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THE ATLANTIC ABOMINATION

JOHN BRUNNER

**First Book
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AWAKEN, TERROR!

When the first expedition descended to the bottom of the Atlantic in a perfected high-pressure diving bell, their speculation ran wild as to the wonders they would encounter in that unknown sea-bottom world.

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Then, at the height of their excitement, elation turned to horror. For they had brought back an abomination so old that the memory of it had been lost to man's remotest ancestors. Ships were disappearing, men and women were becoming enslaved by invisible whips of mental mastery, and it began to look as if it might be beyond the powers even of modern science to stop something that had so successfully defied time and space.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

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His greatest scientific discovery could well be mankind's last!

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This scientist knew that something which couldn't be proven was not necessarily untrue.

Luke Wallace

When he returned from the deep he was not dead—but he wasn't exactly alive either.

Mary Davis

Science had claimed the boy she loved, then robbed her of the man she married.

General Barghin

Though war was a thing of the past, the general saved the world.

The Monster

To him a million years was but a day—and he thought it the same for humans.

THE ATLANTIC ABOMINATION

by
JOHN BRUNNER

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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THE MARTIAN MISSILE

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PART ONE

THE MYSTERY

1

THEIR LUSTS HAD known no limit until now. They had gorged themselves, surpassed their own imaginings again and again, recklessly squandering what they had supposed to be inexhaustible; they had been like children in a house filled with sweetmeats, destroying what they could not consume. Until now.

Now it was as though the planet itself was sick of their arrogance.

How many times had the weaklings of this world fled cowering before the wrath of Ruagh and others of his kind? It was of no comfort to recall and count such occasions. Now he, Ruagh—the unquestioned master of thousands—was himself in flight, before the terrible and not-to-be-withstood anger of blind nature. . . .

Far behind were the marble towers and jewelled citadels of Avvan, the city they had raised to honor him. Far behind in time now as well as space, for when he and his retinue had set out on their panicky retreat, the sea had already broached the white stone walls of the harbor and was hurling vessels against the nearest of the buildings. There had been cracks and splits in the fabric of the temple, Ruagh's temple.

And now here was Ruagh, for whom thousands had existed only to serve and worship, reduced to the overlordship of a starving and ragged band of refugees; his temple a palanquin, his high priests a handful of moaning bearers.

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It was intolerable! Ruagh raged and fumed, wishing there were some means of punishing the cause of his indignities.

Ahead of the straggling procession a plain seemed to stretch endlessly. The sun beat down out of the sky, glinting on the ceremonial gongs which their players were too weak to beat but still carried, being also too weak to make the mental effort involved in throwing them away. Ruagh too was weakening, though he husbanded his strength, for he realized that once his iron grip on his people failed, their hatred would boil to the surface and they would turn on him and rend him.

The plain was not endless, he knew. It was a level shelf, tilted slightly so that it rose inland from the shore where he had had his city of Avvan built. Now they had accomplished almost half the distance to their destination which was a city built by another of Ruagh's kind, or rather by his subjects. That city was set among mountains. Surely, although the sea that beat at the walls of Avvan had gone mad, the mountains would stand fast!

Heat was making the ground appear to shimmer in the distance. For an instant it seemed to Ruagh that he was looking out on an ocean instead of firm ground. If only his vision could pierce the barrier separating them from their goal! If only he could see, and not merely hope, that safety lay ahead! The unbelievable, unprecedented behaviour of the seas had shaken his confidence in the natural order of events.

Then the shabby finery of his palanquin fell almost in a single instant to the ground. Ruagh's ill-controlled fury boiled up like lava from the pit of a volcano, blinding him to everything except the idiot incompetence of his bearers. He lavished pain on all those around him, and their suffering gave him back a little of his lost strength. That was the nature of Ruagh's kind.

At last he was sufficiently in control of himself again to summon his highest priest and make him writhe for what had

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happened. But no answer came to his imperious signaling. His rage blackened again. Doubtless, while he himself had let his mind wander, the idiot weakling had dropped dead of fatigue along the trail. He summoned the next in seniority, and was relieved to feel the man respond at once.

But the priest was a sorry sight. He limped as he hurried to the fallen palanquin, and blood was oozing from a cut on his face. When he spoke, he did so with stammering difficulty.

"Greatest Lord! The earth has gone mad!"

"What do you mean?" Ruagh, the memory of fresh suffering tingling, accompanied the question with a suggestion of pain. The man flinched outwardly, and rushed on.

"Lord, the earth shook and trembled, and a great cavity has opened in the plain across our path!"

Ruagh looked. It was true. He had been so furious at his bearers letting his conveyance fall that he had not seen. A crevasse many times deeper than the height of a man had yawned in the plain. Even now, loose soil and rocks were tumbling from its lip and vanishing below. Some of the fugitives were on the far side, wailing to the sky. One foolhardy man had approached almost to the edge of the crevasse and was attempting to see what fate had overtaken those who had been swallowed up.

And that, Ruagh presumed, was what had happened to his highest priest.

Now, for the first time in his life, he was coming to know fear; now the arbitrary behaviour of the planet was forcing him to the state where he so often drove his subjects. Fear of the fear was what drove him to madness.

"Make a bridge for me!" he commanded.

The surviving priest looked about him incredulously; he saw the plain, covered with low-growing scrub and an occasional thorny bush, but without trees. "But, Lord!" he protested. "What is there here out of which we may make a bridge?"

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"Of your bodies!" Ruagh ordered. "And be swift!"

The crossing killed nearly half the survivors. Though they found the strength to hand together while Raugh's palanquin was manhandled over the gulf, they had not the strength to haul the weight of their own bodies back. By twos and threes, screaming, they joined their companions in the crevasse. Rock and soil fell to cover their corpses.

Others dropped as Ruagh flayed the procession onwards, depleting his own strength in the desperation that had overcome his better judgment. Only when night fell did he let the survivors rest and drink. They could not eat for they had already used up the few supplies they had brought.

Even then, Ruagh chafed, although he knew he was wholly at the mercy of his bearers and companions. He did not exact the full ritual of the sunset worship because that too was a drain on their bodily resources. He compelled himself to be patient while they sluiced their parched throats, fell asleep in the act, and woke again to requench a thirst that haunted them even in their dreams. Stars looked down after the sun had set, and Ruagh focused his attention on them to quell his terror. He had known some of them—even, one might say, many of them—and where yesterday he would have regarded their broods of planets as far inferior to the richly stored paradise he and his kind were now enjoying, he found himself aching for the placid predictability he had known under those suns.

And then the earth shook again. Not much; barely a tremor. The sleeping men around him twitched in their sleep, and then were still. But even a tremor was more than Ruagh could stand. Onward! To the safety of the city in the mountains! He lashed his weary bearers to their blistered feet.

They came at last, in the light of dawn, to the brow of a hill. Across the valley that lay beneath the hill, it was possible to see their destination. Eagerly, and yet at the same time

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reluctant lest his suspicions prove the truth, Ruagh had his palanquin borne forward at a stumbling run. Where he would normally have tortured his bearers for jogging him so, he noticed nothing.

There, in the red morning glow, sparkled the colossal dome of the temple where his cousin reigned. There were the varicolored palaces of his retinue, the broad roads, the high and splendid towers. The relief was blinding. For a long moment Ruagh stared and stared his fill.

It was his last opportunity.

Most of his subjects had dropped off to sleep already, glad to take advantage of even a moment's halt. But those who had not saw before Ruagh did what was happening. He looked only at the city; they looked beyond, to the great mountain on whose flank the city was sited. They looked, and they saw. . . .

Gradually, with the dignity of one of Ruagh's ritual ceremonies, the crown of the mountain was splitting. A rock that looked no larger than the head of a man at such a distance was breaking loose. Falling. It struck the mountainside and bounced.

Faintly, the sound began to come to them, seconds after the sight.

And then the rock smashed through the dome of the temple, brought it crashing, broke down the mighty wall, and came to rest in the vast square beyond. A second rock shattered the glorious towers like ninepins, toppling them left and right. After the avalanche, the wreck of the city lay breathing dust beneath the rising sun.

Ruagh knew only a sense of desolation beyond anything he had conceived possible. All hope was gone. . . .

He could not bear to look at where the city had been; he stared down into the valley, and saw something snaking out across its floor. Something that had been in darkness and shadow until the angle of the sun was high enough to reveal it. A procession! A train such as he had driven out of Avvan!

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Heedless of future need, he drained the last reserves of his bearers and made them carry him swiftly towards the other party. The leaders of this group from the mountain city halted suspiciously and fanned out, drawing knives and swords.

Ruagh felt puzzled. He urged his bearers on, towards the other palanquin which bore the ruler of the mountain city. And from this palanquin now came a command, strongly uttered, with all the power that one who had not had to flee across a barren plain could still employ.

"Back! There is no place for you herel!"

"Back!" echoed Ruagh, and felt how feeble he was in comparison with this other member of his race. "But back where? I have seen all between here and the coast, and there is no refugel!"

"You should have done as I did!" There was contempt in the words. "There is no time to leave this world as we have left others. Indeed, until now none would have been willing to prepare to leave it! But I was wise, and some few others who foresaw this day. In the living rock I have built a refuge for myself, where I can hope to sleep a million years if need be, where I can wait out the fury of this maddened world."

"Take me with you! By all that we have done together, take me with you!" Ruagh felt himself shaking.

"Fool! There is place for *one*."

And now, too late, Ruagh faced the truth.

The other went on, with a hint of cruel amusement, "Why do you not command your subjects to make a refuge for you, as I commanded mine?"

The picture of his worn-out band of survivors mocked Ruagh in his imagination. Without conscious thought, he had flogged them one last time to their feet, and bid them attack the members of the other procession. Perhaps he thought of seizing the refuge built for his fellow.

But of the outcome there could be no doubt. And amid the carnage Ruagh was left alone, while the sound of mountains falling echoed and re-echoed about him.

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II

THE CHILL which ran along Peter Trant's spine was not due to the chilly water; he was efficiently insulated against his environment. It was due to awe.

For it had just occurred to him that he was the first event here for thousands upon thousands of years.

Nothing, ordinarily, *happened* here. There was the never-ending rain of Globigerina on the seabed, forming the ooze whose depth divided by its estimated rate of fall enabled man to put an age to the sea in which Peter Trant now swam. Fish were rare, and those existing were migrants from higher levels.

The sense of isolation shook him, and he turned in the water and glanced back to the dim green sun shining overhead. It was not the real sun, of course. Sunlight was a mile or more away, and in any case it had been overcast when he and his companions started their long trip down. It was the beacon of the bathynef which had brought him here.

Well, that was all right, then. The beacon was the brightest light ever devised by man, fusing the hydrogen from the water surrounding it.

He hung, floating, thinking of the fantastic achievements that had combined to bring him here, and enabling him to move about as though he were in outer space, in free fall. The bathynef was, perhaps the least of these technical miracles, although the fact that it could hang itself up on a fusion reaction more than a thousand fathoms below the surface was the result of an almost incredible masterpiece of design. The magnetic bottle which contained the beacon damped the escaping radiation to a level safe for the crew of

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the vessel, applying principles derived from the observation of white dwarf stars.

Here, stars had never been seen—not for millenniums. This side of the great Atlantic Ridge it was probable there had been land in other geological epochs. Under the layer of globigerina ooze which had enabled scientists to say that there had been ocean here for about a hundred thousand years, there was granite. On the other side of the Atlantic Ridge, those fantastic submarine mountains wider than the Andes and higher than the Himalayas, the ocean floor was basalt. Basalt is igneous, rock born of the primal fires that shook the new-born earth; granite is the rock on which the continents are founded.

Another shiver of awe crept down Peter Trant's back. He began to revise his opinion of the relative status of the miracles that had brought him here. He had been thinking that the greatest of them was the Ostrovsky-Wong process by which he was enabled to stand the pressure of the ocean deeps in a free-diving outfit less cumbersome than the space-suit needed to endure interplanetary vacuum. But was it not almost more astonishing that before men had been able to come and see for themselves, they should have been able to send tenuous messengers, sonar probes, and discover what they were likely to see when they followed in person?

He turned with a wriggle like an eel and stared towards the mountains on the opposite side from the bathynef. He could not see them in the dim water, but they were there, all right. The few peaks of this range which man could see were called a chain of islands, the Azores, St. Paul's Rocks, not far from the equator, Tristan da Cunha (that symbol of loneliness), Gough Island and the Bouvet Islands far to the south. Only oceanographers and those few others who were accustomed to thinking of the sea in depth as well as on its surface regarded the Ridge in its true light.

As he came nearer to the bathynef, he had to turn like an acrobat, but the high resistance of the dense water made it

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dreamily easy. He dodged into shadow beneath the vast buoyancy tanks and had to pause a while to let his eyes adjust to the field of brightness surrounding the beacon, which was now hidden from him. As soon as he was able to discern the still darker oblong which was the entry to the lock, he hauled himself into it.

The outer door closed behind him. The inner one opened instantly. The crew compartment, of course, was full of water. Air at any pressure tolerable for human breathing under normal circumstances would have meant doubling the strength of the hull of the bathynef. To crew this craft meant taking the Ostrovsky-Wong treatment and staying in a suit during the trip. The controls, the engine, the beacon generator and the rest didn't need air. They were embedded in a solid block of plastic which made servicing abominably difficult but which solved the pressure problem neatly.

He edged past Mary Davis and tapped her shoulder as he did so. She turned her head so that he could see her face through the front plate of her helmet, and he gave her a broad grin and a wink. Her answering smile was forced.

The third crewman, Luke Wallace, had been taking advantage of Peter's absence to use up more than his share of the tiny space. Moving back into his allotted area, he pantomimed throwing Peter back out of the lock.

"What you want to come back for so soon?" he whispered over the headsets. In the bathynef itself sound travelled well enough to speak in an ordinary voice, but stray pickup by the throat mikes had got them into the habit of whispering all the time. "Me and Mary were getting along fine!"

"Don't give me that!" said Peter, forcing himself to adapt to Luke's irrepressible manner. "I know they've done some investigation into possibilities in free fall, though it's only theoretical till they start sending up mixed spaceship crews. But here!"

"What a chance we had for research, anyway!" said Luke.

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Mary cut in impatiently. "Peter, you be serious. Does the process *work*?"

"A hundred per cent," Peter confirmed soberly. "I can't quite believe it, even after going through God knows how many pressure-tank tests and the shallower descents we made before. If they ever get around to giving prizes for oceanography, Ostrovsky and Wong had better share the first even though they aren't oceanographers. I think they've revolutionized our whole damn job."

Luke's whisper cut in. "I'm still damn glad it was you who had to make the first open-water trial, Petey. But I'd like to do the first field-test, so to speak. How close are we to bottom? Or rather, to *side*?"

"What?"

"Well, we're in the East Atlantic Basin, aren't we? When did you see a basin without sides?"

"Not bad, Luke," Mary said with a grudging chuckle. "I'll check." She pressed a control on the sonar panel, and a pattern of dots like dim stars showed behind a quartz screen.

"I get eleven hundred yards to the nearest at our level."

"Right. Let's paddle over. I want to go and grub about a bit, shift some ooze and pick up a few samples of fauna if I can spot any."

"Well—" Mary seemed hesitant, and Peter spoke up.

"I think it's an excellent idea."

Mary nodded, and began to let water into the reactor pile.

"Steady! Right, that's it. I've just got the mountain wall in the light from the beacon." Luke was hanging on the hull of the 'nef beside the lock, peering forward into the green gloom. "I don't think I'll need a handlight when you're so close, but I'll take it along in case I want to get to the bottom of the ooze."

There was silence. Peter shifted in his cramped space, and stared at Mary, thinking about the more-than-equality, the indistinguishability, which the technological wonders sur-

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rounding them had imposed on the sexes. The throat mikes took the richness out of Mary's voice; the suit took it from her shapely figure. He could catch only glimpses of her face behind her helmet. She had large expressive eyes, flat and almost Oriental cheekbones, a full soft-looking mouth. She was freckled in all shades of brown from near-orange to near-black, and her hair was a lustrous light brown. Amazing.

He made sure that his mike was set for in-ship calling only. "Mary, can I ask you a personal question?"

The helmet turned toward him. He thought a smile twitched at her mouth, but it was hard to be sure. "Just one. As a reward."

"Reward? For what?" Peter was as puzzled as he sounded.

"For being the first to go out. The fact that I got into oceanography at all was due to hero-worship. So I suppose when I run across a small case of heroism I suffer an attack of renewed adolescence." The second sentence seemed to embarrass her, and to be added in mitigation of her remark about a reward in spite of that.

"Well, I'll be— As a matter of fact, that half answers my personal question. Mary, you're a very attractive girl, you know. What in hell are you doing here, instead of being back home having dinner with prosperous boy friends?"

There was a long pause. "All right, I'll tell you," she said. She began to giggle. "I warn you, you'll think it's very silly.

"It goes way back to when I was fourteen and in school. I had a crush on an older boy. He must have been about seventeen. I tried to throw myself at him. And boy, did he know how to duck! Why not? I was a kid. He was nearly a man.

"Only, being the way fourteen-year-olds sometimes are, I wasn't convinced of that. I made like I was older than my age, tried to look and talk and act sophisticated. He laughed at me. No wonder. It must have been a real farce. But in the end I really got mad. First at him and then at myself for being a mousy little frump. Well, I knew what this boy was

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going to do when he graduated; he wanted to join the staff of the Scripps Institute. He was friendly with one of the submarine geologists who knew his father, and he even got permission to go along on a survey ship one summer vacation. I said: right! What's the Scripps Institute? Institute for Oceanography. Never heard of it. But so help me, I'll learn more about it than he ever will!"

A dry chuckle. "And darn it, I did. Oh, I got over the boy within a few months. But I'd got interested by then, and I'd convinced myself I was going to be a lonely spinster all my life, so I decided I'd have to have a career anyway and this looked like a good one. When boys did start dating me and making passes instead of ignoring my existence I nearly died of surprise. Truly! And here I am."

Peter was grinning, but keeping his face averted. He was on the verge of saying that he did find it silly but perfectly logical, when there was an interruption. Not more than a mutter. But it came from Luke, out in the deep water.

"Oh-oh!" It was like the calm but annoyed exclamation of a man who sees a cat or a small child endangering a valuable ornament.

Mary put her helmet plate hard against the quartz window, but the field of vision from inside the 'nef was almost nil. For seeing things instead of registering them on sonar, the crew had to go out of the lock. "Luke!" she called. "You all right?"

"Personally, I'm fine, just as well as Peter was." Luke sounded calm, but the fact that he said "Peter" and not "Pete" or "Petey" was betraying. "Exertion is possible, but not for long periods. My co-ordination is slipping a bit. There's a sort of cave I poked into, found a few unlikely barnacles or something. I chipped a few of them off, and maybe I hit too hard, or something. Half a ton of sludge has shifted across the mouth of the cave."

"Can you get out?" Mary demanded anxiously.

"I think so. The opening's wide enough, and I can see

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the beacon clear as anything. The trick will be to swim straight through without touching the sides of the hole. It's balanced like a juggling act! Have to do it now—or never!”

The last word was accompanied by a grunt, as though in the same moment he had lanced towards the mouth of the cave.

Suddenly the 'nef shifted like a balloon in a gale, outwards and away from the mountainside where Luke had been exploring. A vast grumbling noise at the edge of hearing troubled their ears with the psychological disturbance of subsonics. A cloud of slow mud blanked the narrow windows of the 'nef.

Mary was better prepared for the shock than Peter, being at her control post, securely seated, while he was stretched out and consequently floundering in the resistant water that filled the cabin. But all the time he was trying to regain his place, he was aware of what must have happened. The cave must have been on a sloping outcrop of rock, with tons upon tons of ooze above it, undisturbed for eons by anything except the gentle deep-ocean currents which rounded it like weather-eroded hills, but ready to collapse and thunder into the abyss like a slow-motion avalanche if triggered off.

He was shouting, “Luke! Luke!” Then he realized he had set his mike for in-ship transmission only. But it probably made no difference at all. Luke couldn't hear their cries.

III

“OH MY GOD!” Mary was whispering. “Oh my God!” She was awakening the reactor and controlling the tossing of their craft as she spoke. It was probably a defense against expected tears. Peter crammed his faceplate hard against the window and tried to see into the murky water. There was nothing, except

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for a lump of something solid but not very heavy tumbling through the edge of the light from the beacon. It moved slowly, but it vanished forever towards the ooze of the Atlantic floor.

"I think it's stopped," he said harshly, and then remembered to relapse into whispering. "Have we been moved far?"

"Not very," Mary managed to reply.

"Could you relocate the spot we were at before?"

"Oh God, I don't know." She made a gesture as though to brush hair out of her eyes. Her hand fetched up short against the hardness of her helmet. "I can try. You're going out?"

"Of course! If there's the remotest chance he's still in reach . . . He may only have been trapped in sludge. Maybe he's still in the cave, unable to pick us up or get his signals through." He was starting to operate the lock door.

Mary stopped with her hand poised to open the reactor pipe. For a long moment she remained still. Then she turned away shaking her head. "It's not worth the risk. There may be another fall coming."

"Not worth it? What do you mean? So long as there's any hope—"

Then a sudden light dawned on him. Mary must be about twenty-seven. He knew for sure Luke was thirty.

"Mary, wasn't Luke at Scripps Institute before he came to us at Atlantic?"

Her answering "yes" was barely breathed.

"Was it Luke who got you down here? Like you said?"

Again, fainter, "Yes."

"All right. It may not be worth it for you, he may not be the godlike ideal you thought he was when you were fourteen, but he's a human being and a damn fine oceanographer. I won't give him up till I've seen for myself! Now get the 'nef moving!"

He passed through the lock and seized the handholds on the hull, staring ahead towards the Ridge. The bathynerf's speed was at most two knots. He could barely feel the pres-

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sure difference caused by their slow advance, but it was enough to make suspended mud deposit on his faceplate and force him to scrape it off every minute or two.

Nonetheless, the brilliance of the beacon sheared through the muddy fog, and he was able to deduce that although the shock had been violent, the fall had been comparatively small. Only a few hundred tons of ooze would have taken part in the slithering redistribution of weight. *Only!* Peter shuddered. The Ostrovsky-Wong process enabled the human body to resist enormous pressures, but the weight of a hundred tons of mud was another question altogether.

Almost without doubt, it was hopeless.

"Right. Steady!" he commanded Mary. "I can see the wall ahead." He surveyed the gradually widening area that the beacon illuminated. "It looks like we're coming back at the same spot, okay. There's a vague color difference between the mud ahead and the rest, like it was reflecting more light from an irregular surface."

"How close do you think we can go?" Mary's voice showed restrained tension.

"As close as your nerves will let you bring her," Peter answered grimly. "Okay, hold it. I don't see where another fall could come from. The ooze has slipped over a hundred square yards. I'll cast off now and survey the surface without touching anything. If it seems to have settled I'll go over with the sonar and see if I can get a reflection off Luke's helmet or oxygen bottles."

There was practically no risk of further slipping, he decided after carefully circling the area of the disaster. Accordingly, he set the little sonar device which normally served for communication so that it would receive its own impulses, and began laboriously to quarter the surface of the shifted mud, back and forth, back and forth. . . .

He was on the point of signalling to Mary that he must give up, when a last thought struck him. Maybe the ooze had slipped clear of the mouth of the cave where Luke had

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been trapped, slipped all the way to a lower level. They could well be a little below the cave.

He kicked himself round and jetted upwards, towards the rocks laid bare by the movement of the ooze. In answer to a curt request, Mary made the 'nef imitate him. The beacon lit bare rock, without sign of a cave mouth.

Rock?

He was so intent on what he was searching for that it took him a long moment to recognize the incongruity. *Rock?* Since when had rock of any kind distorted itself into small level areas at slightly different angles to one another, *each area square?*

Molten rock, lava, pouring fast and cooling quickly, will crystallize into hexagons: witness the famous Giant's Causeway and other such formations. But *squares?* Of identical sizes? Like flagstones under which the ground has subsided?

In that instant, Peter forgot his missing comrade, and knew after that Luke would have forgiven him; would willingly have sacrificed his life to reveal what might otherwise have gone undetected for still more centuries. He plunged forward and scraped at the thin film of mud still covering the incredible surface of the stone.

Marble. But not just marble. Slabs of marble carved with grooves and inlaid with something harder than marble. The pattern of the inlay, standing out black on the lighter background, was not accidental.

The first one he managed to trace was similar to the Seal of Solomon, except that instead of two triangles interlocked it consisted of two squares. The next was something very like the caduceus, the serpent-twined staff of Mercury which is the symbol of the medical profession. Except that Peter hoped no such snakes had ever crawled on Earth. Their very curves seemed unnatural, improbable.

"Mary! I've found something fantastic! Unbelievable! You can float the 'nef over, but gently! I want some pictures, good ones, and lots of them."

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It was not cynicism, but scientific enthusiasm which reminded him at this point that without Luke there would be plenty of oxygen for the return to the surface. If only there were some means of communicating with the mother ship! But radio was impossible, of course, and they had avoided tethering the 'nef on a phone cable because that hindered its unique power to range along the bottom in search of interesting fauna.

Feverishly he worked at clearing the thin slimy ooze. He frustrated himself with the vigor of his work, for if he scrubbed too hard he fogged the water near the—the pavement, he was already calling it. He had to find a smooth rhythm which would disperse the fine particles in the water long enough for the 'nef's camera to capture the mysterious symbols.

There were some that were quite familiar, the concentric circles, isosceles triangles arranged in a star pattern, and straightforward groups of intersecting lines. There were some that were tantalizingly reminiscent, like the caduceus. There were forked symbols like the Chinese ideogram for "Man," and a thing like a three-legged swastika which reminded him of the coat of arms of the Isle of Man. And there were things he could not compare to anything he had ever seen before, which, in one or two cases, gave him a peculiar sense of disquiet.

"Peter!" Mary warned him, seemingly against her will. "I think we'll have to start the ascent soon. I'd prefer not to have to bleed oxygen off the beacon to get us home—we'd have to be decontaminated of fission products, you know. I think this will still be here when we come back. Suppose you survey the area and see if there's anything else of interest."

He circled the area lit by the beacon, prodding several times at what might conceivably have been relics of masonry showing under the mud, but which he dared not try to scrape clean for fear they might be holding back another avalanche of ooze. Finally, he returned to the ship.

Mary was waiting silently for him. When he was safely in

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the cabin, she at once set in train the device that fed the water from the buoyancy tank into the beacon's magnetic bottle. The raging power instantly dissociated the elements into gases. Charged with this gas, the tank began to lift them the slow, slow way to the surface.

Peter settled in his place, thinking what the pictures would show when they applied the necessary correction factors to them and could screen them in full color.

"Mary," he said, awed by his own reasoning, "you realize we've stumbled across something that's obviously far older than Atlantis is supposed to be; older than any known human civilization?"

She nodded. "If they were builders before—before we were," she said. "what could they have been?"

"Who," Peter corrected. "Not 'what.' If they were builders, then they were our cousins, whatever shape they had."

He paused, and then added awkwardly, "You know, I think Luke is going to have a finer memorial than any man ever had."

For just a second he didn't realize what he was seeing. Then, just in time, he made the appropriate movements with his arms. Sobbing blindly, Mary fell into them, and under thousands of feet of ocean and hampered by the suits which kept them alive, he tried to comfort her grief.

In the very great depths, in the vastness of the Eastern Atlantic Basin, there was the second event in millenniums. Awareness. Inquiry. Hope. Amazed delight.

Why, the planet was teeming with life! A richness! Such a richness had never been known before, anywhere.

And the awareness *knew*.

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IV

COLOR-CORRECTED according to the Land principle, the pictures of the unbelievable submerged flagstones shone out vividly on the screen, filling the hastily darkened messroom of the *Alexander Bache*. Now it could be seen that their pink, yellow, mottled white hues almost glowed under their layer of mud.

Peter stared at them dazedly. This was burial in a hundred thousand years of globigerina ooze, which had doubtless mummified them as efficiently as the peaty water of the bog had embalmed the body of Tollund Man, dead only for centuries. Allow that this hard stone was ten times more durable than human skin and bone, and it was credible.

There were six other people in the room besides himself and Mary. Of the ship's permanent crew, there was Captain Hartlund, First Officer Ellington, and Engineer Officer Platt. Even though their jobs demanded that they be much more than seamen only—Platt, for instance, having to service the bathynerf, was no mean atomic physicist and could carbon datings with his eyes shut—they were laymen when it came to this sort of problem. Correction: to this problem. It was without precedent. Unique.

Of the Atlantic Research Foundation's scientists aboard the *Alexander Bache* this trip, Dick Loescher was a novice studying submarine geology, and Eloise Vanderplank was a bioecologist studying the interdependence of fish populations and plankton.

Therefore it was to the last member of the group that Peter looked when at last he managed to drag his eyes away from the screen at the end of the table. The Chief: Dr. Gordon.

Gordon was a plump and placid man, possessed usually of

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a sharp tongue equal to every occasion, respected in his field as a sober and experienced oceanologist. Years of patient work on laborious research programs had enabled him to provide mortar for the bricks of a score of brilliant but tottering theories, and he was liked for that reason both by the proposers of such theories and by those under him who were unwilling to assume what Gordon was still dedicatedly trying to place beyond doubt.

Peter was shocked to see that Gordon, the unshakable, was leaning forward on his elbows, his gaze fixed on the screen, and murmuring to himself almost as though in prayer.

Peter glanced at Mary on the other side of the table. She looked cool and lovely in a plain white shirt and skirt, but red puffings of her eyelids betrayed what she had done when the 'nef was hauled alongside. While the pictures were being developed and Peter was telling the story of Luke's disappearance, she had hidden herself in her cabin and wept the grief out of her.

Was it for the real Luke, the Luke of today, that she had cried? Or was it for the Luke she had idolized so long ago? The latter, perhaps. Peter had known Luke and liked him well enough, but although he was good at his job he was hardly a remarkable enough person to spark such admiration.

He caught Mary's eye now and nodded towards Gordon. An answering nod made him clear his throat and turn in his chair.

"Uh, Dr. Gordon! Have you formed any theory about the origin of these remains yet?" This, to someone who often spent months or years testing a theory before pronouncing it fit for use, was a bad question, and Peter hastened to qualify it. "I mean, insofar as we have data to draw tentative—"

"Theory, my dear Peter? *Theory?* Who can talk of theories in a moment such as the one we experience now? When, for this rare and precious time only, one can speak with immediate and perfect certainty! Theories, for God's sake, when we *know*, you *know*, everyone *knows!*"

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He blew a harrumphing blast and pocketed his handkerchief before returning to his rapt contemplation of the screen.

The other people in the room exchanged glances. Because Eloise Vanderplank was the next senior member of the staff, was not a specialist in this field, and had worked with Gordon more often than the rest of them, the lot fell to her. She rested one tanned, bony arm on the table and demanded in her high voice, "Know what, Chief?"

"Oh, really, Eloise!" Gordon sat bolt upright. "We find buildings, or traces of building, *on* the ocean floor, *in* the Eastern Atlantic Basin which is known to be floored with granite and therefore once part of a landmass, and you ask a question like that. Really, Eloise, even if you do specialize in fish populations, I'd have thought something of the general knowledge of the field would have rubbed off. From me, if no one else."

Peter's heart suddenly sank. Was this Gordon's "secret vice?" Had they uncovered the true reason behind his patient oceanographic work, his gathering of data, his patching of promising but leaky hypotheses?

Mary must have seen the truth quicker. She shoved back her chair with a grunt. "Dr. Gordon, if you're talking about Atlantis you must be crazy!"

The company grinned and relaxed. Peter heard the faintest whisper of, "Good girl!" He thought it came from Eloise.

But the effect on Gordon was appalling. He grew red in the face. He snorted. He slapped the table loudly. At last he found his voice again. "That is unforgivable! At least grant me that I did not mention Atlantis first. I wouldn't, for I know as well as you, and maybe better because I was studying this when you were in your cradle, that Plato's Atlantis is supposed to have submerged far more recently than this landmass above which we float. But Atlantis is a good enough name, hallowed by usage and sanctioned by tradition.

"Why, it's been clear—clear to me, anyway—from the circumstantial evidence that some real disaster overwhelmed

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some real and great civilization, ever since I began in school. I oughtn't to have to tell you! A single theme, a single cataclysmic event has been distorted in passage from mouth to mouth and generation to generation. Primitive, degenerate peoples have attached truth they could no longer understand to petty local events: Noah's flood, Deucalion's flood.

"And now we find evidence which no one can dispute, however bitterly they may wish to. Not of Plato's Atlantis, perhaps. But certainly of a great civilization, perhaps as great as ours in a different way. Had they been so technically accomplished, they would probably have survived the upheaval that brought about their doom. But there are other fields of knowledge than engineering." He made the word sound like an insult, and Engineer Officer Platt started to voice a protest but thought better of it and subsided, fuming.

Mary sat with downcast eyes. Peter found her foot under the table and pressed it with the side of his own, wishing he could reach her hand instead. Into the silence that followed, Captain Hartlund's voice drifted coolly.

"I must say, Chief, you seem to be getting a hell of a lot out of a few isolated flagstones with hieroglyphs on them—which may only be ornament, after all." He removed the empty pipe that jutted from his mouth and jabbed it at the screen.

"I'm not a trained scientist, but I've worked aboard the *Bache* and her predecessors long enough for some of it to have rubbed off, as you put it. There isn't any doubt that here under our feet there's an epoch-making discovery—literally. A hundred thousand years back there weren't supposed to be people on earth who lived in anything much better than skin tents, or even caves. But what have we actually got? An inexhaustible treasure-trove, or something as tantalizing and mysterious as the Easter Island statues were until they got pushed into a pattern? Peter said he couldn't see anything else except what might be traces of masonry construction. I figure there's a chance we may only have come across a sort

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of—well, a super Stonehenge, for instance; a unique masterpiece produced by an otherwise primitive society for some practical or mystical purpose it'll take anthropologists and paleontologists years to unravel."

The air cleared. Hartlund's forceful good sense impressed even Gordon, although he seemed deflated.

"Very well," he said with a good grace. "I had considered radioing an immediate report and facsimiles of the pictures Peter and Mary brought back. It occurs to me that newspaper reporters may seize on Atlantis, by which of course I mean the fabulous Atlantis of Plato and Ignatius Donnelly, and obscure the much more important possibilities we may later uncover."

He sighed, and for a moment was far away again. "But if it is *not* what you envisage, not a mere submarine Easter Island, then what vistas open up before us! The key to the future, yielded up by the past. Hopes of forgotten lore, of—"

Eloise coughed, and the Chief broke off. "I'm sorry. As to practical proposals for immediate action . . .?"

V

THE REST of the meeting passed in a normal atmosphere, and when it was over Peter followed Hartlund out on deck. It was nearing sunset, but the air was still and warm.

"Thanks for putting a stop to that nasty little situation," he said.

The captain, tamping shag tobacco into his pipe, smiled without raising his wood-brown face to look at Peter. "We all have our shortcomings," he said. "I'd begun to think I'd never find out what the Chief's was."

"But to hear him actually blather about forgotten secret

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lorel" Peter spread his hands in amazement, and then gave up. He switched the subject.

"How long before we start the 'nef down again?"

"Depends on how long it takes Fred Platt to give his okay. And on whether the Chief insists on running shallow tests on Dick and Eloise's Ostrovsky-Wong process before going all the way down. How long is it you have to allow between dives?"

"Forty-eight hours minimum in sea-level air, and they think six dives below a mile is enough on any one trip. But they don't know, of course. It may prove possible to cut down the rest periods. They're playing safe."

"'Scuse!" said Platt from behind them, and they stepped apart to let him through. He was carrying the servicing and fault-detection kits for the 'nef, and one of the two apprentice engineers was hot on his heels.

"Handled like a dream all the way for us, Fred!" Peter shot at the engineer officer's back. Platt flung his reply over his shoulder.

"Great! Now let's see if it works like a piece of machinery!"

He and his assistant were overside a moment later, swarming out along the line to the 'nef, hand over hand. Hartlund chuckled. "No doubts, no delays," he commented. "Wish there was more than one of those damned 'nefs. The 'scaphes aren't bad in their way, but what can you really do without atomics?"

"Well, there is more than one, you know," Peter corrected, and Hartlund blew smoke.

"Yes, of course. The Russkis have one, don't they? The *Vladimir Ostrovsky*, isn't it?"

"*Pavel Ostrovsky*," Peter answered. "I'd really like to see that 'nef. Better yet, make a trip in her. Some of the data they'd already hauled in before we got this thing of ours over its teething troubles made me crazy jealous!"

He laughed. "Mark you, the luck seems to be on our side at the moment."

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"Where are they working mostly?"

"The Pacific deeps. That was the main reason they allotted that one out there to us, I gather. The military who were still in on the project approved its going to Atlantic because the Russian 'nef couldn't kidnap ours if it was in another ocean, and it was all right with us because we wanted 'nef data on the Atlantic more than we wanted to duplicate the work the Russkis were doing."

Watching the 'nef go under again next morning with Eloise and Dick Loescher on board, Peter felt like kicking himself. If he hadn't wasted so much time on that damned pavement, he could have done most of the work these two were intended to do on the first trip, and had the greater satisfaction of getting an overall picture of the discovery. That would have averted the unpleasant scene with the Chief yesterday.

As to getting a general picture of what lay a thousand fathoms under them, that was work for which it was reasonable to send a geologist and an expert on fish economy. They could look about, take photographs, report the evidence of their eyes. On the next trip after this, he and Mary could begin to interpret the data.

To occupy his time during the thirty-six hours this descent was scheduled to last, Peter prepared a report on the flagstones to accompany the picture. He had polished it five times in order to kill a couple of extra hours before he finally surrendered and took it to the Chief. Gordon received it with an abstracted nod, studied it, seemed to wish to comment but said nothing.

Peter hesitated, and then turned to go.

"Just a moment, Peter," Gordon said almost inaudibly. "I should like to ask a question. I know already what Mary Davis thinks about my attitude towards this discovery. May I have your views?"

He squared his shoulders as though tensing to receive a blow.

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"I've learned from you, Chief," said Peter carefully, "not to formulate conclusions without gathering all the evidence available. There's more evidence, probably, than what I got on my trip. Till it's all in, or at least till we know the nature of what's left, I'd rather reserve my opinion."

"Very sound, very sound," muttered Gordon. It was a typical, almost automatic, comment. But this time his heart was not in it. "Oh, one more thing. Hartlund reminded me that we ought to hold an investigation into Luke Wallace's death. Well, that's hard. But I think it will suffice if you swear to a written statement. Mary will have to do the same, of course."

Peter left the office and sauntered out on deck, thoughtful. Through his mind was running the memory of the story Mary had told him just before Luke's death, the story of how she came to be in oceanography. It was curious. Prior to hearing it, he had had a blind spot towards Mary. She was too attractive to be overlooked, but although she was plainly not attached to anyone on board, nor did she speak of anyone ashore, and although their work brought them together continually, he had never thought of her as Mary Davis. As a woman.

Partly, he now realized as he thought back, it was because he had made a subconscious assumption that lady scientists who were beautiful must be lacking in some essential thing which would make paying attention to them worthwhile. He had found such a lack so often—even in girls who seemed at first contact vivacious, intelligent, interesting to be with—that he had taken to saving himself the money and trouble involved in finding out its nature.

But the story she had told him while waiting for Luke had suddenly made her human in his eyes.

A door opened. It was dark, but Mary wore her plain white shirt and skirt and it made her instantly recognizable. She stood out of the darkness near the bows like a vague white

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statue, leaning on the rail and looking at the traces of phosphorescence in the sea.

Peter walked quietly toward her and leaned on the rail at her side. She acknowledged his presence with a turn of her head, and went back to staring at the water.

He didn't say anything. He let his hand first brush and then close around hers, and she returned his inquiring pressure with a squeeze. At length she spoke.

"It was great of you to go out looking for Luke that way."

"What the hell did you expect me to do?" said Peter. "Sit in the 'nef and bobble off back to the surface singing songs?"

She managed a courtesy laugh. It sounded forced. "No. I—well, I guess I might as well say it. I didn't try very hard to persuade you not to, because I was trying like hell not to push for the lock and go hunting myself."

"I understand," said Peter as gently as he could. "Coming on top of having told me that story, when the whole thing was fresh in your mind. . . ."

She nodded. She was still gazing at the water. "That made it worse, of course."

"That story you told me," Peter ventured. "You tell it often?"

"Almost never. I told it to the Chief one time, when he was ribbing me about a student who was panting at my heels. He said I had no business in Atlantic, that I ought to be in a Park Avenue apartment. No, not often."

"And . . . to Luke?"

"No." The word was dry and isolated, as though cut off. "No. And now I never can!" Abruptly she had turned towards him, and sobs were shaking her while he comforted her as he had done in the 'nef when they left the site of Luke's disaster. It felt better to be doing it in the open air.

Peter said gently, "You really carried a torch for that guy, didn't you? Hidden under a bushel, too."

She pulled away from him, her face suddenly still, her eyes searching his face. "You said you understood," she breathed. "Only you don't. You don't at all!"

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While Peter was still standing with his mouth half open and hunting for a reply, the mess call sounded. Mary seized it as a cue to turn on her heel and walk away.

That incomprehensible episode was stuck in his mind next noon, getting between him and the paper on which he was trying to compose the statement about Luke which the Chief had asked him for. He had firmly dismissed it for the tenth time and was renewing his attack when there was a sudden flurry of activity. Eloise and Dick weren't due back for hours yet. He got up and went out, bumping into First Officer Ellington almost before he had left the doorway.

"Hey! What gives?"

"The 'nef's surfacing," Ellington answered. "I got it on sonar a couple of minutes back. They're ahead of schedule, and that means trouble, most likely. Or something epoch-making in the way of discoveries, which they couldn't sit on any longer. Excuse me."

Ellington was right. On both counts. How right, he did not learn for some time.

There seemed to be nothing wrong with the 'nef as it progressed to the surface. The launch went skimming toward its point of arrival, Platt driving with all his test and repair equipment beside him. But as it could be seen that the 'nef was under perfect control, he slowed and ran a puzzled circle before closing in. The trouble must be with Dick or Eloise, not the mechanism.

But two suited figures duly broke surface beside the 'nef, which was normal.

And a third followed them. The third looked like—Luke. No. Correction. It *was* Luke!

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VI

THE WORD went round the entire survey ship before Platt had brought the launch to a rocking halt beside the three explorers. Everyone, barring the apprentice engineer who had to stand by in the engine room and the radio officer, burst out on the deck, eager to confirm the impossible with their own eyes.

Its effect on Dr. Gordon was tremendous. He came trotting from his office with a stylo still in his hands, his face red with excitement and beaded with new sweat. He clutched the afterrail as though strangling an enemy, and his lips moved silently.

Peter found his powers of mind temporarily suspended. He could not even form ridiculous theories to account for Luke's return. Damn it, if Eloise and Dick had chanced across his *body* that would have been acceptable, although it would have made needles in haystacks simple by comparison. But Luke was alive; he clambered over the gunwale of the launch without assistance, and removed his own helmet, squatting in the sternsheets.

Without oxygen. . . .

He *couldn't* have any oxygen left! His reserve had been identical with Peter's own; sufficient for about six hours altogether, contained in two cylinders. At three-hour intervals one exchanged an exhausted cylinder for a fresh one stored in the 'nef. Consequently Luke must have suffocated within a few hours—four, perhaps—of the 'nef's departure for the surface.

Peter looked about him at the other people on deck. They were all talking except Mary, of course, and also except the Chief. He had not moved from his rigid stance, hands grasping the rail.

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Now the launch was coming alongside; Platt had secured the 'nef's painter to the mooring line almost without slowing in his haste to get his strange passenger aboard. He came up first into a chorus of questions, but ignored them and turned to help Luke.

Peter had expected Mary to rush forward and throw herself round his neck. Only she did not; she had not even joined the group helping him up the ladder. She was just staring at him. Assuredly, Peter reflected, she had been right to tell him he didn't understand her.

Eloise and Dick followed, to be plagued with loud questions by those who had not got answers out of Luke. He wasn't giving any, in fact, except a shake of the head.

But before Eloise and Dick could sort out the inquiries and reply to them, the Chief had thrust his way between Ellington and Hartlund and was dominating the scene, as if he had a power to dominate that he could turn on at will.

"Enough!" he said sharply. "Hartlund, your head's screwed on properly. Get Luke to sick bay and have him checked head to toe. I'll be down in a minute. Dick, Eloise, you two come to my cabin and report on what happened. All right, the rest of you. We'll get at the answers quicker if you stop bothering us. Break it up!"

Obediently, they dispersed, glancing back reluctantly. As Peter moved off, he looked for Mary, and found she was nowhere to be seen.

It was seventeen hundred when the hear-this announced there would be a staff conference in the messroom immediately. Peter was already in the messroom, having a beer with First Officer Ellington and hypothesizing about what was being said by Dick, Eloise and Platt in the Chief's office. They had been there without interruption since the Chief returned from interviewing Luke.

In a couple of minutes the company was complete. Gordon was at the head of the table. No sign of Luke. Everyone

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looked for him, sighed, and composed himself or herself to listen.

Gordon was smiling. Almost beaming. But there was a hint of self-satisfaction in the smile which Peter disliked.

"All right!" the Chief began. "Eloise, let's deal with the first things first. What happened? Tell us as you told me."

Eloise seemed withdrawn, far away. There was a continual puzzlement in her high voice. "The descent had been perfectly normal, of course," she said. "And we had very little trouble locating the site of these flagstones Peter found. They gave a real shout on the sonar because they were almost clear of ooze. We'd better beacon the place, though, next time—I'm sorry.

"You were quite right about what you thought were walls, Peter. We were afraid of starting an avalanche if we weren't careful, so we thought we'd forestall it, and we set off a couple of four-ounce charges in the water near the site. Nothing happened, except that some of the ooze was cleared by the shock wave, so we judged it was safe and started following the line of the walls.

"They outline a gigantic square; a sort of piazza, which may well be a hundred yards on a side. What's more, it continues *downwards*. There's a sort of enormous step higher than I am, on the downhill side. Since you left, presumably the loose ooze which slipped has settled or washed away a bit. Anyway, when we got there the edge of this 'step' was showing above the pile of mud.

"Well, that's as far as we got. Dick was outside clearing the base of a wall, when something that gave a sonar pulse came towards us. From the *deep* side, more or less on our level. I called Dick back. It was big, and if it was big it was probably also hungry, because down there the fish population eat each other more often than not. Anyway, it came into view. It was Luke."

Dick picked up the story in response to a cue from Gordon. "Well, I went out to him, not believing my eyes, and tried

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to talk, but he showed me that his sonar was full of mud and not working. I brought him inboard, and changed his oxygen cylinders right away, and we tried to get sense out of him by giving him the spare sonar set, but that didn't help either, so we judged his mike must be out, as well.

"We decided this whole thing was so incredible that we must head back at once. So we did. On the way, we managed to exchange messages with Luke by writing, but he was rather weak, and couldn't write very clearly. All we got was that he had been trapped under the mud fall and lost all track of time. He seems to have been unconscious. When he finally recovered and managed to work free, there was no sign of the 'nef. He waited, hoping it would come back, but just before our arrival, he'd got lightheaded and decided to swim off. Catching sight of the beacon brought him back to sanity."

"And he is sane," said Gordon. "We've examined him with all the facilities we have. He's not only sane, but he's in good health aside from bruises and weakness due to hunger. By the time he's rested up—he's asleep, so I haven't asked him to speak for himself at this conference—he'll likely be in perfect shape again."

Peter leaned forward. "Chief, something important. Can I ask Fred Platt a question?"

Annoyed at being interrupted, Gordon grunted consent.

"Fred, did you check Luke's discarded oxygen tanks? How much reserve did he have left when Dick changed them?"

"The meters said two hours," Platt answered, and there was a murmur of incredulity. "So I checked them on the master gauge. Same result. Pressure was worth two hours."

"In which case," said Peter as calmly as he could, "either he found a means of recharging them six thousand feet under the Atlantic—or we have a resurrected corpse aboard."

"Good, Peter! Good!" burst out Gordon, slamming his hand delightedly on the table. "It's fine to hear you reasoning sensibly like that."

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Peter blinked. "It's inescapable," he began, but the Chief cut him short.

"Yes, of *course* it's inescapable. I said it was even before this happened. Luke is back, and well, from a situation that ought to have killed him. It's not accidental. Can't be. And he himself says he doesn't remember finding what I suppose is just conceivable; an oxygen generator left behind by the builders of the city and still in working order. Yes, I agree that is ridiculous, but it's just not out of the question. Dismissing that, though, we are left with the likely truth."

"Which is?" grunted Hartlund needlessly.

"That something—or rather *someone*—down there *helped* Luke and either resuscitated him or kept him alive."

VII

Kept him alive.

For Peter the words had an ominous ring, and a picture came unbidden to his mind. A picture of a coelacanth, caught when "old fourlegs" was still regarded as a fantastic impossibility in the living state, moving despondently in the tank where his captors had placed him, dying by inches because they did not know and he could not say that sunlight was unbearable to him.

And after it came impressions of specimens in an aquarium. Because if this were true, and something intelligent did move and live down *there*, it could only be alien to man.

A babble of excited talk, half contradictory, half in agreement with the logic of Gordon's remarks, was running round the table. The Chief let it continue for a moment, then snapped its thread.

"All right. Unless someone really has a valid counter-

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explanation, I want discussion of further activities. We are limited by supplies and the capacity of our equipment. I want to know what really is down there. On the other hand, it looks beyond doubt that it's far too big for us few to handle with what we've got." A hand went up. "Ellington?"

"Chief, I'd like to hear what Luke has to say."

"Impossible. We're going to let him sleep the clock round. I've had the bones of his story, and Eloise gave them to you, and so did Dick. We can only hope sleep will clear his mind. On his own admission, he'd become delirious by the time he was found. If not, we'll have to hunt for ourselves. Platt?"

The engineer officer was frowning. "I wish I could see for myself what's under us. All I can do is make suggestions. I vote we undertake one more dive, with every bit of equipment I can secure to the 'nef. I'm divided between sending two as crew, for the sake of the longer time they could stay under, or three, allowing two to be working outside."

"It'll have to be two. Dick and Eloise have to rest for forty-eight hours, and Luke isn't going to be fit. Or even if he is, I won't let him dive again till he's had a proper hospital examination. That leaves Mary and Peter. By the way, where is Mary?" The Chief glanced round.

"Keeping guard on Luke," said Peter.

"All right. Yes, for a full-scale exploration we'd need the Russian 'nef as well as our own, and I'm pretty sure they will agree to come. And for lack of anything better we must invite the French to loan a couple of their 'scaphes. Too, the British have been trying out a new ultradeep TV drogue, which will go down deeper than a 'nef has been taken so far."

"And which won't show much except ooze," said Dick Loescher baldly. "Chief, to get at all there is down there, we'll have to invent whole new fleets of gadgets. Hell, burrowing into four thousand feet of mud *above* water would be a problem!"

"Agreed. But for the first time," Gordon pointed out, "we have something as spectacular as the space research program

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can offer. More so I've been wondering, actually, if they will find traces of this civilization on the moon. Perhaps, if they got so far as they seem to have done. And besides, in view of what happened to Luke, do you think we'll have to do it all ourselves?"

"You think there may be a friendly intelligent race down there?" Hartlund put it into words.

"If we accept the only reasonable explanation for Luke's escape," shrugged Gordon, "there must be."

As they neared their goal, while Mary hunted for the distinctive sonar echo that would guide them in, Peter stared through the exiguous windows. He wondered if he would see anything, if Luke had seen anything. Luke was still asleep when the 'nef had started down.

They had long ago left the levels at which the sea teemed in a manner befitting its role as the cradle of life. Not that even the deeps were barren. They were just quite thinly populated, and one of the few disadvantages of the beacon was that the marked local rise in warmth it communicated to the water seemed to make fish steer away from it. Or maybe the magnetic bottle produced ultrasonics they could sense, thus frightening them. They were still arguing the point.

"Homing in," said Mary suddenly. "Gotcha!" she added—Peter presumed—to the city-site beyond the port. He acknowledged her words and went to the lock to supervise the fine manoeuvring of the last few hundred feet.

This time they moored the 'nef so that if it were necessary they could both leave the cabin for a short while. But they were under strict orders not to take risks when doing so. The first task was to find a suitable site for the sonar beacon they would activate when they left.

Peter went out first, and began by surveying the same area Dick and Eloise had covered. They seemed to have done most of what was possible. Short of some gadget like a super

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vacuum cleaner, there was no means of laying bare the walls around the plaza further than had been done already.

His mind busy with atomic-powered suction devices, he returned to the 'nef and collected sample bags, boxes and nets. Meantime, Mary was "photographing" by sonar-scanning the exact nature of the ground about them.

The first six-hour shift passed in careful, patient consolidation of what had been done previously. The next would be spent differently, Peter decided.

"Let's face it," he said, "we've done what we can here. The rest is for later. I propose we cast off and move down the mountainside, to see if we can locate a similar site to this, one where we might set off a slipping in the accumulated ooze and let gravity shift it for us. It won't be funny if the really interesting stuff turns out to be in the valley at the bottom, but by the time we get there a few more tons on top of the natural load won't bother us."

Mary agreed without argument, and with Peter clinging to the hull they descended by stages of a hundred feet at a time. Each time, taking it in turns, they swam away from the 'nef and surveyed the mountainside, but each time the sonar told them that ooze lay thick over the rock, and over any more remains that might be in the area.

They had descended nearly a thousand feet when they drew blank for the last time in this direction. They were moving and breathing comfortably and freely; Mary made a note of the indicated depth in confirmation of the success of the Ostrovsky-Wong treatment.

"No show," Peter shrugged. "Okay. We'll try going sideways."

They went back to the original site, and began to move out from it horizontally instead of vertically. At their arbitrary limit of a thousand foot range, they found something new; the broken-off stump of a round tower, around which ooze was piled. But the vast hollow shaft of the tower was clogged full with mud, and nothing else in the area was detectable.

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Nonetheless, they passed more than three hours in mapping its shape with sonar, as far as they could, in measuring it and in chipping off odd pieces for study and analysis. It was very hard, but it did not seem to be stone. Peter wondered what cataclysm had snapped it off. Perhaps half a mountain had fallen on it. It was hard to see what else, short of a heavy bomb, could have managed the job.

They retraced their steps and worked once more in the opposite direction. Here and there objects registered on the sonar, but most of them they disregarded, being too near the surface of the mud, and therefore having been embedded quite recently.

"Well, that leaves *up*," said Peter when they had reached the end, once more, of a thousand-foot sweep. "Do we set the beacon going to save coming down again, or not yet?"

"Not yet. I prefer to be able to talk. Besides, at this short range it would quite probably foul our own probes with harmonics."

"Right. Let's go straight to the head of the slip which buried Luke. It might have faulted at the outcrop of some wall-foundation, or at another 'step' like the one we've seen."

Ruagh and his kind had powers.

Once they had been able to look after themselves; to forage and feed themselves. They did not need to eat often, but when they did, they ate vastly. But because they had powers, they could compel others to labor for them, to feed them. It had been a long time since they had descended to shift for themselves. Even before they had come to Earth, it had been long.

And once on Earth—that fantastic, seemingly inexhaustible paradise—they had grown careless, even gluttonous. They had eaten for the pleasure of eating, and they had grown beyond the limit at which they could possibly have gathered for themselves the amount they consumed at a single meal.

Thus it was with Ruagh. Thus it was that, although he

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set out when his fellows abandoned him to try and find stragglers from the other's city whom he could compel to find food for him, he weakened before he had gone halfway. Besides, it was centuries since he had had to carry his own weight more than a few yards . . .

His dying was unspectacular. He became still. The bacteria which cause earthly things to putrefy invaded his alien flesh and found it unwholesome. So, for a long time, he did not change visibly. That was why the men who still roamed that country, some of whom had been subjects of Ruagh's kind and could voice a warning, gave him a wide berth.

Eventually, though, the symbiotic bacteria in his own body began to decay him. When at last the sea burst into that valley, the body was full of gases of decomposition, and floated on the stormily rising waters like an obscene rubber toy. He drifted so for a little while.

Then a gust hurled him against the broken shards of a tower in the city he had been laboring to reach. Gases whined out of a rent in his hide. Water-filled, he sank.

In the water, the bacteria which had reduced him to a hollow ceased their work, and their terrestrial cousins could not complete it. Slowly the ooze gave him burial.

There was something here, all right! Peter's heart jumped. The mud had indeed slipped at the site of another wall. It looked curved, maybe the base of another round tower. And in the heap of mud that had not slipped and fallen, there was something embedded. Something large, a little shiny, quite smooth, slightly yielding to pressure. And enormous.

It was so enormous that he had laid the whole thing bare from end to end and still not realized what it was, when a choking cry came to him from Mary. Automatically he spun in the water and plunged towards the 'nef.

"No, Peter! I'm all right! But look!"

He turned, looked, and was suddenly afraid.

Thirty or more feet long, with legs, swollen belly, a head

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whose dull and mud-crusts eyes seemed to fix them with a stare, it was an animal.

But such an animal as only nightmares breed. . . .

VIII

THERE WAS a vast silence, as vast as the ocean around.

At last Mary broke in, her voice shaking. "You know, I'd just figured out another explanation for Luke's survival. I was going to suggest it could be an unexpected result of the Ostrovsky-Wong process. I was rehearsing the scorn I meant to pour on the Chief's theories. And now—"

"And now we find a life-form absolutely and utterly different from anything known before." Peter put grimness into the words. "It's *so* different I'm even prepared to accept it could be intelligent."

"I'm glad it's dead," Mary whispered.

"So am I. . . . Think the 'nef will lift it?"

She took a moment to understand him. "Are you out of your mind? You want to take that thing to the surface? We can't dig it out of the mud by ourselves, for heaven's sake! And even if we did, if it's built for this kind of pressure it will just break to pieces on the way up."

"I'm not so sure," Peter murmured. He plunged back towards the dead beast, and began to survey it cautiously, scraping away ooze by the shovelful from around its legs. Under its bloated belly he discovered a triangular rent, where a flap of the tough hide had been ripped on a sharp rock or stone. He went almost headfirst into the mud while struggling to see more clearly.

At length he pushed himself away, grunting. "No, you are wrong. There's nothing left of this thing but its hide and its

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skeleton, and the hide is so impervious it makes a rhino's look like papier-mâché. There's just the hole in the belly where the water leaked in. Aside from that, it's still sound, and the interior is full of water, not mud. If I'm any judge, we could lash a cable round it and drag it clear without trouble. As for it bursting on the way to the surface it won't. At the speed the 'nef rises, the pressure can equalize quite happily through the hole in the belly."

"Peter, even if it's possible I still don't think we dare! Supposing—supposing this is a sort of graveyard for the things? Would we like it if someone came grubbing up corpses in one of our cemeteries?"

"Don't be anthropocentric!" Peter snapped. "What gives you the idea they'd bury their dead deliberately? In any case, this thing was under so much ooze before the avalanche it must have been here for centuries. This is our last dive before heading for home, remember. We could save a thousand unnecessary problems by taking it along to where we can study it properly."

"Oh, very well. I give in. I suppose there isn't much they could do to us inside the 'nef. Go on, tie it up."

A few minutes later the 'nef was straining and tugging at the body, with two quarter-inch hawsers taut and singing like violin strings. Peter and Mary watched in puzzlement, asking themselves whether the little mud in which it was still embedded could possibly suck at the beast so powerfully. But it was not the fault of the mud. The corpse was shifting, very slowly, moving out over the ooze like a tractor over snow.

"It's not full of mud!" exclaimed Peter. "It couldn't be."

Mary gave him a wry glance. "No. Haven't you realized? That thing's *heavy*, Peter. It weighs tons!"

Peter's hands closed convulsively on a bar before him. He had sudden idiotic visions of the dead weight of the body dragging them down into the ultimate depths, while he sawed frantically at the hawsers and tried to cut the 'nef free.

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Then the balance turned, as the raging power of the atomic beacon atomized the water in the buoyancy tanks past a critical point. The nightmarish corpse rose from its muddy grave and swung slowly to a point below them and out of their view. The nef continued steadily to rise.

First: remnants of a lost civilization.

Second: a man alive when he should have been dead.

Third: the body of a creature that resembled, literally, nothing on earth or under the sea; with an articulated skeleton harder and denser than granite, and a flexible hide so tough it blunted their biggest wire-cutting shears before they managed to cut a sample of it.

What kind of insane world had the bathynef brought man into?

A kind of awe-struck hush seemed to have settled over the *Alexander Bache*. Since they had hauled the beast's corpse alongside with the anchor winch and rigged an improvised crane to dump it on the afterdeck, the staff and crew both had been going about with faraway, mystified expressions, talking little, and then only about the things beneath the sea.

Even the Chief, although he was fascinated by the strange animal Peter and Mary had found, was subdued. The reason was probably to be found in what he had said to the discoverers in the privacy of his office directly after their return.

"I don't know what to make of this," he had muttered. "And nobody else will, either, for a hell of a long time. Was it creatures like this one that built the city down there? And if it was, how did they vanish so completely in such a short space of time, geologically speaking? And why haven't we found relatives of theirs? Damnation, a hundred thousand years isn't much more than yesterday as the earth counts time! There's never been a trip like this, not in history; never a single voyage that's brought back so many unanswerable questions!"

It had almost been possible to see, behind his brow, the

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illusions dissolving into puffs of smoke. For a few crazy days he had been able to give full rein to his long-hidden dreams of sunken civilizations whose forgotten lore had once been the common property of mankind and now would be brought to light again; now the nightmare beast had stamped its many feet on his hopes and left him shaken and depressed.

They had more than enough to be going on with, anyway. A message had been radioed to their base at Atlantic Foundation, not describing their discoveries but indicating their tremendous importance. Tomorrow morning, the 'nef would be made ready for towing and they would turn for home. Everyone would have preferred to leave at once, but Fred Platt and his two apprentice engineers were too busy to see to the 'nef at the moment. They had to build cradles and weld anchor posts to the framework of the hull to secure the corpse on the afterdeck. If they hit even slightly rough weather with so much loose weight aboard they would be in for serious trouble.

"My God!" Peter said suddenly, an hour after he came back aboard. "We forgot to trigger the beacon we planted!"

He dashed in search of the Chief and made frantic apologies. Absently, the Chief brushed them aside. "Tell Fred to sink another one," he suggested, and walked away.

The problem wasn't that simple. Platt frowned over it and promised to work out an answer, and came up with a jury-rigged adaptation of one of their robot fish-spies, equipped with a sonar homing device which was cued to operate when it reached the precise level of the city-site and would then circle for up to a hundred days within a few hundred feet of its point of arrival.

The work on that, too, would delay their departure.

Preparing reports, developing photographs, going back to look at the creature's body again, Peter found that he had been back aboard for several hours when it occurred to him that he had not seen Luke around. Perhaps a familiar foot-

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fall had alerted him; a moment after he had the thought there was a knock at his cabin door.

"Yup?" he grunted, not looking round.

The door slid back. It was Luke, in dressing gown and pajamas, heavy-eyed with sleep and seeming uncertain of himself.

"Why, Luke! How are you?" Peter demanded, getting up from his chair with a start.

Luke's eyes wandered as though slightly out of focus. He shrugged. "I'm great," he said around a vast yawn. "I've slept till I don't think I'll want to see a bunk for weeks."

"You even slept through all the commotion when we came back?" Peter could hardly believe it. The sound of the body being dumped on deck should have woken a dead man—

And chills ran down his back when he realized belatedly that that was precisely what Luke should have been.

"I must have," Luke agreed. "I woke up only a few minutes back. I wanted to rest up as much as I could before your return, you see."

"So you haven't seen what we got this time?" Peter was halfway out of the cabin as he spoke, tugging at Luke's sleeve. "This will really shake you. It looks like it'll displace you as the number one mystery! You—uh—do you remember any more than we were told before we went away?" He paused and looked around.

An expression of mental pain showed on Luke's mobile face for an instant. Then he was shaking his head worriedly. "I was unconscious. More than unconscious. My guess is that I was kicked into some kind of suspended animation by the shock of being buried. Maybe the Ostrovsky-Wong process caused it."

"Well, we'll find out sooner or later. Right now—"

Almost dragging his companion, Peter made for the deck.

He had said the sight would shake Luke. He had not been prepared for the effect it actually had. Rounding the deck-house and coming literally face to face with the monster,

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Luke stopped dead in his tracks and went white. He was frozen for ten heartbeats, and then his lips began to work as though he were about to burst out crying.

"Steady therel" said Peter, taking his arm for fear he might faint. "Look, it's prètty horrible, but it's stone dead, you know. It's nothing but an empty shell with bones inside."

"Dead?" echoed Luke, as though disbelieving. He took a tentative step forward, his hands clasped together tightly.

"Of course. Think it would sit there calmly and let Fred chain it down if it weren't?" He indicated the engineer, his face hidden by a welding mask, who was anchoring a section of I-beam to act as purchase for a chain around the body.

Cautiously, keeping his distance, Luke began to walk around the corpse, studying it. Now and again he nodded, and by the time he returned to his starting point he seemed to have recovered himself. He licked his lips.

"Yes, of course. Stupid of me. I don't know why it surprised me like that." He wiped his face absently with the sleeve of his dressing gown.

Peter looked at the glistening brown-black hide, on which the sun made bright patches. "Lord knows what it is," he said. "The biologists are going to go crazy over this. I wish we weren't going to have to wait so long to see what they say. Still, I suppose five days isn't eternity."

"Five days?" Luke's voice was sharp and shrill. "What do you mean, five days? We're five days from home, at least!"

Peter felt astonished. "Why, of course! We're pulling away early tomorrow, you know—"

"No, I didn't know. And we're *not* going to leave tomorrow." Luke's eyes were feverish. "Whose idea was this, anyway? I bet it was that fool Gordon's! I'm going to give him a piece of my mind—"

He had whirled and vanished before Peter could recover. Before he caught up again, Luke had slammed aside the door of the Chief's office and was demanding in a hys-

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terical voice, "What the hell's the idea of leaving before I've had another dive?"

The Chief backed away, hands outstretched as though to fend off an attacker. Peter yelled for assistance. Ellington materialized out of the messroom with a beer glass still in his hand just as Luke's self-control snapped and he started to scream.

Between them, they got him to his cabin and dosed him with sedatives. But in spite of everything they pumped into him, and although his eyes were shut and he did not move, he muttered without ceasing about making another dive, and his face contorted, occasionally with pain.

Again, Mary kept watch at his side.

It was just after three in the morning when the hear-this came alive with a squawk. Ellington, who was keeping the watch, demanded to know whether Fred Platt was working on the 'nef. Peter, who had been sleeping with difficulty, decided to go out and see what was happening.

Cast loose from its mooring line, the 'nef was by then a quarter submerged, and from the confused shouting he could tell that everyone else was too startled to think straight.

On a terrified suspicion he ran back to Luke's cabin. He found Mary slumped on a chair beside the rumpled bunk, with a livid bruise across her left temple.

Of Luke himself there was no sign.

IX

"HE HIT me with the water bottle," said Mary dispiritedly. Eloise was dabbing the bruise on her temple with lotion. All about them on the brightly lit deck crew and staff milled in their night clothes, fantastic under the stars.

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"But where did he get the strength?" Gordon snapped. "After the sedatives we gave him, he shouldn't have been able to stir for at least twelve hours."

"He was feverish and delirious all the time," Mary said. "About twelve, he opened his eyes and asked for water. I gave him some and asked how he was. He said the pain was awful, but he couldn't tell me what pain it was. He said it was in his head. I asked if he wanted veganin or anything, and he said no, that wouldn't be any good. Then he went to sleep again for another hour or two, and I dozed. I was awakened by him sitting up and picking up the water bottle, but I was too dazed to move before he hit me."

"Ellington, what the hell were you doing all this time?" Gordon wheeled on the First Officer, who spread his hands.

"What reason had I to expect trouble?" said Ellington defensively. "I knew you wanted to make an early start, so when I saw someone going down the line to the 'nef I naturally assumed it was Fred up early and deciding to use the time to get the damned thing ready for towing. I sang out on the hear-this as soon as I saw the line cast loose, but I thought Luke was still under sedation and who else would want to take the 'nef?"

Platt snorted. "Didn't he light the beacon? He'd gone under before I came on deck."

"No! If I'd seen the beacon go on I'd have known something was adrift, wouldn't I?" Ellington was almost shouting. "He didn't light up until the tanks were well under."

"All right, Ellington," Gordon interrupted in a weary tone. "We won't get ahead any faster by yelling at each other. How about the reserves, Fred? You hadn't serviced the 'nef, had you?"

"No, but we've pretty well established it's foolproof, and although the oxygen is low he'd have plenty for just himself if he's only going to make a straight trip down and back. I doubt if he'd have long to stay at the bottom. Question is,

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what does he mean to do? He's a crazy man, and you just can't figure!"

Peter glanced at Mary. She was biting her lip, and it was not due to the pain of her bruise, which had now been dressed. What the hell kind of mixed-up thoughts did Luke inspire in her attractive head? Peter wished achingly he could have the answer to that maddening problem, if not to the others.

He said, to distract himself, "What do we do now?"

Eloise gave an unfeminine snort. "Sixty-four dollar questions while you wait," she said acidly. "What the hell *can* we do? Care to swim down after the 'nef and haul it back?"

"Shut up, Eloisel" Gordon ordered. "Ellington, warm the radio and see if you can raise a Navy station. Find out if there's a fast submarine anywhere within range of us. It'll take Luke about three hours to get down to two thousand feet. If there's a sub nearby there's a chance of catching him with a grab or a net or something."

Ellington nodded and made for the radio cabin. Dick Loescher made as though to catch at his arm, changed his mind, and spoke to Gordon. "Nets aren't standard equipment on naval subs!" he exclaimed. "And if they go after the 'nef with a grapple, won't Luke just cast loose and try to continue down under his own power?"

"As Fred said, we're dealing with a crazy man and we can't figure him," Gordon responded somberly. "The bathynef is far too big for our own tackle to hold, or I'd have suggested trawling for it at once. But the whole problem's too big for us, period. I wish we hadn't been so cautious about publishing reports. Now there's fifteen millions worth of unique engineering in the hands of a crazy idiot on its way to the bottom of the sea. By the time we catch up with it again—if we do—it'll have been made obsolete. Hell and damnation!"

Into the dead silence which followed this outburst came

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Ellington's voice, very faint, saying, "Survey ship *Alexander Bache*, P-one-T-one-zero!"

"Maybe he'll be satisfied," suggested Hartlund dubiously. "I mean, maybe he just had a temporary obsession. He'll go down and come back up again, normally."

"Maybe, but I doubt it," Gordon sighed. "Did anyone get the impression that Luke thought he ought to have died down there, and needed to go back and finish the job? I'm no psychologist," he added. "Just an idea."

Mary shook her head. "It was the pain that seemed to be driving him."

"Well, there is the chance he'll come back up. Hartlund, do you know of any naval survey ships working this area? We can't sit around and wait for him, but we could get someone else to quarter the area until it's beyond doubt he's lost."

"I'll check," nodded Hartlund, and thrust his pipe between his teeth before starting towards the bridge.

Ellington came back from the radio cabin. "Best I can do for you, Chief," he said despondently, "is a British sub, one of their latest. It's undergoing trials about thirty-six miles from here. It's a pure-reactor job, and they're having trouble with sustained high-speed running, but they're going to do their best for us. If nothing goes wrong, we can expect them in forty minutes."

"What?" said several people simultaneously.

"That's what they said. Forty minutes. Apparently when this thing is working properly it's a wowser. They wouldn't say what its top speed is, but it must be seventy knots at least. Trouble is it's still crawling with bugs, they said."

"Let's hope none of them bite on the way here. That's the first real glimmer of hope." Gordon relaxed visibly.

"Look!" said Hartlund, and pointed to a *Vee* of phosphorescence on the dark water.

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"That was never a sub!" Peter objected, straining to make out the vague silhouette.

"Of course not. That'll be the mother ship. Probably a converted torpedo boat, if this thing is really as fast as they told us. Yes. Look, there she blows!"

The whaling term was appropriate. The bluntly round snout that was breaking water a half mile distant did look like a vast sea animal, although the effect was spoiled by the stub wings which were its control surfaces. Four of them at right angles. Curved back. No conning tower, just a fish-shaped hull with fins.

The mother ship swung to within hailing distance, and a British voice rang out through a loud-hailer.

"Hello *Alexander Bache!* I hope you're all properly disinterested scientists aboard. Nobody except us is supposed to see our baby this close. Tell us what you want done and we'll try and do it."

Hartlund checked his watch. "Thirty-six miles in thirty-eight minutes," he whispered. "Maybe they'll catch him!"

The Chief was answering through their own loud-hailer, giving only the essentials.

"How fast does this thing of yours dive?" the British officer inquired.

"It doesn't dive. It just sinks, and sinks more slowly the deeper it gets. It's been going down for an hour, and is probably beyond a thousand feet, but slowing down gradually."

"Okay! I may say we've had nearly three quarters of an hour's perfect operation on the way here. This means something is likely to blow up any moment now. But cross your fingers."

There was a breathless pause. Peter heard a stir along the deck and turned his head to see that Mary had come out, a white bandage on her bruised temple.

A light showed on the back of the submarine. Very dimly they heard chains clanking.

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"Just rigging something that will hook on to your bathy'nef if they can locate it," the officer reported. "Only makeshift, I'm afraid, but if there's anything to hitch on to, it'll do."

"Make it good and long," the Chief warned. "The 'nef has an atomic beacon on top. You'll need to keep as least fifteen feet clear."

"We're allowing ninety fathoms," said the officer calmly.

The light went out. Another pause. And then—

"Good God!" said Hartlund, and nearly let fall his pipe. The submarine had put its nose down in the water so sharply that its tail, with the reactor pipe, blew a two-hundred-foot fountain of more-than-boiling water towards the sky. And the deck rocked beneath them as it was gone.

Peter and Mary sat long hours in silence on the deck, and stared at the water or dozed fitfully. Without the 'nef, there was nothing to do prior to turning for home, except to cover the monstrous body on the afterdeck. Platt attended to that, using canvas awnings.

Two of the officers from the submarine's mother ship came over in a motor-dinghy at breakfast time and inspected the body at Gordon's invitation. Hartlund and the Chief were asked to lunch in return and warned that they wouldn't be permitted to see over the vessel because it was classified.

There was no news.

It was approaching dark when the submarine came back in sonar range, and the indistinct reports it made held no hope. Nothing had gone wrong with the sub. They had tracked the 'nef and tried to communicate with Luke, without success. Then they had tied a slip knot in their chain—

"What?" said the staff of the survey ship when they heard that. The British officer coughed and looked blandly surprised.

"Yes, why not? Good practice for the pilot, you know. Why else do you think we put ninety fathoms of chain on?"

"Like a needle and thread?" said Hartlund incredulously.

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"Precisely. Then they lassoed the bathynerf and got a good hold before starting to drag it upwards. Only this man of yours got out a cutting torch from somewhere and severed the chain."

"Oh, Jesus!" said Gordon quietly.

"Naturally, that made it difficult to tie another knot. But they managed it all right, and caught him a second time, and he cut the chain again. We didn't have anyone aboard who'd been through the Ostrovsky-Wong process, so we couldn't get anyone outside except in a rubber suit, and he was armed with this torch. They said it was a fearsome kind of weapon. Had a flame as long as a man's arm."

"It does," said Platt, listening intently. "At that depth."

"Anyway, they went after him regardless, but he chased them all round, hanging on to the 'nef with a line, and in the end the commander called them back, deciding it was not worth the candle." The officer shrugged and looked apologetic. "I'm dreadfully sorry we couldn't do more."

There was nothing more to be done—for some considerable time to come. Having lost the 'nef, they would have to wait either until the Russian one was brought from the Pacific or until the next one was built. Unless the Russians had one on the stocks, the "next" one was still on the drawing boards. The sunken city could hardly have been more effectively closed to them if it had been behind locked doors.

A fishery protection vessel of the Royal Navy turned up unannounced just before they pulled dampers to leave the site. It had been asked to stand by at the request of the commander of the submarine, and watch for the 'nef if it returned to the surface. Within another hour the USS *Gondwana* also closed in, dispatched hastily by the Submarine Mapping Department from her usual station on the other side of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge.

As the *Alexander Bache* headed away, the two ships began their patrolling, one on the surface, one a few feet beneath.

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"Do you think he'll come back a second time?" Mary asked Peter as they gazed at the dwindling watchers.

Peter shrugged. "It's in the lap of the gods," he said.

"I—oh well, I'll say it. I don't care so much this time. You must have thought my behavior awfully peculiar, Peter, and I owe you an apology for snapping at you when you were trying to be helpful and kind. You see, I didn't tell you the whole story about me and Luke. Would you like me to finish it?"

The breeze, as the ship picked up speed, blew her hair around her face. Peter looked at her, wondering whether she needed to tell him, wanted to, or just felt she owed it to him.

At length he said, "Yes. I'd like to hear."

She stared fixedly at the sea again, and seemed to be sorting out words in her mind. "It was like this. When I had this obsession about Luke, I told myself there was nothing I wouldn't do. I almost had a breakdown over him. I was a very nervy child, unstable, emotional, the lot.

"And then—it was the last day before he moved over to Scripps to do a preliminary course there—I had my chance. He'd been celebrating, and I was half out of my mind with juvenile self-abnegation, and I'd come to bring him some sort of parting gift. There was no one else in the house . . ."

She shrugged. "Well, I got my chance, like I said, and I suppose you could say I took it. I'd told myself there was nothing I wouldn't do for him, so I did it."

She sounded very calm, as though she were talking about someone else. In a way, Peter realized, she was.

"You can imagine the results. Me, not quite fifteen, crazy-mad with delight about as much as I was shaken by the shock. The two together might have torn me to bits. What did the job, though, was discovering that to Luke it was just another interlude on the way to where he wanted to go.

"It took me months to put myself together again, and when I did, the only way I could do it was by using Luke, my idealized image of Luke, as a center post. So here I am in

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oceanography, like I told you. It was pretty much of a shock when Luke joined Atlantic from Scripps, and I had to accept this flippant, shallow guy as the reality. Oh, I liked him well enough on the surface, but underneath I couldn't forgive him for being what he was, and for not being able to realize how much he had meant to me for so many years. . . ."

She turned to face him, a little defiantly. "Clear?"

Peter nodded. "And now?"

"Now I figure it's about time I started looking for a real man and not a dream to build my life around."

Peter held out his arms, and she came to them, smiling.

X

THE PLACID New England fall moved quietly in on the land. But it was still warm enough to breakfast outdoors, if one did not get up ridiculously early.

"And who," asked Peter of the trees around the little lodge, "gets up early on their honeymoon?"

"Queen Victoria and Prince Albert," said Mary mysteriously, coming out of the door on to the sun porch with a plate of pancakes.

"What?"

" 'S a fact," she nodded, portioning out maple syrup. "I read somewhere that they got up early on the first morning after their wedding, and the lord chamberlain or some bigwig wrote disapprovingly in his diary that this was no way to ensure an heir to the throne."

Their eyes met across the table. For a moment they kept straight faces, but at length they burst into helpless laughter.

"Poor Victoria!" Mary said when at last she could speak.

"Poor Albert, don't you mean?" Peter contradicted. "Or

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maybe not. He always seemed like a straitlaced kind of prig to me. Say, these are delicious."

"What did you expect?" Mary stretched her sweater-clad arms gracefully. "Did you go down for the mail yet?"

"No. And I don't much feel like going, either. It's a long walk down to the highway, you know."

"I do know. And that's what I thought you'd say. So I went before you woke up." Like a conjurer with a rabbit, she produced envelopes she had been sitting on. Fanning them like a poker hand, she proffered them. "Pick a card, any card, and I'll tell your fortune, pretty gentleman. Only first you have to cross my path with silver, or something."

"I have my fortune," said Peter, grinning, and gave her outstretched hand a squeeze. He glanced at the envelopes. "One, two, three from the Foundation. Damnation, can't they leave us in peace even on our honeymoon?"

"Maybe they're private, from people who wrote in the office and snitched the envelopes. Aren't you going to open them?"

When he had done justice to the breakfast, he lit a cigaret with a contented sigh, tipped back the chair, and ripped open the envelopes while Mary cleared the dishes. He left the Foundation ones till last.

"Best wishes from Hartlund and the crew of the *Alexander Bache*," he reported. "Mailed in Panama, when they were done there meeting the Russians and taking them out to the site. With regrets that they missed the ceremony."

"Anything from the Russians?" Mary called jokingly.

"You're not kidding, honey. Right here under Hartlund's signature there's a sort of scribble labeled 'Captain, bathynef Pavel Ostrovsky.'"

"That's nice! What else?"

"Invitation from a cousin of mine to see him in Florida, and a note from—" He broke off, and whistled under his breath. "You don't say! Honey, here's the analysis of the hide of that monster we brought up. It's made of carbon, silicon,

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oxygen, and *boron* of all things, in the damndest sort of arrangement. I wish I was a biochemist. And"—he turned the page—"they've done up the bones, too. They've got chromium in them, so help me, and cobalt and nickel and God knows what. But wait till you get to this bit! The chemists say these materials are basically different from the organic substances found in any high life-form anywhere on Earth. Their tentative conclusion is that they originated elsewhere . . ."

A sudden chill seemed to blow through the trees. Mary came out with a dishtowel in her hands and sat down opposite him, her face sober. "Martians, huh?" she said. But her attempt to keep her tone light was a failure.

Suddenly anxious to know what else was in the letters from the Foundation, Peter thrust the first one at her and attacked the second. Casual news and good wishes from Eloise Vanderplank. He threw it aside after the first glance and took up the last remaining envelope.

The color drained from his face and he sat for a very long time staring at the paper, so long that Mary had to touch his arm twice before bringing him back to reality. He gave her the letter to read herself.

Over Dr. Gordon's signature, it said:

You may have heard by now that the biologists assign a nonterrestrial origin to the creature you brought up from Atlantica (that's the name we've bestowed on the city, by the way). It won't be announced publicly yet; flying saucers on top of what we already have would be too much.

What you will not have heard is that we have found the bathynef. It was discovered accidentally during the search for the Gondwana, the Mapping Department sub we last saw at the site waiting for the 'nef to reappear.

I only have this at secondhand. I was in the Pacific on the way back from my visit to the Russian bathynef expedition, which is due at the site of operations in a few days. But it appears that the Gondwana went down to six or seven hundred feet after a suspicious sonar echo, losing contact with the

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British ship, and failed to come back.

Two days later and a hundred miles west, a Navy patrol plane spotted the abandoned bathynerf, which looked as though someone had laid into its most delicate equipment with a sledge hammer. It will be weeks, perhaps months, before it is again fit for use. There has been no sign of the Gondwana for more than two weeks. This is being kept quiet for obvious reasons. There may be no connection, But—

And, of course, there was no sign of Luke Wallace.

I cannot, and do not want to, say anything more to you than this: Hartlund told me you wanted a trip in the Russian bathynerf, and we are very short of people who have had the Ostrovsky-Wong treatment. The pattern emerging is an ugly one. Before we are finished, we shall need all the help we can get. I don't know what has converted me to wild speculation instead of my old methodical scepticism, but something has.

I'm worried.

Mary folded the letter and handed it back. "That's the nearest thing to panic I can imagine from the Chief," she said.

Peter nodded, his eyes on his bride's face. "Well?"

She sighed heavily and pushed back her chair. "Well," she echoed, "we'd better get packed."

They had been out of touch with events altogether for just over two weeks. On their return, they had spent a week answering questions; decided to get married; made the arrangements and taken off for the country. In that time, much had happened.

The *Gondwana's* disappearance had involved the Navy. The scientific data presented to them had involved the First Soviet Pacific Bathygraphic Expedition, which was the official name of the *Pavel Ostrovsky* and its mother ship. An appeal by Dr. Gordon had involved the oceanographic institutes of every nation that had an Atlantic seaboard and one that had

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not, to wit, Monaco, which has a royalty-sponsored tradition of deepsea exploration.

And the extraterrestrial nature of the creature from Atlantica had involved the United Nations, whose banner flew proudly above the inaccessible rocky islet that had suddenly been promoted to the dignity of base for the new arrivals because a freak of nature had endowed it with fresh water.

The aircraft bringing Peter and Mary was a Navy seaplane flying out a brand-new fifteen-ton underwater TV camera intended to carry the search far below the level a bathynerf could attain. It dropped them out of sunlight and into sight of the scene of operations through an overcast at five thousand feet.

Peter gasped, and caught at Mary's arm. "Look at that!"

There were more than thirty vessels riding here. Dominating them was the Russian bathynerf's mother ship, gleaming white like a cross between a luxury liner and a whaling ship—the latter, because of the hinged bows and miniature dry dock where the bathynerf was carried. Her American cousin was still fitting out; they had decided to go ahead during the summer using the inefficient system of towing so as not to waste time.

Larger, but less conspicuous because of her gray paint, was the aircraft carrier *Cape Wrath*. And there were others, from giant nuclear submarines and the Russian cruiser escorting the survey ship, to the tiny but ultramodern Monegasque floating biology laboratory.

They put down, and as soon as the TV camera had been loaded aboard a lighter, Peter and Mary were whisked in a fast launch across to the Russian mother ship. Its facilities were about comparable with those of the *Alexander Bache*, Peter judged, but it was obvious why the HQ had been established here and not there. Here they had more room.

Gordon greeted them delightedly, showered them with thanks and apologies, introduced them to Captain Vassiliev—the man who had added his signature to the greeting card

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from Panama—and took them on a quick tour to familiarize them with the set-up.

"The *Ostrovsky* went down just before you arrived," he said. "Ostrovsky himself, and Wong, are both across on the island where we've set up our base, processing relief crews from Woods Hole, Darwin and the Chinese station at Tienling. But that's not a quarter of it. People have come up with gadgets nobody knew existed except the owners. That British sub is back again. Right now, it's a thousand feet down with an insane new German invention tied to its snout; an underwater crawler which they're going to dump in the mud at the bottom of the submarine's range and which they hope will be able to crawl down the side of the Ridge as far as the city. It's got a bulldozer blade on it. If this works, we'll be able to shift the ooze ten times as fast as we can now."

He hustled on. "Then there's this TV camera you flew in with. It has four thousand fathoms of cable on it and if we can find a self-propelled drogue to stand the pressure we can get right down across the valley floor. There may be nothing to see but mud—or there may be anything."

Their amazement grew as they really began to take in the extent of the effort being invested here, until finally Mary could bear it no longer. "Chief!" she said. "I'm not going to believe that this is all due to scientific curiosity. I think somebody's not just worried, but frightened!"

Gordon paused and fixed her with his eyes. "Frightened?" he said solemnly. "Yes, you could say that."

"I told you in my letter that there was no sign of the *Gondwana*. That was only a half-truth. She was reported two days ago by the liner *Queen Alexandra*, thirty hours out from New York for Southampton and Cherbourg.

"But we haven't found her again. And now we've lost the *Alexandra*, with eighteen hundred passengers aboard. . . ."

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PART TWO

THE TERROR

XI

AT FIRST he had been very weak. Naturally. He had prepared himself for this as he would have prepared for a long trip between the stars, cutting down his metabolism to near-zero, accumulating reserves, planning the trigger which would awaken him when it was once more safe to walk the surface of this world.

Only he had not bargained for what he found.

He had come aware with the memories of the fall of his city as fresh in his mind as though they had been yesterday's. It seemed that no more than hours had gone by since he left that foolish one who had come pleading for help amid the wreck of his hopes, while the earth shook and shivered.

He was cautious as he reached out mentally into the great dark, prepared to return himself to hibernation if the alarm had been false. It was not.

Normally he would not have been able to gain much information from a human mind. And this mind, he noted, was altogether similar to those he had known before the cataclysm. It was easier to whip these dull mentalities into speech. Their languages had never conveyed subtleties, but they were so easy to analyse and understand.

This mind, though, was dulled by a great shock, perhaps unconscious. It offered no hindrance to his inquiry. He was even able to drive it down still further, inhibiting the processes responsible for heartbeats, breathing, digestion, in order to lessen the "noise" he received.

He was under water, he gathered, and under mud, and still

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secure in his refuge, undiscovered by prying animals. Under water. There was no problem. He had reserves available for just such an eventuality, but the picture he received of the extent and depth of the ocean above him implied that he could not rely on them to get him to land.

But he must get to land. The myriads, the hordes of human beings crawling and pullulating like bacteria across the face of the planet had never known the lash of one of his kind. Instead of building to the glory of and for the appreciation of higher beings, they served only themselves or each other. This was insupportable. If he could get free, he could take to himself, bit by bit, perhaps half the planet. They were so numerous he could not handle more. Then, and only then, he could see whether any more of his kind had survived, and magnanimously allow them to share what was left. If he was alone, then it would be simple enough to thin the population out to manageable levels. .

This device the man had employed to bring him down here; it would be necessary to utilize that. He gathered facts about it, very slowly because he was weak. Possibly a full day had passed before he had enough facts to formulate a plan. The device would be returning. Let it take back this man, and get rid of its other occupants. Let there be a compulsion in the man's mind to bring it down by himself. He cautiously opened that floodgate in his mind behind which was stored his power to inflict pain, and judged his available strength. Yes. One of these creatures was as many as he could handle for the time being.

And while he was awaiting the completion of the order, he would have to burrow out of his hiding place, using up his entire surviving reserves. Which meant that if the man failed to obey his command, he would die as that weakling Ruagh had died. He debated, again measured the pain-giving power he could call on, and decided that it was enough.

He *hurt* the man to prove it. Yes, that would suffice! He could not remember when last he had lashed a human mind

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that had never before known such powers. Even infants in the womb had learned it before birth in the day when his kind ruled the planet. But this one was a stranger to the pain. He had no resistance.

He overlaid the pain temporarily, implanted his commands, and began, satisfied, to work his way out of his refuge.

The thickness of the layer of mud startled him when he compared it with the apparent rate of deposition. He had been in the refuge longer than he had ever anticipated. But it was not until the device had duly returned to bring him to the surface, and he had commanded the man to take it well away from the ship that had launched it overhead, that he was able to get a sight of the stars and know the real duration of his imprisonment.

Not less than a hundred and ten thousand years, he judged. Even by the standards of his race—to whom human beings were mere mayflies, hatched at morning, dead at sunset—that was a long time.

Still, no matter. The first essential was to gather his strength. Then to get servants and extend his dominion. He commanded the man to feed him, and by lashing him now and again drove him to select suitable articles of diet. There were molluscs on the shore of a lonely, rocky islet, whose succulent flesh gave him a little of the metals he needed. Their shells helped to provide silicon, and carbon he could absorb in plenty. It would need more than a single servant to provide him with all his requirements. Nonetheless, he had made a beginning. And he had time to spare.

Patiently, he looked for means of adding to his retinue. He found it, together with a superior means of transport. His strength grew. Sooner than he had hoped, he was in a position to conquer his first city. It was a floating city, a technological achievement he would have thought beyond these short-lived grubs of Earth, crude though it might be by his standards. But here he had enough to feed him, and he could turn his mind to the question of making men aware of their

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inferior status. Proper homage was the next thing to command.

Every now and again other human-filled vessels passed as he consolidated himself. He was not yet ready to trouble himself with them. He blinded them, and they turned aside.

"This I find significant," the Chinese statistician said in his dulcet tenor voice. He put his thumb on the strange gap in the center of the North Atlantic chart he had prepared. "I do not know if it means anything important. Certainly it is to be investigated."

He sat down abruptly, and a hum of conversation went up around the room. The room was the operations center of the aircraft carrier, the *Cape Wrath*, which had become the brain behind the entire project. More than forty people were assembled. Some of them sat with simultaneous translation phones on their heads, and two interpreters were still completing their account of the Chinese's remarks when Lampron spoke. He was the official UN representative. French by birth, international by adoption, he had become accepted as neutral president of the mixed bag of investigators.

"We are extremely busy," he reminded the audience in his matter-of-fact manner. "The list of items we have on the agenda is conclusive, I think. Nonetheless, this is a major discovery; to find that for days past not one of our search units has reported a single sighting in that area. It looks as if it has been deliberately avoided. And yet we know that no less than four ships should have sent in news from there. Yes, Dr. Gordon?"

"You mentioned ships only," Gordon said, leaning forward. "How about patrol planes?"

The Chinese signalled that he would reply, received Lampron's nod, and said, "Air surveys are included, Dr. Gordon. They too show the curious hole in the network of reports."

"In other words," Gordon suggested, "the *Queen Alexandra* and the *Gondwana* are probably slap in the middle, and some-

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thing is deliberately preventing the search parties that sight the missing vessels from informing us."

There was a chorus of objections, belated from those present who did not speak English. Lampion stilled it with a wave of his hand.

"Let us not race ahead of our knowledge," he said. "Let us merely send a further expedition to see."

The thrumming of the engine shook the whole fabric of the helicopter. Peter had found it hard to get used to at first, and the pilot had sympathetically asked if he felt all right.

"It's smoother underwater!" Peter had replied. "And it feels a hell of a sight safer there, too."

"Same difference," the pilot shrugged. "Down there if something goes wrong, the pressure mashes you flat. Up here, if something goes wrong, at least you have a parachute. Matter of taste, most likely."

Peter nodded. He had inveigled his way aboard the 'copter between dives of the Russian 'nef—their own was still being refitted. The work of clearing the site of Atlantica was heart-breakingly slow, even with the German submarine bulldozer shifting mud by the scores of tons. And so far the TV camera, hunting on its robot drogue a thousand fathoms further down, had failed to reveal anything but mud, mud and more mud, dotted with the thinly scattered flora and fauna of the deeps.

"Right," the pilot said, and flipped a switch. He took his hands off the controls and sat back in a relaxed fashion. Noticing Peter's look of alarm, he grinned.

"George has taken over," he said. "He's quite a box of tricks; a whole lot more than just an automatic pilot. He'll take us right into the middle of the blank area, circle us round, and bring us out again dead on course without my doing another hand's turn. He was secret until they turned him loose for our benefit."

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"So we're just passengers!" Peter commented. "Like you said, it must be a matter of taste."

They were flying at about a thousand feet, a reading of 130 showing on the air-speed indicator. There was almost nothing to be seen except sea. An occasional island showed the course of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. A few ships passed within their view, but it was dull today and visibility was poor. Foul weather would be hindering their work soon. Indeed, there was a small storm of rain a few miles to starboard, which they were skirting by courtesy of their robot pilot's radar eyes.

He found the trip restful, and was half dozing, dreaming of the few short days of the honeymoon he had enjoyed with Mary, and making plans for picking up where they had left off, when the pilot leaned forward and pointed.

"There. See?"

"Why, it is the *Alexandra*!" Peter exclaimed. "Of all the crazy things! To think a ship that size could have been lost in the main Atlantic traffic lanes for so long . . ."

She was enormous; she was the biggest liner on the Atlantic run, a thousand and ninety feet long, a hundred and four thousand tons burden, nuclear engines, and a speed of at least forty-five knots average port-to-port.

The pilot snapped on the film cameras which would record what they saw, and touched a button on the casing of the automatic pilot. "Course correction," he said briefly. "This is to let George know the ship ahead is the one we want. He'll take us in and bring us back right away now."

"Any sign of the *Gondwana*?" Peter was staring through binoculars. The distance was closing rapidly.

"Not a thing. Probably been sunk." The pilot was casual.

"You seem to have some preconceived ideas," Peter commented. "But what in hell is going on down there?"

They were close enough now to see movement on the liner's great promenade deck. There were lines of people all round, in a sort of horseshoe formation. They moved rhyth-

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mically, like grass as the wind blows across it. They seemed to be shuffling back and forth. The distance closed further. They began to take on individual features. Some of them were crew in company uniform. Others were passengers in miscellaneous casual clothing. Now and then one or two would walk forward together to face something dark, canopied under an awning, in the middle of the horseshoe's open end.

Suddenly, one of those called forward turned and tried to run. The lines broke. Men and women surged forward, seized him, dragged him to the rail and flung him bodily down to the leaden sea.

A shout so loud that it overcame the droning of the 'copter engine rang out, and they exclaimed together. Now they were circling in close enough to see faces through their binoculars; haggard, drawn faces, eyes ringed with dark circles indicative of sleeplessness. A group of stewards in soiled white jackets was beating on trays as though they were gongs.

"Have they all gone raving mad?" the pilot demanded.

"No . . ." said Peter, his stomach churning in revulsion. "Can't you see what that is under the awning? It's another of those creatures like the one we dragged up from Atlantica—only this one's alive. . . ."

And at the moment he uttered the words, a blast of raw pain hit him, not in his body, but in his mind. In an instant he and the pilot both were slumped unconscious.

Uncaring, unknowing, George flew the 'copter on.

XII

"YOU'RE GOING to be all right," a comforting male voice was saying. Peter blinked his eyes open and found himself looking at a square-jawed face under a peaked naval cap.

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"What—" he said, struggling to sit up. The man in the naval cap helped him, putting an arm behind his shoulders to support him. Peter shook his head dizzily, and looked about him.

He was sitting on the deck of the aircraft carrier. The 'copter was being shunted away on a trolley towards the elevators, and a group of men and women were clustered, talking excitedly, around the pilot. The pilot must have recovered more quickly. He was standing, although he looked pale.

"Something blanked you out," the man was saying to Peter. "But you're perfectly all right physically. Just a bit of shock is your trouble."

"Blanked me out? Oh yes, I remember. When we were flying over the *Alexandra*. We found her!" Peter seized the other's arm. "We found her! And that's not all!"

"Easy now," the man said soothingly. "We know already. Your pilot told us before you woke up. We're developing the pictures now. Your autopilot brought the 'copter back and we landed you under remote control. Now what you need, I'd say, is a drink and a chance to relax for a bit. Suppose you come down to the messroom. Can you walk all right, you think?"

Peter tested his limbs gingerly. He had the illusion that he ought to be unable to move. His memory was full of a pain so excruciating it seemed he must have broken every bone in his body. But the pain was only in memory, he could move freely, and after a moment, normally.

"We don't know what happened to you," his companion said, watching him. "Whatever it was, it's a cinch to be the same as what kept the other search parties from reporting the liner. What puzzles me is why the hell we haven't lost anybody. If your 'copter hadn't been on auto, you'd most likely have gone down in the sea."

Peter frowned. "Maybe we weren't meant to see as much as we did," he suggested. "I don't know what was going on. It looked like some crazy sort of ceremony, though. Maybe the

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creature was distracted, didn't notice us till we'd come in quite close. Then he hit us with all he'd got because he was surprised." He shrugged. "I'm just guessing. Did anybody tell my wife I was all right?"

"I'll check." The other turned away to make inquiries of one of the group surrounding the pilot. Peter went on testing his movements experimentally, his mind dazed by the power of the blow that had been struck at it.

The gray overcast seemed to lower at the sea. A chill wind was creaming the waves into hesitant foam, and in spite of its phenomenally efficient stabilizers the aircraft carrier was moving a little in the water. Over the broad gray landing deck he could see across to the Russian mother ship. The 'nef was being readied for another dive, and there was much bustle and activity. Above, a giant floatplane was circling prior to touching down. A fast launch pulled away from the side of one of the little survey vessels and headed towards the *Cape Wrath*.

"Yes, they told your wife you were all right." The words drew him back from his contemplation of the scene. "She'll be coming aboard in a little while. They didn't say what had happened. Figured it was better not to worry her."

"Good," said Peter with relief. "Now I'd like that drink you suggested."

It was puzzling that the aircraft had not plunged into the sea when its crew was struck unconscious . . . Had it not been for his absorption in the ceremony he had commanded, he would have treated it as he had treated other aircraft and the many ships that had passed, by installing a hint of pain in the minds of the pilots or helmsmen every time they began to turn toward his floating city.

For the time being, he had to be gentle, subtle, although it irked him to treat these coarse and inferior beings with such finesse. Still, there was no doubt they had learned much since they had been freed from their old yoke. Until he had a

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complete picture of the present situation, he would not take risks.

No doubt that ingenious flying machine incorporated some automatic device to make it continue straight and level if the pilot's attention wandered. He knew from his own experience that these dull minds could not be made to concentrate except by regular lashing; automatic machinery was the logical compensation for their human shortcomings. At the mercy of the wind, though, the machine would soon have toppled and drowned its passengers.

He dismissed the matter and decided on his next move. It was time now to extend his retinue further still. He was on the way to his full strength now, and there was the matter of supplies for the subjects that remained. Though he had had the intractable ones thrown overboard as an example to the rest, he had not wanted to cut the numbers significantly. It was good to have many minds to control, it stimulated him.

They had exhausted the stores aboard, though, and they were hungry. If he had realized how few provisions there were aboard, he would have had the recalcitrants merely killed and used to supplement the meat supply, instead of giving them to the fish. Still, under his compulsion, they would serve to bring him to shore, and there he could pick and choose among millions. To shore . . . He sent for a man skilled in navigation as the humans counted skill, and demanded details of the coasts they could make for.

"Peter, you fool!" said Mary, throwing her arms round him. "Why on earth didn't you tell me what you were going to do? You might have been killed!"

"All right, all right," he said comfortingly. "I wasn't, was I? I wouldn't have gone up in that thing if I hadn't been sure it was as safe as a bathynef, at least."

"That's not saying much, after what's happened," she tried to joke. But the words turned serious in her mouth.

"Dr. Trant! Mrs. Trant! Please . . .?" Lampson's voice broke

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in on them, and they grew aware that everyone else in the operations room was impatiently waiting for them to take their places. They slipped into their chairs with a murmured apology, and Lampion coughed and looked round.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "you have all had a chance to study the pictures that have been brought back, I believe. I have some extra copies here, which I will pass around anyway." He spread glossy enlargements on the table.

Peter had not needed to look at them. They showed precisely what he remembered; the crazy horseshoe of passengers and crew on the promenade deck of the liner; stewards beating trays, one unfortunate being seized and cast overboard . . . And, ghoulish in the center of it all, the indistinct but horrible shape of the creature that had come out of the sea.

"According to our latest information, the *Queen Alexandra* has begun to move. She has put about and is following a course which may or may not change, but which if extended will intersect the coast of the United States north of the Bahamas. Most probably, in northern Florida or Georgia. There can be little doubt that this is under the orders of the—sea creature."

"Correction," said Captain Vassiliev politely. "I think we have reason to doubt that it is a sea creature, have we not, Dr. Gordon?"

Gordon nodded. "The results aren't all in yet, but the TV camera we have working at the two-thousand-fathom level has located an opening in the mud which seems to indicate a point at which something emerged from below. Around the opening we located various objects, probably metallic, which resemble oxygen storage canisters. The bathynerf *Pavel Ostrovsky* has just a short while ago started down to investigate the site. It's far below the levels at which we've dived so far, but two members of Professor Wong's staff who have taken equivalent pressures in land-based tests are crew-

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ing for this dive, and both Ostrovsky and Wong think they should be able to stand it."

Lampion nodded. "Thank you, Dr. Gordon. Well, the situation seems to be this. What we have discovered is a survivor of an extraterrestrial species which very probably invaded our planet upwards of a hundred thousand years ago. It enslaved human beings—this is assumed by analogy with current actions—and was then overwhelmed by the latest orogenic or mountain-building era. Their powers are unknown to us. The fact that this individual could emerge from some probably prearranged refuge after such a lapse of time and adjust to the changed situation with such speed suggests that we are facing a very dangerous opponent. Yes, Dr. Trant?"

Peter leaned forward. "I've experienced this power," he said "I think we can assume it's nonphysical, at least as we define physical. It is probably not limited to the mental infliction of pain, as witness the posthypnotic command we can deduce compelled Luke Wallace to steal the bathynef and return to set the alien free from its buried hiding place. In addition, we can presume that either it is equipped with technical devices of a high order, or that it is physically almost indestructible and could survive the pressure at two thousand fathoms as easily as at sea level."

"Can we presume also that we have only one to deal with?" Vassiliev inquired softly. Lampion shrugged.

"A question that must be answered. For myself, I think we must assume so. Any other survivors are probably still under thousands of feet of ooze. Let us not multiply our problems."

"At the moment we have one," Vassiliev said. "What is to be done about this liner and its dangerous passenger?"

"Your opinion, please." Lampion waved his hand vaguely.

Captain Vassiliev looked around the table, as though trying to make up his mind. At length he said, "A torpedo. Now. If necessary, with a nuclear warhead."

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Heads shook automatically. Someone murmured, "No. No."

Vassiliev bent his head and spread his hands. "Very good. All I can say is that I am glad it is not the coast of Soviet Russia to which the ship is coming near."

"We are all frightened of what might happen," said Peter, thinking of the possible consequences. "But there are still several hundred people on the liner, whom we may be able to save. We've obviously got to kill the creature, or render it powerless somehow. If it means to come ashore, then it will very likely expose itself to some means of attack. It's big, heavy, possibly clumsy. I doubt if it could stand, say, a shell from a forty-millimeter cannon if it were a direct hit."

Officially, the *Queen Alexandra* was simply "missing." The vast search operations had used the liner as a cover story. But it was not going to be long before the truth broke, that was for sure. If it could only be held back for another day or two, though, that would suffice.

These thoughts were running through Peter's mind as he and a thousand others waited on the edge of the ocean. The liner was aiming for the Florida coast a little south of Jacksonville. It was as though a patch of blankness had progressed across the ocean, without anyone actually seeing her. There were press releases ready to state that the liner had been commandeered by mutineers. A thin story. It would hold for long enough to help their chances of success. Although the population was boiling with startled anger at the military occupation of an area backed off inland from this stretch of shore.

It was at least comforting that the creature had not made directly for a city. That implied that he felt his power to control human beings was limited, and that he preferred to come ashore in a relatively isolated spot.

The liner stood to nearly a mile offshore. It was nearly dark, but its lights showed brilliantly. Unless the creature

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had the power to sense the thoughts and intentions of human beings as well as their mere presence, he could not know of the ambush that awaited him. There would merely be individuals scattered, a few in groups, mostly separated, over several square miles.

It was hard to make out, even with binoculars, what was happening. Boats were being lowered, it seemed, and that was logical. But was the creature in one of them?

He was not. The first boats grounded on the beach. Their occupants, wild-eyed, drawn-faced, looked around superficially and then signaled back to the liner with the lamp. An advance party. Peter wished achingly that they could be kidnapped into freedom at once. But the creature had to be allowed to show himself. . . .

And he did.

Bowing, gesticulating, beating gongs and wailing, the misérables aboard the liner were carrying him on what looked like the top of a dining table upholstered with chair cushions, up to the largest lifeboat on the shoreward side. The range was too great for accuracy, probably, or the dark blob of the creature was too indistinct a target, so the gunners held fire. Peter wished he had Mary beside him, and then was glad that he had not, for he had not wanted her to take the risk this trip would involve, and she was better employed out at the Atlantica site.

The boat was lowered. As it descended, a hundred men and women, stripping off their clothes desperately, prepared to follow it down. They jumped, in a crazy human fountain, and vanished from sight. Sickly, the watchers prayed for them to reappear.

Some did not. But most did, and swam to the bow of the lifeboat to seize lines dangling in the water and begin towing it to shore. Peter's nails bit deep into his palms with the fury he had to suppress.

The boat was still a quarter of a mile from shore, when there was a sudden muted explosion, and the first shell ripped

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the bows of the lifeboat above the water line. In an instant, six more fired together.

And that was all.

After the explosions, there were screams, and Peter had begun to hope they were the creature's. He felt the anger and the pain just as he realized that they came from the shore around him, and he took two facts with him into the twilight consciousness which was all his mind could contain beside the pain.

The first was that the monster was unharmed. The second, that if his power to control human beings was truly limited, they had not found the limit.

XIII

IT WAS NOT quite as bad as it had been before, aboard the 'copter. But it lasted longer. And it did not permit escape into oblivion. That time, Peter reasoned when he was allowed to think his own thoughts for a few seconds, it had been an absent-minded stroke designed to incapacitate someone for whom the monster had no use. This had purpose behind it.

It was like a migraine in that it was in his head. It was more like the flaying of skin from a body already raw with burning in its savage intensity. He tried to fight it, knowing that others were doing the same, but there was only one way to obtain relief. Act as the monster desired.

Lights sprang up on the dusky shore. Men and women, both those from the liner and those who had been in ambush, staggered about as though blind. And they were screaming, in high, inhuman voices. The weakest stopped screaming first, and set to work on the tasks that did not displease their master.

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It was not easy to find what he wanted them to do, for no instructions were given; simply a continued torment until by chance the victim fell on the desired action. Then it was lifted a little, and as a child racked by stomach pains will lie frozen for hours in the position that causes least suffering, so they went frenziedly to work to avoid a return of the lashing.

Many died. The gunners who had dared to open fire on the creature sprayed their weapons at each other until they were ragged and bloody heaps beside their ruined guns. Some of the watchers, driven into the open, were struck down in this way. Most of them, though, survived.

Hating himself, unable to bear the agony, wishing that a shell had ripped through his guts during the firing, Peter found he was walking towards the water. Another crack of the mental whip and he was running, with hundreds of others, into the sea, and swimming towards the damaged lifeboat.

Coldly, from his improvised palanquin, the creature drove his subjects. That they should have attempted his life—and come so close to succeeding—both angered and alarmed him. It was alarming because it implied that his precautions had not been sufficient. They had found out where he was due to land, and been waiting for him. It made him angry because it was intolerable for inferior creatures to treat him thus.

But they would learn! He would show them their true status; show them that to him, they were no more than tools, to be used until they broke and then thrown away.

Since they had damaged his boat, let them repair it! He whipped and goaded and lashed, and into the ragged hole in the boat's bow a fat woman from the liner jammed her body, crying with the pain of it that was still less frightful than the pain of the master's displeasure. The hole was caulked. He urged the swimmers to drag the boat towards shore.

When it grounded on the beach, he gave them no respite. They must carry him on their shoulders, all the tons of him, and if they stumbled they must be taught better. If one was weak, let another take his place. They were expendable, the

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planet was crawling with them, there were millions and millions of them! He would take them, teach them, grind them down.

Now he would appropriate his first land-based city. He forced his new subjects forward, and as the caravan progressed he summoned others to join it.

By midnight, the train was thousands strong.

"But this is insanity!" said the President of the United States.

"Of course it is!" snapped Dr. Gordon, irritably shoving his glasses back on his nose. "We're dealing with a creature whose mind works differently from ours. It doesn't think as we do. It treats us like dirt!"

"That's so, Mr. President," confirmed an army psychologist. The atmosphere of the White House seemed to impress him less than most of the other hastily summoned outside delegates. He retained an armored calmness while others fidgeted and moved in their chairs. "We've picked up some of the poor so-and-so's who got left behind. They're exhausted, half-starved because they haven't been given time to feed themselves. Their minds are beaten down to the moron level and in some cases to total blankness. They're filthy, they are mostly covered with untreated sores or vermin. Or both. They've just been used to their maximum endurance and left to die."

"And you can't find out what's happened in Jacksonville?"

"Not a thing," said a four star general called Barghin, who had already presented the report demonstrating that Jacksonville, Florida, had been cut off from the world. He sounded weary, but patient, as though he were a good Republican and didn't expect a Democrat president to have more than the brains of a louse. "Every highway is blocked with wrecked cars, houses dynamited with the families still in them, even, on one road, with a pile of a hundred corpses. We tried to put a reconnaissance tank in across country. It stopped re-

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porting after ten minutes and aerial surveys showed it ran full speed into a gasoline storage tank and blew up. The crew had probably been blanked out like the search party that found the *Queen Alexandra*."

"What happened to the ship?" the president demanded.

"The dampers were pulled on the pile before they left her," a Navy spokesman answered. "When we got a party aboard, they found the engine room was a puddle of fused uranium and other stuff. It took us a whole night to decontaminate the search party. We took her in tow and she's being kept at sea till we get a ruling from the owners what to do with her. Can't bring her to port, she's radiating like crazy."

"What about aerial reconnaissance over Jacksonville?" The President was not to be put off.

"As usual," General Barghin sighed. "We have high-altitude TV planes circling the city, but clouds have been bad, and the two times we've tried to get remote-controlled ships down to below a thousand feet, they've been shot down. He got a coastal defense missile station along with the city, of course, and there are about sixty homing missiles of the Thunderhorse class in store there."

"Vassiliev was right," muttered Gordon despondently.

"What was that, Dr. Gordon?" the President rapped.

"The captain of the Soviet bathynerf," Gordon explained. "He said it would be safest to sink the *Queen Alexandra* with the monster aboard, using a nuclear torpedo if necessary."

"Agreed!" said General Barghin forcefully. "Something of the sort will become inevitable. Mr. President, there may be no limit to this creature's powers. He may ultimately enslave the whole United States, the world in fact!"

"I'm not going to authorize the construction of a nuclear missile without UN approval," the president said bluntly. "It took us years of squabbling to get rid of the damnable things, and I for one hope there'll never be another made on this

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planet! How about conventional missiles? Is there any way of pinpointing the exact location of the monster?"

"He could be anywhere in four or five hundred square miles," Barghin answered. "The limits of the blanked-out area have remained constant since early yesterday, when he took over Jacksonville, but it's unlikely he's remained at the geometrical center of it. He probably just chose the most convenient limits, geographically and demographically."

"And we daren't let it spread," the naval spokesman added in a tone of sepulchral gloom. "With a hydrogen warhead, it would be possible to make sure we don't miss; once he's extended his domains, we'd have to go on hitting till we got him, and that might use up several bombs."

"I think Washington should be evacuated," said Barghin suddenly. "Here, we're too damn close to the scene."

A knock came at the door, and the President grunted permission to enter. An aide placed a stack of photographs before him.

"These were taken from a scanner rocket flying too fast for countermissiles, Mr. President," he said. "A courier just delivered them and said they'd try again by daylight tomorrow. And there's a young woman and a Chinese from Atlantica who were sent to see Dr. Gordon."

The President glanced at Gordon, who nodded. "I'm expecting details of the creature's hideout," he said. "We found a kind of burrow in the mud that he emerged from. I think we should hear this right away."

The President gave a curt command, and the aide brought in Mary and a young Chinese of wiry build, who was introduced as Dr. Sun. Mary's face was drawn and expressionless. She clutched a thick portfolio of papers.

Acknowledging the President, she sat down next to Gordon. "Is there any news?" she said in a low voice.

"Of Peter? No, my dear, I'm afraid not. There hasn't been news of anyone who was within a mile of the beach when the

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creature came ashore, or of anyone between there and Jacksonville. The whole area has been cut off."

He tried not to make it sound hopeless, but he knew it was no good disguising the truth. Mary nodded, put her papers on the table, and sat with head downcast and hands folded.

"Could we hear from Dr. Sun?" Gordon proposed.

The Chinese spoke very good English, with hardly a trace of accent. He said, "As you know, your American deep-television camera showed us certain articles on the ocean floor, which we went to investigate in our comrades' bathy-nef. I was one of the special crew, for it was very very deep.

"We had time only to take a few things and many pictures, because the mud had again closed the mouth of the hole and we must spend three hours clearing it before beginning. But we did find much of interest. Mrs. Mary, please!"

Mary started and handed him pictures from her portfolio.

"There was many things like this," Sun said, holding up a picture of a large cylinder with a huge blunt hollow needle on the end. "We find traces of oxygen and of dried organic liquid inside. We hypothesize that the creature would drive the point through his hide into a vein-equivalent and thereby oxygenate his blood, which is perhaps the dried liquid we find in the hollow sharp end. There are of these perhaps thousands.

"There are also"—another picture, this time of ranked shelves full of shadowy black oblate forms—"what it is perhaps possible to call 'food.' Water is dissolving these big lumps, but we salvaged some, and their analysis shows they include many elements common to the skin and skeleton of the dead body which Dr. Trant discovered in Atlantica."

He was about to go on to another picture, when Gordon snapped his fingers and made an exclamation. Sun blinked at him, and courteously indicated that he should speak.

"Excuse me," he apologized. "But I have an idea. On the basis of what can be deduced about the creature's metabolism, could we synthesize a poison for him? A heavy poison

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gas, for example, which might be harmless or at worst merely dangerous to human beings?"

"God knows, Dr. Gordon," said the President. "But if it can be done, that would certainly be the solution. Barghin, see that the Department of Chemical Warfare gets all the necessary data, would you?"

Realizing he was being addressed, the general looked up with a start. "I'm sorry, Mr. President," he said. "I was just getting something out of these TV pictures of Jacksonville. I think I can guess where the monster is."

XIV

HE HAD BEEN one of the lucky ones. . . .

Peter found this out when at long last he had an hour to himself which he did not need to spend in exhausted sleep. He felt as though he had been whipped continually night and day for years. His face and hands were coated with grime, his beard was matted round his chin, and his clothes, still salt-encrusted from his mad rush into the ocean, were torn and soiled. He had not looked at himself in a mirror. He did not need to know that his eyes were red-rimmed and his cheeks suddenly sunken like an old man's.

What little food he had had lately had been snatched from abandoned stores or delivery trucks. Sometimes he had taken crusts of bread from garbage cans, when there was no time to go hunting for something better and he was too hungry to go without.

The city had stopped when the master took it over. He did not care about the needs of his subjects. They could eat what there was, so long as it lasted, and when they died of hunger there were millions more he could whip into his domain. The

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only sign of concern he had shown in this direction was to drive a loaded cargo ship into the roads of the harbor. When it broke up against the sea wall it proved to be a banana boat, and men were allowed to stagger through the city with crates of bananas on their backs.

There were no cars or trucks moving in Jacksonville. The wide streets, laid out anew after the great disaster of '65, when a missile from the coastal defense base fell during practice firings and wrecked the heart of the town, were empty except for men, women and children on feet. Cars, it seemed, were not for human beings. Owners of vehicles had been compelled to drive them to a great junkyard at the city limits, where other men drenched them with gasoline and set them alight. That had been one of Peter's first duties after staggering into the town.

He was getting quite clever at realizing what the master wanted done. They all were. It was necessary for survival. The stupid were useless.

Fresh in his memory, haunting him like a scar, was the fate of one of the stupid or defiant ones; a man as thin as a beanpole, whose whole being seemed to consist in his nervous energy. He had resisted some order, though the pain was making his tendons stand out like knotted cord on the backs of his hands. Peter had seen how pain whipped another man, a few paces away, who was wielding a gasoline hose to feed the great fire of cars. This man had drenched the defiant one from head to foot, and then, dragging his feet, fighting to the last, the thin frame had walked towards the flames. . . .

Yes, Peter had been lucky.

His tasks, after the wrecking of the cars, had been many. But not insupportable. There had been the need to collect certain strange things, from warehouses, abandoned workshops, drugstores especially. He was one of an army of perhaps a thousand engaged on this work, who converged later on the square in front of City Hall where the master had taken up residence. He had had walls blown out of the way when

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he found the small human doors cramping for his bulk. Likewise, as Peter later saw, he was having those parts of the city which offended him dynamited without caring about people who might be crushed by falling ruins.

Working mechanically, able to think a little as he worked, Peter had decided that the incongruous mixture of substances he and others had gathered must be intended to feed the master. Certainly the elements reported in the analysis of the hide and skeleton of the other monster could all be found in this crazy pile. He would have liked to witness the master's meal, but instead, he was driven away to join a gang clearing rubble from a dynamited building.

He had toiled at that for twenty-four hours without interruption, and was nearly dead with fatigue and the coughing caused by concrete dust, when a lash fell on the whole corps of workmen. They dropped their tools and clenched their blistered hands, wondering.

Then someone found that if he moved towards City Hall, the pain stopped. They all moved, like an avalanche. Others came, too, pouring into the square. There they stopped, waiting. Some of them fell asleep. There was no room to lie down when the crowds thickened, so they leaned against their neighbors, and their neighbors had not strength to push them away.

Someone near where Peter was standing had taken cigarettes from a store as they passed. Peter took one, expecting to find that this was forbidden and pain would follow. It did not. Gratefully, he drew in the relaxing smoke, and then found that his dust-irritated throat could not stand it. He was forced to trample it underfoot.

Then there was a stir, and out on to a platform in front of City Hall, built of bronze cladding from a demolished office block and decorated with stained glass ripped from a nearby church, came people. Ten men; ten women. Clean. Dressed in neat clothes. Pallid, but calm. They ranged themselves on either side of the platform, and the dull, dirty crowd

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looked at them enviously but not understanding why they were still clean and neat,

Then, to the beating of a great brass gong, the master appeared. He was borne shoulder-high by twenty big men, white and black in equal numbers. Behind him, idiotically, came a group of choirboys in surplices, waving censers and chanting something too faint for the words to be distinguished.

The bearers set the master down, and there were shudders that ran through the crowd as many of the watchers saw what was ruling them for the first time. Peter was shocked. The thing had grown! Added another segment to its body, he thought. Added a ton or more to its weight. . . .

One of the neatly dressed men who had come out first suddenly staggered, as though struck by a blow. He recovered himself and came forward to face the square.

"The master commands me to speak to you!" he shouted, and a hint of pain tingled in every listening mind. "The master orders me to tell you the truth! We are arrogant, worthless insects. A hundred thousand years ago we were the subjects of the masters. They came to us from a world under another star, and found us naked, grubbing in the dirt, with tools of bone and stone, fit only to be slaves, without an original idea of our own. All we know we learned from the masters, and when our master came back from the sea, we attempted to kill him! We failed, but we must be punished. And we must learn the respect which is proper to a superior race!"

There was something tantalizingly familiar about that voice, but it was raised to a shout that was almost a yell, and depersonalized. Peter's eyes were too bleared with concrete dust for him to see the speaker's face.

"We must do him honor in a suitable way. We must speak of his powers, his intelligence, his length of life, his knowledge. We must sing to his praise, bow down before him, serve him because he is greater than we are."

A stir of discontent in the crowd; a sting of cruel pain, and it was stilled.

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"Sing!" yelled the man on the platform, and the choirboys, stumbling forward as though dragging chains on their feet, began to raise a familiar melody in piping voices.

Peter had not had a religious upbringing. Nonetheless, he was shocked as he suddenly realized they were singing *Old Hundred*. . . .

"No! Never! Blasphemy!" The hysterical cry rang out at the front of the crowd, and a wild-faced woman was suddenly trying to scramble on to the platform and reach the master's palanquin. As her head appeared above the edge, the man who had been speaking drew back his foot and kicked.

Pain stilled the yells of anger. A few hesitant voices began to fumble with the words, and the pain eased. Slowly, draggingly, the helpless slaves lined out the ultimate mockery.

*"Praise, laud and bless his name always,
For it is seemly so to do."*

In the interval before the next verse a child could be heard crying very distinctly. Before the end of the next line, it had stopped. Probably forever.

They finished with the fourth verse, presumably because the master decided Christian theology was hardly applicable to him, and stood waiting for further orders with the last line ringing in their minds: "And shall from age to age endure!"

It seemed only too probable.

A whining passed overhead, and they looked up. Something very swift, leaving a vapor trail, although it was at low altitude, had rushed across the chilly autumn sky. They had heard the same sound before. Peter judged that the people outside were attempting to discover what was going on by using photographic reconnaissance rockets or scanner missiles. Yes, almost certainly, for the whining passed a second time, and a third. Straining tired eyes, Peter caught a glimpse of light gleaming on metal, or perhaps of glowing exhausts.

It was hard to believe that there were still on Earth men who were masters of their own minds.

Abruptly, he saw that the master had been carried back

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indoors, and that the crowd was dispersing. The movement he was involved in was going to carry him close to the platform from which they had been addressed. He went along with it automatically, for that was the first lesson one learned under the lash.

Defiantly, tensely, the ten men and ten women in neat clothing returned the hate-filled stares of their less fortunate fellows. What had made the master single these out? Peter wondered. Perhaps he could not in fact control the whole population of the world. Perhaps he intended to train a corps of collaborators, Quislings, who would make his authority effective.

But what could lead any man to co-operate willingly with such a vicious tyrant? Seeking a clue in these impassive faces, Peter scanned them—and recognized Luke.

Luke recognized him at the same time, and seemed to be on the point of saying something. Peter spat conspicuously and went on shuffling past the platform.

Luke glanced around nervously, and then stooped so as to be able to whisper. "Peter!" he said. "Peter, there will be a free hour now, I think. Meet me where they burned all the cars!"

"I know what you must think of me," Luke said, not meeting Peter's eyes but staring at the rusting heap of scrap which recently had been Detroit's finest. "It's what I think of myself, too. But until you've sensed that power of his directed at you as an individual . . . Keep in the mass if you can; it's not so bad when it's generalized. I've had that too; I know.

"His powers are limited, Peter. And he's made some errors that could be fatal. Because he found us primitive when he first came to Earth, he thinks we're primitive still, so it's up to us to pander to that illusion. The longer we can keep him contented with just this one city and its environs, the better chance they'll have outside of getting the better of him."

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"Hence the hymn singing?" asked Peter grimly.

"Exactly! I picked *Old Hundred* because it could be read as drooling with praise for his superior talents—and also because enough people know the words for it to sound as though the crowd meant what they were singing. Peter, I daren't be long away from him. If he gets suspicious of me, I'm done for. I've seen it happen already. Some of the others he's picked are genuine bastards. There's an old-time prison governor from Alabama who was here on vacation, and a genuine sadist like I never saw before. There's a first-class Quisling-type woman. They don't run much risk; they're convinced, and they're scared. They all hate their fellow men so bad they don't care what happens to them. They're glad of the chance to help out.

"But before I have to go, listen carefully. Right now, no one would have a hope in hell of getting outside. The highways are blocked, any attempt to get an aircraft in is met with missiles. They shot down two already, and they're doing a conversion job on the *Thunderhorse* to enable it to knock down the scanner missiles that have been coming over, too. That damned monster *has* got technical knowledge. He's making the engineers do things I never dreamed of, even though I give them the orders.

"This *may* change. If it does, and you can get away, say that—"

Something went overhead, howling. They ducked instinctively. Before they could raise their heads again, a vast plume of white smoke had gone up from approximately the area of the city hall. And there was the flat *crump* of an explosion.

They looked at each other with sudden wild hope, and Peter was opening his mouth to speak when the impact of pain and an anger greater than ever told them that the attempt had been a failure.

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XV

"I THINK we can take it the result was negligible," said General Barghin heavily. "We got City Hall okay. We learned that much before they took out the scanner missile. But the warhead was only a ton, conventional."

Mud squelched around his feet as he shifted uncomfortably. The field headquarters was under canvas and ready for evacuation at fifteen minutes' notice, as was the entire crescent of the—not defenses; cordon was a better term. A line of men and weapons intended to contain what seemed quite happy to remain where it was.

Dr. Gordon waited to see if anyone else was going to speak. No one did. He coughed and said, "General, I thought you were using scanner missiles because they were too fast to shoot down?"

"We were," agreed Barghin. "*Thunderhorses* oughtn't to be able to catch them. One did. We're flying a series of nuisance raids at the moment, trying to provoke them into using up their stocks. They had about sixty. So far we've made them use eleven. But how much that will help, God knows. The monster's liable to be in a hell of a temper after what we did to him, and if he knows how to soup up *Thunderhorses* to hit scanner missiles flying at two thousand per hour, I wouldn't put it past him to build 'em out of used car parts."

"Anything on the chemical line of approach?" asked a listening colonel. "Someone said—"

"You can't expect results in a hurry on that side," Gordon interrupted. "They have some of the biggest computers in the country working on the job. And so have the Russkis. But they're handicapped! How'd you like to have to figure out that the quickest way to stop a human being was potassium

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cyanide if all you had at hand was a bit of mummified skin and a skeleton?"

"I see your point," said the colonel dryly.

A runner threw back the tent flap and ducked to avoid the swinging lamp. "Signal, general," he said, saluting. "And more to come, looks like."

Barghin took the scribbled note. "Looks like the cue for Mechanical Shovel," he said cryptically. "Let's hope this one works. Colonel, get me a breakdown of all the weapons larger than small arms known to have been in the Jacksonville area prior to the monster's arrival."

The colonel dodged out in the runner's wake.

City Hall was a pile of rubble, its roof caved in and its walls bellied out. But the strength of the signal from within proved that the master had been able to survive even this.

After all, Peter realized, he'd taken the pressure of the deep Atlantic. A stack of loose debris probably wouldn't even dent his hide.

They were among the last to reach the spot. A gang of at least a thousand men and women were at work on the rubble, manhandling it away, throwing it into the square. Peter joined in on the end of a chain, with Luke beside him, catching lumps of concrete and dumping them.

A jagged five-pound block hurtled through the air towards Luke. Too late, Peter realized that Luke had not yet turned back from dropping its predecessor, and tried to catch it. He missed.

Luke's head suddenly caved in from behind. For a moment he showed signs of startled pain. Then he tumbled forward on his face, and blood began to well out under his hair. Peter made to bend and see if there was any help for him, but a new jolt of pain reminded him that the master cared nothing about the fate of his subjects.

At least he could be given a burial. Peter contrived to

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make a sort of cairn above his friend's body, and then to move away and heap the debris elsewhere.

Like slaves toiling to build the pyramids, Peter thought. And at the whim of a far worse master than a Pharaoh. . . .

There were probably other bodies under the heaped rubble when they finally extricated the master, with ropes and brute strength. Some had to wash his hide until it was glossy and clean; some had to hunt material and build a new palanquin for him. Then they all had to carry him, chanting *Old Hundred*, to a large church five blocks away, and install him there in new splendor.

Twice during the proceedings there were sharp, crackling explosions from overhead, and once what looked like the nose cone of a missile ploughed a bloody furrow through a group of workmen. Nobody was allowed to help the dying. Even the elemental compassion of breaking in their skulls with a heavy block to end their suffering was rewarded by another gust of agony.

Either the master was panicking, or he was determined to make what he regarded as idiots understand he meant what his spokesmen had said.

What were the rest of the enslaved population doing? Peter tried to get a clue from staring about him while they were carrying the master to his new abode. Some of them, doubtless, would be at the missile base, manhandling fifty-ton rockets. Some were probably compelled to scout the perimeter of the master's domains, so that they could be driven to hunt down would-be intruders. Some were engaged in clearing the ruins of the buildings that had earlier been dynamited, and in laying paving. And some were engaged on a special task.

...

Down one of the main streets that crossed next to the old church, men and women were laboriously pushing laden handcarts. The carts were piled with weapons: carbines, sporting guns, automatics, together with ammunition for them;

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and besides these, axes, butcher knives, even cutlasses and swords that must have been taken from a museum.

"Can you handle firearms?" they were saying wearily as they passed among the crowd. Those who answered affirmatively received guns. Those who did not, mostly women, were given knives or axes or hatchets.

He's forming an army, Peter told himself silently. So he does know his powers are limited!

He was so elated by the realization that the master could no longer intend to handle his opponents out of his personal resources that he was taken by surprise when the weapons-bearers came to him and asked him the monotonous question. "Can you handle firearms?"

He couldn't lie, he knew. And in any case to say no would mean receiving a cutting weapon that could not run out of ammunition. What was the least deadly of firearms? He said cautiously, "I can handle a .22 pistol."

It was the truth. He could also handle machine guns, carbines, repeating rifles and many more deadly weapons. But the weapons-bearer did not stop to ask questions. He thrust a little target pistol and a box of shells into Peter's hands and pushed past.

There was a lull now, while the rest of the weapons were given out. Peter wondered if he dared drop his gun down an open sewer somewhere, and so avert the risk of behaving as the gunners on the beach had done with their cannons. But someone else was trying it, refusing to keep the axe he had been allotted and shouting that he was a pacifist and had never used violence and never would.

Some spirits were still burning bright. But the poor devil was being tormented and lashed. It could be seen in his eyes. In the end, he accepted the axe and sprawled fainting, the axe held tightly in his hands.

Peter walked blankly down the street looking for food. One of the many cases of bananas which had been brought ashore from the wrecked cargo ship caught his attention, and he

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found that it still held two or three hands of blackened fruit. He ate frantically. A woman with one eye turned to a red pit came and mutely held out bleeding hands to him, and he gave her half of what he had found, less out of pure fellow-feeling than because he was suddenly overwhelmed with joy that Mary was not in the same pitiable condition. Unless another of the monsters turned up, she was safe out at the Atlantica site. Probably safer than anywhere else on Earth.

If she was still there, and hadn't done something crazy like insisting on joining a rescue operation.

But he didn't like to think of possibilities like that. For that reason, he had thought as little as he could about Mary these last few days. He always ended up picturing her either crushed to death like poor Luke, or in a state like the one-eyed woman. It was better not to think, just to sit passively and endure.

Until at last the order came for the army to advance.

"Missiles over New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond and Savannah," was the report. Barghin's face grew suddenly grave.

"Thank God there's no uranium or other fissile material down there," he said. "We'll just have to pray that this monster doesn't know how to make H-bombs out of old tin cans. What damage did the missiles do?"

"Co-ordinating the reports now, sir," the radioman replied. "No serious damage in New York. It exploded before it hit. The worst seems to be in Richmond. It hit a supermarket, and they're still digging out corpses.

"Washington reports panic along most of the eastern seaboard. People have fled to the woods in New England, and all major highways are choked with cars. Crowds have been besieging seaports and fighting their way aboard ship. One freighter has had to put out from Boston at gunpoint."

"What's the President doing?"

"He's in Minnesota somewhere at an emergency hideout

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left over from the Cold War. Reports are he will broadcast to the nation this evening."

"Get me evacuation reports."

The radioman switched to another circuit and fired crisp questions. "Complete for a depth of thirty miles," he said. "They're opening refugee centers in Atlanta, Birmingham and Montgomery. Only, a hell of a lot of people are lighting out from there now they know about the evacuation."

"Go west, you fool!" said Barghin humorlessly. "Any further contact with those poor bastards from Jacksonville?"

"Light small arms engagements all along the western quadrant of the front. Detachment commanders report they've almost completed their withdrawal."

"Okay. I only hope we get some of them back with their minds intact. Mechanical Shovel had better begin now. And have someone move in a couple of countermissile groups. I don't want any more of those souped-up *Thunderhorses* to get more than a mile from their base!"

Chanting in obedience to the mental whip, marching in rhythm with gongs and drums, the army started out in gathering darkness. Some limped. Some tried to lag and were driven remorselessly back to their place in the line.

A few keeled over, and the columns parted when they came to the place where the bodies lay.

Men had done this to each other, too. Feeling the habit of marching taking over from his conscious volition, Peter had visions of other armies of history. They had thought men were finished with such cruel stupidity. Perhaps this last time was going to set the seal of guarantee on the hope.

They came to the roadblocks marking the limit of the master's dominion, and scrambled over or went around. The vanguard reformed. They plodded ahead.

Peter was toward the rear of his column. In the night he could see only a few paces ahead. It took him completely by

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surprise when shots rang out and he was suddenly goaded to raise his pistol and shoot it.

If they were going to waste ammunition like this, he would escape the hell of having to shoot his fellow men.

Lights sprang up, concealed in bushes and isolated houses. The army scattered. Some were compelled to charge forward, firing wildly. But there was no counterfire, and they advanced again to find that the men who had turned on the lights had left their posts and retreated.

The pattern was the same for more than an hour: lights; an attack; discovery of a deserted post. An air of uncertainty which Peter was sure was communicated from the master hung over the army. And then—

Half-tracked trucks, troop carriers, ambulances; a fantastic menagerie of vehicles covered in armor lumbered out of the night. There were sharp rifle-cracks, and mingled with them dull plopping noises like mortar fire. With every *plop* a net sprang from a device attached to one of the vehicles, trapped men and women like birds in a snare, and closed itself automatically. Derricks unfolded, grabbed the filled nets, loaded them with their human cargo into the vehicles. Screams rang out, and shots flew wild over the countryside.

But before more than half the "army" had been thus ignominiously captured, Peter and the rest who were still at large were compelled to turn and run.

Of course! Marvelling at the ingenuity that had sent robot-controlled machines to save them, he obediently fled.

XVI

"THERE's no doubt that the tide is beginning to turn, Mr. President," Barghin told the telephone. "We've brought down all the four missiles that have been launched from Jackson-

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ville since that salvo yesterday, and Operation Mechanical Shovel was a pretty fair success." He listened. "Yes, I still want UN permission to build that nuclear missile. The risk is that so far the monster may merely have been underestimating us, and has tricks he hasn't used yet. I don't know about the biological warfare proposal. I'm expecting a report in a short while and a summary of the progress to date will come to you anyway."

He said goodbye and hung up. Then he sat back in his chair. They'd taken the command headquarters out from under canvas and put it in one of the vehicles that had come back from Mechanical Shovel. The trick wouldn't work twice. It was a decided improvement not to be squelching in wet earth.

"Dr. Gordon and Mrs. Trant, sir," said an orderly, poking his head around the door. The general nodded and got up to receive his visitors.

Mary was looking curiously pale but almost luminous. She was more beautiful than ever, but her beauty seemed to have retreated inside and to be lighting the skin drawn over her facial bones as a lightbulb illuminates a globe surrounding it. Gordon was puffy with tiredness, but he at least managed a smile.

"You've been round?" Barghin ventured, after offering cigarettes.

"Yes," said Mary despondently. "After we went through the live casualties, we inspected the dead ones. No sign of Peter."

"I'm sorry," said Barghin inadequately.

"I'm getting used to the idea of not seeing him again," Mary said. "Making myself get used to it. In a way I'm not sorry he wasn't one of those people picked up by your operation. I don't think if he'd lived through that horror he would ever again be the same man I used to know."

"They're in a pretty bad state," confirmed Gordon.

"I know," sighed Barghin. "It looks as if the monster made

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them go mad when the nets closed over them. They lashed out at each other with their knives, fired their guns . . . But we have amazingly good medical facilities here, you know."

"It's not their physical injuries," said Mary. "It's the damage to their minds. The apathy! The delirious ravings!"

"They can't all be like that," Barghin said. "They'd be useless to the monster if they were."

It was a crumb of hope, all he could in honesty offer. Mary acknowledged it with a miserable nod, and Gordon coughed and shuffled papers out of his pockets.

"We have some progress to report," he said. "I've been commuting between Atlantica, where they're digging out what's left of the monster's refuge, and John Hopkins.

"Assuming that the dried substance they found in the hollow needles attached to the oxygen bottles—you remember Dr. Sun reporting that at the White House?" Barghin nodded.

"Well, it was contaminated with sea water, of course, but they got rid of that, and they've identified the substance which acts as a hemoglobin equivalent. It behaves in the same manner—gives up oxygen in exchange for CO_2 —which is very unfortunate."

"Why?"

"Because this means that human poisons which act like, say, potassium cyanide, by interfering with the supply of oxygen to the tissues, will also be fatal to the monster. By extension, anything which kills the monster will probably kill human beings."

"Bad. Go on."

Gordon shrugged. "Well, this opens a whole possible range of poisons, and then shuts it up again if we still intend to try and spare the lives of as many people as possible. I don't see what else we can do. What we must do, they suggest, is prepare missiles loaded with poisons of various sorts, including potassium cyanide although that's so volatile we'd have to score a direct hit, and attempt to establish where the monster moved his headquarters to after we wrecked City Hall."

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"And how do they propose we do that?" Barghin's tone was heavy with irony. "We haven't had a picture of Jacksonville since the monster figured out how to bring down our fastest scanner missiles. We have faster ones, of course, but they won't give us pictures we can use."

"That's up to you, general, I'm afraid. Or rather, to the technical experts. By the way, I told Vassiliev about this, out at the Atlantica site, and from what he said I think we can expect something rather special in the way of Soviet electron-amplifiers shortly. That might be the answer to getting usable pictures from a super-fast missile."

"Could be."

"It had better be! Everything we've come up with depends on knowing the monster's whereabouts. For example, we deduce that the monster's oxygen requirements are higher than those of human beings, because of his far greater bulk. Consequently he probably suffocates more quickly, so if he could be trapped in a sea of liquid fire that would finish him. Unfortunately, we know he can exist at a hibernation level for a hundred thousand years. He might just possibly be able to retreat into hibernation before the lack of oxygen actually killed him." Gordon spread his hands.

"And in any case," said Barghin, "he's intelligent enough to realize that if he hadn't shown himself at City Hall in front of that crowd of admirers we wouldn't have brought it down about his ears so rapidly. He's probably not taking any more risks of that kind."

"We should have put twenty missiles into that city hall instead of just one," Gordon mourned. "Or followed it up with napalm, to seal him from his oxygen supply."

"I was speaking to the President just now," Barghin said, after a pause. "He's applying to an emergency session of the UN today for permission to assemble a one-kiloton warhead."

"I heard. At least, I heard rumors. The lunatic fringe is saying it should have been done long ago, and I suppose in a way they're right. Vassiliev said so, when the monster was

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still only in control of the *Queen Axexandra*. And I think you said so when it first moved into Jacksonville."

"I had hopes. So I didn't press the point." Barghin lit a cigaret and leaned back in his chair.

"What's it like outside?" he said. "I'm concentrating so damned much on Jacksonville I don't know what's happened."

Mary broke her long silence. "It's *terrible*," she said.

"It could be a lot worse," Gordon objected. "The refugee movements have slowed to a trickle, as you probably know. The Navy got back the freighter that was kidnapped. Aside from that, there's just a sort of general insanity in the air. Old women seeing alien monsters in every street corner shadow; people playing the game of 'What I'd do if I were running this thing'; news commentators clamoring for use of a nuclear missile and others pleading for the lives of the poor trapped citizens."

"News commentators," said Barghin. "I had to have one brought down by the Air Force yesterday. He was determined to parachute into Jacksonville and radio back an on-the-spot story. But in general I must say the press has been wonderfully co-operative. If they'd lost their heads the country would have been in an insane panic by now."

"Maybe not. Since that program about Martian invaders they broadcast back before World War II, people have been very skeptical about alien monsters. I wish this one was a script writer's nightmare and not ours."

"General, I've been wondering," said Mary suddenly. "If this monster is so powerful, why does he make people act out these phony ceremonies?"

"These bowing and scraping and praising affairs? The psychologists have been at that one, and given me a workable theory for once. They assume that because this race is very long-lived, the reproductive urge is negligible. But any theory of an intelligent life-form demands some central pivot on which the personality turns. They propose that this power to inflict pain on other creatures and the urge to dominate them

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corresponds to our sex-urge in the place it occupies in the monster's mind. That's roughly it. They gave it to me loaded with technical jargon. So the monster probably gratifies itself with this lip-service.

"Alternatively, it may be even simpler. It may just be that it's hard work for him to keep watch on thousands of people continually, and he finds it—or used to find it—worth conditioning his slaves into accepting that he was a superior being by the laws of nature, and so to lessen the chance of their rebelling against him."

"The second one sounds more probable," Mary said judiciously. "After all, if it wasn't hard work for him to control large numbers of people, he'd have conquered the country and perhaps the world by now." Her lower lip trembled, and suddenly her self-possession fell in fragments. Startled, her companions tried to comfort her, but she began to sob, deep painful surges of frightened misery.

"I hope Peter's dead!" she choked out at last. "It would be better to die than live the way *he* wants us to!"

It was beginning to appear that he had made a mistake.

Accustomed to instant service from a race of primitives, and under the continued illusion that the catastrophe which had overwhelmed the world he knew had taken place barely a few days ago, he had assumed that he could tackle the teeming millions of human beings without help. But the human beings he had to contend with now were a very long way from being primitive. They were even able to outwit him sometimes.

For instance, the way they had located his headquarters and brought it down with an accurately aimed missile. He had retaliated, of course, but he lacked the resources to wreak significant damage. And they had found an answer to all the improvements he had ordered effected in the stock of missiles he had captured. Again, he lacked the resources to do more. They had brilliantly thwarted his attempt to use his

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subjects as an army, by sending robot devices out instead of living creatures that he could control. And the effort of hammering the fact of his superiority into the thick heads of his subjects was steadily draining his own strength again.

Their strength was diminishing, too. Their food was running short, and although he had sent out scavenging parties to collect bodies from the streets and the surrounding country, he had to compel them to eat the proceeds of these expeditions, which hardly seemed worth the trouble.

He would have to resign himself to the fact that these people were intractable and unteachable. He could not find sufficient suitable deputies to replace those who had been killed in the wreck of the city hall, and thus lighten the task of driving the mob. He would simply have to use brute force, discarding the exhausted ones and replacing them. If only he had not decided to proceed alone!

But almost certainly he was alone in any case. Most others of his fellows had been so corrupted by the ease and comfort of Earth that they would have waited till it was too late to prepare themselves secure retreats. Like that stupid one, Ruagh, who had come begging for aid.

To tackle the problem of resources he needed more strength. Therefore he must be fed. It was hard to make do with what he could find in the city, but it would be long before he could train biochemists to synthesize his preferred nutriment in the quantities he would require. He must take what he could get.

Some days passed in the provision of his wants. Certain essential elements had to be hunted down carefully. And the human material he had to work with was diminishing rapidly.

He was still completing his extended meal when the new missile cut the sky over the city. It went so fast he could barely sense it; no human eye could have noticed it. He gave pain to the humans at the nearby missile station, but despite all the improvements to them the *Thunderhorses* missed the new intruder by thousands of feet.

Still, he was not visible, he consoled himself. The only risk

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of revealing his whereabouts lay in the stocks of nutriment heaped up before the door of the church where he hid.

That was one reason why the missile that crashed through the roof an hour later came as such a tremendous shock. Another followed it, and then a third. The other reason was that these were not loaded with explosive, but with a poison that would infallibly have killed him if he had not been alert and watchful.

He saved himself by retreating into temporary catatonia, to let the potassium cyanide vapor dilute and disperse. When he resumed full metabolic activity, his mind was made up.

The reconquest of Earth must be a long-term project.

XVII

THE CORDON was, on the landward side, a crescent about fifty miles in total length and disposed irregularly in depth. Its forward outposts were all remote-controlled. Most of them were fixed scanner stations. Some few were robot vehicles, light tanks and scout cars., but these were not much more useful than the fixed ones. Any attempt to drive them into the monster's territory resulted in their path being blocked by groups of desperate slaves, and it was more than they could bring themselves to do to plough ahead through a wall of human bodies.

On the seaward side, some twenty naval vessels patrolled, including submarines. Since the episode of the banana boat that had unaccountably sailed into the sea wall at Jacksonville, it had been imperative to keep all ships well clear of the area.

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Overhead, occasionally and for short periods only because of its immense fuel requirements, raced their one "eye." It was a war rocket equipped with a crude scanner and capable of five thousand miles an hour in low-level flight. From the indistinct signals it picked up they could construct, using an adaptation of an electron-amplifier in use at Pulkovo Observatory for studying the spectra of faint stars, large still pictures of the city. It was a secondhand kind of process. They could never have an idea of the situation until it was already changed.

By now, though, they were cautiously assuming that the outline would not alter significantly; that the monster already had as many people as he could conveniently control, and would not attempt to extend his dominion in the immediate future. The information they had received from the people retrieved by Operation Mechanical Shovel had enabled them to zero in the cyanide-laden rockets they had dumped into the church. But at any one time their missile resources were restricted. The disarmament agreements that had so painfully been put into force had had the result of replacing the bludgeon with the surgeon's knife, and all the missiles they could call on from existing stocks were designed either for the purely defensive purpose of hitting incoming missiles at high altitude or for police work, excising carefully delineated local targets.

The psychologists, digesting their data, were becoming more confident, and their confidence was contagious. Everything pointed to the monster having overreached himself; misjudged the power of human beings to oppose him without panicking. If this were true, then by striking with precision and at irregular intervals directly at the monster, they could compel him to lose himself in a neverending series of precautions for his own safety each of which would be frustrated by an attack from a different quarter.

It looked as if it were beginning to work.

Therefore, although the authority had been obtained to construct a one-kiloton nuclear warhead and a suitable missile

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to carry it, they remained determined to keep that as a last resort. Ideas for new local attacks kept pouring in as the information obtained from study of the monster's undersea refuge and from the hide and skeleton of his dead companion was converted into principles of procedure.

A picture received from the scanner rocket showed them that the monster had set eight hundred people to work on excavating an underground refuge for him. Apparently he had been sufficiently shaken by the near-miss with the cyanide to stop trusting himself to surface buildings. They allowed the work to progress almost to completion. Then they sent in a volley of four earth-movers; missiles designed to penetrate anything softer than concrete and explode at predetermined depths. The carefully burrowed-out refuge collapsed obediently, and the work had to begin again.

And as often as they could they located his new hiding place and put ordinary flare-rockets into the locality, not with the intention of doing serious harm, merely to indicate that they knew where he was, and were holding their fire because of the human beings within range of anything big enough to do him permanent damage. They had discovered from the returned slaves that the monster was no longer quite so wasteful with his subjects. It seemed that he must have given up hope of bringing any significantly larger number of people under his orders, and was therefore conserving what he had.

Sooner or later, they would wear him down, and whereas it was a certainty that the use of a nuclear missile to finish the job would kill ninety per cent of the survivors, it was only a risk that in the throes of ultimate despair the monster would drag them down with him. They resigned themselves accordingly to a war of attrition.

And then . . .

"What? *All* of them?" Barghin bellowed.

"The reports say so, sir," the radioman confirmed. "The entire population of Brunswick which hasn't been evacu-

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ated, the whole of Savannah, and just about everywhere in between."

"Get me a 'copter and alert every detachment we've got in the area," Barghin ordered.

"Won't be a lot of help, sir," the radioman ventured. "It says that there haven't been any reports for nearly an hour from any of the troops we had on the fringe of the evacuated area between Jacksonville and Brunswick, and they're afraid they were the first to get on the move."

"Close the gap by remote-controlled vehicles, everything we have. And get me the 'copter, *fast!*"

In the whole history of the United States there had never been anything like this. But there had been in Europe, in wartime. A whole population on the move, by the thousands and then by tens of thousands. Some in cars, some *on* cars, some on foot. When they choked the roads, they overflowed across the country; puzzled, attempting to turn back sometimes, and learning very quickly that that was useless.

Blackening the highway as far as the eye could reach. In the field of his binoculars, Barghin could pick out sudden individual tragedies. There was a mother whose young child could walk no longer, trying to stop and let it rest, being forbidden to by the awful pain and having to stumble on blindly weeping, while the child was left to sob alone. A cripple, one of whose crutches had splintered, trying vainly to get someone to stop and help him get to his feet, and in the end being compelled to crawl because so long as he kept moving the pain abated. And a thousand more.

Barghin located the level at which the pain began to effect him and his pilot. Gasping, they let the automatic controls take them up until they were out of range again, and then Barghin began to marshal his forces.

There was no question of halting this movement by conventional methods of roadblocks or by troops. Roadblocks were by passed, or desperately broken down with bleeding hands. Troops could bear the pain no better than anyone else

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and were among the first to turn aside and continue the trudge towards Jacksonville.

The robot vehicles which had served in Operation Mechanical Shovel just reached the fringe of the evacuated area before the vanguard of the column. Slammed together, tires punctured and radiators ripped open, they expired in the path of the herded victims, forming a wall of metal. At first the oncomers were slowed. Then the inexorable pressure from behind crushed them forwards again, and some began to climb on the bodies of the weak. Those in cars had to abandon their vehicles and join the marchers. Like ants, the river of people flowed up and over the obstacle, and went on.

Harshly, Barghin ordered the blowing-up of overpasses and bridges, but this hardly hindered at all. A man can go, if he is driven to it, where a mountain goat would lose its footing. Some fell by the way, but not enough to thin the ranks noticeably. Was there *no* stopping them?

No, there was not. Even the last chance, the sowing of a curtain of blazing napalm across their path, brought such hideous results—when the head of the column was compelled to blanket the flames with their own bodies so that those behind could pass over—that they could not continue with it.

All that day and night they went on, unstoppable, unheeding of anything but a respite from the awful pain that goaded them. And then, when just under a million survivors had vanished into the blank area around Jacksonville, they stopped.

White-faced, the authorities realized that this new influx rendered it inconceivable that they should use their nuclear missile against the town. And white-faced, the population at large clamored for it to be used at once. . . .

It had long ago become difficult for Peter to believe that the outside world still existed. His last link with it was gone. He no longer saw, as he trudged about the city, faces that he

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remembered as having been among the first of the master's subjects.

He had been very ill for a time. An epidemic of fever had run through the city, perhaps because of the rotting corpses which had never been buried. Dogs had kept the carrion under control for a short while, but one day the master had sent out a group with axes to hunt down and kill the animals that still ran through the streets, and that had become their last supply of fresh meat.

While he was feverish, but still working, still slaving, he had seen Mary's face in every woman's features, and the effect of this had been far-reaching. When he looked the second time, of course, he saw the reality. Filth, running sores, bleared eyes and rotting teeth. And his delirious mind had equated the two. Mary was dead. That was a thing he had discovered at the peak of the fever, when he had gone around tugging at people's arms and telling them, "My wife is dead!"

Sometimes they answered, "I hope to God mine is!" Sometimes they said, "Go to hell!" And most often, they did not even hear what he said to them.

His arm had been broken some time during this period. The same blow had embedded dirt in his bruised skin, and by the time he began to think coherently again, and to remember that that had been when the earth-mover missiles brought down the roof of the underground refuge they had made for the master, it was vastly swollen with blue-green-yellow pus. It ached continually.

Because of that, and because of the dullness of his mind, he did not realize for some time that the master was no longer whipping him on.

It was like a blinding vision when he localized the pain into his arm. It seemed to trigger him out of his half-world of gray and into the real world again. He found he was sitting on a broken sidewalk. A gang was working in a building across the road, doing something with fire and hand tools. Making

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things. Why had he not been driven to work with them? Because of his helpless arm?

He got up and began to hobble round the city, not yet daring to hope that he had been permanently dismissed from the monster's plans. But the hope blossomed. These people were new here! They were still healthy looking and had been well fed until quite recently. Their clothes had been laundered within the past few days, and their shoes were shiny on their feet. The master must have recruited fresh forces, and left the sick, sorry wretches that had served him before to fend for themselves.

He trudged on through the city, hoping to find someone else in the same situation as himself, released from bondage because they had become helpless. There was no one. There were many who were no longer strong enough to move, and he left those in peace. Once he discovered a loaf of fresh bread that must have been brought to the city by the new arrivals, and crammed it hungrily into his mouth before moving on.

But the newcomers could not stop and speak to him. They were working frantically, wildly, at tasks whose complexity baffled his dull mind. They were making things, making individual objects, and he recognized that that was new. Once he found men and women picking metal parts out of the giant scrapheap where all the cars had been destroyed. Once he saw men salvaging plates from the banana boat in the harbor and hauling them ashore.

He got as far as the missile station a mile beyond the town, with no one questioning him or stopping him, and there he saw that a structure was taking shape. Electricians were at work on it, and welders, and children laboring under heavy loads. He stared at it dully, making no sense out of its huge struts and plates. There were portable forges standing around. Men were hammering, sawing, shaping.

Beyond, there were racks and racks of bulbous cylinders that struck a chord of memory. But he did not know what they were. He gave up trying to solve the relationship between

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all the things that were being done in the city, and moaned over his injured arm.

Then an idea came to him. He had walked this far without being turned back or lashed by the master. Could he walk away?

XVIII

IT WAS like the endless arguments about euthanasia. Suppose a cure is found for a supposedly incurable disease one day after you have put a patient out of his misery? Suppose it is not!

Directly and indirectly, perhaps three million people must by now be involved in the affair; from hospital staffs and police, directing the renewed streams of fugitives, to the scientists, psychologists, soldiers and airmen carrying on the battle. But what they did was directed by state governments, the federal government, Congress and the UN. And so in the ultimate resort, these few men in this room were doing the work.

That was the way you had to look at it, Barghin reflected. It wasn't a case of matching one alien against millions and millions of people. It was more like one against twenty. For once you decide to subdivide your effort, specialize, and depute, each individual counts for less than one as well as more than one.

He said, "Mr. President! Let's cut this knot right now. I don't see we're any of us going to give up our preconceived ideas on whether we should or should not use that nuclear missile now. I'll make a suggestion which will save arguing any further, I think. We ready it for firing. We use it only if we see another big population movement starting, or this

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sudden rash of building in Jacksonville turns out to be the manufacture of missiles to hit us where it hurts."

The President ran his finger around the inside of his collar as though to loosen it. "A reasonable proposal, general," he said with relief. "I agree. Gentlemen?"

The conference delegates—cabinet members, armed forces staffs, two UN observers including Lampion from Atlantica, and those who had been on the inside from the beginning like Dr. Gordon and Mary Trant—nodded reluctantly or vigorously. The President managed a smile.

"Good. General, what exactly is this building we hear so much about?"

"Up until lately, we've seen nothing going on in Jacksonville except work we could identify as redesigning streets, making this abortive underground shelter for the monster, and so on. Since the new influx, the pattern has completely changed. We've identified manufactures. The industrial plants within the area, from the shops on the missile station to the harbor facilities, have suddenly been put back-into use. When the monster first took over, he stopped everything of that kind. Factories went dead, power stations quit, phone exchanges and broadcasting stations went out. Now the factories have woken up again, and we found they were drawing on outside power supplies, so we cut the cables and they restarted the local power generators.

"What's more, they've been gutting the places they aren't using. Banks of phone equipment have been carted to the missile station. I'm told you can use it for other kinds of information besides speech, and this looks suspicious. The wrecks in the harbor have been stripped of useful material. And it's all going out to the missile base. It looks dangerous."

"There's no chance of the monster making atomic missiles, is there?" the President queried.

"Theoretically, I'm told, one might adapt the works of a fusion power station to use as a bomb. But there's only one such in the Jacksonville area. And there are no ships in port

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with nuclear engines. They're all merchant vessels. It seems highly improbable."

"That's a relief to know, anyway."

"And in any case, we have every countermissile station on the eastern and southern seaboard on a clock-round alert." Barghin shrugged. "That's it."

A light was blinking on the phone before the President. He answered the call irritably. He listened, and a light seemed to come into his mind. "Yes! Wonderful! I'll get Barghin over. Yes." He covered the microphone with his hand and said, "Barghin, a man has walked out of Jacksonville without being stopped. He's hurt and delirious, but he's got out!"

"Who?" Two voices put the question at once. Barghin glanced around the table and realized that the other one had been Mary's. She was leaning forward with sudden bright hope dawning in her face.

The President listened a little longer and cradled the phone. He said, "The name is Peter Trant."

A fast 'copter brought Barghin with Mary and Dr. Gordon to the field hospital behind the cordon where Peter had been brought. They were met by the local medical corps commander, a Major Lewicz, who heard their questions stony-faced.

"He said his wife was dead," he declared. "He was in a bad way, and it's possible he was delirious from blood poisoning. If it is this lady's husband, I'm afraid she'd better prepare herself for a shock."

"I'm already prepared," Mary said softly.

"No . . . There's another shock, I'm afraid. When he came out of the evacuated area, his left arm was ruined. It had been broken, covered with infected dirt, and not dressed. It was gangrened past the elbow, and the fingers had already begun to slough off. I'm afraid we had to amputate, Mrs. Trant."

"Has he talked at all since you operated?" Mary asked.

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"Not yet. And he won't be back in his right mind for at least a day or two. That's assuming it's only septicaemic poisons that are making him delirious, and not something more fundamental."

"Can I see him, anyway? I'd like to know."

"Of course."

It was Peter, behind that ragged beard and the paste of antibiotic ointments around his inflamed eyes. It *was*. Mary reached out to touch the remaining hand where it lay on the red blanket, and hesitated in horror to see the caluses and ragged nails.

"Peter! Peter!" she whispered. But the unconscious man did not reply.

"I'll have intelligence personnel down here to tape everything he says when he wakes up," Barghin stated to Lewicz. "I don't know, but I think it might help if the first person he saw on waking was the wife he believed dead."

"It's possible," nodded Lewicz. "But from what he was saying earlier, I doubt if you'll make a lot of sense from him."

Barghin shrugged. "Maybe not. But so long as there's a hope in hell of digging the monster's weak spot out of what the poor bastard saw while he was in Jacksonville, we shall have to hold off the nuclear missile we have waiting."

"I see what you mean," said Lewicz soberly. "It's going to be bad enough treating the survivors of Jacksonville anyway. If they've been exposed to radiation and heat flash as well, I wouldn't care to have to try and save them."

"Did you get any clear idea of how he managed to escape?"

"Yes, I think so. From what we could figure—it's on tape if you want to hear it—he suddenly realized that the only pain he could feel was his injured arm. He said all the others had died and they had become new people. I think that means that he is one of the last survivors of the original captives, and they've been left to themselves because they're too weak and ill to be useful to the monster's new plans."

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"Did he know what the plans were?"

"He hadn't been made to work on any of them, and he said he couldn't make out what was going on. He's so starved and apathetic I don't think he cared any more."

"Peter! Peter!" Mary whispered, and no hint of movement showed in the tortured face. It had been an illusion. She sat back and went on holding his hand.

Two quiet young officers in uniform had moved in and sat on chairs just inside the door of the mobile hospital. One of them carried a portable tape recorder. They did not trouble her, and she ignored them. They talked quietly, or read. At intervals one or other of them changed places with a new arrival. Nurses came and changed empty bottles of plasma and nutriment for new ones. Hours that seemed like weeks crept by.

Once, she found she had been asleep, and her heart pounded for fear she had missed a flicker of consciousness. But there had been no change. Or had there?

"Peter!" she said again. And the eyes opened. Looked at her. Puzzled.

"But—" he said faintly. And then smiled.

"Yes," said Peter, pushing aside a heap of photographs and keeping one back. "I saw things like that. A sort of huge rack of them, standing on the field at the missile station."

"Good," said the intelligence lieutenant. He made a note. "We think they're oxygen bottles. A lot of them were dug out of the place where the monster came from. How about this?"

Peter studied it, frowning. "No. I don't think so. Big or small?" The lieutenant indicated with his hands. "No."

"How about this, then?" The new picture showed an oblique overall view of the missile station. It had been taken from the racing scanner missile and its details were blurred. "Can you fill us in on some of these indistinct objects?"

Peter hunted his memory, trying to gather correspondences

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between the foreshortened aerial view and what he had seen on the ground.

"This thing has changed since I saw it," he said at length. "I think. When I was there it was all skeleton; struts and a few plates. Now it's grown. It's been closed in."

"That was our impression. That seems to be the thing about which everything's revolving. Have you any idea what it is?"

"No." Peter turned the photograph round and round. "Is it just possibly a sort of armor-plated protection for the master? I know he was very angry when the missiles fell on his headquarters. Maybe this is meant to serve instead of this crazy kind of sedan chair we had to carry him around in."

"It's possible, I suppose," the lieutenant said dubiously. "But my God! It must weigh a hundred tons or more!"

"Do you think that would bother him?" said Peter grimly, and shuddered as he recalled things he had seen in Jacksonville. "He'd cheerfully make people lie down in the road and lubricate it with their blood to make it slide easily if they couldn't carry it."

Mary put a comforting hand on his shoulder, and he leant his head sideways to touch it with his cheek. He had learned not to move the hand that was no longer there.

"Okay, and thank you," said the lieutenant as he shuffled the pictures into a file. "I'll leave you alone for a bit and let you rest. We really appreciate your help."

"The poor bastards still there will appreciate it more," said Peter. "They're letting me get up tomorrow. I'm coming out to the front and do some work on the spot."

Something was definitely coming to a crux in Jacksonville. The frantic tempo of work had slackened. Now the only remaining pocket of haste was at the missile base, around the cryptic metal structure that had been made of used car parts. Barghin smiled dourly as he remembered how he had said he suspected the monster could make rockets out of just that and other incredible scrap.

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But it was growing dark, and after sunset Jacksonville was like a dead city, without electric lights, moving vehicles or even campfires. It was cold. Barghin pitied the victims huddling together in half-wrecked buildings for warmth. If this waiting had to continue into winter . . . Even though the climate here was southerly and mild, exposure would surely claim many of the weakened slaves. It wouldn't matter if they were well fed and clothed, but after rain, for instance, they would succumb to pneumonia like corn before the harvester.

He called in the scanner missile. It was too dark to get usable pictures now. Tomorrow, they would know for sure what was ahead.

XIX

THE FIRST hint of the climax came an hour before dawn.

The watchers on the cordon were told by their mechanical ears and eyes of movement ahead. Another army, like the one that had broken before Mechanical Shovel? They triggered the floodlights and stared across the suddenly brilliant countryside.

Yes. Something of the kind. Only this was not the same armed desperation as before. It was a steamroller advance, akin to the unstoppable march of the recruits from Savannah and Brunswick. Doubtless these were part of the same horde.

They stopped momentarily as they passed the advance watchposts; broke the searchlights, smashed the TV eyes and the microphones, and went on. Their faces were dull, their steps slow. They came ahead like corpses.

Nervously, wondering if they too were to be subjected to the lashing mental pain that must be driving these strangers,

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the troops at the front of the cordon prepared to meet them.

For them, the lash of pain did not come. But the hordes from the monster's city moved in among them, ignored calls to stop, ignored threats, shook off physical restraint—and kept walking.

In the confusion of night, it was hard to make out how many of them there were, but it seemed that a quarter of a million at least of the monster's slaves had been driven out on this crazy march. Sometimes they eddied around a military vehicle and overturned it by brute force. Mostly, they continued ahead steadily.

Barghin was dragged from sleep by a frantic orderly, and rushed in his pajamas to the radio wagon, to consolidate and digest the startled reports. His first thought was for the mobile field hospital unit in the evacuated belt behind the cordon. The only man to have come back alive from the monster's domain was there. He must be gotten out of the way of the advance, and quickly.

A dozen similar petty details occupied his mind for the first half hour after the alarm, but then he began to notice something peculiar about the pattern he was receiving. No serious damage was being done. The slaves were unarmed. The lash of pain could follow them even here, but the troops among whom they were advancing were not themselves suffering. It looked as though it ought to add up to something. But what?

Report from a detachment of the medical corps. They had evolved a method of dealing with the slaves. Three soldiers held them down while a medical orderly jabbed them full of anaesthetic. They had nearly a hundred unconscious now, and were running low on supplies.

Ingenuous, Barghin thought, and ordered all the stocks of anaesthetic that could be found to be commandeered and brought to the area.

Another group reported. They were using cruder methods of cracking the slaves over the head. They said they were

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doing it only to men of good physique. Women and children they were letting through into the evacuated area.

That was a point. The evacuated area was thirty miles deep most of the way on the western side. He gave amending orders so that the anaesthetics and the medics would be waiting on the other side of the evacuated zone. By then, the wave of slaves would be tired out and easier to deal with, as well as there being longer to prepare for them. They wouldn't make it across the zone till evening, at their present rate of progress. He ordered all units not actually engaged with the slaves to go to ground and let them pass without opposition, and countermanded all attempts to halt their progress.

So whatever the original aim of this outflow of human robots, its energy was going to be dispersed uselessly, and the sum total of its effect would be to incapacitate a number of advance observation posts. Barghin frowned. Why had so large a number of slaves suddenly become redundant in the monster's opinion? There must be a key somewhere. He wished it were dawn, so that the scanner missile could get some pictures of what was happening in the city itself.

Maybe—maybe it was intended only as a diversion. Maybe the monster was consolidating, having completed the task he had planned. Maybe he was ready to launch nuclear attacks in revenge for the missiles that had so narrowly missed him.

Maybe he had something up his sleeve which human beings had never dreamed of.

The drone of a 'copter coming in nearby interrupted his musing. "Go see if that's the Trants, and if it is get me someone from Intelligence and bring them here right away," he commanded an orderly. The man saluted and doubled away.

It was the Trants. Peter, his stump swathed in bandages, was walking with his arm around Mary, and his feet seemed uncertain. As soon as he came into the command vehicle, Barghin made him sit down.

"I'm sorry to haul you out of bed like that," he said. "I heard from Lewicz that you were fit to get up today, though,

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and with this crazy bunch of zombies going straight for the field hospital I figured you were safer here than there. How do you feel?"

Peter managed a wry grin. "Tottering," he said. "But I'm fine otherwise."

The intelligence lieutenant who had interviewed Peter the previous evening came in, saluted, and went to one side with his files of data. "Right," Barghin grunted. "Trant, you're in a better position to guess at the monster's way of handling his slaves than we are. I'm inclined to think that this outburst of two hundred thousand people is a feint. Do you think he rates us high enough to think it worth confusing us?"

Peter shook his head. "Not unless he's learnt some lessons in the past few days. When I left, he was still treating us like vermin, beneath his notice. I think that fits with the way I was able to walk out of the town. He regarded me as expended."

"On the other hand," ventured the lieutenant, "the first reports we've had of the composition of the victims who've left the city shows that they're mostly business types. We find very few practical men among them, engineering hands, or factory operatives. It's hard to tell, naturally. But perhaps the technicians and technologists have been kept back because their skills are useful."

"If that is the case," Peter agreed, "I'm wrong. Maybe it's my impression because while I was there there was little more complex going on than shifting rubble and wrecking cars, jobs anyone could do. This work at the missile base, though. It might have been worth his while to find engineers and so on."

"In which case, that can be counted as a signal victory," said Barghin. "To have made him recognize that we do have intelligence is worth taking notice of. As I see it, in the beginning he'd cheerfully have employed university professors to dig ditches. Now he's catching on that it's simpler to use people who already know what he wants done."

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"But what *does* he want?" said Mary heavily.

"I have a hunch we're going to find out," said Barghin. He checked his watch. Thirty-five minutes to full dawn. He turned to the radioman, who was yawning enormously. "Get me a volunteer pilot to take a 'copter out over the city," he said. "If the troops out here aren't getting the monster's treatment, there's a chance we may at long last be able to go and look at the city for ourselves."

A quarter of an hour later the report came back that the pilot had been low over the city, down to five hundred feet, without either being able to make out details of what if anything was happening or being struck by the monster's mental lash. Barghin digested the news in complete silence, and then stood up straight.

"Well, I think I'd like to see what's been happening. I'm tired of this fighting in the dark. This may be only a momentary lapse on the monster's part, but we must take full advantage of it. Maybe he's decided he can do without human aid altogether, in which case we can fire our nuclear missile and dispose of him. Maybe the whole surviving population has come out of the city, and they've been building him robot slaves."

"But what if he let that 'copter alone to lure us into doing just this?" Mary said.

Barghin shrugged. "I've got the same automatic pilot on all these 'copters as the one that brought your husband here back from discovering the *Queen Alexandra*. And our counter-missile batteries are set to hit anything that goes up from the Jacksonville base. It's not much of a risk."

"In that case, I'd like to come along," said Peter steadily. He looked at his wife with eyes that pleaded for understanding. "I'll probably be able to see the pattern of the changes that have been taking place lately. Maybe the experts will be able to deduce new information from them."

The big 'copter went cautiously at first, in case the success

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of the earlier trip had been due to a loophole in the defenses that had now been closed. But no missile whined skywards into the gray dawn, and their minds remained free of the monster's pain.

This was a twenty-passenger machine. Barghin had had it crammed with a TV transmitter, film cameras, recording devices, and their operators. The intelligence lieutenant made scribbled notes and kept the microphone of his tape recorder close to Peter's face for his comments.

They stared down across the city, which seemed almost as scarred and dead as the surface of the moon. It was virtually lifeless. A few birds could be seen. Their binoculars revealed victims huddled in sheltered corners who might or might not be alive. That was all.

"Nothing," said Peter in a despondent tone. "Or almost nothing. I don't know where the master has taken refuge—the monster, as you say. Curious, isn't it? When one has to work under his power for a while, he gets the feeling that he really is a superior kind of being. The torture proves it, eventually. It's like brainwashing."

"Did you help move him from the church where he went to after City Hall?"

"Yes. But after that I got fever, and I don't remember if we took him anywhere special afterwards. How about what's going on at the missile station?"

Barghin took a deep breath. "It's the chanciest place," he said. "We'll have to stand off far enough for a counter-missile to get at anything they throw at us. But all right. If we must, we must. Pilot!"

And here there was movement.

Around the now apparently completed shell of the mysterious object they had thrown together out of scrap, many slaves lay exhausted on the open ground. Remembering how often he too had fallen where he stood, Peter felt a surge of bitter pity.

But among them still moved staggering figures, mostly men in engineer's overalls, some of them carrying instruments that

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the watchers could not identify because they were standing off instead of flying over the site. The sky brightened.

And then Peter tried to clutch Barghin's shoulder with his left hand. Only his stump moved, of course, and the pain of striking the raw end blinded him for a moment and made him cry out.

"Get us away!" snapped Barghin, fearing that the monster's lash had descended.

"Nol No, it's only my stump!" said Peter. "But didn't you see? Didn't you notice? A flash of green under that—that thing standing on the field. A flash of green light that went clear underneath!"

Puzzled, Barghin shook his head. "I saw it," offered the man operating the movie cameras.

"And didn't you notice?" pressed Peter. "There's nothing *under* that thing! It must weigh a good hundred tons. And there's nothing holding it up! It's just floating!"

"You must be mistaken," said Barghin shortly. He adjusted focus on his binoculars and looked again. "No, there's not enough light to see yet, but—Now I think we really *had* better get out of here. I think the monster's coming."

They stared anxiously. Sure enough, out of one of the vast hangars where the missiles were serviced, a line of chanting slaves was trudging. And, just before the 'copter whirled away, they glimpsed the monster coming into the light of day.

XX

BARGHIN shouldered his way past the technician operating the recording machines, and bent to the microphone of the radio. The air was already full of countermessages about the

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situation around the cordon. Barghin got hold of the command vehicle at base and ordered a direct circuit to the main transmitter.

"All units, attention!" he snapped. "Prepare for counter-missile action, casualty action, aerial action at all levels, possible nuclear attacks on cities. The monster's at the Jacksonville missile base, and he has something new!"

Staring with aching eyes through his binoculars, Peter felt his heart sink. The monster was being taken out to the strange object. He was *sure* he had seen it floating! And the green light was back again, bright now, seeming almost solid between the *thing* and the ground.

And then—

"Oh God!" whispered Peter softly. "Look at that!"

Startled exclamations revealed that the other passengers had seen it too. Barghin ordered the pilot to interrupt their panicky flight and circle at constant distance, because whatever the risk was now, they couldn't afford to miss this most incredible sight.

Steadily, on a column of luminescent green which violated every law of optics Peter could think of, the metal shell was rising from the ground. Majestically; as lightly and yet as placidly as a balloon in dead calm air . . .

"What's he going to do?" wondered Barghin aloud. "Is he armed? Is he going to use that as a permanent mobile headquarters? Or is he just going to go straight on up? Because if he gets higher than a few thousand feet, do you realize what this means? He's put himself at our mercy!"

"Yes, of course," Peter breathed. There was a nuclear missile waiting, back behind the evacuated area. If the monster was going to rise far enough for the explosion to avoid injuring the people below, they could at long last use it.

"Generall" crackled a voice from the radio. "We have a bogey in our sights, rising on some kind of green rockets from the missile base. Do we fire?" The speaker seemed to be in a state of tension-controlled terror. His voice shook.

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"No!" snapped Barghin. "On no account provoke him till we see whether he's going up or along!"

The thing was still rising, gathering speed now. Barghin hesitated, narrow-eyed, and bent to the microphone again.

"Get me in circuit with Last Resort," he ordered. When he was connected, he said, "He's still going up. Are you ready to blow?"

"We're counted down to six, general," was the reply. "I'm holding it there."

"Let's see, you're about forty-eight miles off, aren't you? When his azimuth angle hits twenty degrees, you can blow."

"Right, general!" said the voice excitedly. "And believe me, the pleasure will be all ours."

Does he know? Peter wondered, watching the drifting, puzzling ascent of the monster's craft. Was he perhaps aware that he was laying himself open to the horrible vengeance he had only escaped because these human beings he had considered primitive were not primitive enough to condemn their own species to a nuclear hell until there was no other path open?

Perhaps he was. Perhaps it was shaming to him that the creatures he regarded as expendable vermin should have proved his match, and his code of honor as an allegedly superior being demanded that he suffer death for his failure. They might never know unless one day, out there among the stars where men were also going, their species' paths crossed again.

The craft was moving sideways a little, as though surveying the city below, or jockeying for a course which demanded absolute precision of planning. Peter's mouth was dry, and he could hear Barghin muttering to himself.

And then it *went*. It was as though the column of green, whose brilliance had become nearly blinding, stretched and vanished, leaving no trace but a reddish after-image. They felt the 'copter rock in the wind of the going of it, while they

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threw their heads back in a vain effort to see where it had gone.

"We beat him, anyway," said Barghin. "He's heading back to space, looks like. I'm only sorry he got off so lightly. But we've never built anything that could climb like that."

He spoke to the microphone. "Last Resort, did you blow?"

"He took us by surprise, general," the answer came, apologetically. "We must have undershot by literally a mile. My God, general, what's he using for power?"

"How should I know? Maybe when we can question the technicians who worked for him, we'll be able to piece it together for ourselves—"

"Holy God, no!" The radio voice interrupted in tones of horror. "General, we've lost the missile! They were trying to get it back on course, but it's *gone*."

"What? How? Where was it last on track?" Visions of a kiloton warhead flaring at random filled Barghin's mind. Maybe it had even been seized by the monster! "Quickly!"

"It intersected the green column," said the radio voice. "It was dead on course. Only the monster wasn't there any longer. And since then—"

"General," said Peter quietly, staring upwards through the window of the 'copter. "There's your missile, or I'm much mistaken. And what's more, it seems to have done its job."

Barghin followed his stare incredulously. Against the lightening sky of dawn, a slowly expanding ball of fire was shining like an enormous morning star.

Very faintly, distant thunder came to them.

"Yes, we got confirmation from both the space stations and the lunar base," said Barghin. "As we figure it, Mr. President, that column of green on which the monster's ship went up was a sort of visible by-product of a raging controlled energy. Not nuclear. Electro-gravitic, they tell me. And inside the column, space was twisted. Changed. It doesn't make sense to anyone but a physicist or a mathematician. We guess that

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the laws of gravity didn't apply inside that column, and that was why the monster's ship could go up so fast.

"Only the speed with which the missile arrived enabled it to penetrate the outside of the column. Inside, gravity was polarized, or something. What it amounts to is that the missile flew straight up, along the column, instead of continuing horizontally. And about a hundred and ten miles up, it caught up with the monster, and . . ."

The President ran his finger around the neck of his shirt. He said, "Well, I suppose it doesn't matter exactly *how* it happened, so long as it did happen. Things will be back to normal in a little while, I guess, though reports I've seen on the state of the casualties they're bringing out of Jacksonville means that a hell of a lot of people are going to be in mental homes for a while . . . Dr. Gordon, do your people think there are any more monsters like that hiding under the sea?"

Gordon shook his head. "Lord knows," he said. "I hope not. And in fact I doubt it. It was probably a million-to-one chance that we alerted this one, so even if others are hiding down there, they won't be awakened till we really begin to explore the great depths."

He buried his face in his hands. "I was so sure," he murmured. "When we found Atlantica, I thought we'd found Atlantis, and maybe the secrets of a lost civilization."

"Well," said Peter, "in a way we did. Only the secrets were not very pleasant ones. How far might we not have come by now if our ancestors in those days hadn't had the weight of *him* and his kind on their necks!"

"I must say it's going to give a lot of people qualms when the next batch of appropriations for space research comes up," said the President bluntly. "Myself included, I think. If that thing was a sample of the life that grows on other worlds, then—"

"On the contrary, Mr. President," said Peter. "That thing had experience before it came to Earth, I think. This implies that it had met races similar to ours, and when we go out to

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the stars we're going to find other species similar to man, as well as monsters like the one we unearthed. We dealt with him. I'd almost be inclined to give up oceanography and go into space research just for the privilege of being among the first to meet another race like ourselves."

"Only we're going to have to be hellishly careful," said Barghin. "We'll have to go out with H-bombs in one hand and the pipe of peace in the other, and I'm afraid we shall probably guess wrong when it comes to choosing between them. But it's the only way."

The President smiled suddenly. "I'm glad that thing was found when it was," he said. "From the purely personal point of view, I'm pretty sure the public at large will regard it as something that happened during my term of office, and it will count heavily against me. But if it had come up, say, fifteen or twenty years ago, when there were nuclear weapons poking out from under every stone, the use of an H-bomb on Jacksonville would have triggered a war even if we warned the public why it was being used. They'd have assumed the monster was a Russian secret weapon!"

"Or a century ago," supplied Barghin. "When we'd only have had guns to oppose it, instead of missiles, and no television to give us information from robot watchposts. We would be slaving for him still."

The whole appalling horror, Peter reflected, had directly afflicted perhaps one in a thousand of the people in the world. That included those who suffered under the monster's lash, those who manned the cordon, those who struggled to extract information about him from his behaviour and to locate his psychological and physical weaknesses, those who treated the sick after he had hurt them, and those who fled their homes and were now straggling back.

And they had got the better of him in a few short months.

It was a good augury. When they met his kind again, it would not be the effort of a mere one-tenth of one per cent

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of man that opposed their strength to the monsters. It would be—it would have to be—one hundred per cent.

He would not be among them. He moved his stump tentatively. Not in person. But at least, if he was no longer whole in body, he was whole and free in his mind.

Which was more than the monster's subjects had been the first time he appeared on Earth.

He looked across at Mary, and the memory of Luke came into his mind. Poor devil! What was the secret that he had been about to reveal and never was allowed to utter? Peter could not be sure, but he was fairly certain it was connected with the fact that Luke had managed to secure a position of trust in the monster's retinue while all the time scheming to oppose him. It was something only a free man could know.

Men change their gods, and when they have changed them often enough they cease to fear their power.

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