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THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

KENNETH BULMER



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CRUSADERS IN SPACESUITS



To pave the way for galactic conquest, a united Earth had invented the robot Messiahs. These ingenious devices, dropped from space, created on each alien planet a new and convincing faith—based on the future coming of the men from Earth.

Roy Inglis was a trouble-shooter for the “Earth Gods” operation and he was among the very few who knew that someday they would run into the synthetic equivalent of the Devil. There’d be another set of interplanetary missionaries—only these would be monsters from some anti-Earth part of the universe.

But he never realized that he himself could be the first convert to the creed of the Evil Ones—and that he might never know it until it was too late for the rest of humanity!

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Kenneth Bulmer has been rated by *New Worlds* magazine as "Great Britain's hardest working science-fiction writer." A native of London, he has produced many novels and short stories, as well as non-fiction articles on scientific subjects.

Bulmer states that he has been reading and writing science-fiction for longer than he cares to remember, starting both while still at school in the early 1920's. During the war he served with the Royal Corps of Signals and published and edited a Service magazine in Africa, Sicily and Italy. It was while basking in the Italian sunshine that he first heard of an atomic bomb having been detonated over Japan—and thought it was just another hoax of his comrades.

He is an active member of London "fan" circles, but also includes among his hobbies model ship construction, motor racing and the study of the Napoleonic legend.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

by
KENNETH BULMER

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THE GAMES OF NEITH

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THE PROPHETS of Earth slept crated in their thousands.

They filled the ship's bomb bays, lying quietly waiting in their machine-gleaming metal sheaths.

Each individual one was destined to conquer a world.

Each individual one lay there, quiescent in its capsule, awaiting the master command that would send it, one after the other, in strict mathematical order, out over a new and unknown world to plunge down to its destined consummation.

They were all alike and each one epitomized the embodiment of the Perfect Man.

Made by the cunning hands and brains of men they yet possessed the chilling power of striking awe into those charged with their care, protection and delivery. The knowledge that these godlike beings were composed of steel and plastic, of synthetic flesh and bones and blood, with memory-sponge brains and nuclear-battery hearts, did not dispel that cloying aura of unease and dread.

Prometheus raised fire for man and paid the price, and if from that fire man dared to raise other beings, would he in turn have to pay an even greater price?

Quietly the Prophets of Earth waited. Unawakened they lay, crated in their thousands, ready one by one to arise to the challenge of a new world and to go forth rejoicing and to proclaim the Word—which was the Word of Man.

The fear took him unawares as he leaned over emptiness.

The bomb bay hived with activity. The keynote was speed. A hectic rush and hurry possessed all the crewmen

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

sweating there. Movement flickered. Smells of sweat, acrid on the pumped air, of thick machine oil, of bearings smoking, all the tang of highly trained men busy about a task that had one end and one meaning. And the smell of fear clogging in his nostrils, the taste of bile in his throat.

The speed and the fear, hurrying along together, to coalesce as he pressed the button to evacuate the bomb bay.

Speed. The dully-shining steel flank of the capsule rolling on oiled bearings. Rush. Surge of meters as power tapped from the engines buried in the ship's core swamped from generators, subtly altered, to the terminals waiting on the capsule. Hurry. Check everything, check connections, circuits, resistances, anti-grav—check and triple check everything that would take that capsule out into space and from thence down onto the planet.

So little time!

"Move it along there, Adams. Get with it."

Himself shouting orders. Himself, Abd al-Malik ibn-Zobeir, despatch chief, bullying these men, hustling them along, riding them.

"Make it snappy, Zimmerman!" and "Get the lead out of your spacesuit, Lee Wong!"

So little time.

In three thousand years every second was precious.

Beneath him floated greenly-gray and white-stippled the sickle of the planet. The planet had no name. No name, at least, that men knew to record in their Galactic Almanacs. Perhaps in three thousand years or so when next men sailed in from space again to this planet they would have given it a name or, perhaps, they would use the name the people living down there used. If the plan was fulfilled the name they used would be Terran whichever way it was derived.

The ship, The Solarian CDB ship *Isabella*, had fled in from the stars following her precomputed flight path, and

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

had completed one orbit about the planet during which the crew technicians had carried out all their checks and sampled, docketed and filed every detail it had been possible to obtain in the time and at the distance. Now, as she straightened on to a course that would take her out into space and on to the next stellar system, the Phrophet of Earth trundled along in its capsule, slipping a little on the bearings, positioning itself over the bomb drop.

The dropping crew were all clad in spacesuits of the heavy-duty type that were common in deep space. In a scientific civilization which could mass produce such marvels as the Prophets of Earth to spread the Word of Man, it was considered fitting that the final checks should be carried out by humans. Solterran scientific resources were strained almost beyond the point of containment by the Dissemination Project, so the ship used trained crewmen because even their fantastically complex, lengthy and expensive indoctrination was cheaper than using androids or robots. Especially for this sort of job, when they were away from Earth for years on end.

"All checked. All clear. Ready on signal."

The reports flowed in over Abd al-Malik's headset. He gave a last long look around the bomb bay, scrutinizing every detail of the predrop layout. Then, holding off the fear alive within him, he pressed the lock button. The bomb bay's inner doors were already closed above the despatch crew's head; at the pressure on the button the cycling light glowed and, smoothly, without draught, the bay evacuated of air.

The outer bomb bay doors opened.

Between himself and Space lay—space.

The glimmering sickle of the planet far beneath hung so that he could reach out a gauntleted hand and pluck it from the night skȳ, brushed with stars. He swallowed, fighting the

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

fear. This was just routine, just another drop, just one more in the regulation five thousand, just another duty call in a life that had been trained and drilled to do exactly what he was doing now. The capsule containing the Prophet of Earth would be jettisoned, the light would blink the all-clear, and he would close up the bomb bay doors; the blessed air would gush back into the bay and he could shuck his space suit and go back to his quarters and forget that he had been standing perched over nothingness.

Only—now he was hanging over emptiness—*now*.

"All okay, Abdul?" The voice in his helmet startled him.

Again he swallowed, thankful they were not using throat microphones. A despatch chief wore a golden symbol—a gold-thread capsule and a silver-thread spaceship—on his right sleeve. That meant something. That meant he had worked and studied and kept in line for his promotion—and it meant these men of the despatch crew jumped when he said so.

"All okay," he said harshly. "Prepare to drop."

Now arrived the moment.

As crew chief he had to personally superintend the capsule that was plummeting through the opening precisely to the microsecond. His own all-clear had gone via miles of wiring up to the bridge. Up there the officers and techs had computed the exact co-ordinates for dropping. They would align the ship, ride her up to the dropping area and—right on the dot—flash for capsule away.

After all that, it was up to him, personally, to see that the capsule was released, was set free at the exactly predetermined time. That was why he wore the gold and silver symbol on his sleeve.

He could hear his crew's breathing over the headset. There was a waiting, animal alertness in the quiet rhythm. He tried to control his own unsteady breathing and only

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

made it worse. His helmet wipers were already working, clearing the sweat away. His stomach was somewhere aboard *Isabella* but he doubted that it was anywhere near himself.

On his crew chief's panel the green light flickered, changed to amber. His tongue rasped over his lips.

The red light came on.

No sound came in the airlessness from the capsule clamps. But the first two went up, the thick metal bars smacking home against their retainers. The second pair followed, triggered fractionally later by the signal from the bridge so that the capsule could drop cleanly end on. The second pair. . . .

One hung up.

He stared at it, knowing what it meant, understanding that if man played at being God a sacrifice must be made. His training took over then, blasting aside the dark superstitious doubts and fears. He went scrabbling out along the supporting rail, his wrench ready, everything in him aimed at knocking that release clamp over and getting rid of the capsule.

He swung the wrench in a calculated, skilful blow. The release resisted. He tried again, slamming the wrench in hard. They could bust him for this, break him right down to capsule oiler, send him to bunk in cheerless crew quarters far removed from his own little cubby; they could strip off his sleeve that gold and silver symbol.

One more good hard shrewd knock—the wrench slammed again at the clamp. It must have been partially freed by his earlier blows. He had used far too much power. The clamp flipped over smoothly and the wrench savaged around, pulling his arm with it, twisting his shoulder in the spacesuit, tugging at him.

Clumsy in the big suit he toppled off the rail.

Without thought, the black fear in him blanking all reason, he hooked one arm and leg into the capsule's handlings rings.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Capsule and man—Prophet of Earth and son of Adam—went out the bomb bay together.

He had one single lucid thought that pierced him with its sheer pitiless logic.

A sacrifice had been needed.

He had known this would happen from the beginning.

Then the darkness that lay beyond reasoning engulfed him in a warm and comfortable blackness.

The Prophet of Earth that had been made by the hands of Man lay gently humming in its capsule awaiting the day of uprising into life—and Abd al-Malik ibn-Zobeir lay unconscious in his spacesuit, riding the capsule down onto the mystery of the planet beneath.

2

ROY INGLIS glowered at his reflection in the shaving mirror and was abysmally displeased with what he saw.

He wiped the last of the scentless depilatory cream away from his cheeks and tossed the paper towel into the disposal. Look at him! There he shone from the mirror, lean-faced, black-eyed, radiating crows' feet giving him a permanently quizzical look about those eyes and upper nose, and a mean gash of mouth firmed down now into disgust lines as he stared right back at himself.

Soft.

That was his trouble. Too much desk flying from a comfortably padded armchair. The last time he'd been into space was over eighteen months ago, a courier assignment across to the Centaur System, a sparrow's hop twenty light-years off. No Earthman regarded slipping across to Mars or Venus or

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

the moons of Saturn as going into space, and anyway, he hadn't even dodged up to the Moon in a month.

He reached for his white shirt, released the magne clasps, put it on, shut the clamps, slung a drab gray and silver tie around his neck and, knotting it, stuck his tongue out at his reflection. He shuddered at the sight.

Soft.

Soft as Laura had been soft when he'd married her, seven years ago. Now, he was the softie and she was the tough, practical, bustling one, armored in her own competence.

The speaker in the wall above the mirror hissed, and then Laura's voice said, "Breakfast." The hissing cut.

Roy Inglis sighed, jerked his tie into final shape and whipped a comb through his hair. If he'd been living a few thousand years ago he'd have been losing that by now, seeing the dread tell-tale pink patches creeping up his skull.

Oh, well. There was always the office. The office brought unpleasant memories, and he was aroused by the hissing from the speaker and Laura's voice. There was more bite in it now. "Roy? Breakfast. Didn't you hear me?"

"Yes, dear. Coming right away."

He went through into the lounge, looking automatically out the window to see what Weather Bureau had contrived. He never bothered to read their arrangements in the paper or watch their reports over the TV. He fancied that weather, for some reason, should be unpredictable.

It would be the only unpredictable thing in life, he had often thought, sourly.

Laura glanced up from her reconstituted chicken. She was breathtakingly beautiful; well, she had every right to be the money she spent on herself. Inglis didn't begrudge her that extravagance. He liked her to look nice. He only wished, sadly, that some of that cosmetic treatment would

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

put back the laugh lines, the gayness, the thought of life and fun first and Laura Inglis second.

The day was going to be fine, with sufficient cloud to temper the sun. Up here, fifty floors above ground level, the breeze slithered against the picture window, not unpleasantly.

Inglis bent down and touched his lips to Laura's cheek. That was a routine he had been indoctrinated into as thoroughly as he had learned to handle the fire controls of a Zeus-type cruiser. Something that had been, at first, outside his expected functions. He sat down, flipped open the paper napkin, and began to eat his reconstituted bacon and eggs. He was not fond enough of chicken, like Laura, to desire it for breakfast. Laura said nothing, eating.

He wondered if he had mussed her makeup; but that was hardly possible. He hadn't moved his lips—a straight run in on target, capsule delivery, a clean run out—anyway, that costly a facial didn't muss.

What was he doing dreaming of capsule delivery? He'd finished his stint on that the year before he'd married Laura. Nobody came out quite the same; merely handling the Prophets of Earth subtly changed a man's thinking processes in ways far beyond the planetbound imaginations of those excused the duty.

Laura said, "We are dining with Laurence, Tung Chih Men tonight, Roy. I'd appreciate it if you were particularly attentive to his wife."

Inglis contrived to carry on eating placidly. "Very well dear."

"Mister Tung has important mining interests out beyond the Chandelier cluster, I've heard he owns over half the planets there, and—"

"I know, dear. I've met him."

That was a mistake.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Laura was gathering her massive arsenal of injured womanhood, sarcastic citizen, misunderstood wife, when Inglis was saved by the telephone bell. He rose at once, dabbing his lips with the napkin, thankful that what promised to be a growing and monumental row had been postponed.

"Excuse me, dear. Phone."

Quite deliberately, he took the call in the lobby. The screen lit up and a pert, self-consciously efficient young female-rating's face showed. She said, "Colonel Inglis?"

"Speaking."

A shadow moved in the doorway. So Laura hadn't been able to resist finding out even what this early morning call held. Oh, well.

The communications rating said, "Colonel Inglis. A message from Admiral Rattigan. Would you please call on him as soon as you can. Your office has been informed."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. Goodby."

His hand had not left the cut off switch before Laura spoke.

"Who is this Admiral Rattigan? I've never heard of him."

Inglis did not say what immediately occurred to him. Instead, he smiled, and said, "I've never met him. I think he's a pretty big bug in the CDB—"

"Them!" Laura's face was tight now with sudden fear—sudden selfish fear, Inglis felt, watching her with the dispassion that sometimes shocked him.

"I finished my stint before I met you, remember? Now let's finish breakfast, then I'll be off. Admirals do not like to be kept waiting. Especially by officers of another service."

By the time he had breakfasted, put on his well-cut gray civilian coat, found his briefcase and cane and dialed for the flier, he was suffocated by the luxury flat, as usual. The

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

fresh air outside was like wine. He drove quickly but skillfully through the air lanes, heading for the CDB block rising in isolated grandeur on the south bank of the river.

The city had been of enormous extent before sociological planning had defined limits, contracting here, expanding there, trimming, organizing and finishing up with planned comfort, space and security for every individual on planet. Now sunshine glinted from spire and pinnacle and manmade glass cliffs submerged and part of the abundant greenery—trees and forests growing half way up the tallest towers on their ziggurats. The city was a beautiful place, well enough. A man or woman could leave a whole lot of the Galaxy unexplored and remain quite happy here. But, even then, riding across town with that luxurious beauty spread about him as a feast for the eyes and senses, Inglis allowed himself to hope that Rattigan would have an off-system mission for him.

The tower came up and he slipped his flier into the indicated lane, flashed his ident cipher and switched over to auto. He locked the manuals and leaned back, taking out a green cigar and lighting up; the first today.

Somewhere in that plastic and glass colossus a robotic brain was charting all the myriad fliers, buzzing merrily in and out, sorting them into lanes, bringing them in to their correct landing stages, channeling them out and handing over to other traffic controls in the city. Inglis waited until his flier touched down, in quiet composure. Any man who spends much time in space grows accustomed to waiting.

There was a uniformed human attendant at the landing stage; a slip of a girl in smart uniform that showed rather too much leg for razor-sharp discipline. She didn't smile, checking the vehicles in. She'd probably been on duty for about an hour and was already heartily sick of it.

She directed Inglis' flier into a garage and Inglis to a re-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

ception room. Here another young girl who might have been the third of the triplets he had seen that morning told him to wait in a comfortable lounge.

Despite his own phlegmatic acceptance of procedure, Inglis began to wonder. After all, the Solarian Culture Dissemination Bureau was an extremely powerful organization in the hierarchy of ministries, departments and bureaus administering the Solar Commonwealth of Stars. If they wanted to bother their heads over a relatively insignificant colonel—no, why bother to cavil? A completely insignificant colonel of Marines; then, if they were interested in him, he would have expected a much longer run around than this. No forms, in quintuplicate, for instance.

Inglis allowed himself to become a little excited.

The receptionist looked up. She was listening to her instruments. Then, without smiling; but with perfect courtesy and politeness, she said, "Would you go through door fifteen, please, Colonel Inglis?"

"Thank you," Inglis said, rising. Door fifteen took him into a corridor with another door opposite. He went through. Through that door was another. He went through.

A very large, very silent, very craggy man in total black, cradling a small hand machine gun, felt Inglis' clothes, grunted and indicated that he was clean and could go ahead.

By this time Inglis didn't know whether to be extremely annoyed, extremely frightened or to laugh.

The last door took him into a vestibule. Soft lights and a thick carpet reassured him, giving him the information that he was back in civilization once again. He walked forward into a wide, high-ceilinged room. The walls were covered with what he recognized as maps even though they were security blanketed. Scattered about were a few welcoming armchairs, a table or so with drinks carelessly standing. A communications panel covered the end wall, in front of

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

which stood celestial globes which were not at that moment alight—and the outstretched hand and beamingly fatuous face of Dick Myrtle.

"Roy! You old landlubber! How are you?"

"Dick! I thought they'd pensioned you off years ago. How are you, you busted drive tube, you?"

Inglis was genuinely pleased to see Dick Myrtle again. They'd been shipmates scores of times, and yet in the odd way these things always go, since they'd parted company from the old *Sappho* they'd never even tried to contact each other.

"Married?" Myrtle was saying. Oddly, some of the welcoming gleam went out of his face. But he was still the same old fooling, never-serious Myrtle as he turned to the room's only other occupant.

"Sorry, Gus. Old shipmates, you know."

"That's okay, Dick. Gave me a chance to size up your recommendation."

"Recommendation?" Inglis said, shaking the proffered hand. Gus was burly, his dark blue uniform giving added bulk to the figure, and his face had a scrubbed, raw-beef look that showed many tiny blue veins like marbling. His eyes were deep-set and shrouded; he was wearing a very small jewel in his left ear.

Only after all that registered did Inglis become aware of the enormous weight on the sleeve Gus wore.

He swallowed. He had been about to make some jocular remark. Instead, he said, "Colonel Inglis reporting as ordered, Admiral."

How—why—was nitwitted Dick Myrtle calling a full space navy Admiral, Gus?

Admiral Rattigan motioned to the chairs. As he sat down, he grunted, then said, "I've a job for you, Roy. You've

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

been out disseminating capsules. You know the score. Well, we're up against what we planned against."

"Three thousand years time?" said Inglis.

"No. Nothing vague or futuristic. We're up against the evil—here and now!"

3

WHEN, during the course of their education, children were taught that once in the long long ago a hundred different religions flourished upon the fair face of the Earth, blighting that pleasant place with fear and misunderstanding and strife, they were frankly incredulous. Different ways of thought, multifaceted systems of logic, mores that changed as circumstances dictated—all these and more were understandable. But how two people could disagree about religion was a thing that passed all human understanding.

From the acceptance of one great universal religion of light and grace, power and perfect understanding, the idea that the opposite would be all that the devil's hell could spawn was a simple step. On Earth is light. On the worlds floating in space that the Earth made her own was light. And, on any world that so far had not been visited by man, too, would be light, for the old intolerances had been swept away.

Earthmen went out to the stars owning a belief that they were in a sufficient state of grace as to meet with any alien culture on friendly terms, to explore in humility, to learn and, if it was so willed, to teach.

One thing, they avoided bloodshed.

Now, from the relatively tiny segment of the Galaxy that had been explored and sparsely settled by man, had

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

grown a loose confederation of solar systems living in amity one with another. Men called this the Solar Commonwealth of Stars.

And throughout that commonwealth there had been few wars, few interstellar conflicts, fewer invasions. One migrating influx of alien war-mad ships had caused trouble; but in ridding the Commonwealth of them mankind and her allies had developed strong fighting forces. That had been the eye opening incident that had given rise to the Culture Dissemination Bureau.

But, with one universal religion that thought along ways well-tried in human experience, so that men knew that what they preached and practised was the best and the right; with no dissentients and none unhappy; glorying in their harmony: it must follow that ways of thought that were anti-human, that did not seek to enhance the dignity of man, his birthright of freedom and happiness and the right to lead his own life, must of necessity be evil.

It was no question of simple black and white. Everything that humanity had learned about itself over the centuries had coalesced into the present human way of life.

If any other way of life that was diametrically opposed to it were to be found, and no amount of patient thought and meditation and willingness to learn and understand, could relate that alien mode of conduct with men's—then that alien way of life must, *must*, be evil.

In all the history of the Solar Commonwealth of Stars, no alien *evil* culture had been found.

The CDB had been set up; but that was insurance.

And now, in this quiet room high in the CDB, with the star charts on the walls and the celestial globes waiting to come to life, with Dick Myrtle chuckling away there in his seat and a full space navy admiral called Gus sitting puffily

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

across from him, Colonel Roy Inglis, Space Marines, was solemnly being told that the final evil had arrived.

He found it difficult to accept.

"But has everything been tried?" he asked, automatically. "We call no man enemy until he no longer calls us friend—and even, beyond that—"

"I know, Roy, I know." Admiral Rattigan sat lumpily in his chair, shrouded eyes hiding his thoughts. "Lord knows, we've tried all we could. None of this is public, of course, although leaks have—well, leaked. It is so serious that it is quite beyond our comprehension. We just don't seem to be able to take it seriously."

Leaks. He remembered how one service might know all manner of great secrets within it, and yet the idea of sharing that knowledge with a sister service just did not arise. That was a minor hangover of security; that he could recognize, but now that general scrutiny was needless there were other reasons for that clannish service pride.

"Since we found out," Rattigan was saying. "All the way up the line, no one has really believed. Not believed. I, personally, find it difficult to accept. The ultimate evil has, at last arrived."

"The ultimate evil," Inglis said.

Now he understood the unsmiling welcome he had received. The usual laughing, carefree welcome of communications and service personnel was proverbial. There had been nothing carefree about the CDB staff. They'd known something was wrong. It was a feeling, an aura, that seeped down from higher echelons. Nothing that they, in the lower ranks, could personally finger; but a nuance they would unfailingly recognize.

"Some theologians," Inglis said carefully, "have postulated that there can be no great evil. That if we re-check our thinking we will find ourselves at fault."

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"Would to God we were, Roy. No . . . no, there is no mistake, as far as the best minds can tell."

Dick Myrtle spoke, slowly and thoughtfully for him, or for the way he'd been when Inglis knew him, in the old capsule-dropping days. "Evil is a force just as is good, we all know that. It isn't just a matter of boiling up a few children in oil, or starving half the population and killing the other half so that a selected few may live in luxury, nor is it merely being unkind to your neighbour. These are degrees of evil.

"Remember the reports on that culture on—where was it now—that binary with the involved planetary orbit that gave two winters for every summer?"

"Klordovain, Gus. Summer was a pretty time."

"That's the place, Dick. Remember that culture they had of exposing every third child? And of burying alive every third oldster when the the winters came?"

"I remember," said Inglis. The papers and the networks had been full of it.

"Well, we talked this over, and we were able to affect certain ecological changes, helped the people and today they don't have this inbuilt urge to shed people when the going gets tough. But any group of Terrans faced with a lack of oxygen or food on a drifting ship might get down to drawing straws for life. It's a matter of viewpoint, and of talking it out."

"And you've talked to these aliens—these evil ones?"

"They've been spoken to by a scouting party—luckily enough from the CDB. I have the transcripts. You're going through them, later." Rattigan sighed, fingering the jewel in his ear. "Every mind that has studied them has formed the same conclusion. Evil."

"Not just a bunch of aliens who don't happen to think like us?"

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"Not just that. That and a whole lot more."

"So it seems," said Myrtle gloomily, "that we'll have to unsheath the weapons again, the bombs and the dust and the ray sand all the rest of it."

"It looks very much like war," Admiral Gus Rattigan said. "Devil take it."

"War." Inglis found the idea distasteful. He was not a religious fanatic of any persuasion; he was a space marine who would do a job. If that job included war, he would carry on just the same, despite a civilized man's abhorrence of the idiocy. "War," he said again. "What contacts have the aliens?"

Rattigan chuckled. He sounded like a nuclear steam pile hotting up. "They haven't."

"Oh?"

"The scout ship was smart enough to avoid letting the aliens have any inkling of our spatial co-ordinates. Of course, it doesn't take much guesswork to select an area of space and say: 'These new aliens must come from there,' but that doesn't find a group of suns in all the spread of the Galaxy."

"But," said Inglis with a premonition chasing down his spine right to his toes, "do we know where they come from?"

Slowly, Admiral Rattigan shook his head. He stared straight at Inglis. He had shut his mouth and his jaw lumped, ridged and hard. It was suddenly, after the conversation, very quiet in the lofty room.

Inglis said softly, "And that's why you asked me up here?"

Rattigan, opening his mouth to let the word out and then rat-trapping it again, said, "Yes."

It was left to Dick Myrtle to break the tension. He rose, crossed to the nearer celestial globe and switched it on. Lights speckled the globe, tiny chips of light in patterns and whorls with here and there black pockets between—the stars and galactic dust aswirl in the deeps of space.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"Earth, the Solar Commonwealth," indicated Dick Myrtle, establishing co-ordinates. "Here is where the scouter made contact. The alien ships vanished along a track leading out to here. The ship the scouter brought in and from which our information derives, was fully equipped for extended interstellar travel." He flicked his fingers at the globe. "They could be anywhere out there."

"I'll take the job, of course, Admiral—Gus. And thanks."

"Aren't you married now? What about—"

"I don't think that need worry any of us," Inglis said harshly. Even in a world with a universal religion, wife trouble was no unfamiliar thing.

"Can you start tomorrow?"

"Today."

"Good."

Like that it was settled.

Well, he'd been complaining that he was growing soft. Now was his chance to head back for deep space and see just how soft he had become.

The rest of the details were settled in crisp spaceman style. What ship he would be taking, crew, captain, general directives, armament.

"Armament?"

"We have strong fighting forces, Roy, which have never been used—the last time the Solar Commonwealth fought was years ago. But we have the ships and the weapons and the men; some of whom are trained. You'll take a fully war-trained crew with you. Let's hope they stand up to any real fighting as well as they checked out of combat school."

"War . . ." said Inglis. He shook his head.

"But we don't want you to fight unless you're forced. If you do, it will mean your mission is failing. You appreciate that?"

"Yes. Break the news gently to Laura—my wife—will

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

you, Dick? I don't want to hurt her more than is unavoidable."

"Check."

"One last thing, Colonel Inglis." Admiral Rattigan spoke slowly and deliberately.

He paused, clamped both hands into the small of his back and began to stamp up and down the room.

"Your mission is to seek out and find these aliens. The Evil Ones. Find where their home is, their base, their native star. But," he stopped full in front of Inglis and rocked back on his heels to stare up at the taller man, "but, make very sure that they do not find out from you where Earth is. Make very sure. It may well be necessary that, in the last extreme, to prevent them finding, you may have to—"

"I understand," Inglis said.

Soft? In this, he could not afford to be soft.

"I understand perfectly, Admiral," he said again.

4

APART FROM a parsec long swirl of interstellar dust and an erratic field of radiation that made detector meters jump nervously, space was empty.

Around the Solarian Light Cruiser *Swallow* space stretched clear from the last star they had passed to the next, a hard dot of colored light visible against the distant thickened galaxy only by virtue of its nearness that gave it a disc and by the lick of dust that, in coiling in a centuries-long drift behind it, outlined the star against diaphanous darkness.

The control room of the light cruiser was a warm oasis of human comfort, filled with yellow light and the minuteness

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

of human occupation, familiar, reassuring, against the starkness of forces beyond the full comprehension of men.

Commander Luigi Varese stood with his back to the screens, ignoring the relayed view. He was a handsome man, as many women could testify, with a large face that moved with liquid lizard grace and courtesy that could have originated only in the warm wine-filled Mediterranean lands. Like Admiral Rattigan, he wore a tiny jewel in his ear. He was a spaceman.

Now he stood looking back into the routine bridge activity with his hands clasped together in the small of his back, pressing into his dark blue uniform. That handsome, heavy face was not smiling, and the broad mouth was as near to a twist of annoyance as Varese ever allowed himself.

Abruptly, he flung a gesticulating hand towards the screens behind him. His words, although vehement, were heard only by the ears for which they were intended; the dozen or so officers and technicians on the bridge did not hear anything they should not have. Varese was a good space navy officer.

"We are engaged upon a wild goose chase. I felt that from the moment we sailed, but did not recognize the symptoms. Among all these approaching stars, thickening as we vector in towards the hub, how can you imagine—" He broke off, astounded, even at himself. He went on, "The first contact was by sheer chance; everyone recognizes that. Pretty soon we'll be out somewhere where they're only just getting around to capsule dropping." Then, having prepared what he had to say, he delivered the point of this harangue. "It is therefore necessary, Colonel, for me formally to advise you that in view of the suspect state of the ship's engines we should return to base. I recommend an immediate one hundred and eighty degree course reversal."

"Thank you, Commander." Inglis appreciated the good

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

commander's viewpoint well enough. After all, space navy had always considered themselves top dogs out in space. No doubt Commander Varese wondered, with some resentment, why he had not been entrusted with this task. So far, the presence aboard *Swallow* of Colonel Inglis, Space Marines, had made not the slightest difference to her search.

Inglis had tried to extend the hand of friendship to Varese and had met with only partial success. Men grew into their own ways in space. They constructed a shell over their emotions, a carapace that in protecting them against the great dark, isolated them also from other men. You had to know a man for a long time in space before you accepted him unreservedly. The converse was also true; unshakable bonds of friendship could be forged in microseconds by men facing the same dangers.

He tried again, the olive branch thinly disguised.

"Just how bad are the engines, Commander? I mean, can you give me any idea of their probable life? I'm rather anxious to finish this leg of the pattern."

"We could reach the next star," Varese admitted. "And still be able to return to base. But we are an awfully long way out."

"Yes. Right into the capsule dropping zone as you pointed out." He smiled. "I know how long the chances are of us striking anything out in the galaxy, Commander. Lord knows, the first contact was a fluke. But if the aliens are out here, then the further we vector across the more chance we have of stumbling across them. It's a simple matter of cumulative math."

"That is so. But I have my ship and crew to think of."

"True. And I have you to think of—if you'll forgive me mentioning it. It wasn't exactly tactful."

Varese laughed, all the scowl lines leaving his face.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"At least, Colonel, you're honest! All right. We go look at this upcoming star, and then—"

"And then your poor patched engines can run us home."

Varese took that well, too. Inglis considered himself lucky. The way he'd been feeling lately, he was enough to rub any man up the wrong way, let alone a man who considered that his rightful place as captain had been usurped.

The run out to the co-ordinates of the only previous contact with the Evil Ones had gone to schedule. After that, in Inglis' book, a spreading search line should, if Gus Rattigan was right, bring them slap up against the aliens in some form. *Swallow* was a standard light cruiser and possessed a useful pair of legs. Unfortunately, half of those legs had been found to have cramp; Varese was perfectly in order in his advice, they should turn for base. It was most infuriating; but it was typical space.

The next time the commander spoke to him, Varese's voice was diffident, in marked contrast to his usual vivacious positivism. "I suppose, Colonel, you have considered the possibility of decoy?"

"I had considered that, Commander."

"Umm. Well. We are not a scouter, our screens cannot scan so much of space as one of those lads—a ship just about completely filled with scanning equipment. Oh yes, we have teeth, we can fight. But our shiny little popguns of which I am so proud will be of little use should we meet up with an alien much in size and power above a scouter."

"And you suggest that, beyond our own radar horizon, our own screen ranges, there is a scouter following us, watching us and reporting back to half the Commonwealth Fleet, ready to pounce on whoever or whatever pounces on us?"

"Something like that."

In the pause that followed the contact alarm shrilled.

Commander Varese turned machine-like for the screen.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Inglis, feeling out of it, tried to relax; but the controlled bustle as ratings and techs balanced their equipment, bringing in a picture of the contact, scraped his nerves. He thought about a smoke, then decided against it.

One universal religion based on the best in life that had gone before and designed to answer the deepest needs in mankind had not—most certainly not—resulted in the creation of perfect men. Human nature might be altered very slightly from what it had been when first men stood on their hind legs and monkeyed about with flint and fire; but, assuredly, men were still men and for the sake of the race men hoped that this would always be so.

Varese was a first-class officer and a fine type of man; but he could still feel a natural pique that he had been put under the command of a marine colonel in this important mission. Inglis brought his mind away from that, tried to imagine what Laura was doing now. The ident cyb chimed in triumph.

The tech read off the transcribed code word.

"CDB Ship *Isabella*, sir."

"Solarian!" Varese expelled breath gustily. "We're still not through the capsule dropping zone yet, then. They must have covered a whole lot of space since my days."

"This means, Commander," Inglis pointed out somberly, "that the aliens were inside our dropping areas."

"In other words, what have the CDB ships been dropping their Prophets of Earth onto? Right?"

"Right. I wonder how long *Isabella* has been out?"

"We're overhauling her fast. Soon find out."

Swallow swooped up on *Isabella*. Between the stars the ships were running free on ftl drive and could see each other only by courtesy of complicated apparatus that took in their respective images and translated them from jumbles of neg-space into recognizable pictures. The captain of *Isabella*

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

stepped front and center of his screen, smiling a welcome to this unexpected visitant from a home that grew increasingly precious each year.

"Captain N'Gombi, CDB," he introduced himself.

Varese replied, introducing Inglis. "How long have you been out, Captain?"

N'Gombi kept the smile on his dark, competent face. "We're just completing our fifth year. We have about a hundred Prophets left. As soon as they are dropped—"

He had no need to finish.

Inglis remembered his own CDB stint. He'd been out nine years. Nine years cooped up in a spaceship—admittedly a large spaceship—and in all that time they had not once descended to a planetary surface. They'd been far too busy rushing from solar system to solar system, locating planets, checking for suitability, and dropping their capsules. It was not an experience he would like to have to repeat. Returning to the marines had been like breathing fresh air after a lifetime of canned and reconstituted air; no, he corrected himself, not a lifetime, just nine years.

He said to N'Gombi: "Well, captain, you'll soon be heading back to Solterra. My felicitations." Then, his voice unconsciously hardening. "You haven't made any contacts with alien ships—"

"Alien ships?" N'Gombi's dark features expressed interest. "No. Apart from three routine calls from patrolling cruisers, you are the first contact we've had. We thought you were the patrol, although we did not expect any more. We're well out into the galaxy here."

"Yes, we are. Well out."

There would be more chit-chat, messages, news, all the trivial exchanges of information that the space-weary men aboard the CDB ship hungered for. But, for Inglis, the

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

hurry pressed him in greater urgency, even, than the capsule droppers knew.

Varese anticipated him. In this lonely meeting between the stars, he, as a spaceman, could sense the grandeur of it all; two tiny hulls of Earth filled air, meeting parsecs away from all that had given them birth were well representative of the vaulting aspirations of men.

Varese said politely, "This has been most pleasant, Captain. But we are more pushed for time than perhaps you realize." He went into a technical explanation. N'Gombi listened with his head slightly down bent.

"Yes, Commander. You would do well to head home with despatch. I know your cruiser type—commanded the old *Wyvern*—and you would be well-advised to reach docking facilities as soon as is feasible." N'Gombi hesitated, then, patently making up his mind, he said, "This is in itself a disappointment. I had been hoping that you were the patrol, they have the happy knack of arriving when they are required. I would have asked you to go to a solar system we just left. Unfortunately, during the dropping operations we lost a man overboard."

"In space?"

"No." The pain in N'Gombi's face was quite plain and distressing. "He was the despatch crew chief. A clamp hung up. In freeing it he lost his balance and went through the bomb bay doors with the capsule. His men last saw him in his suit clinging to the capsule handling rings."

Varese swore. "That's terrible. In that type of capsule handling chute he would easily have ridden the capsule to the surface. He'd have landed with it!"

"Quite so, commander. One of my men has been marooned alive on that unknown planet."

"God!" Inglis said softly to himself. He didn't often swear. But this story chilled him. Of course, the big CDB ship

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

could not make planetfall and her orders did not allow for unscheduled stops at planets. The Dissemination ships fled in from space, made one revolution of a planet, dropped their capsule, and fled to the next. Time was too precious to lose. He knew. He'd served nine years of it; the long stretches of boredom and then the livid activity docketing a planet and sending down the Prophet in its capsule.

"We're on a pretty important mission, Captain," Varese was saying doubtfully. "If we'd been merely a routine patrol we would be on our way to pick your man up. Lives are precious. But—"

Inglis made up his mind. "This mission has been shot already," he said firmly. "We can make one more solar system and then head home. We might as well make it the system where this unfortunate man was lost." He did not mention that the failure of his own personal mission from Gus Rattigan would not be rectified by picking up a hundred stranded crewmen.

"If you'd be good enough to pass all the details to Commander Varese, co-ordinates, everything, we'll get along."

He could have made an issue of it. Been reluctant. At last been swayed by the other's pleas. But spacemen—real spacemen—did not operate like that, whether they professed the universal religion or not. Comradeship in space was a strong bond extending even to a solitary crewman stranded upon a primitive planet.

Inglis listened with only half an ear to the details.

The Evil Ones—the hostile aliens, the extra-terrestrials who thought along lines abhorrent to men, call them what you will—were not going to be found this trip. Perhaps, despite his own brave words and hopes, he hadn't really expected to find them all that easily himself. His own life had followed that sort of pattern. There would be a long stretch of humdrum activity, then a frenzied assault on some

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

peak of desire or promotion or a worthwhile job, followed, usually, by a deflating letdown and a sense of loss and of encroaching old age. Even Laura—even the marriage that had started out with such high hopes—had let him down. Or, had he let down her family, the aristocratic, autocratic, high-and-mighty Chalmers-Wong-Berkelys? If those crank engines of *Swallow* hadn't let him down. . . .

Well, one terrified and hopeless capsule despatch chief marooned on an unknown planet might, if he could, begin to hope. If all else failed, at least he could salvage his own pride in rescuing this obscure unfortunate spaceman. The man's name was mentioned along with the other pertinent data.

Abd al-Malik ibn-Zobeir.

"Well, Abdul," Inglis said softly. "We're on our way to find you. Let's hope—for both our sakes—we're successful."

5

BENEATH THEM, like the stippled globe of Earth seen from one of the weather satellites forever circling their widespread orbits, the alien planet spun on her course around her parent Sun. Not the Earth. Earth was an unimaginable distance away, lost among the writhing arms of the Galaxy.

Hair fine wires made a cross. Alongside the cross two selections of figures flitted past on illuminated screens, slowing, ticking slower and slower, matching as *Swallow* lost speed. The light cruiser pulled up from her space consuming gallop, easing into an orbit, and the hair fine cross passed over a certain darkly shadowed area of the surface as the two sets of illuminated figures both showed zero.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"Well, Colonel, that's it. Now it's up to photography to tell us what's down there."

"A most efficient operation, Commander. Very refreshing."

The sparks still flew from these two men. Inglis deprecated this; but he could understand the way Varese's mind was working and he felt himself to be an outsider. Pick up poor old Abdul what's his name from this unknown planet and hare back to base to pick up a fresh, undamaged ship, and stride back into deep space again—with a new commander.

And *he'd* probably feel the same way about the situation, too.

The personal conflict between two men arising through perfectly valid motives on either side was of no consequence when considered against the overpowering authority of space and the stars and the challenges to man that lay therein. Man had grown up to the extent of achieving a universal religion—whether that was right or wrong now no longer affected the issue—and his next step was to grow up in the environment of space.

Lieutenant Chung walked in, smiling, holding the brand new, dried prints.

The three heads bent above the shots. A little cloud obscured most of the frames; but the general picture was clear.

"Blow-ups, Chung?" asked Varese.

"Coming along directly, skipper. They look interesting."

This long range photography was always exciting. You pointed your gear at a planetary surface that was a mere blur in your eyes, and when you developed the negs all manner of detail was shown, all kinds of exciting possibilities were feasible. These shots were no exception.

Inglis used a magnifying glass on the micrograin, waiting for the blow ups. Here he felt far more at ease than racing about space in a light cruiser. As a marine he could judge

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

terrain, planetary surfaces, conditions—the whole chancy business of what a drop might entail. Varese and Chung studied other frames of the surface.

Chung, naturally, held his opinion. It was quite evident to Inglis, however, that the young lieutenant was bursting with the desire to go into explanations.

Inglis said, "Well, it *is* a city. *Isabella* was right there, at least."

"What sort of a city do you call that?" Varese thumped the prints.

Lieutenant Chung said, "It is a floating city."

"So it floats." Varese didn't like what he was looking at. "So we all grow water wings. This character, Abdul, coming in from space, adding load to a Prophet of Earth—who knows what happened to the capsule?"

So he's one of those! Inglis let the thought fester in his mind. He hadn't realized it before. Strangely enough, you found few religious fanatics actually in the space service, connected with the CDB, disseminating Prophets.

Mostly, the religious fanatics confined themselves to TV hookups on planet, fulminating against delays in the Dissemination Project, exhorting people to pay more voluntary taxes, generally rooting—if that was the right word in this context—on the bylines. The farthest into deep space they would venture would be to systems a few light years distant, drumming up the wherewithal. Admittedly, they performed a useful function. The CDB and the space services were not unaware of the increased appropriations flowing their way.

But, actually to discover a relifan—ugly word, in such common usage now as to be ineradicable—aboard ship and in command was rather unsettling. Luigi Varese was a very good man. Inglis knew that, it was self-evident. But, to add to his own chagrin at not being given overall command of

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

the expedition was now added the relifan's personal worry that a Prophet of Earth had not been delivered properly—had been wasted.

A nasty combination. Reminiscent, Inglis considered sourly, of the powder barrel and the lighted fuse.

"Someone will have to go down," Varese was saying, his anger only just below simmering level. "Someone will have to check that the Prophet was delivered correctly and functioning."

"What about Abdul?" asked Inglis, mildly.

Varese was caught off balance. Quite evidently, he had forgotten all about Abd al-Malik ibn-Zobeir.

"Of course. The despatch chief, too, will have to be found."

Lieutenant Chung said soberly but eagerly, "I'll go." Remembering, he added, "Sir."

Both Inglis and Varese spoke together. They stopped, and Inglis wondered with a hint of impatience why he got himself caught up in this sort of situation. Soft. He'd been worrying if he was going soft. Varese was the very man to hone him up; put an edge on him.

"You were about to say, Commander?"

"I was about to offer my services."

"I see."

Inglis had already almost decided that he was going himself. He had worked that one out on the basis of sheer experience. But if both Chung and Varese wanted to go, and as Varese was a relifan, there seemed little option. The relifans didn't worship the Prophets, of course, but their enthusiasm came too damn near that for Inglis' comfort. He shut down his expression, killing both his frown and his sigh of impatient resignation.

This situation would either toughen him into an unthink-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

ing martinet or squeeze him into a soft lump of spineless dough.

"Very well. Commander, you may consider yourself in charge of the landing party. Take whomever you like; Lieutenant Chung also if you wish. But get Abdul back up here fast, if he's still alive."

"And the Prophet of the Earth?"

"Good Lord, Varese! Of course you must look out for the capsule! But that can take care of itself. I doubt that Abdul can."

"Very well, Colonel." Varese was very stiff, very formal about it. No doubt he would report unfavorably. So all right! Hell's bells, he was growing sick of this situation where an honest standup row was denied him. Even Laura could let her hair down and scream. Varese was too polite, too cool, too good. Well. Back at the base lay another ship and another commander. Inglis made up his mind to start off on an altogether different foot with those.

The whaler—why it was called that had never been very clear—left the lock, curving away to drop neatly on her anti grav and jets onto the planet.

And, so far as Colonel Roy Inglis was concerned, that was that. Now he had to wait.

Commander Varese, beside Lieutenant Chung, had taken a third of the ship's complement. Colonel Inglis was now in actual and not just nominal command. He knew that he should not have let Varese go. That had been a serious misjudgement, for which he would have no adequate defense at any possible court martial if anything went wrong. He hoped nothing would. He prowled the ship, checking up, throwing his mind back to watches kept aboard *Zeus* and her sister ships. *Swallow*, of course, was less than a quarter the size of *Zeus*. Inglis brought a comprehensive although self-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

unacknowledged grasp of cruisers to bear; in four hours he felt he could handle *Swallow* in an emergency.

But he did not want to do that. He wanted no emergency.

They went onto a slow orbit, with the worry riding him.

Inevitably, his thoughts reverted to Varese. The man had, to any outside observer, been scrupulously polite to Inglis; he had observed every decency. Perhaps the whole feeling of friction lay in Inglis' mind, self-induced? Even the suspicion that Varese was a relifan could be a fantasy conjured from an overwrought mind? Perhaps, throughout, this feeling stemmed straight from his own fears of failure?

The ship completed another orbit, and Inglis crammed down food and went back to the bridge to brood before the controls.

Lieutenant Bergquist, communications officer, was standing watch for Lieutenant Chung. Inglis stood directly before the scanner on the port side, well away from her, staring moodily at the pictured surface of the planet, slowly rotating beneath. By this time the terminator had passed the postulated landing point of Varese and his crew, and the area was in darkness, stippled by minute specks of yellow light that, coalescing in clumps, gave the impression of a virus culture all lit up and raring to go. Just where, Inglis was in too anxious, angry and frustrated a mood to enquire.

Lieutenant Bergquist said pleasantly, "Everything running to order, Colonel."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Hope that the Commander picks up that poor despatch chief. Being thrown out onto an alien planet must be bad enough; but to know you'd be left there—" She shivered. "I hope he didn't do anything . . . silly."

All the courtesy in Inglis struggled to prevent him from being insufferably rude to the girl. She was nice. She was slim and lissom, with dark hair neatly combed, a figure that,

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

despite the uniform and her rank, elicited invariable low whistles of appreciation from the crew—the male half, that was—and a softly inviting mouth ripe for thoughts that had no place in a married colonel of marines.

"The Commander will do a job," Inglis said. He walked away from the port scanner, over to the chart desk, idly looked at the snakelike line recording their progress in the galaxy. Hell's bells, they were a long way out!

"I do hope he'll call in soon." Lieutenant Bergquist sounded as though she was suppressing a great deal. Inglis looked at her. Then he looked away. Now, if only Laura . . .

"Don't fret, Lieutenant. They'll do okay."

The red contact alarm buzzed and flashed.

At once the control room crew went into that controlled frenzy of highly trained reflexes that ended up with Bergquist excitedly calling across to Inglis: "No recognition on the contact, sir!"

"No recognition?" Inglis was at the girl's side, staring at the screen. Boring in from space, heading on a bearing that would take it slap into the planet, a single chip of light denoted a stranger ship in space. A stranger!

"Cut jets," Inglis ordered. "Free fall around planet. The mass should conceal us from her detectors. We may be unobserved. Sound the call for action stations."

At that the rest of the ship went into a controlled frenzy that resulted in the ship's depleted crew manning all weapons, screens and detectors, keyed up, tense and waiting.

He'd been searching for the Evil Ones. He'd been out into deep space, sticking his neck out, casting around, sniffing like a hound on the trail, hoping that he would pick up the scent that would lead him onto discovering who the aliens were and from which far star system they came.

And now he'd found them. Or, to be more accurate, they'd found him.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

He stood there in the control room of the under-powered cruiser and wondered. Perhaps, after all, it would be best if he and *Swallow* and all her crew had been merely bait, decoys, paddling along so that a powerful Commonwealth Fleet could surge up and take over when trouble came.

Because, quite obviously, trouble had hit them now.

The alien changed course, swinging up at a prodigious pace, barreling in from the stars. The detector crew got a clear sight and blew up the picture on the screens. Inglis stared somberly at what he saw limned on that hateful screen.

"Big," he heard Bergquist saying. "She's big."

She was as large as a battleship. She probably was a battleship. And she had not been built on Earth or any world or artificial satellite construction yard that was known by men.

"Do not open fire until I give word," Inglis heard himself saying. To fire at all was hopeless; a minute's action with that brute would finish *Swallow* completely.

But, because men were built the way they were, they'd go on fighting past the time when it was clear that all hope had gone.

Even then, Inglis was hoping that the big stranger would miss them. It had always been a chance. In the shadow of the planet and shielded by that mass, merging with it and losing themselves against the rolling bulk, then he straightened, seeing that it was a hopeless sort of chance, after all.

The alien had both the speed and range of them. She came swinging in from space and, it was obvious to Inglis, the moment she spotted them, opened fire. There was just that betraying flicker on the telltales which indicated that feeling rays were reaching out and picking them up, and the next microsecond the alien opened fire.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

She didn't even wait to make contact, to find out who she was shooting at, to parley.

Inglis shouted, "Open fire!"

All the cruiser's weapons flamed. They fired just the once.

After that the cruiser was swatted from the sky, flattened, crushed, bruised and kicked aside. She died in the time it took Inglis' mouth to close after that last, futile order.

As for Inglis—all that he was aware of was a terrifying and nauseating sensation of falling.

6

LAURA INGLIS was forced to wait in the cab, hanging poised on its anti grav, while a bond raising procession wound past.

She glanced almost continuously at her wristwatch. Admiral Rattigan had at last consented to grant her an interview after weeks of pleading, lobbying and just plain female persistence. Now, because the relifans were thumping along with all their usual blah, fanfaronade and charlatanism, she was going to be late. She used delicate, pointed, technical language as she waited, fuming, in the hanging cab.

From the window she could see the procession quite clearly. Had she planned a grandstand seat, she could not have contrived a better one. Men and women thronged the windows of the tall office blocks, hanging over the parapets of the walkways, filling fliers and magne coaches, craning to see.

How long the procession had been trailing through the many levels of the city Laura did not know. She didn't care,

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

either; she just wanted the inane thing to finish. Every attempt on the part of the cabby—a robot driving mech—to select a fresh route had been baulked by traffic control. They did not want the inevitable snarls that would develop if every impatient traveler was allowed to find a different route.

Directly ahead a tremendous plastic replica of a capsule supported on anti gravs was bobbing along. The sun caught vagrant gleams from the pseudo metal surface. Laura shuddered. Following the capsule, the heart of the procession, around which the thousands of singers and musicians, the displays and the collecting boxes had been designed, floated the Prophet of Earth.

Again, it was a many times life-size plastic model. The face with all its stern beauty turned blind eyes upon the crowds. The right hand was raised as though in benediction. Flowing white robes, which in certain lights were ochre yellow—the Earth was wise now in the ways of its forbears—fell in cunningly held folds, maintained against the wind of progress by magnetic fields.

Despite her buried revulsion, Laura could not but be impressed.

When, at last, the procession passed and her cab could resume the interrupted journey, she was in a more chastened mood. She was still the same impatient, intolerant, diamond hard Laura; but she felt more near to understanding a point of view which heretofore had seemed to her to be atavistic, childish and impious.

This had been the first relifan procession she had seen in years.

Laura was shown into a small, decorous and simply furnished office. There was here none of the high hope, the machine-like efficiency and the very human workshop atmosphere of the room in which her husband had been re-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

ceived by Admiral Rattigan.

"Mrs. Inglis," Rattigan said pleasantly. They shook hands. "Please sit down."

"I feel I must thank you for seeing me, Admiral. Even though it was a most painful process—"

"Forgive me. I am busy, and my people sometimes think they know better than I do. You know about Roy."

Laura was surprised. "Yes. Yes, I came to ask about my husband, Colonel Inglis."

Rattigan maintained his smile. "I sent Roy off on a special mission. I did not expect to hear from him for some time."

"You are not concerned? Was the mission dangerous?"

The idea was borne in on Rattigan that this woman did not have to be treated with kid gloves; she was tough, and he was tired of covering up for other people. He said; "The mission might have been a simple jaunt around, Mrs. Inglis. On the other hand, it could have turned into the most dangerous assignment any man of Earth has been asked to undertake."

"Could have," Laura said. "You don't know?"

Rattigan shook his head. "We have had no word from Roy. None." He cleared his throat, unnecessarily. "Forgive me, Mrs. Inglis. But were you ever with CDB?"

Laura was taken completely off guard. "Why, I would have thought that you would have checked up on that."

"Why? There was no need."

"If you insist on my telling you—"

"There is no insistence. I merely feel that you keep alive something that prejudices you against us."

"I may." Laura spoke now without worrying about her smart sophistication. "I was with a CDB ship. My crowd thought it fashionable to put in a stint. We didn't know how long we would be out, no one ever does, of course. You take your regulation five thousand Prophets and off you go

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

from system to system, dropping them. And then, when your bays are empty, you are graciously allowed to come home." She closed her eyes; they were violet shaded and made her face look old. "Well, I couldn't stand it. I was lucky. A patrol cruiser made a routine call and I was shipped home after six months."

"You were lucky, Mrs. Inglis. Very lucky."

"I know, I know. But those hypocrites aboard, spouting lies about the manifest destiny of humanity to spread the word of Man among the stars, using fake messiahs, tampering with powers and forces of which they knew nothing! It wasn't just the thought of spending part of my life cooped up in a metal shell of air so far from all that I know as home that the terms of distance are meaningless—"

"It was that you considered that we blasphemed?"

"Yes!" Laura said, defiantly and cuttingly.

Gus Rattigan did not sigh. He'd encountered this method of thinking enough times in his career that now it merely made him think, regretfully, of the hours of argument he'd spent in trying to show doubters the other side of the story. This smart, sophisticated, beautiful and hard woman sitting opposite to him was the very last he'd have catalogued in the brackets of those who felt true religious persuasion. The free thinkers, the agnostics—no man with a thinking brain could ever be an atheist, of course—the humanists, the man for Man do-gooders; all these weighed the scales of modern society down so that those who, whilst professing the universal religion and who were not relifans, were able to believe sincerely, every year shrank in numbers and influence.

Rattigan said, gently, "I respect your views, Mrs. Inglis. But in this matter of capsule dropping, every instinct of a man or woman of Earth—of the Solar Commonwealth of Stars—must, it seems to me, march in harmony. Earth is a small planet, old Sol a minor sun. We have ventured into

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

the great deeps of the Galaxy, spreading out in a thin trickle of ships and men—”

“You don’t have to tell me that we are explorers. I know.”

“—but how can a single planet, a single solar system, a single small grouping of stellar systems, hope to explore, and possibly colonize the thousands upon thousands of planets out there?”

Laura made a small impatient movement with her slender hand. “I do not quarrel with the basic idea or assumptions of the CDB,” she said brusquely. The topic obscurely embarrassed her. “I merely believe that the methods adopted are hysterical, hypocritical and blasphemous.

“And, my dear, you are very probably right. Hysterical—there was a relifan parade scheduled for today—”

“I saw it.”

“—which debases my conception of man as a rational being, however much psychologists tell us we must have outlets. Hypocritical—I’m not sure on that one. If by that you mean that those engaged on CDB activity don’t believe in what they are doing, I would suggest no person is going to spend up to ten years flitting about space doing something he doesn’t believe in. People return from the CDB missions fuller human beings, with better outlooks, balanced against the needs of all of us. They mature out there.”

Laura ignored that. Her own admission of failure on the CDB mission had bothered her for years; she had shut it down among other unwelcome memories. “And the blasphemy?”

“Do you believe in God, Mrs. Inglis?”

“Of course. Do you?”

Gus Rattigan smiled. He should have anticipated the riposte. “Yes, Mrs. Inglis, I do. And that is why I believe that we are not impious when we send down an android and call it the Prophet of Earth. That is only a tag, a name, a

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

label that is convenient. We could have called it a mechanical android, human appearance idealized, powered for extended life, programed to preach, equipped with a built-in martyr complex for use if required, added a whole lot of figures and numbers describing its functions and working parts, and then finished by dubbing it a Mark Four Star, or something similar. Instead, it was called a Prophet of Man, or Prophet of Earth, and the name has stuck. There's no blasphemy in that. Rather, a great humility."

"That may be. But you're arguing over a name."

"To a man who has no profound beliefs, the Galaxy is a mere collection of particles and radiation, spinning along and heading nowhere, from nowhere. A cold philosophy. Really, a hopeless one. But even those people call the CDB androids, Prophets of Earth. How much more powerful must the concept be for those who believe, who feel that to spread the Word of Man is a fine thing?" Rattigan knew he'd gone off the rails somewhere in this argument. He glanced at his watch. "However, Mrs. Inglis. You came to enquire for news of your husband."

"Yes. The sort of discussion we've had flares up very easily these days. Heavy taxes sort of spark off arguments." She folded her hands in her lap. "What can you tell me?"

"He went on a mission, the details of which I cannot divulge. However, as soon as we hear—"

"Save me that, please, Admiral." Laura made up her mind to unlimber her heavy weapons. "You mentioned that your aides made difficulties for people wishing to see you? Well, I was able to bulldoze them into putting my appointment at the head of the queue. You mentioned that you haven't checked on me. If you had done so, you would have realized that my maiden name is Chalmers-Wong-Berkely."

That rattled Gus Rattigan's rear dentures. "CWB!" Then he jerked his head forward, like a relay slapping over.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"Laura. Laura CWB. Well, I'll be! I helped pin one of the first pairs of three-cornered trousers you ever wore!"

Laura did not flush; she was too firmly set in the smart mould of sophistication among the fashionables to allow that sort of plebian betrayal of her emotions. During the evasions that Admiral Rattigan had been going through, she had been growing closer and closer to a conviction that her husband was dead. When she at last allowed herself to look at it squarely, it made no impact on her emotions.

And now this old dodderer was babbling about pinning trousers. She said, icily, "I cannot call to mind that no doubt refreshing experience, Admiral. I naturally had no idea that you knew my father. But you do understand that my family—"

"I haven't seen Jack CWB in, what is it, five or six years. As a marine colonel-admiral, he hasn't been in my orbit for years. Your brothers? Chuck and Hsi and Pierre? Are they—?"

"Chuck is a marine general, Hsi is a marine colonel, Pierre is a marine colonel. Also there is Andy; but he's a mere space navy captain . . . so . . ."

"I take your point, Laura. Well, well!" Rattigan, despite the knife this girl had slipped in under his ribs, was beaming fatuously. Friendships made in space endure. Even so, he hadn't anticipated that old Jack CWB's girl would turn out quite so—quite so—what, case hardened?

"So you see, Admiral, I intend to know what has happened to my husband. And if you refuse to tell me, then I shall take the matter elsewhere."

Rattigan sat forward in his chair and steepled his fingers.

"Mrs. Inglis . . . Laura," he said, staring hard at her and trying to pierce beneath that smart shell. "I will tell you this. Roy was on a dangerous mission in deep space." Rattigan was again grim, gray, broadside-battering space navy admiral. "Tell me, how do you stand space? This business

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

you mentioned with the CDB Disseminator ship. Could you stand up to a long haul in space?"

Laura did not flinch—that would have been common; but she felt the whiplash of insufficiency within her. "I do not intend to go trailing about the Galaxy after Roy. I just want to know what's happened to him."

"Is that why Roy has a desk job?"

"What if it is? I see no reason to be ashamed of it. Roy was too high in the marines just to go space-hopping for the sheer love of boyish adventure. It was time he settled down."

Rattigan, remembering Inglis' cold comment that there would be no trouble from his wife in his going off on a deep space trip, wondered where they'd come unstuck. Marriages smash easily if space hunger bites deep in one partner and cannot touch, except with fear, the mind and feelings of the other.

"I'll tell you everything I'm allowed to," he said, at last, heavily. "Even if you could overcome your reluctance to space travel, Laura, I doubt that there'd be much use in going anywhere. We should have had reports in from his ship long since. There has been none. Only silence from out there in the lonely wastes beneath the stars."

"You mean—he's lost? He's never coming back? He's dead?"

Rattigan lowered his head.

"Yes, Laura. This is what I believe."

She stood up, her chic slimness out of place in the office. "I had anticipated it. I am, of course, deeply shocked. Very much upset. However, it does free me from bothering the family with divorce. They'd never approve of divorce in the CWB clan."

Rattigan cocked his head back and looked at her. He was thinking of Inglis, and the lines on his face, and the way

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

he'd taken the job and his understanding of what might be necessary.

"Yes," he said. "There are so many things people don't approve of. It's lucky they don't have to meet very often."

7

LIEUTENANT BERGQUIST lifted the three-tined, beryl-dural fish spear up from the water. The fat, silver-scaled fish that was firmly pronged on the spear wallowed, plopped, flapped strongly. Inglis, propped against the wrecked chart table, brought the fire axe down on the fish, decapitated it with one blow. Hannah, the muscular quartermaster, removed the fish and began to scale and degut it, throwing the remains onto the bait pile.

Inglis looked over the side at Lieutenant Bergquist. She stared back at him for a moment, her dark hair cropped, her face tanned, the whiteness of her bosom startling against the blue water, then, with a flashing glimpse of pink skin and two slim legs, she dived again.

"Another one should be enough for dinner, Roy," Hannah said, using her knife with a delicate precision. "Don't want to tire Gerda."

"Tire Gerda?" said Sammy, the detector screen tech, looking up from the tiny fire blossoming in the hearth fashioned from what had once been the steel cup for the celestial globe. "She's like a fish herself—or a mermaid."

There were ten of them afloat in what had once been the control section of a Solarian light cruiser, whose name had been *Swallow*. Four men, five girls—and a woman who was dying under the cover of what clothing and fabric they had been able to make into a tent. Lieutenant Carmelli—or

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Belita; they were all now, on Inglis' orders on first name terms—had had her chest caved in as the control sections, cut free from the main hull and lowered at above regulation escape speed on emergency anti gravs, had struck the water. The rest of them were just going through the yellow phase on their bruises and contusions, and Anton, a young talker, was strapped up with a broken arm. How the rest of the ship, where the enemy fire had struck full, had fared they did not know.

All they did know was that Roy Inglis was driving them on under a sail patched from clothing, fabric, dust covers, charts, anything that could be stitched into one main square sail and a tiny jib—on towards the east and the point on the surface of this planet that had once been spotted under hair fine wires and photographed.

The control cabin floated well. The rear bulkhead had been sheared by the freeing explosive bolts so that it faired into some sort of streamlined stern over which an oar serving as rudder had been hung. The oar had been made from conduit piping and a few loose plates. It steered; for which mercy Inglis was profoundly thankful.

He was worried about a forward observation port below water level. The packing had worked loose and a small leak had continually to be kept under observation and the water under the control room floor—now the bilges—to be bailed at regular intervals. Thankfully, the weather was mild, with a kindly sun and a fair breeze. Water was being condensed out in a worm gear contrived by the techs with the aid of burning glasses taken from the optical instruments. Fish was a staple diet. The fire was kept alight using fish refuse, dried, human excreta, a few meagre wooden chippings and plastic trimmings. The techs were working on a cooking plate heated by burning lenses; so far they'd scorched the part of the fish on the plate and left the rest raw.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"Raw fish," Inglis had said, jocularly, "keeps you fit. The phosphorous goes to your brains—so you'll all be grade A geniuses when we hit Earth."

Linda, who had thought it fun when she had donated her shirt and slip to the sail, and who possessed a figure that ensured she would be among the first to be asked to donate the rest of her clothing if that should be necessary, had quickly tired of the expedition, and had fretfully replied that there was no real use in trying to sail to find Commander Varese and the whaler and that they might as well give up now.

Inglis had been kind but firm with her. She was a communications tech, under Gerda's orders, and he wanted her in good trim when they met up with Varese. He didn't like to think what might happen if they missed Varese.

The thought of spending the rest of his life marooned on this planet apalled him. *Isabella* had told him that the planet was a hodgepodge of interlinked seas and lakes, wide rivers and steeply wooded mountains, around the northern temperate belt, where they now were. The rest was sheathed in ice to the north pole, baking desert along the equatorial belt, and more ice down to the south pole. In this belt where they now were, on the globe just under Earth size and mass, with an atmosphere that was a joy to breathe, they must find all that could possibly help them. Of these possible succors, the only one that, for the moment, occupied Inglis, was finding Varese and the whaler. After that, if all went well, they could search for what remained of the ship.

Gerda popped up again with another fish. When she followed the fish into the boat—Inglis supposed he would have to think of the floating, sail-equipped control room as that from now on—he looked at her with a frank interest that he was not unpleasantly unaware was reciprocated. She was certainly lovely. She didn't bother to dry herself but pulled

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

on her three scraps of cloth, letting the sun take care of that.

Standing there, gripping part of the jagged edge of what was left of the hull above him—it had ripped off, of course, in their descent in protecting them against the heat and buffeting and general unpleasantness of that experience—he stared ahead at the bar line of the horizon. The action was quite automatic now, after a week's sailing. A week, that was of Earthly time, as shown by his wrist watch which had survived. The planet possessed a twenty-one and a half hour day and night cycle and, for ordinary shipboard purposes, they reckoned by that. But Inglis was thinking in terms of rescue and astronomical standards; and so he used Terran time to calculate out their sailing progress.

The horizon was empty, deserted. No land. He grunted slightly, despite his own re-iterated caution a little disappointed, and climbed down into the well of the ship. Gerda was arguing with Sammy.

"There's been no danger in swimming so far, Sammy."

"But that doesn't mean there won't be. We fling the bait over, attract the fish, and spear them. I'm worried that one day we'll attract the equivalent of a shark."

"Okay, Sammy," Inglis interrupted, forcing his smile. "The next time anyone goes fishing, you can perch in the maintop with a rifle. Okay?"

"Sure, Roy. Glad to. I'd kinda like to keep Gerda and Linda in one piece. The pieces are so nice."

Sammy was well built, possessed of a shock of fair hair, and with a nose that had evidently lost an argument with a brick wall at some time in a hectic past. Inglis laughed; not altogether relishing the observation, and swung on Gerda.

"Going to have some more fun with the radios, Gerda?"

She tried to keep the conversation on the light and flip-pant plane it had begun on under the cunning nudges of Inglis. "Sure, Roy. I'll have another try." But the flat des-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

pondency in her voice choked Inglis. Here they all were, marooned, living on what was left of the emergency rations, soon going to have to survive on an unrelieved fish diet, battered, bruised and sore, sailing a crazy control cabin boat under a clothing sail in a gallant but pitiful attempt to find—well, what was it they hoped to find?

Commander Varese and the whaler were such slender hopes. The communications equipment aboard the whaler might, just might when tied in with what had survived in the control cabin, suffice to build a subspace radio and so call up the base. But the hope was so slight as to serve merely as a waking dream, a mirage that gave them the excuse for carrying out orders Inglis gave. Gerda wiped her hands down her trunks and squatted before the covered area where the radio components were laid out. It looked like a shrine, with offerings spread before the altar of a barbarian idol.

Gerda began her ritual. She was a first class communications officer, that was clear. But how could even the greatest genius rebuild a shattered subspace radio when so many of the components had been wrecked? She went about her task methodically. At the moment she was refurbishing a gaggle of transistors that had been cruelly mishandled. Inglis called Linda over to help. He ignored the sway of her hips as she stepped across the decking avoiding the bundles and wrecked stanchions that had once supported spaceship equipment. Let her be as good at reconstructing a subspace radio as she was at attracting men, and Inglis would have a lot more time for her.

Inglis looked again at his watch. Time to relieve Lieutenant Commander M'Banga, the gunnery officer, at the rudder.

He walked aft, letting his body go with the sway of the vessel. Sea sickness had been minor; spacemen could handle that well enough, and now he along with others might have

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

found enjoyment in this yachting trip if the stakes had not been so terrifying. M'Banga met him with a wide smile.

"Right on time, Roy. But I'll carry on a while, if you wish."

M'Banga was thinking of Lieutenant Ranee Zutshi, a slight, raven-haired woman with the liquid eyes and delicate grace of an exotic bird. Now she was asleep. Inglis had put her in charge of the medical supplies, a task that consisted in the main of sorting out the salvable items from the first aid chest, of easing Anton and his broken arm, and of making the encroaching death of Belita as painless and full of dignity as possible.

A hard task for a slender, delicate woman, but one which the women of Earth had from times long past accepted and performed with humility and courage.

"Thanks, M'Banga," Inglis said, returning the smile. "That's good of you." M'Banga was his main strength aboard. With him and Gerda he could feel no qualms, no possible failures. Hannah, the long-service quartermaster, too, would be a strength to him in potential danger; but she lacked something of the imagination of the others which, despite its train of terrors, yet lifted their courage and loyalty onto a different plane. Of the others, he had reserved judgement. When the going got tough, as it assuredly would, then would be the time to seek your friends, and watch your back.

"Anyway," said M'Banga, "She steers like a mule."

"You mean," piped the impudent voice of Toni Frescobaldi, squatting on the decking alongside the shining, dominating figure of M'Banga, "that she doesn't like being steered by one."

"Mutinous imp!" growled M'Banga, pretending to cuff Toni. She dodged, glancing a look up at him from her dark eyes. She was barely seventeen, skinny as a boy, moving with the jerky abandon of a marionette, and yet containing

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

the promise of a lush beauty that would put even Linda's charms in the shade. Now Toni glanced up at M'Banga and naked hero worship showed in her face and eyes. Inglis smiled, mentally docketing Toni on what he called the stern-quarters list.

"For a cadet spaceman you've aimed at a big target, Toni," he said mildly. For her he felt badly; her first trip into space wearing the brand new insignia of space cadet and she was pitchforked onto a watery world parsecs beyond the end of the explored Galaxy with only a slender chance of survival. Inglis checked himself. He was marooned on that back-of-beyond world, too; and he was responsible for the others. He could not admit defeat; not even in mental sorrow for another. And, anyway, sorrow was a word with which most of those aboard didn't want to make acquaintance.

He turned from M'Banga and Toni to stare the length of his command. They were all there, busy about the tasks to which he had set them. Linda had gone to see Belita; and that was a sad note among the enforced gaiety. Belita wouldn't last another day, not even the short day on . . . on whatever name this place might one day claim.

Standing like that, the sun burning down, the wind whipping the patchwork sail in cracking protests against the conduit piping yard, braced by intercom wiring, with the salt scents of the sea strong on him, letting his body go with the motion of the waves, Inglis saw a chip of white gleam vagrantly on the horizon bar line, glimmer and vanish.

The words, "Sail ho!" were on his tongue, when he firmed his lips down. A little test of morale, of observation. He turned to M'Banga, who was skylarking with Toni.

"M'Banga. Wait to see who yells, will you?"

"What's that, Roy?" And then M'Banga cottoned on. "Who's on lookout?"

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Inglis knew; he stared the length of the craft.

Linda had left Gerda at the shrine of the radio idol, to minister to Belita. Hannah was fussing—no, that wasn't so, Hannah never fussed—Hannah was superintending the mid-day cooking at the quondam celestial globe support. M'Banga was at the helm, with Toni doing a spot of hero worshiping. Anton with his broken arm was asleep amidships, along with Raneé, and the dying Belita. That left himself, as captain making his rounds—and Sammy.

After leering at Gerda when she had climbed aboard from her fishing trip, Sammy had rehoisted the sail at the conclusion of his watch; now he should be on lookout. Inglis sought the shock of fair hair in the bow of the craft. Well. Sammy was making a show of doing his job. The problem was that he was used to seeking for the traces of other ships in flecks of light on detector screens, not across a desolate waste of water bounded by a horizon over which a sail would put in a momentary appearance only to vanish frustratingly and unpredictably.

The scrap of white shone again.

"I see her," M'Banga said quietly. He shook his head at Toni. "Quiet, imp. Roy's planning something."

"Those photographs we saw," Inglis said. He thought of the blown up prints Lieutenant Chung had provided. "The capsule was dropped with Abdul aboard onto a floating city. There were clear evidences of a culture centered on the ship. But it is also clear that that ship we've just seen is not from the city we're aiming at. A long way to go to there."

"Well, Roy," said M'Banga, "friendly or otherwise, we're in no shape to outrun her. That's for sure."

The white chip gleamed again, longer, held before vanishing.

"Contact!" yelled Sammy, pointing.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Everyone jumped up, except those asleep and dying. Inglis winked at M'Banga and Toni.

He walked slowly forward, trying to work out just what he wanted to do. He'd been hoping to meet someone in this wide and desolate sea; but now that seemed about to happen an odd quivering nervousness possessed him. Soft? Please God, not now!

He took the key of the arms cabinet off its hook and opened the cabinet door. Sammy had left his post, quivering with eagerness, and stood now at Inglis' elbow. Before Inglis could bawl him out, Sammy said, "Better have that rifle now, Roy. Just in case their hostiles."

"There is plenty of time to arm ourselves, Sammy. Just nip back to your post, will you? You never know what might be happening whilst you're away."

Sammy stared at him, eyelids half lowered. "Sure, Roy," he said eventually. "Sure."

Not for the first time Inglis wondered if he had done the right thing in adopting first names and relaxing discipline. It had seemed natural, at the time; but he well knew the mystic of discipline and the fragile basis on which it rested. Well, these were modern people, educated, from a scientific civilization. If they couldn't hold together like a civilized people—then perhaps they wouldn't be worth saving, after all.

By the time the sail had become recognizable as a two-masted vessel with high rectangular sails, a low forepeak and an impossibly tall quarterdeck and poop structure, lavishly carved and painted, the control cabin ship was in a posture of defense. The crew had eaten, the fire was out, and everyone sat or stood at their action stations assigned by Inglis, holding the weapons best suited to them.

Quiet lay over the ship. The slap of waves and the scend and run of the sea sounded full of liquid consonants in sibi-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

lant contrast to the long-drawn vowels of the wind in the rigging. A thin high trumpet note keened from the alien vessel.

"Roy!" M'Banga said, urgently. "Beyond the vessel—there are more. Lots more!"

"I see them, M'Banga." Over the horizon had appeared a forest of shining shapes. The wind before which *Swallow* was running and against which the two-masted alien was tacking, was bringing them down onto a vast mass of ship-ping.

"Not ships," Toni piped. "That's a city. A sea city!"

"Well, if they're friendly," Inglis said. "They'll help us find Commander Varese."

The vessel they had first seen was swinging on the last leg of her tack, turning about, preparing to run up alongside. A second and third vessel, all alike with only variation in coloration to differentiate them, cut in from the opposite beam, boxing off *Swallow*. The alien ships were being handled with a casual precision that spoke eloquently of the seafaring qualities of these people, whoever they might be. The tall narrow sails were flipped from quarter to quarter in tacking with the utmost speed and judgement, they were lowered and raised on the masts by yards sliding on shining metal rings. More ships broke from the main fleet—or floating city—to bear up towards this stranger sailing down upon their city.

Inglis spoke forcefully to his crew. "I want no one firing until I give the word. These aliens are puzzled—more puzzled than we are, I imagine. We must make friends. If we antagonize them, I don't think we'll stand much of a chance." He stared around, letting his eyes linger on each human face. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, Roy," and "Okay, skipper," sounded.

The nearest alien ship was foaming in now, running free

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

before the wind, her sails only halfway up the masts, their feet gathered into smartly laidout bundles. Aboard *Swallow* men and women licked dry lips and stared at the alien decks, trying to see clearly what manner of people these aliens were.

A vast, dark chill shadow fell over all the sea, taking the color and the sparkle from the scene.

Every head went back, every eye looked up—alien and human.

Inglis stared up. He felt the weakness of despair seize him.

"The Evil Ones!" someone shouted.

Above their heads hung the enormous bulk of the alien battleship that had shot them down. Rows of lighted ports stretched away, fore and aft, curving slightly with the hull. Barbettes swung, pointing the dark snouts of gigantic weapons downwards. The sheer size of the ship, poised above their heads, induced an intolerable feeling of claustrophobia.

Inglis felt completely defeated. Into his mind the words of Admiral Rattigan echoed, "Make very sure that they do not find out from you where Earth is. It may well be necessary that, in the last extreme, to prevent them finding, you may have to—"

And of himself, saying confidently, "I understand."

But had he understood?

Here was the challenge, here and now. Those aliens up above wanted to know what ship it was they had shot down; they wanted to know who was, to them, their Evil Ones. And in all the other aliens about, there was no hand that could be raised to help.

A hatch shone out, yellow in the black hull. A flier showed, began to lower. Inglis lifted his rifle, released the safety. He would say goodbye to his friends aboard here, one by one, with a bullet for each.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Only then did he remember the charts, the charts that would infallibly show the aliens the way to Earth. The flier dropped, sliding down the air towards the gaggle of alien ships and the Terran control section masquerading as a ship.

And, in the sail of that pitiful ship, flapped the charts that would betray the Earth.

8

FIRE!

That was the answer. Fire. It was the only answer in a situation that had, whatever action he took, death as its final and inevitable outcome.

He reckoned without the one trait of aliens that would be well-nigh predictable; their unpredictability. A different set of logical premises, a different slant on looking at facts to build of them an alien structure, would result in actions that to another set of logical conclusions be utterly beyond comprehension.

As Inglis leaped down into the waist of the control room ship, seeking the burning glass to rekindle the fire in the celestial globe cup support, a vibrating tingle began in the air above. Everyone else stood or sat as though frozen by the chill of horror. Only Inglis moved, scrabbling up the lenses, turning them to catch the sun and fire the few scraps of kindling.

In that electric air tremor a voice began to speak

He recognized the amplification, the mechanical frenzy of the reproduction. This was someone speaking into a microphone over a hookup where the gain had been turned up full so that the bass thrummed and the treble shrilled.

What the voice said he could not understand. The lan-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

guage was liquid, full of trills and runs with few glottal stops to impede the flow of sound.

The kindling was refusing to catch; a tiny whiff of blue smoke lifted and he blew carefully, and saw only the black of burned embers. He tried again, the fear of failure lumping in his throat.

"Roy! Look at the people on the ships!" Gerda was calling to him, pointing. He spared a single swift glance from his task.

The decks of the alien sailing ships were empty of life; no figures moved there. Then he heard the massive series of plops in the water, all about, and understood. Every alien had incontinently dived overboard.

M'Banga raged down from the helm, seized an axe and slashed the mainsail sheets. The patchwork sail slid in a smother down the mast.

The voice from above boomed and thundered on.

". . . there was a misty roaring and the Four Caves filled with light and the veiled powers nodded and rubbed their tails . . ."

Inglis put one hand to his head, forgetting the fire, forgetting the ship and its betraying sail made from the charts of Earth that would show the Evil Ones the way to attack his home, forgetting, even, what he was doing here. He saw Linda rotating her abdomen in a highly interesting way, and then realized with a despairing sense of sanity sliding away that Gerda was undulating too, so was Toni and Ranee and even the square chunk of Hannah was attempting to wriggle non-existent hips.

He tried to call out something, what he did not know; but some force had thrust a wedge into his mouth, stifling speech. He stared about him wonderingly, not really believing what he saw, fearing that he had broken completely under the strain. Yet he was perfectly and sanely conscious that what

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

he saw was going on, was a part of real life and was most certainly, and unhappily, not a figment of his overtaxed imagination.

Wet forms were climbing back aboard the clustering alien sailing ships. They formed a solid mat around *Swallow* now, hemming her in. The alien ships all possessed large and formidable bumpers which fended one off from another and gave strength to the supposition that the ships habitually passed considerable amounts of time riding lashed together. All noise, from sea and ships and rigging, was lost in the battering wash of mechanically amplified vocal vibrations flowing down from above. The alien flier had halted now and hung motionless. From it the voice continued.

"... dance so that you may understand the revelations that sigh like windswept rainclouds from the four clouds a sign is vouchsafed unto you..."

At that precise instant Inglis, looking at M'Banga, saw the dark man's great smoothly-muscled body begin to undulate as the women were undulating. Inglis started back from the hearth. He could feel in his own body the premonitions of the dance that had possessed all the little aliens on their ships and that was driving the Terran girls into a sinuous hula-hula. He made a supreme effort. He held himself rigid. He felt his muscles binding one against another as they did in limbering exercises.

He opened his mouth, gasping for breath. He formed words, he forced the words out; he expelled them like shot from a cannon.

"Stop! Stop dancing!" He called all his crew by name, checking them, holding them, commanding them.

He was sweating with it now. He staggered across the deck, feeling as though he was moving through viscid mud. He caught Gerda by the shoulders, feeling the smooth satiny skin under his fingers. "Keep still, Gerda! Hold it! Fight it!"

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

M'Banga, now had grappled Toni. Sammy, taking full advantage of the situation, had Linda in a bear hug that proved more effective than Inglis' own gentlemanly grasp on Gerda. He shifted his grip, shouting frenziedly at the girl. Her face, so near his own, was wide-eyed, open-mouthed, sheening with sweat. Her hair blew around his eyes. He gripped her tighter, seeing Sammy and M'Banga gradually quieting their girls and Hannah dealing stolidly with Rane. Anton, clawing up with his broken arm from the midship section, stared about wildly.

He had left Belita, and Inglis shouted at him.

Belita!

Sheer horror possessed Inglis then. He stared down the deck and saw Belita; the dying woman was struggling to rise. She had thrown off her coverings and the bandages across her chest stained a deeper and darker red even as Inglis watched. The girl's life blood was pumping out as she tore her wounds open with the violence of her movement.

Looking at her, feeling still that force playing all along his muscles and jerking the slim body of Gerda between his grasping arms, Inglis saw Belita's face stiffen, tauten, and then fall slack. Anton leaped for her. Her jaw hung flaccidly. She went on with that sinuous undulation of the hips, but Inglis knew that she was dead.

A dead woman, dancing a macabre hula-hula! Dead, yet dancing zombi-like in the grip of an alien power.

For that now was what was happening. Inglis had to recognize that. A potent power that could make the dead dance.

Inglis looked away, tried to take in what was going on about him. Small wet figures, haphazardly clothed in odd shaped pieces of brilliantly colored material, were dancing and gyrating and shaking their tails aboard the alien sailing ships. Inglis tried to concentrate. The aliens he could see,

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

the native inhabitants of the planet, were about five feet tall and appeared to possess two legs and two arms, although this was difficult to determine with all the bedlam about. But one thing was sure, they all had long, thick, heavy tails, like those of the Earthly beaver, and these were flapping about like gale-whipped flags.

Inglis thought he had begun to understand.

The voice above was now making more and more sense. What it said he still could not comprehend in terms of language; but the images and visions and the illusions of the words were strong, and growing stronger with every second.

" . . . the distant banners flare and beckon and from the misty ghoul-eyed ones the Four Caves will give up their ancient secrets and every denizen of the sea will rejoice with one heart and mind . . . "

Inglis had it now. Propaganda! Crude, muscle-jerking and synapse-jolting propaganda. But however raw and primitive it was, he was caught in the power it generated, held into the same pattern of gyration and dance by the machine-fabricated mental control pouring down from the flier hovering above.

Gerda's hip-wiggling was gradually quieting under his shouted, desperate commands. He could feel her body trembling like the flank of a winning racehorse. He dared not look at Belita; but he could see Anton and Anton had not dared approach the dead dancing woman.

The struggle continued, there on the deck of the control room ship, surrounded by the flapping sails and swaying hulls of the beaverlike alien's sailing ships.

" . . . go now and spread the word of the great visitation so that all may join in the wonders of the Four Caves and rejoice that you have been chosen as the people dear to the hearts of the banner-waving, misty-eyed ancients in their mighty wisdom . . . "

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

He was staggering forward, his body aching, his legs twitching as those of a frog twitch when electricity passes through it, feeling nothing in him but an abysmal ache and a great longing for vague and wondrous deeds and visions that would not come quite clear in his mind.

Gerda and Linda had stopped swinging their hips. Both girls stared about and then, together, collapsed, held up only by Inglis and Sammy. Hannah had been little affected and had now calm control of Rane. Toni had been dealt with by M'Banga, and, now, she whirled from him, sobbing, to collapse as the other girls had done. M'Banga stood, stiffly erect, both his hands outstretched, gripping tightly onto nothing. Sammy was being sick over the side and Anton was yelling with pain of his broken arm.

Suddenly, the power had gone and sanity had crept back into the world.

He looked up. The flier was lifting. As he watched it dwindled in size, shrank to a black streamlined shape outlined against the yellow light from the hatch. The doors of the hatch rolled shut. In all that immense flank only the rows of portholes now showed to break the sweep that denoted the speed and power contained within it. The alien battleship of the Evil Ones moved slowly ahead, rising, gaining speed, beginning to push aside restraining air with that familiar supersonic wail. The ship became a black dot vanishing against the sky.

Into the silence washed back the plunk of waves, the creak and groan of wood and the flap of sails. A shrill liquid chittering began from the alien sailing ships.

Inglis shut his eyes, pressed hard until the sparks flew, opened his eyes and began to shout.

"Sammy, no time to be sick! Look at Anton's arm. M'Banga, sort out the girls, revive them, make them comfortable. Hannah, if you feel fit enough, help M'Banga." He

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

began to lash his crew on, giving them orders and tasks that would keep them occupied. He didn't want them to begin to explore the feelings he knew must exist in their minds, the vague and yearning emotions that spilled formless colors and desires in his own brain and that had been generated by the alien mental control. Terrans were familiar enough with the tricks of mechanical and electronic control of the brain. That he could recognize what had happened took away none of the horror.

If only he could rid himself of the fuzzy cap of blurring vagueness that stultified his mind and thinking processes. Giving orders, reorganizing the ship and her crew and devising plans to deal with the next emergency—the aliens and their sailing ships—were difficult processes, demanding a conscious effort for each thought. It was like trying to work out abstruse calculations after an all night binge. His mind kept flying off on tangents that led, excruciatingly and tantalisingly to misty veiled shapes inhabiting four caves, shot through with the green murkiness of the undersea.

"The girls are completely exhausted," M'Banga reported. They had been laid out on clothes, made comfortable; all had a bloodless and waxen quality about their skins that worried Inglis. Then he saw that Sammy and Anton, too, were yellow in the same way and his own hands, held with that damned tremble he could not quell before his face, were like yellow claws. M'Banga was gray. They were all in a state of semi-shock. The girls had suffered most through their physiology; the female anatomy was more suited to that seductive hip-wriggle than the male. Glancing over the side, Inglis realized why they had all been undulating and hip-swinging like that.

One of the alien commands had been to rub tails, and the small forms of the sailors crowding the ships were still at it. As he looked at them he saw their broad, flat, meaty

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

tails curving about, sliding one against another, slapping hard, slipping, caressing—no doubt that was a racial characteristic of friendship, like a handshake, and the tail-less humans had been trying to wave their residual bones in time to the tune called from the flier.

"A real coccygeal kick," M'Banga said, rubbing the affected part tenderly. "Owl I'm sore."

"Does your head feel as though you'd been drinking solidly all night?" asked Inglis.

"All night? I'd say at least a week on the bottle would have been needed to produce what I've got."

Sammy came across. "I need a drink," he said, unconsciously carrying on the sense of the conversation, although they knew he meant water. "I've patched up Anton. Luckily for him the knots and bandages held."

The three men drank in the sunshine. The water was cool and sweet from the condenser. Inglis took a cupful across to the girls and M'Banga followed.

Gerda was conscious. She tried to smile, pushing up on her elbows. A little wind frolicked with her short hair, pulled at the scraps of cloth about her body.

"Drink this, Gerda. How do you feel?"

"Empty," she said, pouting her lips to the cup. She drank in long uneven swallows. "I feel . . . I feel ashamed."

Sammy was tending Linda. M'Banga, after a quick inspection of Ranee who was still unconscious, was feeding water to Toni as one might a favorite budgerigar.

"Don't say anything about it, Gerda. It was bad for all of us. It was the alien . . ." Inglis paused. He had been about to call the aliens in their spaceship another, more familiar name, but for the moment it eluded him. It would come back. "It was their mental-control equipment. That's all. It's over now. You get some rest while we find out what these other little aliens intend to do."

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

He rose, lifting the empty cup, turning to look again across to the clustering tall ships. They all moved sedately to the swell. There were no white caps on the waves. The fleet moved up and down all together in stately motion. On the decks the small aliens were simmering down. They had stopped their frenzied dancing and tail salutations; evidently the power had exercised a more lasting effect on them. One or two heads appeared at the bulwarks.

They had tiny, inquisitive faces, with large stiff sets of whiskers, like cats. Their button noses and large, luminous eyes were set in roughly the places they might have been expected. Their mouths appeared to be covered with an extension of the whiskers, or maybe the long and silky hair that covered their bodies. The gaudy scraps of cloth about their energetic persons were attached without rhyme or reason. Without reason, that is, to a Terran, Inglis realized.

Shrill voices gobbled. Ropes flew out, bars against the sun, to catch and hook *Swallow*. The shattered control room boat was drawn tightly against two sailing ships.

Heads craned down. Arms were raised. The noise increased.

"Don't do anything silly," Inglis said tiredly. "Act calmly. They're coming aboard."

INGLIS HAD worked hard all his life, making a career for himself in the marines against unspoken, and all the more cloying for that, parental opposition. His natural advantages had been outweighed by obscure origins; but despite that he had had his successes; had volunteered to join the CDB capsule dropping organization at an early age; had come

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

through that experience safely and with enhanced prestige, and, in making a brilliant match with Laura CWB, had at last imagined himself breaking clean away from all that had held him back. In the first flush of marriage it had seemed that the stars alone could contain his ambitions and his development. Later, bit by bit and concession by concession, Laura had had her own way until he felt himself to be a bondsman, fettered to the Solar System. There was still a great deal of love in their marriage; but it was overlaid with the thick crust of divergent habit and self-seeking.

Inglis sat now in the pleasantly rocking room of the houseboat, trying on his new scarlet scraps of cloth, and marveling anew at the changes a few weeks had made in the outlooks and living conditions of the quondam crew of *Swallow*. When the little aliens had burst inboard he had imagined that the next moment would see the end, or at least an unpleasant confinement. Instead, they had been treated as equals—not as gods, which would not have surprised him—and had been offered accommodation aboard a well-found sailing ship. They had transferred all their scanty belongings to their new home and the control room section had been sunk.

Belita had been buried with the fullest honors they could contrive at sea.

Despite the welcome fact that Gerda was a navy-qualified philologist and thus better fitted to decipher the alien language, they had all, within a fortnight, been able to speak it and rub along with rapidly increasing fluency. That had confirmed Inglis' suspicion that the spaceship flier had sent down more than a mere mental hypnosis with that damned great blaring voice. None of the Terrans seemed the same. There was a heightened frenzy about them that had sprung back as soon as they had recovered from that macabre dance.

Now, looking back, all of them, including Inglis, felt that

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

to have been a supreme moment in their lives. Linda and Sammy openly bemoaned the fact that the dancing ecstasy had not fallen on the aliens again. The two were often seen on the deck, surrounded by leaping and cavorting sailors. These people called themselves Pogosan, which meant "Thinkers of the Sea."

The cabin door curtains were lifted, tinkling on their rings, and Gerda and M'Banga entered. They both looked fit and the color in her cheeks gave a lustre and sparkle to Gerda's blue eyes. They both wore ribands of emerald green.

"Look at old scarlet banner," Gerda said lightly. "A real first class noble." She used the word in English; the Pogosan translation of noble was "he of the rich, fat, broad, thick and heavy tail." Alien methods of rank nomination were apt to be more logical than speakable, and the Pogosan system was so strictly built upon a class system that the Terrans had had no option but to fall in with their hosts' customs.

"Is everyone ready?" Inglis asked, ignoring Gerda's banter.

"Ready, skipper," M'Banga said. "Sammy and Linda are beside themselves with excitement. This promises to be a big day. A big day," he finished, vaguely.

"Where's Toni?"

"Sulking because she has to wear yellow, and thus cannot stand with us at the ceremony."

"You know," Inglis said, fingering his scarlet cloth. "We might perhaps have stood out that we were all nobles."

"The damage was done the moment you began taking command again, Roy. The Pogosan are quick, intelligent people and they saw how the youngsters jumped when you spoke."

"And," added Gerda, pulling her green headcloth more securely, hiding her hair, "it may be unfeeling and callous to say so; but I'll say it just the same. You, M'Banga, Raneé and I are more fitted . . ." She paused, looked at

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Inglis and away, quickly. "We carry a heavier responsibility for spreading the Word."

She was quite sincere. M'Banga nodded solemnly in agreement.

Inglis said, "That is true. Sammy and Linda are full of enthusiasm, but I mistrust their staying power. Toni is very young and Anton, too, is inexperienced." He smiled round on them. "We do bear a heavy responsibility. We have to put all our energy into spreading the Word. It will be a joyous task."

"Hear, hear," said Gerda and M'Banga, together.

A communion of spirit possessed them so that for that moment they felt very close, knit in the service of a dedicated crusade.

A high Pogosan voice shrilled out on the deck. A trumpet blared, the shell giving the sound a thick, textured tone. Inglis gave a final fussy twitch to the scarlet riband encircling his right thigh. The scarlet shoulder patch secured over and under his left armpit seemed to stay in position well enough, but the movement of the muscles of his legs was always dislodging the thigh patch so that it slipped down. Most embarrassing. He'd tried stitching it to his shorts, but the Pogosan had objected. Color patches, they justly said, were not a part of clothing and to join them to articles of dress was tantamount to less majesty.

The conch whooped again.

"The city must be joining fenders with the strangers," M'Banga said. "Perhaps we ought to be going."

"Yes." Inglis moved to the door curtains, lifted them to call Hannah, who was standing guard over the shrine of radio parts. Hannah, her white ribands denoting a noble of the third class, smiled at Inglis, her muscular body as bronzed and brown as an old cannon.

"If you like, Hannah, you can put Toni or Anton on guard

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

...” Inglis broke off. This over caution was senseless. He said firmly, “I believe we can dispense with a guard over the radio gear. The Pogosan have shown no inclination to steal. We know from their mores that communal property is sacrosanct to them. Hannah, you can go off duty now, and we can all go to the ceremony together.”

“Thank you, Roy,” Hannah said, immensely pleased.

“I think you’re quite right, Roy.” Gerda was pulling self-consciously at her head scarf again. “The Pogosan are inherently honest. In fact, they are a delightful people.”

They walked through onto the deck. All the Terrans had been quartered aft of the mast and the ship’s captain, a genial, mild mannered Pogosan with silver tingeing the tips of his silky hair, was sharing some lower officer’s cabin so as to leave the wide staterooms in the stern vacant. Inglis sniffed appreciatively at the morning breeze. The sky had a high pale-blue luminescence that betokened a fine day.

“We can do with good weather today,” he said to M’Banga. He pointed at the other city floating on the lee side. “Quite a metropolis. How many ships and houseboats and rafts do you think there are, M’Banga?”

M’Banga looked across. “As big as this one.” Spread all about on the sea the wooden hulls and tall masts rocked and bobbed in the swell. Hundreds of pinkish birds with webbed feet and yellow, scooping beaks, circled and howled overhead. They formed up neatly in lines to take their turn in swooping down onto the scraps thrown overboard from the galleys. Flags and banners and bunting fluttered everywhere and a sense of urgency and excitement pervaded everything going on. It was a bright, brisk morning and an animated and color filled scene, loud with laughter and the sounds of music, the slap of waves and the pleasant, companionable shipboard sounds inseparable from wooden ships.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Gerda drew his attention back inboard. "Here's the captain."

The little Pogosan had his green rank-patches prominently displayed. He was showing his two big front teeth in an engaging expression that was the equivalent of a broad smile.

"The admiral awaits your presence, strangers," he said, visibly affected and excited by the morning's portentous events. The word for "admiral" was a complex one, developing upon the shape and weight of tail. The Pogosan still called the Terrans strangers; the word meant more than it did in English.

"Thank you, Captain," Inglis said quietly. "Shall we go along now?"

"If it would please you, of red banner."

"May the misty ones smile upon you," Inglis said in a salutation as new as their own entry onto this planet.

They walked towards the gangplank. It was a solid structure, wide enough to accommodate three people abreast, equipped with strong carved railings. From it, Inglis knew, a person could walk dryshod from end to end of the armada, moving from ship to houseboat and raft by the gang-ways that ran everywhere. A Pogosan living in the center of the city barely saw the sea at all, save for wedge-shaped sparkles between the curving bows of ships.

Floating at the rear of each of these conglomerations of ships and rafts were wide expanses of logs to be used for repairs and new building. Many ships were mere floating barns, stuffed with good food and drink, water, wine and bread, cordage, tar, nails, canvas—everything that a floating city might need.

The journey to the central raft, floating between the two cities, was made in style. On their progress they were joined by many high-ranking Pogosan; the red and green and

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

white ribands clustered from vantage points all about. Somewhere in that throng were Linda, Sammy and Toni. Inglis wished they were with him. He was feeling a strong sense of responsibility for his crew, a feeling heightened by the work they were committed to. The Word must be spread about this world as fast as may be.

During the ceremony they would take a spectator's part. This was acceptable to Inglis. Much as he was fired with the desire to spread news of the Four Caves, he understood that the more he could learn of the Pogosan the better. And this contact of his city with another would teach him much.

The raft was large and solid and floated with an assurance that no gale could ever wrench its stout timbers apart. It was gay with flags and banners. The assembled nobles stood about, rank on rank, leaving a central square with two opposite approaching lanes. The Terrans, because of their superior height, stood close to the water's edge, looking comfortably over the glittering throng towards the center.

Conches blew lustily. Wind slapped the flags. The sea smelt clean and fresh and full of the tang of adventure.

The admiral of their city advanced with slow and dignified steps, onto the raft, along the carpeted pathway, followed by a brilliant retinue. He was preceded by a functionary who was of large physique for a Pogosan. This Thinker of the Sea carried, upright before him as though it were a banner, a tree branch from which fresh green leaves were growing. Inglis knew it had that morning been reverently cut from the sacred tree aboard the admiral's ship. A sea society, however much they might hate land, would have a natural reverence for the trees that gave them the wood that made their life possible.

From the opposite direction the admiral of the other city walked, preceded in like fashion by his own branch from his

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

sacred tree. The two parties met. The clamor from conches and stringed instruments was deafening.

The voices of the two admirals carried clearly to every part of the raft and were passed on in a lightning chain of repetitions by the city criers until everyone, right out to the floating reserves of timber, heard what was said.

There were the greetings. The wishes that the voyage had been prosperous. News of other cities. Condolences on mishaps. Bartering for commodities in short supply. Deals for surplus materials. There would be, later that night when the cities were lit by the myriads of gigantic lanterns in all the colors of the spectrum, the assignations and engagements and a marriage or two would be solemnized before the cities even thought of parting. The Pogosan were monogamous—that was miracle enough; perhaps not so much of their miracle of mammalian ancestry was, but still a sharp reminder that they had much in common with the aliens in their midst.

The sight of this meeting of two floating cities in the wide ocean and the emotions it evoked brought vividly into Inglis' mind the memory of another such meeting in the great deeps between two other representatives of a widely traveling culture; but the memory vanished as soon as it was evoked. He listened to the happy exchanges going on in the center of the raft.

Soon it would be the admiral's joy to announce the great and glorious news. Soon he would tell the people of this new city of the Four Caves and the veiled powers and of the ghoulish-eyed ones of mystery and high promise. These Pogosan would be invited to rejoice in the great visitation, to join in the wonders of the Four Caves, and know that they, too, had been chosen as the people dear to the hearts of the banner waving, misty-eyed ancients in their might wisdom.

The admiral told the great news. He used the words, the words of power and glory that rang like brazen strokes as

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

they had rung that day from the colossus hanging in the sky. He repeated joyfully the surging cadences, the virulent fire of rhetoric that was more than human. As he spoke the people of his city grew more and more excited; they could not contain themselves. The occasion, the atmosphere, had aroused them.

By ones and twos, then by shiploads, they began their ritual dancing that suited perfectly their physiology and their customs and that had nothing in it of salaciousness. They began curling their massive tails, flinging themselves up and down in ecstatic trancelike prancings.

It was very much like the Dancing Death of the Terran Medieval Period, although there was nothing of death in this joyous dance that welcomed the return of the misty-eyed ancients.

Inglis jerked a quick look at Gerda. Her face was rapt, her eyes uplifted. The Terrans did not join in the dance; they had no need of that purely physical form of expression; but Inglis remembered with amused tolerance that he had stopped them from dancing aboard the old control room ship from *Swallow*.

People all about were shouting. They were singing and dancing, giving vent to the dominant emotion that possessed them all.

The infection spread to the new city. Pogosan there were dancing and strutting, waving their tails high. Inglis knew that there were parallels here, to be found in vaguely recalled services in tall narrow buildings with stained glass windows; but this was, of the here and now, of the sea and of a friendly intelligent alien people who danced for the joy of the Word.

He looked up, knowing the dance portended world-shaking events, momentarily expecting to see a long dark shape materialize from nowhere.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

The Terrans, although not dancing, were joining in the chanting, as they might join in responses. Inglis was calling on the visitants to return, to lead all the faithful below to the promised wonders and delights of the Four Caves.

The dancing frenzy of the Pogosan lacked the stunning impact it had possessed before, but that was natural and to be expected. *They* were not here, in person, to lead the revels.

But they would come.

Shouting with the rest, quite conscious of what he was doing, Inglis gave vent to his inmost feelings.

"Come again," they were chanting. "Come again, oh Evil Ones, to thy faithful flock beneath."

10

"THE EVIL ONES!" Admiral Gus Rattigan said. "That's a foolish name for them, if you like!"

Dick Myrtle looked across the long room at his chief. "Why so, Gus?"

"Gives them too much power. It's a bogey name, means far more than it says. They are aliens, coming from some godforsaken planetary system somewhere out in the Galaxy, shooting up our ships and generally creating mayhem. There's nothing we can't handle in that situation, pressed though we are." He put a hand to the jewel in his ear. "We ought to have heard from Baylis by now," he said fretfully.

"Perhaps Admiral Baylis' task force hasn't found that latest contact," Myrtle said smoothly.

"Well, he ought to have done. We've lost twenty peaceful traders out there in a month. Something's doing it. It can't all be mice."

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

A little silence ensued in this wide, workmanlike room in the heart of the CDB building. Since the aliens had begun their open attacks upon Solarian shipping in the starlanes, the space navy had been stretched beyond its capacity. The CDB as a separate service had placed all its available ships at the navy's disposal. Men were racing out into the great deeps, ready to fight to protect their Solar Commonwealth of Suns. The struggle was likely to be prolonged.

One small planet like Earth, even with the addition of her friends out in that small segment of the Galaxy so far opened up to terrestrial occupation, was far too small, far too weak, to explore, chart, even to think of colonizing every planet there was or might be.

So many millions of stars and so many millions of planets. No single small planet could hope to cope with astronomical numbers like that. So the Dissemination Project had been thought up. And now the very danger against which it had been devised was here and now, compelling, urgent, deadly.

Both Rattigan and Myrtle knew that their son's sons would not see the end of it.

It was a depressing prospect.

One answer—the only long-term effective answer—had been to step up the CDB Dissemination Project, and many more thousands of Prophets were on their way to as yet undiscovered planets.

Rattigan raised his head from his work again. "If only Baylis would report it!" He stood up and began to pace.

Myrtle looked at him with sympathy and remained silent.

"Finding their home planet is vital. All the contacts with ships that have been reported must give us a lead. Baylis must find them! It's not like it was when we sent your pal Roy Inglis out. Then it was a pretty forlorn gesture. Now we have the chances and we have the ships there. We *must* find them!"

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"Yes," Myrtle agreed. "Times have changed since Roy went out." He shook his head. "That was a . . . a pity."

Rattigan grunted something. Then he said, "Yes, a great pity and a great waste. Roy was a fine man. A fine career there gone phut." He knuckled his back. "Except that that wife of his had him hog-tied. She was no real daughter of old Jack CWB. No, sir!"

"I hear the divorce went through."

"If Roy ever got to hear of it, after the first shock, he'd be delighted. That I'd be willing to bet on. He was never cut out for a desk job, at least, not yet." He paced energetically for a few moments. "Nor am I, confound it!"

"Production of Prophet capsules is running low . . ." Myrtle began tactfully.

But Rattigan's mind ran on the same groove. "And," he was saying practically, "we could do with *Swallow* now."

The intercom took their attention, and the rating said, "Cyrus Fodor on the screen for you, sir."

Rattigan said, "What does he want now?" Then, recovering himself, he told the rating to put the Minister for Defense on the screen. Rattigan was not savoring the coming conversation at all.

Cyrus came straight to the point. "Hullo, Gus," he said. His stern, deep-set eyes and photogenic features made no impression on Rattigan. He knew that this man was clever, ruthless and a go-getter. Cyrus went on, "I wanted to discuss with you the present affairs and state of CDB."

"Certainly, Cyrus. What, in particular had you in mind?"

"The upward trend of your recruiting figures, your shipping, your supply requisitions and the state of the navy."

Rattigan had it spotted now. He said, "The Navy Secretary has agreed the division of appropriations, Cyrus—"

"It's not just a question of appropriation figures anymore, Gus. It's a question of what the Commonwealth can stand.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

We need every man and every ship to stem this invasion of our part of the Galaxy. No one likes or wants war. We haven't had a war for a long time. But now it's here we will do as our ancestors did; buckle down to it and win."

"Agreed. And the CDB is contributing a large measure—"

"I don't think so, Gus."

Rattigan held himself in check. He said, "If you could explain your point of view, Cyrus, I might be able to understand what you're talking about."

"It's simple. We cannot both increase the scope of the CDB and at the same time increase the navy and marines. One or the other has to go."

Off screen Dick Myrtle was looking at Cyrus with open-mouthed disbelief.

Rattigan said reasonably, "The CDB has been engaged on the work of Dissemination for a long time now, Cyrus. We've been covering all the solar systems in a scheduled pattern outwards from the Sun. A very great deal of money, material and effort has gone into the program, which was thought of and initiated by men who knew what they were talking about. The plan has been approved by every Solarian government since. I see no reason to suppose that the validity of that thinking is nullified now."

"The situation has changed."

"Of course it's changed! The situation we now have is more or less the situation we thought might obtain a thousand or more years in the future. But the crisis is on us now!"

"And because of that we must adapt our thinking."

"You are suggesting, I suppose," Rattigan said heavily, "that because there was an initial flaw in the thinking, and that the crisis, instead of being comfortably in the future as was predicted, is with us today, that the whole train of logic was incorrect? That one miscalculation condemns the whole?"

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Cyrus Fodor said simply, "Yes, Gus. Those are my thoughts."

"Well, I tell you that you are wrong. The CDB is the greatest weapon we of Earth have against the alien enemies at our throats. We can hold their attacks off with the navy we have. When we find their home system, we can go over to the attack—"

"But not with the navy we now have, Gus. We need the men and ships and supplies you are taking for the CDB."

"But that is the short sighted policy. There are bound to be other aliens behind these attacking us. What happens when they start interfering with us?"

"We must fight the Evil Ones with all we have now."

"But the CDB—"

"The CDB," said the Minister of Defense, "remains for me an unconvincing weapon. For a start you have no proof that it is even doing the job for which it was created."

Rattigan could not but admit that truth.

"But there can be proof—"

"Until you present me with unanswerable facts that prove that the CDB and the Prophet dropping will pay the dividends you claim, I remain unconvinced."

"Very well," Rattigan said. "We'll send a ship to a planet and find out."

"But that would ruin—" Myrtle butted in, aghast.

"What is one planet among so many," Cyrus said. He was tired and irritable. "We need allies now, not at some remote time in the future."

"I'm not convinced on that one," Rattigan said. "I still think the Commonwealth can handle these aliens now. Then, when the greater danger arises in the future, as it will, we shall be ready and prepared."

"You give me your proof, Gus, and I'll go along with you."

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

As it is, I am recommending the government that we cut down drastically on CDB appropriations."

The screen went dead.

"The narrowminded bellwhether!" exploded Rattigan. "Of all the dimwitted, muddleheaded, obtuse politicians—"

"We have to find that proof, Gus," Myrtle said soberly. "If we don't, the project will stop. There will be no more Prophets dropped on new planets. None at all."

11

THAT FIRST meeting with another Pogosan city was repeated three times in the ensuing weeks. The floating city on which Inglis and his crew were living happily and with high expectations of spreading the Word on this world made steady progress towards the east. Each fresh city saw a delightful repetition of the events that had occurred on the first meeting. The word of the Four Caves and of the longed for return of the Evil Ones gradually making its way around this planet. Soon, Inglis hoped, news of the Evil Ones would be spread over all the surface so that all the Pogosan might joy in the revelations and join in the ritual dances.

After that, he brooded, eyeing the piled radio parts, after that, they would have to see about spreading the Word to other planets. After all, the glorious news of the coming of the Evil Ones could not be confined to one small planet when there were so many in the Galaxy in need of the Word.

The Pogosan were not a warlike race. They caught fish for food; but there was always a reluctance in the way they killed their catch that told volumes of their mental processes. They had no weapons designed for fighting one with another. Quarrels broke out on the floating city as was to be

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

expected; but mostly these were settled by much argument and tail gesticulation. When, if everything else failed, and the disputants came to blows, they used their heavy tails to belabour one another until the weaker at last succumbed and gave in.

Allied with this, in the Terrans' viewpoint, was the significant absence of painted eyes on the bows of the nimble sailing ships. There was a great deal of rich and decorative ornament, brilliant colors, intricate carving and many gaudy lanterns. But there were no eyes on the bows to let the ships see their way through the dangers of the deep and the spirits of the waters. There had always been eyes on Terran ships, Inglis remembered, no matter what the culture, from the Greek triremes to the Chinese junks.

The Pogosan were a materialistic people. With all the frenzied acceptance and enjoyment of the great news brought by the Evil Ones consuming them, it had been natural for the Terrans to overlook this simple facet of Pogosan existence. But it did mean that the Pogosan, when at last they realized that there were forces and spirits outside their own bodies and understanding, accepted the news with fervor. They hourly expected the return of the visitants with more news of the Four Caves and the long-awaited and eagerly expected invitations to join the Evil Ones with their misty-eyed ancients on the great journey to the Four Caves.

Just what the return and the journey might be, Inglis did not know, and he and M'Banga and Gerda spent long hours wrangling amicably. Ranee joined their company, and, surprisingly, Hannah, too, entered the conversation and brought her own practical wisdom and matter-of-fact outlook to bear. She claimed that all the Evil Ones meant was that they would return in their spaceship at some time in the future and bring the blessings of a scientific and technical society to these happy-go-lucky primitive people, sailing their

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

floating cities forever around the seas and lakes of their world.

M'Banga wasn't so sure. He felt that there was more to it than that. He had, he said, experienced a positive aura of a promise of the Four Caves in return for work. When Gerda rallied him, enquiring with her deceptive politeness, what work he thought the Pogosan could perform for a great stellar empire, M'Banga could bring nothing in evidence. But he stuck to his viewpoint.

Sammy and Linda were seldom seen outside the official times prescribed for meals, shipwork and household duties. Toni was seldom seen outside the water. She was a lithe golden sprite, sporting every spare moment from the vast platform of timber floating at the stern of the city, a quick laughing sliver of potential dynamite.

The thing they all shared in common was the passionate desire to spread word of the Evil Ones, to girdle this planet with vast armadas of sailing cities all bearing the great news, and then to patch up the subetheric radio and call in help to go on spreading the Word.

"According to my calculations," Inglis told Gerda one morning of silver light and salt breeze that slatted canvas and tumbled the component parts of the city in a glittering array, "we ought to fetch up against the area we photographed. As to Commander Varese—"

"I hope he's safe," Gerda said with feeling. She still drew her green head covering across her hair, but the rest of her green rank patches and scraps of clothing revealed more of her than they hid. "And that man who caused it all, Abdul something, I wonder if he's safe, too."

"I fail to understand what he wanted to come down here at all for," Inglis said, staring out across the forest of masts and yards and sails. "He could have done more work by using his brains where he was."

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Gerda said forcefully, "He could have helped by staying on whatever spaceship it was he descended from."

"That's true." Inglis began to feel indignant. "What did he want to land at all for, anyway? Think of the chances he had, out there on a spaceship, of going from planet to planet, spreading the Word, as we are trying to do down here from city to city."

"Yes," Gerda said, wrinkling her nose. "Although . . . although I've an odd memory that he didn't land voluntarily, as we did. Wasn't there some accident or other?"

"Accident?" Inglis paused to think. "I can't quite recall all the details," he said at last, brusquely. "But they're not important."

Gerda nodded, laughing. "Well, that's so anyway!"

The lookouts hailed, high and excitedly. The news spread. Another city had been sighted. A city that was bearing up towards them, tacking against the wind. That meant, Inglis knew, that something of great importance had happened aboard the approaching city. An unwieldy mass like the floating cities sailed before the wind unless absolutely compelled to do otherwise. He began to feel some of that excitement in him. Perhaps Commander Varese had brought his ship down to the very city now approaching?

The Terrans moved across the connecting gangways, swaying up and down in the rolling surge of the sea, headed out to the outermost line of ships and houseboats. Here the bulwarks were covered by the craning backs of Pogosan and the Terrans had need of their height to be able to look across the silky heads, out over the sparkling sea, to the other city covering the horizon.

"Big," Gerda said, pulling her head scarf against the wind. "Bigger than our city."

"A great new city for conversion," M'Banga said with immense satisfaction.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

The city approaching had trimmed sails, their white and colored material fluting upwards and down again like the magical shift of a great flock of birds, motivated by that mysterious force that can turn every bird as one. The bellying conch shell trumpets boomed. Pogosan called. The cities approached, the strip of bright water narrowing between them. The day was clear limpid transparency, and the light splintered from wave tops and every scrap of metal, showing it up, denoting the very real reliance of the Pogosan upon wood for their building.

Fenders scraped, touched, rebounded and then came together again to cling. Ropes flung across smacked down on scrubbed decks. Pogosan tailed onto the ropes, drawing the cities together. Everyone yielded a little as the gentle shock of collision rippled through the floating units of the cities.

Inglis stared hard at the stranger city. Each time this had happened before on the wide seas he had not worried over Varese; but now there was a strong chance that the Commander had made planetfall on this city, and would be there now, waiting for the rest of his crew; unknowingly, worrying over what had happened to them, thinking himself marooned for ever on this planet, unaware that they were bringing the radio parts that in conjunction with his own radio would build to make the set that would call rescue.

"What a shock Varese will get when he sees us!" he said.

"If he's in that city, Roy. You sound very confident."

"I am. If not this city, then the next—"

But there was no need to wait. A water-dripping sprite heaved over the rail, waving wildly excited hands at them. Toni pushed through the chattering Pogosan, her slender body bronzed and already filling out. She whipped hair out of her eyes. "They're there!" she shouted. "The Commander and the crew—and the whaler is there, floating all tied up in the middle of the city!"

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"Now praise the Evil Ones!" said Inglis.

The inevitable delays were a source of infuriating frustration. But the formalities must be observed. The central raft between the cities, the carpeted approach, the official procession with the bannerman carrying the greenly growing branch from the sacred tree, and the assembly of all the nobles had to be carried through just so and with due ceremony. Inglis and the Terrans were waiting long before the admiral arrived, peering all about for sight of Varese.

They could see *Swallow's* whaler. The little spaceship, designed for short interplanetary journeys, snuggled down between the tall sailing ships like a streamlined fish among a crowd of lobsters. They waved and shouted, but evoked no reply. Presently the admirals advanced, showing their front teeth in genial Pogosan smiles, and the ceremony began.

"Where is Varese?" Inglis was wondering. As a scarlet banner noble he stood a little way apart from the green banner nobles. But he could see Gerda and M'Banga sharing their worried looks between him and the whaler. Perhaps the whaler had been picked up by these stranger Pogosan. Perhaps they had found it, floating empty? Perhaps Varese and all the crew were dead?

Inglis didn't like that thought and thrust it from him for later worry after the ceremony. The admiral was now winding up the courtesies. Any minute now he would begin to tell the new Pogosan city of the wonders of the Four Caves and the promised return of the Evil Ones. The importance of that banished thought of Varese from Inglis' mind.

All around Inglis the Pogosan were fidgeting and shifting, limbering up for the dance. Inglis heard the stranger admiral begin a new incident of his city's roving, and a strong and impatient feeling swept over him. Hurry it up! News of the Word could not wait!

The admiral was saying, "This strange ship which we

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

have here was found with beings unknown to us aboard. However, I see that your strangers are similar to them." Inglis pricked up his ears, half his mind coming back from the desire for the dance to what the admiral was saying. "They have gone off in a squadron to bring one of their number who was before them, and I expect to see their sails tomorrow."

Inglis understood then. Varese had borrowed some ships from the Pogosan—the Thinkers of the Sea would find that a perfectly natural action—and had gone to find Abd al-Malik ibn-Zobeir. Tomorrow. By tomorrow, then they would know that they were not marooned on this planet. By tomorrow Varese could help with the communications men under his command to reconstruct the radios, and, tomorrow . . . tomorrow Varese could be told the great news, news of the Word and of the promise of the Four Caves given by the Evil Ones.

Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

12

THE NEXT day turned out to be a big day; but not because Commander Varese and the crew of *Swallow* turned up.

As soon as it was possible after the dancing and the rejoicing following upon the passing on of the great news about the Evil Ones, Inglis and his people went aboard the whaler. The little ship had been left in tiptop condition; everything shone with care and attention.

"There's been no panic here, at the least," M'Banga said with evident satisfaction.

"Did you expect any?" Gerda asked him.

"We-ell, no. Not really. Not with Commander Varese in

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

charge. But it must have been a nasty shock to them to see their ship blown apart in space and sent to crash—”

“And that, too, is odd,” Inglis said. “I mean, you’d think they’d be chasing as hard as they could in the whaler to find us.”

“Perhaps they did.” Ranees was her cool, composed self. “We were a very small object in a very wide sea. They could have gone looking for us and they could have missed us on the detectors.”

“Well,” Sammy said, remembering he was a detector screen tech, “they could have done. After all, I wasn’t aboard.”

Linda kidded him over this and the two scuffled. Toni shouted, “Hay! You two—don’t step all over the bits and pieces!” She lowered her bundle to the deck and glared at the skylarkers.

“Linda,” Gerda said practically: “Have a look at that circuit diagram, will you?” She pointed to the manual open on the workbench. “We’ll need to rig that on a bread board, I’m thinking.”

Linda released Sammy’s hair and went across to the work bench. She wasn’t a bad kid, Inglis supposed; it was simply that this open-air, sea roving life had made them all more than a little impatient with restrictive discipline. And with Varese he would have need of ironbound discipline. The man would have to be handled carefully; there were no two ways about that.

Toni and Sammy went back for more radio spares from the shrine where Hannah stood, again on guard. There could be no last minute losses at this stage. Gerda looked up, a smudge on her cheek putting a sparkle into her eye, holding a hot soldering iron casually so that Inglis winced. A strand of dark hair strayed over her temple. She felt it and pushed it back with her free hand, looking guilty.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Inglis wondered idly why she worried so much over keeping her green headcloth so firmly in place.

Gerda looked down on the wrecked radio—wrecked by her own fair hands—awaiting its reassembly into a subetheric radio set. "Commander Varese is going to get something of a shock when he gets back, Roy," she said.

"Umm," said Inglis, "I'm afraid he is, Lieutenant Bergquist."

"Huh?" said Gerda. M'Banga looked up. Then they caught on.

"Oh, oh," said M'Banga. "Do you think he'll mind our calling him Luigi?"

"I should imagine he'd mind very much," Inglis said.

"I don't know. He's a fine sailor. I've sailed with him a couple of times before. He might take it well."

"Well," Gerda said, going back to her equipment. "You should know."

"The trouble is, my dear Gerda, I don't."

"Well," Inglis said. "Let's not worry about that till we have to. For the moment our main job is to get that radio working and call out for rescue."

This job was the one that consumed them all, and each one was anxious to have a hand in it somewhere, even if it was only in portorage or handing up instruments and tools at the curt commands of Gerda or Linda. They wanted to finish the job before Varese returned; it was the natural pride of effort and achievement that animates a good crew in the absence of their commander. The whaler's radio gear when added to the equipment salvaged from *Swallow's* control room would build to a subetheric radio set, Gerda told them, and the breaths of relief were sincere and heartfelt. No one had wanted to spend the rest of his life down on this planet, no matter how pleasant and hospitable the Pogosan were.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

On the second day of the junction of the two cities, with the prolonged absence of Varese beginning to worry them all, the radio had been reconstructed. Gerda strung the rig and heated it up and called Inglis. Smiling, he sat before the screen.

"Call out, Linda," Gerda ordered.

The girl began to call out, and the set swept space, reaching out to contact any receiving set in range. The waiting tension was painful. Gerda was not one hundred percent sure of the range she was achieving; they might call out for a long time before any space ship picked up their signal and replied. The whaler's atomics would give ample power; time was the element in short supply.

The crew shared watches on the monotonous yet nerve punishing calling out. All that morning and afternoon and through into a golden evening they called out, sending their signals into space, swinging them across the heavens in a steady rotation that scientifically took in every target area where a ship might be. Punching through that odd and mathematically complex section of subspace that gave speeds to radio waves and to spaceships values that in the normal space time continuum were far above that of light, the signals beamed out, ceaselessly, the sweep matching the sweep of the hands on Inglis' watch. He sat up all that night, taking a major portion of duty himself; and still the answering signals did not light the screen.

With Anton on duty, Inglis forced his tired brain to consider the other problem. He sought out the stranger admiral. The two front teeth gleamed in friendly greeting.

"I had expected our guests by now; but they traveled in a number of ships, splitting up to search a vast area of ocean and lake so that I do not fret that they have not returned. They will come, tall-one-without-a-tail, they will come. Com-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

pose yourself, remembering that the whole world awaits the coming of the Evil Ones."

"That is true, Admiral," Inglis said. The Word took very little time to be assimilated.

Gerda swayed towards him across a gangplank. She looked tired. The breeze caught her headscarf as she stepped onto the deck. Her restraining hand was too late. The scarf billowed, lifted and blew away from her head, flying to cling about a backstay. She ran for it at once.

Inglis whistled in sheer admiration.

When Gerda joined him, tucking her hair back into place, Inglis said, "I have seldom met a more cruel woman than you, Gerda."

She was flushed and uncomfortable. "Oh? Why?"

But of course, she knew what he was talking about.

"Why did you dye your hair? I've never seen a more glorious blonde—a wonderful, gay, alive hair—and you dye it a mousy brown. Gerda! There is little enough of beauty in the Galaxy for you to hide such glory."

He suddenly realized what he was saying, the way he was talking to this girl; and it was his turn to be embarrassed.

Gerda said simply, "As a communications officer in the space navy I have a job to do. I found my hair distracting. So I dyed it. I could concentrate on the job more easily."

"I can understand. But when the dye has grown out—" He laughed. "But, by then, we shall be in space again, bound for fresh planets, to spread the Word. So I suppose you will dye the mousy brown back again?"

"Perhaps. It depends—it depends on what happens."

And, Inglis thought with a certain panic, there was more to that remark than was good either for his peace of mind or his settled state in life.

Toni lifted a wet head over the side. Inglis had been con-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

sidering dubbing her Iris. One brown hand flipped water and hair from her eyes.

"Linda's receiving signals—" she began, and stopped talking. More words were unnecessary. Inglis and Gerda were running as fast as they could for the whaler and the radio.

Quite a crowd of Pogosan had collected about the whaler. They were aware that great events were toward, and wanted, with their natural inquisitiveness, to know what went on. Inglis stood behind Gerda as the girl answered the incoming call.

"What ship is that? Who is calling? Come in please."

"Well," Gerda said. "They're speaking English." She was trembling with the importance of the moment. Inglis was frankly sweating.

"We'll have to chance it," he said as firmly as he could.

Gerda said competently: "This is CDB light cruiser *Swallow*. What ship is that?"

"Good girl," breathed Inglis. M'Banga, at his side, nodded approval. There was no need to say where they were; not yet. Although the chance was remote, there still remained the possibility that the ship calling them from the deeps of space despite the use of English was not Solarian. *Swallow* had been shot down by someone, some hostile aliens. Whoever they had been, Inglis thought savagely, he did not wish to bring them back again. Except, the hot thought was full of revenge, except in the hope that they might meet the Evil Ones and have retribution wrought upon them. The Evil Ones would know how to deal with mad-dog aliens who shot down their friends without so much as a challenge.

"What ship is that?" Gerda was repeating.

"This is Solarian battleship *Sagittarius*, Tenth Task Force, Admiral Baylis commanding. Did you say you were *Swallow*?"

Everyone let out their breaths, shakily.

"Solarian!" Inglis said. "Thanks bel" The screen daubed

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

reflected colors across them, and then they were looking into the control room of a solarian battleship. Inglis did not know Baylis, but he had no difficulty in recognizing the Admiral front and center of the screen as a man with a bulldog manner, a quick grasp of essentials and a practical understanding of the needs of the space navy and the CDB. He was a short man, chirpy and direct-eyed, with quick, energetic movements.

"I'll take it," he was saying. Someone said something to him offscreen. He faced the assembled *Swallows* and said, "Is Commander Varese there, please?"

The very form of the words told Inglis that Baylis expected a bad report.

"This is Colonel Inglis, Marines," he said. "Commander Varese is not available just now." On the screen a series of red and black checkers flowed, distorting the admiral's picture. When the screen cleared Inglis was left with a vague impression of having looked beyond the battleship's control room, through into another long wide room that had a meaning for him, but one which at the moment he could not grasp.

"Can you give a report?" asked Baylis.

Inglis swallowed. He knew that aboard *Sagittarius* banks of recorders were storing up his picture and what he said. The thought cheered him. He had an audience that in effect was far more important than any of the floating cities of the Pogosan. He felt the needs of the situation giving him strength. Gerda looked at him, quickly, smiling. M'Banga nodded again, exuding a quiet confidence.

The most pressing need was to put a complete record of the Evil Ones and the great message into those waiting spools of tape aboard the Solarian ship. After that, with the Word spread abroad for onward transmission, they could arrange co-ordinates to be picked up.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

He began to speak, huskily at first, but gaining strength and confidence as he went along, the very words themselves building up and encouraging him so that before long he was lost again in the wonder of the revelations of the Four Caves and of the puissant promise of the misty-eyed ancients. The mood of excitement and high adventure was picked up. The Pogosan who were always ready to dance and sing were capering outside beyond the doorway and as the mighty words reverberated the whole floating city became impregnated once again with the divine aura of rapture.

He felt pride. He felt immense satisfaction that he had been the instrument to whom had been entrusted the work of spreading off this planet news of the Word. The thought came that his parish was all of space.

He poured out the whole grand story. He told of the Four Caves and of the misty-eyed ancients and of the firm promise made by the Evil Ones that they would return. He was sweating and excited and wrought up and the reaction of Baylis and the officers in the Solarian battleship was slow to register on his keyed-up senses.

A stir went through the crowd outside and Toni, still capering, slipped out.

"Colonel Inglis!" The incisive words of Admiral Baylis sliced into the noise. "Have you completely lost control of your senses? Are you utterly insane?" Then Baylis stopped, cocking his head to one side. Inglis felt bewildered. What was the matter with Baylis and the others? Didn't they understand what he was telling them? Didn't they see the mighty glory of it all, of the grand promise of the Evil Ones to return?

Baylis went on, "This circuit has been hooked through to the CDB building and Admiral Rattigan has been looking in. There seems to him no point in carrying on this . . . this

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

insanity any further. Our locators have aligned your source of radiation and we will reach you as soon as possible."

"That is good," Inglis said. "But why are you not all feeling the magic urge of dancing? Don't you understand what I have been telling you?"

"We understand, Colonel. We understand only too well."

"Well then! The Evil Ones have promised to return! When they do, who knows what glories may follow?"

"Who knows what may follow," Baylis said.

Inglis understood why he had caught that impression of the long high-ceilinged room on the screen. Gus had been looking in, connected through the subspace radio relay. That was fine! It meant that a direct pipeline through to Earth had been achieved, and the great news of the Word could be spread there direct. He said, "Gus. This is a most important development. You have to spread the Word on Earth. The Evil Ones will want the home planet fully ready for them when they return."

Baylis said sharply, "Do they know where Earth is?"

"No." Inglis felt regret. "I'm sorry about that, Admiral. We didn't have the opportunity of telling them."

"You—didn't—have—the—opportunity! And you regret it!"

"Yes, Admiral. But as soon as you reach here we can space out and rectify that."

"Rectify it!" For some reason Baylis could not say any more. His face flushed and his eyes stared out from the screen at the scene in the whaler and at her lock, where Pogosan had crowded in and were dancing in delighted mutual admiration and love for the Evil Ones.

"I'll see you later, Colonel," Baylis managed to say.

The screen jiggered with that black and red checkerboard and Gus Rattigan's heavy voice came through, muffled and remote.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"My God! He's completely—perhaps Laura CWB wasn't inhuman, after all, in divorcing him."

"What's that?"

"Your wife divorced you. She couldn't wait for the official release on your death. Perhaps it might have been better if you had died out there."

The screen went dead. Inglis couldn't understand that last remark, and his feelings on Laura were dulled. His dominant emotion was one of intolerable triumph. He had succeeded in sending news of the Evil Ones into space. It was a great moment.

Toni rushed in. She squeezed between dancing Pogosan. She was not wet. Black smears lay over her body and she was coughing, red-eyed.

"Fire!" She swung on them, driving them. M'Banga caught her by the shoulders so that she winced.

"What is it, imp?"

"Commander Varese returned while we were talking to the admiral and the Pogosan were dancing. He acted most peculiarly. They were trying to tell him of the good news, and the Word of the Four Caves." Toni coughed, tears running from her eyes. "Now the city is on fire!"

In the shocked silence the sound of the crackling reached them all. The Pogosan heard. The air filled with shrill cries and bleats. Conch shell trumpets took up the alarm. Smoke began to drift in.

Inglis said, "Fire! But how?"

Toni shouted, "Commander Varese set the city on fire!"

THE MOMENTUM of the dance slowed gradually. Even the magnitude of the disaster which was an age-old inbred fear in every Pogosan could not burst through the chains of

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

delight in dancing and of shouting the joyous news of the Four Caves. Like inpooling ripples, the fear spread from the outer perimeter of the two cities, at last joining and comingling at the center. Because of that, when at last the Pogosan and the Terrans in the whaler realized fully what was happening, their reactions were more volatile, more urgent, more panic-stricken than the others. For, what was happening was the destruction of the two joined cities.

There was no need to go into laborious details of what fire meant aboard the wooden cities; the Terrans were aware of the menace of fire aboard spaceships. Here, the peril was all the greater for the lack of adequate fire-fighting facilities. The Pogosan had the sea, and this they used.

Inglis and the Terrans found themselves in bucket chains, lifting and hurling and returning for refills, endlessly, on and on, in the face of fire and smoke and lack of air and heat that singed and roasted them. The red face of the fire demon glared out, and the end was blackness and death. They toiled in a shower of sparks, retreating as the flames hurled themselves across tarred ropes, varnished masts and fragile sails. Great sections of the cities broke free, to sail off raggedly before the breeze. There was no thought in Inglis' mind of lifting in the whaler and of escaping from the holocaust. Any decency, gratitude, reverence of the Evil Ones, would have precluded that base action.

Spread across the sea the fiery shambles roared on, and the water curdled with the red reflections.

Of Varese and the other Terrans there was no sign. Inglis understood from an admiral, in gasps between hurling buckets and beating out the Pogosan's silky singeing hair, that the outrage perpetrated by Varese was the major crime in the Pogosan calendar. Despite the smallness of the Pogosan and their mildness, they had rounded up Varese and his

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

pyromaniacs and confined them aboard a ship which, ironically enough, was clear of flames.

Inglis had no time to spare for Varese now. The fire threatened everything that he felt worthwhile here; his plain duty was to do all he could to extinguish it fast.

The fire was conquered in the end only by abandoning to it its already won victories and much wealth that he had already fastened its teeth upon. They cut free the flaming ships and houseboats, the rafts and floating warehouses full of treasure. They sank ships in a long, wavering line to form a barrier, and then sailed with slatted sails before the wind, outracing the hunger of the fire. Until they were exhausted they beat out the chips of flame and fiery embers sweeping down on the wind. The guilt the Terrans felt would not let loose upon the Pogosan by men from Earth; other men from Earth could do nothing less than attempt to give everything they could in reparation.

Inglis, thinking of the Pogosan and their toothy smiles and their friendship, had no wish to meet Varese just yet.

He felt an atavistic impulse to hurl the man back into the flames he had set and escaped.

For some reason, perhaps a quirk of his exhausted mind, he thought of Abd al-Malik ibn-Zobeir. He wondered if Varese had found the stranded . . . stranded? Abdul had landed here. Into the tired mind of Inglis strange fantasies paraded. He seemed to be seeing double; rather, to be thinking double. He went to find Gerda and M'Banga and took them with him as support when he called on Varese. He felt lightheaded and unsure of himself.

Varese and the rest of the survivors were aboard a Pogosan ship, sitting moodily in the hold. Lights were brought and Inglis, stern-faced, descended the ladders.

"Well, you've made a fine mess of things," Varese said.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Inglis was astounded. These were the very words he had intended to use himself.

"What do you mean?" he said, his anger black and boiling. "You deliberately set fire to the Pogosan cities! Are you mad? Don't you understand what you've done?"

"I understand that I have tried to root out the work of the Evil Ones! I am a man of Earth and I see all about me the dark forces of evil. They must be smitten with the full might of the sword!" Varese spoke quietly, very intensely, as though hoping that what he said might have some special and quite other meaning for Inglis. Inglis was still angry.

"The Tenth Task Force is on its way here," he said. "I'll leave Admiral Baylis to deal with you. Until he arrives I'd try to think of excuses. What excuses you can possibly contrive for deliberately burning friendly cities, I leave to your own twisted mind."

Lieutenant Chung said, "It is useless arguing with them, Commander. They're not sane any more."

Varese said, "I think you're right Lieutenant. At least they've had the sense to repair the subspace radio and call out. As soon as the admiral arrives—"

"I advise you to have your excuses, or your prayers, ready," Inglis said. He turned his back on the pyromaniacs and climbed up onto the deck again.

Altogether, a most unsatisfactory interview.

Perhaps Varese might more fully comprehend his mischief if he saw personally the blackened ships, the gaps in the cities, the burial parties. Inglis half turned to return below. A voice stopped him. Toni and M'Banga were pointing off to leeward and Gerda, who had called him, faced about again as soon as she had attracted his attention. Inglis walked across. A ship was tacking against the wind, bearing up under skilfully handled sails. In the dusk lights blazed from every part and cord so that the ship appeared a float-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

ing lantern, giant-sized, ethereal, enchanting across the dark water.

"Don't you feel it?" Toni whispered.

Gerda put her hand quite unselfconsciously on Inglis' arm. He could feel an odd, exciting thrilling sensation vibrating from the approaching ship. It made his chest expand, lightened him, sloughed off his worry and fretfulness, so that he assumed larger, more magnificent proportions. He felt uplifted.

"What is it?" Gerda said, softly. Pogosan were crowding up now, quietly, their feet shuffling on the decks. The magic of that silent ship, radiant with light and color like a many-faceted Chinese lantern caught at all their throats. The wind had slackened, the ship glided almost without a sound. From that eerie, beautiful and yet supremely friendly vision flowed wave on wave of reassurance, of calmness, of comfort and balm. Inglis wanted to sink all his worries into that ship out there—into whatever being it might be who was radiating those intense waves of compassion and understanding.

The ship neared. Torches woke to light all about. Slowly, with absolute authority, an organ note began to sound, rising and falling, linking in measured cadences into music that stirred the emotions. The music swelled. The Pogosan remained perfectly quiet.

On a sweetly balanced yet crashing chord the music thinned into a prolonged high note that dwindled effectively; riveting all attention. The voice spoke to them from the shining ship.

"I am the Son of Man. I bring you good tidings of great joy, for Man is seeking his friends in the Galaxy. Soon, he will come to this world, bringing gifts that pass all comprehension. I have been sent as a herald, unworthy though I am. Prepare ye the way! For Man in his goodness deals kindly with his friends."

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

Inglis felt as though a red hot band of fire around his head was crushing in his temples.

"From Earth have I come. Know ye all that in the fullness of time men will descend to this world, and they would joy in finding friends to receive them, good friends with whom to share their secrets and with whom to voyage in amity among the stars."

The voice talked on. The waves of mental power radiated, assuring, comforting, bringing promise of help and sustenance, of understanding of the Pogosan problems and of surcease from all worry and pain.

- And Inglis recognized the words.

He had, for nine long years, studied them, programed them onto tape, fed them into the electronic brains of androids ready to be dropped upon many unknown planets.

The Universe tilted upside down. Everything fell into place.

He understood what he had done.

He understood. . . .

He remembered little of what happened after that.

Varese was talking to him, with Gerda close, and M'Banga and Rance and the others sitting about the desk, heads sunk into hands, taking no notice of the quietly talking Pogosan. The golden glory was still in the air. Pogosan were exchanging fragments of what the voice from the Prophet of Earth, the Son of Man, had said. There was no wild dancing. But many people were singing, happily. All night, for the erstwhile crew of the *Swallow* control room ship, the mental readjustments went on.

Someway through that night Inglis found himself and Gerda under the stars seeking comfort and succor from each other. Thought of Laura and the divorce washed away in the flood of passion. In Gerda, at last, he had found the girl who could stand by his side out in the beckoning star lanes.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

With the sun came the dawning hope. Strengthened, he looked across at his crew, haggard, eyes rimmed in black, and knew that now if ever they would need from him inspired leadership.

With that growing understanding pulsing newly in him he went across to the bulwarks and put his elbows down on them, looking across at the ship rocking in the swell. Gerda joined him, the blonde hair with its brown tips free to the air. He knew that she would never again need to dye it to hide its beauty from men.

On that ship swaying gently over there was the capsule and the equipment that produced that radiated aura of goodwill. There the Prophet of Earth was waiting with the patience of nuclear energy and electronics to talk once more to these people, to spread the Word of Man. Inglis knew, without the need to prepare for a martyrdom that, on another world, would seal irrevocably the stamp of Earth upon the world.

And he . . . he had been spreading the Word of the Evil Ones!

Varese was gentle with him. Gerda and M'Banga had done the explaining. And, after all, there was little to say. Control of the brain through induced electric currents was no novelty; that the unknown aliens had controlled the minds of Terrans meant merely that their technique was on a par with that of the Solarians. It made them just that much more dangerous as opponents.

"I've been in touch with Admiral Baylis. They want to talk to you, Inglis."

"I'll come." He stood up like an old man.

Baylis had lost that puffed-turkey look. He was calm and reasonable. "You do comprehend what has happened, Inglis?"

"Yes."

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"If I hadn't heard you myself, if we didn't have it all on tape, I don't think I'd believe it. A Solarian officer, a Terran of the Space Marines, spouting gibberish direct from the mortal enemies of Earth, on their side, rooting for them. You've corrupted that planet. I suppose you realize that?"

"Not all of it. It's quite large. We contacted four cities apart from our own."

"We'll have to get to those fast. Varese, can you organize the Prophet?"

Varese said, "I haven't so far contacted the Prophet, sir. We failed to find them; that is, the Prophet and Abdul. They found us. Or the Prophet did."

"You haven't checked on the man who was marooned?"

"No, sir. There was rather a lot to do, besides—"

"I understand."

A mellow chime gonged. A new voice said, "Hullo, Roy."

The screen flickered in red and black chequers, and then split. Half showed the familiar work room and Admiral Rattigan with Dick Myrtle at his shoulder. "You have been having yourself a time."

"I . . . I'm sorry, Gus . . . Admiral. Very sorry. There is one rather interesting ray of hope, however—"

"I'll say there is!" Rattigan was effervescent. He radiated good humor. "You admit fully and freely that you were under the influence of the mental control radiating from the alien spaceship? That you wanted more than anything else for the aliens to return? That you would have done anything—anything—for the Evil Ones?"

The smell of burning hanging over the floating city tasted sourly in his mouth. "It's useless to deny it. It's all on tape. Yes. Yes, I admit all that."

"Excellent."

"What's that?" Inglis was jolted from his apathy.

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

"I can't explain over an open hook-up, Roy. But I'll just say that the Prophet down there on that planet you're on did a job that couldn't have been bettered. We were waiting for a miracle. A gentleman called Cyrus demanded a miracle. The future of the CDB depended on it. You, my dear Roy, by being reconverted by the Prophet, afford us that miracle." Rattigan was full of it. "We owe you our thanks."

Inglis wasn't following this.

The very extent of the tragedy had been so vast that his muted reactions had been the only possible ones; he was too stunned to take it all in. He had passed beyond the stage where suicide had seemed the only honorable avenue left; but only just passed it. Gerda, of course, had saved him. Under that depth of understanding and in his present inmost mental agony, any extravagant show of horror, remorse, sorrow, would have been childish ranting. He understood what he had done and why, and he had an inkling now of what Rattigan was talking about. In a straight contest of wills and influences, the Solarian mental control operating through the Prophet, had ousted the implantations of the Evil Ones.

It was a very real victory.

"I somehow wish I hadn't been the battlefield for it, though," he told Rattigan.

Gerda's hand rested on his arm. He felt the fingers press into him with a peculiar, profound sense of gratitude.

A disturbance at his back failed to distract him. Toni, wet as usual, was trying to attract his attention.

Toni said in high excitement, "The Prophet was—"

Rattigan, using his heavy voice, cut in, "Yes. The Prophet is to be put hard at work at once." Toni had pushed past M'Banga now. Rattigan was still speaking, "The Prophet must chase up those cities who are still influenced by the Evil Ones. The damage on that planet of yours—what d'ye

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

call it, Pogosan?—must be cleared up even though the basic problem remains—”

Inglis, waving Toni to quietness, interrupted. Rattigan, it was plain, was ready to give his eye teeth to the first asker. Inglis felt that he'd wriggled off the hook only by a fluke, the fluke of this man Cyrus' demands; but he very much wanted and desired to unhook himself—himself. “The basic problem is solved,” he said, and waited.

Rattigan stared at him blankly. In the whaler a quietness fell on those gathered there, save for Toni, who again tried to say something, and the noises of voices and laughter outside on the Pogosan sailing ships. Inglis savored the moment. It was all that was left of his self esteem—that and Gerda—and he meant to use it all the way.

“My instructions were to locate the home system of the Evil Ones.”

“Well?”

“I still remember the misty-eyed ancients. I still recall the words of fire and glory and the picture of the Four Caves is still very plain in my mind. That has meant that I am very well aware of what I was doing.” He sought for the right words. “The Four Caves form a pattern, a pattern outlined in fire. That fire is composed of stars. In effect, the knowledge of the Four Caves is displayed through a star map. The Four Caves are the four home suns of the Evil Ones. They must have used this type of picture system to impress a formula for their descendants so that there would be no mistake.”

“That follows,” Varese said, unexpectedly, over Inglis' ear.

“I can study that picture in my brain, as can anyone who has received knowledge of the four caves, and from that implanted information locate the Evil Ones' home system.”

“The devil you can!” Rattigan breathed softly. “So we've

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

got them. We can go ahead, move onto the attack."

"Yes."

"Will you listen to me?" shouted Toni.

"What is it?" Inglis turned. A short, swarthy man he had never seen before in his life stood at his elbow.

Rattigan said, "Who's that?"

The man said, "My name is Abd al-Malik ibn-Zobeir, capsule despatch chief of CDB ship *Isabella*, sir."

"You got down alive? That's good! You can return at once with the crew of *Swallow* aboard *Sagittarius*."

Abdul said tiredly, "You'll have to send down another Prophet in a fresh capsule. The one I rode down to the surface cracked up rather badly on landing."

"What!"

"But the Voice!" Inglis said. "The waves of mental power? We were under the influence of the Evil Ones and the Solarian Prophet of Earth reconverted us."

"No," Abd al-Malik said. "I did."

"You?"

"Yes. The android was smashed up. That was my fault, my sacrifice, in falling with it. But the Dissemination Project had to go on. And the mental radiation equipment was still intact. So I just set about doing the job myself."

"Well, I'll be—" Admiral Gus Rattigan said.

Inglis said, "I don't know how you feel about it, but, speaking personally, I feel I owe Abdul a vote of thanks. A big one. That must have been a pretty tough job, alone."

The despatch chief smiled wearily. "Maybe. The Prophet was just a machine. It was put out of action. As a man, a Solarian, I couldn't let Earth down, could I?" The Pogosan were singing now on their sailing ships, a happy, lilting tune taught them from the tapes and Abd al-Malik had been run-

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

ning. The tune would have been recognized at once on Earth. "Whenever Earthmen land on this planet—even three thousand years in the future—they will come knowing that they are friends, visiting friends made long ago. That was the object of the CDB, wasn't it?"

"The Evil Ones had the same idea." someone said.

"Right." Abdul glanced at his watch. "If you cannot afford to send a full-scale exploration party, or even a small scout, to all the planets in the Galaxy because there are so many of them, you have to think of something else. Because there is every chance that other, unfriendly aliens, are busy at the same thing. So you send a Prophet to drop them down on the planets you find to pave the way, to channel the evolving people's minds into ways of thinking understandable to Terrans, so that when you do have time to explore the planet you discover people who already think as you do, who are not truly alien at all. The CDB hoped to make sure that the people of the Galaxy—or that part of it we can reach at the moment—are attuned to your way of thinking, your way of life, your religion, if you like. Then, when you, or we, land, we are met by friends."

Abd al-Malik ibn-Zobeir saluted gravely. "I'd better get back and run a few more song tapes. These Pogosan are a fine race of people, worthy allies to have. Until you can send a new Prophet to take over, I'll carry on. After all, a man ought to be able to do this job far better than a machine, even if there are only a few of us."

"Better than a machine." Inglis said. "On this planet that is true, the Pogosan don't martyr prophets. But, on other planets, we'd best continue using androids."

"The CDB will continue disseminating prophets," Gus Rattigan said. "Roy, you and your girl friend had better hurry home. I've work for you both."

THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING

And Abd al-Malik ibn-Zobeir went out onto the deck into the sunshine to get on with his job. He felt very happy. He was no longer frightened; not frightened at all.