that the burn wouldn't have been fatal anyway, in all probability. But the shock made it instantaneous."

Dreams are like this, Caquer told himself.

In dreams things happen without meaning anything, he thought. But I'm not dreaming, this is real.

"Any other wounds, or marks on the body?" he asked, slowly.

"None. I'd suggest, Rod, you concentrate on a search for that blaster. Search all of Sector Three, if you have to. You know what a blaster looks like, don't you?"

"I've seen pictures," said Caquer. "Do they make a noise, Medico? I've never seen one fired."

Dr. Skidder shook his head. "There's a flash and a hissing sound, but no report."

"It couldn't be mistaken for a gunshot?"

The doctor stared at him.

"You mean an explosive gun? Of course not. Just a faint s-s-s-s. One couldn't hear it more than ten feet away."

When Lieutenant Caquer had clicked off the visiphone, he sat down and closed his eyes to concentrate. Somehow he had to make sense out of three conflicting sets of observations. His own, the patrolman's, and the medico's.

Brager had been the first one to see the body, and he said there was a hole over the heart. And that there were no other wounds. He had heard the report of the shot.

Caquer thought, suppose Brager is lying. It still doesn't make sense. Because according to Dr. Skidder, there was no bullet hole, but a blaster wound. Skidder had seen the body after Brager had.

Someone could, theoretically at least, have used a blaster in the interim, on a man already dead. But—

But that did not explain the head wound, nor the fact that the medico had not seen the bullet hole.

Someone could, theoretically at least, have struck the skull

with a sword between the time Skidder had made the autopsy and the time he, Rod Caquer, had seen the body. But—

But that didn't explain why he hadn't seen the charred shoulder when he'd lifted the sheet from the body on the stretcher. He might have missed seeing the bullet hole, but he would not, and he could not, have missed seeing a shoulder in the condition Dr. Skidder described it.

Around and around it went, until at last it dawned on him that there was only one explanation possible. The Medico-in-Chief was lying, for whatever mad reason. Brager's story could be true, in toto. That meant, of course, that he, Rod Caquer, had overlooked the bullet hole Brager had seen; but that was possible.

But Skidder's story could not be true. Skidder himself, at the time of the autopsy, could have inflicted the wound in the head. And he could have lied about the shoulder wound. Why—unless the man was mad—he would have done either of those things, Caquer could not imagine. But it was the only way he could reconcile all the factors.

But by now the body had been disposed of. It would be his word against Dr. Skidder's—

But wait!—the utility men, two of them, would have seen the corpse when they put it on the stretcher.

Quickly Caquer stood up in front of the visiphone and obtained a connection with utility headquarters.

"The two clearance men who took a body from Shop 9364 less than an hour ago—have they reported back yet?" he asked.

"Just a minute, Lieutenant . . . Yes, one of them was through for the day and went on home. The other one is here."

"Put him on."

Rod Caquer recognized the man who stepped into the screen. It was the one of the two utility men who had asked him to hurry.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" said the man.

"You helped put the body on the stretcher?"

"Of course."

"What would you say was the cause of death?"

The man in white looked out of the screen incredulously.

"Are you kidding me, Lieutenant?" he grinned. "Even a moron could see what was wrong with that stiff."

Caquer frowned.

"Nevertheless, there are conflicting statements. I want your opinion."

"Opinion? When a man has his head cut off, what two opinions can there be, Lieutenant?"

Caquer forced himself to speak calmly. "Will the man who went with you confirm that?"

"Of course. Earth's Oceans! We had to put it on the stretcher in two pieces. Both of us for the body, and then Walter picked up the head and put it on next to the trunk. The killing was done with a disintegrator beam, wasn't it?"

"You talked it over with the other man?" said Caquer. "There was no difference of opinion between you about the—uh—details?"

"Matter of fact there was. That was why I asked you if it was a disintegrator. After we'd cremated it, he tried to tell me the cut was a ragged one like somebody'd taken several blows with an axe or something. But it was clean."

"Did you notice evidence of a blow struck at the top of the skull?"

"No. Say, lieutenant, you aren't looking so well. Is anything the matter with you?"

CHAPTER TWO: TERROR BY NIGHT

That was the setup that confronted Rod Caquer, and one can not blame him for beginning to wish it had been a simple case of murder.

A few hours ago, it had seemed bad enough to have Calisto's no-murder record broken. But from there, it got worse. He did not know it then, but it was going to get still worse and that would be only the start.

It was eight in the evening, now, and Caquer was still at his office with a copy of Form 812 in front of him on the duraplast surface of his desk. There were questions on that form, apparently simple questions.

Name of Deceased: Willem Deem

Occupation: Prop. of book-and-reel shop

Residence: Apt. 8250, Sector Three, Clsto.

Place of Bus.: Shop 9364, S. T., Clsto.

Time of Death: Approx. 3 P.M. Clsto. Std. Time

Cause of Death:

Yes, the first five questions had been a breeze. But the sixth? He had been staring at that question an hour now. A Callisto hour, not so long as an Earth one, but long enough when you're staring at a question like that.

But confound it, he would have to put something down.

Instead, he reached for the visiphone button and a moment later Jane Gordon was looking at him out of the screen. And Rod Caquer looked back, because she was something to look at.

"Hello, Icicle," he said. "Afraid I'm not going to be able to get there this evening. Forgive me?"

"Of course, Rod. What's wrong? The Deem business?"

He nodded gloomily. "Desk work. Lot of forms and reports I got to get out for the Sector Coordinator."

"Oh. How was he killed, Rod?"

"Rule Sixty-five," he said with a smile, "forbids giving details of any unsolved crime to a civilian."

"Brother Rule Sixty-five. Dad knew Willem Deem well, and he's been a guest here often. Mr. Deem was practically a friend of ours."

"Practically?" Caquer asked. "Then I take it you didn't like him, Icicle?"

"Well—I guess I didn't. He was interesting to listen to, but he was a sarcastic little beast, Rod. I think he had a perverted sense of humor. How was he killed?"

"If I tell you, will you promise not to ask any more questions?" Caquer said with a sigh.

Her eyes lighted eagerly. "Of course."

"He was shot," said Caquer, "with an explosive-type gun and a blaster. Someone split his skull with a sword, chopped off his head with an axe and with a disintegrator beam. Then after he was on the utility stretcher, someone struck his head back on because it wasn't off when I saw him. And plugged up the bullet hole, and—"

"Rod, stop driveling," cut in the girl. "If you don't want to tell me, all right."

Rod grinned. "Don't get mad. Say, how's your father?"

"Lots better. He's asleep now, and definitely on the upgrade. I think he'll be back at the university by next week. Rod, you look tired. When do those forms have to be in?"

"Twenty-four hours after the crime. But—"

"But nothing. Come on over here, right now. You can make out those old forms in the morning."

She smiled at him, and Caquer weakened. He was not getting anywhere anyway, was he?

"All right, Jane," he said. "But I'm going by patrol quarters on the way. Had some men canvassing the block the crime was committed in, and I want their report."

But the report, which he found waiting for him, was not illuminating. The canvass had been thorough, but it had failed to elicit any information of value. No one had been seen to leave or enter the Deem shop prior to Brager's arrival, and none of Deem's neighbors knew of any enemies he might have. No one had heard a shot.

Rod Caquer grunted and stuffed the reports into his pocket, and wondered, as he walked to the Gordon home, where the investigation went from there. How did a detective go about solving such a crime?

True, when he was a college kid back on Earth a few years ago, he had read a detective usually trapped someone by discovering a discrepancy in his statements. Generally in a rather dramatic manner, too.

There was Wilder Williams, the greatest of all the fictional detectives, who could look at a man and deduce his whole life history from the cut of his clothes and the shape of his hands. But Wilder Williams had never run across a victim who had been killed in as many ways as there were witnesses.

He spent a pleasant—but futile—evening with Jane Gordon, again asked her to marry him, and again was refused. But he was used to that. She was a bit cooler this evening than usual, probably because she resented his unwillingness to talk about Willem Deem.

And home, to bed.

Out the window of his apartment, after the light was out, he could see the monstrous ball of Jupiter hanging low in the sky, the green-black midnight sky. He lay in bed and stared at it until it seemed that he could still see it after he had closed his eyes.

Willem Deem, deceased. What was he going to do about Willem Deem? Around and around, until at last one orderly thought emerged from chaos.

Tomorrow morning he would talk to the Medico. Without mentioning the sword wound in the head, he would ask Skidder about the bullet hole Brager claimed to have seen over the heart. If Skidder still said the blaster burn was the only

wound, he would summon Brager and let him argue with the Medico.

And then—Well, he would worry about what to do then when he got there. He would never get to sleep this way.

He thought about Jane, and went to sleep.

After a while, he dreamed. Or was it a dream? If so, then he dreamed that he was lying there in bed, almost but not quite awake, and that there were whispers coming from all corners of the room. Whispers out of the darkness.

For big Jupiter had moved on across the sky now. The window was a dim, scarcely discernible outline, and the rest of the room in utter darkness.

Whispers!

“—kill them.”

“You hate them, you hate them, you hate them.”

“—kill, kill, kill.”

“Sector Two gets all the gravy and Sector Three does all the work. They exploit our corla plantations. They are evil. Kill them, take over.”

“You hate them, you hate them, you hate them.”

“Sector Two is made up of weaklings and usurers. They have the taint of Martian blood. Spill it, spill Martian blood. Sector Three should rule Callisto. Three the mystic number. We are destined to rule Callisto.”

“You hate them, you hate them.”

“—kill, kill, kill.”

“Martian blood of usurious villains. You hate them, you hate them, you hate them.”

Whispers.

“Now—now—now.”

“Kill them, kill them.”

“A hundred ninety miles across the flat planes. Get there in an hour in monocars. Surprise attack. Now. Now. Now.”

And Rod Caquer was getting out of bed, fumbling hastily and blindly into his clothing without turning on the light because this was a dream and dreams were in darkness.

His sword was in the scabbard at his belt and he took it out and felt the edge and the edge was sharp and ready to spill the blood of the enemy he was going to kill.

Now it was going to swing in arcs of red death, his unblooded sword—the anachronistic sword that was his badge of office, of authority. He had never drawn the sword

in anger, a stubby symbol of a sword, scarce eighteen inches long; enough, though, enough to reach the heart—four inches to the heart.

The whispers continued.

"You hate them, you hate them, you hate them."

"Spill the evil blood; kill, spill, kill, spill."

"Now, now, now, now."

Unsheathed sword in clenched fist, he was stealing silently out the door, down the stairway, past the other apartment doors.

And some of the doors were opening, too. He was not alone, there in the darkness. Other figures moved beside him in the dark.

He stole out of the door and into the night-cooled darkness of the street, the darkness of the street that should have been brightly lighted. That was another proof that this was a dream. Those streetlights were never off after dark. From dusk till dawn, they were never off.

But Jupiter over there on the horizon gave enough light to see by. Like a round dragon in the heavens, and the red spot like an evil, malignant eye.

Whispers breathed in the night, whispers from all around him.

"Kill—kill—kill—"

"You hate them, you hate them, you hate them."

The whispers did not come from the shadowy figures about him. They pressed forward silently, as he did.

Whispers came from the night itself, whispers that now began to change tone.

"Wait, not tonight, not tonight, not tonight," they said.

"Go back, go back, go back."

"Back to your homes, back to your beds, back to your sleep."

And the figures about him were standing there, fully as ir-resolute as he had now become. And then, almost simultaneously, they began to obey the whispers. They turned back, and returned the way they had come, and as silently. . . .

Rod Caquer awoke with a mild headache and a hangover feeling. The sun, tiny but brilliant, was already well up in the sky.

His clock showed him that he was a bit later than usual, but he took time to lie there for a few minutes, just the same,

remembering that screwy dream he'd had. Dreams were like that; you had to think about them right away when you woke up, before you were really fully awake, or you forgot them completely.

A silly sort of dream, it had been. A mad, purposeless dream. A touch of atavism, perhaps? A throwback to the days when people had been at each other's throats half the time, back to the days of wars and hatreds and struggle for supremacy.

This was before the Solar Council, meeting first on one inhabited planet and then another, had brought order by arbitration, and then union. And now war was a thing of the past. The inhabitable portion of the solar system—Earth, Venus, Mars, and the moons of Jupiter—were all under one government.

But back in the old bloody days, people must have felt as he had felt in that atavistic dream. Back in the days when Earth, united by the discovery of space travel, had subjugated Mars—the only other planet already inhabited by an intelligent race—and then had spread colonies wherever Man could get a foothold.

Certain of those colonies had wanted independence and, next, supremacy. The bloody centuries, those times were called now.

Getting out of bed to dress, he saw something that puzzled and dismayed him. His clothing was not neatly folded over the back of the chair beside the bed as he had left it. Instead, it was strewn about the floor as though he had undressed hastily and carelessly in the dark.

"Earth!" he thought. "Did I sleepwalk last night? Did I actually get out of bed and go out into the street when I dreamed that I did? When those whispers told me to?"

"No," he then told himself, "I've never walked in my sleep before, and I didn't then. I must simply have been careless when I undressed last night. I was thinking about the Deem case. I don't actually remember hanging my clothes on that chair."

So he donned his uniform quickly and hurried down to the office. In the light of morning it was easy to fill out those forms. In the "Cause of Death" blank he wrote, "Medical Examiner reports that shock from a blaster wound caused death."

That let him out from under; he had not said that was the cause of death; merely that the medico said it was.

CHAPTER THREE: BLACKDEX

He rang for a messenger and gave him the reports with instructions to rush them to the mail ship that would be leaving shortly. Then he called Barr Maxon.

"Reporting on the Deems matter, Regent," he said. "Sorry, but we just haven't got anywhere on it yet. Nobody was seen leaving the shop. All the neighbors have been questioned. Today I'm going to talk to all his friends."

Regent Maxon shook his head.

"Use all jets, Lieutenant," he said. "The case must be cracked. A murder, in this day and age, is bad enough. But an unsolved one is unthinkable. It would encourage further crime."

Lieutenant Caquer nodded gloomily. He had thought of that, too. There were the social implications of murder to be worried about—and there was his job as well. A Lieutenant of Police who let anyone get away with murder in his district was through for life.

After the Regent's image had clicked off the visiphone screen, Caquer took the list of Deem's friends from the drawer of his desk and began to study it, mainly with an eye to deciding the sequence of his calls.

He penciled a figure "1" opposite the name of Perry Peters, for two reasons. Peters's place was only a few doors away, for one thing, and for another he knew Perry better than anyone on the list, except possibly Professor Jan Gordon. And he would make that call last, because later there would be a better chance of finding the ailing professor awake—and a better chance of finding his daughter Jane at home.

Perry Peters was glad to see Caquer, and guessed immediately the purpose of the call.

"Hello, Shylock."

"Huh?" said Rod.

"Shylock—the great detective. Confronted with a mystery for the first time in his career as a policeman. Or have you solved it, Rod?"

"You mean Sherlock, you dope—Sherlock Holmes. No, I haven't solved it, if you want to know. Look, Perry, tell me

all you know about Deem. You knew him pretty well, didn't you?"

Perry Peters rubbed his chin reflectively and sat down on the workbench. He was so tall and lanky that he could sit down on it instead of having to jump up.

"Willém was a funny little runt," he said. "Most people didn't like him because he was sarcastic, and he had crazy notions on politics. Me, I'm not sure whether he wasn't half right half the time, and anyway he played a swell game of chess."

"Was that his only hobby?"

"No. He liked to make things, gadgets mostly. Some of them were good, too, although he did it for fun and never tried to patent or capitalize anything."

"You mean inventions, Perry? Your own line?"

"Well, not so much inventions as gadgets, Rod. Little things, most of them, and he was better on fine workmanship than on original ideas. And, as I said, it was just a hobby with him."

"Ever help you with any of your own inventions?" asked Caquer.

"Sure, occasionally. Again, not so much on the idea of it as by helping me make difficult parts." Perry Peters waved his hand in a gesture that included the shop around them. "My tools here are all for rough work, comparatively. Nothing under thousandths. But Willem has—had a little lathe that's a honey. Cuts anything, and accurate to a fifty-thousandth."

"What enemies did he have, Perry?"

"None that I know of. Honestly, Rod. Lot of people disliked him, but just an ordinary mild kind of dislike. You know what I mean, the kind of dislike that makes 'em trade at another book-and-reel shop, but not the kind that makes them want to kill anybody."

"And who, as far as you know, might benefit by his death?"

"Um—nobody, to speak of," said Peters, thoughtfully. "I think his heir is a nephew on Venus. I met him once, and he was a likable guy. But the estate won't be anything to get excited about. A few thousand credits is all I'd guess it to be."

"Here's a list of his friends, Perry." Caquer handed Peters a paper. "Look it over, will you, and see if you can make any additions to it. Or any suggestions."

The lanky inventor studied the list, and then passed it back.

"That includes them all, I guess," he told Caquer. "Couple on there I didn't know he knew well enough to rate listing. And you have his best customers down, too; the ones that bought heavily from him."

Lieutenant Caquer put the list back in his pocket.

"What are you working on now?" he asked Peters.

"Something I'm stuck on, I'm afraid," the inventor said. "I needed Deem's help—or at least the use of his lathe, to go ahead with this." He picked up from the bench a pair of the most peculiar-looking goggles Rod Caquer had ever seen. The lenses were shaped like arcs of circles instead of full circles, and they fastened in a band of resilient plastic obviously designed to fit close to the face above and below the lenses. At the top center, where it would be against the forehead of the goggles' wearer, was a small cylindrical box an inch and a half in diameter.

"What on earth are they for?" Caquer asked.

"For use in radite mines. The emanations from that stuff, while it's in the raw state, destroy immediately any transparent substance yet made or discovered. Even quartz. And it isn't good on naked eyes either. The miners have to work blindfolded, as it were, and by their sense of touch."

Rod Caquer looked at the goggles curiously.

"But how is the funny shape of these lenses going to keep the emanations from hurting them, Perry?" he asked.

"That part up on top is a tiny motor. It operates a couple of specially treated wipers across the lenses. For all the world like an old-fashioned windshield wiper, and that's why the lenses are shaped like the wiper-arm arcs."

"Oh," said Caquer. "You mean the wipers are absorbent and hold some kind of liquid that protects the glass?"

"Yes, except that it's quartz instead of glass. And it's protected only a minute fraction of a second. Those wipers go like the devil—so fast you can't see them when you're wearing the goggles. The arms are half as big as the arcs, and the wearer can see out of only a fraction of the lens at a time. but he can see, dimly, and that's a thousand percent improvement in radite mining."

"Fine, Perry," said Caquer. "And they can get around the dimness by having ultra-brilliant lighting. Have you tried these out?"

"Yes, and they work. Trouble's in the rods; friction heats them and they expand and jam after it's run a minute, or thereabouts. I have to turn them down on Deem's lathe—or one like it. Think you could arrange for me to use it? Just for a day or so?"

"I don't see why not," Caquer told him. "I'll talk to whom-ever the Regent appoints executor, and fix it up. And later you can probably buy the lathe from his heir. Or does the nephew go in for such things?"

Perry Peters shook his head. "Nope, he wouldn't know a lathe from a drill-press. Be swell of you, Rod, if you can arrange for me to use it."

Caquer had turned to go, when Perry Peters stopped him.

"Wait a minute," Peters said and then paused and looked uncomfortable.

"I guess I was holding out on you, Rod," the inventor said at last. "I do know one thing about Willem that might possibly have something to do with his death, although I don't see how, myself. I wouldn't tell it on him, except that he's dead, and so it won't get him in trouble."

"What was it, Perry?"

"Illicit political books. He had a little business on the side selling them. Books on the index—you know just what I mean."

Caquer whistled softly. "I didn't know they were made any more. After the council put such a heavy penalty on them—whew!"

"People are still human, Rod. They still want to know the things they shouldn't know—just to find out why they shouldn't, if for no other reason."

"Graydex or Blackdex books, Perry?"

Now the inventor looked puzzled.

"I don't get it. What's the difference?"

"Books on the official index," Caquer explained, "are divided into two groups. The really dangerous ones are in the Blackdex. There's a severe penalty for owning one, and a death penalty for writing or printing one. The mildly dangerous ones are in the Graydex, as they call it."

"I wouldn't know which Willem peddled. Well, off the record, I read a couple Willem lent me once, and I thought they were pretty dull stuff. Unorthodox political theories."

"That would be Graydex." Lieutenant Caquer looked re-

lieved. "Theoretical stuff is all Graydex. The Blackdex books are the ones with dangerous practical information."

"Such as?" The inventor was staring intently at Caquer.

"Instructions how to make outlawed things," explained Caquer. "Like Lethite, for instance. Lethite is a poison gas that's tremendously dangerous. A few pounds of it could wipe out a city, so the council outlawed its manufacture, and any book telling people how to make it for themselves would go on the Blackdex. Some nitwit might get hold of a book like that and wipe out his whole home town."

"But why would anyone?"

"He might be warped mentally, and have a grudge," explained Caquer. "Or he might want to use it on a lesser scale for criminal reasons. Or—by Earth, he might be the head of a government with designs on neighboring states. Knowledge of a thing like that might upset the peace of the solar system."

Perry Peters nodded thoughtfully. "I get your point," he said. "Well, I still don't see what it could have to do with the murder, but I thought I'd tell you about Willem's sideline. You probably want to check over his stock before whoever takes over the shop reopens."

"We shall," said Caquer, "Thanks a lot, Perry. If you don't mind, I'll use your phone to get that search started right away. If there are any Blackdex books there, we'll take care of them all right."

When he got his secretary on the screen, she looked both frightened and relieved at seeing him.

"Mr. Caquer," she said, "I've been trying to reach you. Something awful's happened. Another death."

"Murder again?" gasped Caquer.

"Nobody knows what it was," said the secretary. "A dozen people saw him jump out of a window only twenty feet up. And in this gravity that couldn't have killed him, but he was dead when they got there. And four of them that saw him knew him. It was—"

"Well, for Earth's sake, who?"

"I don't—Lieutenant Caquer, they said, all four of them, that it was Willem Deem!"

CHAPTER FOUR: RULE OF THUMB

With a nightmarish feeling of unreality Lieutenant Rod Caquer peered down over the shoulder of the Medico-in-Chief at the body that already lay on the stretcher of the utility men, who stood by impatiently.

"You better hurry, Doc," one of them said. "He won't last much longer and it will take us five minutes to get there."

Dr. Skidder nodded impatiently without looking up, and went on with his examination. "Not a mark, Rod," he said. "Not a sign of poison. Not a sign of anything. He's just dead."

"The fall couldn't have caused it?" said Caquer.

"There isn't even a bruise from the fall. Only verdict I can give is heart failure. Okay, boys, you can take it away."

"You through too, Lieutenant?"

"I'm through," said Caquer. "Go ahead. Skidder, which of them was Willem Deem?"

The medico's eyes followed the white-sheeted burden of the utility men as they carried it toward the truck, and he shrugged helplessly.

"Lieutenant, I guess that's your pigeon," he said. "All I can do is certify to cause of death."

"It just doesn't make sense," Caquer wailed. "Sector Three City isn't so big that he could have had a double living here without people knowing about it. But one of them had to be a double. Off the record, which looked to you like the original?"

Dr. Skidder shook his head grimly.

"Willem Deem had a peculiarly shaped wart on his nose," he said. "So did both of his corpses, Rod. And neither one was artificial, or make-up. I'll stake my professional reputation on that. But come on back to the office with me, and I'll tell you which one of them is the real Willem Deem."

"Huh? How?"

"His thumbprint's on file at the tax department, like everybody's is. And it's part of routine to fingerprint a corpse on Callisto, because it has to be destroyed so quickly."

"You have thumbprints of both corpses?" inquired Caquer.

"Of course. Took them before you reached the scene, both times. I have the one for Willem—I mean the other corpse—

back in my office. Tell you what—you pick up the print on file at the tax office and meet me there.”

Caquer sighed with relief as he agreed. At least one point in the case would be cleared up—which corpse was which.

And in that comparatively blissful state of mind he remained until half an hour later when he and Dr. Skidder compared the three prints—the one Rod Caquer had secured from the tax office, and one from each of the corpses.

They were identical, all three of them.

“Um,” said Caquer. “You’re sure you didn’t get mixed up on those prints, Dr. Skidder?”

“How could I? I took only one copy from each body, Rod. If I had shuffled them just now while we were looking at them, the result would be the same. All three prints are alike.”

“But they can’t be.”

Skidder shrugged.

“I think we should lay this before the Regent, direct,” he said. “I’ll call him and arrange an audience. Okay?”

Half an hour later, he was giving the whole story to Regent Barr Maxon, with Dr. Skidder corroborating the main points. The expression on Regent Maxon’s face made Lieutenant Rod Caquer glad, very glad, that he had that corroboration.

“You agree,” Maxon asked, “that this should be taken up with the Sector Coordinator, and that a special investigator should be sent here to take over?”

A bit reluctantly, Caquer nodded. “I hate to admit that I’m incompetent, Regent, or that I seem to be,” Caquer said. “But this isn’t an ordinary crime. Whatever goes on, it’s way over my head. And there may be something even more sinister than murder behind it.”

“You’re right, Lieutenant. I’ll see that a qualified man leaves headquarters today and he’ll get in touch with you in the morning.”

“Regent,” Caquer asked, “has any machine or process ever been invented that will—uh—duplicate a human body with or without the mind being carried over?”

Maxon seemed puzzled by the question.

“You think Deem might have been playing around with something that bit him. No, to my knowledge a discovery like that has never been approached. Nobody has ever duplicated,

except by constructive imitation, even an inanimate object. You haven't heard of such a thing, have you, Skidder?"

"No," said the Medical Examiner. "I don't think even your friend Perry Peters could do that, Rod."

From the Regent Maxon's office, Caquer went on to Deem's shop. Brager was in charge there, and Brager helped him search the place thoroughly. It was a long and laborious task, because each book and reel had to be examined minutely.

The printers of illicit books, Caquer knew, were clever at disguising their product. Usually, forbidden books bore the cover and title page, often even the opening chapters, of some popular work of fiction, and the projection reels were similarly disguised.

Jupiter-lighted darkness was falling outside when they finished, but Rod Caquer knew they had done a thorough job. There wasn't an indexed book anywhere in the shop, and every reel had been run off on a projector.

Other men, at Rod Caquer's orders, had been searching Deem's apartment with equal thoroughness. He phoned there, and got a report, completely negative.

"Not so much as a Venusian pamphlet," said the man in charge at the apartment, with what Caquer thought was a touch of regret in his voice.

"Did you come across a lathe, a small one for delicate work?" Rod asked.

"Um—no, we didn't see anything like that. One room's turned into a workshop, but there's no lathe in it. Is it important?"

Caquer grunted noncommittally. What was one more mystery, and a minor one at that, to a case like this?

"Well, Lieutenant," Brager said, when the screen had gone blank, "what do we do now?"

Caquer sighed.

"You can go off duty, Brager," he said. "But first arrange to leave men on guard here and at the apartment. I'll stay until whoever you send comes to relieve me."

When Brager had left, Caquer sank wearily into the nearest chair. He felt terrible, physically, and his mind just did not seem to be working. He let his eyes run again around the orderly shelves of the shop and their orderliness oppressed him.

If there was only a clue of some sort. Wilder Williams had never had a case like this in which the only leads were two identical corpses, one of which had been killed five different ways and the other did not have a mark or sign of violence. What a mess, and where did he go from here?

Well, he still had the list of people he was going to interview, and there was time to see at least one of them this evening.

Should he look up Perry Peters again, and see what, if anything, the lanky inventor could make of the disappearance of the lathe? Perhaps he might be able to suggest what had happened to it. But then again, what could a lathe have to do with a mess like this? One cannot turn out a duplicate corpse on a lathe.

Or should he look up Professor Gordon? He decided to do just that.

He called the Gordon apartment on the visiphone, and Jane appeared in the screen.

"How's your father?" Jane asked Caquer. "Will he be able to talk to me for a while this evening?"

"Oh, yes," said the girl. "He's feeling much better, and thinks he'll go back to his classes tomorrow. But get here early if you're coming. Rod, you look terrible; what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, except I feel goofy. But I'm all right, I guess."

"You have a gaunt, starved look. When did you eat last?"

Caquer's eyes widened. "Earth! I forgot all about eating. I slept late and didn't even have breakfast!"

Jane Gordon laughed.

"You dope! Well, hurry around, and I'll have something ready for you when you get here."

"But—"

"But nothing. How soon can you start?"

A minute after he had clicked off the visiphone, Lieutenant Caquer went to answer a knock on the shuttered door of the shop.

He opened it. "Oh, hullo, Reese," he said. "Did Brager send you?"

The policeman nodded.

"He said I was to stay here in case. In case what?"

"Routine guard duty, that's all," explained Caquer. "Say, I've been stuck here all afternoon. Anything going on?"

"A little excitement. We been pulling in soap-box orators off and on all day. Screwballs. There's an epidemic of them."

"The devil you say! What are they hipped about?"

"Sector Two, for some reason I can't make out. They're trying to incite people to get mad at Sector Two and do something about it. The arguments they use are plain nutty."

Something stirred uneasily in Rod Caquer's memory—but he could not quite remember what it was. Sector Two? Who'd been telling him things about Sector Two recently—usury, unfairness, tainted blood, something silly. Although of course a lot of the people over there did have Martian blood in them. . . .

"How many of the orators were arrested?" he asked.

"We got seven. Two more slipped away from us, but we'll pick them up if they start spouting that kind of stuff again."

Lieutenant Caquer walked slowly, thoughtfully, to the Gordon apartment, trying his level best to remember where, recently, he heard anti-Sector Two propaganda. There must be something back of the simultaneous appearance of nine soap-box radicals, all preaching the same doctrine.

A sub-rosa political organization? But none such had existed for almost a century now. Under a perfectly democratic government, a component part of a stable system-wide organization of planets, there was no need for such activity. Of course an occasional crackpot was dissatisfied, but a group in that state of mind struck him as fantastic.

It sounded as crazy as the Willem Deem case. That did not make sense either. Things happened meaninglessly, as in a dream. Dream? What was he trying to remember about a dream? Hadn't he had an odd sort of dream last night—what was it?

But, as dreams usually do, it eluded his conscious mind.

Anyway, tomorrow he would question—or help question—those radicals who were under arrest. Put men on the job of tracing them back, and undoubtedly a common background somewhere, a tieup, would be found.

It could not be accidental that they should all pop up on the same day. It was screwy, just as screwy as the two inexplicable corpses of a book-and-reel shop proprietor. Maybe because the cases were both screwy, his mind tended to couple the two sets of events. But taken together, they were no more digestible than taken separately. They made even less sense.

Confound it, why hadn't he taken that post on Ganymede when it was offered to him? Ganymede was a nice orderly moon. Persons there did not get murdered twice on consecutive days. But Jane Gordon did not live on Ganymede; she lived right here in Sector Three and he was on his way to see her.

And everything was wonderful except that he felt so tired he could not think straight, and Jane Gordon insisted on looking on him as a brother instead of a suitor, and he was probably going to lose his job. He would be the laughingstock of Callisto if the special investigator from headquarters found some simple explanation of things that he had overlooked. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE: NINE-MAN MORRIS

Jane Gordon, looking more beautiful than he had ever seen her, met him at the door. She was smiling, but the smile changed to a look of concern as he stepped into the light.

"Rod!" she exclaimed. "You do look ill, really ill. What have you been doing to yourself besides forgetting to eat?"

Rod Caquer managed a grin.

"Chasing vicious circles up blind alleys, Icicle. May I use your visiphone?"

"Of course. I've some food ready for you; I'll put it on the table while you're calling. Dad's taking a nap. He said to wake him when you got here, but I'll hold off until you're fed."

She hurried out to the kitchen. Caquer almost fell into the chair before the visiscreen, and called the police station. The red, beefy face of Borgesen, the night lieutenant, flashed into view.

"Hi, Borg," said Caquer. "Listen, about those seven screwballs you picked up. Have you—"

"Nine," Borgesen interrupted. "We got the other two, and I wish we hadn't. We're going nuts down here."

"You mean the other two tried it again?"

"No. Suffering Asteroids, they came in and gave themselves up, and we can't kick them out, because there's a charge against them. But they're confessing all over the place. And do you know what they're confessing?"

"I'll bite," said Caquer.

"That you hired them, and offered one hundred credits apiece to them."

"Huh?"

Borgesen laughed, a little wildly. "The two that came in voluntarily say that, and the other seven—Gosh, why did I ever become a policeman? I had a chance to study for fireman on a spacer once, and I end up doing this."

"Look—maybe I better come around and see if they make that accusation to my face."

"They probably would, but it doesn't mean anything, Rod. They say you hired them this afternoon, and you were at Deem's with Brager all afternoon. Rod, this moon is going nuts. And so am I. Walter Johnson has disappeared. Hasn't been seen since this morning."

"What? The Regent's confidential secretary? You're kidding me, Borg."

"Wish I was. You ought to be glad you're off duty. Maxon's been raising seven brands of thunder for us to find his secretary for him. He doesn't like the Deem business, either. Seems to blame us for it; thinks it's bad enough for the department to let a man get killed once. Say, which was Deem, Rod? Got any idea?"

Caquer grinned weakly.

"Let's call them Deem and Redeem till we find out," he suggested. "I think they were both Deem."

"But how could one man be two?"

"How could one man be killed five ways?" countered Caquer. "Tell me that and I'll tell you the answer to yours."

"Nuts," said Borgesen, and followed it with a masterpiece of understatement. "There's something funny about that case."

Caquer was laughing so hard that there were tears in his eyes when Jane Gordon came to tell him food was ready. She frowned at him, but there was concern behind the frown.

Caquer followed her meekly, and discovered he was ravenous. When he'd put himself outside enough food for three ordinary meals, he felt almost human again. His headache was still there, but it was something that throbbed dimly in the distance.

Frail Professor Gordon was waiting in the living room when they went there from the kitchen. "Rod, you look like something the cat dragged in," he said. "Sit down before you fall down."

Caquer grinned. "Overeating did it. Jane's a cook in a million."

He sank into a chair facing Gordon. Jane Gordon had sat on the arm of her father's chair and Caquer's eyes feasted on her. How could a girl with lips as soft and kissable as hers insist on regarding marriage only as an academic subject? How could a girl with—

"I don't see offhand how it could be a cause of his death, Rod, but Willem Deem rented out political books," said Gordon. "There's no harm in my telling that, since the poor chap is dead."

Almost the same words, Caquer remembered, that Perry Peters had used in telling him the same thing.

Caquer nodded.

"We've searched his shop and his apartment and haven't found any, Professor," he said. "You wouldn't know, of course, what kind—"

Professor Gordon smiled. "I'm afraid I would, Rod. Off the record—and I take it you haven't a recorder on our conversation—I've read quite a few of them."

"You?" There was frank surprise in Caquer's voice.

"Never underestimate the curiosity of an educator, my boy. I fear the reading of Graydex books is a more prevalent vice among the instructors in universities than among any other class. Oh, I know it's wrong to encourage the trade, but the reading of such books can't possibly harm a balanced, judicious mind."

"And Father certainly has a balanced, judicious mind, Rod," said Jane, a bit defiantly. "Only—darn him—he wouldn't let me read those books."

Caquer grinned at her. The professor's use of the word "Graydex" had reassured him.

Renting Graydex books was only a misdemeanor, after all.

"Ever read any Graydex books, Rod?" the professor asked. Caquer shook his head.

"Then you've probably never heard of hypnotism. Some of the circumstances in the Deem case—Well, I've wondered whether hypnotism might have been used."

"I'm afraid I don't even know what it is, Professor."

The frail little man sighed.

"That's because you've never read illicit books, Rod," said Gordon. "Hypnotism is the control of one mind by another, and it reached a pretty high state of development before it

was outlawed. You've never heard of the Kaprelian Order or the Vargas Wheel?"

Caquer shook his head.

"The history of the subject is in Graydex books, in several of them," said the professor. "The actual methods, and how a Vargas Wheel is constructed would be Blackdex, high on the roster of the lawless. Of course, I haven't read that, but I have read the history.

"A man by the name of Mesmer, way back in the eighteenth century, was one of the first practitioners, if not the discoverer, of hypnotism. At any rate, he put it on a more or less scientific basis. By the twentieth century, quite a bit had been learned about it—and it became extensively used in medicine.

"A hundred years later, doctors were treating almost as many patients through hypnotism as through drugs and surgery. True, there were cases of its misuse, but they were relatively few.

"But another hundred years brought a big change. Mesmerism had developed too far for the public safety. Any criminal or selfish politician who had a smattering of the art could operate with impunity. He could fool all the people all the time, and get away with it."

"You mean he could really make people think anything he wanted them to?" Caquer asked.

"Not only that, he could make them do anything he wanted. And by that time, television was in such common use that one speaker could visibly and directly talk to millions of people."

"But couldn't the government have regulated the art?"

Professor Gordon smiled thinly. "How, when legislators were human, too, and as subject to hypnotism as the people under them? And then, to complicate things almost hopelessly, came the invention of the Vargas Wheel.

"It had been known, back as far as the nineteenth century, that an arrangement of moving mirrors could throw anyone who watched it into a state of hypnotic submission. And thought transmission had been experimented with in the twenty-first century. It was in the following one that Vargas combined and perfected the two into the Vargas Wheel. A sort of helmet affair, really, with a revolving wheel of specially constructed tricky mirrors on top of it."

"How did it work, Professor?" asked Caquer.

"The wearer of a Vargas Wheel helmet had immediate and automatic control over anyone who saw him—directly, or on a television screen," said Gordon. "The mirrors in the small turning wheel produced instantaneous hypnosis and the helmet—somehow—brought thoughts of its wearer to bear through the wheel and impressed upon his subjects any thoughts he wished to transmit.

"In fact, the helmet itself—or the wheel—could be set to produce certain fixed illusions without the necessity of the operator speaking, or even concentrating, on those points. Or the control could be direct, from his mind."

"Ouch," said Caquer. "A thing like that would—I can certainly see why instructions in making a Vargas Wheel would be Blackdexed. Suffering Asteroids! A man with one of these could—"

"Could do almost anything. Including killing a man and making the manner of his death appear five different ways to five different observers."

Caquer whistled softly. "And including playing nine-man Morris with soap-box radicals—or they wouldn't even have to be radicals. They could be ordinary orthodox citizens."

"Nine men?" Jane Gordon demanded. "What's this about nine men, Rod? I hadn't heard about it."

But Rod was already standing up.

"Haven't time to explain, Icicle," he said. "Tell you tomorrow, but I must get down to—Wait a minute. Professor, is that all you know about the Vargas Wheel business?"

Absolutely all, my boy. It just occurred to me as a possibility. There were only five or six of them ever made, and finally the government got hold of them and destroyed them, one by one. It cost millions of lives to do it.

"When they finally got everything cleaned up, colonization of the planets was starting, and an international council had been started with control over all governments. They decided that the whole field of hypnotism was too dangerous, and they made it a forbidden subject. It took quite a few centuries to wipe out all knowledge of it, but they succeeded. The proof is that you'd never heard of it."

"But how about the beneficial aspects of it," Jane Gordon asked. "Were they lost?"

"Of course," said her father. "But the science of medicine had progressed so far by that time that it wasn't too much of

a loss. Today the medicos can cure, by physical treatment, anything that hypnotism could handle."

Caquer who had halted at the door, now turned back.

"Professor, do you think it possible that someone could have rented a Blackdex book from Deem, and learned all those secrets?" he inquired.

Professor Gordon shrugged. "It's possible," he said. "Deem might have handled occasional Blackdex books, but he knew better than try to sell or rent any to me. So I wouldn't have heard of it."

At the station, Lieutenant Caquer found Lieutenant Borgesen on the verge of apoplexy.

He looked at Caquer.

"You!" he said. And then, plaintively, "The world's gone nuts. Listen, Brager discovered Willem Deem, didn't he? At ten o'clock yesterday morning? And stayed there on guard while Skidder and you and the clearance men were there?"

"Yes, why?" asked Caquer.

Borgesen's expression showed how much he was upset by developments.

"Nothing, not a thing, except that Brager was in the emergency hospital yesterday morning, from nine until after eleven, getting a sprained ankle treated. He couldn't have been at Deem's. Seven doctors and attendants and nurses swear up and down he was in the hospital at that time."

Caquer frowned.

"He was limping today, when he helped me search Deem's shop," he said. "What does Brager say?"

"He says he was there, I mean at Deem's, and discovered Deem's body. We just happened to find out otherwise accidentally—if it is otherwise. Rod, I'm going nuts. To think I had a chance to be fireman on a spacer and took this celestial job. Have you learned anything new?"

"Maybe. But first I want to ask you, Borg. About these nine nitwits you picked up. Has anybody tried to identify—"

"Them," interrupted Borgesen. "I let them go."

Caquer stared at the beefy face of the night lieutenant in utter amazement.

"Let them go?" he repeated. "You couldn't, legally. Man, they'd been charged. Without a trial, you couldn't turn them loose."

"Nuts. I did, and I'll take the responsibility for it. Look, Rod, they were right, weren't they?"

"What?"

"Sure. People ought to be waked up about what's going on over in Sector Two. Those phonies over there need taking down a peg, and we're the only ones to do it. This ought to be headquarters for Callisto, right here. Why listen, Rod, a united Callisto could take over Ganymede."

"Borg, was there anything over the televis tonight? Anybody make a speech you listened to?"

"Sure, didn't you hear it? Our friend Skidder. Must have been while you were walking here, because all the televis turned on automatically—it was a general."

"And—was anything specific suggested, Borg? About Sector Two, and Ganymede, and that sort of thing?"

"Sure, general meeting tomorrow morning at ten. In the square. We're all supposed to go; I'll see you there, won't I?"

"Yeah," said Lieutenant Caquer. "I'm afraid you will. I—I got to go, Borg."

CHAPTER SIX: TOO FAMILIAR FACE

Rod Caquer knew what was wrong now. Also the last thing he wanted to do was stay around the station listening to Borgesen talking under the influence of—what seemed to be—a Vargas Wheel. Nothing else, nothing less, could have made police Lieutenant Borgesen talk as he had just talked. Professor Gordon's guess was getting righter every minute. Nothing else could have brought about such results.

Caquer walked on blindly through the Jupiter lighted night, past the building in which his own apartment was. He did not want to go there either.

The streets of Sector Three City seemed crowded for so late an hour of the evening. Late? He glanced at his watch and whistled softly. It was not evening any more. It was two o'clock in the morning, and normally the streets would have been utterly deserted.

But they were not, tonight. People wandered about, alone or in small groups that walked together in uncanny silence. Shuffle of feet, but not even the whisper of a voice. Not even—

Whispers! Something about those streets and the people on them made Rod Caquer remember now, his dream of the night before. Only now he knew that it had not been a

dream. Nor had it been sleepwalking, in the ordinary sense of the word.

He had dressed. He had stolen out of the building. And the streetlights had been out too, and that meant that employes of the service department had neglected their posts. They, like others, had been wandering with the crowds.

"Kill—kill—kill—You hate them . . ."

A shiver ran down Rod Caquer's spine as he realized the significance of the fact that last night's dream had been a reality. This was something that dwarfed into insignificance the murder of a petty book-and-reel shop owner.

This was something which was gripping a city, something that could upset a world, something that could lead to unbelievable terror and carnage on a scale that hadn't been known since the twenty-fourth century. This—which had started as a simple murder case!

Up ahead somewhere, Rod Caquer heard the voice of a man addressing a crowd. A frenzied voice, shrill with fanaticism. He hurried his steps to the corner, and walked around it to find himself on the fringe of a crowd of people pressing around a man speaking from the top of a flight of steps.

"—and I tell you that tomorrow is the day. Now we have the Regent himself with us, and it will be unnecessary to depose him. Men are working all night tonight, preparing. After the meeting in the square tomorrow morning, we shall—"

"Hey!" Rod Caquer yelled. The man stopped talking and turned to look at Rod, and the crowd turned slowly, almost as one man, to stare at him.

"You're under—"

Then Caquer saw that this was but a futile gesture.

It was not the man's surging toward him that convinced him of this. He was not afraid of violence. He would have welcomed it as relief from uncanny terror, welcomed a chance to lay about him with the flat of his sword.

But standing behind the speaker was a man in uniform—Brager. And Caquer remembered, then, that Borgesen, now in charge at the station, was on the other side. How could he arrest the speaker, when Borgesen, now in charge, would refuse to book him. And what good would it do to start a riot and cause injury to innocent people—people acting not under their own volition, but under the insidious influence Professor Gordon had described to him?

Hand on his sword, he backed away. No one followed.

Like automatons, they turned back to the speaker, who resumed his harangue, as though never interrupted. Policeman Brager had not moved, had not even looked in the direction of his superior officer. He alone of all those there had not turned at Caquer's challenge.

Lieutenant Caquer hurried on in the direction he had been going when he had heard the speaker. That way would take him back downtown. He would find a place open where he could use a visiphone, and call the Sector Coordinator. This was an emergency.

And surely the scope of whoever had the Vargas Wheel had not yet extended beyond the boundaries of Sector Three.

He found an all-night restaurant, open but deserted, the lights on but no waiters on duty, no cashier behind the counter. He stepped into the visiphone booth and pushed the button for a long-distance operator. She flashed into sight on the screen almost at once.

"Sector Coordinator, Callisto City," Caquer said. "And rush it."

"Sorry, sir. Out of town service suspended by order of the controller of Utilities, for the duration."

"Duration of what?"

"We are not permitted to give out information."

Caquer gritted his teeth. Well, there was *one* someone who might be able to help him. He forced his voice to remain calm.

"Give me Professor Gordon, University Apartments," he told the operator.

"Yes, sir."

But the screen stayed dark, although the little red button that indicated the buzzer was operating flashed on and off, for minutes.

"There is no answer, sir."

Probably Gordon and his daughter were asleep, too soundly asleep to hear the buzzer. For a moment, Caquer considered rushing over there. But it was on the other side of town, and of what help could they be? None, and Professor Gordon was a frail old man, and ill.

No, he would have to— Again he pushed a button of the visiphone and a moment later was talking to the man in charge of the ship hangar.

"Get out that little speed job of the Police Department,"

snapped Caquer. "Have it ready and I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Sorry, Lieutenant," came the curt reply. "All outgoing power beams shut off, by special order. Everything's grounded for the emergency."

He might have known it, Caquer thought. But what about the special investigator coming in from the Coordinator's office? "Are incoming ships still permitted to land?" he inquired.

"Permitted to land, but not to leave again without special order," answered the voice.

"Thanks," Caquer said. He clicked off the screen and went out into the dawn, outside. There was a chance, then. The special investigator might be able to help.

But he, Rod Caquer would have to intercept him, tell him the story and its implications before he could fall, with the others, under the influence of the Vargas Wheel. Caquer strode rapidly toward the terminal. Maybe it was too late. Maybe his ship had already landed and the damage had been done.

Again he passed a knot of people gathered about a frenzied speaker. Almost everyone must be under the influence by this time. But why had he been spared? Why was not he, too, under the evil influence?

True, he must have been on the street on the way to the police station at the time Skidder had been on the air, but that didn't explain everything. All of these people could not have seen and heard that visicast. Some of them must have been asleep already at that hour.

Also he, Rod Caquer, had been affected, the night before, the night of the whispers. He must have been under the influence of the wheel at the time he investigated the murder—the murders.

Why, then, was he free now? Was he the only one, or were there others who had escaped, who were sane and their normal selves?

If not, if he was the only one, why was he free?

Or was he free?

Could it be that what he was doing right now was under direction, was part of some plan?

But no use to think that way, and go mad. He would have to carry on the best he could, and hope that things, with him, were what they seemed to be.

Then he broke into a run, for ahead was the open area of the terminal, and a small spaceship, silver in the dawn, was settling down to land. A small official speedster—it must be the special investigator. He ran around the check-in building, through the gate in the wire fence, and toward the ship, which was already down. The door opening.

A small, wiry man stepped out and closed the door behind him. He saw Caquer and smiled.

"You're Caquer?" he asked, pleasantly. "Coordinator's office sent me to investigate a case you fellows are troubled with. My name—"

Lieutenant Rod Caquer was staring with horrified fascination at the little man's well-known features, the all-too-familiar wart on the side of the little man's nose, listening for the announcement he knew this man was going to make—

"—is Willem Deem. Shall we go to your office?"

CHAPTER SEVEN: WHEELS WITHIN THE WHEEL

Such a thing as too much can happen to any man!

Lieutenant Rod Caquer, Lieutenant of Police of Sector Three, Callisto, had experienced more than his share. How can you investigate the murder of a man who has been killed twice? How should a policeman act when the victim shows up, alive and happy, to help you solve the case?

Not even when you know he is not there really—or if he is, he is not what your eyes tell you he is and is not saying what your ears hear.

There is a point beyond which the human mind can no longer function sanely with proper sense and when they reach and pass that point different people react in different ways.

Rod Caquer's reaction was a sudden blind, red anger. Directed, for lack of a better object, at the special investigator—if he was the special investigator and not a hypnotic phantasm which wasn't there at all.

Rod Caquer's fist lashed out, and it met a chin. Which proved nothing except that if the little man who'd just stepped out of the speedster was an illusion, he was an illusion of touch as well as of sight. Rod's fist exploded on his chin like a rocket blast, and the little man swayed and fell forward. Still smiling, because he had not had time to change the expression on his face.

He fell face down, and then rolled over, his eyes closed but smiling gently up at the brightening sky.

Shakily, Caquer bent own and put his hand against the front of the man's tunic. There was the thump of a beating heart, all right. For a moment, Caquer had feared he might have killed with that blow.

And Caquer closed his eyes, deliberately, and felt the man's face with his hand—and it still felt like the face of Willem Deem looked, and the wart was there to the touch as well as to the sense of sight.

Two men had run out of the check-in building and were coming across the field toward him. Rod caught the expression on their faces and then thought of the little speedster only a few paces from him. He had to get out of Sector Three City, to tell somebody what was happening before it was too late.

If only they'd been lying about the outgoing power beam being shut off. He leaped across the body of the man he had struck and into the door of the speedster, jerked at the controls. But the ship did not respond, and—no, they hadn't been lying about the power beam.

No use staying here for a fight that could not possibly decide anything. He went out the door of the speedster, on the other side, away from the men coming toward him, and ran for the fence.

It was electrically charged, that fence. Not enough to kill a man, but plenty to hold him stuck to it until men with rubber gloves cut the wire and took him off. But if the power beam was off, probably the current in the fence was off, too.

It was too high to jump, so he took the chance. And the current was off. He scrambled over it safely and his pursuers stopped and went back to take care of the fallen man beside the speedster.

Caquer slowed down to a walk, but he kept on going. He didn't know where, but he had somehow to keep moving. After a while he found that his steps were taking him toward the edge of town, on the northern side, toward Callisto City.

But that was silly. He couldn't possibly walk to Callisto City and get there in less than three days. Even if he could walk across the intervening roadless desert at all. Besides, three days would be too late.

He was in a small park near the north border when the significance, and the futility, of his direction came to him. And

he found, at the same time, that his muscles were sore and tired, that he had a raging headache, that he could not keep on going unless he had a worthwhile and possible goal.

He sank down on a park bench, and for a while his head was sunk in his hands. No answer came.

After a while he looked up and saw something that fascinated him. A child's pinwheel on a stick, stuck in the grass of the park, spinning in the wind. Now fast, now slow, as the breeze varied.

It was going in circles, like his mind was. How could a man's mind go other than in circles when he could not tell what was reality and what was illusion? Going in circles, like a Vargas Wheel.

Circles.

But there ought to be some way. A man with a Vargas Wheel was not completely invincible, else how had the council finally succeeded in destroying the few that had been made? True, possessors of the wheels would have cancelled each other out to some extent, but there must have been a last wheel, in someone's hands. Owned by someone who wanted to control the destiny of the solar system.

But they had stopped the wheel.

It could be stopped, then. But how? How, when one could not see it? Rather when the sight of it put a man so completely under its control that he no longer, after the first glimpse, knew that it was there because, on sight, it had captured his mind.

He must stop the wheel. That was the only answer. But how?

That pinwheel there could be the Vargas Wheel, for all he could tell, set to create the illusion that it was a child's toy. Or its possessor, wearing the helmet, might be standing on the path in front of him at this moment, watching him. The possessor of the wheel might be invisible because Caquer's mind was told not to see.

But if the man was there, he'd be *really* there, and should Rod slash out with his sword, the menace would be ended, wouldn't it? Of course.

But how to find a wheel that one could not see? That one could not see because—

And then, still staring at the pinwheel, Caquer saw a chance, something that might work, a slender chance!

He looked quickly at his wristwatch and saw that it was

half past nine which was one half hour before the demonstration in the square. And the wheel and its owner would be there, surely.

His aching muscles forgotten, Lieutenant Rod Caquer started to run back toward the center of town. The streets were deserted. Everyone had gone to the square, of course. They had been told to come.

He was winded after a few blocks, and had to slow down to a rapid walk, but there would be time for him to get there before it was over, even if he missed the start.

Yes, he could get there all right. And then, if his idea worked. . . .

It was almost ten when he passed the building where his own office was situated, and kept on going. He turned in a few doors beyond. The elevator operator was gone, but Caquer ran the elevator up and a minute later he had used his picklock on a door and was in Perry Peters's laboratory.

Peters was gone, of course, but the goggles were there, the special goggles with the trick windshield-wiper effect that made them usable in radite mining.

Rod Caquer slipped them over his eyes, put the motive-power battery into his pocket, and touched the button on the side. They worked. He could see dimly as the wipers flashed back and forth. But a minute later they stopped.

Of course. Peters had said that the shafts heated and expanded after a minute's operation. Well, that might not matter. A minute might be long enough, and the metal would have cooled by the time he reached the square.

But he would have to be able to vary the speed. Among the litter of stuff on the workbench, he found a small rheostat and spliced it in one of the wires that ran from the battery to the goggles.

That was the best he could do. No time to try it out. He slid the goggles up onto his forehead and ran out into the hall, took the elevator down to street level. And a moment later he was running toward the public square, two blocks away.

He reached the fringe of the crowd gathered in the square looking up at the two balconies of the Regency building. On the lower one were several people he recognized. Dr. Skidder, Walther Johnson. Even Lieutenant Borgesen was there.

On the higher balcony, Regent Barr Maxon was alone, and was speaking to the crowd below. His sonorous voice rolled

out phrases extolling the might of empire. Only a little distance away, in the crowd, Caquer caught sight of the gray hair of Professor Gordon, and Jane Gordon's golden head beside it. He wondered if they were under the spell, too. Of course they were deluded also or they would not be there. He realized it would be useless to speak to them, then, and tell them what he was trying to do.

Lieutenant Caquer slid the goggles down over his eyes, blinded momentarily because the wiper arms were in the wrong position. But his fingers found the rheostat, set at zero, and began to move it slowly around the dial toward maximum.

And then, as the wipers began their frantic dance and accelerated, he could see dimly. Through the arc-shaped lenses, he looked around him. On the lower balcony he saw nothing unusual, but on the upper balcony the figure of Regent Barr suddenly blurred.

There was a man standing there on the upper balcony wearing a strange-looking helmet with wires and atop the helmet was a three-inch wheel of mirrors and prisms.

A wheel that stood still, because of the stroboscopic effect of the mechanized goggles. For an instant, the speed of those wiper arms was synchronized with the spinning of the wheel, so that each successive glimpse of the wheel showed it in the same position, and to Caquer's eyes the wheel stood still, and he could see it.

Then the goggles jammed.

But he did not need them any more now.

He knew that Barr Maxon, or whoever stood up there on the balcony, was the wearer of the wheel.

Silently, and attracting as little attention as possible, Caquer sprinted around the fringe of the crowd and reached the side door of the Regency building.

There was a guard on duty there.

"Sorry, sir, but no one's allowed—"

Then he tried to duck, too late. The flat of Police Lieutenant Rod Caquer's shortsword thudded against his head.

The inside of the building seemed deserted. Caquer ran up the three flights of stairs that would take him to the level of the higher balcony, and down the hall toward the balcony door.

He burst through it, and Regent Maxon turned. Maxon now no longer wore the helmet on his head. Caquer had lost

the goggles, but whether he could see it or not, Caquer knew the helmet and the wheel were still in place and working, and that this was his one chance.

Maxon turned and saw Lieutenant Caquer's face, and his drawn sword.

Then, abruptly, Maxon's figure vanished. It seemed to Caquer—although he knew that it was not—that the figure before him was that of Jane Gordon. Jane, looking at him pleadingly, and speaking in melting tones.

"Rod, don't—" she began to say.

But it was not Jane, he knew. A thought, in self-preservation, had been directed at him by the manipulator of the Var-gas Wheel.

Caquer raised his sword, and he brought it down hard.

Glass shattered and there was the ring of metal on metal, as his sword cut through and split the helmet.

Of course it was not Jane now—just a dead man lying there with blood oozing out of the split in a strange and complicated, but utterly shattered, helmet. A helmet that could now be seen by everyone there, and by Lieutenant Caquer himself.

Just as everyone, including Caquer, himself, could recognize the man who had worn it.

He was a small, wiry man, and there was an unsightly wart on the side of his nose.

Yes, it was Willem Deem. And this time, Rod Caquer knew, it *was* Willem Deem. . . .

"I thought," Jane Gordon said, "that you were going to leave for Callisto City without saying good-bye to us."

Rod Caquer threw his hat in the general direction of a hook.

"Oh, that," he said. "I'm not even sure I'm going to take the promotion to a job as police coordinator there. I have a week to decide, and I'll be around town at least that long. How you been doing, Icicle?"

"Fine, Rod. Sit down. Father will be home soon, and I know he has a lot of things to ask you. Why, we haven't seen you since the big mass meeting."

Funny how dumb a smart man can be, at times.

But then again, he had proposed so often and been refused, that it was not all his fault.

He just looked at her.

"Rod, all the story never came out in the newscasts," she

said. "I know you'll have to tell it all over again for my father, but while we're waiting for him, won't you give me some information?"

Rod grinned.

"Nothing to it, really, Icicle," he said. "Willem Deem got hold of a Blackdex book, and found out how to make a Vargas Wheel. So he made one, and it gave him ideas.

"His first idea was to kill Barr Maxon and take over as Regent, setting the helmet so he would appear to be Maxon. He put Maxon's body in his own shop, and then had a lot of fun with his own murder. He had a warped sense of humor, and got a kick out of chasing us in circles."

"But just how did he do all the rest?" asked the girl.

"He was there as Brager, and pretended to discover his own body. He gave one description of the method of death, and caused Skidder and me and the clearance men to see the body of Maxon each a different way. No wonder we nearly went nuts."

"But Brager remembered being there too," she objected.

"Brager was in the hospital at the time, but Deem saw him afterward and impressed on his mind the memory pattern of having discovered Deem's body," explained Caquer. "So naturally, Brager thought he had been there.

"Then he killed Maxon's confidential secretary, because being so close to the Regent, the secretary must have suspected something was wrong even though he couldn't guess what. That was the second corpse of Willem Deem, who was beginning to enjoy himself in earnest when he pulled that on us.

"And of course he never sent to Callisto City for a special investigator at all. He just had fun with me, by making me seem to meet one and having the guy turn out to be Willem Deem again. I nearly did go nuts then, I guess."

"But why, Rod, weren't you as deeply in as the others—I mean on the business of conquering Callisto and all of that?" she inquired. "You were free of that part of the hypnosis."

Caquer shrugged.

"Maybe it was because I missed Skidder's talk on the televis," he suggested. "Of course it wasn't Skidder at all, it was Deem in another guise and wearing the helmet. And maybe he deliberately left me out, because he was having a psychopathic kind of fun out of my trying to investigate the murders of two Willem Deems. It's hard to figure. Perhaps I was

slightly cracked from the strain, and it might have been that for that reason I was partially resistant to the group hypnosis."

"You think he really intended to try to rule all of Callisto, Rod?" asked the girl.

"We'll never know, for sure, just how far he wanted or expected to go later. At first, he was just experimenting with the powers of hypnosis, through the wheel. That first night, he sent people out of their houses into the streets, and then sent them back and made them forget it. Just a test, undoubtedly."

Caquer paused and frowned thoughtfully.

"He was undoubtedly psychopathic, though, and we don't dare even guess what all his plans were," he continued. "You understand how the goggles worked to neutralize the wheel, don't you, Icicle?"

"I think so. That was brilliant, Rod. It's like when you take a moving picture of a turning wheel, isn't it? If the camera synchronizes with the turning of the wheel, so that each successive picture shows it after a complete revolution, then it looks like it's standing still when you show the movie."

Caquer nodded.

"That's it on the head," he said. "Just luck I had access to those goggles, though. For just a second I could see a man wearing a helmet up there on the balcony—but that was all I had to know."

"But Rod, when you rushed out on the balcony, you didn't have the goggles on any more. Couldn't he have stopped you, by hypnosis?"

"Well, he didn't. I guess there wasn't time for him to take over control of me. He did flash an illusion at me. It wasn't either Barr Maxon or Willem Deem I saw standing there at the last minute. It was you, Jane."

"I?"

"Yep, you. I guess he knew I'm in love with you, and that's the first thing flashed into his mind; that I wouldn't dare use the sword if I thought it was you standing there. But I knew it wasn't you, in spite of the evidence of my eyes, so I swung it."

He shuddered slightly, remembering the willpower he had needed to bring that sword down.

"The worst of it was that I saw you standing there like I've

always wanted to see you—with your arms out toward me, and looking at me as though you loved me.”

“Like this, Rod?”

And he was not too dumb to get the idea, that time.

DOORWAY INTO TIME

Famous Fantastic Mysteries,

September

by C. L. Moore

This may be a solo effort by Catherine Moore, although the science fantasy element was also common in Kuttner's work. The story appeared in Famous Fantastic Mysteries, which is unusual in itself, since FFM was primarily a reprint magazine, restoring to print works by hands as diverse as those of Franz Kafka, Ray Cummings and H.G. Wells. It had a surprisingly long run, lasting from 1939 to 1953, a remarkable performance which saw it survive the paper shortage of World War II, which killed so many of the pulp magazines.

(Long before the feminist revolution had brought women authors by the dozen into science fiction, C. L. Moore was one of the few who invaded what had been an almost purely masculine realm. What's more, her stories seemed "masculine" because they didn't deal with the petty fripperies that readers expected of women authors and that women authors were therefore forced to deal with if they expected to sell. I wonder how many of her early readers assumed C. L. stood for Charles Ludwig, or something like that. I was in the audience a couple of years ago when she appeared at a convention. She has aged well, married again in the period since Hank Kuttner's death and seemed very happy and contented with life.—I.A.)

He came slowly, with long, soft, ponderous strides, along the hallway of his treasure house. The gleanings of many

worlds were here around him, he had ransacked space and time for the treasures that filled his palace. The robes that moulded their folds richly against his great rolling limbs as he walked were in themselves as priceless as anything within these walls, gossamer fabric pressed into raised designs that had no meaning, this far from the world upon which they had been created, but—in their beauty—universal. But he was himself more beautiful than anything in all that vast collection. He knew it complacently, a warm contented knowledge deep in the center of his brain.

His motion was beautiful, smooth power pouring along his limbs as he walked, his great bulk ponderous and graceful. The precious robes he wore flowed open over his magnificent body. He ran one sensuous palm down his side, enjoying the texture of that strange, embossed delicacy in a fabric thinner than gauze. His eyes were proud and half shut, flashing many-colored under the heavy lids. The eyes were never twice quite the same color, but all the colors were beautiful.

He was growing restless again. He knew the feeling well, that familiar quiver of discontent widening and strengthening far back in his mind. It was time to set out once more on the track of something dangerous. In times past, when he had first begun to stock this treasure house, beauty alone had been enough. It was not enough any longer. Danger had to be there too. His tastes were growing capricious and perhaps a little decadent, for he had lived a very long time.

Yes, there must be a risk attending the capture of his next new treasure. He must seek out great beauty and great danger, and subdue the one and win the other, and the thought of it made his eyes change color and the blood beat faster in mighty rhythms through his veins. He smoothed his palm again along the embossed designs of the robe that moulded itself to his body. The great, rolling strides carried him noiselessly over the knife-edged patterns of the floor.

Nothing in life meant much to him any more except these beautiful things which his own passion for beauty had brought together. And even about these he was growing capricious now. He glanced up at a deep frame set in the wall just at the bend of the corridor, where his appreciative eyes could not fail to strike the objects it enclosed at just the proper angle. Here was a group of three organisms fixed in an arrangement that once had given him intense pleasure. On their own world they might have been living creatures, per-

haps even intelligent. He neither knew nor cared. He did not even remember now if there had been eyes upon their world to see, or minds to recognize beauty. He cared only that they had given him acute pleasure whenever he turned this bend of the corridor and saw them frozen into eternal perfection in their frame.

But the pleasure was clouded as he looked at them now. His half-shut eyes changed color, shifting along the spectrum from yellow-green to the cooler purity of true green. This particular treasure had been acquired in perfect safety; its value was impaired for him, remembering that. And the quiver of discontent grew stronger in his mind. Yes, it was time to go out hunting again. . . .

And here, set against a panel of velvet, was a great oval stone whose surface exhaled a light as soft as smoke, in waves whose colors changed with languorous slowness. Once the effect had been almost intoxicating to him. He had taken it from the central pavement of a great city square upon a world whose location he had forgotten long ago. He did not know if the people of the city had valued it, or perceived its beauty at all. But he had won it with only a minor skirmish, and now in his bitter mood it was valueless to his eyes.

He quickened his steps, and the whole solid structure of the palace shook just perceptibly underfoot as he moved with ponderous majesty down the hall. He was still running one palm in absent appreciation up and down the robe across his mighty side, but his mind was not on present treasures anymore. He was looking to the future, and the color of his eyes had gone shivering up the spectrum to orange, warm with the anticipation of danger. His nostrils flared a little and his wide mouth turned down at the corners in an inverted grimace. The knife-edged patterns of the floor sang faintly beneath his footsteps, their sharp intricacies quivering as the pressure of his steps passed by.

He went past a fountain of colored fire which he had wrecked a city to possess. He thrust aside a hanging woven of unyielding crystal spears which only his great strength could have moved. It gave out showers of colored sparks when he touched it, but their beauty did not delay him now.

His mind had run on ahead of him, into that room in the center of his palace, round and dim, from which he searched the universe for plunder and through whose doorways he set out upon its track. He came ponderously along the hall

toward it, passing unheeded treasures, the gossamer of his robes floating after him like a cloud.

On the wall before him, in the dimness of the room, a great circular screen looked out opaquely, waiting his touch. A doorway into time and space. A doorway to beauty and deadly peril and everything that made livable for him a life which had perhaps gone on too long already. It took strong measures now to stir the jaded senses which once had responded so eagerly to more stimuli than he could remember anymore. He sighed, his great chest expanding tremendously. Somewhere beyond that screen, upon some world he had never trod before, a treasure was waiting lovely enough to tempt his boredom and dangerous enough to dispel it for just a little while.

The screen brightened as he neared the wall. Blurred shadows moved, vague sounds drifted into the room. His wonderful senses sorted the noises and the shapes and dismissed them as they formed; his eyes were round and luminous now, and the orange fires deepened as he watched. Now the shadows upon the screen moved faster. Something was taking shape. The shadows leaped backward into three-dimensional vividness that wavered for a moment and then sharpened into focus upon a desert landscape under a vivid crimson sky. Out of the soil a cluster of tall flowers rose swaying, exquisitely shaped, their colors shifting in that strange light. He glanced at them carelessly and grimaced. And the screen faded.

He searched the void again, turning up scene after curious scene and dismissing each with a glance. There was a wall of carved translucent panels around a city he did not bother to identify. He saw a great shining bird that trailed luminous plumage, and a tapestry woven gorgeously with scenes from no earthly legend, but he let all of them fade again without a second look, and the orange glow in his eyes began to dull with boredom.

Once he paused for a while before the picture of a tall, dark idol carved into a shape he did not recognize, its strange limbs adorned with jewels that dripped fire, and for an instant his pulse quickened. It was pleasant to think of those jewels upon his own great limbs, trailing drops of flame along his halls. But when he looked again he saw that the idol stood deserted upon a barren world, its treasure his for the taking. And he knew that so cheap a winning would be savorless. He

sighed again, from the depths of his mighty chest, and let the screen shift its pictures on.

It was the faraway flicker of golden lightning in the void that first caught his eyes, the distant scream of it from some world without a name. Idly he let the screen's shadows form a picture. First was the lightning, hissing and writhing from a mechanism which he spared only one disinterested glance. For beside it two figures were taking shape, and as he watched them his restless motions stilled and the floating robe settled slowly about his body. His eyes brightened to orange again. He stood very quiet, staring.

The figures were of a shape he had not seen before. Remotely like his own, but flexible and very slender, and of proportions grotesquely different from his. And one of them, in spite of its difference, was—He stared thoughtfully. Yes, it was beautiful. Excitement began to kindle behind his quietness. And the longer he stared the clearer the organism's subtle loveliness grew. No obvious flamboyance like the fire-dripping jewels or the gorgeously plumed bird, but a delicate beauty of long, smooth curves and tapering lines, and colors in softly blended tints of apricot and creamy white and warm orange-red. Folds of blue-green swathing it were probably garments of some sort. He wondered if it was intelligent enough to defend itself, or if the creature beside it, making lightnings spurt out of the mechanism over which it bent, would know or care if he reached out to take its companion away.

He leaned closer to the screen, his breath beginning to come fast and his eyes glowing with the first flush of red that meant excitement. Yes, this was a lovely thing. A very lovely trophy for his halls. Briefly he thought of it arranged in a frame whose ornaments would echo the soft and subtle curves of the creature itself, colored to enhance the delicacy of the subject's coloring. Certainly a prize worth troubling himself for—if there were danger anywhere near to make it a prize worth winning. . . .

He put one hand on each side of the screen and leaned forward into it a little, staring with eyes that were a dangerous scarlet now. That flare of lightning looked like a weapon of some sort. If the creatures had intelligence—It would be amusing to test the limits of their minds, and the power of the weapon they were using. . . .

He watched a moment longer, his breath quickening. His

mighty shoulders hunched forward. Then with one shrug he cast off the hampering garment of gossamer and laughed deep in his throat and lunged smoothly forward into the open doorway of the screen. He went naked and weaponless, his eyes blazing scarlet. This was all that made life worth living. Danger, and beauty beyond danger. . . .

Darkness spun around him. He shot forward through dimensionless infinity along a corridor of his own devising.

The girl leaned back on her metal bench and crossed one beautiful long leg over the other, stirring the sequined folds of her gown into flashing motion.

"How much longer, Paul?" she asked.

The man glanced over his shoulder and smiled.

"Five minutes. Look away now—I'm going to try it again." He reached up to slip a curved, transparent mask forward, closing his pleasant, dark face away from the glare. The girl sighed and shifted on the bench, averting her eyes.

The laboratory was walled and ceiled in dully reflecting metal, so that the blue-green blur of her gown moved as if in dim mirrors all around her when she changed position. She lifted a bare arm to touch her hair, and saw the reflections lift too, and the pale blur that was her hair, shining ashes of silver and elaborately coiffed.

The murmur of well-oiled metal moving against metal told her that a lever had been shifted, and almost instantly the room was full of golden glare, like daylight broken into hissing fragments as jagged as lightning. For a long moment the walls quivered with light and sound. Then the hissing died, the glare faded. A smell of hot metal tainted the air.

The man sighed heavily with satisfaction and lifted both hands to pull the mask off. Indistinctly behind the glass she heard him say:

"Well, that's done. Now we can—"

But he never finished, and the helmet remained fixed on his shoulders as he stared at the wall they were both facing. Slowly, almost absentmindedly, he pushed aside the glass across his face, as if he thought it might be responsible for the thing they both saw. For above the banked machinery which controlled the mechanism he had just released, a shadow had fallen upon the wall. A great circle of shadow. . . .

Now it was a circle of darkness, as if twilight had rushed timelessly into midnight before them as they watched, and a

midnight blacker than anything earth ever knew. The midnight of the ether, of bottomless spaces between worlds. And now it was no longer a shadow, but a window opening upon that midnight, and the midnight was pouring through. . . .

Like smoke the darkness flowed in upon them, dimming the glitter of machinery, dimming the girl's pale hair and pale, shining shoulders and the shimmer of her gown until the man looked at her as if through veil upon veil of falling twilight.

Belatedly he moved, making a useless gesture of brushing the dark away with both hands before his face.

"Alanna—" he said helplessly. "What's happened? I can't see—very well—"

He heard her whimper in bewilderment, putting her own hands to her eyes as if she thought blindness had come suddenly upon them both. He was too sick with sudden dizziness to move or speak. This, he told himself wildly, must be the blindness that foreruns a swoon, and his obedient mind made the floor seem to tilt as if the faintness and blindness were inherent in himself, and not the result of some outward force.

But before either of them could do more than stammer a little, as their minds tried desperately to rationalize what was happening into some weakness of their own senses, the dark was complete. The room brimmed with it, and sight ceased to exist.

When the man felt the floor shake, he thought for an unfathomable moment that it was his own blindness, his own faintness again, deceiving his senses. The floor could not shake, as if to a ponderous tread. For there was no one here but themselves—there could not be great footfalls moving softly through the dark, making the walls shudder a little as they came. . . .

Alanna's caught breath was clear in the silence. Not terror at first; but surprised inquiry. She said, "Paul—Paul, don't—"

And then he heard the beginning of her scream. He heard the beginning, but incredibly, he never heard the scream's end. One moment the full-throated roundness of her cry filled the room, pouring from a throat stretched wide with terror; the next, the sound diminished and vanished into infinite distances, plummeting away from him and growing thin and tiny while the echo of its first sound still rang through the room. The impossibility of such speed put the last touch of nightmare upon the whole episode. He did not believe it.

The dark was paling again. Rubbing his eyes, still not sure at all that this had not been some brief aberration of his own senses, he said, "Alanna—I thought—"

But the twilight around him was empty.

He had no idea how long a while elapsed between that moment and the moment when he stood up straight at last, facing the wall upon which the shadow still lay. In between there must have been a period of frantic search, of near hysteria and self-doubt and reeling disbelief. But now, as he stood looking up at the wall upon which the shadow still hung blackly, drawing into itself the last veils of twilight from the corners of the room, he ceased to rationalize or disbelieve.

Alanna was gone. Somehow, impossibly, in the darkness that had come upon them a Something with great silent feet that trod ponderously, shaking the walls, had seized her in the moment when she said, "Paul—" thinking it was himself. And while she screamed, it had vanished into infinite distances out of this room, carrying her with it.

That it was impossible he had no time to consider. He had time now only to realize that nothing had passed him toward the door, and that the great circle upon the wall before him was—an entrance?—out of which Something had come and into which Something must have retreated again—and not alone. . . .

And the entrance was closing.

He took one step toward it, unreasoning and urgent, and then stumbled over the boxed instrument which he had been testing just before insanity entered the room. The sight and feel of it brought back his own sanity a little. Here was a weapon; it offered a grip upon slipping reality to know that he was not wholly helpless. Briefly he wondered whether any weapon at all would avail against That which came in impossible darkness on feet that made no sound, though their tread shook the foundations of the building. . . .

But the weapon was heavy. And how far away from the parent machine would it work? With shaking fingers he groped for the carrying handle. He staggered a little, lifting it, but he turned toward the end of the room where the great circle drank in the last of its twilight and began imperceptibly to pale upon the wall. If he were to follow, to take That

which had gone before him by surprise, he must go swiftly. . . .

One glance at the lever of the parent machine, to be sure it was thrown full over, for the weapon itself drank power from that source alone—if it would drink power at all in the unfathomable distances to which he was going. . . . One last unbelieving glance around the room, to be quite sure Alanna was really gone—

The lower arc of the circle was a threshold opening upon darkness. He could not think that he would pass it, this flat shadow upon the flat and solid wall, but he put out one hand uncertainly and took a step forward, and another, bent to the weight of the box he carried. . . .

But there was no longer any weight. Nor was there any light or sound—only wild, whirling motion that spun him over and over in the depths of his blindness. Spun interminably—spun for untimed eons that passed in the flash of an eye. And then—

“Paul! Oh, Paul!”

He stood reeling in a dim, round room walled with strange designs he could not quite focus upon. He had no sense that was not shaken intolerably; even sight was not to be relied upon just now. He thought he saw Alanna in the dimness, pale hair falling over her pale, shining shoulders, her face distorted with bewilderment and terror. . . .

“Paul! Paul, answer me! What is it? What’s happened?”

He could not speak yet. He could only shake his head and cling by blind instinct to the weight that dragged down upon one arm. Alanna drew her bare shoulders together under the showering hair and hugged herself fearfully, the creamy arms showing paler circles where her fingertips pressed them hard. Her teeth were chattering, though not from cold.

“How did we get here?” she was saying. “How did we get here, Paul? We’ll have to go back, won’t we? I wonder what’s happened to us.” The words were almost aimless, as if the sound of speech itself were more important to her now than any sense of what she was saying. “Look behind you, Paul—see? We came out of—there.”

He turned. A great circle of mirror rose behind him on the dim wall, but a mirror reversed, so that it reflected not themselves, but the room they had just left.

Clearer than a picture—he looked into it—his laboratory walls shining with dull reflections, his batteries and dials, and

the lever standing up before them that meant the heavy thing he carried would be deadly—perhaps. Deadly? A weapon in a dream? Did they even know that the Something which dwelt here was inimical?

But this was ridiculous. It was too soon yet to accept the fact that they were standing here at all. In reality, of course, they must both be back in the laboratory, and both of them dreaming the same strange dream. And he felt, somehow, that to treat all this as a reality would be dangerous. For if he accepted even by implication that such a thing could be true, then perhaps—perhaps. . . . Could acceptance make it *come true*?

He set his weapon down and rubbed his arm dazedly, looking around. Words did not come easily yet, but he had to ask one question.

"That—that thing, Alanna. What was it? How did you—"

She gripped her own bare arms harder, and another spasm of shuddering went over her. The blue-green sequins flashed chilly star points from her gown as she moved. Her voice shook too; her very mind seemed to be shaking behind the blank eyes. But when she spoke the words made approximate sense. And they echoed his own thought.

"I'm dreaming all this, you know." Her voice sounded far away. "This isn't really happening. But—but *something* took me in its arms back there." She nodded toward the mirrored laboratory on the wall. "And everything whirled, and then—" A hard shudder seized her. "I don't know. . . ."

"Did you see it?"

She shook her head. "Maybe I did. I'm not sure. I was so dizzy—I think it went away through that door. Would you call it a door?" Her little breath of laughter was very near hysteria. "I—I felt its feet moving away."

"But what was it? What did it look like?"

"I don't know, Paul."

He closed his lips on the questions that rushed to be asked. Here in the dream, many things were very alien indeed. Those patterns on the wall, for instance. He thought he could understand how one could look at something and not be sure at all what the something was. And Alanna's heavy spasms of shuddering proved that shock must have blanked her mind protectively to much of what had happened. She said:

"Aren't we going back now, Paul?" And her eyes flickered past him to the pictured laboratory. It was a child's question;

her mind was refusing to accept anything but the barest essentials of their predicament. But he could not answer. His first impulse was to say, "Wait—we'll wake up in a minute." But suppose they did not? Suppose they were trapped here? and if the Thing came back. . . . Heavily, he said:

"Of course it's a dream, Alanna. But while it lasts I think we'll have to act as if it were real. I don't want to—" The truth was, he thought, he was afraid to. "But we must. And going back wouldn't do any good as long as we go on dreaming. *It* would just come after us again."

It would come striding through the dream to drag them back, and after all people have died in their sleep—died in their dreams, he thought.

He touched the unwieldy weapon with his toe, thinking silently, "This will help us—maybe. If anything can, it will. And if it won't—well, neither will running away." And he glanced toward the high, distorted opening that must be a doorway into some other part of this unimaginable, dream-created building. It had gone that way, then. Perhaps they should follow. Perhaps their greatest hope of waking safely out of this nightmare lay in acting rashly, in following with the weapon before it expected them to follow. It might not guess his own presence here at all. It must have left Alanna alone in the dim room, intending to return, not thinking to find her with a defender, or to find the defender armed. . . .

But was he armed? He grinned wryly.

Perhaps he ought to test the weapon. And yet, for all he knew, the Thing's strange, alien gaze might be upon him now. He was aware of a strong reluctance to let it know that he had any defense against it. Surprise—that was important. Keep it a secret until he needed a weapon, if he ever did need one. Very gently he pressed the trigger of the lens that had poured out lightnings in the faraway sanity of his laboratory. Would it work in—a dream? For a long moment nothing happened. Then, faintly and delicately against his palm he felt the tubing begin to throb just a little. It was as much of an answer as he dared take now. Some power was there. Enough? He did not know. It was unthinkable, really, that he should ever need to know. Still—

"Alanna," he said, "I think we'd better explore a little. No use just standing here waiting for *it* to come back. It may be perfectly friendly, you know. Dream creatures often are. But I'd like to see what's outside."

"We'll wake up in a minute," she assured him between chattering teeth. "I'm all right, I think, really. Just—just nervous." He thought she seemed to be rousing from her stupor. Perhaps the prospect of action—any action—even rashness like this, was better for them both than inactivity. He felt surer of himself as he lifted the heavy weapon.

"But Paul, we can't!" She turned, halfway to the door, and faced him. "Didn't I tell you? I tried that before you came. There's a corridor outside, with knives all over the floor. Patterns of them, sharp-edged spirals and—and shapes. Look." She lifted her sparkling skirt a little and put out one foot. He could see the clean, sharp lacerations of the leather sole. His shoulders sagged a bit. Then:

"Well, let's look anyhow. Come on."

The corridor stretched before them, swimming in purple distances, great gothic hollows and arches melting upon arches. There were things upon the walls. Like the patterns in the room behind them, many were impossible to focus upon directly, too different from anything in human experience to convey meaning to the brain. The eye perceived them blankly, drawing no conclusions. He thought vaguely that the hall looked like a museum, with those great frames upon the walls.

Beside the door another tall frame leaned, empty. About six feet high, it was deep enough for a man to lie down in, and all around its edges an elaborate and beautiful decoration writhed, colored precisely like Alanna's blue-green gown. Interwoven in it were strands of silver, the color of her pale and shining hair.

"It looks like a coffin," Alanna said aimlessly. Some very ugly thought stirred in Paul's mind. He would not recognize it; he pushed it back out of sight quickly, but he was gladder now that he had brought this lightning-throwing weapon along.

The hall shimmered with strangeness before them. So many things he could not quite see clearly, but the razor-edged decorations of the floor were clear enough. It made the mind reel a little to think what utter alienage lay behind the choice of such adornment for a floor that must be walked upon—even in a dream. He thought briefly of the great earth-shaking feet in the darkness of his laboratory. Here in the dream they walked this knife-edged floor. They must.

But how?

The spirals of the pattern lay in long loops and rosettes. After a moment, eyeing them, he said, "I think we can make it, Alanna. If we walk between the knives—see, there's space if we're careful." And if they were not careful, if they had to run. . . . "We've got to risk it," he said aloud, and with those words admitted to himself for perhaps the first time an urgency in this dream, risk and danger. . . .

He took a firmer grip upon his burden and stepped delicately into the hollow of a steely spiral. Teetering a little, clutching at his arm to steady herself, Alanna came after him.

Silence—vast, unechoing hollows quivering with silence all around them. They advanced very slowly, watching wide-eyed for any signs of life in the distances, their senses strained and aching with the almost subconscious awareness of any slightest motion in the floor that might herald great feet ponderously approaching. But That which had opened the doorway for them had gone now, for a little while, and left them to their own devices.

Paul carried the lens of his weapon ready in his free hand, the lightest possible pressure always on its trigger so that the tubing throbbed faintly against his palm. That reassurance that contact still flowed between his faraway laboratory and this unbelievable hall was all that kept him forging ahead over the razory mosaics.

They went slowly, but they passed many very strange things. A tremendous transparent curtain swung from the vaulted ceiling in folds as immovable as iron. They slipped through the little triangle of opening where the draperies hung awry, and a shower of fiery sparkles sprang out harmlessly when they brushed the sides. They passed a fountain that sent up gushes of soundless flame from its basin in the center of the corridor floor. They saw upon the walls, in frames and without them, things too alien to think about clearly. That very alienage was worrying the man. In dreams one rehearses the stimuli of the past, fears and hopes and memories. But how *could* one dream of things like these? Where in any human past could such memories lie?

They skirted an oval stone set in the floor, the metal patterns swirling about it. They were both dizzy when they looked directly at it. Dangerous dizziness, since a fall here must end upon razor edges. And once they passed an in-

describable something hanging against a black panel of the wall, that brought tears to the eyes with its sheer loveliness, a thing of unbearable beauty too far removed from human experience to leave any picture in their minds once they had gone past it. Only the emotional impact remained, remembered beauty too exquisite for the mind to grasp and hold. And the man knew definitely now that this at least was no part of any human memory, and could be in itself no dream.

They saw it all with the strange clarity and vividness of senses sharp with uncertainty and fear, but they saw it too with a dreamlike haziness that faded a little as they went on. To the man, a terrible wonder was dawning. Could it, after all, be a dream? Could it possibly be some alien reality into which they had stumbled? And the import of that frame outside the door they had left—the frame shaped like a coffin and adorned with the colors of Alanna's gown and hair. . . . Deep in his mind he knew what that frame was for. He knew he was walking through a museum filled with lovely things, and he was beginning to suspect why Alanna had been brought here too. The thing seemed unthinkable, even in a dream as mad as this, and yet—

"Look, Paul." He glanced aside. Alanna had reached up to touch a steel-blue frame upon the wall, its edges enclosing nothing but a dim rosy shimmer. She was groping inside it, her face animated now. No thought had come to her yet about that other frame, evidently. No thought that from this dream neither of them might ever wake. . . .

"Look," she said. "It seems empty, but I can *feel* something—something like feathers. What do you suppose—"

"Don't try to suppose," he said almost brusquely. "There isn't any sense to any of this."

"But some of the things are so pretty, Paul. See that—that snowstorm ahead, between the pillars?"

He looked. Veiling the hallway a little distance away hung a shower of patterned flakes, motionless in midair. Perhaps they were embroideries upon some gossamer drapery too sheer to see. But as he looked he thought he saw them quiver just a little. Quiver, and fall quiet, and then quiver again, as if—as if—

"Paul!"

Everything stopped dead still for a moment. He did not need Alanna's whisper to make his heart pause as he strained intolerably to hear, to see, to feel. . . . Yes, definitely now

the snowstorm curtain shook. And the floor shook with it in faint rhythms to that distant tremor—

This is it, he thought. This is real.

He had known for minutes now that he was not walking through a dream. He stood in the midst of impossible reality, and the Enemy itself came nearer and nearer with each great soundless footfall, and there was nothing to do but wait. Nothing at all. It wanted Alanna. He knew why. It would not want himself, and it would brush him away like smoke in its juggernaut striding to seize her, unless his weapon could stop it. His heart began to beat with heavy, thick blows that echoed the distant footsteps.

"Alanna," he said, hearing the faintest possible quiver in his voice. "Alanna, get behind something—that pillar over there. Don't make a sound. And if I tell you—*run!*"

He stepped behind a nearer pillar, his arm aching from the weight of his burden, the lens of it throbbing faintly against his palm with its promise of power in leash. He thought it would work. . . .

There was no sound of footfalls as the rhythm grew stronger. Only by the strength of those tremors that shook the floor could he judge how near the Thing was drawing. The pillar itself was shaking now, and the snowstorm was convulsed each time a mighty foot struck the floor soundlessly. Paul thought of the knife-edged patterns which those feet were treading with such firm and measured strides.

For a moment of panic he regretted his daring in coming to meet the Thing. He was sorry they had not stayed cowering in the room of the mirror—sorry they had not fled back down the whirling darkness through which they came. But you can't escape a nightmare. He held his lensed weapon throbbing like a throat against his palm, waiting to pour out lightning upon—what?

Now it was very close. Now it was just beyond the snowstorm between the pillars. He could see dim motion through their veil. . . .

Snow swirled away from its mighty shoulders, clouded about its great head so that he could not see very clearly what it was that stood there, tall and grotesque and terrible, its eyes shining scarlet through the veil. He was aware only of the eyes, and of the being's majestic bulk, before his hand of

its own volition closed hard upon the pulse of violence in his palm.

For one timeless moment nothing happened. He was too stunned with the magnitude of the thing he faced to feel even terror at his weapon's failure; awe shut out every other thought. He was even a little startled when the glare of golden daylight burst hissing from his hand, splashing its brilliance across the space between them.

Then relief was a weakness that loosened all his muscles as he played the deadlines of his weapon upon the Enemy, hearing the air shriek with its power, seeing the stone pillars blacken before those lashes of light. He was blinded by their glory; he could only stand there pouring the lightnings forth and squinting against their glare. The smell of scorched metal and stone was heavy in the air, and he could hear the crash of a falling column somewhere, burned through by the blast of the flame. Surely *it* too must be consumed and falling. . . . Hope began to flicker in his brain.

It was Alanna's whimper that told him something must still be wrong. Belatedly he reached up to close the glass visor of the mask he still wore, and by magic the glare ceased to blind him. He could see between the long, writhing whips of light—see the pillars falling and the steel patterns of the floor turn blue and melt away. But he could see it standing between those crumbling pillars now. . . .

He could see it standing in the full bath of the flames, see them splash upon its mighty chest and sluice away over its great shoulders like the spray of water, unheeded, impotent.

Its eyes were darkening from crimson to an angry purple as it lurched forward one ponderous, powerful stride, brushing away the sparks from its face, putting out a terrible arm. . . .

"Alanna—" said the man in a very quiet voice, pitched below the screaming of the flame. "Alanna—you'd better start back. I'll hold it while I can. You'd better run, Alanna. . . ."

He did not know if she obeyed. He could spare no further attention from the desperate business at hand, to delay it—to hold it back even for sixty seconds—for thirty seconds—for one breath more of independent life. What might happen after that he could not let himself think. Perhaps not death—perhaps something far more alien and strange than death. . . . He knew the struggle was hopeless and senseless, but he knew he must struggle on while breath remained in him.

There was a narrow place in the corridor between himself and it. The lightning had weakened one wall already. He swung it away from the oncoming colossus and played the fire screaming to and fro upon blackened stones, seeing mortar crumble between them and girders bending in that terrible heat.

The walls groaned, grinding their riven blocks surface against surface. Slowly, slowly they leaned together; slowly they fell. Stone dust billowed in a cloud to hide the final collapse of the corridor, but through it the scream of lightnings sounded and the shriek of metal against falling stone. And then, distantly, a deeper groaning of new pressure coming to bear.

The man stood paralyzed for a moment, dizzy with an unreasonable hope that he had stopped the Enemy at last, not daring to look too closely for fear of failure. But hope and despair came almost simultaneously into his mind as he watched the mass of the closed walls shuddering and resisting for a moment—but only for a moment.

With dust and stone blocks and steel girders falling away from its tremendous shoulders, it stepped through the ruined arch. Jagged golden lightnings played in its face, hissing and screaming futilely. It ignored them. Shaking off the debris of the wall, it strode forward, eyes purple with anger, great hands outstretched.

And so the weapon failed. He loosed the trigger, hearing its shriek die upon the air as the long ribbons of lightning faded. It was instinct, echoing over millennia from the first fighting ancestor of mankind, that made him swing the heavy machine overhead with both hands and hurl it into the face of the Enemy. And it was a little like relinquishing a living comrade to let the throb of that fiery tubing lose contact with his palm at last.

Blindly he flung the weapon from him, and in the same motion whirled and ran. The knife-edged floor spun past below him. If he could hit a rhythm to carry him from loop to empty loop of the pattern, he might even reach the room at the end of the passage—There was no sanctuary anywhere, but unreasoning instinct made him seek the place of his origin here. . . .

Ahead of him a flutter of blue-green sequins now and then told him that Alanna was running too, miraculously keeping her balance on the patterned floor. He could not look up to

watch her. His eyes were riveted to the spirals and loops among which his precarious footing lay. Behind him great feet were thudding soundlessly, shaking the floor.

The things that happened then happened too quickly for the brain to resolve into any sequence at all. He knew that the silence which had flowed back when the screaming lightnings died was suddenly, shockingly broken again by a renewed screaming. He remembered seeing the metal patterns of the floor thrown into sharp new shadows by the light behind him, and he knew that the Enemy had found the trigger he had just released, that his weapon throbbed now against an alien hand.

But it happened in the same instant that the doorway of the entrance room loomed up before him, and he hurled himself desperately into the dimness after Alanna, knowing his feet were cut through and bleeding, seeing the dark blotches of the tracks she too was leaving. The mirror loomed before them, an unbearable picture of the lost familiar room he could not hope to enter again in life.

And all this was simultaneous with a terrifying soundless thunder of great feet at his very heels of a mighty presence suddenly and ponderously in the same room with them, like a whirlwind exhausting the very air they gasped to breathe. He felt anger eddying about him without words or sound. He felt monstrous hands snatch him up as if a tornado had taken him into its windy grasp. He remembered purple eyes glaring through the dimness in one brief instant of perception before the hands hurled him away.

He spun through empty air. Then a howling vortex seized him and he was falling in blindness, stunned and stupefied, through the same strange passageway that had brought him here. Distantly he heard Alanna scream.

There was silence in the dim, round room in the center of the treasure house, except for a muffled howling from the screen. He who was master here stood quietly before it, his eyes half shut and ranging down the spectrum from purple to red, and then swiftly away from red through orange to a clear, pale, tranquil yellow. His chest still heaved a little with the excitement of that minor fiasco which he had brought upon himself, but it was an excitement soon over, and wholly disappointing.

He was a little ashamed of his momentary anger. He

should not have played the little creatures' puny lightnings upon them as they fell down the shaft of darkness. He had misjudged their capacity, after all. They were not really capable of giving him a worthwhile fight.

It was interesting that one had followed the other, with its little weapon that sparkled and stung, interesting that one fragile being had stood up to him.

But he knew a moment's regret for the beauty of the blue-and-white creature he had flung away. The long, smooth lines of it, the subtle coloring. . . . Too bad that it had been worthless because it was helpless too.

Helpless against himself, he thought, and equally against the drive of its own mysterious motives. He sighed.

He thought again, almost regretfully, of the lovely thing he had coveted hurtling away down the vortex with lightnings bathing it through the blackness.

Had he destroyed it? He did not know. He was a little sorry now that anger for his ruined treasures had made him lose his temper when they ran. Futile, scuttling little beings—they had cheated him out of beauty because of their own impotence against him, but he was not even angry about that now. Only sorry, with vague, confused sorrows he did not bother to clarify in his mind. Regret for the loss of a lovely thing, regret that he had expected danger from them and been disappointed, regret perhaps for his own boredom, that did not bother any longer to probe into the motives of living things. He was growing old indeed.

The vortex still roared through the darkened screen. He stepped back from it, letting opacity close over the surface of the portal, hushing all sound. His eyes were a tranquil yellow. Tomorrow he would hunt again, and perhaps tomorrow. . . .

He went out slowly, walking with long, soundless strides that made the steel mosaics sing faintly beneath his feet.

THE STORM

Astounding,

October

by A. E. van Vogt (1912-)

The then prolific A. E. van Vogt continued his production of quality stories in 1943 (see Volume 4, 1942 and preceeding volumes for other examples). In addition to the present selection he published in 1943, among others, "The Search" (Astounding, January); "M 33 In Andromeda" (Astounding, August); "The Beast" (Astounding, November); the novel The Book of Ptath (Unknown, October); "The Great Engine" (Astounding, July); "The Witch" (Unknown, February); "Concealment" (Astounding, September); and The Weapon Makers, a three-part serial that began in the February issue of Astounding, and which proved to be one of his most famous works.

"The Storm" was a sequel to "Concealment" but far superior to that story. Together with another story of the Dellian Robots it formed part of his novel The Mixed Men (1952).

(No one captured the Campbell aura as well as van Vogt did. No, not even I. I caught what Campbell was driving at, I thought. I understood the general outlook of the man in the matter of reason, logic, and pragmatism, but I interpreted it in my own way. I had no way of imitating the florid gashes of primary color that filled Campbell's writing. Van Vogt did, though, and in this story particularly it is almost as though I am listening to Campbell.—Except, of course, that van Vogt, when he was really rolling, did it better.—I.A.)

Over the miles and the years, the gases drifted. Waste matter from ten thousand suns, a diffuse miasma of spent explosions, of dead hell fires and the furies of a hundred million raging sunspots—formless, purposeless.

But it was the beginning.

Into the great dark the gases crept. Calcium was in them, and sodium, and hydrogen; and the speed of the drift varied up to twenty miles a second.

There was a timeless period while gravitation performed its function. The inchoate mass became masses. Great blobs of gas took a semblance of shape in widely separate areas, and moved on and on and on.

They came finally to where a thousand flaring seetee suns had long before doggedly "crossed the street" of the main stream of terrene suns. Had crossed, and left *their* excrement of gases.

The first clash quickened the vast worlds of gas. The electron haze of terrene plunged like spurred horses and sped deeper into the equally violently reacting positron haze of contraterrene. Instantly, the lighter orbital positrons and electrons went up in a blaze of hard radiation.

The storm was on.

The stripped seetee nuclei carried now terrific and unbalanced negative charges and repelled electrons, but tended to attract terrene atom nuclei. In their turn the stripped terrene nuclei attracted contraterrene.

Violent beyond all conception were the resulting cancellations of charges.

The two opposing masses heaved and spun in a cataclysm of partial adjustment. They had been heading in different directions. More and more they became one tangled, seething whirlpool.

The new course, uncertain at first, steadied and became a line drive through the midnight heavens. On a front of nine light years, at a solid fraction of the velocity of light, the storm roared toward its destiny.

Suns were engulfed for half a hundred years—and left behind with only a hammering of cosmic rays to show that they had been the centers of otherwise invisible, impalpable atomic devastation.

In its four hundred and ninetieth Sidereal year, the storm intersected the orbit of a Nova at the flash moment.

It began to move!

On the three-dimensional map at weather headquarters on the planet Kaider III, the storm was colored orange. Which meant it was the biggest of the four hundred odd storms raging in the Fifty Suns region of the Lesser Magellanic Cloud.

It showed as an uneven splotch fronting at latitude 473, longitude 228, center 190 parsecs, but that was a special Fifty Suns degree system which had no relation to the magnetic center of the Magellanic Cloud as a whole.

The report about the Nova had not yet been registered on the map. When that happened the storm color would be changed to an angry red.

They had stopped looking at the map. Maltby stood with the councillors at the great window staring up at the Earth ship.

The machine was scarcely more than a dark sliver in the distant sky. But the sight of it seemed to hold a deadly fascination for the older men.

Maltby felt cool, determined, but also sardonic. It was funny, these—these people of the Fifty Suns in this hour of their danger calling upon *him*.

He unfocused his eyes from the ship, fixed his steely, laconic gaze on the plump, perspiring chairman of the Kaider III government—and, tensing his mind, forced the man to look at him. The councillor, unaware of the compulsion, conscious only that he had turned, said: "You understand your instructions, Captain Maltby?"

Maltby nodded. "I do."

The curt words must have evoked a vivid picture. The fat face rippled like palsied jelly and broke out in a new trickle of sweat.

"The worst part of it all," the man groaned, "is that the people of the ship found us by the wildest accident. They had run into one of our meteorite stations and captured its attendant. The attendant sent a general warning and then forced them to kill him before they could discover which of the fifty million suns of the Lesser Magellanic Cloud was us.

"Unfortunately, they did discover that he and the rest of us were all descendants of the robots who had escaped the mas-

sacre of the robots in the main galaxy fifteen thousand years ago.

"But they were baffled, and without a clue. They started home, stopping off at planets on the way on a chance basis. The seventh stop was us. Captain Maltby—"

The man looked almost beside himself. He shook. His face was as colorless as a white shroud. He went on hoarsely:

"Captain Maltby, you must not fail. They have asked for a meteorologist to guide them to Cassidor VII, where the central government is located. They mustn't reach there. You must drive them into the great storm at 473.

"We have commissioned you to do this for us because you have the two minds of the Mixed Men. We regret that we have not always fully appreciated your services in the past, but you must admit that, after the wars of the Mixed Men, it was natural that we should be careful about—"

Maltby cut off the lame apology. "Forget it," he said. "The Mixed Men are robots, too, and therefore as deeply involved, as I see it, as the Dellians and non-Dellians. Just what the Hidden Ones of my kind think, I don't know, nor do I care. I assure you I shall do my best to destroy this ship."

"Be careful!" the chairman urged anxiously. "This ship could destroy us, our planet, our sun in a single minute. We never dreamed that Earth could have gotten so far ahead of us and produced such a devastatingly powerful machine. After all, the non-Dellian robots and, of course, the Mixed Men among us are capable of research work; the former have been laboring feverishly for thousands of years.

"But, finally, remember that you are not being asked to commit suicide. The battleship is absolutely invincible. Just how it will survive a real storm we were not told when we were shown around. But it will. What happens, however, is that everyone aboard becomes unconscious.

"As a Mixed Man you will be the first to revive. Our combined fleets will be waiting to board the ship the moment you open the doors. Is that clear?"

It had been clear the first time it was explained, but these non-Dellians had a habit of repeating themselves, as if thoughts kept growing vague in their minds. As Maltby closed the door of the great room behind him, one of the councillors said to his neighbor:

"Has he been told that the storm has gone Nova?"

The fat man overheard. He shook his head. His eyes gleamed as he said quietly: "No. After all, he is one of the Mixed Men. We can't trust him too far no matter what his record."

All morning the reports had come in. Some showed progress, some didn't. But her basic good humor was untouched by the failures.

The great reality was that her luck had held. She had found a planet of the robots. Only one planet so far, but—

Grand Captain Laurr smiled grimly. It wouldn't be long now. Being a supreme commander was a terrible business. But she had not shrunk from making the deadly threat: provide all required information, or the entire planet of Kaider III would be destroyed.

The information was coming in: Population of Kaider III two billion, one hundred million, two-fifths Dellian, three-fifths non-Dellian robots.

Dellians physically and mentally the higher type, but completely lacking in creative ability. Non-Dellians dominated in the research laboratories.

The forty-nine other suns whose planets were inhabited were called, in alphabetical order: Assora, Atmion, Bresp, Buraco, Cassidor, Corrab—They were located at (1) Assora: latitude 931, longitude 27, center 201 parsecs; (2) Atmion—

It went on and on. Just before noon she noted with steely amusement that there was still nothing coming through from the meteorology room, nothing at all about storms.

She made the proper connection and flung her words: "What's the matter, Lieutenant Cannons? Your assistants have been making prints and duplicates of various Kaider maps. Aren't you getting anything?"

The old meteorologist shook his head. "You will recall, noble lady, that when we captured that robot in space, he had time to send out a warning. Immediately on every Fifty Suns planet, all maps were despoiled, civilian meteorologists were placed aboard spaceships, that were stripped of receiving radios, with orders to go to a planet on a chance basis, and stay there for ten years.

"To my mind, all this was done before it was clearly grasped that their navy hadn't a chance against us. Now they are going to provide us with a naval meteorologist, but we

shall have to depend on our lie detectors as to whether or not he is telling us the truth."

"I see." The woman smiled. "Have no fear. They don't dare oppose us openly. No doubt there is a plan being built up against us, but it cannot prevail now that we can take action to enforce our unalterable will. Whoever they send must tell us the truth. Let me know when he comes."

Lunch came, but she ate at her desk, watching the flashing pictures on the astro, listening to the murmur of voices, storing the facts, the general picture, into her brain.

"There's no doubt, Captain Turgess," she commented once, savagely, "that we're being lied to on a vast scale. But let it be so. We can use psychological tests to verify all the vital details.

"For the time being it is important that you relieve the fears of everyone you find it necessary to question. We must convince these people that Earth will accept them on an equal basis without bias or prejudice of any kind because of their robot orig—"

She bit her lip. "That's an ugly word, the worst kind of propaganda. We must eliminate it from our thoughts."

"I'm afraid," the officer shrugged, "not from our thoughts."

She stared at him, narrow-eyed, then cut him off angrily. A moment later she was talking into the general transmitter: "The word robot must not be used—by any of our personnel—under pain of fine—"

Switching off, she put a busy signal on her spare receiver, and called Psychology House. Lieutenant Neslor's face appeared on the plate.

"I heard your order just now, noble lady," the woman psychologist said. "I'm afraid, however, that we're dealing with the deepest instincts of the human animal—hatred or fear of the stranger, the alien.

"Excellency, we come from a long line of ancestors who, in their time, have felt superior to others because of some slight variation in the pigmentation of the skin. It is even recorded that the color of the eyes has influenced the egoistic in historical decisions. We have sailed into very deep waters, and it will be the crowning achievement of our life if we sail out in a satisfactory fashion."

There was an eager lilt in the psychologist's voice; and the grand captain experienced a responsive thrill of joy. If there

was one thing she appreciated, it was the positive outlook, the kind of people who faced all obstacles short of the recognizably impossible with a youthful zest, a will to win. She was still smiling as she broke the connection.

The high thrill sagged. She sat cold with her problem. It was a problem. Hers. All aristocratic officers had *carte blanche* powers, and were expected to solve difficulties involving anything up to whole groups of planetary systems.

After a minute she dialed the meteorology room again.

"Lieutenant Cannons, when the meteorology officer of the Fifty Suns navy arrives, please employ the following tactics—"

Maltby waved dismissal to the driver of his car. The machine pulled away from the curb and Maltby stood frowning at the flaming energy barrier that barred farther progress along the street. Finally, he took another look at the Earth ship.

It was directly above him now that he had come so many miles across the city toward it. It was tremendously high up, a long, black torpedo shape almost lost in the mist of distance.

But high as it was it was still visibly bigger than anything ever seen by the Fifty Suns, an incredible creature of metal from a world so far away that, almost, it had sunk to the status of myth.

Here was the reality. There would be tests, he thought, penetrating tests before they'd accept any orbit he planned. It wasn't that he doubted the ability of his double mind to overcome anything like that, but—

Well to remember that the frightful gap of years which separated the science of Earth from that of the Fifty Suns had already shown unpleasant surprises. Maltby shook himself grimly and gave his full attention to the street ahead.

A fan-shaped pink fire spread skyward from two machines that stood in the center of the street. The flame was a very pale pink and completely transparent. It looked electronic, deadly.

Beyond it were men in glittering uniforms. A steady trickle of them moved in and out of buildings. About three blocks down the avenue a second curtain of pink fire flared up.

There seemed to be no attempt to guard the sides. The men he could see looked at ease, confident. There was murmured conversation, low laughter and—they weren't all men.

As Maltby walked forward, two fine-looking young women in uniform came down the steps of the nearest of the requisitioned buildings. One of the guards of the flame said something to them. There was a twin tinkle of silvery laughter. Still laughing, they strode off down the street.

It was suddenly exciting. There was an air about these people of far places, of tremendous and wonderful lands beyond the farthest horizons of the staid Fifty Suns.

He felt cold, then hot, then he glanced up at the fantastically big ship; and the chill came back. One ship, he thought, but so big, so mighty that thirty billion people didn't dare send their own fleets against it. They—

He grew aware that one of the brilliantly arrayed guards was staring at him. The man spoke into a wrist radio, and after a moment a second man broke off his conversation with a third soldier and came over. He stared through the flame barrier at Maltby.

"Is there anything you desire? Or are you just looking?"

He spoke English, curiously accented—but English! His manner was mild, almost gentle, cultured. The whole effect had a naturalness, an unalienness that was pleasing. After all, Maltby thought, he had never had the fear of these people that the others had. His very plan to defeat the ship was based upon his own fundamental belief that the robots were indestructible in the sense that no one could ever wipe them out completely.

Quietly, Maltby explained his presence.

"Oh, yes," the man nodded, "we've been expecting you. I'm to take you at once to the meteorological room of the ship. Just a moment—"

The flame barrier went down and Maltby was led into one of the buildings. There was a long corridor, and the transmitter that projected him into the ship must have been focused somewhere along it.

Because abruptly he was in a very large room. Maps floated in half a dozen antigravity pits. The walls shed light from millions of tiny point sources. And everywhere were tables with curved lines of very dim but sharply etched light on their surfaces.

Maltby's guide was nowhere to be seen. Coming toward him, however, was a tall, fine-looking old man. The oldster offered his hand.

"My name is Lieutenant Cannons, senior ship meteorologist. If you will sit down here we can plan an orbit and the ship can start moving within the hour. The grand captain is very anxious that we get started."

Maltby nodded casually. But he was stiff, alert. He stood quite still, feeling around with that acute second mind of his, his Dellian mind, for energy pressures that would show secret attempts to watch or control his mind.

But there was nothing like that.

He smiled finally, grimly. It was going to be as simple as this, was it? Like hell it was.

As he sat down, Maltby felt suddenly cozy and alive. The pure exhilaration of existence burned through him like a flame. He recognized the singing excitement for the battle thrill it was and felt a grim joy that for the first time in fifteen years he could do something about it.

During his long service in the Fifty Suns navy, he had faced hostility and suspicion because he was a Mixed Man. And always he had felt helpless, unable to do anything about it. Now, here was a far more basic hostility, however veiled, and a suspicion that must be like a burning fire.

And this time he could fight. He could look this skillfully voluble, friendly old man squarely in the eye and—

Friendly?

"It makes me smile sometimes," the old man was saying, "when I think of the unscientific aspects of the orbit we have to plan now. For instance, what is the time lag on storm reports out here?"

Maltby could not suppress a smile. So Lieutenant Cannons wanted to know things, did he? To give the man credit, it wasn't really a lame opening. The truth was, the only way to ask a question was—well—to ask it. Maltby said: "Oh, three, four months. Nothing unusual. Each space meteorologist takes about that length of time to check the bounds of the particular storm in his area, and then he reports, and we adjust our maps.

"Fortunately"—he pushed his second mind to the fore as he coolly spoke the great basic lie—"there are no major storms between the Kaider and Cassidor suns."

He went on, sliding over the untruth like an eel breasting wet rock: "However, several suns prevent a straight-line

movement. So if you would show me some of your orbits for twenty-five hundred light years, I'll make a selection of the best ones."

He wasn't, he realized instantly, going to slip over his main point as easily as that.

"No intervening storms?" the old man said. He pursed his lips. The fine lines in his long face seemed to deepen. He looked genuinely nonplused; and there was no doubt at all that he hadn't expected such a straightforward statement. "Hm-m-m, no storms. That does make it simple, doesn't it?"

He broke off. "You know, the important thing about two"—he hesitated over the word, then went on—"two people, who have been brought up in different cultures, under different scientific standards, is that they make sure they are discussing a subject from a common viewpoint.

"Space is so big. Even this comparatively small system of stars, the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, is so vast that it defies our reason. We on the battleship *Star Cluster* have spent ten years surveying it, and now we are able to say glibly that it comprises two hundred sixty billion cubic light-years, and contains fifty millions of suns.

"We located the magnetic center of the Cloud, fixed our zero line from center to the great brightest star, S Doradus; and now, I suppose, there are people who would be fools enough to think we've got the system stowed away in our brainpans."

Maltby was silent because he himself was just such a fool. This was warning. He was being told in no uncertain terms that they were in a position to check any orbit he gave them with respect to all intervening suns.

It meant much more. It showed that Earth was on the verge of extending her tremendous sway to the Lesser Magellanic Cloud. Destroying this ship now would provide the Fifty Suns with precious years during which they would have to decide what they intended to do.

But that would be all. Other ships would come; the inexorable pressure of the stupendous populations of the main galaxy would burst out even farther into space. Always under careful control, shepherded by mighty hosts of invincible battleships, the great transports would sweep into the Cloud, and every planet everywhere, robot or non-robot, would acknowledge Earth suzerainty.

Imperial earth recognized no separate nations of any description anywhere. The robots, Dellian, non-Dellian, and Mixed, would need every extra day, every hour; and it was lucky for them all that he was not basing his hope of destroying this ship on an orbit that would end inside a sun.

Their survey had magnetically placed all the suns for them. But they couldn't know about the storms. Not in ten years or in a hundred was it possible for one ship to locate possible storms in an area that involved twenty-five hundred light years of length.

Unless their psychologists could uncover the special qualities of his double brain, he had them. He grew aware that Lieutenant Cannons was manipulating the controls of the orbit table.

The lines of light on the surface flickered and shifted. Then settled like the balls in a game of chance. Maltby selected six that ran deep into the great storm. Ten minutes after that he felt the faint jar as the ship began to move. He stood up, frowning. Odd that they should act without *some* verification of his—

"This way," said the old man.

Maltby thought sharply: This couldn't be all. Any minute now they'd start on him and—

His thought ended.

He was in space. Far, far below was the receding planet Kaider III. To one side gleamed the vast dark hull of the battleship; and on every other side, and up, and down, were stars and the distances of dark space.

In spite of all his will, the shock was inexpressibly violent.

His active mind jerked. He staggered physically; and he would have fallen like a blindfolded creature except that, in the movement of trying to keep on his feet, he recognized that he *was* still on his feet.

His whole being steadied. Instinctively, he—tilted—his second mind awake, and pushed it forward. Put its more mechanical and precise qualities, its Dellian strength, between his other self and whatever the human beings might be doing against him.

Somewhere in the midst of darkness and blazing stars, a woman's clear and resonant voice said: "Well, Lieutenant Neslor, did the surprise yield any psychological fruits?"

The reply came from a second, an older-sounding woman's voice: "After three seconds, noble lady, his resistance leaped to I.Q. 900. Which means they've sent us a Dellian. Your excellency, I thought you specifically asked that their representative be not a Dellian."

Maltby said swiftly into the night around him: "You're quite mistaken. I am not a Dellian. And I assure you that I will lower my resistance to zero if you desire. I reacted instinctively to surprise, naturally enough."

There was a click. The illusion of space and stars snapped out of existence. Maltby saw what he had begun to suspect, that he was, had been all the time, in the meteorology room.

Nearby stood the old man, a thin smile on his lined face. On a raised dais, partly hidden behind a long instrument board, sat a handsome young woman. It was the old man who spoke. He said in a stately voice:

"You are in the presence of Grand Captain, the Right Honorable Gloria Cecily, the Lady Laurr of Noble Laurr. Conduct yourself accordingly."

Maltby bowed but he said nothing. The grand captain frowned at him, impressed by his appearance. Tall, magnificent-looking body—strong, supremely intelligent face. In a single flash she noted all the characteristics common to the first-class human being and robot.

These people might be more dangerous than she had thought. She said with unnatural sharpness for her: "As you know, we have to question you. We would prefer that you do not take offense. You have told us that Cassidor VII, the chief planet of the Fifty Suns, is twenty-five hundred light-years *feeling* our way across such an immense gap of uncharted, star-filled space. But you have given us a choice of orbits.

"We must make sure those orbits are honest, offered without guile or harmful purpose. To that end we have to ask you to open your mind and answer our questions under the strictest psychological surveillance."

"I have orders," said Maltby, "to cooperate with you in every way."

He had wondered how he would feel, now that the hour of decision was upon him. But there was nothing abnormal. His body was a little stiffer, but his minds—

He withdrew his *self* into the background and left his Dellian mind to confront all the questions that came. His Dellian mind that he had deliberately kept apart from his thoughts. That curious mind, which had no will of its own, but which, by remote control, reacted with the full power of an I. Q. of 191.

Sometimes, he marveled himself at that-second mind of his. It had no creative ability, but its memory was machine-like, and its resistance to outside pressure was, as the woman psychologist had so swiftly analyzed, over nine hundred. To be exact, the equivalent of I. Q. 917.

"What is your name?"

That was the way it began: His name, distinction—He answered everything quietly, positively, without hesitation. When he had finished, when he had sworn to the truth of every word about the storms, there was a long moment of dead silence. And then a middle-aged woman stepped out of the nearby wall.

She came over and motioned him into a chair. When he was seated she tilted his head and began to examine it. She did it gently; her fingers were caressing as a lover's. But when she looked up she said sharply:

"You're not a Dellian or a non-Dellian. And the molecular structure of your brain and body is the most curious I've ever seen. All the molecules are twins. I saw a similar arrangement once in an artificial electronic structure where an attempt was being made to balance an unstable electronic structure. The parallel isn't exact, but—mm-m-m, I must try to remember what the end result was of that experiment."

She broke off: "What is your explanation? What are you?"

Maltby sighed. He had determined to tell only the one main lie. Not that it mattered so far as his double brain was concerned. But untruths effected slight variations in blood pressure, created neural spasms, and disturbed muscular integration. He couldn't take the risk of even one more than was absolutely necessary.

"I'm a Mixed Man," he explained. He described briefly how the cross between the Dellian and non-Dellian, so long impossible, had finally been brought about a hundred years before. The use of cold and pressure—

"Just a moment," said the psychologist.

She disappeared. When she stepped again out of the wall transmitter, she was thoughtful.

"He seems to be telling the truth," she confessed, almost reluctantly.

"What is this?" snapped the grand captain. "Ever since we ran into that first citizen of the Fifty Suns, the psychology department has qualified every statement it issues. I thought psychology was the only perfect science. Either he is telling the truth or he isn't."

The older woman looked unhappy. She stared very hard at Maltby, seemed baffled by his cool gaze, and finally faced her superior, said: "It's that double-molecule structure of his brain. Except for that, I see no reason why you shouldn't order full acceleration."

The grand captain smiled. "I shall have Captain Maltby to dinner tonight. I'm sure he will cooperate then with any further studies you may be prepared to make at that time. Meanwhile I think—"

She spoke into a communicator: "Central engines, step up to half light-year a minute on the following orbit—"

Maltby listened, estimating with his Dellian mind. Half a light-year a minute; it would take a while to attain that speed, but—in eight hours they'd strike the storm.

In eight hours he'd be having dinner with the grand captain.

Eight hours!

The full flood of a contraterrene Nova impinging upon terrene gases already infuriated by seetee gone insane—that was the new, greater storm.

The exploding, giant sun added weight to the diffuse, maddened thing. And it added something far more deadly.

Speed! From peak to peak of velocity the tumult of ultrafire leaped. The swifter crags of the storm danced and burned with an absolutely hellish fury.

The sequence of action was rapid almost beyond the tolerance of matter. First raced the light of the Nova, blazing its warning at more than a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second to all who knew that it flashed from the edge of an interstellar storm.

But the advance glare of warning was nullified by the colossal speed of the storm. For weeks and months it drove

through the vast night at a velocity that was only a bare measure short of that of light itself.

The dinner dishes had been cleared away. Maltby was thinking: In half an hour—*half an hour!*

He was wondering shakily just what did happen to a battleship suddenly confronted by thousands of gravities of deceleration. Aloud he was saying: "My day? I spent it in the library. Mainly, I was interested in the recent history of Earth's interstellar colonization. I'm curious as to what is done with groups like the Mixed Men. I mentioned to you that, after the war in which they were defeated largely because there was so few of them, the Mixed Men hid themselves from the Fifty Suns. I was one of the captured children who—"

There was an interruption, a cry from the wall communicator: "*Noble lady, I've solved it!*"

A moment fled before Maltby recognized the strained voice of the woman psychologist. He had almost forgotten that she was supposed to be studying him. Her next words chilled him: "Two minds! I thought of it a little while ago and rigged up a twin watching device. Ask him, *ask* him the question about the storms. Meanwhile stop the ship. At once!"

Maltby's dark gaze clashed hard with the steely, narrowed eyes of the grand captain. Without hesitation he concentrated his two minds on her, forced her to say: "Don't be silly, lieutenant. One person can't have two brains. Explain yourself further."

His hope was delay. They had ten minutes in which they could save themselves. He must waste every second of that time, resist all their efforts, try to control the situation. If only his special three-dimensional hypnotism worked through communicators—

It didn't. Lines of light leaped at him from the wall and crisscrossed his body, held him in his chair like so many unbreakable cables. Even as he was bound hand and foot by palpable energy, a second complex of forces built up before his face, barred his thought pressure from the grand captain, and finally coned over his head like a dunce cap.

He was caught as neatly as if a dozen men had swarmed with their strength and weight over his body. Maltby relaxed and laughed.

"Too late," he taunted. "It'll take at least an hour for this ship to reduce to a safe speed; and at this velocity you can't turn aside in time to avoid the greatest storm in this part of the universe."

That wasn't strictly true. There was still time and room to sheer off before the advancing storm in any of the fronting directions. The impossibility was to turn toward the storm's tail or its great, bulging sides.

His thought was interrupted by the first cry from the young woman, a piercing cry: "Central engines! Reduce speed! Emergency!"

There was a jar that shook the walls and a pressure that tore at his muscles. Maltby adjusted and then stared across the table at the grand captain. She was smiling, a frozen mask of a smile; and she said from between clenched teeth:

"Lieutenant Neslor, use any means physical or otherwise, but make him talk. There must be something."

"His second mind is the key," the psychologist's voice came. "It's not Dellian. It has only normal resistance. I shall subject it to the greatest concentration of conditioning ever focused on a human brain, using the two basics: sex and logic. I shall have to use you, noble lady, as the object of his affections."

"Hurry!" said the young woman. Her voice was like a metal bar.

Maltby sat in a mist, mental and physical. Deep in his mind was awareness that he was an entity, and that irresistible machines were striving to mold his thought.

He resisted. The resistance was as strong as his life, as intense as all the billions and quadrillions of impulses that had shaped his being could make it.

But the outside thought, the pressure, grew stronger. How silly of him to resist Earth—when this lovely woman of Earth loved him, loved him, loved him. Glorious was that civilization of Earth and the main galaxy. Three hundred million billion people. The very first contact would rejuvenate the Fifty Suns. How lovely she is; I must save her. She means everything to me.

As from a great distance, he began to hear his own voice, explaining what must be done, just how the ship must be turned, in what direction, how much time there was. He tried

to stop himself, but inexorably his voice went on, mouthing the words that spelled defeat for the Fifty Suns.

The mist began to fade. The terrible pressure eased from his straining mind. The damning stream of words ceased to pour from his lips. He sat up shakily, conscious that the energy cords and the energy cap had been withdrawn from his body. He heard the grand captain say into a communicator: "By making a point 0100 turn we shall miss the storm by seven light-weeks. I admit it is an appallingly sharp curve, but I feel that we should have at least that much leeway."

She turned and stared at Maltby: "Prepare yourself. At half a light-year a minute even a hundredth of a degree turn makes some people black out."

"Not me," said Maltby, and tensed his Dellian muscles.

She fainted three times during the next four minutes as he sat there watching her. But each time she came to within seconds.

"We human beings," she said wanly, finally, "are a poor lot. But at least we know how to endure."

The terrible minutes dragged. And dragged. Maltby began to feel the strain of that infinitesimal turn. He thought at last: Space! How could these people ever hope to survive a direct hit on a storm?

Abruptly, it was over; a man's voice said quietly: "We have followed the prescribed course, noble lady, and are now out of dang—"

He broke off with a shout: "Captain, the light of a Nova sun has just flashed from the direction of the storm. We—"

In those minutes before disaster struck, the battleship *Star Cluster*, glowed like an immense and brilliant jewel. The warning glare from the Nova set off an incredible roar of emergency clamor through all of her hundred and twenty decks.

From end to end her lights flicked on. They burned row by row straight across her four thousand feet of length with the hard tinkle of cut gems. In the reflection of that light, the black mountain that was her hull looked like the fabulous planet of Cassidor, her destination, as seen at night from a far darkness, sown with diamond-shining cities.

Silent as a ghost, grand and wonderful beyond all imagination, glorious in her power, the great ship slid through the

blackness along the special river of time and space which was her plotted course.

Even as she rode into the storm there was nothing visible. The space ahead looked as clear as any vacuum. So tenuous were the gases that made up the storm that the ship would not even have been aware of them if it had been traveling at atomic speeds.

Violent the disintegration of matter in that storm might be, and the sole source of cosmic rays the hardest energy in the known universe. But the immense, the cataclysmic danger to the *Star Cluster* was a direct result of her own terrible velocity.

If she had had time to slow, the storm would have meant nothing.

Striking that mass of gas at half a light-year a minute was like running into an unending solid wall. The great ship shuddered in every plate as the deceleration tore at her gigantic strength.

In seconds she had run the gamut of all the recoil systems her designers had planned for her as a unit.

She began to break up.

And still everything was according to the original purpose of the superb engineering firm that had built her. The limit of unit strain reached, she dissolved into her nine thousand separate sections.

Streamlined needles of metal were those sections, four hundred feet long, forty feet wide; sliverlike shapes that sinuated cunningly through the gases, letting the pressure of them slide off their smooth hides.

But it wasn't enough. Metal groaned from the torture of deceleration. In the deceleration chambers, men and women lay at the bare edge of consciousness, enduring agony that seemed on the verge of being beyond endurance.

Hundreds of the sections careened into each other in spite of automatic screens, and instantaneously fused into white-hot coffins.

And still, in spite of the hideously maintained velocity, that mass of gases was not bridged; light-years of thickness had still to be covered.

For those sections that remained, once more all the limits of human strength were reached. The final action was chemical, directly on the human bodies that remained of the origi-

nal thirty thousand. Those bodies for whose sole benefit all the marvelous safety devices had been conceived and constructed, the poor, fragile, human beings who through all the ages had persisted in dying under normal conditions from a pressure of something less than fifteen gravities.

The prompt reaction of the automatics in rolling back every floor, and plunging every person into the deceleration chambers of each section—that saving reaction was abruptly augmented as the deceleration chamber was flooded by a special type of gas.

Wet was that gas, and clinging. It settled thickly on the clothes of the humans, soaked through to the skin and *through* the skin, into every part of the body.

Sleep came gently, and with it a wonderful relaxation. The blood grew immune to shock; muscles that, in a minute before, had been drawn with anguish—loosened; the brain impregnated with life-giving chemicals that relieved it of all shortages remained untroubled even by dreams.

Everybody grew enormously flexible to gravitation pressures—a hundred—a hundred and fifty gravities of deceleration; and still the life force clung.

The great heart of the universe beat on. The storm roared along its inescapable artery, creating the radiance of life, purging the dark of its poisons—and at last the tiny ships in their separate courses burst its great bounds.

They began to come together, to seek each other, as if among them there was an irresistible passion that demanded intimacy of union.

Automatically, they slid into their old positions; the battleship *Star Cluster* began again to take form—but there were gaps. Segments destroyed, and segments lost.

On the third day Acting Grand Captain Rutgers called the surviving captains to the forward bridge, where he was temporarily making his headquarters. After the conference a **communique** was issued to the crew:

At 008 hours this morning a message was received from Grand Captain, the Right Honorable Gloria Cecily, the Lady Laurr of Noble Laurr, I. C., C. M., G. K. R. She has been forced down on the planet of a yellow-white sun. Her ship crashed on landing, and is unrepairable. As all communication with her has been by nondirectional sub-space

radio, and as it will be utterly impossible to locate such an ordinary type sun among so many millions of other suns, the Captains in Session regret to report that our noble lady's name must now be added to that longest of all lists of naval casualties: the list of those who have been lost forever on active duty.

The admiralty lights will burn blue until further notice.

Her back was to him as he approached. Maltby hesitated, then tensed his mind, and held her there beside the section of ship that had been the main bridge of the *Star Cluster*.

The long metal shape lay half buried in the marshy ground of the great valley, its lower end jutting down into the shimmering deep yellowish-black waters of a sluggish river.

Maltby paused a few feet from the tall, slim woman, and, still holding her unaware of him, examined once again the environment that was to be their life.

The fine spray of dark rain that had dogged his exploration walk was retreating over the yellow rim of valley to the "west."

As he watched, a small yellow sun burst out from behind a curtain of dark, ocherous clouds and glared at him brilliantly. Below it an expanse of jungle glinted strangely brown and yellow.

Everywhere was that dark-brown and intense, almost liquid yellow.

Maltby sighed—and turned his attention to the woman, willed her not to see him as he walked around in front of her.

He had given a great deal of thought to the Right Honorable Gloria Cecily during his walk. Basically, of course, the problem of a man and a woman who were destined to live the rest of their lives together, alone, on a remote planet, was very simple. Particularly in view of the fact that one of the two had been conditioned to be in love with the other.

Maltby smiled grimly. He could appreciate the artificial origin of that love. But that didn't dispose of the profound fact of it.

The conditioning machine had struck to his very core. Unfortunately, it had not touched her at all; and two days of being alone with her had brought out one reality: The Lady Laurr of Noble Laurr was not even remotely thinking of yielding herself to the normal requirements of the situation.

It was time that she was made aware, not because an early solution was necessary or even desirable, but because she had to realize that the problem existed.

He stepped forward and took her in his arms.

She was a tall, graceful woman; she fitted into his embrace as if she belonged there; and, because his control of her made her return the kiss, its warmth had an effect beyond his intention.

He had intended to free her mind in the middle of the kiss.

He didn't.

When he finally released her, it was only a physical release. Her mind was still completely under his domination.

There was a metal chair that had been set just outside one of the doors. Maltby walked over, sank into it and stared up at the grand captain.

He felt shaken. The flame of desire that had leaped through him was a telling tribute to the conditioning he had undergone. But it was entirely beyond his previous analysis of the intensity of his own feelings.

He had thought he was in full control of himself, and he wasn't. Somehow, the sardonicism, the half detachment, the objectivity, which he had fancied was the keynote of his own reaction to this situation, didn't apply at all.

The conditioning machine had been thorough.

He loved this woman with such a violence that the mere touch of her was enough to disconnect his will from operations immediately following.

His heart grew quieter; he studied her with a semblance of detachment.

She was lovely in a handsome fashion; though almost all robot women of the Dellian race were better-looking. Her lips, while medium full, were somehow a trifle cruel; and there was a quality in her eyes that accentuated that cruelty.

There were built-up emotions in this woman that would not surrender easily to the idea of being marooned for life on an unknown planet.

It was something he would have to think over. Until then—

Maltby sighed. And released her from the three-dimensional hypnotic spell that his two minds had imposed on her.

He had taken the precaution of turning her away from

him. He watched her curiously as she stood, back to him, for a moment, very still. Then she walked over to a little knob of trees above the springy, soggy marsh land.

She climbed up it and gazed in the direction from which he had come a few minutes before. Evidently looking for him.

She turned finally, shaded her face against the yellow brightness of the sinking sun, came down from the hillock and saw him.

She stopped; her eyes narrowed. She walked over slowly. She said with an odd edge in her voice:

"You came very quietly. You must have circled and walked in from the west."

"No," said Maltby deliberately, "I stayed in the east." She seemed to consider that. She was silent, her lean face creased into a frown. She pressed her lips together, finally; there was a bruise there that must have hurt, for she winced, then she said: "What did you discover? Did you find any—"

She stopped. Consciousness of the bruise on her lip must have penetrated at that moment. Her hand jerked up, her fingers touched the tender spot. Her eyes came alive with the violence of her comprehension. Before she could speak, Maltby said: "Yes, you're quite right."

She stood looking at him. Her stormy gaze quieted. She said finally, in a stony voice: "If you try that again I shall feel justified in shooting you."

Maltby shook his head. He said, unsmiling: "And spend the rest of your life here alone? You'd go mad."

He saw instantly that her basic anger was too great for that kind of logic. He went on swiftly: "Besides, you'd have to shoot me in the back. I have no doubt you could do that in the line of duty. But not for personal reasons."

Her compressed lips—separated. To his amazement there were suddenly tears in her eyes. Anger tears, obviously. But tears!

She stepped forward with a quick movement and slapped his face.

"You robot!" she sobbed.

Maltby stared at her ruefully; then he laughed. Finally he said, a trace of mockery in his tone: "If I remember rightly, the lady who just spoke is the same one who delivered a ringing radio address to all the planets of the Fifty Suns swearing

that in fifteen thousand years Earth people had forgotten all their prejudices against robots.

"Is it possible," he finished, "that the problem on *closer* investigation is proving more difficult?"

There was no answer. The Honorable Gloria Cecily brushed past him and disappeared into the interior of the ship.

She came out again a few minutes later.

Her expression was more serene; Maltby noted that she had removed all trace of the tears. She looked at him steadily, said, "What did you discover when you were out? I've been delaying my call to the ship till you returned."

Maltby said, "I thought they asked you to call at 010 hours."

The woman shrugged; and there was an arrogant note in her voice as she replied, "They'll take my calls when I make them. Did you find any sign of intelligent life?"

Maltby allowed himself brief pity for a human being who had as many shocks still to absorb as had Grand Captain Laurr.

One of the books he had read while aboard the battleship about colonists of remote planets had dealt very specifically with castaways.

He shook himself and began his description. "Mostly marsh land in the valley and there's jungle, very old. Even some of the trees are immense, though sections show no growth rings—some interesting beasts and a four-legged, two-armed thing that watched me from a distance. It carried a spear but it was too far away for me to use my hypnotism on it. There must be a village somewhere, perhaps on the valley rim. My idea is that during the next months I'll cut the ship into small sections and transport it to drier ground.

"I would say that we have the following information to offer the ship's scientists: We're on a planet of a G-type sun. The sun must be larger than the average yellow-white type and have a larger surface temperature.

"It must be larger and hotter because, though it's far away, it is hot enough to keep the northern hemisphere of this planet in a semitropical condition.

"The sun was quite a bit north at midday, but now it's swinging back to the south. I'd say offhand the planet must

be tilted at about forty degrees, which means there's a cold winter coming up, though that doesn't fit with the age and type of vegetation."

The Lady Laurr was frowning. "It doesn't seem very helpful," she said. "But, of course, I'm only an executive."

"And I'm only a meteorologist."

"Exactly. Come in. Perhaps my astrophysicist can make something of it."

"*Your* astrophysicist!" said Maltby. But he didn't say it aloud.

He followed her into the segment of ship and closed the door.

Maltby examined the interior of the main bridge with a wry smile as the young woman seated herself before the astroplate.

The very imposing glitter of the instrument board that occupied one entire wall was ironical now. All the machines it had controlled were far away in space. Once it had dominated the entire Lesser Magellanic Cloud; now his own handgun was a more potent instrument.

He grew aware that Lady Laurr was looking up at him.

"I don't understand it," she said. "They don't answer."

"Perhaps"—Maltby could not keep the faint sardonicism out of his tone—"perhaps they may really have had a good reason for wanting you to call at 010 hours."

The woman made a faint, exasperated movement with her facial muscles but she did not answer. Maltby went on coolly: "After all, it doesn't matter. They're only going through routine motions, the idea being to leave no loophole of rescue unlooked through. I can't even imagine the kind of miracle it would take for anybody to find us."

The woman seemed not to have heard. She said, frowning, "How is it that we've never heard a single Fifty Suns broadcast? I intended to ask about that before. Not once during our ten years in the Lesser Cloud did we catch so much as a whisper of radio energy."

Maltby shrugged. "All radios operate on an extremely complicated variable wavelength—changes every twentieth of a second. Your instruments would register a tick once every ten minutes, and—"

He was cut off by a voice from the astroplate. A man's face was there—Acting Grand Captain Rutgers.

"Oh, there you are, captain," the woman said. "What kept you?"

"We're in the process of landing our forces on Cassidor VII," was the reply. "As you know, regulations require that the grand captain—"

"Oh, yes. Are you free now?"

"No. I've taken a moment to see that everything is right with you, and then I'll switch you over to Captain Planston."

"How is the landing proceeding?"

"Perfectly. We have made contact with the government. They seem resigned. But now I must leave. Good-bye, my lady."

His face flickered and was gone. The plate went blank. It was about as curt a greeting as anybody had ever received. But Maltby, sunk in his own gloom, scarcely noticed.

So it was all over. The desperate scheming of the Fifty Suns leaders, his own attempt to destroy the great battleship, proved futile against an invincible foe.

For a moment he felt very close to the defeat, with all its implications. Consciousness came finally that the fight no longer mattered in his life. But the knowledge failed to shake his dark mood.

He saw that the Right Honorable Gloria Cecily had an expression of mixed elation and annoyance on her fine, strong face; and there was no doubt that she didn't *feel*—disconnected—from the mighty events out there in space. Nor had she missed the implications of the abruptness of the interview.

The astroplate grew bright and a face appeared on it—one that Maltby hadn't seen before. It was of a heavy-jowled, oldish man with a ponderous voice that said: "Privilege, your ladyship—hope we can find something that will enable us to make a rescue. Never give up hope, I say, until the last nail's driven in your coffin."

He chuckled; and the woman said: "Captain Maltby will give you all the information he has, then no doubt you can give him some advice, Captain Planston. Neither he nor I, unfortunately, are astrophysicists."

"Can't be experts on every subject," Captain Planston puffed. "Er, Captain Maltby, what do you know?"

Maltby gave his information briefly, then waited while the other gave instructions. There wasn't much: "Find out length of seasons. Interested in that yellow effect of the sunlight and

the deep brown. Take the following photographs, using orthosensitive film—use three dyes, a red sensitive, a blue, and a yellow. Take a spectrum reading—what I want to check on is that maybe you've got a strong blue sun there, with the ultraviolet barred by a heavy atmosphere, and all the heat and light coming in on the yellow band.

"I'm not offering much hope, mind you—the Lesser Cloud is packed with blue suns—five hundred thousand of them brighter than Sirius.

"Finally, get that season information from the natives. Make a point of it. Good-bye!"

The native was wary. He persisted in retreating elusively into the jungle; and his four legs gave him a speed advantage of which he seemed to be aware. For he kept coming back, tantalizingly.

The woman watched with amusement, then exasperation.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "if we separated, and I drove him toward you?"

She saw the frown on the man's face as Maltby nodded reluctantly. His voice was strong, tense.

"He's leading us into an ambush. Turn on the sensitives in your helmet and carry your gun. Don't be too hasty about firing, but don't hesitate in a crisis. A spear can make an ugly wound; and we haven't got the best facilities for handling anything like that."

His orders brought a momentary irritation. He seemed not to be aware that she was as conscious as he of the requirements of the situation.

The Right Honorable Gloria sighed. If they had to stay on this planet there would have to be some major psychological adjustments, and not—she thought grimly—only by herself.

"Now!" said Maltby beside her, swiftly. "Notice the way the ravine splits in two. I came this far yesterday and they join about two hundred yards farther on. He's gone up the left fork. I'll take the right. You stop here, let him come back to see what's happened, then drive him on."

He was gone, like a shadow, along a dark path that wound under thick foliage.

Silence settled.

She waited. After a minute she felt herself alone in a yellow and black world that had been lifeless since time began.

She thought: This was what Maltby had meant yesterday

when he had said she wouldn't dare shoot him—and remain alone. It hadn't penetrated then.

It did now. Alone, on a nameless planet of a mediocre sun, one woman waking up every morning on a moldering ship that rested its unliving metal shape on a dark, muggy, yellow marshland.

She stood somber. There was no doubt that the problem of robot and human being would have to be solved here as well as out there.

A sound pulled her out of her gloom. As she watched, abruptly more alert, a catlike head peered cautiously from a line of bushes a hundred yards away across the clearing.

It was an interesting head; its ferocity not the least of its fascinating qualities. The yellowish body was invisible now in the underbrush, but she had caught enough glimpses of it earlier to recognize that it was the CC type, of the almost universal Centaur family. Its body was evenly balanced between its hind and forelegs.

It watched her, and its great glistening black eyes were round with puzzlement. Its head twisted from side to side, obviously searching for Maltby.

She waved her gun and walked forward. Instantly the creature disappeared. She could hear it with her sensitives, running into distance. Abruptly, it slowed; then there was no sound at all.

He's got it, she thought.

She felt impressed. These two-brained Mixed Men, she thought, were bold and capable. It would really be too bad if antirobot prejudice prevented them from being absorbed into the galactic civilization of Imperial Earth.

She watched him a few minutes later, using the block system of communication with the creature. Maltby looked up, saw her. He shook his head as if puzzled.

"He says it's always been warm like this, and that he's been alive for thirteen hundred moons. And that a moon is forty suns—forty days. He wants us to come up a little farther along this valley, but that's too transparent for comfort. Our move is to make a cautious, friendly gesture, and—"

He stopped short. Before she could even realize anything was wrong, her mind was caught, her muscles galvanized. She was thrown sideways and downward so fast that the blow of striking the ground was pure agony.

She lay there stunned, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the spear plunge through the air where she had been.

She twisted, rolled over—her own free will now—and jerked her gun in the direction from which the spear had come. There was a second centaur there, racing away along a bare slope. Her finger pressed on the control; and then—

"Don't!" It was Maltby, his voice low. "It was a scout the others sent ahead to see what was happening. He's done his work. It's all over."

She lowered her gun and saw with annoyance that her hand was shaking, her whole body trembling. She parted her lips to say: "Thanks for saving my life!" Then she closed them again. Because the words would have quavered. And because—

Saved her life! Her mind poised on the edge of blankness with the shock of the thought. Incredibly—she had never before been in personal danger from an individual creature.

There had been the time when her battleship had run into the outer fringes of a sun; and there was the cataclysm of the storm, just past.

But those had been impersonal menaces to be met with technical virtuositities and the hard training of the service.

This was different.

All the way back to the segment of ship she tried to fathom what the difference meant.

It seemed to her finally that she had it.

"Spectrum featureless." Maltby gave his findings over the astro. "No dark lines at all; two of the yellow bands so immensely intense that they hurt my eyes. As you suggested, apparently what we have here is a blue sun whose strong violet radiation is cut off by the atmosphere.

"However," he finished, "the uniqueness of that effect is confined to our planet here, a derivation of the thick atmosphere. Any questions?"

"No-o!" The astrophysicist looked thoughtful. "And I can give you no further instructions. I'll have to examine this material. Will you ask Lady Laurr to come in? Like to speak to her privately, if you please."

"Of course."

When she had come, Maltby went outside and watched the moon come up. Darkness—he had noticed it the previous night—brought a vague, overall violet haze. Explained now!

An eighty-degree temperature on a planet that, the angular

diameter of the sun being what it was, would have been minus one hundred eighty degrees, if the sun's apparent color had been real.

A blue sun, one of five hundred thousand—Interesting but—Maltby smiled savagely—Captain Planston's "No further instructions!" had a finality about it that—

He shivered involuntarily. And after a moment tried to picture himself sitting, like this, a year hence, staring up at an unchanged moon. Ten years, twenty—

He grew aware that the woman had come to the doorway and was gazing at him where he sat on the chair.

Maltby looked up. The stream of white light from inside the ship caught the queer expression on her face, gave her a strange, bleached look after the yellowness that had seemed a part of her complexion all day.

"We shall receive no more astroradio calls," she said and, turning, went inside.

Maltby nodded to himself, almost idly. It was hard and brutal, this abrupt cutting off of communication. But the regulations governing such situations were precise.

The marooned ones must realize with utter clarity, without false hopes and without the curious illusions produced by radio communication, that they were cut off forever. Forever on their own.

Well, so be it. A fact was a fact, to be faced with resolution. There had been a chapter on castaways in one of the books he had read on the battleship. It had stated that nine hundred million human beings had, during recorded history, been marooned on then undiscovered planets. Most of these planets had eventually been found; and on no less than ten thousand of them great populations had sprung from the original nucleus of castaways.

The law prescribed that a castaway could not withhold himself or herself from participating in such population increases—regardless of previous rank. Castaways must forget considerations of sensitivity and individualism, and think of themselves as instruments of race expansion.

There were penalties; naturally inapplicable if no rescue was effected, but ruthlessly applied whenever recalcitrants were found.

Conceivably the courts might determine that a human being and a robot constituted a special case.

Half an hour must have passed while he sat there. He

stood up finally, conscious of hunger. He had forgotten all about supper.

He felt a qualm of self-annoyance. Damn it, this was not the night to appear to be putting pressure on her. Sooner or later she would have to be convinced that she ought to do her share of the cooking.

But not tonight.

He hurried inside, toward the compact kitchen that was part of every segment of ship. In the corridor, he paused.

A blaze of light streamed from the kitchen door. Somebody was whistling softly and tunelessly but cheerfully; and there was an odor of cooking vegetables, and hot *lak* meat.

They almost bumped in the doorway. "I was just going to call you," she said.

The supper was a meal of silences, quickly over. They put the dishes into the automatic and went and sat in the great lounge; Maltby saw finally that the woman was studying him with amused eyes.

"Is there any possibility," she said abruptly, "that a Mixed Man and a human woman can have children?"

"Frankly," Maltby confessed, "I doubt it."

He launched into a detailed description of the cold and pressure process that had molded the protoplasm to make the original Mixed Men. When he finished he saw that her eyes were still regarding him with a faint amusement. She said in an odd tone: "A very curious thing happened to me today, after that native threw his spear. I realized"—she seemed for a moment to have difficulty in speaking—"I realized that I had, so far as I personally was concerned, solved the robot problem.

"Naturally," she finished quietly, "I would not have withheld myself in any event. But it is pleasant to know that I like you without"—she smiled—"qualifications."

Blue sun that looked yellow. Maltby sat in the chair the following morning puzzling over it. He half expected a visit from the natives, and so he was determined to stay near the ship that day.

He kept his eyes aware of the clearing edges, the valley rims, the jungle trails, but—

There was a law, he remembered, that governed the shifting of light to other wave bands, to yellow for instance. Rather complicated, but in view of the fact that all the in-

struments of the main bridge were controls of instruments, not the machines themselves, he'd have to depend on mathematics if he ever hoped to visualize the kind of sun that was out there.

Most of the heat probably came through the ultraviolet range. But that was uncheckable. So leave it alone and stick to the yellow.

He went into the ship. Gloria was nowhere in sight, but her bedroom door was closed. Maltby found a notebook, returned to his chair and began to figure.

An hour later he stared at the answer: One million three hundred thousand million miles. About a fifth of a light-year.

He laughed curtly. That was that. He'd have to get better data than he had or—

Or would he?

His mind poised. In a single flash of understanding, the stupendous truth burst upon him.

With a cry he leaped to his feet, whirled to race through the door as a long, black shadow slid across him.

The shadow was so vast, instantly darkening the whole valley, that, involuntarily, Maltby halted and looked up.

The battleship *Star Cluster* hung low over the yellow-brown jungle planet, already disgorging a lifeboat that glistened a yellowish silver as it circled out into the sunlight, and started down.

Maltby had only a moment with the woman before the lifeboat landed. "To think," he said, "that I just now figured out the truth."

She was, he saw, not looking at him. Her gaze seemed far away. He went on: "As for the rest, the best method, I imagine, is to put me in the conditioning chamber, and—"

Still without looking at him, she cut him off: "Don't be ridiculous. You must not imagine that I feel embarrassed because you have kissed me. I shall receive you later in my quarters."

A bath, new clothes—at last Maltby stepped through the transmitter into the astrophysics department. His own first realization of the tremendous truth, while generally accurate, had lacked detailed facts.

"Ah, Maltby!" The chief of the department came forward, shook hands. "Some sun you picked there—we suspected from your first description of the yellowness and the black.

But naturally we couldn't rouse your hopes—Forbidden, you know.

"The axial tilt, the apparent length of a summer in which jungle trees of great size showed no growth rings—very suggestive. The featureless spectrum with its complete lack of dark lines—almost conclusive. Final proof was that the orthosensitive film was overexposed, while the blue and red sensitives were badly underexposed.

"This star-type is so immensely hot that practically all of its energy radiation is far in the ultraviolet. A secondary radiation—a sort of fluorescence in the star's own atmosphere—produces the visible yellow when a minute fraction of the appalling ultraviolet radiation is transformed into longer wavelengths by helium atoms. A fluorescent lamp, in a fashion—but on a scale that is more than ordinarily cosmic in its violence. The total radiation reaching the planet was naturally tremendous; the surface radiation, after passing through miles of absorbing ozone, water vapor, carbon-dioxide, and other gases, was very different.

"No wonder the native said it had always been hot. The summer lasts four thousand years. The normal radiation of that special appalling star type—the æon-in-æon-out radiation rate—is about equal to a full-fledged Nova at its catastrophic maximum of violence. It has a period of a few hours, and is equivalent to approximately a hundred million ordinary suns. Nova O, we call that brightest of all stars; and there's only one in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, the great and glorious S-Doradus.

"When I asked you to call Grand Captain Laurr, and I told her that out of thirty million suns she had picked—"

It was at that point that Maltby cut him off. "Just a minute," he said, "did you say you told Lady Laurr *last night*?"

"Was it night down there?" Captain Planston asked, interested. "Well, well—By the way, I almost forgot—this marrying and giving in marriage is not so important to me now that I am an old man. But congratulations."

The conversation was too swift for Maltby. His minds were still examining the first statement. That she had known all the time. He came up, groping, before the new words.

"Congratulations?" he echoed.

"Definitely time she had a husband," boomed the captain. "She's been a career woman, you know. Besides, it'll have a

revivifying effect on the other robots . . . pardon me. Assure you, the name means nothing to me.

"Anyway, Lady Laurr herself made the announcement a few minutes ago, so come down and see me again."

He turned away with a wave of a thick hand.

Maltby headed for the nearest transmitter. She would probably be expecting him by now.

She would not be disappointed.

THE PROUD ROBOT

Astounding,

October

by Lewis Padgett
(this one is *probably* by Kuttner)

"The Proud Robot" is one of the Galloway Gallagher series of stories about a heavy drinking inventor who can only be creative when drunk and then can't remember how his inventions work. The series of five stories all appeared in Astounding between 1943 and 1948 and were collected as Robots Have No Tails in 1952.

This selection is arguably the best in the series, although all were memorable.

(In the 1940s, when I was turning out my positronic robot stories with tolerable frequency, the only other robot series which seemed to impress the readers as much was Henry Kuttner's Gallagher series. I must admit that Kuttner's robots were amusing and in those days, Kuttner was one of the established major figures in science fiction and I was just an up-and-coming junior, so I felt it inevitable that he could outdo me. Even so, I didn't like it. I am quite certain that if Kuttner had lived out a normal lifetime he would have continued to stay ahead of me in the robot world.—I.A.)

Things often happened to Gallagher, who played at science by ear. He was, as he often remarked, a casual genius. Sometimes he'd start with a twist of wire, a few batteries, and a button hook, and before he finished, he might contrive a new type of refrigerating unit.

At the moment he was nursing a hangover. A disjointed,

lanky, vaguely boneless man with a lock of dark hair falling untidily over his forehead, he lay on the couch in the lab and manipulated his mechanical liquor bar. A very dry martini drizzled slowly from the spigot into his receptive mouth.

He was trying to remember something, but not trying too hard. It had to do with the robot, of course. Well, it didn't matter.

"Hey, Joe," Gallegher said.

The robot stood proudly before the mirror and examined its innards. Its hull was transparent, and wheels were going around at a great rate inside.

"When you call me that," Joe remarked, "whisper. And get that cat out of here."

"Your ears aren't that good."

"They are. I can hear the cat walking about, all right."

"What does it sound like?" Gallegher inquired, interested.

"Jest like drums," said the robot, with a put-upon air. "And when you talk, it's like thunder." Joe's voice was a discordant squeak, so Gallegher meditated on saying something about glass houses and casting the first stone. He brought his attention, with some effort, to the luminous door panel, where a shadow loomed—a familiar shadow, Gallegher thought.

"It's Brock," the annunciator said. "Harrison Brock. Let me in!"

"The door's unlocked." Gallegher didn't stir. He looked gravely at the well-dressed, middle-aged man who came in, and tried to remember. Brock was between forty and fifty; he had a smoothly massaged, clean-shaven face, and wore an expression of harassed intolerance. Probably Gallegher knew the man. He wasn't sure. Oh, well.

Brock looked around the big, untidy laboratory, blinked at the robot, searched for a chair, and failed to find it. Arms akimbo, he rocked back and forth and glared at the prostrate scientist.

"Well?" he said.

"Never start conversations that way," Gallegher mumbled, siphoning another martini down his gullet. "I've had enough trouble today. Sit down and take it easy. There's a dynamo behind you. It isn't very dusty, is it?"

"Did you get it?" Brock snapped. "That's all I want to know. You've had a week. I've a check for ten thousand in my pocket. Do you want it, or don't you?"

"Sure," Gallegher said. He extended a large, groping hand. "Give."

"*Caveat emptor*. What am I buying?"

"Don't you know?" the scientist asked, honestly puzzled.

Brock began to bounce up and down in a harassed fashion. "My God," he said. "They told me you could help me if anybody could. Sure. And they also said it'd be like pulling teeth to get sense out of you. Are you a technician or a driveling idiot?"

Gallegher pondered. "Wait a minute. I'm beginning to remember. I talked to you last week, didn't I?"

"You talked—" Brock's round face turned pink. "Yes! You lay there swilling liquor and babbled poetry. You sang 'Frankie and Johnnie.' And you finally got around to accepting my commission."

"The fact is," Gallegher said, "I have been drunk. I often get drunk. Especially on my vacation. It releases my subconscious, and then I can work. I've made my best gadgets when I was tizzied," he went on happily. "Everything seems so clear then. Clear as a bell. I mean a bell, don't I? Anyway—" He lost the thread and looked puzzled. "Anyway, what are you talking about?"

"Are you going to keep quiet?" the robot demanded from its post before the mirror.

Brock jumped. Gallegher waved a casual hand. "Don't mind Joe. I just finished him last night, and I rather regret it."

"A robot?"

"A robot. But he's no good, you know. I made him when I was drunk, and I haven't the slightest idea how or why. All he'll do is stand there and admire himself. And sing. He sings like a banshee. You'll hear him presently."

With an effort Brock brought his attention back to the matter at hand. "Now look, Gallegher. I'm in a spot. You promised to help me. If you don't, I'm a ruined man."

"I've been ruined for years," the scientist remarked. "It never bothers me. I just go along working for a living and making things in my spare time. Making all sorts of things. You know, if I'd really studied, I'd have been another Einstein. So they tell me. As it is, my subconscious picked up a first-class scientific training somewhere. Probably that's why I never bothered. When I'm drunk or sufficiently absent-minded, I can work out the damnedest problems."

"You're drunk now," Brock accused.

"I approach the pleasanter stages. How would you feel if you woke up and found you'd made a robot for some unknown reason, and hadn't the slightest idea of the creature's attributes?"

"Well—"

"I don't feel that way at all," Gallegher murmured. "Probably you take life too seriously, Brock. Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging. Pardon me. I rage." He drank another martini.

Brock began to pace around the crowded laboratory, circling various enigmatic and untidy objects. "If you're a scientist, heaven help science."

"I'm the Larry Adler of science," Gallegher said. "He was a musician—lived some hundreds of years ago, I think. I'm like him. Never took a lesson in my life. Can I help it if my subconscious likes practical jokes?"

"Do you know who I am?" Brock demanded.

"Candidly, no. Should I?"

There was bitterness in the other's voice. "You might have the courtesy to remember, even though it was a week ago. Harrison Brock. Me. I own Vox-View Pictures."

"No," the robot said suddenly, "it's no use. No use at all, Brock."

"What the—"

Gallegher sighed wearily. "I forget the damned thing's alive. Mr. Brock, meet Joe. Joe, meet Mr. Brock—of Vox-View."

Joe turned, gears meshing within his transparent skull. "I am glad to meet you, Mr. Brock. Allow me to congratulate you on your good fortune in hearing my lovely voice."

"Ugh," said the magnate inarticulately. "Hello."

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," Gallegher put in, *sotto voce*. "Joe's like that. A peacock. No use arguing with him either."

The robot ignored this aside. "But it's no use, Mr. Brock," he went on squeakily. "I'm not interested in money. I realize it would bring happiness to many if I consented to appear in your pictures, but fame means nothing to me. Nothing. Consciousness of beauty is enough."

Brock began to chew his lips. "Look," he said savagely, "I didn't come here to offer you a picture job. See? Am I offering you a contract? Such colossal nerve—*Pah!* You're crazy."

"Your schemes are perfectly transparent," the robot remarked coldly. "I can see that you're overwhelmed by my beauty and the loveliness of my voice—its grand tonal qualities. You needn't pretend you don't want me, just so you can get me at a lower price. I said I wasn't interested."

"You're *cr-r-razy!*" Brock howled, badgered beyond endurance, and Joe calmly turned back to his mirror.

"Don't talk so loudly," the robot warned. "The discordance is deafening. Besides you're ugly and I don't like to look at you." Wheels and cogs buzzed inside the transplastic shell. Joe extended his eyes on stalks and regarded himself with every appearance of appreciation.

Gallegher was chuckling quietly on the couch. "Joe has a high irritation value," he said. "I've found that out already. I must have given him some remarkable senses, too. An hour ago he started to laugh his damn fool head off. No reason, apparently. I was fixing myself a bite to eat. Ten minutes after that I slipped on an apple core I'd thrown away and came down hard. Joe just looked at me. 'That was it,' he said. 'Logics of probability. Cause and effect. I knew you were going to drop that apple core and then step on it when you went to pick up the mail.' Like the White Queen, I suppose. It's a poor memory that doesn't work both ways."

Brock sat on the small dynamo—there were two, the larger one named Monstro, and the smaller one serving Gallegher as a bank—and took deep breaths. "Robots are nothing new."

"This one is. I hate its gears. It's beginning to give me an inferiority complex. Wish I knew why I'd made it," Gallegher sighed. "Oh, well. Have a drink?"

"No. I came here on business. Do you seriously mean you spent last week building a robot instead of solving the problem I hired you for?"

"Contingent, wasn't it?" Gallegher asked. "I think I remember that."

"Contingent," Brock said with satisfaction. "Ten thousand, if and when."

"Why not give me the dough and take the robot? He's worth that. Put him in one of your pictures."

"I won't have any pictures unless you figure out an answer," Brock snapped. "I told you all about it."

"I have been drunk," Gallegher said. "My mind has been

wiped clear, as by a sponge. I am as a little child. Soon I shall be as a drunken little child. Meanwhile, if you'd care to explain the matter again—"

Brock gulped down his passion, jerked a magazine at random from the bookshelf, and took out a stylo. "All right. My preferred stocks are at twenty-eight, way below par—" He scribbled figures on the magazine.

"If you'd taken that medieval folio next to that, it'd have cost you a pretty penny," Gallagher said lazily. "So you're the sort of guy who writes on tablecloths, eh? Forget this business of stocks and stuff. Get down to cases. Who are you trying to gyp?"

"It's no use," the robot said from before its mirror. "I won't sign a contract. People may come and admire me, if they like, but they'll have to whisper in my presence."

"A madhouse." Brock muttered, trying to get a grip on himself. "Listen, Gallagher. I told you all this a week ago, but—"

"Joe wasn't here then. Pretend like you're talking to him."

"Uh—look. You've heard of Vox-View Pictures, at least."

"Sure. The biggest and best television company in the business. Sonatone's about your only competitor."

"Sonatone's squeezing me out."

Gallagher looked puzzled. "I don't see how. You've got the best product. Tri-dimensional color, all sorts of modern improvements, the top actors, musicians, singers—"

"No use," the robot said. "I won't."

"Shut up, Joe. You're tops in your field, Brock. I'll hand you that. And I've always heard you were fairly ethical. What's Sonatone got on you?"

Brock made helpless gestures. "Oh, it's politics. The bootleg theaters. I can't buck 'em. Sonatone helped elect the present administration, and the police just wink when I try to have the bootleggers raided."

"Bootleg theaters?" Gallagher asked, scowling a trifle. "I've heard something—"

"It goes way back. To the old sound-film days. Home television killed sound film and big theaters. People were conditioned away from sitting in audience groups to watch a screen. The home televisors got good. It was more fun to sit in an easy chair, drink beer, and watch the show. Television wasn't a rich man's hobby by that time. The meter system

brought the price down to middle-class levels. Everybody knows that."

"I don't," Gallegher said. "I never pay attention to what goes on outside of my lab, unless I have to. Liquor and a selective mind. I ignore everything that doesn't affect me directly. Explain the whole thing in detail so I'll get a complete picture. I don't mind repetition. Now, what about this meter system of yours?"

"Televisors are installed free. We never sell 'em; we rent them. People pay according to how many hours they have the set tuned in. We run a continuous show, stage plays, wire-tape films, operas, orchestras, singers, vaudeville—everything. If you use your televisor a lot, you pay proportionately. The man comes around once a month and reads the meter. Which is a fair system. Anybody can afford a Vox-View. Sonatone and the other companies do the same thing, but Sonatone's the only big competitor I've got. At least, the only one that's crooked as hell. The rest of the boys—they're smaller than I am, but I don't step on their toes. Nobody's ever called me a louse," Brock said darkly.

"So what?"

"So Sonatone has started to depend on audience appeal. It was impossible till lately—you couldn't magnify tri-dimensional television on a big screen without streakiness and mirage-effect. That's why the regular three-by-four home screens were used. Results were perfect. But Sonatone's bought a lot of the ghost theaters all over the country—"

"What's a ghost theater?" Gallegher asked.

"Well—before sound films collapsed, the world was thinking big. Big—you know? Ever heard of the Radio City Music Hall? That wasn't in it! Television was coming in, and competition was fierce. Sound-film theaters got bigger and more elaborate. They were palaces. Tremendous. But when television was perfected, nobody went to the theaters any more, and it was often too expensive a job to tear 'em down. Ghost theaters—see? Big ones and little ones. Renovated them. And they're showing Sonatone programs. Audience appeal is quite a factor. The theaters charge plenty, but people flock into 'em. Novelty and the mob instinct."

Gallegher closed his eyes. "What's to stop you from doing the same thing?"

"Patents," Brock said briefly. "I mentioned that dimensional television couldn't be used on big screens till lately.

Sonatone signed an agreement with me ten years ago that any enlarging improvements would be used mutually. They crawled out of that contract. Said it was faked, and the courts upheld them. They uphold the courts—politics. Anyhow, Sonatone's technicians worked out a method of using the large screen. They took out patents—twenty-seven patents, in fact, covering every possible variation on the idea. My technical staff has been working day and night trying to find some similar method that won't be an infringement, but Sonatone's got it all sewed up. They've a system called the Magna. It can be hooked up to any type of televisor—but they'll only allow it to be used on Sonatone machines. See?"

"Unethical, but legal," Gallegher said. "Still, you're giving your customers more for their money. People want good stuff. The size doesn't matter."

"Yeah," Brock said bitterly, "but that isn't all. The news-tapes are full of A. A.—it's a new catchword. Audience Appeal. The herd instinct. You're right about people wanting good stuff—but would you buy Scotch at four a quart if you could get it for half that amount?"

"Depends on the quality. What's happening?"

"Bootleg theaters," Brock said. "They've opened all over the country. They show Vox-View products, and they're using the Magna enlarger system Sonatone's got patented. The admission price is low—lower than the rate of owning a Vox-View in your own home. There's audience appeal. There's the thrill of something a bit illegal. People are having their Vox-Views taken out right and left. I know why. They can go to a bootleg theater instead."

"It's illegal," Gallegher said thoughtfully.

"So were speakeasies, in the Prohibition Era. A matter of protection, that's all. I can't get any action through the courts. I've tried. I'm running in the red. Eventually I'll be broke. I can't lower my home rental fees on Vox-Views. They're nominal already. I make my profits through quantity. Now, no profits. As for these bootleg theaters, it's pretty obvious who's backing them."

"Sonatone?"

"Sure. Silent partners. They get the take at the box office. What they want is to squeeze me out of business, so they'll have a monopoly. After that, they'll give the public junk and pay their artists starvation salaries. With me it's different. I pay my staff what they're worth—plenty."

"And you offered me a lousy ten thousand," Gallegher remarked. "Uh-huh!"

"That was only the first instalment," Brock said hastily. "You can name your own fee. Within reason," he added.

"I shall. An astronomical sum. Did I say I'd accept the commission a week ago?"

"You did."

"Then I must have had some idea how to solve the problem." Gallegher pondered. "Let's see. I didn't mention anything in particular, did I?"

"You kept talking about marble slabs and . . . uh . . . your sweetie."

"Then I was singing," Gallegher explained largely. "'St. James Infirmary.' Singing calms my nerves, and God knows they need it sometimes. Music and liquor. I often wonder what the vintners buy—"

"What?"

"One half so precious as the stuff they sell. Let it go. I am quoting Omar. It means nothing. Are your technicians any good?"

"The best. And the best paid."

"They can't find a magnifying process that won't infringe on the Sonatone Magna patents?"

"In a nutshell, that's it."

"I suppose I'll have to do some research," Gallegher said sadly. "I hate it like poison. Still, the sum of the parts equals the whole. Does that make sense to you? It doesn't to me. I have trouble with words. After I say things, I start wondering what I've said. Better than watching a play," he finished wildly. "I've got a headache. Too much talk and not enough liquor. Where were we?"

"Approaching the madhouse," Brock suggested. "If you weren't my last resort, I'd—"

"No use," the robot said squeakily. "You might as well tear up your contract, Brock. I won't sign it. Fame means nothing to me—nothing."

"If you don't shut up," Gallegher warned, "I'm going to scream in your ears."

"All right!" Joe shrilled. "Beat me! Go on, beat me! The meaner you are, the faster I'll have my nervous system disrupted, and then I'll be dead. I don't care. I've got no instinct of self-preservation. Beat me. See if I care."

"He's right, you know," the scientist said after a pause. "And it's the only logical way to respond to blackmail or threats. The sooner it's over, the better. There aren't any graduations with Joe. Anything really painful to him will destroy him. And he doesn't give a damn."

"Neither do I," Brock grunted. "What I want to find out—"

"Yeah. I know. Well, I'll wander around and see what occurs to me. Can I get into your studios?"

"Here's a pass." Brock scribbled something on the back of a card. "Will you get to work on it right away?"

"Sure," Gallegher lied. "Now you run along and take it easy. Try and cool off. Everything's under control. I'll either find a solution to your problem pretty soon or else—"

"Or else what?"

"Or else I won't," the scientist finished blandly, and fingered the buttons on a control panel near the couch. "I'm tired of martinis. Why didn't I make that robot a mechanical bartender, while I was at it? Even the effort of selecting and pushing buttons is depressing at times. Yeah, I'll get to work on the business, Brock. Forget it."

The magnate hesitated. "Well, you're my only hope. I needn't bother to mention that if there's anything I can do to help you—"

"A blonde," Gallegher murmured. "That gorgeous, gorgeous star of yours, Silver O'Keefe. Send her over. Otherwise I want nothing."

"Good-bye, Brock," the robot said squeakily. "Sorry we couldn't get together on the contract, but at least you've had the delight of hearing my beautiful voice, not to mention the pleasure of seeing me. Don't tell too many people how lovely I am. I really don't want to be bothered with mobs. They're noisy."

"You don't know what dogmatism means till you've talked to Joe," Gallegher said. "Oh, well. See you later. Don't forget the blonde."

Brock's lips quivered. He searched for words, gave it up as a vain task, and turned to the door.

"Good-bye, you ugly man," Joe said.

Gallegher winced as the door slammed, though it was harder on the robot's supersensitive ears than on his own.

"Why do you go on like that?" he inquired. "You nearly gave the guy apoplexy."

"Surely he didn't think he was beautiful," Joe remarked.

"Beauty's in the eye of the beholder."

"How stupid you are. You're ugly, too."

"And you're a collection of rattletrap gears, pistons, and cogs. You've got worms," said Gallagher, referring of course, to certain mechanisms in the robot's body.

"I'm lovely." Joe stared raptly into the mirror.

"Maybe, to you. Why did I make you transparent, I wonder?"

"So others could admire me. I have X-ray vision, of course."

"And wheels in your head. Why did I put your radio-atomic brain in your stomach? Protection?"

Joe didn't answer. He was humming in a maddeningly squeaky voice, shrill and nerve-racking. Gallagher stood it for a while, fortifying himself with a gin rickey from the siphon.

"Get it up!" he yelled at last. "You sound like an old-fashioned subway train going round a curve."

"You're merely jealous," Joe scoffed, but obediently raised his tone to a supersonic pitch. There was silence for a half-minute. Then all the dogs in the neighborhood began to howl.

Wearily Gallagher dragged his lanky frame up from the couch. He might as well get out. Obviously there was no peace to be had in the laboratory. Not with that animated junk pile inflating his ego all over the place. Joe began to laugh in an off-key cackle. Gallagher winced.

"What now?"

"You'll find out."

Logic of causation and effect, influenced by probabilities, X-ray vision and other enigmatic senses the robot no doubt possessed. Gallagher cursed softly, found a shapeless black hat, and made for the door. He opened it to admit a short, fat man who bounced painfully off the scientist's stomach.

"*Whoof!* Uh. What a corny sense of humor that jackass has. Hello, Mr. Kennicott. Glad to see you. Sorry I can't offer you a drink."

Mr. Kennicott's swarthy face twisted malignantly. "Don' wanna no drink. Wanna my money. You gimme. Howzabout it?"

Gallegher looked thoughtfully at nothing. "Well, the fact is, I was just going to collect a check."

"I sella you my diamonds. You say you gonna make somet'ing wit' 'em. You gimme check before. It go bounca, bounca, bounca. Why is?"

"It was rubber," Gallegher said faintly. "I never can keep track of my bank balance."

Kennicott showed symptoms of going bounca on the threshold. "You gimme back diamonds, eh?"

"Well, I used 'em in an experiment. I forget just what. You know, Mr. Kennicott, I think I was a little drunk when I bought them, wasn't I?"

"Dronk," the little man agreed. "Mad wit' vino, sure. So whatta? I wait no longer. Awready you put me off too much. Pay up now or elsa."

"Go away, you dirty man," Joe said from within the room. "You're awful."

Gallegher hastily shouldered Kennicott out into the street and latched the door behind him. "A parrot," he explained. "I'm going to wring its neck pretty soon. Now about that money. I admit I owe it to you. I've just taken on a big job, and when I'm paid, you'll get yours."

"Bah to such stuff," Kennicott said. "You gotta position, eh? You are technician wit' some big company, eh? Ask for ahead-salary."

"I did," Gallegher sighed. "I've drawn my salary for six months ahead. Now look. I'll have that dough for you in a couple of days. Maybe I can get an advance from my client. O.K.?"

"No."

"No?"

"Ah-h, nutsa. I waita one day. Two daysa, maybe. Enough. You get money. Awright. If not, O.K., *calabozo* for you."

"Two days is plenty," Gallegher said, relieved. "Say, are there any of those bootleg theaters around here?"

"Better you get to work an' not waste time."

"That's my work. I'm making a survey. How can I find a bootleg place?"

"Easy. You go downtown, see guy in doorway. He sell you tickets. Anywhere. All over."

"Swell," Gallegher said, and bade the little man adieu. Why had he bought diamonds from Kennicott? It would be almost worthwhile to have his subconscious amputated. It did the most extraordinary things. It worked on inflexible principles of logic, but that logic was completely alien to Galle-

gher's conscious mind. The results, though, were often surprisingly good, and always surprising. That was the worst of being a scientist who knew no science—who played by ear.

There was diamond dust in a retort in the laboratory, from some unsatisfactory experiment Gallegher's subconscious had performed; and he had a fleeting memory of buying the stones from Kennicott. Curious. Maybe—oh, yeah. They'd gone into Joe. Bearings or something. Dismantling the robot wouldn't help now, for the diamonds had certainly been re-ground. Why the devil hadn't he used commercial stones, quite as satisfactory, instead of purchasing blue-whites of the finest water? The best was none too good for Gallegher's subconscious. It had a fine freedom from commercial instincts. It just didn't understand the price system of the basic principles of economics.

Gallegher wandered downtown like a Diogenes seeking truth. It was early evening, and the luminates were flickering on overhead, pale bars of light against darkness. A sky sign blazed above Manhattan's towers. Air-taxis, skimming along at various arbitrary levels, paused for passengers at the elevator landings. Heigh-ho.

Downtown, Gallegher began to look for doorways. He found an occupied one at last, but the man was selling postcards. Gallegher declined and headed for the nearest bar, feeling the needs of replenishment. It was a mobile bar, combining the worst features of a Coney Island ride with uninspired cocktails, and Gallegher hesitated on the threshold. But at last he seized a chair as it swung past and relaxed as much as possible. He ordered three rickeys and drank them in rapid succession. After that he called the bartender over and asked him about bootleg theaters.

"Hell, yes," the man said, producing a sheaf of tickets from his apron. "How many?"

"One. Where do I go?"

"Two-twenty-eight. This street. Ask for Tony."

"Thanks," Gallegher said, and having paid exorbitantly, crawled out of the chair and weaved away. Mobile bars were an improvement he didn't appreciate. Drinking, he felt, should be performed in a state of stasis, since one eventually reached that stage, anyway.

The door was at the bottom of a flight of steps, and there was a grilled panel set in it. When Gallegher knocked, the

visascreen lit up—obviously a one-way circuit, for the doorman was invisible.

"Tony here?" Gallegher said.

The door opened, revealing a tired-looking man in pneumoslacks, which failed in their purpose of building up his skinny figure. "Got a ticket? Let's have it. O.K., bud. Straight ahead. Show now going on. Liquor served in the bar on your left."

Gallegher pushed through soundproofed curtains at the end of a short corridor and found himself in what appeared to be the foyer of an ancient theater, *circa* 1980, when plastics were the great fad. He smelled out the bar, drank expensively priced cheap liquor, and, fortified, entered the theater itself. It was nearly full. The great screen—a Magna, presumably—was filled with people doing things to a spaceship. Either an adventure film or a newsreel, Gallegher realized.

Only the thrill of lawbreaking would have enticed the audience into the bootleg theater. It smelled. It was certainly run on a shoestring, and there were no ushers. But it was illicit, and therefore well patronized. Gallegher looked thoughtfully at the screen. No streakiness, no mirage effect. A Magna enlarger had been fitted to a Vox-View unlicensed televisor, and one of Brock's greatest stars was emoting effectively for the benefit of the bootleggers' patrons. Simple highjacking. Yeah.

After a while Gallegher went out, noticing a uniformed policeman in one of the aisle seats. He grinned sardonically. The flatfoot hadn't paid his admission, of course. Politics were as usual.

Two blocks down the street a blaze of light announced SONATONE BIJOU. This, of course, was one of the legalized theaters, and correspondingly high-priced. Gallegher recklessly squandered a small fortune on a good seat. He was interested in comparing notes, and discovered that, as far as he could make out, the Magna in the Bijou and the bootleg theater were identical. Both did their job perfectly. The difficult task of enlarging television screens had been successfully surmounted.

In the Bijou, however, all was palatial. Resplendent ushers salaamed to the rugs. Bars dispensed free liquor, in reasonable quantities. There was a Turkish bath. Gallegher went through a door labelled MEN and emerged quite dazzled by the splendor of the place. For at least ten minutes afterward he felt like a Sybarite.

All of which meant that those who could afford it went to

the legalized Sonatone theaters, and the rest attended the boot-leg places. All but a few homebodies, who weren't carried off their feet by the new fad. Eventually Brock would be forced out of business for lack of revenue. Sonatone would take over, jacking up their prices and concentrating on making money. Amusement was necessary to life; people had been conditioned to television. There was no substitute. They'd pay and pay for inferior talent, once Sonatone succeeded in their squeeze.

Gallegher left the Bijou and hailed an air-taxi. He gave the address of Vox-View's Long Island studio, with some vague hope of getting a drawing account out of Brock. Then, too, he wanted to investigate further.

Vox-View's eastern offices sprawled wildly over Long Island, bordering the Sound, a vast collection of variously shaped buildings. Gallegher instinctively found the commissary, where he absorbed more liquor as a precautionary measure. His subconscious had a heavy job ahead, and he didn't want it handicapped by lack of complete freedom. Besides, the collins was good.

After one drink, he decided he'd had enough for a while. He wasn't a superman, though his capacity was slightly incredible. Just enough for objective clarity and subjective release—

"Is the studio always open at night?" he asked the waiter.

"Sure. Some of the stages, anyway. It's a round-the-clock program."

"The commissary's full."

"We get the airport crowd, too. 'Nother?"

Gallegher shook his head and went out. The card Brock had given him provided entry at a gate, and he went first of all to the big-shot's office. Brock wasn't there, but loud voices emerged, shrilly feminine.

The secretary said, "Just a minute, please," and used her interoffice visor. Presently—"Will you go in?"

Gallegher did. The office was a honey, functional and luxurious at the same time. Three-dimensional stills were in niches along the walls—Vox-View's biggest stars. A small, excited, pretty brunette was sitting behind the desk, and a blonde angel was standing furiously on the other side of it. Gallegher recognized the angel as Silver O'Keefe.

He seized the opportunity. "Hiya, Miss O'Keefe. Will you autograph an ice cube for me? In a highball?"

Silver looked feline. "Sorry, darling, but I'm a working girl. And I'm busy right now."

The brunette scratched a cigarette. "Let's settle this later, Silver. Pop said to see this guy if he dropped in. It's important."

"It'll be settled," Silver said. "And soon." She made an exit. Gallegher whistled thoughtfully at the closed door.

"You can't have it," the brunette said. "It's under contract. And it wants to get out of the contract, so it can sign up with Sonatone. Rats desert a sinking ship. Silver's been kicking her head off ever since she read the storm signals."

"Yeah?"

"Sit down and smoke or something. I'm Patsy Brock. Pop runs this business, and I manage the controls whenever he blows his top. The old goat can't stand trouble. He takes it as a personal affront."

Gallegher found a chair. "So Silver's trying to renege, eh? How many others?"

"Not many. Most of 'em are loyal. But, of course, if we bust up—" Patsy Brock shrugged. "They'll either work for Sonatone for their cakes, or else do without."

"Uh-huh. Well—I want to see your technicians. I want to look over the ideas they've worked out for enlarger screens."

"Suit yourself," Patsy said. "It's not much use. You just can't make a televisior enlarger without infringing on some Sonatone patent."

She pushed a button, murmured something into a visor, and presently two tall glasses appeared through a slot in the desk. "Mr. Gallegher?"

"Well, since it's a collins—"

"I could tell by your breath," Patsy said enigmatically. "Pop told me he'd seen you. He seemed a bit upset, especially by your new robot. What is it like, anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know," Gallegher said, at a loss. "It's got lots of abilities—new senses, I think—but I haven't the slightest idea what it's good for. Except admiring itself in a mirror."

Patsy nodded. "I'd like to see it sometime. But about this Sonatone business. Do you think you can figure out an answer?"

"Possibly. Probably."

"Not certainly?"

"Certainly, then. Of that there is no manner of doubt—no possible doubt whatever."

"Because it's important to me. The man who owns Sonatone is Elia Tone. A piratical skunk. He blusters. He's got a son named Jimmy. And Jimmy, believe it or not, has read 'Romeo and Juliet.' "

"Nice guy?"

"A louse. A big, brawny louse. He wants me to marry him."

" 'Two families, both alike in—' "

"Spare me," Patsy interrupted. "I always thought Romeo was a dope, anyway. And if I ever thought I was going aising with Jimmy Tone, I'd buy a one-way ticket to the nut hatch. No, Mr. Gallegher, it's not like that. No hibiscus blossoms. Jimmy has proposed to me—his idea of a proposal, by the way, is to get a half Nelson on a girl and tell her how lucky she is."

"Ah," said Gallegher, diving into his collins.

"This whole idea—the patent monopoly and the bootleg theaters—is Jimmy's. I'm sure of that. His father's in on it, too, of course, but Jimmy Tone is the bright little boy who started it."

"Why?"

"Two birds with one stone. Sonatone will have a monopoly on the business, and Jimmy thinks he'll get me. He's a little mad. He can't believe I'm in earnest in refusing him, and he expects me to break down and say 'Yes' after a while. Which I won't, no matter what happens. But it's a personal matter. I can't let him put this trick over on us. I want that self-sufficient smirk wiped off his face."

"You just don't like him, eh?" Gallegher remarked. "I don't blame you, if he's like that. Well, I'll do my damndest. However, I'll need an expense account."

"How much?"

Gallegher named a sum. Patsy styloed a check for a far smaller amount. The scientist looked hurt.

"It's no use," Patsy said, grinning crookedly. "I've heard of you, Mr. Gallegher. You're completely irresponsible. If you had more than this, you'd figure you didn't need any more, and you'd forget the whole matter. I'll issue more checks to you when you need 'em—but I'll want itemized expense accounts."

"You wrong me," Gallegher said, brightening. "I was figur-

ing on taking you to a night club. Naturally I don't want to take you to a dive. The big places cost money. Now if you'll just write another check—"

Patsy laughed. "No."

"Want to buy a robot?"

"Not that kind, anyway."

"Then I'm washed up," Gallagher sighed. "Well, what about—"

At this point the visor hummed. A blank, transparent face grew on the screen. Gears were clicking rapidly inside the round head. Patsy gave a small shriek and shrank back.

"Tell Gallagher Joe's here, you lucky girl," a squeaky voice announced. "You may treasure the sound and sight of me till your dying day. One touch of beauty in a world of drabness—"

Gallagher circled the desk and looked at the screen. "What the hell. How did you come to life?"

"I had a problem to solve."

"How'd you know where to reach me?"

"I vastened you," the robot said.

"What?"

"I vastened you were at the Vox-View studios, with Patsy Brock."

"What's vastened?" Gallagher wanted to know.

"It's a sense I've got. You've nothing remotely like it, so I can't describe it to you. It's like a combination of sagrazi and prescience."

"Sagrazi?"

"Oh, you don't have sagrazi, either, do you. Well, don't waste my time. I want to go back to the mirror."

"Does he always talk like that?" Patsy put in.

"Nearly always. Sometimes it makes even less sense. O.K., Joe. Now what?"

"You're not working for Brock any more," the robot said.

"You're working for the Sonatone people."

Gallagher breathed deeply. "Keep talking. You're crazy, though."

"I don't like Kennicott. He annoys me. He's *too* ugly. His vibrations grate on my sagrazi."

"Never mind him," Gallagher said, not wishing to discuss his diamond-buying activities before the girl. "Get back to—"

"But I knew Kennicott would keep coming back till he got

his money. So when Elia and James Tone came to the laboratory, I got a check from them."

Patsy's hand gripped Gallagher's biceps. "Steady! What's going on here? The old double cross?"

"No. Wait. Let me get to the bottom of this. Joe, damn your transparent hide, just what did you do? How could you get a check from the Tones?"

"I pretended to be you."

"Sure," Gallagher said with savage sarcasm. "That explains it. We're twins. We look exactly alike."

"I hypnotized them," Joe explained. "I made them think I was you."

"You can do *that*?"

"Yes. It surprised me a bit. Still, if I'd thought, I'd have vastened I could do it."

"You . . . yeah, sure. I'd have vastened the same thing myself. *What happened?*"

"The Tones must have suspected Brock would ask you to help him. They offered an exclusive contract—you work for them and nobody else. Lots of money. Well, I pretended to be you, and said all right. So I signed the contract—it's your signature, by the way—and got a check from them and mailed it to Kennicott."

"The whole check?" Gallagher asked feebly. "How much was it?"

"Twelve thousand."

"They only offered me *that*?"

"No," the robot said, "they offered a hundred thousand, and two thousand a week for five years. But I merely wanted enough to pay Kennicott and make sure he wouldn't come back and bother me. The Tones were satisfied when I said twelve thousand would be enough."

Gallegher made an inarticulate, gurgling sound deep in his throat. Joe nodded thoughtfully.

"I thought I had better notify you that you're working for Sonatone now. Well, I'll go back to the mirror and sing to myself."

"Wait," the scientist said. "Just wait, Joe. With my own two hands I'm going to rip you gear from gear and stamp on your fragments."

"It won't hold in court," Patsy said, gulping.

"It will," Joe told her cheerily. "You may have one last, satisfying look at me, and then I must go." He went.

Gallegher drained his collins at a draft. "I'm shocked sober," he informed the girl. "What did I put into that robot? What abnormal senses has he got? Hypnotizing people into believing he's me—I'm him—I don't know what I mean."

"Is this a gag?" Patsy said shortly, after a pause. "You didn't sign up with Sonatone yourself, by any chance, and have your robot call up here to give you an out—an alibi? I'm just wondering."

"Don't. Joe signed a contract with Sonatone, not me. But—figure it out: If the signature's a perfect copy of mine, if Joe hypnotized the Tones into thinking they saw me instead of him, if there are witnesses to the signature—the two Tones are witnesses, of course—Oh, hell."

Patsy's eyes were narrowed. "We'll pay you as much as Sonatone offered. On a contingent basis. But you're working for Vox-View—that's understood."

"Sure."

Gallegher looked longingly at his empty glass. Sure. He was working for Vox-View. But, to all legal appearances, he had signed a contract giving his exclusive services to Sonatone for a period of five years—and for a sum of twelve thousand! *Yipes!* What was it they'd offered? A hundred thousand flat, and . . . and—

It wasn't the principle of the thing, it was the money. Now Gallegher was sewed up tighter than a banded pigeon. If Sonatone could win a court suit, he was legally bound to them for five years. With no further emolument. He had to get out of that contract, somehow—and at the same time solve Brock's problem.

Why not Joe? The robot, with his surprising talents, had got Gallegher into this spot. He ought to be able to get the scientist out. He'd better—or the proud robot would soon be admiring himself piecemeal.

"That's it," Gallegher said under his breath. "I'll talk to Joe. Patsy, feed me liquor in a hurry and send me to the technical department. I want to see those blueprints."

The girl looked at him suspiciously. "All right. If you try to sell us out—"

"I've been sold out myself. Sold down the river. I'm afraid of that robot. He's vastened me into quite a spot. That's right, collinses." Gallegher drank long and deeply.

After that, Patsy took him to the tech offices. The reading of three-dimensional blueprints was facilitated with a scan-

ner—a selective device which eliminated confusion. Gallagher studied the plans long and thoughtfully. There were copies of the patent Sonatone prints, too, and, as far as he could tell, Sonatone had covered the ground beautifully. There weren't any outs. Unless one used an entirely new principle—

But new principles couldn't be plucked out of the air. Nor would that solve the problem completely. Even if Vox-View owned a new type of enlarger that didn't infringe on Sonatone's Magna, the bootleg theaters would still be in existence, pulling the trade. A. A.—audience appeal—was a prime factor now. It had to be considered. The puzzle wasn't a purely scientific one. There was the human equation as well.

Gallegher stored the necessary information in his mind, neatly indexed on shelves. Later he'd use what he wanted. For the moment, he was completely baffled. Something worried him.

What?

The Sonatone affair.

"I want to get in touch with the Tones," he told Patsy. "Any ideas?"

"I can reach 'em on a visor."

Gallegher shook his head. "Psychological handicap. It's too easy to break the connection."

"Well, if you're in a hurry, you'll probably find the boys night-clubbing. I'll go see what I can find out." Patsy scuttled off, and Silver O'Keefe appeared from behind a screen.

"I'm shameless," she announced. "I always listen at keyholes. Sometimes I hear interesting things. If you want to see the Tones, they're at the Castle Club. And I think I'll take you up on that drink."

Gallegher said, "O.K. You get a taxi. I'll tell Patsy we're going."

"She'll hate that," Silver remarked. "Meet you outside the commissary in ten minutes. Get a shave while you're at it."

Patsy Brock wasn't in her office, but Gallagher left word. After that, he visited the service lounge, smeared invisible shave cream on his face, left it there for a couple of minutes, and wiped it off with a treated towel. The bristles came away with the cream. Slightly refreshed, Gallagher joined Silver at the rendezvous and hailed an air-taxi. Presently they were leaning back on the cushions, puffing cigarettes and eyeing each other warily.

"Well?" Gallegher said.

"Jimmy Tone tried to date me up tonight. That's how I knew where to find him."

"Well?"

"I've been asking questions around the lot tonight. It's unusual for an outsider to get into the Vox-View administration offices. I went around saying, 'Who's Gallegher?'"

"What did you find out?"

"Enough to give me a few ideas. Brock hired you, eh? I can guess why."

"*Ergo* what?"

"I've a habit of landing on my feet," Silver said, shrugging. She knew how to shrug. "Vox-View's going bust. Sonatone's taking over. Unless—"

"Unless I figure out an answer."

"That's right. I want to know which side of the fence I'm going to land on. You're the lad who can probably tell me. Who's going to win?"

"You always bet on the winning side, eh?" Gallegher inquired. "Have you no ideals, wench? Is there no truth in you? Ever hear of ethics and scruples?"

Silver beamed happily. "Did you?"

"Well, I've heard of 'em. Usually I'm too drunk to figure out what they mean. The trouble is, my subconscious is completely amoral, and when it takes over, logic's the only law."

She threw her cigarette into the East River. "Will you tip me off which side of the fence is the right one?"

"Truth will triumph," Gallegher said piously. "It always does. However, I figure truth is a variable, so we're right back where we started. All right, sweetheart. I'll answer your question. Stay on my side if you want to be safe."

"Which side are you on?"

"God knows," Gallegher said. "Consciously I'm on Brock's side. But my subconscious may have different ideas. We'll see."

Silver looked vaguely dissatisfied, but didn't say anything. The taxi swooped down to the Castle roof, grounding with pneumatic gentleness. The Club itself was downstairs, in an immense room shaped like half a melon turned upside down. Each table was on a transparent platform that could be raised on its shaft to any height at will. Smaller service elevators allowed waiters to bring drinks to the guests. There wasn't any particular reason for this arrangement, but at least it was

novel, and only extremely heavy drinkers ever fell from their tables. Lately the management had taken to hanging transparent nets under the platforms, for safety's sake.

The Tones, father and son, were up near the roof, drinking with two lovelies. Silver towed Gallagher to a service lift, and the man closed his eyes as he was elevated skyward. The liquor in his stomach screamed protest. He lurched forward, clutched at Elia Tone's bald head, and dropped into a seat beside the magnate. His searching hand found Jimmy Tone's glass, and he drained it hastily.

"What the hell," Jimmy said.

"It's Gallagher," Elia announced. "And Silver. A pleasant surprise. Join us?"

"Only socially," Silver said.

Gallegher, fortified by the liquor, peered at the two men. Jimmy Tone was a big, tanned, handsome lout with a jutting jaw and an offensive grin. His father combined the worst features of Nero and a crocodile.

"We're celebrating," Jimmy said. "What made you change your mind, Silver? You said you had to work tonight."

"Gallegher wanted to see you. I don't know why."

Elia's cold eyes grew even more glacial. "All right. Why?"

"I hear I signed some sort of contract with you," the scientist said.

"Yeah. Here's a photostatic copy. What about it?"

"Wait a minute." Gallegher scanned the document. It was apparently his own signature. Damn that robot!

"It's a fake," he said at last.

Jimmy laughed loudly. "I get it. A hold up. Sorry, pal, but you're sewed up. You signed that in the presence of witnesses."

"Well—" Gallegher said wistfully. "I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I said a robot forged my name to it—"

"Haw!" Jimmy remarked.

"—hypnotizing you into believing you were seeing me."

Elia stroked his gleaming bald head. "Candidly, no. Robots can't do that."

"Mine can."

"Prove it. Prove it in court. If you can do that, of course—" Elia chuckled. "Then you might get the verdict."

Gallegher's eyes narrowed. "Hadn't thought of that. However—I hear you offered me a hundred thousand flat, as well as a weekly salary."

"Sure, sap," Jimmy said. "Only you said all you needed was twelve thousand. Which was what you got. Tell you what, though. We'll pay you a bonus for every usable product you make for Sonatone."

Gallegher got up. "Even my subconscious doesn't like these lugs," he told Silver. "Let's go."

"I think I'll stick around."

"Remember the fence," he warned cryptically. "But suit yourself. I'll run along."

Elia said, "Remember, Gallegher, you're working for us. If we hear of *you* doing any favors for Brock, we'll slap an injunction on you before you can take a deep breath."

"Yeah?"

The Tones deigned no answer. Gallegher unhappily found the lift and descended to the floor. What now? Joe.

Fifteen minutes later Gallegher let himself into his laboratory. The lights were blazing, and dogs were barking frantically for blocks around. Joe stood before the mirror, singing inaudibly.

"I'm going to take a sledge hammer to you," Gallegher said. "Start saying your prayers, you misbegotten collection of cogs. So help me, I'm going to sabotage you."

"All right, beat me," Joe squeaked. "See if I care. You're merely jealous of my beauty."

"Beauty?"

"You can't see all of it—you've only six senses."

"Five."

"Six. I've a lot more. Naturally my full splendor is revealed only to me. But you can see enough and hear enough to realize part of my loveliness, anyway."

"You squeak like a rusty tin wagon," Gallegher growled.

"You have dull ears. Mine are supersensitive. You miss the full tonal values of my voice, of course. Now be quiet. Talking disturbs me. I'm appreciating my gear movements."

"Live in your fool's paradise while you can. Wait'll I find a sledge."

"All right, beat me. What do I care?"

Gallegher sat down wearily on the couch, staring at the robot's transparent back. "You've certainly screwed things up for me. What did you sign that Sonatone contract for?"

"I told you. So Kennicott wouldn't come and bother me."

"Of all the selfish, lunk-headed . . . uh! Well, you got me.

into a sweet mess. The Tones can hold me to the letter of the contract unless I prove I didn't sign it. All right. You're going to help me. You're going into court with me and turn on your hypnotism or whatever it is. You're going to prove to a judge that you did and can masquerade as me."

"Won't," said the robot. "Why should I?"

"Because you got me into this," Gallagher yelled. "You've got to get me out!"

"Why?"

"Why? Because . . . uh . . . well, it's common decency!"

"Human values don't apply to robots," Joe said. "What care I for semantics? I refuse to waste time I could better employ admiring my beauty. I shall stay here before the mirror forever and ever—"

"The hell you will," Gallagher snarled. "I'll smash you to atoms."

"All right, I don't care."

"You don't?"

"You and your instinct for self-preservation," the robot said, rather sneeringly. "I suppose it's necessary for you, though. Creatures of such surpassing ugliness would destroy themselves out of sheer shame if they didn't have something like that to keep them alive."

"Suppose I take away your mirror?" Gallagher asked in a hopeless voice.

For answer Joe shot his eyes out on their stalks. "Do I need a mirror? Besides, I can vasten myself lokishly."

"Never mind that. I don't want to go crazy for a while yet. Listen, dope, a robot's supposed to *do* something. Something useful, I mean."

"I do. Beauty is all."

Gallegher squeezed his eyes shut, trying to think. "Now look. Suppose I invent a new type of enlarger screen for Brock. The Tones will impound it. I've got to be legally free to work for Brock, or—"

"Look!" Joe cried squeakily. "They go round! How lovely." He stared in ecstasy at his whirling insides. Gallagher went pale with impotent fury.

"Damn you!" he muttered. "I'll find some way to bring pressure to bear. I'm going to bed." He rose and spitefully snapped off the lights.

"It doesn't matter," the robot said. "I can see in the dark, too."

The door slammed behind Gallegher. In the silence Joe began to sing tunelessly to himself.

Gallegher's refrigerator covered an entire wall of his kitchen. It was filled mostly with liquors that required chilling, including the imported canned beer with which he always started his binges. The next morning, heavy-eyed and disconsolate, Gallegher searched for tomato juice, took a wry sip, and hastily washed it down with rye. Since he was already a week gone in bottle-dizziness, beer wasn't indicated now—he always worked cumulatively, by progressive stages. The food service popped a hermetically sealed breakfast on a table, and Gallegher morosely toyed with a bloody steak.

Well?

Court, he decided, was the only recourse. He knew little about the robot's psychology. But a judge would certainly be impressed by Joe's talents. The evidence of robots was not legally admissible—still, if Joe could be considered as a machine capable of hypnotism, the Sonatone contract might be declared null and void.

Gallegher used his visor to start the ball rolling. Harrison Brock still had certain political powers of pull, and the hearing was set for that very day. What would happen, though, only God and the robot knew.

Several hours passed in intensive but futile thought. Gallegher could think of no way in which to force the robot to do what he wanted. If only he could remember the purpose for which Joe had been created—but he couldn't. Still—

At noon he entered the laboratory.

"Listen, stupid," he said, "you're coming to court with me. Now."

"Won't."

"O.K." Gallegher opened the door to admit two husky men in overalls, carrying a stretcher. "Put him in, boys."

Inwardly he was slightly nervous. Joe's powers were quite unknown, his potentialities an x quantity. However, the robot wasn't very large, and, though he struggled and screamed in a voice of frantic squeakiness, he was easily loaded on the stretcher and put in a straitjacket.

"Stop it! You can't do this to me! Let me go, do you hear? Let me go!"

"Outside," Gallegher said.

Joe, protesting valiantly, was carried out and loaded into

an air-van. Once there, he quieted, looking up blankly at nothing. Gallegher sat down on a bench beside the prostrate robot. The van glided up.

"Well?"

"Suit yourself," Joe said. "You got me all upset, or I could have hypnotized you all. I still could, you know. I could make you all run around barking like dogs."

Gallegher twitched a little. "Better not."

"I won't. It's beneath my dignity. I shall simply lie here and admire myself. I told you I don't need a mirror. I can vasten my beauty without it."

"Look," Gallegher said. "You're going to a courtroom. There'll be a lot of people in it. They'll all admire you. They'll admire you more if you show how you can hypnotize people. Like you did to the Tones, remember?"

"What do I care how many people admire me?" Joe asked. "I don't need confirmation. If they see me, that's their good luck. Now be quiet. You may watch my gears if you choose."

Gallegher watched the robot's gears with smoldering hatred in his eyes. He was still darkly furious when the van arrived at the court chambers. The men carried Joe inside, under Gallegher's direction, and laid him down carefully on a table, where, after a brief discussion, he was marked as Exhibit A.

The courtroom was well filled. The principals were there, too—Elia and Jimmy Tone, looking disagreeably confident, and Patsy Brock, with her father, both seeming anxious. Silver O'Keefe, with her usual wariness, had found a seat midway between the representatives of Sonatone and Vox-View. The presiding judge was a martinet named Hansen, but, as far as Gallegher knew, he was honest. Which was something, anyway.

Hansen looked at Gallegher. "We won't bother with formalities. I've been reading this brief you sent down. The whole case stands or falls on the question of whether you did or did not sign a certain contract with the Sonatone Television Amusement Corp. Right?"

"Right, your honor."

"Under the circumstances you dispense with legal representation. Right?"

"Right, your honor."

"Then this is technically *ex officio*, to be confirmed later by appeal if either party desires. Otherwise after ten days the

verdict becomes official." This new type of informal court hearing had lately become popular—it saved time, as well as wear and tear on everyone. Moreover, certain recent scandals had made attorneys slightly disreputable in the public eye. There was a prejudice.

Judge Hansen called up the Tones, questioned them, and then asked Harrison Brock to take the stand. The big shot looked worried, but answered promptly.

"You made an agreement with the appellor eight days ago?"

"Yes. Mr. Gallegher contracted to do certain work for me—"

"Was there a written contract?"

"No. It was verbal."

Hansen looked thoughtfully at Gallegher. "Was the appellor intoxicated at the time? He often is, I believe."

Brock gulped. "There were no tests made. I really can't say."

"Did he drink any alcoholic beverages in your presence?"

"I don't know if they were *alcoholic* bev—"

"If Mr. Gallegher drank them, they were alcoholic. Q.E.D. The gentleman once worked with me on a case— However, there seems to be no legal proof that you entered into any agreement with Mr. Gallegher. The defendant—Sonatone—possesses a written contract. The signature has been verified."

Hansen waved Brock down from the stand. "Now, Mr. Gallegher. If you'll come up here— The contract in question was signed at approximately 8 P.M. last night. You contend you did not sign it?"

"Exactly. I wasn't even in my laboratory then."

"Where were you?"

"Downtown."

"Can you produce witnesses to that effect?"

Gallegher thought back. He couldn't.

"Very well. Defendant states that at approximately 8 P.M. last night you, in your laboratory, signed a certain contract. You deny that categorically. You state that Exhibit A, through the use of hypnotism, masqueraded as you and successfully forged your signature. I have consulted experts, and they are of the opinion that robots are incapable of such power."

"My robot's a new type."

"Very well. Let your robot hypnotize me into believing that it is either you, or any other human. In other words, let

it prove its capabilities. Let it appear to me in any shape it chooses."

Gallagher said, "I'll try," and left the witness box. He went to the table where the straitjacketed robot lay and silently sent up a brief prayer.

"Joe."

"Yes."

"You've been listening?"

"Yes."

"Will you hypnotize Judge Hansen?"

"Go away," Joe said. "I'm admiring myself."

Gallegher started to sweat. "Listen. I'm not asking much. All you have to do—"

Joe off-focused his eyes and said faintly, "I can't hear you. I'm vastening."

Ten minutes later Hansen said, "Well, Mr. Gallegher—"

"Your honor! All I need is a little time. I'm sure I can make this rattle-gearred Narcissus prove my point if you'll give me a chance."

"This court is not unfair," the judge pointed out. "Whenever you can prove that Exhibit A is capable of hypnotism, I'll rehear the case. In the meantime, the contract stands. You're working for Sonatone, not for Vox-View. Case closed."

He went away. The Tones leered unpleasantly across the courtroom. They also departed, accompanied by Silver O'Keefe, who had decided which side of the fence was safest. Gallegher looked at Patsy Brock and shrugged helplessly.

"Well—" he said.

She grinned crookedly. "You tried. I don't know how hard, but—Oh, well, maybe you couldn't have found the answer, anyway."

Brock staggered over, wiping sweat from his round face. "I'm a ruined man. Six new bootleg theaters opened in New York today. I'm going crazy. I don't deserve this."

"Want me to marry the Tone?" Patsy asked sardonically.

"Hell, no! Unless you promise to poison him just after the ceremony. Those skunks can't lick me. I'll think of something."

"If Gallegher can't, you can't," the girl said. "So—what now?"

"I'm going back to my lab," the scientist said. "*In vino veritas*. I started this business when I was drunk, and maybe if I

get drunk enough again, I'll find the answer. If I don't sell my pickled carcass for whatever it'll bring."

"O.K.," Patsy agreed, and led her father away. Gallegher sighed, superintended the reloading of Joe into the van, and lost himself in hopeless theorizing.

An hour later Gallegher was flat on the laboratory couch, drinking passionately from the liquor bar, and glaring at the robot, who stood before the mirror singing squeakily. The binge threatened to be monumental. Gallegher wasn't sure flesh and blood would stand it. But he was determined to keep going till he found the answer or passed out.

His subconscious knew the answer. Why the devil had he made Joe in the first place? Certainly not to indulge a Narcissus complex! There was another reason, a soundly logical one, hidden in the depths of alcohol.

The *x* factor. If the *x* factor were known, Joe might be controllable. He *would* be. *X* was the master switch. At present the robot was, so to speak, running wild. If he were told to perform the task for which he was made, a psychological balance would occur. *X* was the catalyst that would reduce Joe to sanity.

Very good. Gallegher drank high-powered Drambuie. *Whoosh!*

Vanity of vanities; all is vanity. How could the *x* factor be found? Deduction? Induction? Osmosis? A bath in Drambuie—Gallegher clutched at his wildly revolving thoughts. What had happened that night a week ago?

He had been drinking beer. Brock had come in. Brock had gone. Gallegher had begun to make the robot—Hm-m-m. A beer drunk was different from other types. Perhaps he was drinking the wrong liquors. Very likely. Gallegher rose, sobered himself with thiamine, and carted dozens of imported beer cans out of the refrigerator. He stacked them inside a frost unit beside the couch. Beer squirted to the ceiling as he plied the opener. Now let's see.

The *x* factor. The robot knew what it represented, of course. But Joe wouldn't tell. There he stood, paradoxically transparent, watching his gears go around.

"Joe."

"Don't bother me. I'm immersed in contemplation of beauty."

"You're not beautiful."

"I am. Don't you admire my tarzeel?"

"What's your tarzeel?"

"Oh, I forgot," Joe said regretfully. "You can't sense that, can you? Come to think of it, I added the tarzeel myself after you made me. It's very lovely."

"Hm-m-m." The empty beer cans grew more numerous. There was only one company, somewhere in Europe, that put up beer in cans nowadays, instead of using the omnipresent plastibulbs, but Gallagher preferred the cans—the flavor was different, somehow. But about Joe. Joe knew why he had been created. Or did he? Gallagher knew, but his subconscious—

"Oh-oh! What about Joe's subconscious?"

Did a robot have a subconscious? Well, it had a brain—

Gallagher brooded over the impossibility of administering scopolamin to Joe. Hell! How could you release a robot's subconscious?

Hypnotism.

Joe couldn't be hypnotized. He was too smart.

Unless—

Autohypnotism?

Gallagher hastily drank more beer. He was beginning to think clearly once more. Could Joe read the future? No; he had certain strange senses, but they worked by inflexible logic and the laws of probability. Moreover, Joe had an Achillean heel—his Narcissus complex.

There *might*—there just *might*—be a way.

Gallagher said, "You don't seem beautiful to me, Joe."

"What do I care about you? I *am* beautiful, and I can see it. That's enough."

"Yeah. My senses are limited, I suppose. I can't realize your full potentialities. Still, I'm seeing you in a different light now. I'm drunk. My subconscious is emerging. I can appreciate you with both my conscious and my subconscious. See?"

"How lucky you are," the robot approved.

Gallagher closed his eyes. "You see yourself more fully than I can. But not completely, eh?"

"What? I see myself as I am."

"With complete understanding and appreciation?"

"Well, yes," Joe said. "Of course. Don't I?"

"Consciously *and* subconsciously? Your subconsciousness might have different senses, you know. Or keener ones. I

know there's a qualitative and quantitative difference in my outlook when I'm drunk or hypnotized or my subconscious is in control somehow."

"Oh." The robot looked thoughtfully into the mirror. "Oh."

"Too bad you can't get drunk."

Joe's voice was squeakier than ever. "My subconscious . . . I've never appreciated my beauty that way. I may be missing something."

"Well, no use thinking about it," Gallegher said. "You can't release your subconscious."

"Yes, I can," the robot said. "I can hypnotize myself."

Gallegher dared not open his eyes. "Yeah? Would that work?"

"Of course. It's just what I'm going to do now. I may see undreamed-of beauties in myself that I've never suspected before. Greater glories— Here I go."

Joe extended his eyes on stalks, opposed them, and then peered intently into each other. There was a long silence.

Presently Gallegher said, "Joe!"

Silence.

"Joe!"

Still silence. Dogs began to howl.

"Talk so I can hear you."

"Yes," the robot said, a faraway quality in its squeak.

"Are you hypnotized?"

"Yes."

"Are you lovely?"

"Lovelier than I'd ever dreamed."

Gallegher let that pass. "Is your subconscious ruling?"

"Yes."

"Why did I create you?"

No answer. Gallegher licked his lips and tried again.

"Joe. You've got to answer me. Your subconscious is dominant—remember? Now why did I create you?"

No answer.

"Think back. Back to the hour I created you. What happened then?"

"You were drinking beer," Joe said faintly. "You had trouble with the can opener. You said you were going to build a bigger and better can opener. That's me."

Gallegher nearly fell off the couch. "What?"

The robot walked over, picked up a can, and opened it

with incredible deftness. No beer squirted. Joe was a perfect can opener.

"That," Gallegher said under his breath, "is what comes of knowing science by ear. I build the most complicated robot in existence just so—" He didn't finish.

Joe woke up with a start. "What happened?" he asked.

Gallegher glared at him. "Open that can!" he snapped.

The robot obeyed, after a brief pause. "Oh. So you found out. Well, I guess I'm just a slave now."

"Damned right you are. I've located the catalyst—the master switch. You're in the groove, stupid, doing the job you were made for."

"Well," Joe said philosophically, "at least I can still admire my beauty, when you don't require my services."

Gallegher grunted. "You oversized can opener! Listen. Suppose I take you into court and tell you to hypnotize Judge Hansen. You'll have to do it, won't you?"

"Yes. I'm no longer a free agent. I'm conditioned to obey only one command—to do the job I was made for. Until you commanded me to open cans, I was free. Now I've got to obey you completely."

"Uh-huh," Gallegher said. "Thank God for that. I'd have gone nuts within a week otherwise. At least I can get out of the Sonatone contract. Then all I have to do is solve Brock's problem."

"But you did," Joe said.

"Huh?"

"When you made me. You'd been talking to Brock previously, so you incorporated the solution to *his* problem into me. Subconsciously, perhaps."

Gallegher reached for a beer. "Talk fast. What's the answer?"

"Subsonics," Joe said. "You made me capable of a certain subsonic tone that Brock must broadcast at irregular time intervals over his televiews—"

Subsonics cannot be heard. But they can be felt. They can be felt as a faint, irrational uneasiness at first, which mounts to a blind, meaningless panic. It does not last. But when it is coupled with A.A.—audience appeal—there is a certain inevitable result.

Those who possessed home Vox-View units were scarcely troubled. It was a matter of acoustics. Cats squalled; dogs howled mournfully. But the families sitting in their parlors,

watching Vox-View stars perform on the screen, didn't really notice anything amiss. There wasn't sufficient amplification, for one thing.

But in the bootleg theater, where illicit Vox-View televisions were hooked up to Magnas—

There was a faint, irrational uneasiness at first. It mounted. Someone screamed. There was a rush for the doors. The audience was afraid of something, but didn't know what. They knew only that they had to get out of there.

All over the country there was a frantic exodus from the bootleg theaters when Vox-View first rang in a subsonic during a regular broadcast. Nobody knew why, except Gallegher, the Brocks, and a couple of technicians who were let in on the secret.

An hour later another subsonic was played. There was another mad exodus.

Within a few weeks it was impossible to lure a patron into a bootleg theater. Home televisions were far safer! Vox-View sales picked up—

Nobody would attend a bootleg theater. An unexpected result of the experiment was that, after a while, nobody would attend any of the legalized Sonatone theaters either. Conditioning had set in.

Audiences didn't know why they grew panicky in the bootleg places. They associated their blind, unreasoning fear with other factors, notably mobs and claustrophobia. One evening a woman named Jane Wilson, otherwise not notable, attended a bootleg show. She fled with the rest when the subsonic was turned on.

The next night she went to the palatial Sonatone Bijou. In the middle of a dramatic feature she looked around, realized that there was a huge throng around her, cast up horrified eyes to the ceiling, and imagined that it was pressing down.

She had to get out of there!

Her squall was the booster charge. There were other customers who had heard subsonics before. No one was hurt during the panic; it was a legal rule that theater doors be made large enough to permit easy egress during a fire. No one was hurt, but it was suddenly obvious that the public was being conditioned by subsonics to avoid the dangerous combination of throngs and theaters. A simple matter of psychological association—

Within four months the bootleg places had disappeared

and the Sonatone supertheaters had closed for want of patronage. The Tones, father and son, were not happy. But everybody connected with Vox-View was.

Except Gallegher. He had collected a staggering check from Brock, and instantly cabled to Europe for an incredible quantity of canned beer. Now, brooding over his sorrows, he lay on the laboratory couch and siphoned a highball down his throat. Joe, as usual, was before the mirror, watching the wheels go round.

"Joe," Gallegher said.

"Yes? What can I do?"

"Oh, nothing." That was the trouble. Gallegher fished a rumpled cable tape out of his pocket and morosely read it once more. The beer cannery in Europe had decided to change its tactics. From now on, the cable said, their beer would be put in the usual plastibulbs, in conformance with custom and demand. No more cans.

There wasn't *anything* put up in cans in this day and age. Not even beer, now.

So what good was a robot who was built and conditioned to be a can opener?

Gallegher sighed and mixed another highball—a stiff one. Joe postured proudly before the mirror.

Then he extended his eyes, opposed them, and quickly liberated his subconscious through autohypnotism. Joe could appreciate himself better that way.

Gallegher sighed again. Dogs were beginning to bark like mad for blocks around. Oh, well.

He took another drink and felt better. Presently, he thought, it would be time to sing "Frankie and Johnnie." Maybe he and Joe might have a duet—one baritone and one inaudible sub or supersonic. Close harmony.

Ten minutes later Gallegher was singing a duet with his can opener.

SYMBIOTICA

Astounding,

October

by Eric Frank Russell (1905-1978)

The late Eric Frank Russell was a talented writer who always seemed to be able to come up with new ideas. Perhaps his best known work is the novel Sinister Barrier, based on one of Charles Fort's beliefs that appeared in the premier issue of Unknown in 1939. He won a Hugo Award for his story "Al-lamagoosa" in 1956.

"Symbiotica" is one of the four stories in his "Jay Score" series that were collected as Men, Martians and Machines in 1956. (See Volume III, 1941 of this series for "Jay Score.") Although the concept of symbiosis (the idea that species are linked together in mutually beneficial ways in nature) had long existed in biology, it did not receive widespread attention until the ecological concerns of the 1960s. "Symbiotica" beautifully illustrates the concept, and is a fine story besides.

(Marty mentioned "Sinister Barrier" and that reminds me— When I read Charles Fort's series of columns in Astounding Stories in the mid-1930s, I despised them. The best way I can describe Fort is by saying he was the von Daniken of his time. He used newspaper items, chosen uncritically, to support the most outlandish theories and managed to inspire a group of Fortean, otherwise presumably intelligent men, who accepted his ideas. Russell was one of them and, as Marty said, "Sinister Barrier" was rather Fortean in its outlook. And yet, at the time I read it, it seemed to me that "Sinister Bar-

rier" was the best and most exciting story I had ever read. That's how good a writer Russell was. He made me swallow Fort, and do so enthusiastically.—I.A.)

I

They'd commissioned the *Marathon* to look over one floating near Rigel, and what some of us would've liked to know was how the devil our Terrestrial astronomers could pick out likely specimens at such an arithmetical distance. Last trip they'd found us a juicy job when they sent us to that mechanical world and its watery neighbor near Bootes. The *Marathon*, a newly designed Flettner job, was something super. It hadn't a counterpart in our neck of the cosmos. So our solution of the mystery was that the astronomers had got hold of some instrument just as revolutionary.

Anyway, we'd covered the outward trip as per instructions and were near enough to see that once again the astronomers had lined them up for jackpot when they said that here was a planet likely to hold life. Rigel blazed like a distant furnace way over to starboard and about thirty degrees above the plane that was horizontal at that moment. What I mean is that the horizontal plane is always the ship's horizontal plane and the cosmos has to relate itself to it whether it likes it or not. But this plane's primary wasn't the faroff Rigel; it was a kid brother sun just a fraction smaller and paler than Old Sol. There were two more planets lying farther out; we'd seen yet another the other side of the sun. That made four in all, but three looked as sterile as a Venusian guppy's mind and truly this one, the innermost, seemed interesting.

We swooped on it bow first. The way that world swelled in the ports did things to my bowels. One trip on the casually meandering *Upsydaisy* had given me my space legs and got me used to living in suspense over umpteen million miles of nothing, but I reckoned it'd take me another century or two to get accustomed to the mad bull takeoffs and landings of these Flettner craft. Young Wilson muttered in his harness and I knew that he was following his pious custom of praying for the safety of his precious photographic plates. From his look of spiritual agony you'd have thought he was married to

the darned things. We landed, *kerumph!* The boat did a belly slide.

"I wouldn't grieve," I told Wilson. "Those things never fry you a chicken or shove a strawberry shortcake under your drooling mouth."

"No," he admitted, "they don't." Struggling out of his harness, he gave me the sour eye and growled. "How'd you like me to spit in the needlers?"

"I wouldn't," I snapped.

"See?" he said, and forthwith beat it to find out whether his stuff had survived.

Sticking my face to the nearest port, I stared through the immensely strong Permex disk, had a look at the new world. It was green. You'd've never believed any place could be so thoroughly and absolutely green. The sun, which had appeared a primrose color out in space, now looked an extremely pale green. It poured down a flood of yellowy-green light. The *Marathon* lay in a great glade that cut through a mighty forest, and the glade was full of green grasses, herbs, shrubs, and bugs. The forest was one mass of tremendous growths that ranged in color from a very light silver-green to a dark, glossy green that verged on black. Brennand came and stood beside me; his face promptly went a spotty and bilious green as the light hit it. He looked like one of the undead.

"Well, here we are again." He turned his attention from the port, grinned at me, abruptly wiped away the grin. "Hey, don't you be sick over me!"

"It's the light," I pointed out. "You look like something floating in the scuppers of a moon-tripper."

"Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it."

We stood there looking out and waiting for the general summons to the conference which usually preceded the first venture out of the ship. I was counting on maintaining my lucky streak by being picked out of the hat, and Brennand was itching to stamp his dogs outside, too. But the summons didn't come.

After a while, Brennand said, "The skipper's slow. What's holding him back?"

"No idea." I had another look at his leprous face. It was awful. Judging by his expression, he wasn't enamored of my

features either. "You know what a cautious guy McNulty is. Guess that spree we had on Mechanistria persuaded him to count a hundred before giving an order."

"Yeah," agreed Brennand. "I'll go forward and see what's cooking."

He went along the passage. I couldn't go with him because I had to stand by the armory. You could never tell when they'd come for my stuff, and they had a habit of coming on the run. Brennand mooched disconsolately around the farther corner and had hardly gone when sure enough the exploring party barged in shouting for equipment. There were six of them: Molders, an engineer; Jepson, a navigating officer; Sam Hignett, our Negro surgeon; young Wilson and two Martians, Kli Dreen and Kli Morg.

"Huh, lucky again?" I growled at Sam, tossing him his needle ray and sundry oddments.

"Yes, sergeant." Sam's very white teeth glistened in his black face as he smiled with satisfaction. "The skipper says nobody's to go out afoot until we've first scouted around in No. 4 lifeboat."

Kli Morg got his needler in a long, snaky tentacle, waved the thing with bland disregard for everybody's personal safety, and chirruped, "Give Dreen and me our helmets."

"Helmets?" I looked from him to the Terrestrials. "You guys want spacesuits, too?"

"No," replied Jepson. "The stuff outside is up to fifteen pounds and so rich in oxygen you whizz while you think you're just ambling along."

"Mud," snapped Kli Morg. "Just like mud. Give us our helmets."

He got the helmets. These Martians were so accustomed to the three pounds atmospheric pressure of their native planet that anything heavier bothered them no end. That's why they had the use of the starboard air lock in which pressure was kept down to suit their taste. They could endure heavy pressure for a limited time, but sooner or later they'd wax unsociable and act like somebody had burdened them with all the world's woes.

We Terrestrials helped the pair of Martians to clamp down their goldfish bowls and exhaust the air to what they considered comfortable. If I'd lent a hand with this job once, I'd done it fifty times and it still seemed as wacky as ever. It isn't right that guys should be happy breathing in short whiffs.

Jay Score lumbered lithely into the armory just as I'd got all the clients decorated like Christmas trees. He leaned his three hundred pounds on the tubular barrier, which promptly groaned. He got off it quickly. His strong face was impassive as ever, his eyes brilliant with their unearthly light.

Shaking the barrier to see if it was wrecked, I told him, "The trouble with you is that you don't know your own strength."

"No?" he inquired, with utter lack of tone. He turned his attention to the others. "The skipper wants you to be extra careful. We can't permit any copy of what happened to Haines and his crew. Don't fly below one thousand feet, keep the autocamera running, keep eyes skinned and beat it back here immediately if you find anything worth reporting."

"Sure, Jay." Molders slung a couple of ammo belts over one arm. "We'll be careful."

They trailed out. Shortly, the lifeboat broke free with a squeaky parody of the *Marathon's* deep-throated, sonorous drumming. It curved sharply into the green light, soared over the huge trees and diminished to a dot. Brennan came back, stood by the port, watched the boat vanish.

"McNulty's as leery as an old maid with a penitentiary out back."

"He's got plenty of reason," I pointed out. "He's got all the explaining to do when we return."

A smirk passed over his bilious complexion, and he went on, "I took a walk to the noisy end and found that a couple of stern-gang punks have beaten us all to it. They're outside playing duck-on-the-rock."

"Playing what?" I yelped.

"Duck-on-the-rock," he repeated, enjoying himself.

I beat it to stern, Brennan following with a wide grin. Sure enough, two of those dirty mechanics who polish the tail had pulled a fast one. They must have crawled out through a main driver not yet cool. Standing ankle-deep in the green growths, the pair of them were ribbing each other and shying pebbles at a small rock poised on top of a boulder. You'd have thought this was a Sunday-school picnic.

"Does the skipper know about this?"

"You bet he doesn't! Think he'd pick that pair of unshaven bums for first out?"

One of the couple turned, saw us staring at him through the port. He smiled toothily, shouted something we could not

hear, jumped nine feet into the air, smacked his chest with a grimy hand. I gathered that the gravity was low, the oxygen high, and that he was feeling top notch. Brennand's face suggested that he was sorely tempted to crawl through a tube and join in the fun.

"McNulty'll skin those hoodlums," I said.

"Can't blame them. The artificial gravity's still on, the ship's full of fog and we've come a long, long way. It'll be great to get out. I could do some sand-castling myself."

"There isn't any sand."

The pair outside became tired of the rock, got themselves a supply of pebbles from somewhere down among the growths, advanced toward a big bush growing fifty yards from the *Marathon's* stern. The farther out they went, the more they were likely to be spotted from the skipper's lair, but they didn't care a hoot. They knew McNulty couldn't do much more than lecture them.

This bush stood between ten and twelve feet high, had a very thick mass of bright-green foliage at the top of a thin, willowy trunk. One of the approaching pair got a couple of yards ahead of the other, slung a pebble at the bush, struck it fair and square in the middle of the foliage. What happened then was so swift that we had the utmost difficulty in following it.

The pebble crashed into the foliage, the entire bush whipped over as if its trunk were a steel spring. A trio of tiny creatures fell out of its leaves, dropped from sight in the herbage below. The bush stood as before, undisturbed except for a minute quivering in its topmost branches. But the guy who'd flung the missile lay flat on his face. His following companion had stopped and was gaping like one petrified by the unexpected.

"Hey," squawked Brennand, "what happened there?"

Outside, the one who'd fallen flat stirred, rolled over, sat up and started picking at himself. The other one got to him, helped him pick. No sound came into the ship, so we couldn't hear what they might have been talking about or the oaths they were certainly using. The picking finished, the smitten one came unsteadily erect. His balance was lousy, and his companion supported him as they started back to the ship. Behind them, the bush stood as imperturbably as ever, even its vague quivers having died out.

Halfway to the *Marathon* the pebble-thrower teetered, went white. Then he licked his lips and keeled over. The other one looked anxiously back toward the bush as if he wouldn't have been surprised to find it charging them. Bending down, he got the body in a fireman's hitch, struggled with it toward the midway air lock. Jay Score met him before he'd heaved his load ten steps. Jay strode powerfully and confidently through the carpet of green, took the limp form from the other's arms, carried it like it was nothing. We raced toward bow to find out what had happened.

Jay brushed past us, carried his burden into our tiny surgery where Wally Simcox, Sam's sidekick, started working on the patient. The other guy hung around outside the door and looked sick. He looked even sicker when Captain McNulty came along and stabbed him with a stare before he went inside.

After half a minute, the skipper shoved out a red, irate face and bellowed, "Go tell Steve to order that boat back at once. He's to warn Sam he's urgently needed."

Pelting to the radio room, I passed the message on. Steve's eyebrows circumnavigated his face as he flicked a switch and cuddled the microphone to his chest. He rattled off the message, listened to the reply.

"They're returning at once."

Going back, I said to the uneasy duck-on-the-rock enthusiast, "What happened, stupid?"

He flinched. "That bush made a target of him and filled his area with darts. Long thin ones, like thorns. All over his face and neck and through his clothes. One of 'em made a pinhole in his ear, but they didn't get his eyes."

"Hell!" mouthed Brennand.

"A bunch of them whisked past me on my left, fell twenty feet behind. I heard 'em buzz like bees." He swallowed hard, shuffled his feet around. "It must have flung fifty or more. Guess I was lucky."

McNulty came out then. He looked pretty fierce, and the escapee promptly changed his mind about being lucky. The skipper said to him, very slowly and deliberately, "I'll deal with you later!" The look he passed across was enough to scorch the pants off a space cop. We watched his portly form parade down the passage.

The victim registered bitterness, scrambled to his post at stern. Next minute, the lifeboat made one complete circle

overhead, descended with a thin zoom ending in a heavy *swish*. Its crew poured aboard the *Marathon* while the dericks clanked and rattled as they swung the lifeboat's twelve-ton bulk into the mother ship.

Sam was in the surgery an hour, came out shaking his head. "He's gone. We could do nothing for him."

"You mean he's—dead?"

"Yes. There's some sort of vegetable poison in those darts. It's virulent. We've no antidote for it. It seems to create blood clots, a condition of thromboses." He rubbed a weary hand over his crisp, curly hair, added, "I hate having to report this to the skipper."

We followed him toward bow. I stuck my eye to the peephole in the starboard air lock as I passed and had a look at what the Martians were doing. Kli Dreen and Kli Morg were playing chess with three others watching them. As usual, Sug Farn was asleep in one corner. It takes a Martian to be bored by adventure and to sweat with excitement over a slow-motion game like chess. They always did have an inverted sense of values.

Kli Dreen kept one saucerlike eye on the board while the other glanced idly at my face framed in the peephole. His two-way look gave me the meemies. I've heard that chameleons can swivel them independently, but no chameleon could do it so violently that the spectacle tied your own optic nerves in knots. I chased after Brennand and Sam. There was a strong smell of trouble up at that end.

II

The skipper fairly rocketed on getting Sam's report. His voice resounded loud and complainingly through the slightly open door.

"Hardly landed and already there's a casualty in the log . . . utter foolhardiness . . . more than a silly prank . . . disregard of standing orders . . . sheer indiscipline." He paused while he took a breath. "The responsibility is mine. Jay, summon the ship's company."

The general call sounded throughout the ship as Jay Score pressed the stud. We barged in, the rest following close behind, the Martians arriving last. Eyeing us sourly, McNulty strutted up and down, lectured us at some length. We'd been picked as the crew of the *Marathon* because we were believed

to be cool, calculating, well-disciplined individuals who'd come of age and had long outgrown such infantile attractions as duck-on-the-rock.

"Not to mention chess," he added, his manner decidedly jaundiced.

Kli Dreen started, looked around to see whether the others heard this piece of incredible blasphemy. Nobody spoke in denial.

"Mind you," continued the skipper, thinking again, "I'm no killjoy, but it is necessary to emphasize that there's a time and place for everything." The Martians rallied. "And so," McNulty went on, "I want you always to—"

The ship's phone shrilled and cut him short. He had three phones on his desk, and he gaped at them as if his ears were telling him blatant lies. The ship's company looked each other over to see who was missing. They were all supposed to be there.

McNulty suddenly decided that to answer the phone would be a simple way to solve the mystery. Grabbing up an instrument, he shouted, "Yes?" One of the other phones whirled, proving him a bad picker. He slammed down the one he was holding, took up another, repeated, "Yes?"

The phone made squeaky noises against his ear while his florid features underwent the most peculiar contortions. "Who? What?" he said, incredulously. "What awoke you?" His eyes bugged out. "Somebody knocking at the door?" He planted the phone with the air of a sleepwalker, then spoke weakly to Jay Score. "That was Sug Farn. He complains that he's been disturbed from a siesta by somebody hammering on the turn-screw of the storrad lock." Finding a chair, he flopped into it, breathed asthmatically. His still popping eyes found Steve Gregory, and he snapped, "For heaven's sake, man, control those eyebrows of yours!"

Steve pushed one up, pulled one down, opened his mouth, and tried to look contrite. The result was imbecilic. Jay Score bent over the skipper, conversed with him in smooth undertones. McNulty nodded tiredly. Jay came erect, addressed us.

"All right men, get back to your stations. The Martians had better don their helmets. We'll install a pom-pom in that lock and have the armed lifeboat crew standing ready. Then we'll open the lock."

That was sensible enough. You could see anyone approaching the ship in broad daylight, but you couldn't see

them once they'd got close up. The side ports didn't allow a sharp enough angle, besides which anyone standing under the lock would be shielded by the vessel's bulge. Nobody mentioned it, but the skipper had made an error in holding a revival meeting without keeping watch. Unless the hammerers chose to move farther out there was no way of getting a gander at them except by opening. And we weren't going to cook the dinner and make the beds before seeing what was outside, not after that nasty experience when intelligent machines had started to disassemble the ship around us.

Well, the dozy Sug Farn got pushed out of his corner and sent off for his goldfish bowl. We erected the pom-pom, its eighth barrel lined dead center on the closed door of the lock. Something made half a dozen loud clunks on the door as we finished. It sounded to me like a shower of flung stones.

Slowly the door spun along its worm and drew aside. A bright shaft of green light poured through, also a dollop of air that made me feel like a healthy hippopotamus. At the same time, Chief Engineer Douglas switched off the artificial gravity and we all dropped to two-thirds normal weight.

We watched the green illuminated opening so intently and anxiously that it was easy to imagine an animated metal coffin suddenly clambering through, its front lenses staring glassily. But there came no whir of hidden machinery, no menacing clank of metal arms and legs, nothing except the sigh of invigorating wind in the distant trees, the rustle of blown grasses and a queer, faraway throbbing that I couldn't identify.

So silent was everyone that Jepson's regular breathing was loud over my shoulder. The pom-pom gunner squatted in his metal seat, his hard eyes focused along the sights, his finger ready on the trigger, his right- and left-hand feeders ready with reserve belts. All three were busy with wads of gum. Then I heard a soft pad-pad of feet moving in the grass below the lock.

We all knew that McNulty would throw a fit if anyone walked out to the rim. He still nursed memories of the last time somebody did just that and got snatched out. So we stayed put like a gang of dummies, waiting, waiting. Presently, there sounded a querulous gabble beneath the opening. A smooth rock the size of a melon flew through the

gap, missing Jepson by a few inches, shattered against the back wall.

Skipper or no skipper, I got fed up, hefted my needler in my right hand, prowled half-bent along the footwalk cut through the threads of the air-lock opening. I reached the rim which was about nine feet above ground level, shoved out my inquiring face. Molders pressed close behind me. The muffled throbbing was clearer than ever, but just as elusive.

Beneath me stood a band of six beings who were startlingly human in general appearance. Same bodily contours, same limbs and digits, same features. They differed from us mostly in that their skins were coarse and crinkly, a dull, dead green in color, and that they had a peculiar organ like the head of a green and fleshy chrysanthemum growing out of their chests. Their eyes were sharp and jet-black, they jerked them about with monkeylike alertness.

For all these differences, our similarity was so surprising that I stood staring at them while they stood staring back at me. Then one of them shrilled something in the singsong tones of an agitated Chinese, swung his right arm, did his best to bash out what I use for brains. I ducked, heard the missile swish over my hair. Molders also ducked it, involuntarily pushed against me. The thing crashed somewhere inside the lock, I heard someone spit a lurid oath just as I overbalanced and fell out.

Clinging grimly to the needle ray, I flopped into soft greenery, rolled like mad and bounced to my feet. At any instant, I expected to see a shower of meteors as I got slugged. But the six weren't there. They were fifty yards away and moving fast, making for the forest in long, agile leaps that would have shamed a hungry kangaroo. It would have been easy to have brought two or three of them down, but McNulty would have crucified me for that. Earth laws were strict about treatment of extramundane aborigines.

Molders dropped down beside me, followed by Jepson, Wilson, and Kli Yang. Wilson had his owl-eye camera with a color filter over the lens. He was wild with excitement.

"I got them from the fourth port. I made two shots as they scrambled."

"Humph!" Molders stared around. He was a big, burly, phlegmatic man who looked more like a Scandinavian brewer than a space bug. "Let's follow them to the edge of the forest."

"Yeah," agreed Jepson, heartily. He wouldn't have been so hearty if he'd known what was coming to him. Stamping his feet in the springy turf, he took a lungful of the oxygen-rich air. "This is our chance for a legitimate walk."

We started off without delay, knowing it wouldn't be long before the skipper began baying for us to come back. There was no man so hard to convince that risks have to be taken and that casualties are the price of knowledge, nor was there any man who went so far determined to do so little.

Reaching the verge of the forest, the six green ones stopped and watched our approach. If they were quick to beat it when caught out in the open, they weren't so quick when in the shadow of the trees which, for some unknown reason, inspired them with confidence. Turning his back to us, one of them doubled himself, peered at us from between his knees. It seemed senseless.

"What's that for?" growled Jepson.

Wilson sniggered dirtily, and said, "The Arab's farewell to his steed. It must be of cosmic significance."

"I could have scalded his seat if I'd been quick," remarked Jepson, aggrievedly. Then he put his foot in a hole and fell on his face.

The green ones set up a howl of glee, flung a volley of stones which all fell far short. We began to run, going along in great bounds. The low gravity wasn't spoiled by the thick blanket of air which, of course, pressed equally in all directions. Our weight was down so that we went along several laps ahead of Olympic champions. Five of the green ones promptly faded into the forest; the sixth shot like a squirrel up the trunk of the nearest tree. Their behavior told that they'd reason for regarding the trees as safe refuge against all assault.

We stopped about eighty yards from that tree which, for all we knew, might have been ready for us with a monster load of darts. Our minds recalled what one bush had done. Scattering in a thin line, each ready to flop at the first untoward motion, we edged cautiously toward it. Nothing happened. We went nearer. Still nothing happened. In this manner we got well beneath its branches and close to its trunk. There was a strange fragrance like that of a mixture of pineapple and cinnamon. The elusive throbbing was stronger than ever.

It was a big, imposing tree. Its dark green, fibrous trunk, seven feet in diameter, soared up to twenty-five feet before it split into strong, lengthy branches each of which terminated in one huge, spatulate leaf. Looking at that trunk, it was difficult to tell how our quarry had fled up it, but he'd performed the feat like an adept.

All the same, we couldn't see him. Carefully, we went around the tree, gazing up into its great branches through which the green light filtered in large mosaic patterns. There was not a sign of him. No doubt about it, he was somewhere up there, but he simply couldn't be spotted by us. There wasn't any way in which he could have passed from this tree to its nearest neighbor, neither could he have come down. Our view up this lump of alien timber was fairly good considering the peculiar light, but the more we stared the more invisible he remained.

"That's a puzzler!" Jepson stepped well away from the trunk, seeking a better angle of view.

With a mighty *swoosh* a branch above his head drove down. Its spatulate leaf smacked him squarely in the back and a waft of pineapple and cinnamon went all over the place. Just as swiftly, the branch went up, carrying Jepson high into the air. Swearing like a tail mechanic, he struggled furiously while we gathered below him. He was stuck to the underside of that great leaf, gradually became covered in thick, yellowy-green goo as he writhed. The stuff must have been fifty times stickier than birdlime.

Together we roared at him to keep still before he got the deadly junk spread all over his face. Already his clothes were covered with it, his left arm tied up in it. He looked a mess. It was obvious that once he smeared it over his mouth and nostrils he'd stick up there and quietly suffocate.

Molders had a try at getting up the trunk, found it impossible. He edged out to have a look upward, came in when he noticed another leaf in a strategic position. The safest place was beneath the unfortunate Jepson. A little over twenty feet up, the goo was slowly spreading over its victim and I reckoned that in half an hour he'd be completely covered—in much less if he wriggled around. All this time the dull pulsations continued as if ticking off the last moments of the doomed. They made me think of jungle drums heard through thick walls.

Gesturing to the golden cylinder which was the *Marathon*

lying five hundred yards away in the glade, Wilson said, "Let's beat it back and get ropes and steel dogs. We'll soon bring him down."

"No," I answered. "We'll get him down a darned sight faster than that." Whereupon I aimed my needle ray at the point where Jepson's leaf joined the branch. The beam lanced forth at full strength.

The leaf dropped off and the tree went mad. Jepson fell into soft, springy undergrowth, the leaf still firmly fastened to his back. He landed with a wild yelp and a flood of curses. While we all lay flat, frantically trying to bury ourselves deeper, the tree thrashed around, its gum-laden spatulates hungry for vengeance.

One persistent branch kept beating within a yard of my head as I tried to shove said top-piece below ground. I hated the stink of pineapple and cinnamon that permeated the air. And it made me sweat to think how my lungs would strain, my eyes pop, and my heart burst if I got a dollop of that junk slap in the face. I'd sooner've been neatly needled.

The tree ended its wild larruping, stood like a dreaming giant liable to wake into frenzy at any moment. Crawling to Jepson, we dragged him out of reach. He couldn't walk, his jackboots and the legs of his pants being firmly stuck together. His left arm was just as securely gummed to his side. He was in an awful pickle, cursed steadily and without pause for breath or thought. We'd never suspected him of such fluency. But we got him into the safety of the glade, and it was there I thought up a few words he'd overlooked.

II

Molders stolidly said nothing, contenting himself with listening to Jepson and me. Molders had helped me do the dragging and now neither of us could let go. We were fixed to the original victim, bonded like brothers but not talking like brothers. There was nothing to do but carry Jepson bodily with our hands remaining on the most inconvenient parts of his anatomy. He had to go horizontally and face downward, as if he were a drunk getting frog-marched to barracks. He was still adorned with the leaf. He was still reciting.

The task wasn't lightened by that young fool Wilson who thought there was something funny in other people's misfortunes. He followed us, snapping his accursed camera which I

could have stuffed down his gullet with the greatest of pleasure. He was too happy about the fact that there wasn't any goo on him.

Jay Score, Brennand, Armstrong, Petersen, and Drake met us as we lumbered awkwardly, across the sward. They looked curiously at Jepson, listened to him with much respect. We warned them not to touch. The pair of us weren't feeling too sprightly by the time we reached the *Marathon*. Jepson's weight was only two-thirds normal, but after five hundred yards he seemed like the last remains of a glutinous mammoth.

We dumped him on the grass below the open lock, perforce sitting with him. The faint booming sound was still coming out of the forest. Jay went inside the ship, brought out Sam and Wally to see what they could do about the super-adhesive. The stuff was stiffening, growing gradually harder. My hands and fingers felt as if they'd been set into glassite gloves.

Sam and Wally tried cold water, lukewarm water, and hot water, but none of it did any good. Chief Engineer Douglas obliged them with a bottle of rocket fuel. That didn't work either. They had a go with some special gasoline which Steve Gregory kept for the crew's cigarette lighters. They wasted their time. That gasoline could play hell with rubber, but it couldn't dissolve this stuff.

"Stick it, fellers!" advised Wilson, cackling loudly. Jepson made sulphuric mention of this idiot's parents. I enlarged upon his grandparents. Jepson turned to the subject of his nonexistent progeny. Molders looked stolid, said nothing. "You sure are in a fix," went on Wilson. "By gum!"

Then Sam came out with some iodine. It didn't work, but it did make a terrible stink. Molders permitted his face to look slightly pained. Some nitric acid caused bubbles on the surface of the semi-hard goo, but did no more than that. It was risky stuff to use, anyway. Frowning, Sam went back to look for something else, passed Jay Score coming out to see how we were doing. Jay stumbled as he got near, a strange thing for him to do considering his superhuman sense of balance. His solid three hundred pounds nudged young Wilson between the shoulder blades and that grinning ape promptly flopped against Jepson's legs. Wilson struggled and changed his tune, but stayed stuck. Jepson gave him the sardonic ha-ha, and the other didn't enjoy it a bit.

Picking up the dropped camera, Jay dangled it in one powerful hand, said contritely, "I never missed a step before. It is most unfortunate."

"Unfortunate, hell!" yelled Wilson.

Sam came out with a big glass jar, dribbled its contents over my gooeey hands. The ghastly green covering at once thinned into a weak slime and my hands came free.

"Ammonia," remarked Sam. He needn't have mentioned it—I could smell the pungent stuff. It was a good solvent, and he soon had us cleaned up.

Then I chased Wilson three times around the ship. He was too fast for me. We were just about to go aboard to tell our tale to the skipper when that tree started threshing again. You could see its deadly branches beating the air and hear the violent *swoosh* of them even at that distance. Pausing beneath the lock, we watched the spectacle wonderingly. Suddenly, Jay Score spoke, his voice metallic, harsh.

"Where's Kli Yang?"

None of us knew. Now I came to think about it, I couldn't recall him being with us while we dragged Jepson home. The last I remembered of him was when he stood beside me under that tree and his saucer eyes gave me the creeps by carefully scanning two opposite branches at once. Armstrong shot into the ship, came out with the report that Kli Yang definitely wasn't there. His own eyes as saucerlike as the missing Martian's, Wilson said that he didn't remember Kli Yang coming out of the forest. Upon which we snatched up our needlers and made for that tree at the run. All the while, the tree continued to larrup around like a crazy thing, tied down by its own roots.

Reaching the monstrous growth, we made a circle just beyond the sweep of its treacherous leaves, had a look to see where the Martian was wrapped in glue. He wasn't wrapped in glue. We found him forty feet up the trunk, five of his powerful tentacles clamped around its girth, the other five embracing the green native we'd pursued. His captive was struggling wildly and futilely, all the time yelling a high-pitched stream of gibberish.

Carefully, Kli Yang edged down the trunk. The way he looked and moved made him resemble an impossible cross between a college professor and an educated octopus. His eyes rolling with terror, the native battered at Kli's glassite

helmet. Kli blandly ignored the hostility, reached the branch that had caught Jepson, didn't descend any farther. Still grasping the furiously objecting green one, he crept along the whipping limb until he reached its leafless end. At that point, he and the native were being waved up and down in twenty-five-foot sweeps.

Timing himself, he cast off at the lowermost point of one beat, scuttled from reach before another eager branch could swat him. There was a singing howl from the nearer parts of the forest and something that looked like a blue-green coconut shot out of the shadows and broke at Drake's feet. The thing was as thin and brittle as an empty eggshell, had a white inner surface, and contained nothing. Kli Yang took no notice of the howls or the missile, bore his still struggling captive toward the *Marathon*.

Hanging back, Drake peered curiously at the coconut or whatever it was, struck the fragments of shell with his boot. He caught the full benefit of something invisible that was floating up from it, sucked in his cheeks, screwed up his eyes and backed away. Then he retched. He did it so violently that he fell over as he ran. We'd the sense to pick him up and rush him after Kli without getting too nosy about what had bitten him. He continued to regurgitate all the way across the grass, recovered just as we came under the ship's bulging side.

"Holy smoke!" he wheezed, "what a stench! I'd make a skunk smell like the rose of the animal world." He wiped his lips. "My stomach turned right over."

Looking up Kli, we found that his captive had been conducted to the galley for a peacemaking feed. Kli dragged off his helmet, said, "That tree wasn't so difficult for me to mount. It walloped around as I went up, but it couldn't get at anything on its own trunk." He sniffed, rubbed his flat, Red Planet face with the flexible tip of a great tentacle. "Don't know how you bipeds can swallow this soup which you're pleased to regard as air."

"Where'd you find the greenie, Kli?" asked Brennand.

"He was stuck to the trunk more than forty feet up. His whole front fitted nearly into an indentation shaped like himself, and his back matched the trunk so perfectly that I couldn't see him until he moved uneasily as I got near him." He picked up the helmet. "It was a most wonderful sample of camouflage." He looked at the helmet with one eye, kept the

other on the interested Brennand, made a gesture of disgust. "How about pulling down the pressure some place where higher forms of life can live in peace?"

"We'll pump out the port lock," Brennand promised. "And don't be so all-fired snooty, you caricature of a rubber spider."

"Bah!" said Kli, with great dignity. "Who invented chess? And who can't even play duck-on-the-rock without grabbing the grief?" With that insulting reference to Terrestrial ineptness at chess, he slapped on his glassite dome. I pumped it down for him. "Thanks!" he said, through the diaphragm.

Now to get the low-down on the greenie.

Captain McNulty himself interviewed the native. The skipper sat grandly behind his metal desk, eyed the jittery captive with a mixture of pomposity and kindness. The native stood before him, his black optics jerking around fearfully. At that close range you could see he was wearing a loincloth that matched his own skin. His back was several shades darker than his front, coarser, more fibrous, with little nodules here and there—perfect simulation of the surface of the trunk of the tree in which he'd sought refuge. Even his loincloth was darker at the back than at the front. His feet were broad and bare; the toes double-jointed and as long as the fingers of his hands. Except for the loincloth, he was completely naked and had no weapons. The queer chrysanthemum growing out of his chest attracted all eyes.

"Has he been given a meal?" asked the skipper, full of solicitude.

"He was offered one," Jay told him. "He refused it. As far as I can make out, he wants to go back to his tree."

"Hm-m-m," grunted McNulty. "In due time, in due time." He assumed the expression of a benevolent uncle, said to the native, "What's your name?"

The green one grasped the note of interrogation, waved his arms, broke into an untranslatable tirade. On and on he went, helping his gabble with many emphatic but incomprehensible gestures. His language was very liquid, his voice singsong.

"I see," murmured McNulty as the flood of talk petered out. He blinked at Jay Score. "Think this fellow is telepathic, like those lobster things were?"

"It is much to be doubted. I'd put him at the level of a Congo pygmy—maybe lower. He doesn't even possess a simple spear, let alone bow and arrow or a blowpipe."

"Yes, that's how he looks to me." Still maintaining his soothingly paternal air, McNulty went on, "All right, Jay. There's no common basis on which we can gain his understanding at the start, so I guess we'll have to create one. We'll dig up a natural linguist, set him to learning the rudiments of this fellow's language and teaching him some of ours."

"I've got the advantage of a mechanical memory—let me have a try," suggested Jay. He approached the green native, his huge, well-proportioned body moving quietly on the sponge-rubber cushions of his dogs. The native didn't like his size or his bearing; neither did he approve of those brightly lit eyes. He backed away from Jay, backed right to the wall, his optics darting hither and thither.

Jay stopped as he saw the other's fear, slapped his own top-piece with a hand that could have knocked mine clean off my neck. He said, "Head." He did it half a dozen times, repeating, "Head, head."

The green one wasn't so stupid; he caught on, faltered, "*Mah*."

Touching his own head again, Jay said, inquiringly, "*Mah*?"

"*Bya*!" lilted the other, starting to recover his composure.

"See, it's dead easy," approved McNulty. "*Mah*—head; *bya*—yes."

"Not necessarily," Jay contradicted. "It all depends upon how his mind translated my action. *Mah* might mean head, face, man, hair, god, mind, thought, or alien, or even the color black. If he's thinking of my hair and his own, then *mah* probably does mean black, while *bya* may mean not yes, but green."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that." The skipper looked crushed.

"We'll have to carry on with this performance until we've picked up enough words to form lame sentences. Then we can deduce further meanings from the context. Give me a few days."

"Go ahead. Do your best, Jay. We can't expect to be able to talk turkey in the first five minutes. It isn't reasonable."

Taking our prisoner to the rest room, Jay summoned Minshull and Petersen. He thought three might just as well learn something as one. Minshull and Petersen were both hot on languages, speaking Esperanto, Ido, Venusian, low Martian, and high Martian. They were the only ones aboard the ship

who could give our chess maniacs a boiling in their own lingo.

I found Sam in the armory, waiting to hand in the stuff he'd taken out, and I said to him, "What did you see from the lifeboat, Sam?"

"Not so much. We weren't out long enough. Didn't get more than a hundred and twenty miles away. There was forest, nothing but forest with glades here and there. A couple of glades were the size of counties. The biggest of them lay at the end of a long lake. There were several rivers and streams."

"Any signs of life?"

"None." He gestured down the passage toward the rest room where Jay and the others were cross-examining the native. "It seems there's superior life in the forest, but you can detect no signs of it from above. Wilson's processing his reel—I doubt whether his camera caught anything that we missed."

"Ah, well," I said, "one twenty miles in one direction is nothing from which to estimate a world. I don't let myself be deluded, not since that drummer sold me a can of striped paint."

He chuckled. "Didn't it come out?"

"I laid it wrong side up," I told him.

It was right in the middle of that bantering that a powerful idea smote me. I followed him out of the armory, made a rush to the radio room. Steve Gregory was sitting by his instruments trying to look busy doing nothing. I was all set to wake him with my brain wave.

IV

As Steve looked up inquiringly, I said to him, "Hey, how about combing the bands?"

"Uh?"

"Remember those weird whistles and waterfalls you picked up on Mechanistria? Well, if anyone's radiating here, couldn't you detect 'em?"

"Sure." He kept his bushy eyebrows still for once, but spoiled it by waggling his ears. "If anyone was radiating."

"Go ahead and find out. It'll tell us something. What're you waiting for?"

"Have you kept those needlers cleaned and charged?" he asked.

I stared at him. "You bet I have! They're always ready for action. That's my job."

"And this one's mine," he said, dryly. He waved the ears again. "You're hours behind the times. I searched the ether immediately when we landed, got nothing but a faint hiss on twelve point three meters. It was Rigel's characteristic discharge and came from that way. D'you think I'm that snake-armed snorer Sug Farn?"

"No, I don't. Sorry, Steve—it just struck me as a bright idea."

"Oh, it's O.K., sergeant," he said, amiably. "Every man to his job and every tail mechanic to his dirt." Idly he twiddled the shining dials of his slow-motion selectors.

The loudspeaker coughed as if it were clearing its throat, then announced in sharp tones, "*Pip-pip-whop! Pip-pip-whop!*"

Nothing could have been better calculated to upset the determined serenity of his brows. I'll swear that after they'd entered his hair they continued over the top, down the back and lodged under his collar.

"Morse," he said, in the complaining tone of a hurt child.

"I always thought Morse was a code, not a mode," I remarked. "Anyway, if it is Morse, you'll be able to translate it." I paused as the loudspeaker shouted me down with, "*Pip-pipper-pee-eep-whop!*" then I concluded, "Every cat to his ash can."

"Tain't Morse," he contradicted himself. "But it's spark signals." He might have frowned if it hadn't taken too long to drag the brows back. Giving me one of those tragic looks you get sometimes, he snatched a pad, started recording the impulses.

The spacesuits, pom-pom chargers and other things had to be done, so I left him, returned to the armory, got on with my work. He was still fiddling around when darkness fell. So were Jay and his gang, but not for long.

The sun sank, its long, greenish streamers faded from the sky and a velvet pall covered the forest and the glade. I ambled along the passage toward the gallery and was passing the rest room when its door jerked open and the green native burst out. His face was desperate, his legs going as if there were a thousand international smackers tied to the tape. Min-shull yelped somewhere back of him as he jumped full tilt into my ready arms. The greenie squirmed like an eel, beat at

my face, tried to kick my legs off my torso with his bare feet. His rough, harsh body exuded a weak odor of pineapple and cinnamon.

The others pounced out, got him tight, talked to him in halting words until he relaxed. His eyes shifty, anxious, he jabbered excitedly to Jay Score, making urgent gestures and waving his woody arms around in a way that reminded me of branches beating the air. Jay soothed him with fair if faltering speech. It looked as if they'd picked up enough words to get along, though not enough to understand each other perfectly. Still, they were managing.

Eventually, Jay said to Petersen, "Tell the skipper I want to let Kala go."

Petersen cleared off, came back in a minute. "He says do whatever you think is best."

"Good." Conducting the native to the opening of the starboard lock, Jay yapped to him briefly, let him go. The greenie dived off the rim. Someone in the forest must have owed him for a loincloth because his feet made rapid brushing sounds as he fled across the turf. Jay stood on the rim, his flaming orbs staring into outer gloom.

"Why let him go, Jay?"

Turning, he said to me, "I've tried to persuade him to come back at sunup. He may, or he may not—it remains to be seen. We didn't have time to get much out of him, but his language is exceedingly simple and we picked up enough of it to learn that he calls himself Kala of the tribe of Ka. All members of his tribe are named Ka-something, such as Kalee, Ka'noo, or Kaheer."

"Something like the Martians with their Klis and Leids and Sugs," I remarked.

"Something," he agreed, not caring what the Martians might think of being compared with the green aborigines. "He also told us that every man has his tree, every gnat its lichen. I can't understand what he means by that, but he satisfied me that his life depended upon his being with his tree during darkness. It was imperative. I tried to delay him, but his need was almost pitiful. He was willing to die rather than be away from his tree."

"Sounds silly to me." I blew my nose, grinned widely. "It sounds even sillier to Jepson."

Jay stared again into the deep murkiness from which came

strange, nocturnal scents and those everlasting pulsations. Quietly, he said, "I also learned that there are others in the dark, others mightier than the Ka. They have much *gamish*."

"They have what?"

"Much *gamish*," he repeated. "That word defeated me. He used it again and again. He said that the *Marathon* had much *gamish*, I had much *gamish* and that Kli Yang had very much *gamish*. Captain McNulty, it appeared, had only a little. The Ka have none at all."

"Was it something of which he was afraid?"

"Not exactly. As far as I could make out, anything unusual or surprising or unique is chock-full of *gamish*. Anything just abnormal has a lesser amount of *gamish*. Anything ordinary has none at all."

"This," I said, "goes to show the difficulties of communication. It isn't as easy as the people back home think it ought to be."

"No, it isn't." His gleaming optics shifted toward Armstrong leaning against the pom-pom. "You doing this guard?"

"Until twelve. Kelly follows me."

Picking Kelly for guard was poor psychology. That tattooed specimen was welded to a three-foot spanner and in any hot moment was liable to wield said instrument in preference to such new-fangled articles as pom-poms and needlers. Rumor had it that he'd held the lump of iron at his wedding and that his wife had gained a divorce on account of the thing's effect on her morale. My private opinion was that Kelly had a Neanderthal mind.

"We'll shut the lock," decided Jay, "fresh air or no fresh air." That was characteristic of him, and what made him seem so human—he could mention fresh air as if he used it himself. The casual way he did it made you forget that he'd never taken a breath since the day old Knud Johanssen stood him on his dogs. "Let's plug in the turnscrew." Turning his back upon the throbbing gloom, he started to walk into the lighted lock, treading carefully in the cutout of the threads.

A piping voice sprang from the darkness; it ejaculated, "*Nou baiders!*"

Jay stopped dead. His eyes were glowing. Feet padded outside just underneath the lock. Something spherical and glassy soared through the worm, went over Jay's left shoulder, broke

to shards on the top recoil chamber of the pom-pom. A thin, golden liquid splashed around, vaporized instantly.

Reversing, Jay faced the black opening. Armstrong got to the wall, put out a thumb to jab the general alarm stud. Without touching the stud, Armstrong went down as if batted by an invisible club. My needler out, its muzzle extended, I began to move cautiously forward, saw the glittering thread of the worm framing a picture of Jay standing against the ebony background. It was a hell of a mistake—I should have gone for that stud. Three steps, and the whole picture swelled like a blown bubble, the circle widened, the threads of the worm became broad and deep with Jay as a gigantic shape in the middle. The bubble burst and I went down as soggly as Armstrong had done.

Don't know how long I stayed that way, for when I opened my eyes it was with the faint memory of hearing much shouting and stamping of feet around my prostrate form. Things must have happened over and all around me while I lay like a corpse. Now I was still flat. I reposed full length on deep, dew-soaked turf with the throbbing forest close on my left, the indifferent stars peering at me from the vault of night. I was bound up like an Egyptian mummy. Jepson was another mummy at one side of me; Armstrong and several more at the other.

Several hundreds of yards away, noises were still spoiling the silence of the night, a mixture of occasional Terrestrial oaths and many queer, alien pipings. The *Marathon* lay over there; all that could be seen of her in the general blackness was the funnel of light pouring from her open lock. The light flickered, waxed and waned, once or twice was momentarily obliterated. There was a struggle on that shaft of light which became blocked as the fight swayed to and fro.

Jepson was snoring as if it were Saturday night in the old home town, but Armstrong was in full possession of his wits and tongue. He cursed luridly. Rolling over, he started to chew at the knots of Blaine's bindings. Something vaguely human emerged silently from the darkness, smote downward. Armstrong went quiet.

Blinking my eyes, I adapted them enough to make out many more noiseless shapes standing around us. Keeping still and behaving myself, I thought noncomplimentary thoughts about McNulty, the *Marathon*, old Flettner who'd invented the ship and all the public-spirited guys who backed him

morally and financially. I'd always had the feeling that sooner or later they would be the death of me.

Deep down inside me, a tiny voice said, "Sergeant, d'you remember that promise you made your mother about obscene language? D'you remember when you gave that guppy a can of condensed milk for a pinfire opal not as big as the city clock? Repent, sergeant, while there yet is time!"

The distant pipings arose crescendo, the few earthly voices died out. There sounded occasional smashings of light, brittle things. More shapes brought more bodies, dumped them beside us, melted back into the gloom. I wish I could have counted the catch, but darkness didn't permit it. All the newcomers were unconscious. They revived rapidly. I could recognize Brennand's angry voice and the skipper's asthmatic breathing.

A blue star shone through the thin fringe of a drifting cloud as the fight ended. The succeeding pause was ghastly; a solemn, brooding silence broken only by the scuffle of many feet through the grass and the steady pumping in the forest.

Forms gathered around us in large number. The glade was full of them. Hands lifted me, felt my bonds, tossed me into a wicker hammock. I went up shoulder-high, was borne along. You'd have thought I was a defunct wart hog being toted in some sportsman's line of native porters. Just meat—that was me. Just a trophy of the chase. I wondered whether God would confront me with that guppy.

The caravan filed into the forest, my direction of progress being head first. Another hammock followed my feet and I could sense rather than see a string of them farther behind. Jepson was the sardine following me; he went along making a loud recitation about how he'd got tied up ever since he landed in this unprintable world. Curving warily around one dim tree, our line marched boldly under the next, dodged the third. How the deuce our bearers could tell one growth from another in this lousy light was beyond my comprehension.

We'd just got deep into the deeper darkness when a tremendous explosion sounded way back in the glade and a column of fire lit up the whole sky. Even the fire looked faintly green. Our line stopped. Two or three hundred voices cheeped querulously, running from the front past me to a hundred yards farther back. "They've blown up the good old *Marathon*," thought I. "Ah, well, all things come to an end, including the flimsiest hope of returning home."

The squeakers were drowned out as the noisy pillar of flame built itself up to a roar. My hammock started to jump as its bearers reacted. The way they put on the pace had to be experienced to be believed; I almost flew along, dodging this tree, but not that, sometimes avoiding half-seen growths that weren't trees at all. My heart was in my boots.

The bellowing back in the glade suddenly ended in a mighty thump, and a crimson spear flung itself into the sky and stabbed the clouds. It was a spectacle I'd seen before: it was a spaceship going up. It was the *Marathon*!

Were these creatures so talented that they could pick up a thoroughly strange vessel and take it wherever they wanted it? Were these the beings described as superior to the Ka? The whole thing was incongruous—expert astronauts carrying their prisoners in wicker hammocks. Besides, the way they'd jabbered and put on the pace suggested that the *Marathon's* spurt of life had taken them by surprise. The mystery was one I couldn't solve.

While the fiery trail of the spaceship arced northward, our party pressed hurriedly on. There was one stop during which our captors congregated together, but their continual piping suggested that they hadn't stopped for a meal. Twenty minutes afterward there was another halt and a hell of a row in front. Guards kept close to us while a short distance ahead sounded a vocal uproar in which many voices vied with a loud mewling and much beating of great branches. I tried to imagine a bright green tiger.

Things went *phut-phut* and the mewling ended in a choking cough. The sound of whipping branches died away. We moved on, making a wide curve around a monstrous growth that I strained in vain to see. If only this world had possessed a moon. But there was no moon. There were only the stars and the clouds and the forest from which came that all-per-vading beat.

Dawn broke as the line warily bent away from a small clump of apparently innocent briars. We came to the bank of a wide river. Here, we could give our guards the once-over as they shepherded bearers and burdens down the bank. They were creatures very much like the Ka, only taller, more slender, with big, intelligent eyes. They had the same fibrous skins, grayer, not so green, and the same chrysanthemums on their chests. Unlike the Ka, their middles were clothed in

pleated garments, they had harness of woven fiber, and wooden accouterments which included things like complicated blow-guns and bowl-shaped vessels having a bulbous container in the base. A few also bore panniers holding small spheres like the one that had laid me flat in the air lock.

Craning my head, I tried to see more, but could only discern Jepson in the next hammock and Brennand in the one behind that. The next instant, my hammock was unceremoniously dumped by the water's brink, Jepson's beside mine, the rest in a level row.

Jepson screwed round his head, looked at me, and said, "The punks!"

"Take it easy," I suggested. "If we play with them, they may give us more rope."

"And," he said, viciously, "I don't like guys who try to be funny at the wrong time."

"I wasn't trying to be funny," I snapped. "We're all bound to hold our own opinions, aren't we?"

"There you go again!" He writhed around on his hammock, tried to stretch his fastenings. "Some day I'll bind you!"

It's no use talking with a guy like that, so I didn't answer. The light waxed stronger, shone greenly through the thin, green mist hanging over the green river. I could now see Blaine and Minshull tied up beyond Armstrong, and the portly form of McNulty beyond them. We'd traveled about two hours.

Ten of our captors went along the line opening jackets and shirts, baring our chests. They had with them a supply of the bowls with bulbous containers. Two of them pawed my uniform apart, got my chest exposed, stared at it like Anthony stared at Cleopatra. Something about it struck them as wonderful, and it wasn't my reserve beard. It didn't require much brains to tell that they missed my chrysanthemum and couldn't see how I'd got through life without it. They called their fellows, the whole gang debated the subject while I lay like a sacrificial virgin. Then they decided that they'd struck a new line of research and went hot along the trail.

Seizing Blaine and the boob who'd played duck-on-the-rock, they untied them, stripped them down to the raw, examined them as if they were prize cattle at an agricultural exhibition. One of them prodded Blaine in the solar plexus, whereat he jumped the fellow with a savage whoop and

brought him down. The other nudist joined in. Armstrong, who never had been a ninety-pound weakling, promptly burst his bonds, came up dark-faced with the effort and roared into the fray. Fragments of his mangled hammock swung and bounced on his beefy back.

All along the line the rest of us made mighty efforts to break free, but in vain. Green ones centered on the scene of the struggle, brittle spheres plopped all around the three madly fighting Earthmen. The tail mechanic and Blaine collapsed together, going down as if in a sleep. Armstrong shuddered and roared, teetered and pulled himself to, held out long enough to toss two natives into the river and slug the daylights out of a third. Then he, too, dropped.

V

The green ones dragged their fellows from the river, dressed the slumber-wrapped Blaine and the other, added Armstrong, tied all three securely. Once more they conferred together. I couldn't make head or tail of their canary talk, but I got the notion that, in their opinion, we had an uncertain quantity of *gamish*.

My bonds began to irk. I'd have given much for the chance to go into action and bash a few green heads. Twisting myself, I used a lackluster eye to survey a tiny shrub growing near the side of the hammock. The shrub jiggled its midget branches and emitted a smell of burned caramel. Local vegetation was all movement and stinks.

Abruptly, the green ones ended their talk, crowded down to the bank of the river. A flotilla of long, narrow, shapely vessels swept around the bend, foamed under projecting branches of great trees, cut in to the bank. We were carted aboard, five prisoners to the boat. Thrusting away from the bank, our crew of twenty pulled and pushed rhythmically at a row of ten wooden levers on each side of the boat, drove the vessel upstream. We went along at a fair pace, left a shallow wake on the surface of the sluggish river.

"I had a grandfather who was a missionary," I told Jepson. "He got himself in trouble like this."

"So what?"

"He went to pot," I said.

"So can you," snapped Jepson. He strained futilely at his bonds.

For lack of anything better to do, I watched the way in which our crew handled our vessel, came to the conclusion that the levers worked two large pumps or a battery of small ones, and that the vessel got along by sucking in water at the bow and blowing it out at the stern. Later, I found I was wrong. Their method was much simpler than that. The levers connected with twenty split-bladed paddles jutting horizontally a foot or two below the water line. The two flaps of the blades closed together as each paddle drove forward, opened as it swept backward. By this means they got along a good deal faster than they could have done with oars since the sub-surface paddles only moved forward and back with their weight on the boat—they didn't have to be raised, turned and dipped by the muscles of the rowers.

The sun climbed higher as we progressed steadily upriver. On the second bend, the river split, its current moving more rapidly at either side of a rocky islet about a hundred yards long. A group of four huge trees stood at the upstream end of the islet, their trunks and limbs a somber green that verged on black. Each of them had one horizontal spray of branches above which the trunk continued to a feathery crest forty feet higher. Every branch ended in half a dozen powerful twigs which curved downward like the fingers of a clutching hand.

Their crews speeding up the levers, the string of boats took the right-hand channel over which reached the largest of those great branches. As the first boat's prow came underneath, the branch twitched its fingers hungrily. It was no illusion; I saw it as clearly as I can see my trip bonus when they slide it toward me across the mahogany. That limb was getting all set to grab, and from its size and spread I reckoned it could pluck the entire boatload out of the water and do things of which I didn't care to think.

But it didn't do it. Just as that boat entered the danger area its helmsman stood up, bawled a string of gibberish at the tree. The fingers relaxed. The helmsman of the next boat did the same. And the next. Then mine. Flat on my back, as ready for action as a corpse, I gaped at that enormous neck-wringer while all too slowly it came on, passed above and fell behind. Our helmsman went silent; the one in the following boat took up the tale. There was dampness on my spine.

Five miles farther on, we made for the shore. My head was toward that side. I didn't get a view of the buildings until the greenies contemptuously tossed out my hammock, released

me from the thing, stood me on my feet. I promptly lost balance and sat down. Temporarily, my dogs were dead. Rubbing them to restore the circulation, my curious eyes examined this dump that might have been anything from a one-horse hamlet to a veritable metropolis.

The buildings were made of light green wood, all cylindrical, of uniform height and diameter, and each had a big tree growing through its middle. The foliage of each tree extended farther than the radius of each house, thus effectively hiding it from overhead view. Nothing could have been better calculated to conceal the place from the air, though there wasn't any reason to suppose that the inhabitants feared any menace from above.

Still, the way in which trees and buildings shared the same sites made it quite impossible to estimate the size of the place, for beyond the nearer screen of buildings were trees, trees and more trees, each of which may have shielded a house. I couldn't tell whether I was looking at a kraal or at the riverside suburb of some place running right over the horizon. It was little wonder that the exploring lifeboat had observed nothing but forest. Its crew could have scouted over an area holding a population of many millions and have thought it nothing but jungle.

Their weapons ready, their eyes alert, a horde of the green ones clustered around us while some of them finished the task of releasing the prisoners. The fact that we'd arrived in a thing like the *Marathon* didn't awe them one little bit. My feet were obedient now, so I lugged on my jackboots, stood up and looked around. It was then that I got two shocks.

The first hit me as I scanned my companions in misery. They consisted of little more than half the complement of the *Marathon*. The rest weren't there. One hammock held a still, lax figure that I recognized as the body of the guy who'd caught the darts soon after we landed. Upon another reposed the awake but dreamy, disinterested form of Sug Farn. But he was the only Martian present. None of the others were there. Neither were Chief Douglas, Bannister, Kane, Richards, Kelly, Jay Score, Steve Gregory, young Wilson, and a dozen others.

Were they dead? It didn't seem so—else why should the greenies have transported one body and not the others? Had they escaped, or did they form a second party of prisoners

that had been taken elsewhere? There was no way of determining their fate, yet it was strange that they should be missing.

I nudged Jepson. "Hey, have you noticed—"

Came a sudden roar over that river and all the green ones stared upward and gesticulated with their weapons. They made mouth motions, but the roar drowned them out. Whirling around, I could feel my eyes bugging as the *Marathon's* sleek pinnacle dived within a few feet of the surface of the river, soared upward again. It vanished over the treetops, drummed into the distance.

Then I could hear it sweeping round in a wide circle. Its note accelerated as it went into another dive, it shot back into view, swooped so low that it touched the surface of the water, whisked a shower of green droplets behind it and sent a small wash lapping into the bank. Then it was gone in another swift and uproarious soar, bulleting past at such a rate that it was impossible to see the pilot's cabin.

Jepson spat on his fist, gave the greenies a sour eye, and said, "They've got it coming to them, the lice!"

"*Tut!*" I chided.

"As for you," he went on. He didn't get a chance to say more because a tall, thin, mean-looking greenie suddenly picked on him.

This one gave him a contemptuous shove in the chest and piped something on a rising note of interrogation.

"Don't you do that to me!" snarled Jepson, giving an answering shove.

The green one staggered backward, recovered his balance, kicked out with his right leg. I thought he was trying to give Jepson a crack on the shins, but he wasn't. He was throwing something with his foot and what he threw was alive. All I could see of it was something that may or may not have been a tiny snake. It had no more length and thickness than a pencil and, for a change, it wasn't green but a bright orange color relieved by small, black spots. It landed on Jepson's chest, bit him, then flicked down his front so fast that I could hardly follow it. Reaching the ground, it made the grass fairly whip aside as it streaked back to its owner.

Curling around the green one's ankle, it went supine, looking exactly like a harmless leg ornament. A very small number of the other natives were wearing similar objects all of

which were orange and black excepting one which was yellow and black.

Jepson bugged his eyes, opened his mouth, but emitted no sound. He teetered. The guy wearing the yellow and black lump of wickedness was standing right at my side watching Jepson with academic interest. I broke his neck. The way it snapped reminded me of a rotten broomstick. That thing on his leg left him the moment he was mutton, but fast as it moved it was too late. Jepson fell onto his face just as my jackboot scrunched the thing into the turf.

There was a hullabaloo all around me. I could hear McNulty's anxious voice yelping, "Men! Men!" Even at a time like this the crackpot could dwell on the vision of himself being demoted for tolerating maltreatment of natives. Armstrong kept bawling, "Another bugger!" and each time there followed a loud splash in the river. Things were going *phut-phut* and spheres were crashing again. Jepson lay like one dead while combatants stumbled over his body. Brennan barged up against me. He was breathing in quick puffs and trying to gouge a black eye out of a green face.

By this time I'd got myself another aborigine and proceeded to take him apart. I tried to imagine that he was a fried chicken of which I never seem to get any more than the piece that goes last over the fence. He was hard to hold, this greenie, and bounced around like a rubber ball. Over his swaying shoulder I could see Sug Farn juggling with five at once and envied him the anacondas he used for limbs. My opponent stabbed his fingers into the chrysanthemum I didn't possess, looked surprised at his own forgetfulness, was still trying to think of something else as he went into the river.

Then half a dozen spheres cracked open at my feet and the last I remember hearing was Armstrong bellowing just before a splash. The last I remember seeing was Sug Farn suddenly shooting out a spare tentacle he'd temporarily overlooked and using it to arrange that of the six greenies who jumped me only five landed. The other one was still going up as I went down.

For some reason I didn't pass out as I'd done before. Maybe I only got a half-dose of whatever the spheres gave forth, or perhaps they contained a different mixture. All I know is that I went down with five aborigines aboard my ribs, the skies spun crazily, my brains turned to porridge.

Then, astonishingly, I was awake, my upper limbs again tightly bound.

Over to the left a group of natives made a heaving pile atop some forms that I couldn't see but could easily hear. Armstrong was doing some championship hog-calling underneath that bunch which, after a couple of hectic minutes, broke apart to reveal his tied body along with those of Blaine and Sug Farn. On my right lay Jepson, his limbs quite free, but the lower ones apparently helpless. There was now no sign of the pinnacle.

Without further ado the greenies whisked us across the sward and five miles deep into the forest, or city, or whatever it ought to be called. Two of them bore Jepson in a sort of wicker hamper. There were still as many trees as houses. Here and there a few impassive citizens came to the doors of their abodes and watched us dragging on our way. You'd have thought we were the sole surviving specimens of the dodo.

Minshull and McNulty were right behind me in this death parade, and I heard the latter say, pontifically, "I shall speak to their leader about this. I shall point out to him that all these unfortunate struggles are the inevitable result of his own people's bellicosity."

"Undoubtedly," afforded Minshull, with a touch of sardonic heartiness.

"Making all allowances for mutual difficulties of understanding," McNulty went on, "I still think that we are entitled to be received with a modicum of courtesy."

"Quite," said Minshull. His voice was now solemn, like that of the president of a mortician's convention. "And we consider that our reception left much to be desired."

"Precisely my point," said the skipper.

"And any further hostilities would be most deplorable," continued Minshull.

"Of course!" McNulty enthused.

"In which event we'll tear the guts out of every greenie on this stinking planet."

"Eh?" McNulty paused in his pace. His voice went up in pitch.

"Nothing," lied Minshull, amiably. "I didn't even open my mouth."

What the outraged shipmaster intended to say remained a mystery, for at this point a greenie caught him lagging and

prodded him on. With an angry snort, he speeded up, moving in introspective silence from then on.

Presently, we emerged from a long, orderly line of tree-shrouded homes and entered a glade fully twice as large as that in which the missing *Marathon* had made its landing. It was roughly circular, its surface level and carpeted with close-growing moss of a rich, emerald green. The sun, now well up in the sky, poured a flood of pale-green beams into this strange amphitheater around the fringes of which clustered a horde of silent, expectant natives.

The middle of the glade captured out attention. Here, as outstanding as the biggest skyscraper in the old home town, soared a veritable monster among trees. How high it went was quite impossible to estimate, but it was large enough to make Terra's giant redwoods look puny by comparison. Its bole was a full forty feet in diameter, and the spread of its oaklike branches looked immense even though they were way, way up there. So enormous was this mighty growth that we just couldn't keep our eyes off it. If these transcosmic Zulus were going to hang us, well, they sure intended to do it high and handsome. Our kicking bodies wouldn't look more than a few struggling bugs dangling between Earth and heaven.

Minshull must have been afflicted by the same thought, for I heard him say to McNulty, "There's the Christmas tree! We're the ornaments. They'll draw lots for us, and the boob who gets the ace of spades will be the fairy at the top."

"Don't be morbid," snapped McNulty. "They'll do nothing so illegal."

Then a native pointed at the positive skipper and six pounced on him before he could dilate further on the subject of intercosmic law. With complete disregard for all the customs which the victim held holy, they bore him toward the waiting tree.

VI

Up to that moment we'd failed to notice the drumming sound which thundered dully from all around the glade. It was strong now, and held a sinister quality in its muffled, insistent beat. The weird, elusive sound had been with us from the start; we'd got used to it, had become unconscious of it in the same way that one becomes insensitive to the ticking of a

familiar clock. But now, perhaps because it lent emphasis to the dramatic scene, we were keenly aware of that deadly *throb, throb, throb*.

The green light made the skipper's face ghastly as he went forward. All the same, he still managed to lend importance to his characteristic strut, and his features had the air of one who has unshakable faith in the virtue of sweet reasonableness. I've never encountered a man with more confidence in the law. As he walked forward, I know he was supported by the profound conviction that these poor people could do nothing drastic with him unless they first filled in the necessary forms and got them properly stamped and signed. Whenever McNulty died, it was going to be with official approval.

Halfway to the tree the skipper and his guard were met by nine tall natives. The latter were dressed in no way different from their fellows, yet, in some vague manner, managed to convey the impression that they were beings apart from the common herd. Witch doctors, decided my agitated mind.

Those holding McNulty promptly handed him over to the newcomers, then beat it toward the fringe of the glade as if the devil himself had appeared in the middle. There wasn't any devil; there was only that monstrous tree. Still, I knew what some growths could and did do in this green-wrapped world and it was highly probable that this, the grandpappy of all trees, was capable of some unique wickedness. Of that lump of statuesque timber one thing was certain—it possessed a damned good dollop of *gamish*.

Briskly, the nine stripped McNulty to the waist. He was talking to them all the time, but he was too far away for us to get the gist of his lecture, and his captors took not the slightest notice. Again they examined his chest, conferred among themselves, abruptly started dragging him nearer to the tree. McNulty resisted with appropriate dignity. Picking him up bodily, they carried him forward.

Armstrong said, in harsh tones, "We've still got legs, haven't we?" and forthwith kicked his nearest guardian's feet from beneath him.

But before any of us could follow his example and start another useless melee an interruption came from the sky. Upon the steady drumming from the forest was superimposed another fiercer, more rapid roll which quickly merged its beats to a rising howl. The howl waxed to an explosive roar

as, swift and silvery, the pinnacle swooped low over the fateful tree.

Something dropped from the belly of the bulleting boat, something which blew out to mushroomlike shape, hesitated in its fall, then lowered gently into the head of the tree. It was a parachute! I could see a figure hanging in its harness just before he was swallowed in the deeps of that elevated foliage. The distance made it quite impossible to recognize this invader from above.

The nine who were bearing McNulty dropped him uncereemoniously on the sward, gazed expectantly at the tree. Strangely enough, aerial manifestations filled these natives more with curiosity than fear. The tree stood unmoving. Suddenly, amid its top branches, the thin beam of a needle ray lanced forth, touched a large branch at its junction with the trunk, and severed it. The amputated limb went whirling to the ground.

At once a thousand budlike protuberances, which lay concealed between the leaves of the tree swelled up as if they were blown balloons, reached the size of giant pumpkins, and burst with a fusillade of dull pops. They gave out a light yellow mist, exuding the stuff at such a rate that the entire tree was clouded with it in less than one minute. All the natives within sight hooted like a gang of owls, turned and ran. McNulty's nine guardians also called off the ceremony they'd had in mind and started after their fellows. The needle caught two of them before they'd gone ten steps; the remaining seven doubled their pace. McNulty was left struggling with the bonds around his wrists while slowly the mist crawled toward him.

Again the beam speared high up in the tree which had grown dim within the envelope of its own fog, and again a branch went to the ground. The last native had faded from sight. The creeping mist was now within thirty yards of the skipper who was standing and watching it like a man fascinated. His wrists were still tied to his sides. Deep inside the mist the popping sounds continued, though not as rapidly.

Yelling at the witless McNulty to make use of his nether limbs, we struggled furiously with our own and one another's bonds. McNulty responded no more than to shuffle backward a few yards. By a superhuman effort Armstrong burst free, snatched a jackknife from his pants pocket, started cutting our arms loose. Minshull and Blaine, the first two thus re-

lieved, immediately raced to McNulty who was posing within ten yards of the mist like a portly Ajax defying the power of alien gods. They dragged him back.

Just as we'd all got rid of our bonds the pinnacle came around in another wide sweep, vanished behind the column of yellow cloud and thundered away into the distance. We gave it a hoarse cheer. Then from the mist strode a great figure dragging a limp body with each hand. It was Jay Score. He had a tiny two-way radio on his back.

He came toward us, big, powerful, his eyes aflame with their everlasting fires, released his grip on the pair of cadavers, said, "Look—this is what that vapor will do to you unless you move out plenty fast!"

We looked. These things were the remains of the two natives he'd needled, but the needlers had not caused that awful rotting of the flesh. Both leprous objects were too far gone to be corpses, not far enough to be skeletons. They were mere rags of flesh and half-eaten organs on frames of festering bone. It was easy to see what would have happened to Jay had he been composed of flesh and blood, or had he been a breather.

"Back to the river," advised Jay, "even if we have to fight our way through. The *Marathon's* going to land on the front. We must reach her at all costs."

"And remember, men," put in McNulty, "I want no unnecessary slaughter."

That was a hell of a laugh. Our sole weapons now consisted of Jay's needler, Armstrong's jackknife, and our fists. Behind us, already very near and creeping steadily nearer, was the mist of death. Between us and the river lay the greenie metropolis with its unknown number of inhabitants armed with unknown devices. Veritably we were between a yellow devil and a green sea.

We started off, Jay in the lead, McNulty and the burly Armstrong following. Behind them, two men carried Jepson who could use his tongue even if not his legs. Two more bore the body which our attackers had borne all the way from the ship. Without opposition or mishap we got a couple of hundred yards deep into the trees and there we buried the corpse of the man who was first to set foot on this soil. He went from sight with the limp silence of the dead while all around us the forest throbbed.

In the next hundred yards we were compelled to bury an-

other. The surviving duck-on-the-rock player, sobered by the end of his buddy, took the lead as a form of penance. We were marching slowly and cautiously, our eyes alert for hidden natives, our wits ready for any untoward move by a dart-throwing bush or a goo-smearing branch.

The man in front swerved away from one tree which topped an empty and silent greenie abode. His full attention was upon the vacant entrance to that house, and he failed to be wary of another tree under which he had moved. This growth was of medium size, had a silvery green bark, long, ornamental leaves from which dangled sprays of stringy threads. The ends of the threads came within four feet of the ground. He brushed against two of them. Came a sharp, bluish flash of light, a smell of ozone and scorched hair, and he dropped. He'd been electrocuted as thoroughly as if smitten by a stroke of lightning.

Mist or no mist, we carried him back the hundred yards we'd just traversed, buried him beside his comrade. That job was done in the nick of time. The crawling leprosy was at our very heels as we resumed our way. High in the almost concealed sky the sun poured down its limpid rays and made mosaic patterns through overhead leaves.

Giving a wide berth to this latest menace, which we named the voltree, we hit the end of Main Street. Here, we had the advantage in one way, though not in another. The houses stood dead in line and well apart; we could march along the center of the route beneath the wider gap of sky and be beyond reach of this planet's bellicose vegetation. But this made our march exposed to attack from any direction by any natives who might be determined to oppose our escape. We'd have to do the trip, one way or the other, with our necks stuck out a yard.

Sug Farn said to me, "You know, I've an idea well worth developing."

"What is it?" I demanded, hopefully.

"Supposing that we had twelve squares a side," he suggested, "we could then have four more pawns and four new master pieces. I propose to call the latter 'archers.' They would move two squares forward, and could take opponents one square sidewise. Wouldn't that make a beautifully complicated game?"

"You," I told him, "may go drown yourself!"

"As I should have known, your mental appreciation is poor." So saying, he extracted a bottle of *hooloo* scent which somehow he'd managed to retain through all the turmoil, moved away from me, and sniffed it in a deliberately offensive manner. I don't give a damn what anybody says—we don't smell like Martians say we do! These octopuses are downright liars.

Stopping both our progress and argument, Jay Score growled, "I guess this'll do." Unhitching his portable radio, he tuned it up, said into its microphone. "That you, Steve?" A pause, then, "Yes, we're waiting about a quarter of a mile on the river side of the glade. No, there's been no opposition—yet. But it'll come, it'll come. O.K., we'll wait." Another pause. "We'll give it guidance by sound."

Turning his attention from the radio to the sky, but with one earpiece still in action, he listened intently. We all listened. For a while there was nothing but that *throb, throb, throb* which never ceased upon this crazy world, but presently came a faraway drone like the hum of an approaching bumblebee.

Jay snatched at the mike. "We've got you. You're coming nearer." The drone grew louder. "Nearer, nearer." He waited a moment. "Now you're away to one side." The drone drifted off. "No, you're swerved the wrong way." Another brief wait. The distant sound suddenly grew strong. "Heading correctly now." The drone swelled to a roar. "Right!" yelled Jay. "You're almost on us!"

He looked expectantly upward, and we followed his gaze as one man. The next instant the pinnacle raced across the sky gap at such a pace that it had come and gone in less time than it takes to draw one breath. But those aboard must have seen us, for the little vessel zoomed around in a wide, graceful arc, hit the main stem a couple of miles farther down, and came up it at terrific speed. This time, we could watch it most of the way, and we yelled at it as if we were a gang of excited kids.

"Got us?" inquired Jay of the microphone. "All right, try it on the next run."

Again the pinnacle swept around, struck its former path, tore the air as it traveled toward us. It was like a monster shell from some old-time cannon. Things fell from its underside as it neared us, bundles and packages in a parachuted stream. The stuff came down as manna from heaven while

the sower passed uproariously on and dug a hole in the northern sky. But for these infernal trees the pinnacle could have landed and snatched the lot of us from danger's grasp.

Eagerly we pounced on the supplies, tearing covers open and dragging out the contents. Spacesuits for all. Well, they'd preserve us from various forms of gaseous unpleasantness. Needlers, oiled and loaded, together with reserves of excitants. A small case, all sponge rubber and cotton wool, containing half a dozen atomic bombs. An ampoule of iodine and a first-aid pack apiece.

One large bundle had become lodged high up in the branches of a tree, or rather its parachute had become entangled and it was dangling enticingly from the ropes. Praying that it contained nothing liable to blast the earth from beneath us, we needled the ropes and brought it down. It proved to hold a good supply of concentrated rations and a three-gallon can of pineapple juice.

Packing the chutes and shouldering the supplies, we started off. The first mile was easy: just trees, trees, trees and abandoned houses. It was on this part of the journey that I noticed that it was always the same type of tree which surmounted a house. There was no abode built around any of those gootrees or voltrees of whose powers we now knew too well. Whether those particular trees were innocuous was something nobody seemed inclined to discover, but it was here that Minshull discovered in them the source of that everlasting throbbing.

Disregarding McNulty, who was clucking at him like an agitated hen, he tiptoed into one empty house, his needler held forward in readiness for trouble. A minute later he came out, said that the building was deserted, but that the tree in its center was booming like a tribal tom-tom. He'd put his ear to its trunk and had heard the beating of its mighty heart.

That started a dissertation by McNulty, his subject being our legal right to mutilate or otherwise harm the trees of this planet. If, in fact, they were semisentient, then in law they had the status of aborigines and as such were subject to subsection so-and-so, paragraph such 'n such of the Intercosmic Code governing planetary relations. He got down to this with gusto and with typical disregard for the fact that he might be boiled in oil by nightfall.

When he paused for breath, Jay Score said, evenly, "Skip-

per, maybe these people have laws of their own and are about to enforce them!" He pointed straight ahead.

I followed his unemotional finger, then frantically poured myself into my spacesuit. This, I thought, is it! The long arm of justice was about to face me with that poor guppy.

VII

What awaited us about half a mile ahead was a vanguard of enormous, snakelike things fully as thick as my body and about a hundred feet in length. They were writhing in our general direction, their movements peculiarly stiff and lacking in sinuosity. Behind them, also moving awkwardly forward, was a small army of bushes deceptively harmless in appearance. And behind those, hooting with the courage of those who now feel themselves secure, was a great horde of natives. The progress of this nightmarish crowd was determined by the pace of the snakish objects in front, and these crept forward in tortuous manner as if they were trying to move a hundred times faster than nature had intended them to move.

Aghast at this crazy spectacle, we stopped. The creepers came steadily on and somehow managed to convey an impression of tremendous strength awaiting sudden release. The nearer they got, the bigger they looked, and when they were a mere three hundred yards away I knew that any one of them could embrace a bunch of six of us and do more to us than any boa constrictor ever did to a hapless goat.

These were the wild ones of a vast and semisentient forest. I knew it instinctively, and I could hear them faintly mewling as they came on. These, then, were my bright green tigers, samples of the thing our captors had slaughtered in the emerald jungle. But they could be tamed, their strength and fury kept on tap. This tribe had done it. Veritably, they were higher than the Ka.

"I think I can just about make this distance," said Jay Score when the intervening space had shrunk to two hundred yards.

Nonchalantly, he thumbed an atomic bomb which could have made an awful mess of the *Marathon*. His chief weakness was that he never could appreciate the power of things that go bang. So he juggled it around in a way that made me wish him someplace the other end of the cosmos, and just when I

was about to burst into tears, he threw it. His powerful right arm whistled in the air as he flung the missile in a great arc.

We flattened. The earth heaved like the belly of a sick man. Huge clods of plasma and lumps of green, fibrous stuff geysered, hung momentarily in midair, then showered all around us. We got up, raced forward a hundred yards, went prone as Jay tossed another. This one made me think of volcanoes. Its blast nearly pushed me back into my boots. The uproar had scarcely ceased when the pinnacle reappeared, dived upon the rear ranks of the foe, and let them have a couple there. More disruption. It tied me in knots to see what went up.

"Now!" yelled Jay. Grabbing the handicapped Jepson, he tossed him upon one shoulder and pounced forward. We drove with him as one man.

Our first obstacle was a great crater bottomed with tired and steaming earth and some mutilated yellow worms. Cutting around the edges of this, I leaped a six-foot length of blasted creeper which, even in death, continued to jerk spasmodically and horribly. There were many more odd lengths writhing between here and the next crater. All were greener than any complexion, and bristled with hair-like tendrils which squirmed around as if seeking the life that had gone. The one hundred yards between craters we covered in record time, Jay still in the lead despite his heavy burden. I was sweating like a tormented bull, and I thanked my lucky star for the low gravity which enabled us to keep up this frantic pace.

Again we split and raced around the rim of the second crater. This brought us nose to nose with the enemy, and after that, all was confusion.

A bush got me. Sheer Terrestrialism made me disregard the darned thing despite all my recent experiences. I had my eyes off it, and in an instant it had shifted to one side, wrapped itself around my legs and brought me down. I went prostrate, unharmed but cursing, and the bush methodically sprinkled my space fabric with a fine gray powder. Then a long, leatherish tentacle snaked from behind me, ripped the bush from my form, tore it to pieces.

"Thanks, Sug Farn!" I breathed, got up, and charged on.

A second bellicose growth collapsed before my needler and the potent ray carried on another sixty or seventy yards and

roasted the guts of a yelling, gesticulating native. Sug snatched a third bush, scattered it with scorn. The powder it emitted did not seem to affect him.

Jay was now twenty yards ahead. He paused, flung a bomb, dropped, got up and raced on, Jepson still grasped in his mighty left arm. The pinnacle howled overhead, dived, created wholesale slaughter in the enemy's rear. A needle ray spurted from behind me, lanced dangerously close to my helmet, and burned a bush. I could hear in my phone a constant and monotonous cursing as I pounded along. On my right, a great tree lashed furiously and toppled headlong, but I had neither time nor inclination to look at it.

Then a snake got Blaine. How it had survived, alone among its blasted fellows, was a mystery. It lay jerking exactly like all the other tattered bits and pieces, but it was still in one long lump and, as Blaine jumped it, the thing curled viciously, wound around him. He shrieked into his mouthpiece, and the sound of his dying was terrible to hear. His spacesuit sank in and his blood spurted out between the folds. The sound and the sight shocked me so much that I stopped abruptly, and Armstrong blundered into me from behind.

"Get going!" he roared. With his needler he sliced the green constrictor, segmenting it with savage gusto. We charged on, perforce leaving behind Blaine's crushed and broken corpse.

Now we were through the fronting ranks and into the natives whose numbers miraculously had thinned. Brittle globes plopped all around our thudding feet, but their gaseous contents were as harmless as summer air. We were protected and, in any case, we were moving too fast to get a whiff. I needed three greenies in rapid succession, saw Jay tear off the head of another without as much as pausing in his heavy onrush.

We were gasping with exertion when unexpectedly the foe gave up. The remaining natives melted into their protecting forest just as the pinnacle roared vengefully toward them again. Our way was clear. Not slackening our pace in the slightest, and with eyes alert and weapons ready, we raced to the water front, and there, lying in the great space of bright green sward, found the sweetest sight in the entire cosmos—the *Marathon*!

It was here that Sug Farn put a scare into us, for as we sprinted joyfully toward the open port, he beat us to it, held

up the stump of a tentacle, said, "It would be as well if we do not enter—yet."

"Why not?" demanded Jay. His cold, glowing eyes settled on the Martian's stump. "What the devil happened to you?"

"I was forced to shed a limb," said Sug Farn, mentioning it with the air of one to whom shedding a limb is like taking off a hat. "It was that powder. It was made of a million insects. It crawls around and it eats. It was eating me. Look at yourselves!"

By hokey, he was right! Now that I came to look at it, I could see small clusters of gray powder changing shape on my spacesuit. It was moving around. Sooner or later, it would eat its way through—and then start on me. I've never felt lousier in my life. So, keeping watch upon the fringe of the forest, we had to spend an impatient and sweaty half-hour roasting each other's suits with needlers turned to wide jet and low power. I was cooked by the time the last microscopic louse dropped off.

Young Wilson seized the opportunity to dig out a movie camera and record our communal decontamination. This, I knew, eventually would be shown to an amused world sitting in armchair comfort far, far from the troubles surrounding Rigel. Secretly, I wished that a few surviving bugs would somehow manage to get around with the film. With a more official air, he also got shots of the forest, the river, and a couple of upturned boats with all their bivalve paddles exposed. Then, thankfully, we all piled into the spaceship.

The pinnacle was lugged aboard and the *Marathon* blew off pronto. I don't think there's ever been a time when I felt more like a million dollars than I did when normal, glorious light came through the ports and the bilious green coloring faded from our faces. With Brennand, I watched this strange, eerie world sink below us, and I can't say I was sorry to see it drop.

Jay came along, said, "Sergeant, we're not making any further landings. The skipper's decided to return to Terra at once and make a full report."

"Why?" asked Brennand. He gestured below. "We've come away with practically nothing worth having!"

"McNulty thinks we've learned quite enough." The rhythmic hum of the stern tubes sounded through his momentary silence. "He said he's conducting an exploratory expedition

and not managing a slaughterhouse. He's had enough and is thinking of offering his resignation."

"The dunderhead!" said Brennand, with total lack of reverence.

"What have we learned, if anything?" I asked.

"Well, we know that life on that planet is mostly symbiotic," Jay replied. "There, different forms of life share their existence and their faculties. Men share with trees, each according to his kind. The communal point is that queer chest organ."

"Drugs for blood," said Brennand. "Bah!"

"But," Jay went on. "There were some higher than the Ka and their kind, some so high and godlike that they could depart from their trees and travel the globe, by day or by night. They could milk their trees, transport their nourishment and absorb it from bowls. Of the partnership imposed upon them, they had gained the mastery, and, in the estimation of this planet, they alone were free!"

"How fallen are the mighty," I commented.

"Not so," Jay contradicted. "We have killed, but not conquered. The world is still theirs. We are retiring, with our losses—and we still have Jepson to cure!" He turned away.

A thought struck me, and I said to him, "Hey, what happened during that assault on the ship? And how did you keep track of us?"

"It was a losing fight, so we blew free," he replied. "After that, we followed you very easily." His eyes were always inscrutably aflame, but I will swear that there was a touch of humor in them as he went on. "You had Sug Farn with you. We had Kli Yang and the rest." He tapped his head suggestively. "The Martians have much *gamish*."

"Hell, telepathy!" yelled Brennand. "I forgot all about that. Sug Farn never said a word. That cross-eyed spider just slept every chance he got!"

"Nevertheless," said Jay, "he was constantly in touch with his fellows!"

He went along the passage, rounded the corner. Then the warning alarm sounded, and Brennand and I clung like brothers while the ship switched to Flettner drive. The green world faded to a dot with swiftness that never failed to astound me. We took fresh hold on ourselves, rubbed our distorted innards into shape. Then Brennand went to the valve

of the storrad air lock, turned the control, watched the pressure gauge crawl from three pounds to fifteen.

"The Martians are inside there," I pointed out. "And they won't like that."

"I don't want 'em to like it. I'll teach those rubber caricatures to hold out on me!"

"McNulty won't like it either."

"Who cares what McNulty likes!" he yelled. Then McNulty himself came around the corner, walking with portly dignity, and Brennand promptly added, in a still louder voice, "You ought to be a darned sight more respectful and refer to him as the skipper."

When you travel the void, never mind the ship—pick the guys who're going to accompany you in it!

THE IRON STANDARD

Astounding,

December

**by Lewis Padgett
(Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore)**

What a year for the Kuttners! In addition to the five stories in this volume, they (in a few cases one or the other) published among others—"Endowment Policy" (Astounding, August); "Gallegher Plus" (Astounding, November); "Ghost" (Astounding, May); "Nothing But Gingerbread Left" (Astounding, January); "Shock" (Astounding, March); "Open Secret" (Astounding, April); "Time Locker" (Astounding, January); and "The World Is Mine" (Astounding, June). In addition, they published the serialized novel Earth's Last Citadel and Catherine Moore had her noteworthy novel Judgment Night serialized in Astounding in August and September.

"The Iron Standard" is an excellent story about survival, and is representative of the rich vein of ideas that was mined by science fiction writers from the field of cultural anthropology.

(Back in 1947, I attended the Fifth World Science Fiction Convention, held in Philadelphia that year. It was the first I attended since the very first such convention in 1939.

Several of the war years were skipped—the only break in the long line.) The convention voted for "favorite author" and I apparently ended in 11th place, something I was, at the time, pretty proud of. If you want to know who finished in first place, it was Henry Kuttner.—I.A.)

Alien races didn't have to be either friendly or unfriendly; they could be stubbornly indifferent—with serious effect.

"So the ghost won't walk for a year—Venusian time," Thirkell said, spooning up cold beans with a disgusted air.

Rufus Munn, the captain, looked up briefly from his task of decockroaching the soup. "Dunno why we had to import these. A year plus four weeks, Steve. There'll be a month at space before we hit Earth again."

Thirkell's round, pudgy face grew solemn. "What happens in the meantime? Do we starve on cold beans?"

Munn sighed, glancing through the open, screened port of the spaceship *Goodwill* to where dim figures moved in the mists outside. But he didn't answer. Barton Underhill, supercargo and handyman, who had wangled his passage by virtue of his father's wealth, grinned tightly and said, "What d'you expect? We don't dare use fuel. There's just enough to get us home. So it's cold beans or nothing."

"Soon it will be nothing," Thirkell said solemnly. "We have been spendthrifts. Wasting our substance in riotous living."

"Riotous living!" Munn growled. "We gave most of our grub to the Venusians."

"Well," Underhill murmured, "they fed us—for a month."

"Not now. There's an embargo. What do they have against us anyhow?"

Munn thrust back his stool with sudden decision. "That's something we'll have to figure out. Things can't go on like this. We simply haven't enough food to last us a year. And we can't live off the land—" He stopped as someone unzipped the valve screen and entered, a squat man with high cheekbones and a beak of a nose in a red-bronze face.

"Find anything, Redskin?" Underhill asked.

Mike Soaring Eagle tossed a plastisac on the table. "Six mushrooms. No wonder the Venusians use hydroponics. They have to. Only fungi will grow in this sponge of a world, and most of that's poisonous. No use, skipper."

Munn's mouth tightened. "Yeah. Where's Bronson?"

"Panhandling. But he won't get a *fal*." The Navaho nodded toward the port. "Here he comes now."

After a moment the others heard Bronson's slow footsteps. The engineer came in, his face red as his hair. "Don't ask he," he murmured. "Don't say a word, anybody. Me, a Kerry man, trying to bum a lousy *fal* from a shagreen-

skinned so-and-so with an iron ring in his nose like a Ubangi savage. Think of it! The shame will stay with me forever."

"My sympathy," Thirkell said. "But did you get any *fals*?"

Bronson glared at him. "Would I have taken his dirty coins if he'd offered them?" the engineer yelled, his eyes bloodshot. "I'd have flung them in his slimy face, and you can take my word for it. *I* touch their rotten money? Give me some beans." He seized a plate and morosely began to eat.

Thirkell exchanged glances with Underhill. "He didn't get any money," the latter said.

Bronson started back with a snort. "He asked me if I belonged to the Beggars' Guild! Even tramps have to join a union on this planet!"

Captain Munn scowled thoughtfully. "No, it isn't a union, Bronson, or even much like the medieval guilds. The *tarkomars* are a lot more powerful and a lot less principled. Unions grew out of a definite social and economic background, and they fill a purpose—a check-and-balance system that keeps building. I'm not talking about unions; on Earth some of 'em are good—like the Air Transport—and some are graft-ridden, like Undersea Dredgers. The *tarkomars* are different. They don't fulfill any productive purpose. They just keep the Venusian system in its backwater."

"Yes," Thirkell said, "and unless we're members, we aren't allowed to work—at anything. And we can't be members till we pay the initiation fee—a thousand *sofals*."

"Easy on those beans," Underhill cautioned. "We've only ten more cans."

There was silence. Presently Munn passed cigarettes.

"We've got to do something, that's certain," he said. "We can't get food except from the Venusians, and they won't give it to us. One thing in our favor: the laws are so arbitrary that they can't refuse to *sell* us grub—it's illegal to refuse legal tender."

Mike Soaring Eagle glumly sorted his six mushrooms. "Yeah. *If* we can get our hands on legal tender. We're broke—broke on Venus—and we'll soon be starving to death. If anybody can figure out an answer to that one—"

This was in 1964, three years after the first successful flight to Mars, five years since Dooley and Hastings had brought their ship down in Mare Imbrium. The moon, of course, was uninhabited, save by active but unintelligent algae. The big-

ched, alert Martians, with their high metabolism and their brilliant, erratic minds, had been friendly, and it was certain that the cultures of Mars and Earth would not clash. As for Venus, till now, no ship had landed there.

The *Goodwill* was the ambassador. It was an experiment, like the earlier Martian voyage, for no one knew whether or not there was intelligent life on Venus. Supplies for more than a year were stowed aboard, dehydrates, plastibulbs, concentrates and vitamin foods, but every man of the crew had a sneaking hunch that food would be found in plenty on Venus.

There was food—yes. The Venusians grew it, in their hydroponic tanks under the cities. But on the surface of the planet grew nothing edible at all. There was little animal or bird life, so hunting was impossible, even had the Earthmen been allowed to retain their weapons. And in the beginning it had seemed like a gala holiday after the arduous space trip—a year-long fete and carnival in an alien, fascinating civilization.

It was alien, all right. The Venusians were conservative. What was good enough for their remote ancestors was quite good enough for them. They didn't *want* changes, it seemed. Their current setup had worked O.K. for centuries; why alter it now?

The Earthmen meant change—that was obvious.

Result: a boycott of the Earthmen.

It was all quite passive. The first month had brought no trouble; Captain Munn had been presented with the keys of the capital city, Vyring, on the outskirts of which the *Goodwill* now rested, and the Venusians brought food in plenty—odd but tasty dishes from the hydroponic gardens. In return, the Earthmen were lavish with their own stores, depleting them dangerously.

And the Venusian food spoiled quickly. There was no need to preserve it, for the hydroponic tanks turned out a steady, unfailing supply. In the end the Earthmen were left with a few weeks' stock of the food they had brought with them, and a vast pile of garbage that had been lusciously appetizing a few days before.

Then the Venusians stopped bringing their quick-spoiling fruits, vegetables and meat-mushrooms and clamped down. The party was over. They had no intention of harming the Earthmen; they remained carefully friendly. But from now

on it was Pay as You're Served—and no checks cashed. A big meat-mushroom, enough for four hungry men, cost ten *fals*.

Since the Earthmen had no *fals*, they got no meat-mushrooms—nor anything else.

In the beginning it hadn't seemed important. Not until they got down to cases and began to wonder exactly how they could get food.

There was no way.

So they sat in the *Goodwill* eating cold beans, and looking like five of the Seven Dwarfs, a quintet of stocky, short, husky men, big-boned and muscular, especially chosen for their physiques to stand the rigors of space flight—and their brains, also specially chosen, couldn't help them now.

It was a simple problem—simple and primitive. They, the representatives of Earth's mightiest culture, were hungry. They would soon be hungrier.

And they didn't have a *fal*—nothing but worthless gold, silver and paper currency. There was metal in the ship, but none of the pure metal they needed, except in alloys that couldn't be broken down.

Venus was on the iron standard.

“—there's got to be an answer,” Munn said stubbornly, his hard-bitten, harsh face somber. He pushed back his plate with an angry gesture. “I'm going to see the Council again.”

“What good will that do?” Thirkell wanted to know. “We're on the spot, there's no getting around it. Money talks.”

“Just the same, I'm going to talk to Jorust,” the captain growled. “She's no fool.”

“Exactly,” Thirkell said cryptically.

Munn stared at him, beckoned to Mike Soaring Eagle and turned toward the valve. Underhill jumped up eagerly.

“May I go?”

Bronson gloomily toyed with his beans. “Why do *you* want to go? You couldn't even play a slot machine in Vyring's skid row—if they had slot machines. Maybe you think if you tell 'em your old man's a tycoon of Amalgamated Ores, they'll break down and hand out meal tickets—eh?”

But his tone was friendly enough, and Underhill merely grinned. Captain Munn said, “Come along, if you want, but

hurry up." The three men went out into the steaming mists, their feet sloshing through sticky mud.

It wasn't uncomfortably hot; the high winds of Venus provided for quick evaporation, a natural air conditioning that kept the men from feeling the humidity. Munn referred to his compass. The outskirts of Vyring were half a mile away, but the fog was, as usual, like pea soup. On Venus it is always bird-walking weather. Silently the trio slogged on.

"I thought Indians knew how to live off the land," Underhill presently remarked to the Navaho. Mike Soaring Eagle looked at him quizzically.

"I'm not a Venusian Indian," he explained. "Maybe I could make a bow and arrow and bring down a Venusian—but that wouldn't help, unless he had a lot of *sofals* in his purse."

"We might eat him," Underhill murmured. "Wonder what roast Venusian would taste like?"

"Find out and you can write a best seller when you get back home," Munn remarked. "If you get back home. Vyring's got a police force, chum."

"Oh, well," Underhill said, and left it at that. "Here's the Water Gate. Lord—I smell somebody's dinner!"

"So do I," the Navaho grunted, "but I hoped nobody would mention it. Shut up and keep walking."

The wall around Vyring was in the nature of a dike, not a fortification. Venus was both civilized and unified; there were, apparently, no wars and no tariffs—a natural development for a world state. Air transports made sizzling noises as they shot past, out of sight in the fog overhead. Mist shrouded the streets, torn into tatters by occasional huge fans. Vyring, shielded from the winds, was unpleasantly hot, except indoors where artificial air-conditioning could be brought into use.

Underhill was reminded of Venice: the streets were canals. Water craft of various shapes and sizes drifted, glided, or raced past. Even the beggars traveled by water. There were rutted, muddy footpaths beside the canals, but no one with a *fal* to his name ever walked.

The Earthmen walked, cursing fervently as they splashed through the muck. They were, for the most part, ignored.

A water taxi scooted toward the bank, its pilot, wearing the blue badge of his *tarkomar*, hailing them. "May I escort you?" he wanted to know.

Underhill exhibited a silver dollar. "If you'll take this—sure." All the Earthmen had learned Venusian quickly; they were good linguists, having been chosen for this as well as other transplanetary virtues. The phonetic Venusian tongue was far from difficult.

It was no trouble at all to understand the taxi pilot when he said no.

"Toss you for it," Underhill said hopefully. "Double or nothing."

But the Venusians weren't gamblers. "Double what?" the pilot inquired. "That coin? It's silver." He indicated the silver, rococo filigree on the prow of his craft. "Junk!"

"This would be a swell place for Benjamin Franklin," Mike Soaring Eagle remarked. "His false teeth were made of iron, weren't they?"

"If they were, he had a Venusian fortune in his mouth," Underhill said.

"Not quite."

"If it could buy a full-course dinner, it's a fortune," Underhill insisted.

The pilot, eyeing the Earthmen scornfully, drifted off in search of wealthier fares. Munn, doggedly plodding on, wiped sweat from his forehead. Swell place, Vyring, he thought. Swell place to starve to death.

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Half an hour of difficult hiking roused Munn to a slow, dull anger. If Jorust refused to see him, he thought, there was going to be trouble, even though they'd taken away his guns. He felt capable of tearing down Vyring with his teeth. And eating the more edible portions.

Luckily, Jorust was available. The Earthmen were ushered into her office, a big, luxurious room high above the city, with windows open to the cooling breezes. Jorust was skittering around the room on a high chair, equipped with wheels and some sort of motor. Along the walls ran a slanting shelf, like a desk and presumably serving the same function. It was shoulder-high, but Jorust's chair raised her to its level. She probably started in one corner in the morning, Munn thought, and worked her way around the room during the day.

Jorust was a slim, gray-haired Venusian woman with a skin the texture of fine shagreen, and alert black eyes that were wary now. She climbed down from her chair, gestured the

men to seats, and took one herself. She lit a pipe that looked like an oversized cigarette holder, stuffing it with a cylinder of pressed yellow herbs. Aromatic smoke drifted up. Underhill sniffed wistfully.

"May you be worthy of your fathers," Jorust said politely, extending her six-fingered hand in greeting. "What brings you?"

"Hunger," Munn said bluntly. "I think it's about time for a showdown."

Jorust watched him inscrutably. "Well?"

"We don't like being pushed around."

"Have we harmed you?" the Council head asked.

Munn looked at her. "Let's put our cards on the table. We're getting the squeeze play. You're a big shot here, and you're either responsible or you know why. How about it?"

"No," Jorust said after a pause. "No, I'm not as powerful as you seem to think. I am one of the administrators. I do not make the laws. I merely see that they are carried out. We are not enemies."

"That might happen," Munn said grimly. "If another expedition comes from Earth and finds us dead—"

"We would not kill you. It is untraditional."

"You could starve us to death, though."

Jorust narrowed her eyes. "Buy food. Any man can do that, no matter what his race."

"And what do we use for money?" Munn asked. "You won't take our currency. We haven't any of yours."

"Your currency is worthless," Jorust explained. "We have gold and silver for the mining—it is common here. A *difal*—twelve *fals*—will buy a good deal of food. A *sofal* will buy even more than that."

She was right, of course, Munn knew. A *sofal* was one thousand seven hundred twenty-eight *fals*. Yeah!

"And how do you expect us to get any of your iron money?" he snapped.

"Work for it, as our own people do. The fact that you are from another world does not dispose of your obligatory duty to create through labor."

"All right," Munn pursued, "we're willing. Get us a job."

"What kind?"

"Dredging canals! Anything!"

"Are you a member of the canal dredgers' *tarkomar*?"

"No," Munn said. "How could I have forgotten to join?"

Jorust ignored the sarcasm. "You must join. All trades here have their *tarkomars*."

"Lend me a thousand *sofals* and I'll join one."

"You have tried that before," Jorust told him. "Our moneylenders reported that your collateral was worthless."

"Worthless! D'you mean to say we've nothing in our ship worth a thousand *sofals* to your race? It's a squeeze play and you know it. Our water purifier alone is worth six times that to you."

Jorust seemed affronted. "For a thousand years we have cleansed our water with charcoal. If we changed now, we would be naming our ancestors fools. They were not fools; they were great and wise."

"What about progress?"

"I see no need for it," Jorust said. "Our civilization is a perfect unit as it stands. Even the beggars are well fed. There is no unhappiness on Venus. The ways of our ancestors have been tested and found good. So why change?"

"But—"

"We would merely upset the *status quo* if we altered the balance," Jorust said decisively, rising. "May you be worthy of your fathers' names."

"Listen—" Munn began.

But Jorust was back on her chair, no longer listening.

The three Earthmen looked at one another, shrugged and went out. The answer was definitely no.

"And that," Munn said, as they descended in the elevator, "is emphatically that. Jorust plans to have us starve to death. The word's out."

Underhill was inclined to disagree. "She's all right. As she said, she's just an administrator. It's the *tarkomars* who are the pressure group here. They're a powerful bloc."

"They run Venus. I know." Munn grimaced. "It's difficult to understand the psychology of these people. They seem unalterably opposed to change. We represent change. So they figure they'll simply ignore us."

"It won't work," Underhill said. "Even if we starve to death, there'll be more Earth ships later."

"The same gag could work on them, too."

"Starvation? But—"

"Passive resistance. There's no law compelling Venusians to treat with Earthmen. They can simply adopt a closed-door

policy, and there's not a thing we can do about it. There's no welcome mat on Venus."

Mike Soaring Eagle broke a long silence as they emerged to the canal bank. "It's a variation of ancestor worship, their psychology. Transferred egotism, perhaps—a racial inferiority complex."

Munn shook his head. "You're drawing it a bit fine."

"All right, maybe I am. But it boils down to worship of the past. And fear. Their present social culture has worked for centuries. They want no intrusions. It's logical. If you had a machine that worked perfectly at the job for which it had been designed, would you want improvements?"

"Why not?" Munn said. "Certainly I would."

"Why?"

"Well—to save time. If a new attachment would make the machine double its production, I'd want that."

The Navaho looked thoughtful. "Suppose it turned out—say—refrigerators. There'd be repercussions. You'd need less labor, which would upset the economic structure."

"Microscopically."

"In that case. But there'd also be a change in the consumer's angle. More people would have refrigerators. More people would make homemade ice cream. Sales on ice cream would drop—retail sales. The wholesalers would buy less milk. The farmers would—"

"I know," Munn said. "For want of a nail the kingdom was lost. You're speaking of microcosms. Even if you weren't, there are automatic adjustments—there always are."

"An experimental, growing civilization is willing to stand for such adjustments," Mike Soaring Eagle pointed out. "The Venusians are ultraconservative. They figure they don't need to grow or change any more. Their system has worked for centuries. It's perfectly integrated. Intrusion of anything might upset the apple cart. The *tarkomars* have the power, and they intend to keep it."

"So we starve," Underhill put in.

The Indian grinned at him. "Looks like it. Unless we can dope out some way of making money."

"We ought to," Munn said. "We were chosen for our I.Q., among other things."

"Our talents aren't too suitable," Mike Soaring Eagle remarked, kicking a stone into the canal. "You're a physicist. I'm a naturalist. Bronson's an engineer and Steve Thirkell's a

sawbones. You, my useless young friend, are a rich man's son."

Underhill smiled in an embarrassed fashion. "Well, dad came up the hard way. He knew how to make money. That's what we need now, isn't it?"

"How did he clean up?"

"Stock market."

"That helps a lot," Munn said. "I think our best plan is to find some process the Venusians really need, and then sell it to them."

"If we could wireless back to Earth for help—" Underhill began.

"—then we'd have nothing to worry about," the Navaho ended. "Unfortunately Venus has a Heaviside layer, so we can't wireless. You'd better try your hand at inventing something, skipper. But whether or not the Venusians will want it afterwards, I don't know."

Munn brooded. "The *status quo* can't remain permanently that way. It ain't sensible, as my grandfather used to say about practically everything. There are always inventors. New processes—they've got to be assimilated into the social setup. I should be able to dope out a gadget. Even a good preservative for foods might do it."

"Not with the hydroponic gardens producing as they do."

"Um-m. A better mousetrap—something useless but intriguing. A one-armed bandit—"

"They'd pass a law against it."

"Well, you suggest something."

"The Venusians don't seem to know much about genetics. If I could produce some unusual foods by crossbreeding . . . eh?"

"Maybe," Munn said. "Maybe."

Steve Thirkell's pudgy face looked into the port. The rest of the party were seated at the table, scribbling on stylo pads and drinking weak coffee.

"I have an idea," Thirkell said.

Munn grunted. "I know your ideas. What is it now?"

"Very simple. A plague strikes the Venusians and I find an antivirus that will save them. They will be grateful—"

"—and you'll marry Jorust and rule the planet," Munn finished. "Ha!"

"Not exactly," Thirkell went on imperturbably. "If they're

not grateful, we'll simply hold out on the antitoxin till they pay up."

The only thing wrong with that brainstorm is that the Venusians don't seem to be suffering from a plague," Mike Soaring Eagle pointed out. "Otherwise it's perfect."

Thirkell sighed. "I was afraid you'd mention that. Maybe we could be unethical—just a little, you know—and start a plague. Typhoid or something."

"What a man!" the Navaho said admiringly. "You'd make a grand murderer, Steve."

"I have often thought so. But I didn't intend to go as far as murder. A painful, incapacitating disease—"

"Such as?" Munn asked.

"Diphtheria?" the murderous physician suggested hopefully.

"A cheerful prospect," Mike Soaring Eagle muttered. "You sound like an Apache."

"Diphtheria, beriberi, leprosy, bubonic plague," Pat Bronson said violently. "I vote for all of 'em. Give the nasty little frogs a taste of their own medicine. Wallop 'em good."

"Suppose we let you start a mild plague," Munn said. "Something that couldn't conceivably be fatal—how would you go about it?"

"Pollute the water supply or something . . . eh?"

"What with?"

Thirkell suddenly looked heartbroken. "Oh! Oh!"

Munn nodded. "The *Goodwill* isn't stocked for that sort of thing. We're germless. Antiseptic inside and out. Have you forgotten the physical treatment they gave us before we left?"

Bronson cursed. "Never will I forget that—a hypo every hour! Antitoxins, shots, ultraviolet X-rays, till my bones turned green."

"Exactly," Munn said. "We're practically germless. It's a precaution they had to take, to prevent our starting a plague on Venus."

"But we *want* to start a plague," Thirkell said plaintively.

"You couldn't even give a Venusian a head cold," Munn told him. "So that's out. What about Venusian anesthetics? Are they as good as ours?"

"Better," the physician admitted. "Not that they need them, except for the children. Their synapses are funny. They've mastered self-hypnosis so they can block pain when it's necessary."

"Sulfa drugs?"

"I've thought of that. They've got those, too."

"My idea," Bronson broke in, "is water power. Or dams. Whenever it rains, there's a flood."

"There's good drainage, though," Munn said. "The canals take care of that."

"Now let me finish! Those fish-skinned so-and-sos have hydropower, but it isn't efficient. There's so much fast water all over the place that they build plants wherever it seems best—thousands of them—and half the time they're useless, when the rains concentrate on another district. Half of the plants are inoperable all the time. Which costs money. If they'd build dams, they'd have a steady source of power without the terrific overhead."

"It's a thought," Munn acknowledged.

Mike Soaring Eagle said, "I'll stick to my crossbreeds in the hydroponic gardens. I can raise beefsteak-mushrooms to taste of Worcestershire sauce or something. An appeal to the palate, you know—"

"Fair enough. Steve?"

Thirkell rumbled his hair. "I'll think of an angle. Don't rush me."

Munn looked at Underhill. "Any flashes of intellect, chum?"

The youngster grimaced. "Not just now. All I can think of is manipulating the stock market."

"Without money?"

"That's the trouble."

Munn nodded. "Well, my own idea is advertising. As a physicist, it's in my line."

"How?" Bronson wanted to know. "Demonstrating atom-smashing? A strong-man act?"

"Pipe down. Advertising isn't known on Venus, though commerce is. That's funny. I should think the retailers would jump at the chance."

"They've got radio commercials."

"Stylized and ritualistic. Their televisions are ready-made for splash advertising. A visual blurb . . . yeah. Trick gadgets I could make to demonstrate the products. Why not?"

"I think I'll build an X-ray machine," Thirkell said suddenly, "if you'll help me, skipper."

Munn said sure. "We've got the equipment—and the blueprints. Tomorrow we'll start. It must be pretty late."

It was, though there was no sunset on Venus. The quintet

retired, to dream of full-course dinners—all but Thirkell, who dreamed he was eating a roast chicken that abruptly turned into a Venusian and began to devour him, starting at the feet. He woke up sweating and cursing, took some nembatal, and finally slept again.

The next morning they scattered. Mike Soaring Eagle took a microscope and other gadgets to the nearest hydroponic center and went to work. He wasn't allowed to carry spores back to the *Goodwill*, but there was no objection to his experimenting in Vyring itself. He made cultures and used forced-growth vitamin complexes and hoped for the best.

Pat Bronson went to see Skottery, head of Water Power. Skottery was a tall, saturnine Venusian who knew a lot about engineering and insisted on showing Bronson the models in his office before they settled down to a talk.

"How many power stations do you have?" Bronson asked.

"Third power twelve times four dozens. Forty-two dozen in this district."

Nearly a million altogether, Bronson made it. "How many in actual operation now?" he carried on.

"About seventeen dozen."

"That means three hundred idle—twenty-five dozen, that is. Isn't the upkeep a factor?"

"Quite a factor," Skottery acknowledged. "Aside from the fact that some of those stations are now permanently inoperable. The terrain changes rapidly. Erosion, you know. We'll build one station on a gorge one year, and the next the water will be taking a different route. We build about a dozen a day. But we salvage something from the old ones, of course."

Bronson had a brainstorm. "No watershed?"

"Eh?"

The Earthman explained. Skottery shook his shoulders in negation.

"We have a different type of vegetation here. There's so much water that roots don't have to strike deeply."

"But they need soil?"

"No. The elements they need are in suspension in the water."

Bronson described how watersheds worked. "Suppose you imported Earth plants and trees and forested the mountains. And built dams to retain your water. You'd have power all

the time, and you'd need only a few big stations. And they'd be permanent."

Skottery thought that over. "We have all the power we need."

"But look at the expense!"

"Our rates cover that."

"You could make more money—*difals* and *sofals*—"

"We have made exactly the same profits for three hundred years," Skottery explained. "Our net remains constant. It works perfectly. You fail to understand our economic system, I see. Since we have everything we need, there's no use making more money—not even a *fal* more."

"Your competitors—"

"We have only three, and they are satisfied with their profits."

"Suppose I interest them in my plan?"

"But you couldn't," Skottery said patiently. "They wouldn't be interested any more than I am. I'm glad you dropped in. May you be worthy of your father's name."

"Ye soulless fish!" Bronson yelled, losing his temper. "Is there no red blood in your green-skinned carcass? Does no one on this world know what fight means?" He hammered a fist into his palm. "I wouldn't be worthy of the old Seumas Bronson's name unless I took a poke at that ugly phiz of yours right now—"

Skottery had pressed a button. Two large Venusians appeared. The head of Water Power pointed to Bronson.

"Remove it," he said.

Captain Rufus Munn was in one of the telecasting studios with Bart Underhill. They were sitting beside Hakkapuy, owner of the Veetsy—which might be freely translated as Wet Tingles. They were watching the telecast commercial plug for Hakkapuy's product, on the 'visor screen high on the wall.

A Venusian faded in, legs wide apart, arms akimbo. He raised one hand, six fingers spread wide.

"All men drink water. Water is good. Life needs water. Veetsy is good also. Four *fals* buys a globe of Veetsy. That is all."

He vanished. Colors rippled across the screen and music played in off-beat rhythm. Munn turned to Hakkapuy.

"That isn't advertising. You can't get customers that way."

"Well, it's traditional," Hakkapuy said weakly.

Munn opened the pack at his feet, brought out a tall glass beaker, and asked for a globe of Veetsy. It was given him, and he emptied the green fluid into his beaker. After that, he dropped in a half dozen colored balls and added a chunk of dry ice, which sank to the bottom. The balls went up and down rapidly.

"See?" Munn said. "Visual effect. The marbles are only slightly heavier than Veetsy. It's the visual equivalent of Wet Tingles. Show that on the televisior, with a good sales talk, and see how your sales curve jumps."

Hakkapuy looked interested. "I'm not sure—"

Munn dragged out a sheaf of papers and hammered at the breach in the wall. After a time a fat Venusian came in and said, "May you be worthy of your ancestors' names." Hakkapuy introduced him as Lorish.

"I thought Lorish had better see this. Would you mind going over it again?"

"Sure," Munn said. "Now the principle of display windows—"

When he had finished, Hakkapuy looked at Lorish, who shook his shoulders slowly.

"No," he said.

Hakkapuy blew out his lips. "It would sell more Veetsy."

"And upset the economy charts," Lorish said. "No."

Munn glared at him. "Why not? Hakkapuy owns Veetsy, doesn't he? Who are you, anyhow—a censor?"

"I represent the advertisers' *tarkomar*," Lorish explained. "You see, advertising on Venus is strongly ritual. It is never changed. Why should it be? If we let Hakkapuy use your ideas, it would be unfair to other makers of soft drinks."

"They could do the same thing," Munn pointed out.

"A pyramiding competition leading to ultimate collapse. Hakkapuy makes enough money. Don't you, Hakkapuy?"

"I suppose so."

"Are you questioning the motives of the *tarkomars*?"

Hakkapuy gulped. "No," he said hastily. "No, no, no! You're perfectly right."

Lorish looked at him. "Very well. As for you, Earthman, you had better not waste your time pursuing this—scheme—further."

Munn reddened. "Are you threatening me?"

"Of course not. I simply mean that no advertiser could use

your idea without consulting my *tarkomar*, and we would veto it."

"Sure," Munn said. "O.K. Come on, Bert. Let's get out of here."

They departed, to stroll along a canal bank and confer. Underhill was thoughtful.

"The *tarkomars* have held the balance of power for a long time, it looks like. They want things to stay as they are. That's obvious."

Munn growled.

Underhill went on, "We'd have to upset the whole apple cart to get anywhere. There's one thing in our favor, though."

"What?"

"The laws."

"How do you figure that out?" Munn asked. "They're all against us."

"So far—yes. But they're traditionally rigid and unswerving. A decision made three hundred years ago can't be changed except by a long court process. If we can find a loophole in those laws, they can't touch us."

"All right, find the loophole," Munn said grumpily. "I'm going back to the ship and help Steve build an X-ray machine."

"I think I'll go down to the stock exchange and snoop," Underhill said. "It's just possible—"

After a week, the X-ray device was finished. Munn and Thirkell looked through the Vyring law records and found they were permitted to sell a self-created device without belonging to a *tarkomar*, provided they obeyed certain trivial restrictions. Leaflets were printed and strewn around the city, and the Venusians came to watch Munn and Thirkell demonstrating the merits of Roentgen rays.

Mike Soaring Eagle knocked off work for the day and recklessly smoked a dozen cigarettes from his scanty store, burning with dull fury as he puffed. He had run into trouble with his hydroponic cultures.

"Crazy!" he told Bronson. "Luther Burbank would have gone nuts—the way I'm going. How the devil can I guess-pollinate those ambiguous specimens of Venusian flora?"

"Well, it doesn't seem exactly fair," Bronson consoled. "Eighteen sexes, eh?"

"Eighteen so far. And four varieties that apparently

haven't any sex at all. How can you crossbreed those perverted mushrooms? You'd have to exhibit the result in a side show."

"You're getting nowhere?"

"Oh, I'm getting places," Mike Soaring Eagle said bitterly. "I'm getting all sorts of results. The trouble is nothing stays constant. I get a rum-flavored fungus one day, and it doesn't breed true—its spores turn into something that tastes like turpentine. So you see."

Bronson looked sympathetic. "Can't you swipe some grub when they're not looking? That way the job wouldn't be a complete washout."

"They search me," the Navaho said.

"The dirty skunks," Bronson yelled. "What do they think we are? Crooks?"

"Mph. Something's going on outside. Let's take a look."

They went out of the *Goodwill* to find Munn arguing passionately with Jorust, who had come in person to examine the X-ray machine. A crowd of Venusians watched avidly. Munn's face was crimson.

"I looked it up," he was saying. "You can't stop me this time, Jorust. It's perfectly legal to build a machine and sell it outside the city limits."

"Certainly," Jorust said. "I'm not complaining about that."

"Well? We're not breaking any law."

The woman beckoned, and a fat Venusian waddled forward. "Patent three gross squared fourteen two dozen, issued to Metzi-Stang of Mylosh year fourth power twelve, subject sensitized plates."

"What's that?" Munn asked.

"It's a patent," Jorust told him. "It was issued some time ago to a Venusian inventor named Metzi-Stang. A *tarkomar* bought and suppressed the process, but it's still illegal to infringe on it."

"You mean somebody's already invented an X-ray machine on Venus?"

"No. Merely sensitized film. But that's part of your device, so you can't sell it."

Thirkell pushed forward. "I don't need film—"

The fat Venusian said, "Vibratory patent three gross two dozen and seven—"

"What now?" Munn broke in.

Jorust smiled. "Machines employing vibration must not infringe on that patent."

"This is an X-ray machine," Thirkell snapped.

"Light is vibration," Jorust told him. "You can't sell it without buying permission from the *tarkomar* now owning that patent. It should cost—let's see—five thousand *sofals* or so."

Thirkell turned abruptly and went into the ship, where he mixed a whisky-and-soda and thought wistfully about diphtheria germs. After a time the others appeared, looking disconsolate.

"Can she do it?" Thirkell asked.

Munn nodded. "She can do it, chum. She's done it."

"We're not infringing on their patents."

"We're not on Earth. The patent laws here are so wide that if a man invents a gun, nobody else can make telescopic sights. We're rooked again."

Underhill said, "It's the *tarkomars* again. When they see a new process or invention that might mean change, they buy it up and suppress it. I can't think of any gadget we could make that wouldn't be an infringement on some Venusian patent or other."

"They stay within the law," Munn pointed out. "*Their* law. So we can't even challenge them. As long as we're on Venus, we're subject to their jurisprudence."

"The beans are getting low," Thirkell said morosely.

"Everything is," the captain told him. "Any ideas, somebody?"

There was silence. Presently Underhill took out a globe of Veetsy and put it on the table.

"Where'd you get that?" Bronson asked. "It costs four *fals*."

"It's empty," Underhill said. "I found it in an ash can. I've been investigating glassite—the stuff they use for things like this."

"What about it?"

"I found out how they make it. It's a difficult, expensive process. It's no better than our flexiglass, and a lot harder to make. If we had a flexiglass factory here—"

"Well?"

"The bottom would dop out of Amalgamated Glassite."

"I don't get it," Bronson said. "So what?"

"Ever heard of a whispering campaign?" Underhill asked. "My father wangled many an election that way, the old devil.

Suppose we passed the word around that there was a new process for making a cheaper, better substitute for glassite? Wouldn't Amalgamated stock drop?"

"Possibly," Munn said.

"We could clean up."

"What with?"

"Oh." Underhill was silent. "It takes money to make money."

"Always."

"I wonder. Here's another idea. Venus is on the iron standard. Iron's cheap on Earth. Suppose we talked about bringing in iron here—strewing it broadcast. There'd be a panic, wouldn't there?"

"Not without some iron to strew around," Munn said. "Counter-propaganda would be telecast; we couldn't compete with it. Our whispering campaign would be squashed before we got it started. The Venusian government—the *tarkomars*—would simply deny that Earth had unlimited iron supplies. We wouldn't profit, anyway."

"There must be some angle," Underhill scowled. "There's got to be. Let's see. What's the basis of the Venusian system?"

"No competition," Mike Soaring Eagle said. "Everybody has all he wants."

"Maybe. At the top. But the competitive instinct is too strong to be suppressed like that. I'll bet plenty of Venusians would like to make a few extra *fals*."

"Where does that get us?" Munn wanted to know.

"The way my father did it . . . Hm-m-m. He manipulated, pulled the wires, made people come to him. What's the weak spot in Venusian economy?"

Munn hesitated. "Nothing we can strike at—we're too handicapped."

Underhill shut his eyes. "The basis of an economic and social system is—what?"

"Money," Bronson said.

"No. Earth's on the radium standard. Years ago it was gold or silver. Venus is on iron. And there's the barter system, too. Money's a variable."

"Money represents natural resources—" Thirkell began.

"Man-hours," Munn put in quietly.

Underhill jumped. "That's it! Of course—man hours! That's the constant. The amount of production a man can

turn out in an hour represents an arbitrary constant—two dollars, a dozen *difals* or whatever it is. That's the base for any economic setup. And it's the base we've got to hit. The ancestor worship, the power of the *tarkomars*—they're superficial really. Once the basic system is challenged, they'll go down."

"I don't see where it gets us," Thirkell said.

"Make the man-hours variable," Underhill explained. "Once we do that, anything can happen."

"Something had better happen," Bronson said, "and quick. We've little food left."

"Shut up," Munn said. "I think the kid's got the right angle. Alter the man-hour constant, eh? How can we do that? Specialized training? Train a Venusian to turn out twice as much stuff in the same period of time? Skilled labor?"

"They've got skilled labor," Underhill said. "If we could make 'em work faster, or increase their stamina—"

"Benzedrine plus," Thirkell interrupted. "With enough caffeine, vitamin complex and riboflavin—I could whip up a speeder-upper, all right."

Munn nodded slowly, "Pills, not shots. If this works out, we'll have to do it undercover after a while."

"What the devil will it get us to make the Venusians work faster?" Bronson asked.

Underhill snapped his fingers. "Don't you see? Venus is ultra-conservative. The economic system is frozen static. It isn't adapted to change. There'll be hell popping!"

Munn said, "We'll need advertising to arouse public interest first of all. A practical demonstration." He looked around the table, his gaze settling on Mike Soaring Eagle. "Looks like you're elected, Redskin. You've more stamina than any of us, according to the tests we took back on Earth."

"All right," the Navaho said. "What do I do?"

"Work!" Underhill told him. "Work till you drop!"

It began early the next morning in the main plaza of Vyr-ing. Munn had checked up carefully, determined to make sure nothing would go wrong, and had learned that a recreation building was to be constructed on the site of the plaza. "Work won't start for several weeks," Jorust said. "Why?"

"We want to dig a hole there," Munn said. "Is it legal?"

The Venusian smiled. "Why, of course. That's public

domain—until the contractors begin. But a demonstration of your muscular prowess won't help you, I'm afraid."

"Eh?"

"I'm not a fool. You're trying to land a job. You hope to do that by advertising your abilities. But why do it in just this way? Anybody can dig a hole. It isn't specialized."

Munn grunted. If Jorust wanted to jump at that conclusion, swell. He said, "It pays to advertise. Put a steam shovel to work, back on Earth, and a crowd will gather to watch it. We don't have a steam shovel, but—"

"Well, whatever you like. Legally you're within your rights. Nevertheless you can't hold a job without joining a *tarkomar*."

"Sometimes I think your planet would be a lot better off without the *tarkomars*," Munn said bluntly.

Jorust moved her shoulders. "Between ourselves, I have often thought so. I am merely an administrator, however. I have no real power. I do what I'm told to do. If I were permitted, I would be glad to lend you the money you need—"

"What?" Munn looked at her. "I thought—"

The woman froze. "It is not permitted. Tradition is not always wisdom, but I can do nothing about it. To defy the *tarkomars* is unthinkable and useless. I am sorry."

Munn felt a little better after that, somehow. The Venusians weren't all enemies. The all-powerful *tarkomars*, jealous of their power, fanatically desirous of preserving the *status quo*, were responsible for this mess.

When he got back to the plaza, the others were waiting. Bronson had rigged up a scoreboard, in phonetic Venusian, and had laid out mattock, pick, shovel, wheelbarrow and boards for the Navaho, who stood, a brawny, red-bronze figure, stripped to the waist in the cool wind. A few canal boats had stopped to watch.

Munn looked at his watch. "O.K., Redskin. Let's go. Steve can start—"

Underhill began to beat a drum. Bronson put figures on the scoreboard: 4:03:00, Venusian Vyring Time. Thirkell went to a nearby camp table, littered with bottles and medical equipment, shook from a vial one of the stimulant pills he had concocted, and gave it to Mike Soaring Eagle. The Indian ate it, heaved up the mattock and went to work.

That was all.

A man digging a hole. Just why the spectacle should be so fascinating no one has ever figured out. The principle remains the same, whether it's a steam shovel scooping out half a ton of earth at a bite, or a sweating, stocky Navaho wielding shovel and pick. The boats grew thicker.

Mike Soaring Eagle kept working. An hour passed. Another. There were regular, brief rest periods, and Mike kept rotating his tools, to get all his muscles into play. After breaking earth for a while with the mattock, he would shovel it into the wheelbarrow, roll his burden up a plank and dump it on an ever growing pile some distance away. Three hours. Four. Mike knocked off for a brief lunch. Bronson kept track of the time on his scoreboard.

Thirkell gave the Navaho another pill. "How're you doing?"

"Fine. I'm tough enough."

"I know, but these stimulants—they'll help."

Underhill was at a typewriter. He had already ground out a tremendous lot of copy, for he had been working since Mike Soaring Eagle started. Bronson had discovered a long-forgotten talent and was juggling makeshift Indian clubs and colored balls. He'd been keeping that up for quite a while, too.

Captain Rufus Munn was working a sewing machine. He didn't especially like the task, but it was precision work, and therefore helpful to the plan. All the party except Thirkell were doing something, and the physician was busy administering pills and trying to look like an alchemist.

Occasionally he visited Munn and Underhill, collected stacks of paper and carefully sewn scraps of cloth, and deposited them in various boxes near the canal, labeled, "Take One." On the cloth a legend was machine-embroidered in Venusian: "A Souvenir from Earth." The crowds thickened.

The Earthmen worked on. Bronson kept juggling, with pauses for refreshment. Eventually he experimented with coin and card tricks. Mike Soaring Eagle kept digging. Munn sewed. Underhill continued to type—and the Venusians read what his flying fingers turned out.

"Free! Free! Free!" the leaflets said. "Souvenir pillow-case covers from Earth! A free show! Watch the Earthmen demonstrate stamina, dexterity and precision in four separate ways. How long can they keep it up? With the aid of POWER PILLS—indefinitely! Their output is doubled and their preci-

sion increased by POWER PILLS—they pep you up! A medical product of Earth that can make any man worth twice his weight in *sofals!*”

It went on like that. The old army game—with variations. The Venusians couldn't resist. Word got around. The mob thickened. How long could the Earthmen keep up the pace?

They kept it up. Thirkell's stimulant pills—as well as the complex shots he had given his companions that morning—seemed to be working. Mike Soaring Eagle dug like a beaver. Sweat poured from his shining red-bronze torso. He drank prodigiously and ate salt tablets.

Munn kept sewing, without missing a stitch. He knew that his products were being scanned closely for signs of sloppy workmanship. Bronson kept juggling and doing coin tricks, never missing. Underhill typed with aching fingers.

Five hours. Six hours. Even with the rest periods, it was grueling. They had brought food from the *Goodwill*, but it wasn't too palatable. Still, Thirkell had selected it carefully for caloric content.

Seven hours. Eight hours. The crowds made the canals impassable. A policeman came along and argued with Thirkell, who told him to see Jorust. Jorust must have put a flea in his ear, for he came back to watch, but not to interfere.

Nine hours. *Ten hours*. Ten hours of Herculean effort. The men were exhausted—but they kept going.

They had made their point by then, though, for a few Venusians approached Thirkell and inquired about the Power Pills. What were they? Did they really make you work faster? How could they buy the—

The policeman appeared to stand beside Thirkell. “I've a message from the medical *tarkomar*,” he announced. “If you try to sell any of those things, you go to jail.”

“Wouldn't think of it,” Thirkell said. “We're giving away free samples. Here, buddy.” He dug into a sack and tossed the nearest Venusian a Power Pill. “Two days' work in that instead of your usual one. Come back for more tomorrow. Want one, pal? Here. You, too. Catch.”

“Wait a minute—” the policeman said.

“Go get a warrant,” Thirkell told him. “There's no law against making presents.”

Jorust appeared with a burly, intolerant-looking Venusian. She introduced the latter as head of the Vyring *tarkomars*.

"And I'm here to tell you to stop this," the Venusian said.

Thirkell knew what to say. His companions kept on with their work, but he felt them watching and listening.

"What rule do you invoke?"

"Why . . . why, peddling."

"I'm not selling anything. This is public domain; we're putting on a free show."

"Those . . . ah . . . Power Pills—"

"Free gifts," Thirkell said. "Listen, pal. When we gave all our food to you Venusian crooks, did you squawk? No, you took it. And then clamped down. When we asked for our grub back, you just told us that we had no legal recourse; possession is nine points of the law, and we had a perfect right to make free gifts. That's what we're doing now—giving presents. So what?"

Jorust's eyes were twinkling, but she hooded them swiftly. "I fear he speaks the truth. The law protects him. It is no great harm."

Thirkell, watching her, wondered. Had Jorust guessed the right answer? Was she on their side? The *tarkomar* leader turned dark green, hesitated, swung on his heel and went away. Jorust gave the Earthmen a long, enigmatic look, moved her shoulders and followed.

"I'm still stiff," Mike Soaring Eagle said a week later in the *Goodwill*. "Hungry, too. When do we get grub?"

Thirkell, at the valve, handed out a Power Pill to a Venusian and came back rubbing his hands and grinning. "Wait. Just wait. What's going on, skipper?"

Munn nodded towards Underhill. "Ask the kid. He got back from Vyring a few minutes ago."

Underhill chuckled. "There was hell popping. All in a week, too. We've certainly struck at the economic base. Every Venusian who labors on a piecework basis wants our pills, so he can speed up his production and make more *fals*. It's the competitive instinct—which is universal."

"Well?" Bronson asked. "How do the lizard-faced big shots like that?"

"They don't like it. It's hit the economic setup they've had for centuries. Till now, one Venusian would make exactly ten *sofals* a week—say—by turning out five thousand bottle caps. With the pills Steve made up, he's turning out eight or ten

thousand and making correspondingly more dough. The guy at the next bench says what the hell, and comes to us for a Power Pill for himself. Thus it goes. And the lovely part is that not all the labor is on piecework basis. It can't be. You need tangibles for piecework. Running a weather machine has got to be measured by time—not by how many raindrops you make in a day."

Munn nodded. "Jealousy, you mean?"

Underhill said, "Well, look. A weather-machine operator has been making ten *sofals* a week, the same as a bottle capper on piecework. Now the bottle capper's making twenty *sofals*. The weather-machine man doesn't see the point. He's willing to take Power Pills, too, but that won't step up his production. He asks for a raise. If he gets it, the economy is upset even more. If he doesn't, other weather-machine operators get together with him and figure it's unfair discrimination. They get mad at the *tarkomars*. They strike!"

Mike Soaring Eagle said, "The *tarkomars* have forbidden work to any Venusian taking Power Pills."

"And still the Venusians ask us for Power Pills. So what? How can you prove a man's been swallowing them? His production steps up, sure, but the *tarkomars* can't clamp down on everybody with a good turnout. They tried that, and a lot of guys who never tried the Power Pills got mad. They were fast workers, that was all."

"The demonstration we put on was a good idea," Thirkell said. "It was convincing. I've had to cut down the strength of the pills—we're running low—but the power of suggestion helps us."

Underhill grinned. "So the base—the man-hour unit—had gone cockeyed. One little monkey wrench, thrown where it'll do the most good. It's spreading, too. Not only Vyring. The news is going all over Venus, and the workers in the other cities are asking why half of Vyring's laborers should get better pay. That's where the equal standard of exchange helps us—one monetary system all over Venus. Nothing has ever been off par here for centuries. Now—"

Munn said, "Now the system's toppling. It's a natural fault in a perfectly integrated, rigid setup. For want of a nail the *tarkomars* are losing their grip. They've forgotten how to adjust."

"It'll spread," Underhill said confidently. "It'll spread. Steve, here comes another customer."

Underhill was wrong. Jorust and the Vyring *tarkomar* leader came in. "May you be worthy of your ancestors' names," Munn said politely. "Drag up a chair and have a drink. We've still got a few bulbs of beer left."

Jorust obeyed, but the Venusian rocked on his feet and glowered. The woman said, "Malsi is distressed. These Power Pills are causing trouble."

"I don't know why," Munn said. "They increase production, don't they?"

Malsi grimaced. "This is a trick! A stratagem! You are abusing our hospitality!"

"What hospitality?" Bronson wanted to know.

"You threatened the system," Malsi plunged on doggedly. "On Venus there is no change. There must be none."

"Why not?" Underhill asked. "There's only one real reason, and you know it. Any advances might upset the *tarkomars*—threaten the power they hold. You racketeers have had the whip hand for centuries. You've suppressed inventions, kept Venus in a backwater, tried to drive initiative out of the race, just so you could stay on top. It can't be done. Changes happen; they always do. If we hadn't come, there'd have been an internal explosion eventually."

Malsi glared at him. "You will stop making these Power Pills."

"Point of law," Thirkell said softly. "Show precedent."

Jorust said. "The right of free gift is one of the oldest on Venus. That law could be changed, Malsi, but I don't think the people would like it."

Munn grinned. "No. They wouldn't. That would be the tip-off. Venusians have learned it's possible to make more money. Take that chance away from them, and the *tarkomars* won't be the benevolent rulers any more."

Malsi turned darker green. "We have power—"

"Jorust, you're an administrator. Are we protected by your laws?" Underhill asked.

She moved her shoulders. "Yes, you are. The laws are sacrosanct. Perhaps because they have always been designed to protect the *tarkomars*."

Malsi swung toward her. "Are you siding with the Earthmen?"

"Why, of course not, Malsi. I'm merely upholding the law, according to my oath of office. Without prejudice—that's it, isn't it?"

Munn said, "We'll stop making the Power Pills if you like, but I warn you that it's only a respite. You can't halt progress."

Malsi seemed unconvinced. "You'll stop?"

"Sure. If you pay us."

"We cannot pay you," Malsi said stubbornly. "You belong to no *tarkomar*. It would be illegal."

Jorust murmured, "You might give them a free gift of—say—ten thousand *sofals*."

"Ten thousand!" Malsi yelled. "Ridiculous!"

"So it is," Underhill said. "Fifty thousand is more like it. We can live well for a year on that."

"No."

A Venusian came to the valve, peeped in and said: "I made twice as many *difals* today. May I have another Power Pill?" He saw Malsi and vanished with a small shriek.

Munn shrugged. "Suit yourself. Pay up, or we go on handing out Power Pills—and you'll have to adjust a rigid social economy. I don't think you can do it."

Jorust touched Malsi's arm. "There is no other way."

"I—" The Venusian by now was almost black with impatient rage. "All right," he capitulated, spitting the words between his teeth. "I won't forget this, Jorust."

"But I must administer the laws," the woman said. "Why, Malsi! The rule of the *tarkomars* has always been unswerving honesty."

Malsi didn't answer. He scribbled a credit check for fifty thousand *sofals*, validated it and gave the tag to Munn. After that he sent a parting glare around the cabin and stamped out.

"Well!" Bronson said. "Fifty grand! Tonight we eat!"

"May you be worthy of your fathers' names," Jorust murmured. At the valve she turned. "I'm afraid you've upset Malsi."

"Too bad," Munn said hypocritically.

Jorust moved her shoulder slightly. "Yes. You've upset Malsi. And Malsi represents the *tarkomars*—"

"What can he do about it?" Underhill asked.

"Nothing. The laws won't let him. But—it's nice to know the *tarkomars* aren't infallible. I think the word will get around."

Jorust winked gravely at Munn and departed, looking as innocent as a cat, and as potentially dangerous.

"Well!" Munn said. "What does that mean? The end of the *tarkomar's* rule, maybe?"

"Maybe," Bronson said. "I don't give a damn. I'm hungry and I want a beefsteak-mushroom. Where can we cash a check for fifty grand?"



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