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THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

From spaceships to flying broomsticks — ten
stories of science fiction and fantasy

By **THEODORE R. COGSWELL**

with a double introduction by

ANTHONY BOUCHER AND FREDERIK POHL



TWO-SIDED TEACHER

THEODORE R. COGSWELL is a respectable teacher of English at an Indiana college. Yet at times a strange change comes over him—fangs protrude from his mouth, an expression of bestial cunning shadows his face, and claws sprout from his fingers and proceed to rattle on the typewriter. The result is a series of stories, both supernatural and scientific, which have received the raves of discriminating readers. *THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD* is the first collection of these stories in book form—eight short stories and two novelettes, including the famous title story and the well-remembered “The Specter General.”

Anthony Boucher and Frederik Pohl, who, as editors, have bought some of the stories in this collection, contribute a joint introduction.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

By **THEODORE R. COGSWELL**



**PYRAMID
BOOKS**

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THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD, *by Theodore R. Cogswell*

TO MY GIRLS

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CONTENTS

Introduction:

Fantasy and/or Science Fiction: Anthony Boucher 7

Fantasy in Science Fiction—No: Frederik Pohl 9

The Masters 11

The Specter General 18

Wolfie 72

Emergency Rations 80

The Burning 85

Things 89

Test Area 101

Prisoner of Love 108

Invasion Report 121

The Wall Around the World 135

INTRODUCTION

FANTASY AND /OR SCIENCE FICTION

LABELS ARE DANGEROUS THINGS.

The same label that seems to one reader to spell out an alluring *taste me* will appear to another as the skull-and-crossbones warning of poison.

"Science fiction" is a particularly ambivalent label. There is a small group of enthusiasts who read it eagerly and have little desire to read anything else; and there is a large group of general readers who absolutely refuse to touch the stuff. Neither group has any clear concept of what science fiction is; they simply know it as a label for what they, respectively, will/will not read.

So s.f. editors apply the label to a broad range of fantasy, which s.f. readers accept happily. And mainstream publishers and readers withdraw the label from certain selected works, saying "This is not science fiction"—which is mainstreameese for "This is science fiction but I think you'll like it."

There was a time when the term "science fiction" had critical validity and importance, denoting a particular branch of imaginative literature characterized by rigorous intellectual disciplines. These are most recognizable in what we may call hard-core science fiction—all of the work of Hal Clement, for instance, and much of Robert A. Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke—fiction of closely reasoned speculation, in which the story could not exist without the thinking back of it.

But what is labeled "s.f." today ranges over a whole spectrum, from this hard-core stuff through recognizably close relations and on to pure fantasy-with-the-words-changed . . . or worse yet, to wholly unimaginative fiction which is simply a conventional western or thriller set on Mars.

That admirable craftsman Fredric Brown once explained (somewhat cynically, I fear) how "almost any fantasy can

INTRODUCTION

be made into a science fiction story." In the tale of King Midas and his golden wish, for instance, the wish-granting pagan god becomes "an extraterrestrial from a far planet who is living in New York anonymously as an observer for the Galactic Federation," who creates "a machine which alters the molecular vibrations of Mr. Midas's body so his touch will have a transmuting effect upon other objects."

This is, of course, still sheer fantasy (and a hell of a lot harder to believe than the Greek original; surely Occam's Razor would indicate a plain old god as preferable to that molecular vibrations bit); but Mr. Brown is pragmatically right: it would certainly be acceptable as s.f. to most editors and readers, because the label is right.

It is clear that the people who think they like only s.f. enjoy a surprising amount of pure fantasy—even as the readers who think they shun s.f. can relish it under another label.

But it seems to me more honest to label vaguely than to mislabel. I prefer to say (as I did when I edited *Fantasy & Science Fiction*), "Here are a number of excellent stories of the imagination. Some are strict science fiction, some are pure fantasy, some are unclassifiable. Mr. Cogswell is very good at *your* kind of story, and you may well enjoy him in other types too—but don't ask me to say which is which."

Whenever an F&SF annual appears, the reviewers try to break it down into categories: stories A and D are absolute fantasy, B is unarguably s.f., C is a mixed type . . . They're all quite positive of the accuracy of their labeling; but no two reviewers agree on which labels go on which stories.

Two fine fantasy magazines (*Unknown Worlds* and *Beyond*) died because their labels read, in effect, "Here are all types of fantasy *except* science fiction." (And their best stories have since appeared in many s.f. anthologies. . . .)

The devil (or the Galactic Visitant) take labels. Theodore Cogswell has imagination and can write. That's all you need to know.

ANTHONY BOUCHER

INTRODUCTION

FANTASY IN SCIENCE FICTION—NO

WHEN CYRIL KORNBLUTH DIED, HE LEFT unwritten a story I have always longed to read. Only six words of it exist.

It was Cyril's habit to roll a sheet of paper several times around the platen of his typewriter, to improve the typing surface. It had a useful secondary effect: It was right there handy for story ideas. This is more important than it might seem to the layman, because it is a fact well known to all writers that the best time for getting story ideas is when you are working on something else. Unbidden, plots and characters and situations leap to your mind, so beautiful and moving that they far outshine in their crystalline splendor the tawdry potboiler actually in work. So you have a choice. Either you interrupt what you are doing to make a note—and once interrupted, you remember you need a cup of coffee, and you fall into a conversation with the mailman, and the kids come home from school . . . and there's another day down the drain. Or you resolutely continue with the potboiler, and the idea is lost by the time you're through.

Cyril's roller-wrapper took care of all that. Between pages he would jot a note on the roller itself, three or four words sometimes, rarely a sentence. And then (again unlike most writers!) he would sooner or later write the story.

All but one. The note that he never wrote a story to fit said simply:

ghosts in a Martian department store

It remains one of my favorite unwritten stories. I wish we had it to read right now.

If this be "fantasy in science fiction" I'm for it; for what Kornbluth would have done, I am sure, would be to invest the "ghosts" with such scrupulous rightness that their "fantasy" origins would be irrelevant, except as they added a piquant contrast to a perfectly rational plot—as irrelevant, and in the same way irrelevant, say, as the ancestry of Napoleon Bonaparte or the stinking civet glands that give body to a delicate perfume. What Kornbluth would have done is what he did with vampires in "The Mindworm"—what

INTRODUCTION

Lester del Rey did with fairies in "Return Engagement" or James Blish with werewolves in "There Shall Be No Darkness." This sort of thing is fair game—why not? Science fiction is not limited to mighty machines.

"Science" is, after all, knowledge. The term for any given science is a "discipline"—what distinguishes science from non-science is an attitude. The gadgets, the cybernetic brains and space-drives, are only hardware that transmute into practice the knowledge obtained by methodical investigation.

As John Rackham says, the term "science" can apply to any subject studied in a scientific—i.e., a methodical—manner. It is the *study* that is science (or isn't science), not the subject matter. So with science fiction; it is not the subject matter that determines whether or not it qualifies, but the manner in which it is written. You can write a science fiction story about ghosts as well as you can write one about rockets. Certainly you can write one about any of the conventions of literary fantasy.

But this is not to say that science fiction and fantasy are the same thing. Far from it. The clanking chains, the spreading blotches on a wall—let Algernon Blackwood have them back, we don't want them in s.f. Not unless they are handled *as* science fiction—which is to say, by the application of brainpower, by investigating their causes and their consequences.

I still wonder, from time to time, just what Cyril Kornbluth would have made of his Martian ghosts. I have an idea that it would have borne some resemblance to a similar notion that must have occurred to another highly competent science-fiction writer. His name is Robert A. Heinlein, and what he made of the notion he called *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

And that brings us to Theodore R. Cogswell. Here is a man who knows both science fiction and fantasy, and knows how to combine them.

It's about time that Ted Cogswell had a volume of his short stories on the shelves, and it is with pleasure that I help introduce him to you. Ted, these are your readers. Readers, here is a man you will enjoy knowing.

FREDERIK POHL

THE MASTERS

"SO HEAVY!" GROANED THE LAST EARTHMAN to himself as he laboriously pried up a heavy flagstone with the butt of an old halberd. "So very, very, heavy."

As the flat rock finally toppled over, he bent down, with all the speed his complaining back would permit, and grabbed a centipede that was scuttling for safety. Grimacing slightly, he bit off its head and sucked out its little ration of unsatisfying juices. While he did so, he nearsightedly scanned the moist ground the flagstone had covered, to see if there was anything else. But that section of his larder was empty. With a weary grunt he moved over to the next paving stone. When he had it halfway up, he saw a fine wiggling underneath. Before he could do anything about it, there was a sudden shattering of the night silence, as something exploded in the high distance. Startled, he let the halberd drop—almost smashing a toe in the process—and looked up. As he watched, there came another thundering, and, with the harsh explosions, a flickering light flood. The ragged mountains that cupped his tiny signory jumped in and out of darkness. By the time he recovered his vision, the sound was almost overhead. He squinted upward into the darkness as the flashes came again, less bright this time. Then he saw a strange something descending toward him on spouting pillars of emerald flame.

"Company!" he chortled happily to himself as he tottered down the winding stairs that led to his chambers. "After all these years, real live company!"

Trembling with haste—and something else—he took his musty dinner clothes out of a great oak chest. A few minutes later he was ready, immaculately attired, a multi-colored ribbon—signifying the highest decoration of the Austrian Empire—diagonally across the gleaming white of his shirt front. The little rosette of the French Legion of Honor shone modestly in one lapel.

By the time the ground around the strange ship outside

had cooled enough to let its occupants emerge, the great hall was a blaze of light from hastily lighted tapers. A new fire crackled in the fireplace, and the long banquet table had been dusted and stood gleaming in the candlelight. The last of his cellar, a single cobwebbed bottle, had been carefully placed on the table. With one last glance to assure himself that everything was at its best, he hobbled to the entrance and waited, the perfect image of a gracious host.

He felt a momentary pang of disappointment when he saw only one figure emerge from the ship, but then shrugged philosophically. He, of all people, was in no position to complain over the magnitude of windfalls. At least this night, for the first time in more years than he cared to think about, he would dine as a gentleman should.

When she stepped into the candlelight, he gave a little purr of satisfaction. No thick bodied peasant this, but a patrician, an aristocrat of the first order. He stepped out of the shadows and gave a courtly bow.

"You are welcome, my dear. What little my poor house has to offer is yours."

Her response marked her as a thoroughbred. When she turned slowly to face him, there was no fright, no confusion.

"How strange," she murmured. "How very, very strange. The scouts claimed to have detected night movements, but it was hard to believe. Are there more of you?"

"No, my dear," said Count Shirov sadly. "I'm the last, the very last of all my kind. But to have such a lovely thing as you to brighten my dwelling makes the years of loneliness a mere nothing."

"You are too kind," she said absently, her eyes sweeping the ruined hall as if they were looking for hidden men in dark corners. Suits of ancestral armor still stood in glass fronted cases, but part of the roof had fallen in and the great doors hung on broken hinges.

"Amusing artifacts," she said. "It might be interesting to preserve this place as a museum."

"Now it is you who are being too kind," said the Count, as he ushered her toward two chairs that had been placed very close together at one end of the banquet table. "But I am being remiss in my duties as a host. A glass of wine, perhaps? I can vouch for its excellence."

"I don't drink," she said.

THE MASTERS

"A pity," sighed the Count. "Wine and beauty belong together. But at least be kind enough to grant an old man just a sip of both."

Before she could protest, he eased her into one of the chairs, and seated himself beside her. He poured a crystal goblet half full of bubbling blood-red fluid, and held it up so it caught the light from the tapers. As he twisted the glass, brilliant little crimson flashes coruscated from it.

"Isn't it beautiful, my dear?" he murmured, and tilted the goblet slightly so the dancing light flecks caught her full in the eyes.

"So beautiful, so very, very beautiful." As his voice crooned on it became softer and softer, until it was barely audible. "So much beauty that it seems impossible to take your eyes away from it. It fills them with little wavelets of shimmering light and makes you drowsy, so drowsy that even the sparklets begin to dim away because you are so terribly sleepy . . . sleepy . . . sleepy . . ."

His voice trailed off into silence, and slowly he began to bend toward her, his own eyes dazzled by the whiteness of her neck. And then a wave of blind hunger that he was powerless to resist swirled over him. His lips curled back to expose two incisors that were more like fangs than teeth. With a sudden animal-like snarl, he snapped at her jugular vein.

Under ordinary circumstances the Count would not have acted so precipitously—he had always prided himself on the delicacy of his dining—but these were by no means ordinary circumstances. After long famine, greediness, if not excused, can at least be condoned.

During the time of the fleeing men, he had eaten so well that for the first time in his life he had begun to acquire a slight paunch. What they were fleeing from didn't arouse his curiosity—he was long accustomed to the periodic waves of madness that had been sweeping through the Balkans for as long as he could remember.

The flight was toward the west, so it might be from the Turks. The Count didn't mind. He had always rather enjoyed the Ottoman invasions. Their half-starved fighting men were much too gamey for his taste but the bashas—ah the bashas!

But then one night came the first of the green clouds, small

puffs of glittering light-points that moved as if they had an intelligence of their own. And then more, ever more, darting through the passes and up over the mountain meadows, searching, ever searching until they found what they were hunting for. Then there were swift swooping dives and a clustering on twitching two-legged or four-legged things. When they left to hunt again the vultures came, and after them the rats and crawling things.

And then the green clouds themselves were gone. Whether they died, or ran out of fuel, or just evaporated, Count Shirov didn't know—and didn't care. By then he was too hungry.

Something had happened to the balance of things. There were more lichens and toadstools than there were honest grasses, and leaves crinkled and grew brown before their time. Soon there was little left for decent greenness except long streamers of Spanish moss hanging from the dying trees.

The Count didn't adjust to the new order without protest. There had been a time when only the blood of the most beautiful of village virgins had been considered suitable for the breaking of his fast. Now he was reduced to vultures—not without a great deal of initial gagging, however.

More than disgust was present. There was also pain. Vultures have an unfortunate predilection for perching side by side on the highest branches available come nightfall, and neither the Count's dignity, nor his aging muscles, were equal to the laborious task of climbing up after them. As a result, night after night he was forced to go through an agonizing metamorphosis and sweep through the night air on black bat wings to where his breakfast slumbered.

Popular tradition to the contrary, changing form is an agonizing process. There is a melting and a twisting and a shoving, a compressing of delicate nerve endings that is so painful that, except for an initial trying of his powers when he was young, and one or two emergency escapes from angry Transylvanian villagers, the Count had been content to keep his normal shape through the centuries. Now he had no choice but to put himself on the rack twice nightly.

Unfortunately for him, however, although he could survive on a diet of vulture blood, they couldn't keep alive without adequate rations of carrion. When the harvest left behind by the green clouds had all been gathered, there was nothing left for the naked-necked scavengers. They grew wan and

THE MASTERS

thin, bundles of feathers stretched tight on stick-like bones. And then there were none.

The Count almost starved again before he learned to look under rocks. The many-legged things still bred and flourished—but it took so many of them, and the stones were so very heavy.

And now . . .

She didn't move as he struck. Already savoring the richness of the hot arterial blood, he snapped expertly. The results weren't quite what he'd expected. A sudden wrenching pain stabbed through his mouth, and then he found himself hurled to the floor. He sprawled for a moment, half stunned, and then, shaking his head to clear it, he pulled himself to his hands and knees and looked up at the girl, who was standing over him like an angry goddess.

"You lout," she hissed, "You've chipped my enamel!"

He pulled himself groggily to his feet and looked. Sure enough, where his teeth had raked the adamantine surface of her neck, bright metal showed through scratches in the flesh-colored covering.

In spite of his loosened teeth and aching jaws, Count Shirov remained the gentleman.

"A thousand pardons, my lady," he said. "I didn't dream that such beauty could be counterfeit. Surely you can't blame a poor old half-blind man for failing to penetrate such a perfect disguise."

"I can and I do!" she said angrily. "If one of the Masters had come upon you before I did, you might have injured him seriously."

She drew a long rod-like mechanism from the loose folds of her tunic, and pointed it at the Count.

"How you managed to escape the exterminators, I don't know," she said. "But be that as it may, your end is overdue."

"Perhaps these exterminators didn't have the right equipment," said the Count, shrugging politely.

"Nonsense!" she said sharply. "The plans were too carefully drawn. Every major life form on this planet was taken into account." Her eyes narrowed. "But this one small oversight can easily be rectified."

"As you will," said the Count. "I have lived so long already that death is a meaningless term to me. But wouldn't

you have the kindness to let me finish one last glass of this most excellent and irreplaceable wine?"

She nodded impatiently. "But be quick about it. The Masters will soon be here. It will be fitting that the place which marks the last of the old shall also mark the first of the new."

The Count sipped his wine slowly.

"Tell me," he said, "the Masters, are they all like you?"

She seemed shocked at the thought.

"Of course not! I am a Servant, a machine built to do their will. I was one of those specially prepared to come in advance to clear this planet of all forms of noxious life, so that it could become a fit dwelling place for them. Now that that has been done—except for you—the Masters have been summoned. Their ships are outside atmosphere now, waiting for sunrise so that they can land."

Count Shirov looked down into his glass. There was one sip of wine left. "My lady," he said humbly, "it has long been a custom of this planet to give a condemned man a final wish."

"We are not bound by your customs," she said coldly.

"I know, but this is such a little thing, an old man's whim. Wouldn't it be possible just to look at one of the new masters before I die?"

"Impossible! It is still an hour before sunrise, and I must remove you before then."

"But if just one ship could land ahead of time."

She gave a scornful laugh. "Don't be absurd. You know that it is impossible for the Masters to . . . But of course you couldn't. You would have no way to."

"To what?" asked the Count, letting a note of genteel curiosity slip into his voice.

"I am conditioned against giving that information," she said primly. Keeping the rod-shaped weapon pointed at him, she looked around the hall again.

"Where does that lead to?" she asked, gesturing toward a shadowed archway in the far corner.

"To the cellars, my dear."

"That will be as good a place as any," she said, and pointed toward it with her weapon.

Count Shirov rose to his feet and lifted his glass.

"To man's past," he said softly, "and the Master's future."

THE MASTERS

Draining the last swallow of wine, he crashed the goblet into the fireplace.

"Your servant, my lady. If it must be done, do it quickly. Dawn is not too far away and I am allergic to sunlight."

As he walked toward the vaulted stairway he seemed more a gallant ushering his lady to her opera box than a condemned man being led to his death. He paused at the entrance and looked at her enquiringly.

"Keep going!" she snapped.

He bowed and disappeared into the darkness.

She waited until the sound of his descending footsteps had almost disappeared, and then pressed a stud on her long rod-like weapon. There was a soft hiss, and from the tip a green cloud of tiny light-points appeared. It circled for a moment as if picking up a scent, and then darted down the stairway after Count Shirov.

It was bright morning outside, and the first thundering of the descending ships of the Masters could be heard, by the time she descended into the crypt. For a moment she thought he had escaped, but then she found him. He was dead. She knew the signs. Satisfied, she dropped the lid on the long, black box and climbed the winding steps back up into the great hall.

Her mission completed, the last of the Servants pressed a button concealed in her navel and permanently deactivated herself.

Kar Klen, the royal physician, looked nervously out the window. The sun had almost dropped behind the peaks, and his quarters were all the way across the central square.

"You aren't listening to me," said a complaining voice.

"Oh, I am, my lady, I am! I was just trying to decide which of my many remedies would best combat this strange sickness of yours."

"You'd better come up with the right one this time," grated the Princess Royal, "or this court is going to have to get along without your services. And," she added, clicking her mandibles noisily, "the Queen Mother is going to have a new week husband. I'm sick and tired of waking up every morning so exhausted that I'm barely able to crawl out of my web."

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

A green globule of nervous perspiration oozed from Kar Klen's ventral pore.

"This time I'm certain to find the remedy, my lady," he said and began to back toward the door. "And now, if you'll excuse me, the shadows are already long. If I don't hurry The Sleep will catch me on the square. I will wait upon your ladyship the first thing in the morning."

"You will not!" she snapped. "You'll keep right on working here until you've compounded my medicine for me. I'll have a servant with a sleep-dispeller light you home when you're through."

"Yes, my lady," said Kar Klen in unhappy submission, and he opened up the case containing his pills and purges. As it darkened outside he began to yawn in spite of himself.

"Turn on the lights, you fool," growled the princess. "The Sleep is almost on us."

Kar Klen clicked a light switch and overhead a great bank of sleep-dispelling, ultra-violet lamps filled the room with their protective radiations. Turning back to his case, he looked at bottle after bottle, in a desperate search for the remedy that would cure the Princess of her persistent anemia, and save him from the hatching pens. But since vampires were unknown on Alpha Centauri, he never thought of looking in the obvious place, an ancient crypt beneath a ruined castle. There the last earthman slumbered through the bright sunlit hours, a happy smile on his full red lips, and his aristocratic hands folded over a small but nicely rounded paunch.

THE SPECTER GENERAL

I

"SERGEANT DIXON!"

Kurt stiffened. He knew *that* voice. Dropping the handles of the wooden plow, he gave a quick "rest" to the private and a polite "by your leave, sir" to the lieutenant who were yoked together in double harness. They both sank gratefully to the ground as Kurt advanced to meet the approaching officer.

THE SPECTER GENERAL

Marcus Harris, the commander of the 427th Light Maintenance Battalion of the Imperial Space Marines, was an imposing figure. The three silver eagle feathers of a full colonel rose proudly from his war bonnet and the bright red of the flaming comet insignia of the Space Marines that was painted on his chest stood out sharply against his sun-blackened, leathery skin. As Kurt snapped to attention before him and saluted, the colonel surveyed the fresh turned earth with an experienced eye.

"You plow a straight furrow, soldier!" His voice was hard and metallic, but it seemed to Kurt that there was a concealed glimmer of approval in his flinty eyes. Dixon flushed with pleasure and drew back his broad shoulders a little further.

The commander's eyes flicked down to the battle-ax that rested snugly in its leather holster at Kurt's side. "You keep a clean sidearm, too."

Kurt uttered a silent prayer of thanksgiving that he had worked over his weapon before reveille that morning until there was a satin gloss to its redwood handle and the sheen of black glass to its obsidian head.

"In fact," said Colonel Harris, "you'd be officer material if—" His voice trailed off.

"If what?" asked Kurt eagerly.

"If," said the colonel with a note of paternal fondness in his voice that sent cold chills dancing down Kurt's spine, "you weren't the most completely unmanageable, undisciplined, overmuscled and under-brained knucklehead I've ever had the misfortune to have in my command. This last little unauthorized jaunt of yours indicates to me that you have as much right to sergeant's stripes as I have to have kittens. Report to me at ten tomorrow! I personally guarantee that when I'm through with you—if you live that long—you'll have a bare forehead!"

Colonel Harris spun on one heel and stalked back across the dusty plateau toward the walled garrison that stood at one end. Kurt stared after him for a moment and then turned and let his eyes slip across the wide belt of lush green jungle that surrounded the high plateau. To the north rose a great range of snow-capped mountains and his heart filled with longing as he thought of the strange and beautiful thing he had found behind them. Finally he plodded slowly back to the plow, his shoulders stooped and his head sag-

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

ging. With an effort he recalled himself to the business at hand.

"Up on your dying feet, soldier!" he barked to the reclining private. "If you please, sir!" he said to the lieutenant. His calloused hands grasped the worn plow handles.

"Giddiup!" The two men strained against their collars and with a creak of harness the wooden plow started to move slowly across the arid plateau.

II

Conrad Krogson, Supreme Commander of War Base Three of Sector Seven of the Galactic Protectorate stood at quaking attention before the visiscreen of his space communicator. It was an unusual position for the commander. He was accustomed to having people quake while *he* talked.

"The Lord Protector's got another hot tip that General Carr is still alive!" said the sector commander. "He's yelling for blood; and if it's a choice between yours and mine, you know who will do the donating!"

"But, sir," quavered Krogson to the figure on the screen, "I can't do anything more than I am doing. I've had double security checks running since the last time there was an alert, and they haven't turned up a thing. And I'm so short-handed now that if I pull another random purge, I won't have enough techs left to work the base."

"That's your problem, not mine," said the sector commander coldly. "All that I know is that rumors have got to the Protector that an organized underground is being built up and that Carr is behind it. The Protector wants action now. If he doesn't get it, heads are going to roll!"

"I'll do what I can, sir," promised Krogson.

"I'm sure you will," said the sector commander viciously, "because I'm giving you exactly ten days to produce something that is big enough to take the heat off me. If you don't, I'll break you, Krogson. If I'm sent to the mines, you'll be sweating right alongside me. That's a promise!"

Krogson's face blanched.

"Any questions?" snapped the sector commander.

"Yes," said Krogson.

"Well don't bother me with them. I've got troubles of my own!" The screen went dark.

THE SPECTER GENERAL

Krogson slumped into his chair and sat staring dully at the blank screen. Finally he roused himself with an effort and let out a bellow that rattled the windows of his dusty office.

"Schninkle! Get in here!"

A gnomelike little figure scuttled in through the door and bobbed obsequiously before him.

"Yes, commander?"

"Switch on your thinktank," said Krogson. "The Lord Protector has the shakes again and the heat's on!"

"What is it this time?" asked Schninkle.

"General Carr!" said the commander gloomily, "the ex-Number Two."

"I thought he'd been liquidated."

"So did I," said Krogson, "but he must have slipped out some way. The Protector thinks he's started up an underground."

"He'd be a fool if he didn't," said the little man. "The Lord Protector isn't as young as he once was and his grip is getting a little shaky."

"Maybe so, but he's still strong enough to get us before General Carr gets him. The Sector Commander just passed the buck down to me. We produce or elsel"

"We?" said Schninkle unhappily.

"Of course," snapped Krogson, "we're in this together. Now let's get to work! If you were Carr, where would be the logical place for you to hide out?"

"Well," said Schninkle thoughtfully, "if I were as smart as Carr is supposed to be, I'd find myself a hideout right on Prime Base. Everything's so fouled up there that they'd never find me."

"That's out for us," said Krogson. "We can't go rooting around in the Lord Protector's own backyard. What would Carr's next best bet be?"

Schninkle thought for a moment. "He might go out to one of the deserted systems," he said slowly. "There must be half a hundred stars in our own base area that haven't been visited since the old empire broke up. Our ships don't get around the way they used to and the chances are mighty slim that anybody would stumble on to him accidentally."

"It's a possibility," said the commander thoughtfully, "A bare possibility." His right fist slapped into his left palm in a gesture of sudden resolution. "But by the Planets! at least it's something! Alert all section heads for a staff meeting in half

an hour. I want every scout out on a quick check of every system in our area!"

"Beg pardon, commander," said Schninkle, "but half our light ships are red-lined for essential maintenance and the other half should be. Anyway it would take months to check every possible hideout in this area even if we used the whole fleet."

"I know," said Krogson, "but we'll have to do what we can with what we have. At least I'll be able to report to sector that we're doing *something*! Tell Astrogation to set up a series of search patterns. We won't have to check every planet. A single quick sweep through each system will do the trick. Even Carr can't run a base without power. Where there's power, there's radiation, and radiation can be detected a long way off. Put all electronic techs on double shifts and have all detection gear double checked."

"Can't do that either," said Schninkle. "There aren't more than a dozen electronic techs left. Most of them were transferred to Prime Base last week."

Commander Krogson blew up. "How in the name of the Bloody Blue Pleiades am I supposed to keep a war base going without technicians? You tell me, Schninkle, you always seem to know all the answers."

Schninkle coughed modestly. "Well, sir," he said, "as long as you have a situation where technicians are sent to the uranium mines for making mistakes, it's going to be an unpopular vocation. And, as long as the Lord Protector of the moment is afraid that Number Two, Number Three, and so on have ideas about grabbing his job—which they generally do—he's going to keep his fleet as strong as possible and their fleets so weak they aren't dangerous. The best way to do that is to grab techs. If most of the base's ships are sitting around waiting repair, the commander won't be able to do much about any ambitions he may happen to have. Add that to the obvious fact that our whole technology has been on a downward spiral for the last three hundred years and you have your answer."

Krogson nodded gloomy agreement. "Sometimes I feel as if we were all on a dead ship falling into a dying sun," he said. His voice suddenly altered. "But in the meantime we have our necks to save. Get going, Schninkle!"

Schninkle bobbed and darted out of the office.

III

It was exactly ten o'clock in the morning when Sergeant Dixon of the Imperial Space Marines snapped to attention before his commanding officer.

"Sergeant Dixon reporting as ordered sir!" His voice cracked a bit in spite of his best efforts to control it.

The colonel looked at him coldly. "Nice of you to drop in, Dixon," he said. "Shall we go ahead with our little chat?"

Kurt nodded nervously.

"I have here," said the colonel, shuffling a sheaf of papers, "a report of an unauthorized expedition made by you into *Off Limits* territory."

"Which one do you mean, sir?" asked Kurt without thinking.

"Then there has been more than one?" asked the colonel quietly.

Kurt started to stammer.

Colonel Harris silenced him with a gesture of his hand. "I'm talking about the country to the north, the tableland back of the Twin Peaks."

"It's a beautiful place!" burst out Kurt enthusiastically. "It's . . . it's like Imperial Headquarters must be. Dozens of little streams full of fish, trees heavy with fruit, small game so slow and stupid that they can be knocked over with a club. Why, the battalion could live there without hardly lifting a finger!"

"I've no doubt that they could," said the colonel.

"Think of it, sir!" continued the sergeant. "No more plowing details, no more hunting details, no more nothing but taking it easy!"

"You might add to your list of 'no mores,' no more tech schools," said Colonel Harris. "I'm quite aware that the place is all you say it is, sergeant. As a result I'm placing all information that pertains to it in a 'Top Secret' category. That applies to what is inside your head as well!"

"But, sir!" protested Kurt. "If you could only see the place—"

"I have," broke in the colonel, "thirty years ago."

Kurt looked at him in amazement. "Then why are we still on the plateau?"

"Because my commanding officer did just what I've just done, classified the information 'Top Secret.' Then he gave

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

me thirty days extra detail on the plows. After he took my stripes away that is." Colonel Harris rose slowly to his feet. "Dixon," he said softly, "it's not every man who can be a noncommissioned officer in the Space Marines. Sometimes we guess wrong. When we do we do something about it!" There was the hissing crackle of distant summer lightning in his voice and storm clouds seemed to gather about his head. "Wipe those chevrons off!" he roared.

Kurt looked at him in mute protest.

"You heard me!" the colonel thundered.

"Yes-s-s, sir," stuttered Kurt, reluctantly drawing his forearm across his forehead and wiping off the three triangles of white grease paint that marked him a sergeant in the Imperial Space Marines. Quivering with shame, he took a tight grip on his temper and choked back the angry protests that were trying to force their way past his lips.

"Maybe," suggested the colonel, "you'd like to make a complaint to the I.G. He's due in a few days and he might reverse my decision. It has happened before, you know."

"No, sir," said Kurt woodenly.

"Why not?" demanded Harris.

"When I was sent out as a scout for the hunting parties I was given direct orders not to range farther than twenty kilometers to the north. I went sixty." Suddenly his forced composure broke. "I couldn't help it, sir," he said. "There was something behind those peaks that kept pulling me and pulling me and"—he threw up his hands—"you know the rest."

There was a sudden change in the colonel's face as a warm human smile swept across it, and he broke into a peal of laughter. "It's a hell of a feeling, isn't it, son? You know you shouldn't, but at the same time there's something inside you that says you've got to know what's behind those peaks or die. When you get a few more years under your belt you'll find that it isn't just mountains that make you feel like that. Here, boy, have a seat." He gestured toward a woven wicker chair that stood by his desk.

Kurt shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, stunned by the colonel's sudden change of attitude and embarrassed by his request. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but we aren't out on work detail, and—"

The colonel laughed. "And enlisted men not on work detail don't sit in the presence of officers. Doesn't the way we do things ever strike you as odd, Dixon? On one hand you'd

see nothing strange about being yoked to a plow with a major, and on the other, you'd never dream of sitting in his presence off duty."

Kurt looked puzzled. "Work details are different," he said. "We all have to work if we're going to eat. But in the garrison, officers are officers and enlisted men are enlisted men and that's the way it's always been."

Still smiling, the colonel reached into his desk drawer, fished out something, and tossed it to Kurt.

"Stick this in your scalp lock," he said.

Kurt looked at it, stunned. It was a golden feather crossed with a single black bar, the insignia of rank of a second lieutenant of the Imperial Space Marines. The room swirled before his eyes.

"Now," said the older officer, "sit down!"

Kurt slowly lowered himself into the chair and looked at the colonel through bemused eyes.

"Stop gawking!" said Colonel Harris. "You're an officer now! When a man gets too big for his sandals, we give him a new pair—after we let him sweat a while!"

He suddenly grew serious. "Now that you're one of the family, you have a right to know why I'm hushing up the matter of the tableland to the north. What I have to say won't make much sense at first. Later I'm hoping it will. Tell me," he said suddenly, "where did the battalion come from?"

"We've always been here, I guess," said Kurt. "When I was a recruit, Granddad used to tell me stories about us being brought from some place else a long time ago by an iron bird, but it stands to reason that something that heavy can't fly!"

A faraway look came into the colonel's eyes. "Six generations," he mused, "and history becomes legend. Another six and the legends themselves become tales for children. Yes, Kurt," he said softly, "it stands to reason that something that heavy couldn't fly so we'll forget it for a while. We did come from some place else though. Once there was a great empire, so great that all the stars you see at night were only part of it. And then, as things do when age rests too heavily on them, it began to crumble. Commanders fell to fighting among themselves and the Emperor grew weak. The battalion was set down here to operate a forward maintenance station for his ships. We waited but no ships came. For five hundred years no ships have come," said the colonel somberly.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"Perhaps they tried to relieve us and couldn't, perhaps the Empire fell with such a crash that we were lost in the wreckage. There are a thousand perhapses that a man can tick off in his mind when the nights are long and sleep comes hard! Lost . . . forgotten . . . who knows?"

Kurt stared at him with a blank expression on his face. Most of what the colonel had said made no sense at all. Wherever Imperial Headquarters was, it hadn't forgotten them. The I.G. still made his inspection every year or so.

The colonel continued as if talking to himself. "But out operational orders said that we would stand by to give all necessary maintenance to Imperial warcraft until properly relieved, and stand by we have."

The old officer's voice seemed to be coming from a place far distant in time and space.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Kurt, "but I don't follow you. If all these things did happen, it was so long ago that they mean nothing to us now."

"But they do!" said Colonel Harris vigorously. "It's because of them that things like your rediscovery of the tableland to the north have to be suppressed for the good of the battalion! Here on the plateau the living is hard. Our work in the fields and the meat brought in by our hunting parties give us just enough to get by on. But here we have the garrison and the Tech Schools—and vague as it has become—a reason for remaining together as the battalion. Out there where the living is easy we'd lose that. We almost did once. A wise commander stopped it before it went too far. There are still a few signs of that time left—left deliberately as reminders of what can happen if commanding officers forget why we're here!"

"What things?" asked Kurt curiously.

"Well, son," said the colonel, picking up his great war bonnet from the desk and gazing at it quizzically, "I don't think you're quite ready for that information yet. Now take off and strut your feather. I've got work to do!"

IV

At War Base Three nobody was happy. Ships that were supposed to be light-months away carrying on the carefully planned search for General Carr's hideout were fluttering

THE SPECTER GENERAL

down out of the sky like senile penguins, disabled by blown jets, jammed computers, and all the other natural ills that worn out and poorly serviced equipment is heir to. Technical maintenance was quietly going mad. Commander Krogson was being noisy about it.

"Schninkle!" he screamed. "Isn't anything happening any place?"

"Nothing yet, sir," said the little man.

"Well *make* something happen!" He hoisted his battered brogans onto the scarred top of the desk and chewed savagely on a frayed cigar. "How are the other sectors doing?"

"No better than we are," said Schninkle. "Commander Snork of Sector Six tried to pull a fast one but he didn't get away with it. He sent his STAP into a plantation planet out at the edge of the Belt and had them hypno the whole population. By the time they were through there were about fifteen million greenies running around yelling 'Up with General Carr!' 'Down with the Lord Protector!' 'Long Live the People's Revolution!' and things like that. Snork even gave them a few medium vortex blasters to make it look more realistic. Then he sent in his whole fleet, tipped off the press at Prime Base, and waited. Guess what the Bureau of Essential Information finally sent him?"

"I'll bite," said Commander Krogson.

"One lousy cub reporter. Snork couldn't back out then so he had to go ahead and blast the planet down to bedrock. This morning he got a three line notice in *Space* and a citation as Third Rate Protector of the People's Space Ways, Eighth Grade."

"That's better than the nothing we've got so far!" said the commander gloomily.

"Not when the press notice is buried on the next to last page right below the column on 'Our Feathered Comrades'," said Schninkle, "and when the citation is posthumous. They even misspelled his name; it came out Snark!"

V

As Kurt turned to go, there was a sharp knock on Colonel Harris' door.

"Come in!" called the colonel.

Lieutenant Colonel Blick, the battalion executive officer,

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

entered with an arrogant stride and threw his commander a slovenly salute. For a moment he didn't notice Kurt standing at attention beside the door.

"Listen, Harris!" he snarled. "What's the idea of pulling that clean-up detail out of my quarters?"

"There are no servants in this battalion, Blick," the older man said quietly. "When the men come in from work detail at night they're tired. They've earned a rest and as long as I'm C.O. they're going to get it. If you have dirty work that has to be done, do it yourself. You're better able to do it than some poor devil who's been dragging a plow all day. I suggest you check pertinent regulations!"

"Regulations!" growled Blick. "What do you expect me to do, scrub my own floors?"

"I do," said the colonel dryly, "when my wife is too busy to get to it. I haven't noticed that either my dignity or my efficiency have suffered appreciably. I might add," he continued mildly, "that staff officers are supposed to set a good example for their juniors. I don't think either your tone or your manner are those that Lieutenant Dixon should be encouraged to emulate." He gestured toward Kurt and Blick spun on one heel.

"*Lieutenant Dixon!*" he roared in an incredulous voice. "By whose authority?"

"Mine," said the colonel mildly. "In case you've forgotten I am still commanding officer of this battalion."

"I protest!" said Blick. "Commissions have always been awarded by decision of the entire staff."

"Which you now control," replied the colonel.

Kurt coughed nervously. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I think I'd better leave."

Colonel Harris shook his head. "You're one of our official family now, son, and you might as well get used to our squabbles. This particular one has been going on between Colonel Blick and me for years. He has no patience with some of our old customs." He turned to Blick. "Have you, Colonel?"

"You're right, I haven't!" growled Blick. "And that's why I'm going to change some of them as soon as I get the chance. The sooner we stop this Tech School nonsense and put the recruits to work in the fields where they belong, the better off we'll all be. Why should a plowman or a hunter have to know how to read wiring diagrams or set tubes. It's nonsense,

THE SPECTER GENERAL

superstitious nonsense. You!" he said, stabbing his finger into the chest of the startled lieutenant. "You! Dixon! You spent fourteen years in the Tech Schools just like I did when I was a recruit. What for?"

"To learn maintenance, of course," said Kurt.

"What's maintenance?" demanded Blick.

"Taking stuff apart and putting it back together and polishing jet bores with microplanes and putting plates in alignment and checking the meters when we're through to see the job was done right. Then there's class work in Direc calculus and subelectronics and—"

"That's enough!" interrupted Blick. "And now that you've learned all that, what can you do with it?"

Kurt looked at him in surprise.

"Do with it?" he echoed. "You don't *do* anything with it. You just learn it because regulations say you should."

"And this," said Blick, turning to Colonel Harris, "is one of your prize products. Fourteen of his best years poured down the drain and he doesn't even know what for!" He paused and then said in an arrogant voice, "I'm here for a showdown, Harris!"

"Yes?" said the colonel mildly.

"I demand that the Tech Schools be closed at once, and the recruits released for work details. If you want to keep your command, you'll issue that order. The staff is behind me on this!"

Colonel Harris rose slowly to his feet. Kurt waited for the thunder to roll, but strangely enough, it didn't. It almost seemed to him that there was an expression of concealed amusement playing across the colonel's face.

"Some day, just for once," he said, "I wish somebody around here would do something that hasn't been done before."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Blick.

"Nothing," said the colonel. "You know," he continued conversationally, "a long time ago I walked into my C.O.'s and made the same demands and the same threats that you're making now. I didn't get very far, though—just as you aren't going to—because I overlooked the little matter of the Inspector General's annual visit. He's due in from Imperial Headquarters Saturday night, isn't he, Blick?"

"You know he is!" growled the other.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"Aren't worried, are you? It occurs to me that the I.G. might take a dim view of your new order."

"I don't think he'll mind," said Blick with a nasty grin. "Now will you issue the order to close the Tech Schools or won't you?"

"Of course not!" said the colonel brusquely.

"That's final?"

Colonel Harris just nodded.

"All right," barked Blick, "you asked for it!"

There was an ugly look on his face as he barked, "Kanel Simmons! Arnett! The rest of you! Get in here!"

The door to Harris' office swung slowly open and revealed a group of officers standing sheepishly in the anteroom.

"Come in, gentlemen," said Colonel Harris.

They came slowly forward and grouped themselves just inside the door.

"I'm taking over!" roared Blick. "This garrison has needed a house cleaning for a long time and I'm just the man to do it!"

"How about the rest of you?" asked the colonel.

"Beg pardon, sir," said one hesitantly, "but we think Colonel Blick's probably right. I'm afraid we're going to have to confine you for a few days. Just until after the I.G.'s visit," he added apologetically.

"And what do you think the I.G. will say to all this?"

"Colonel Blick says we don't have to worry about that," said the officer. "He's going to take care of everything."

A look of sudden anxiety played across Harris' face and for the first time he seemed on the verge of losing his composure.

"How?" he demanded, his voice betraying his concern.

"He didn't say, sir," the other replied. Harris relaxed visibly.

"All right," said Blick. "Let's get moving!" He walked behind the desk and plumped into the colonel's chair. Hoisting his feet on the desk he gave his first command.

"Take him away!"

There was a sudden roar from the far corner of the room. "No you don't!" shouted Kurt. His battle-ax leaped into his hand as he jumped in front of Colonel Harris, his muscular body taut and his gray eyes flashing defiance.

Blick jumped to his feet. "Disarm that man!" he commanded. There was a certain amount of scuffling as the officers in

the front of the group by the door tried to move to the rear and those behind them resolutely defended their more protected positions.

Blick's face grew so purple that he seemed on the verge of apoplexy. "Major Kane," he demanded, "place that man under restraint!"

Kane advanced toward Kurt with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. Keeping a cautious eye on the glittering ax head, he said in what he obviously hoped to be a placating voice, "Come now, old man. Can't have this sort of thing, you know." He stretched out his hand hesitantly toward Kurt. "Why don't you give me your ax and we'll forget that the incident ever occurred."

Kurt's ax suddenly leaped toward the major's head. Kane stood petrified as death whizzed toward him. At the last split second Kurt gave a practiced twist to his wrist and the ax jumped up, cutting the air over the major's head with a vicious whistle. The top half of his silver staff plume drifted slowly to the floor.

"You want it," roared Kurt, his ax flicking back and forth like a snake's tongue, "you come get it. That goes for the rest of you, too!"

The little knot of officers retreated still farther. Colonel Harris was having the time of his life.

"Give it to 'em, son!" he whooped.

Blick looked contemptuously at the staff and slowly drew his own ax. Colonel Harris suddenly stopped laughing.

"Wait a minute, Blick!" he said. "This has gone far enough." He turned to Kurt.

"Give them your ax, son."

Kurt looked at him with an expression of hurt bewilderment in his eyes, hesitated for a moment, and then glumly surrendered his weapon to the relieved major.

"Now," snarled Blick, "take that insolent puppy out and feed him to the lizards!"

Kurt drew himself up in injured dignity. "That is no way to refer to a brother officer," he said reproachfully.

The vein in Blick's forehead started to pulse again. "Get him out of here before I tear him to shreds!" he hissed through clenched teeth. There was silence for a moment as he fought to regain control of himself. Finally he succeeded.

"Lock him up!" he said in an approximation to his normal

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

voice. "Tell the provost sergeant I'll send down the charges as soon as I can think up enough."

Kurt was led resentfully from the room.

"The rest of you clear out," said Blick. "I want to talk with Colonel Harris about the I.G."

VI

There was a saying in the Protectorate that when the Lord Protector was angry, stars and heads fell. Commander Krogson felt his wobble on his neck. His far-sweeping scouts were sending back nothing but reports of equipment failure, and the sector commander had coldly informed him that morning that his name rested securely at the bottom of the achievement list. It looked as if War Base Three would shortly have a change of command. "Look, Schninkle," he said desperately, "even if we can't give them anything, couldn't we make a promise that would look good enough to take some of the heat off us?"

Schninkle looked dubious.

"Maybe a new five-year plan?" suggested Krogson.

The little man shook his head. "That's a subject we'd better avoid entirely," he said. "They're still asking nasty questions about what happened to the last one. Mainly on the matter of our transport quota. I took the liberty of passing the buck on down to Logistics. Several of them have been . . . eh . . . removed as a consequence."

"Serves them right!" snorted Krogson. "They got me into that mess with their 'if a freighter and a half flies a light-year and a half in a month and a half, ten freighters can fly ten light-years in ten months!' I knew there was something fishy about it at the time, but I couldn't put my finger on it."

"It's always darkest before the storm," said Schninkle helpfully.

VII

"Take off your war bonnet and make yourself comfortable," said Colonel Harris hospitably.

Blick grunted assent. "This thing is sort of heavy," he said. "I think I'll change uniform regulations while I'm at it."

THE SPECTER GENERAL

"There was something you wanted to tell me?" suggested the colonel.

"Yeah," said Blick. "I figure that you figure the I.G.'s going to bail you out of this. Right?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"I would," said Blick. "I was up snoopin' around the armory last week. There was something there that started me doing some heavy thinking. Do you know what it was?"

"I can guess," said the colonel.

"As I looked at it, it suddenly occurred to me what a happy coincidence it is that the Inspector General always arrives just when you happen to need him."

"It is odd, come to think of it."

"Something else occurred to me, too. I got to thinking that if I were C.O. and I wanted to keep the troops whipped into line, the easiest way to do it would be to have a visible symbol of Imperial Headquarters appear in person once in a while."

"That makes sense," admitted Harris, "especially since the chaplain has started preaching that Imperial Headquarters is where good marines go when they die—if they follow regulations while they're alive. But how would you manage it?"

"Just the way you did. I'd take one of the old battle suits, wait until it was good and dark, and then slip out the back way and climb up six or seven thousand feet. Then I'd switch on my landing lights and drift slowly down to the parade field to review the troops." Blick grinned triumphantly.

"It might work," admitted Colonel Harris, "but I was under the impression that those rigs were so heavy that a man couldn't even walk in one, let alone fly."

Blick grinned triumphantly. "Not if the suit was powered. If a man were to go up into the tower of the arsenal and pick the lock of the little door labeled 'Danger! Absolutely No Admittance,' he might find a whole stack of shiny little cubes that look suspiciously like the illustrations of power packs in the tech manuals."

"That he might," agreed the colonel.

Blick shifted back in his chair. "Aren't worried, are you?"

Colonel Harris shook his head. "I was for a moment when I thought you'd told the rest of the staff, but I'm not now."

"You should be! When the I.G. arrives this time, I'm going to be inside that suit. There's going to be a new order around here, and he's just what I need to put the stamp of ap-

proval on it. When the Inspector General talks, nobody questions!"

He looked at Harris expectantly, waiting for a look of consternation to sweep across his face. The colonel just laughed.

"Blick," he said, "you're in for a big surprise!"

"What do you mean?" said the other suspiciously.

"Simply that I know you better than you know yourself. You wouldn't be executive officer if I didn't. You know, Blick, I've got a hunch that the battalion is going to change the man more than the man is going to change the battalion. And now if you'll excuse me—" He started toward the door. Blick moved to intercept him.

"Don't trouble yourself," chuckled the colonel, "I can find my own way to the cell block." There was a broad grin on his face. "Besides, you've got work to do."

There was a look of bewilderment in Blick's face as the erect figure went out the door. "I don't get it," he said to himself. "I just don't get it!"

VIII

Flight Officer Ozaki was unhappy. Trouble had started two hours after he lifted his battered scout off War Base Three and showed no signs of letting up. He sat glumly at his controls and enumerated his woes. First there was the matter of the air conditioner which had acquired an odd little hum and discharged into the cabin oxygen redolent with the rich, ripe odor of rotting fish. Secondly, something had happened to the complex insides of his food synthesizer and no matter what buttons he punched, all that emerged from the ejector were quivering slabs of undercooked protein base smeared with a raspberry-flavored goo.

Not last, but worst of all, the ship's fuel converter was rapidly becoming more erratic. Instead of a slow, steady feeding of the plutonite ribbon into the combustion chamber, there were moments when the mechanism would falter and then leap ahead. The resulting sudden injection of several square millimicrons of tape would send a sudden tremendous flare of energy spouting out through the rear jets. The pulse only lasted for a fraction of a second, but the sudden application of several G's meant a momentary blackout and,

unless he was strapped carefully into the pilot seat, several new bruises to add to the old.

What made Ozaki the unhappiest was that there was nothing he could do about it. Pilots who wanted to stay alive just didn't tinker with the mechanism of their ships.

Glumly he pulled out another red-bordered IMMEDIATE MAINTENANCE card from the rack and began to fill it in.

Description of item requiring maintenance: "Shower thermostat, M7, Small Standard."

Nature of malfunction: "Shower will deliver only boiling water."

Justification for immediate maintenance: Slowly in large, block letters Ozaki bitterly inked in "Haven't had a bath since I left Basel" and tossed the card into the already overflowing gripe box with a feeling of helpless anger.

"Kitchen mechanics," he muttered. "Couldn't do a decent repair job if they wanted to—and most of the time they don't. I'd like to see one of them three days out on a scout sweep with a toilet that won't flush!"

IX

It was a roomy cell as cells go but Kurt wasn't happy there. His continual striding up and down was making Colonel Harris nervous.

"Relax, son," he said gently, "you'll just wear yourself out."

Kurt turned to face the colonel who was stretched out comfortably on his cot. "Sir," he said in a conspiratorial whisper, "we've got to break out of here."

"What for?" asked Harris. "This is the first decent rest I've had in years."

"You aren't going to let Blick get away with this?" demanded Kurt in a shocked voice.

"Why not?" said the colonel. "He's the exec, isn't he? If something happened to me, he'd have to take over command anyway. He's just going through the impatient stage, that's all. A few days behind my desk will settle him down. In two weeks he'll be so sick of the job he'll be down on his knees begging me to take over again."

Kurt decided to try a new tack. "But, sir, he's going to shut down the Tech Schools!"

"A little vacation won't hurt the kids," said the colonel indulgently.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"After a week or so the wives will get so sick of having them underfoot all day that they'll turn the heat on him. Blick has six kids himself, and I've a hunch his wife won't be any happier than the rest. She's a very determined woman, Kurt, a very determined woman!"

Kurt had a feeling he was getting no place rapidly. "Please, sir," he said earnestly, "I've got a plan."

"Yes?"

"Just before the guard makes his evening check-in, stretch out on the bed and start moaning. I'll yell that you're dying and when he comes in to check, I'll jump him!"

"You'll do no such thing!" said the colonel sternly. "Sergeant Wetzell is an old friend of mine. Can't you get it through your thick head that I don't want to escape. When you've held command as long as I have, you'll welcome a chance for a little peace and quiet. I know Blick inside out, and I'm not worried about him. But, if you've got your heart set on escaping, I suppose there's no particular reason why you shouldn't. Do it the easy way though. Like this." He walked to the bars that fronted the cell and bellowed, "Sergeant Wetzell! Sergeant Wetzell!"

"Coming, sir!" called a voice from down the corridor. There was a shuffle of running feet and a gray scalp-locked and extremely portly sergeant puffed into view.

"What will it be, sir?" he asked.

"Colonel Blick or any of the staff around?" questioned the colonel.

"No, sir," said the sergeant. "They're all upstairs celebrating."

"Good!" said Harris. "Unlock the door, will you?"

"Anything you say, colonel," said the old man agreeably and produced a large key from his pouch and fitted it into the lock. There was a slight creaking and the door swung open.

"Young Dixon here wants to escape," said the colonel.

"It's all right by me," replied the sergeant, "though it's going to be awkward when Colonel Blick asks what happened to him."

"The lieutenant has a plan," confided the colonel. "He's going to overpower you and escape."

"There's more to it than just that!" said Kurt. "I'm figuring on swapping uniforms with you. That way I can walk

THE SPECTER GENERAL

right out through the front gate without anybody being the wiser."

"That," said the sergeant, slowly looking down at his sixty-three inch waist, "will take a heap of doing. You're welcome to try though."

"Let's get on with it then," said Kurt, winding up a round-house swing.

"If it's all the same with you, lieutenant," said the old sergeant, eying Kurt's rocklike fist nervously, "I'd rather have the colonel do any overpowering that's got to be done."

Colonel Harris grinned and walked over to Wetzel.

"Ready?"

"Ready!"

Harris' fist traveled a bare five inches and tapped Wetzel lightly on the chin.

"Oof!" grunted the sergeant cooperatively and staggered back to a point where he could collapse on the softest of the two cots.

The exchange of clothes was quickly effected. Except for the pants—which persisted in dropping down to Kurt's ankles—and the war bonnet—which with equal persistence kept sliding down over his ears—he was ready to go. The pants problem was solved easily by stuffing a pillow inside them. This Kurt fondly believed made him look more like the rotund sergeant than ever. The garrison bonnet presented a more difficult problem, but he finally achieved a partial solution. By holding it up with his left hand and keeping the palm tightly pressed against his forehead, it should appear to the casual observer that he was walking engrossed in deep thought.

The first two hundred yards were easy. The corridor was deserted and he plodded confidently along, the great war bonnet wabbling sedately on his head in spite of his best efforts to keep it steady. When he finally reached the exit gate, he knocked on it firmly and called to the duty sergeant.

"Open up! It's Wetzel."

Unfortunately, just then he grew careless and let go of his headgear. As the door swung open, the great war bonnet swooped down over his ears and came to rest on his shoulders. The result was that where his head normally was there could be seen only a nest of weaving feathers. The duty sergeant's jaw suddenly dropped as he got a good look at the strange figure that stood in the darkened corridor. And

then with remarkable presence of mind he slammed the door shut in Kurt's face and clicked the bolt.

"Sergeant of the guard!" he bawled. "Sergeant of the guard! There's a *thing* in the corridor!"

"What kind of a thing?" inquired a sleepy voice from the guard room.

"A horrible kind of a thing with wiggling feathers where its head ought to be," replied the sergeant.

"Get its name, rank, and serial number," said the sleepy voice.

Kurt didn't wait to hear any more. Disentangling himself from the head-dress with some difficulty, he hurled it aside and pelted back down the corridor.

Lieutenant Dixon wandered back into the cell with a crest-fallen look on his face. Colonel Harris and the old sergeant were so deeply engrossed in a game of "rockets high" that they didn't even see him at first. Kurt coughed and the colonel looked up.

"Change your mind?"

"No, sir," said Kurt. "Something slipped."

"What?" asked the colonel.

"Sergeant Wetzel's war bonnet. I'd rather not talk about it." He sank down on his bunk and buried his head in his hands.

"Excuse me," said the sergeant apologetically, "but if the lieutenant's through with my pants I'd like to have them back. There's a draft in here."

Kurt silently exchanged clothes and then moodily walked over to the grille that barred the window and stood looking out.

"Why not go upstairs to officers' country and out that way?" suggested the sergeant, who hated the idea of being overpowered for nothing. "If you can get to the front gate without one of the staff spotting you, you can walk right out. The sentry never notices faces, he just checks for insignia."

Kurt grabbed Sergeant Wetzel's plump hand and wrung it warmly. "I don't know how to thank you," he stammered.

"Then it's about time you learned," said the colonel. "The usual practice in civilized battalions is to say 'thank you.'"

"Thank you!" said Kurt.

"Quite all right," said the sergeant. "Take the first stair-

THE SPECTER GENERAL

way to your left. When you get to the top, turn left again and the corridor will take you straight to the exit."

Kurt got safely to the top of the stairs and turned right. Three hundred feet later the corridor ended in a blank wall. A small passageway angled off to the left and he set off down it. It also came to a dead end in a small anteroom whose farther wall was occupied by a set of great bronze doors. He turned and started to retrace his steps. He had almost reached the main corridor when he heard angry voices sounding from it. He peeked cautiously around the corridor. His escape route was blocked by two officers engaged in acrimonious argument. Neither was too sober and the captain obviously wasn't giving the major the respect that a field officer usually commanded.

"I don't care what she said!" the captain shouted. "I saw her first."

The major grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him back against the wall. "It doesn't matter who saw her first. You keep away from her or there's going to be trouble!"

The captain's face flushed with rage. With a snarl he tore off the major's breechcloth and struck him in the face with it.

The major's face grew hard and cold. He stepped back, clicked his calloused heels together, and bowed slightly.

"Axes or fists?"

"Axes," snapped the captain.

"May I suggest the armory anteroom?" said the major formally. "We won't be disturbed there."

"As you wish, sir," said the captain with equal formality. "Your breechcloth, sir." The major donned it with dignity and they started down the hall toward Kurt. He turned and fled back down the corridor.

In a second he was back in the anteroom. Unless he did something quickly he was trapped. Two flaming torches were set in brackets on each side of the great bronze door. As flickering pools of shadow chased each other across the worn stone floor, Kurt searched desperately for some other way out. There was none. The only possible exit was through the bronze portals. The voices behind him grew louder. He ran forward, grabbed a projecting handle, and pulled. One door creaked open slightly and with a sigh of relief Kurt slipped inside.

There were no torches here. The great hall stood in half darkness, its only illumination the pale moonlight that

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

streamed down through the arching skylight that formed the central ceiling. He stood for a moment in awe, impressed in spite of himself by the strange unfamiliar shapes that loomed before him in the half-darkness. He was suddenly brought back to reality by the sound of voices in the anteroom.

"Hey! The armory door's open!"

"So what? That place is off limits to everybody but the C.O."

"Blick won't care. Let's fight in there. There should be more room."

Kurt quickly scanned the hall for a safe hiding place. At the far end stood what looked like a great bronze statue, its burnished surface gleaming dimly in the moonlight. As the door swung open behind him, he slipped cautiously through the shadows until he reached it. It looked like a coffin with feet, but to one side of it there was a dark pool of shadow. He slipped into it and pressed himself close against the cold metal. As he did so his hipbone pressed against a slight protrusion and with a slight clicking sound, a hinged middle section of the metallic figure swung open, exposing a dark cavity. The thing was hollow!

Kurt had a sudden idea. "Even if they do come down here," he thought, "they'd never think of looking inside this thing!" With some difficulty he wiggled inside and pulled the hatch shut after him. There were legs to the thing—his own fit snugly into them—but no arms.

The two officers strode out of the shadows at the other end of the hall. They stopped in the center of the armory and faced each other like fighting cocks. Kurt gave a sigh of relief. It looked as if he were safe for the moment.

There was a sudden wicked glitter of moonlight on ax-heads as their weapons leaped into their hands. They stood frozen for a moment in a murderous tableau and then the captain's ax hummed toward his opponent's head in a vicious slash. There was a shower of sparks as the major parried and then with a quick wrist twist sent his own weapon looping down toward the captain's midriff. The other pulled his ax down to ward the blow, but he was only partially successful. The keen obsidian edge raked his ribs and blood dripped darkly in the moonlight.

As Kurt watched intently, he began to feel the first faint stirrings of claustrophobia. The Imperial designers had planned their battle armor for efficiency rather than comfort and

THE SPECTER GENERAL

Kurt felt as if he were locked away in a cramped dark closet. His malaise wasn't helped by a sudden realization that when the men left they might very well lock the door behind them. His decision to change his hiding place was hastened when a bank of dark clouds swept across the face of the moon. The flood of light poured down through the skylight suddenly dimmed until Kurt could barely make out the pirouetting forms of the two officers who were fighting in the center of the hall.

This was his chance. If he could slip down the darkened side of the hall before the moon lighted up the hall again, he might be able to slip out of the hall unobserved. He pushed against the closed hatch through which he entered. It refused to open. A feeling of trapped panic started to roll over him, but he fought it back. "There must be some way to open this thing from the inside," he thought.

As his fingers wandered over the dark interior of the suit looking for a release lever, they encountered a bank of keys set just below his midriff. He pressed one experimentally. A quiet hum filled the armor and suddenly a feeling of weightlessness came over him. He stiffened in fright. As he did so one of his steel shod feet pushed lightly backwards against the floor. That was enough. Slowly, like a child's balloon caught in a light draft, he drifted toward the center of the hall. He struggled violently, but since he was now several inches above the floor and rising slowly it did him no good.

The fight was progressing splendidly. Both men were master axmen, and in spite of being slightly drunk, were putting on a brilliant exhibition. Each was bleeding from a dozen minor slashes, but neither had been seriously axed as yet. Their flashing strokes and counters were masterful, so masterful that Kurt slowly forgot his increasingly awkward situation as he became more and more absorbed in the fight before him. The blond captain was slightly the better axman, but the major compensated for it by occasionally whistling in cuts that to Kurt's experienced eye seemed perilously close to fouls. He grew steadily more partisan in his feelings until one particularly unscrupulous attempt broke down his restraint altogether.

"Pull down your guard!" he screamed to the captain. "He's trying to cut you below the belt!" His voice reverberated within the battle suit and boomed out with strange metallic overtones.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Both men whirled in the direction of the sound. They could see nothing for a moment and then the major caught sight of the strange menacing figure looming above him in the murky darkness.

Dropping his ax he dashed frantically toward the exit shrieking: "It's the Inspector General!"

The captain's reflexes were a second slower. Before he could take off, Kurt poked his head out of the open faceport and shouted down, "It's only me, Dixon! Get me out of here, will you?"

The captain stared up at him goggle-eyed. "What kind of a contraption is that?" he demanded. "And what are you doing in it?"

Kurt by now was floating a good ten feet off the floor. He had visions of spending the night on the ceiling and he wasn't happy about it. "Get me down now," he pleaded. "We can talk after I get out of this thing."

The captain gave a leap upwards and tried to grab Kurt's ankles. His jump was short and his outstretched fingers gave the weightless armor a slight shove that sent it bobbing up another three feet.

He cocked his head back and called up to Kurt. "Can't reach you now. We'll have to try something else. How did you get into that thing in the first place?"

"The middle section is hinged," said Kurt. "When I pulled it shut, it clicked."

"Well, unclick it!"

"I tried that. That's why I'm up here now."

"Try again," said the man on the floor. "If you can open the hatch, you can drop down and I'll catch you."

"Here I come!" said Kurt, his fingers selecting a stud at random. He pushed. There was a terrible blast of flame from the shoulder jets and he screamed skywards on a pillar of fire. A microsecond later, he reached the skylight. Something had to give. It did!

At fifteen thousand feet the air pressure dropped to the point where the automatics took over and the face plate clicked shut. Kurt didn't notice that. He was out like a light. At thirty thousand feet the heaters cut in. Forty seconds later he was in free space. Things could have been worse though; he still had air for two hours.

THE SPECTER GENERAL

X

Flight Officer Ozaki was taking a cat nap when the alarm on the radiation detector went off. Dashing the sleep out of his eyes, he slipped rapidly into the control seat and cut off the gong. His fingers danced over the controls in a blur of movement. Swiftly the vision screen shifted until the little green dot that indicated a source of radiant energy was firmly centered. Next he switched on the pulse analyzer and watched carefully as it broke down the incoming signal into components and sent them surging across the scope in the form of sharp-toothed sine waves. There was an odd peak to them, a strength and sharpness that he hadn't seen before.

"Doesn't look familiar," he muttered to himself, "but I'd better check to make sure."

He punched the comparison button and while the analyzer methodically began to check the incoming trace against the known patterns stored up in its compact little memory bank, he turned back to the vision screen. He switched on high magnification and the system rushed toward him. It expanded from a single pin point of light into a distinct planetary system. At its center a giant dying sun expanded on the plate like a malignant red eye. As he watched, the green dot moved appreciably, a thin red line stretching out behind it to indicate its course from point of first detection. Ozaki's fingers moved over the controls and a broken line of white light came into being on the screen. With careful adjustments he moved it up toward the green track left by the crawling red dot. When he had an exact overlay, he carefully moved the line back along the course that the energy emitter had followed prior to detection.

Ozaki was tense. It looked as if he might have something. He gave a sudden whoop of excitement as the broken white line intersected the orange dot of a planetary mass. A vision of the promised thirty-day leave and six months' extra pay danced before his eyes as he waited for the pulse analyzer to clear.

"Home!" he thought ecstatically. "Home and unplugged plumbing!"

With a final whirl of relays the analyzer clucked like a contented chicken and dropped an identity card out of its emission slot. Ozaki grabbed it and scanned it eagerly. At the top was printed in red, "Identity. Unknown," and below

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

in smaller letters, "Suggest check of trace pattern on base analyzer." He gave a sudden whistle as his eyes caught the energy utilization index. 927! That was fifty points higher than it had any right to be. The best tech in the Protectorate considered himself lucky if he could tune a propulsion unit so that it delivered a thrust of forty-five per cent of rated maximum. Whatever was out there was hot! Too hot for one man to handle alone. With quick decision he punched the transmission key of his space communicator and sent a call winging back to War Base Three.

XI

Commander Krogson stormed up and down his office in a frenzy of impatience.

"It shouldn't be more than another fifteen minutes, sir," said Schninkle.

Krogson snorted. "That's what you said an hour ago! What's the matter with those people down there? I want the identity of that ship and I want it now."

"It's not Identification's fault," explained the other. "The big analyzer is in pretty bad shape and it keeps jamming. They're afraid that if they take it apart they won't be able to get it back together again."

The next two hours saw Krogson's blood pressure steadily rising toward the explosion point. Twice he ordered the whole identification section transferred to a labor battalion and twice he had to rescind the command when Schninkle pointed out that scrapings from the bottom of the barrel were better than nothing at all. His fingernails were chewed down to the quick when word finally came through.

"Identification, sir," said a hesitant voice on the intercom.

"Well?" demanded the commander.

"The analyzer says—" The voice hesitated again.

"The analyzer says what?" shouted Krogson in a fury of impatience.

"The analyzer says that the trace pattern is that of one of the old Imperial drive units."

"That's impossible!" sputtered the commander. "The last Imperial base was smashed five hundred years ago. What of their equipment was salvaged has long since been worn out and tossed on the scrap heap. The machine must be wrong!"

THE SPECTER GENERAL

"Not this time," said the voice. "We checked the memory bank manually and there's no mistake. It's an Imperial all right. Nobody can produce a drive unit like that these days."

Commander Krogson leaned back in his chair, his eyes veiled in deep thought. "Schninkle," he said finally, thinking out loud, "I've got a hunch that maybe we've stumbled on something big. Maybe the Lord Protector is right about there being a plot to knock him over, but maybe he's wrong about who's trying to do it. What if all these centuries since the Empire collapsed a group of Imperials have been hiding out waiting for their chance?"

Schninkle digested the idea for a moment. "It could be," he said slowly. "If there is such a group, they couldn't pick a better time than now to strike; the Protectorate is so wobbly that it wouldn't take much of a shove to topple it over."

The more he thought about it, the more sense the idea made to Krogson. Once he felt a fleeting temptation to hush up the whole thing. If there were Imperials and they did take over, maybe they would put an end to the frenzied rat race that was slowly ruining the galaxy—a race that sooner or later entangled every competent man in the great web of intrigue and power politics that stretched through the Protectorate and forced him in self-defense to keep clawing his way toward the top of the heap.

Regretfully he dismissed the idea. This was a matter of his own neck, here and now!

"It's a big IF, Schninkle," he said, "but if I've guessed right, we've bailed ourselves out. Get hold of that scout and find out his position."

Schninkle scooted out of the door. A few minutes later he dashed back in. "I've just contacted the scout!" he said excitedly. "He's closed in on the power source and it isn't a ship after all. It's a man in space armor! The drive unit is cut off, and it's heading out of the system at fifteen hundred per. The pilot is standing by for instructions."

"Tell him to intercept and capture!" Schninkle started out of the office. "Wait a second; what's the scout's position?"

Schninkle's face fell. "He doesn't quite know, sir."

"He *what*?" demanded the commander.

"He doesn't quite know," repeated the little man. "His astrocomputer went haywire six hours out of base."

"Just our luck!" swore Krogson. "Well, tell him to leave his transmitter on. We'll ride in on his beam. Better call the

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

sector commander while you're at it and tell him what's happened."

"Beg pardon, commander," said Schninkle, "but I wouldn't advise it."

"Why not?" asked Krogson.

"You're next in line to be sector commander, aren't you, sir?"

"I guess so," said the commander.

"If this pans out, you'll be in a position to knock him over and grab his job, won't you?" asked Schninkle slyly.

"Could be," admitted Krogson in a tired voice. "Not because I want to, though—but because I have to. I'm not as young as I once was, and the boys below are pushing pretty hard. It's either up or out—and out is always feet first."

"Put yourself in the sector commander's shoes for a minute," suggested the little man. "What would you do if a war base commander came through with news of a possible Imperial base?"

A look of grim comprehension came over Krogson's face. "Of course! I'd ground the commander's ships and send out my own fleet. I must be slipping; I should have thought of that at once!"

"On the other hand," said Schninkle "you might call him and request permission to conduct routine maneuvers. He'll approve as a matter of course and you'll have an excuse for taking out the full fleet. Once in deep space, you can slap on radio silence and set course for the scout. If there is an Imperial base out there, nobody will know anything about it until it's blasted. I'll stay back here and keep my eyes on things for you."

Commander Krogson grinned. "Schninkle, it's a pleasure to have you in my command. How would you like me to make you Devoted Servant of the Lord Protector, Eighth Class? It carries an extra shoe ration coupon!"

"If it's all the same with you," said Schninkle, "I'd just as soon have Saturday afternoons off."

XII

As Kurt struggled up out of the darkness, he could hear a gong sounding in the faint distance. *Bong! BONG! BONG!* It grew nearer and louder. He shook his head painfully and

groaned. There was light from some place beating against his eyelids. Opening them was too much effort. He was in some sort of a bunk. He could feel that. But the gong. He lay there concentrating on it. Slowly he began to realize that the beat didn't come from outside. It was his head. It felt swollen and sore and each pulse of his heart sent a hammer thud through it.

One by one his senses began to return to normal. As his nose reassumed its normal acuteness, it began to quiver. There was a strange scent in the air, an unpleasant sickening scent as of—he chased the scent down his aching memory channels until he finally had it cornered—rotting fish. With that to anchor on, he slowly began to reconstruct reality. He had been floating high above the floor in the armory and the captain had been trying to get him down. Then he had pushed a button. There had been a microsecond of tremendous acceleration and then a horrendous crash. That must have been the skylight. After the crash was darkness, then the gongs, and now fish—dead and rotting fish.

"I must be alive," he decided. "Imperial Headquarters would never smell like this!"

He groaned and slowly opened one eye. Wherever he was he hadn't been there before. He opened the other eye. He was in a room. A room with a curved ceiling and curving walls. Slowly, with infinite care, he hung his head over the side of the bunk. Below him in a form-fitting chair before a bank of instruments sat a small man with yellow skin and blue-black hair. Kurt coughed. The man looked up. Kurt asked the obvious question.

"Where am I?"

"I'm not permitted to give you any information," said the small man. His speech had an odd slurred quality to Kurt's ear.

"Something stinks!" said Kurt.

"It sure does," said the small man gloomily. "It must be worse for you. I'm used to it."

Kurt surveyed the cabin with interest. There were a lot of gadgets tucked away here and there that looked familiar. They were like the things he had worked on in Tech School except that they were cruder and simpler. They looked as if they had been put together by an eight-year-old recruit who was doing the first trial assembly. He decided to make an-

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

other stab at establishing some sort of communication with the little man.

"How come you have everything in one room? We always used to keep different things in different shops."

"No comment," said Ozaki.

Kurt had a feeling he was butting his head against a stone wall. He decided to make one more try.

"I give up," he said, wrinkling his nose, "where'd you hide it?"

"Hide what?" asked the little man.

"The fish," said Kurt.

"No comment."

"Why not?" asked Kurt.

"Because there isn't anything that can be done about it," said Ozaki. "It's the air conditioner. Something's haywire inside."

"What's an air conditioner?" asked Kurt.

"That square box over your head."

Kurt looked at it, closed his eyes, and thought for a moment. The thing did look familiar. Suddenly a picture of it popped into his mind. Page 318 in the "Manual of Auxiliary Mechanisms."

"It's fantastic!" he said.

"What is?" said the little man.

"This," Kurt pointed to the conditioner. "I didn't know they existed in real life. I thought they were just in books. You got a first echelon kit?"

"Sure," said Ozaki. "It's in the recess by the head of the bunk. Why?"

Kurt pulled the kit out of its retaining clips and opened its cover, fishing around until he found a small screwdriver and a pair of needle-nose pliers.

"I think I'll fix it," he said conversationally.

"Oh, no you won't!" howled Ozaki. "Air with fish is better than no air at all." But before he could do anything, Kurt had pulled the cover off the air conditioner and was probing into the intricate mechanism with his screwdriver. A slight thumping noise came from inside. Kurt cocked his ear and thought. Suddenly his screwdriver speared down through the maze of whirring parts. He gave a slow quarter turn and the internal thumping disappeared.

"See," he said triumphantly, "no more fish!"

Ozaki stopped shaking long enough to give the air a tenta-

THE SPECTER GENERAL

tive sniff. He had got out of the habit of smelling in self-defense and it took him a minute or two to detect the difference. Suddenly a broad grin swept across his face.

"It's going away! I do believe it's going away!"

Kurt gave the screwdriver another quarter of a turn and suddenly the sharp spicy scent of pines swept through the scout. Ozaki took a deep ecstatic breath and relaxed in his chair. His face lost its pallor.

"How did you do it?" he said finally.

"No comment," said Kurt pleasantly.

There was silence from below. Ozaki was in the throes of a brain storm. He was more impressed by Kurt's casual repair of the air conditioner than he liked to admit.

"Tell me," he said cautiously, "can you fix other things beside air conditioners?"

"I guess so," said Kurt, "if it's just simple stuff like this." He gestured around the cabin. "Most of the stuff here needs fixing. They've got it together wrong."

"Maybe we could make a dicker," said Ozaki. "You fix things, I answer questions—Some questions that is," he added hastily.

"It's a deal," said Kurt who was filled with a burning curiosity as to his whereabouts. Certain things were already clear in his mind. He knew that wherever he was he'd never been there before. That meant evidently that there was a garrison on the other side of the mountains whose existence had never been suspected. What bothered him was how he had got there.

"Check," said Ozaki. "First, do you know anything about plumbing?"

"What's plumbing?" asked Kurt curiously.

"Pipes," said Ozaki. "They're plugged. They've been plugged for more time than I like to think about."

"I can try," said Kurt.

"Good!" said the pilot and ushered him into the small cubicle that opened off the rear bulkhead. "You might tackle the shower while you're at it."

"What's a shower?"

"That curved dingbat up there," said Ozaki pointing. "The thermostat's out of whack."

"Thermostats are kid stuff," said Kurt, shutting the door. Ten minutes later Kurt came out. "It's all fixed."

"I don't believe it," said Ozaki, shouldering his way past

Kurt. He reached down and pushed a small curved handle. There was the satisfying sound of rushing water. He next reached into the little shower compartment and turned the knob to the left. With a hiss a needle spray of cold water burst forth. The pilot looked at Kurt with awe in his eyes.

"If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it! That's two answers you've earned."

Kurt peered back into the cubicle curiously. "Well, first," he said, "now that I've fixed them, what are they for?"

Ozaki explained briefly and a look of amazement came over Kurt's face. Machinery he knew, but the idea that it could be used for something was hard to grasp.

"If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it!" he said slowly. This would be something to tell when he got home. Home! The pressing question of location popped back into his mind.

"How far are we from the garrison?" he asked.

Ozaki made a quick mental calculation.

"Roughly two light-seconds," he said.

"How far's that in kilometers?"

Ozaki thought again. "Around six hundred thousand. I'll run off the exact figures if you want them."

Kurt gulped. No place could be that far away. Not even Imperial Headquarters! He tried to measure out the distance in his mind in terms of days' marches, but he soon found himself lost. Thinking wouldn't do it. He had to see with his own eyes where he was.

"How do you get outside?" he asked.

Ozaki gestured toward the air lock that opened at the rear of the compartment. "Why?"

"I want to go out for a few minutes to sort of get my bearings."

Ozaki looked at him in disbelief. "What's your game, anyhow?" he demanded.

It was Kurt's turn to look bewildered. "I haven't any game. I'm just trying to find out where I am so I'll know which way to head to get back to the garrison."

"It'll be a long, cold walk." Ozaki laughed and hit the stud that slid back the ray screens on the vision ports. "Take a look."

Kurt looked out into nothingness, a blue-black void marked only by distant pin points of light. He suddenly felt terribly alone, lost in a blank immensity that had no boundaries.

THE SPECTER GENERAL

Down was gone and so was *up*. There was only this tiny lighted room with nothing underneath it. The port began to swim in front of his eyes as a sudden, strange vertigo swept over him. He felt that if he looked out into that terrible space for another moment he would lose his sanity. He covered his eyes with his hands and staggered back to the center of the cabin.

Ozaki slid the ray screens back in place. "Kind of gets you first time, doesn't it?"

Kurt had always carried a little automatic compass within his head. Wherever he had gone, no matter how far afield he had wandered, it had always pointed steadily toward home. Now for the first time in his life the needle was spinning helplessly. It was an uneasy feeling. He had to get oriented.

"Which way is the garrison?" he pleaded.

Ozaki shrugged. "Over there some place. I don't know whereabouts on the planet you come from. I didn't pick up your track until you were in free space."

"Over where?" asked Kurt.

"Think you can stand another look?"

Kurt braced himself and nodded. The pilot opened a side port to vision and pointed. There, seemingly motionless in the black emptiness of space, floated a great greenish-gray globe. It didn't make sense to Kurt. The satellite that hung somewhat to the left did. Its face was different, the details were sharper than he'd ever seen them before, but the features he knew as well as his own. Night after night on scouting detail for the hunting parties while waiting for sleep he had watched the silver sphere ride through the clouds above him.

He didn't want to believe but he had to!

His face was white and tense as he turned back to Ozaki. A thousand sharp and burning questions milled chaotically through his mind.

"Where am I?" he demanded. "How did I get out here? Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"You're in a spaceship," said Ozaki, "a two-man scout. And that's all you're going to get out of me until you get some more work done. You might as well start on this microscopic projector. The thing burned out just as the special investigator was about to reveal who had blown off the commissioner's

head by wiring a bit of plutonite into his autoshave. I've been going nuts ever since trying to figure out who did it!"

Kurt took some tools out of the first echelon kit and knelt obediently down beside the small projector.

Three hours later they sat down to dinner. Kurt had repaired the food machine and Ozaki was slowly masticating synthasteak that for the first time in days tasted like synthasteak. As he ecstatically lifted the last savory morsel to his mouth, the ship gave a sudden leap that plastered him and what remained of his supper against the rear bulkhead. There was darkness for a second and then the ceiling lights flickered on, then off, and then on again. Ozaki picked himself up and gingerly ran his fingers over the throbbing lump that was beginning to grow out of the top of his head. His temper wasn't improved when he looked up and saw Kurt still seated at the table calmly cutting himself another piece of pie.

"You should have braced yourself," said Kurt conversationally, "The converter's out of phase. You can hear her build up for a jump if you listen. When she does you ought to brace yourself. Maybe you don't hear so good?" he asked helpfully.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, it isn't polite," snarled Ozaki.

Late that night the converter cut out altogether. Ozaki was sleeping the sleep of the innocent and didn't find out about it for several hours. When he did awake, it was to Kurt's gentle shaking.

"Hey!" Ozaki groaned and buried his face in the pillow.

"Hey!" This time the voice was louder. The pilot yawned and tried to open his eyes.

"Is it important if all the lights go out?" the voice queried. The import of the words suddenly struck home and Ozaki sat bolt upright in his bunk. He opened his eyes, blinked, and opened them again. The lights *were* out. There was a strange unnatural silence about the ship.

"Good Lord!" he shouted and jumped for the controls. "The power's off."

He hit the starter switch but nothing happened. The converter was jammed solid. Ozaki began to sweat. He fumbled over the control board until he found the switch that cut the emergency batteries into the lighting circuit. Again nothing happened.

THE SPECTER GENERAL

"If you're trying to run the lights on the batteries, they won't work," said Kurt in a conversational tone.

"Why not?" snapped Ozaki as he punched savagely and futilely at the starter button.

"They're dead," said Kurt. "I used them all up."

"You what?" yelled the pilot in anguish.

"I used them all up. You see, when the converter went out, I woke up. After a while the sun started to come up, and it began to get awfully hot so I hooked the batteries into the refrigeration coils. Kept the place nice and cool while they lasted."

Ozaki howled. When he swung the shutter of the forward port to let in some light, he howled again. This time in dead earnest. The giant red sun of the system was no longer perched off to the left at a comfortable distance. Instead before Ozaki's horrified eyes was a great red mass that stretched from horizon to horizon.

"We're falling into the sun!" he screamed.

"It's getting sort of hot," said Kurt. "Hot" was an understatement. The thermometer needle pointed at a hundred and ten and was climbing steadily.

Ozaki jerked open the stores compartment door and grabbed a couple of spare batteries. As quickly as his trembling fingers would work, he connected them to the emergency power line. A second later the cabin lights flickered on and Ozaki was warming up the space communicator. He punched the transmitter key and a call went arcing out through hyperspace. The vision screen flickered and the bored face of a communication tech, third class, appeared.

"Give me Commander Krogson at once!" demanded Ozaki.

"Sorry, old man," yawned the other, "but the commander's having breakfast. Call back in half an hour, will you?"

"This is an emergency! Put me through at once!"

"Can't help it," said the other, "nobody can disturb the Old Man while he's having breakfast!"

"Listen, you knucklehead," screamed Ozaki, "if you don't get me through to the commander as of right now, I'll have you in the uranium mines so fast that you won't know what hit you!"

"You and who else?" drawled the tech.

"Me and my cousin Takahashi!" snarled the pilot. "He's Reclassification Officer for the Base STAP."

The tech's face went white. "Yes, sir!" he stuttered. "Right

away, sir! No offense meant, sir!" He disappeared from the screen. There was a moment of darkness and then the interior of Commander Krogson's cabin flashed on.

The commander was having breakfast. His teeth rested on the white tablecloth and his mouth was full of mush.

"Commander Krogson!" said Ozaki desperately.

The commander looked up with a startled expression. When he noticed his screen was on, he swallowed his mush convulsively and popped his teeth back into place.

"Who's there?" he demanded in a neutral voice in case it might be somebody important.

"Flight Officer Ozaki," said Flight Officer Ozaki.

A thundercloud rolled across the commander's face. "What do you mean by disturbing me at breakfast?" he demanded.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the pilot, "but my ship's falling into a red sun."

"Too bad," grunted Commander Krogson and turned back to his mush and milk.

"But, sir," persisted the other, "you've got to send somebody to pull me off. My converter's dead!"

"Why tell me about it?" said Krogson in annoyance. "Call Space Rescue, they're supposed to handle things like this."

"Listen, commander," wailed the pilot, "by the time they've assigned me a priority and routed the paper through proper channels, I'll have gone up in smoke. The last time I got in a jam it took them two weeks to get to me; I've only got hours left!"

"Can't make exceptions," snapped Krogson testily. "If I let you skip the chain of command, everybody and his brother will think he has a right to."

"Commander," howled Ozaki, "we're frying in here!"

"All right. All right!" said the commander sourly. "I'll send somebody after you. What's your name?"

"Ozaki, sir. Flight Officer Ozaki."

The commander was in the process of scooping up another spoonful of mush when suddenly a thought struck him squarely between the eyes.

"Wait a second," he said hastily, "you aren't the scout who located the Imperial base, are you?"

"Yes, sir," said the pilot in a cracked voice.

"Why didn't you say so?" roared Krogson. Flipping on his intercom he growled, "Give me the Exec." There was a moment's silence.

THE SPECTER GENERAL

"Yes, sir?"

"How long before we get to that scout?"

"About six hours, sir."

"Make it three!"

"Can't be done, sir."

"It will be done!" snarled Krogson and broke the connection.

The temperature needle in the little scout was now pointing to a hundred and fifteen.

"I don't think we can hold out that long," said Ozaki.

"Nonsense!" said the commander and the screen went blank.

Ozaki slumped into the pilot chair and buried his face in his hands. Suddenly he felt a blast of cold air on his neck. "There's no use in prolonging our misery," he said without looking up. "Those spare batteries won't last five minutes under this load."

"I knew that," said Kurt cheerfully, "so while you were doing all the talking, I went ahead and fixed the converter. You sure have mighty hot summers out here!" he continued, mopping his brow.

"You what?" yelled the pilot, jumping half out of his seat. "You couldn't even if you did have the know-how. It takes half a day to get the shielding off so you can get at the thing!"

"Didn't need to take the shielding off for a simple job like that," said Kurt. He pointed to a tiny inspection port about four inches in diameter. "I worked through there."

"That's impossible!" interjected the pilot. "You can't even see the injector through that, let alone get to it to work on!"

"Shucks," said Kurt, "a man doesn't have to see a little gadget like that to fix it. If your hands are trained right, you can feel what's wrong and set it to rights right away. She won't jump on you anymore either. The syncromesh thrust baffle was a little out of phase so I fixed that, too, while I was at it."

Ozaki still didn't believe it, but he hit the controls on faith. The scout bucked under the sudden strong surge of power and then, its converter humming sweetly, arched away from the giant sun in a long sweeping curve.

There was silence in the scout. The two men sat quietly, each immersed in an uneasy welter of troubled speculation.

"That was close!" said Ozaki finally. "Too close for comfort. Another hour or so and—!" He snapped his fingers.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Kurt looked puzzled. "Were we in trouble?"

"Trouble!" snorted Ozaki. "If you hadn't fixed the converter when you did, we'd be cinders by now!"

Kurt digested the news in silence. There was something about this superbeing who actually made machines work that bothered him. There was a note of bewilderment in his voice when he asked: "If we were really in danger, why didn't you fix the converter instead of wasting time talking on that thing?" He gestured toward the space communicator.

It was Ozaki's turn to be bewildered. "Fix it!" he said with surprise in his voice. "There aren't a half a dozen techs on the whole base who know enough about atomics to work on a propulsion unit. When something like that goes out, you call Space Rescue and chew your nails until a wrecker can get to you."

Kurt crawled into his bunk and lay back staring at the curved ceiling. He had thinking to do, a lot of thinking!

Three hours later, the scout flashed up alongside the great flagship and darted into a landing port. Flight Officer Ozaki was stricken by a horrible thought as he gazed affectionately around his smoothly running ship.

"Say," he said to Kurt hesitantly, "would you mind not mentioning that you fixed this crate up for me? If you do, they'll take it away from me sure. Some captain will get a new gig, and I'll be issued another clunk from Base Junkpile."

"Sure thing," said Kurt.

A moment later the flashing of a green light on the control panel signaled that the pressure in the lock had reached normal.

"Back in a minute," said Ozaki. "You wait here."

There was a muted hum as the exit hatch swung slowly open. Two guards entered and stood silently beside Kurt as Ozaki left to report to Commander Krogson.

XIII

The battle fleet of War Base Three of Sector Seven of the Galactic Protectorate hung motionless in space twenty thousand kilometers out from Kurt's home planet. A hundred tired detection techs sat tensely before their screens, sweeping the globe for some sign of energy radiation. Aside from the occasional light spatters caused by space static, their scopes

remained dark. As their reports filtered into Commander Krogson he became more and more exasperated.

"Are you positive this is the right planet?" he demanded of Ozaki.

"No question about it, sir."

"Seems funny there's nothing running down there at all," said Krogson. "Maybe they spotted us on the way in and cut off power. I've got a hunch that—" He broke off in mid sentence as the red top-priority light on the communication panel began to flash. "Get that," he said. "Maybe they've spotted something at last."

The executive officer flipped on the vision screen and the interior of the flagship's communication room was revealed.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," said the tech whose image appeared on the screen, "but a message just came through on the emergency band."

"What does it say?"

The tech looked unhappy. "It's coded, sir."

"Well, decode it!" barked the executive.

"We can't," said the technician diffidently. "Something's gone wrong with the decoder. The printer is pounding out random groups that don't make any sense at all."

The executive grunted his disgust. "Any idea where the call's coming from?"

"Yes, sir; it's coming in on a tight beam from the direction of Base. Must be from a ship emergency rig, though. Regular hyperspace transmission isn't directional. Either the ship's regular rig broke down or the operator is using the beam to keep anybody else from picking up his signal."

"Get to work on that decoder. Call back as soon as you get any results." The tech saluted and the screen went black.

"Whatever it is, it's probably trouble," said Krogson morosely. "Well, we'd better get on with this job. Take the fleet into atmosphere. It looks as if we are going to have to make a visual check."

"Maybe the prisoner can give us a lead," suggested the executive officer.

"Good idea. Have him brought in."

A moment later Kurt was ushered into the master control room. Krogson's eyes widened at the sight of his scalp lock and paint.

"Where in the name of the Galactic Spirit," he demanded, "did you get that rig?"

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"Don't you recognize an Imperial Space Marine when you see one?" Kurt answered coldly.

The guard that had escorted Kurt in made a little twirling motion at his temple with one finger. Krogson took another look and nodded agreement.

"Sit down, son," he said in a fatherly tone. "We're trying to get you home, but you're going to have to give us a little help before we can do it. You see, we're not quite sure just where your base is."

"I'll help all I can," said Kurt.

"Finel!" said the commander, rubbing his palms together. "Now just where down there do you come from?" He pointed out the vision port to the curving globe that stretched out below.

Kurt looked down helplessly. "Nothing makes sense, seeing it from up here," he said apologetically.

Krogson thought for a moment. "What's the country like around your base?" he asked.

"Mostly jungle," said Kurt. "The garrison is on a plateau though and there are mountains to the north."

Krogson turned quickly to his exec. "Did you get that description?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Get all scouts out for a close sweep. As soon as the base is spotted, move the fleet in and hover at forty thousand!"

Forty minutes later a scout came streaking back.

"Found it, sir!" said the exec. "Plateau with jungle all around and mountains to the north. There's a settlement at one end. The pilot saw movement down there, but they must have spotted us on our way in. There's still no evidence of energy radiation. They must have everything shut down."

"That's not good!" said Krogson. "They've probably got all their heavy stuff set up waiting for us to sweep over. We'll have to hit them hard and fast. Did they spot the scout?"

"Can't tell, sir."

"We'd better assume that they did. Notify all gunnery officers to switch their batteries over to central control. If we come in fast and high and hit them with simultaneous fleet concentration, we can vaporize the whole base before they can take a crack at us."

"I'll send the order out at once, sir," said the executive officer.

The fleet pulled into tight formation and headed toward

the Imperial base. They were halfway there when the fleet gunnery officer entered the control room and said apologetically to Commander Krogson, "Excuse me, sir, but I'd like to suggest a trial run. Fleet concentration is a tricky thing, and if something went haywire—we'd be sitting ducks for the ground batteries."

"Good idea," said Krogson thoughtfully. "There's too much at stake to have anything go wrong. Select an equivalent target, and we'll make a pass."

The fleet was now passing over a towering mountain chain.

"How about that bald spot down there?" said the Exec. pointing to a rocky expanse that jutted out from the side of one of the towering peaks.

"Good enough," said Krogson.

"All ships on central control" reported the gunnery officer.

"On target!" repeated the tech on the tracking screen. "One. Two. Three. Four—"

Kurt stood by the front observation port watching the ground far below sweep by. He had been listening intently, but what had been said didn't make sense. There had been something about *batteries*—the term was alien to him—and something about the garrison. He decided to ask the commander what it was all about, but the intentness with which Krogson was watching the tracking screen deterred him. Instead he gazed moodily down at the mountains below him.

"Five. Six. Seven. Ready. FIRE!"

A savage shudder ran through the great ship as her ground-pointed batteries blasted in unison. Seconds went by and then suddenly the rocky expanse on the shoulder of the mountain directly below twinkled as blinding flashes of actinic light danced across it. Then as Kurt watched, great masses of rock and earth moved slowly skyward from the center of the spurting nests of tangled flame. Still slowly, as if buoyed up by the thin mountain air, the debris began to fall back again until it was lost from sight in quick rising mushrooms of jet-black smoke. Kurt turned and looked back toward Commander Krogson. *Batteries* must be the things that had torn the mountains below apart. And *garrison*—there was only one garrison!

"I ordered fleet fire," barked Krogson. "This ship was the only one that cut loose. What happened?"

"Just a second, sir," said the executive officer, "I'll try and find out." He was busy for a minute on the intercom

system. "The other ships were ready, sir," he reported finally. "Their guns were all switched over to our control, but no impulse came through. Central fire control must be on the blink!" He gestured toward a complex bank of equipment that occupied one entire corner of the control room.

Commander Krogson said a few appropriate words. When he reached the point where he was beginning to repeat himself, he paused and stood in frozen silence for a good thirty seconds.

"Would you mind getting a fire control tech in here to fix that obscenity bank?" he asked in a voice that put everyone's teeth on edge.

The other seemed to have something to say, but he was having trouble getting it out.

"Well?" said Krogson.

"Prime Base grabbed our last one two weeks ago. There isn't another left with the fleet."

"Doesn't look like much to me," said Kurt as he strolled over to examine the bank of equipment.

"Get away from there!" roared the commander. "We've got enough trouble without you making things worse."

Kurt ignored him and began to open inspection ports.

"Guard!" yelled Krogson. "Throw that man out of here!"

Ozaki interrupted timidly. "Beg pardon, commander, but he can fix it if anybody can."

Krogson whirled on the flight officer. "How do you know?"

Ozaki caught himself just in time. If he talked too much, he was likely to lose the scout that Kurt had fixed for him.

"Because he . . . eh . . . talks like a tech," he concluded lamely.

Krogson looked at Kurt dubiously. "I guess there's no harm in giving it a trial," he said finally. "Give him a set of tools and turn him loose. Maybe for once a miracle will happen."

"First," said Kurt, "I'll need the wiring diagrams for this thing."

"Get them!" barked the commander and an orderly scuttled out of the control, headed aft.

"Next you'll have to give me a general idea of what it's supposed to do," continued Kurt.

Krogson turned to the gunnery officer. "You'd better handle this."

When the orderly returned with the circuit diagrams, they

were spread out on the plotting table and the two men bent over them.

"Got it!" said Kurt at last and sauntered over to the control bank. Twenty minutes later he sauntered back again.

"She's all right now," he said pleasantly.

The gunnery officer quickly scanned his testing board. Not a single red trouble light was on. He turned to Commander Krogson in amazement.

"I don't know how he did it, sir, but the circuits are all clear now."

Krogson stared at Kurt with a look of new respect in his eyes. "What were you down there, chief maintenance tech?"

Kurt laughed. "Me? I was never chief anything. I spent most of my time on hunting detail."

The commander digested that in silence for a moment. "Then how did you become so familiar with fire-control gear?"

"Studied it in school like everyone else does. There wasn't anything much wrong with that thing anyway except a couple of sticking relays."

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted the executive officer, "but should we make another trial run?"

"Are you sure the bank is in working order?"

"Positive, sir!"

"Then we'd better make straight for that base. If this boy here is a fair example of what they have down there, their defenses may be too tough for us to crack if we give them a chance to get set up!"

Kurt gave a slight start which he quickly controlled. Then he had guessed right! Slowly and casually he began to sidle toward the semicircular bank of controls that stood before the great tracking screen.

"Where do you think you're going!" barked Krogson.

Kurt froze. His pulses were pounding within him, but he kept his voice light and casual.

"No place," he said innocently.

"Get over against the bulkhead and keep out of the way!" snapped the commander. "We've got a job of work coming up."

Kurt injected a note of bewilderment into his voice.

"What kind of work?"

Krogson's voice softened and a look approaching pity came into his eyes. "It's just as well you don't know about it until it's over," he said gruffly.

"There she is!" sang out the navigator, pointing to a tiny brown projection that jutted up out of the green jungle in the far distance. "We're about three minutes out, sir. You can take over at any time now."

The fleet gunnery officer's fingers moved quickly over the keys that welded the fleet into a single instrument of destruction, keyed and ready to blast a barrage of ravaging thunderbolts of molecular disruption down at the defenseless garrison at a single touch on the master fire-control button.

"Whenever you're ready, sir," he said deferentially to Krogson as he vacated the controls. A hush fell over the control room as the great tracking screen brightened and showed the compact bundle of white dots that marked the fleet crawling slowly toward the green triangle of the target area.

"Get the prisoner out of here," said Krogson. "There's no reason why he should have to watch what's about to happen."

The guard that stood beside Kurt grabbed his arm and shoved him toward the door.

There was a sudden explosion of fists as Kurt erupted into action. In a blur of continuous movement, he streaked toward the gunnery control panel. He was halfway across the control room before the pole-axed guard hit the floor. There was a second of stunned amazement, and then before anyone could move to stop him, he stood beside the controls, one hand poised tensely above the master stud that controlled the combined fire of the fleet.

"Hold it!" he shouted as the moment of paralysis broke and several of the officers started toward him menacingly. "One move, and I'll blast the whole fleet into scrap!"

They stopped in shocked silence, looking to Commander Krogson for guidance.

"Almost on target, sir," called the tech on the tracking screen.

Krogson stalked menacingly toward Kurt. "Get away from those controls!" he snarled. "You aren't going to blow anything to anything. All that you can do is let off a premature blast. If you are trying to alert your base, it's no use. We can be on a return sweep before they have time to get ready for us."

Kurt shook his head calmly. "Wouldn't do you any good," he said. "Take a look at the gun ports on the other ships. I

made a couple of minor changes while I was working on the control bank."

"Quit bluffing," said Krogson.

"I'm not bluffing," said Kurt quietly. "Take a look. It won't cost you anything."

"On target!" called the tracking tech.

"Order the fleet to circle for another sweep," snapped Krogson over his shoulder as he stalked toward the forward observation port. There was something in Kurt's tone that had impressed him more than he liked to admit. He squinted out toward the nearest ship. Suddenly his face blanched!

"The gunports! They're still closed!"

Kurt gave a whistle of relief. "I had my fingers crossed," he said pleasantly. "You didn't give me enough time with the wiring diagrams for me to be sure that cutting out that circuit would do the trick. Now . . . guess what the results would be if I should happen to push down on this stud."

Krogson had a momentary vision of several hundred shells ramming their sensitive noses against the thick chrome steel of the closed gun ports.

"Don't bother trying to talk," said Kurt, noticing the violent contractions of the commander's Adam's apple. "You'd better save your breath for my colonel."

"Who?" demanded Krogson.

"My colonel," repeated Kurt. "We'd better head back and pick him up. Can you make these ships hang in one place or do they have to keep moving fast to stay up?"

The commander clamped his jaws together sullenly and said nothing.

Kurt made a tentative move toward the firing stud.

"Easy!" yelled the gunnery officer in alarm. "That thing has hair-trigger action!"

"Well?" said Kurt to Krogson.

"We can hover," grunted the other.

"Then take up a position a little to one side of the plateau." Kurt brushed the surface of the firing stud with a casual finger. "If you make me push this, I don't want a lot of scrap iron falling down on the battalion. Somebody might get hurt."

As the fleet came to rest above the plateau, the call light on the communication panel began to flash again.

"Answer it," ordered Kurt, "but watch what you say."

Krogson walked over and snapped on the screen.

"Communications, sir."

"Well?"

"It's that message we called you about earlier. We've finally got the decoder working—sort of, that is." His voice faltered and then stopped.

"What does it say?" demanded Krogson impatiently.

"We still don't know," admitted the tech miserably. "It's being decoded all right, but it's coming out in a North Vegan dialect that nobody down here can understand. I guess there's still something wrong with the selector. All that we can figure out is that the message has something to do with General Carr and the Lord Protector."

"Want me to go down and fix it?" interrupted Kurt in an innocent voice.

Krogson whirled toward him, his hamlike hands clinching and unclenching in impotent rage.

"Anything wrong, sir?" asked the technician on the screen.

Kurt raised a significant eyebrow to the commander.

"Of course not," growled Krogson. "Go find somebody to translate that message and don't bother me until it's done."

A new face appeared on the screen.

"Excuse me for interrupting, sir, but translation won't be necessary. We just got a flash from Detection that they've spotted the ship that sent it. It's a small scout heading in on emergency drive. She should be here in a matter of minutes."

Krogson flipped off the screen impatiently. "Whatever it is, it's sure to be more trouble," he said to nobody in particular. Suddenly he became aware that the fleet was no longer in motion. "Well," he said sourly to Kurt, "We're here. What now?"

"Send a ship down to the garrison and bring Colonel Harris back up here so that you and he can work this thing out between you. Tell him that Dixon is up here and has everything under control."

Krogson turned to the executive officer. "All right," he said, "do what he says." The other saluted and started toward the door.

"Just a second," said Kurt. "If you have any idea of telling the boys outside to cut the transmission leads from fire control, I wouldn't advise it. It's a rather lengthy process, and the minute a trouble light blinks on that board, up we go! Now on your way!"

XIV

Lieutenant Colonel Blick, acting commander of the 427th Light Maintenance Battalion of the Imperial Space Marines, stood at his office window and scowled down upon the whole civilized world, all twenty-six square kilometers of it. It had been a hard day. Three separate delegations of mothers had descended upon him demanding that he reopen the Tech Schools for the sake of their sanity. The recruits had been roaming the company streets in bands composed of equal numbers of small boys and large dogs creating havoc wherever they went. He tried to cheer himself up by thinking of his forthcoming triumph when he in the guise of the Inspector General would float magnificently down from the skies and once and for all put the seal of final authority upon the new order. The only trouble was that he was beginning to have a sneaking suspicion that maybe that new order wasn't all that he had planned it to be. As he thought of his own six banshees screaming through quarters, his suspicion deepened almost to certainty.

He wandered back to his desk and slumped behind it gloomily. He couldn't backwater now, his pride was at stake. He glanced at the water clock on his desk, and then rose reluctantly and started toward the door. It was time to get into battle armor and get ready for the inspection.

As he reached the door, there was a sudden slap of running sandals down the hall. A second later, Major Kane burst into the office, his face white and terrified.

"Colonel," he gasped, "the I.G.'s here!"

"Nonsense," said Blick. "I'm the I.G. now!"

"Oh yeah?" whimpered Kane. "Go look out the window. He's here, and he's brought the whole Imperial fleet with him!"

Blick dashed to the window and looked up. High above, so high that he could see them only as silver specks, hung hundreds of ships.

"Headquarters *does* exist!" he gasped.

He stood stunned. What to do . . . what to do . . . what to do—The question swirled around in his brain until he was dizzy. He looked to Kane for advice, but the other was as bewildered as he was.

"Don't stand there, man," he stormed. "Do something!"

"Yes, sir," said Kane. "What?"

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Blick thought for a long, silent moment. The answer was obvious, but there was a short, fierce inner struggle before he could bring himself to accept it.

"Get Colonel Harris up here at once. He'll know what we should do."

A stubborn look came across Kane's face. "We're running things now," he said angrily.

Blick's face hardened and he let out a roar that shook the walls. "Listen, you pup, when you get an order, you follow it. Now get!"

Forty seconds later, Colonel Harris stormed into the office. "What kind of a mess have you got us into this time?" he demanded.

"Look up there, sir," said Blick leading him to the window.

Colonel Harris snapped back into command as if he'd never left it.

"Major Kane!" he shouted.

Kane popped into the office like a frightened rabbit.

"Evacuate the garrison at once! I want everyone off the plateau and into the jungle immediately. Get litters for the sick and the veterans who can't walk and take them to the hunting camps. Start the rest moving north as soon as you can."

"Really, sir," protested Kane, looking to Blick for a cue.

"You heard the colonel," barked Blick. "On your way!" Kane bolted.

Colonel Harris turned to Blick and said in a frosty voice: "I appreciate your help, colonel, but I feel perfectly competent to enforce my own orders."

"Sorry, sir," said the other meekly. "It won't happen again."

Harris smiled. "O.K., Jimmie," he said, "let's forget it. We've got work to do!"

XV

It seemed to Kurt as if time was standing still. His nerves were screwed up to the breaking point and although he maintained an air of outward composure for the benefit of those in the control room of the flagship, it took all his will power to keep the hand that was resting over the firing stud from quivering. One slip and they'd be on him. Actually it was only a matter of minutes between the time the scout was

dispatched to the garrison below and the time it returned, but to him it seemed as if hours had passed before the familiar form of his commanding officer strode briskly into the control room.

Colonel Harris came to a halt just inside the door and swept the room with a keen penetrating gaze.

"What's up, son?" he asked Kurt.

"I'm not quite sure. All that I know is that they're here to blast the garrison. As long as I've got control of this," he indicated the firing stud, "I'm top dog, but you'd better work something out in a hurry."

The look of strain on Kurt's face was enough for the colonel.

"Who's in command here?" he demanded.

Krogson stepped forward and bowed stiffly. "Commander Conrad Krogson of War Base Three of the Galactic Protectorate."

"Colonel Marcus Harris, 427th Light Maintenance Battalion of the Imperial Space Marines," replied the other briskly. "Now that the formalities are out of the way, let's get to work. Is there some place here where we can talk?"

Krogson gestured toward a small cubicle that opened off the control room. The two men entered and shut the door behind them.

A half hour went by without agreement. "There may be an answer somewhere," Colonel Harris said finally, "but I can't find it. We can't surrender to you, and we can't afford to have you surrender to us. We haven't the food, facilities, or anything else to keep fifty thousand men under guard. If we turn you loose, there's nothing to keep you from coming back to blast us—except your word, that is, and since it would obviously be given under duress, I'm afraid that we couldn't attach much weight to it. It's a nice problem. I wish we had more time to spend on it, but unless you can come up with something workable during the next few minutes, I'm going to give Kurt orders to blow the fleet."

Krogson's mind was operating at a furious pace. One by one he snatched at possible solutions, and one by one he gave them up as he realized that they would never stand up under the scrutiny of the razor-sharp mind that sat opposite him.

"Look," he burst out finally, "your empire is dead and our protectorate is about to fall apart. Give us a chance to

come down and join you and we'll chuck the past. We need each other and you know it!"

"I know we do," said the colonel soberly, "and I rather think you are being honest with me. But we just can't take the chance. There are too many of you for us to digest and if you should change your mind—" He threw up his hands in a helpless gesture.

"But I wouldn't," protested Krogson. "You've told me what your life is like down there and you know what kind of a rat race I've been caught up in. I'd welcome the chance to get out of it. All of us would!"

"You might to begin with," said Harris, "but then you might start thinking what your Lord Protector would give to get his hands on several hundred trained technicians. No, commander," he said, "we just couldn't chance it." He stretched his hand out to Krogson and the other after a second's hesitation took it.

Commander Krogson had reached the end of the road and he knew it. The odd thing about it was that now he found himself there, he didn't particularly mind. He sat and watched his own reactions with a sense of vague bewilderment. The strong drive for self-preservation that had kept him struggling ahead for so long was petering out and there was nothing to take its place. He was immersed in a strange feeling of emptiness and though a faint something within him said that he should go out fighting, it seemed pointless and without reason.

Suddenly the moment of quiet was broken. From the control room came a muffled sound of angry voices and scuffling feet. With one quick stride, Colonel Harris reached the door and swung it open. He was almost bowled over by a small disheveled figure who darted past him into the cubicle. Close behind came several of the ship's officers. As the figure came to a stop before Commander Krogson, one of them grabbed him and started to drag him back into the control room.

"Sorry, sir," the officer said to Krogson, "but he came busting in demanding to see you at once. He wouldn't tell us why and when we tried to stop him, he broke away."

"Release him!" ordered the commander. He looked sternly at the little figure. "Well, Schninkle," he said sternly, "what is it this time?"

"Did you get my message?"

THE SPECTER GENERAL

Krogson snorted. "So it was you in that scout! I might have known it. We got it all right, but Communication still hasn't got it figured out. What are you doing out here? You're supposed to be back at base keeping knives out of my back!"

"It's private, sir," said Schninkle.

"The rest of you clear out!" ordered Krogson. A second later, with the exception of Colonel Harris, the cubicle stood empty. Schninkle looked questioningly at the oddly uniformed officer.

"Couldn't put him out if I wanted to," said Krogson, "now go ahead."

Schninkle closed the door carefully and then turned to the commander and said in a hushed voice, "There's been a blowup at Prime Base. General Carr was hiding out there after all. He hit at noon yesterday. He had two-thirds of the Elite Guard secretly on his side and the Lord Protector didn't have a chance. He tried to run but they chopped him down before he got out of the atmosphere."

Krogson digested the news in silence for a moment. "So the Lord Protector is dead." He laughed bitterly. "Well, long live the Lord Protector!" He turned slowly to Colonel Harris. "I guess this lets us both off. Now that the heat's off me, you're safe. Call off your boy out there, and we'll make ourselves scarce. I've got to get back to the new Lord Protector to pay my respects. If some of my boys get to Carr first, I'm apt to be out of a job."

Harris shook his head. "It isn't as simple as that. Your new leader needs technicians as much as your old one did. I'm afraid we are still back where we started."

As Krogson broke into an impatient denial, Schninkle interrupted him. "You can't go back, commander. None of us can. Carr has the whole staff down on his 'out' list. He's making a clean sweep of all possible competition. We'd all be under arrest now if he knew where we were!"

Krogson gave a slow whistle. "Doesn't leave me much choice, does it?" he said to Colonel Harris. "If you don't turn me loose, I get blown up; if you do, I get shot down."

Schninkle looked puzzled. "What's up, sir?" he asked.

Krogson gave a bitter laugh. "In case you didn't notice on your way in, there is a young man sitting at the fire controls out there who can blow up the whole fleet at the touch of a button. Down below is an ideal base with hundreds of

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

techs, but the colonel here won't take us in, and he's afraid to let us go."

"I wouldn't," admitted Harris, "but the last few minutes have rather changed the picture. My empire has been dead for five hundred years and your protectorate doesn't seem to want you around any more. It looks like we're both out of a job. Maybe we both ought to find a new one. What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think," said Krogson. "I can't go back and I can't stay here, and there isn't any place else. The fleet can't keep going without a base."

A broad grin came over the face of Colonel Harris. "You know," he said. "I've got a hunch that maybe we can do business after all. Come on!" He threw open the cubicle door and strode briskly into the control room, Krogson and Schninkle following close at his heels. He walked over to Kurt who was still poised stiffly at the fire-control board.

"You can relax now, lad. Everything is under control."

Kurt gave a sigh of relief and pulling himself to his feet, stretched luxuriantly. As the other officers saw the firing stud deserted, they tensed and looked to Commander Krogson questioningly. He frowned for a second and then slowly shook his head.

"Well?" he said to Colonel Harris.

"It's obvious," said the other, "you've a fleet, a darn good fleet, but it's falling apart for lack of decent maintenance. I've got a base down there with five thousand lads who can think with their fingers. This knucklehead of mine is a good example." He walked over to Kurt and slapped him affectionately on the shoulder. "There's nothing on this ship that he couldn't tear down and put back together blindfolded if he was given a little time to think about it. I think he'll enjoy having some real work to do for a change."

"I may seem dense," said Krogson with a bewildered expression on his face, "but wasn't that the idea that I was trying to sell you?"

"The idea is the same," said Harris, "but the context isn't. You're in a position now where you have to cooperate. That makes a difference. A big difference!"

"It sounds good," said Krogson, "but now you're overlooking something. Carr will be looking for me. We can't stand off the whole galaxy!"

"You're overlooking something too, sir," Schninkle inter-

rupted. "He hasn't the slightest idea where we are. It will be months before he has things well enough under control to start an organized search for us. When he does, his chances of ever spotting the fleet are mighty slim if we take reasonable precautions. Remember that it was only by a fluke that we ever happened to spot this place to begin with."

As he talked a calculating look came into his eyes. "A year of training and refitting here, and there wouldn't be a fleet in the galaxy that could stand against us." He casually edged over until he occupied a position between Kurt and the fire-control board. "If things went right, there's no reason why you couldn't become Lord Protector, commander."

A flash of the old fire stirred within Krogson and then quickly flickered out. "No, Schninkle," he said heavily. "That's all past now. I've had enough. It's time to try something new."

"In that case," said Colonel Harris, "let's begin! Out there a whole galaxy is breaking up. Soon the time will come when a strong hand is going to be needed to piece it back together and put it in running order again. You know," he continued reflectively, "the name of the old empire still has a certain magic to it. It might not be a bad idea to use it until we are ready to move on to something better."

He walked silently to the vision port and looked down on the lush greenness spreading far below. "But whatever we call ourselves," he continued slowly, half talking to himself, "we have something to work for now." A quizzical smile played over his lips and his wise old eyes seemed to be scanning the years ahead. "You know, Kurt; there's nothing like a visit from the Inspector General once in a while to keep things in line. The galaxy is a big place, but when the time comes, we'll make our rounds!"

XVI

On the parade ground behind the low buildings of the garrison, the 427th Light Maintenance Battalion of the Imperial Space Marines stood in rigid formation, the feathers of their war bonnets moving slightly in the little breeze that blew in from the west and their war paint glowing redly in the slanting rays of the setting sun.

A quiver ran through the hard surface soil of the plateau

as the great mass of the fleet flagship settled down ponderously to rest. There was a moment of expectant silence as a great port clanged open and a gangplank extended to the ground. From somewhere within the ship a fanfare of trumpets sounded. Slowly and with solemn dignity, surrounded by his staff, Conrad Krogson, Inspector General of the Imperial Space Marines, advanced to review the troops.

WOLFIE

PETER VINCENT HAD TOO MUCH TO GAIN—and too much to lose—to risk committing murder in any of the usual ways. He was an obvious suspect if his cousin Anthony Lan should die violently, and much as he wanted his share of Anthony's money, he had an intelligent man's respect for the efficiency of the metropolitan police. That's why he sought, and after a long search found, Dr. Arsoldi.

Dr. Arsoldi's antecedents were mysterious and his techniques were unorthodox, but that was to be expected from a practicing warlock. Peter had rather expected a dimly lighted room cluttered with stuffed owls, crystal balls, chalked pentagrams, and the other paraphernalia commonly associated with wizardry. Instead, he found himself in a small and rather dusty office, whose sole decoration was a flyspecked Petty Girl calendar. Dr. Arsoldi himself didn't correspond to the usual stereotype—he was a broad shouldered and muscular young man with crew-cut and horn rimmed glasses.

"How did you find me?" he asked as he gestured Peter to a chair. There was a trace of an Iowa nasal twang to his voice.

"The same way the others did," said Peter. "I kept looking in the right places. When a whole series of things occur in a limited area that can't be explained in the usual way, it's not too difficult to fit them together into a pattern that makes sense."

Dr. Arsoldi took a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of his tweed jacket, lit one, and inhaled deeply.

"Things such as what?" he asked, letting the smoke trickle lazily from his nostrils.

"The Saunders case for one," said Peter. "The police are

still trying to figure out how an elderly woman could burn to death in a locked room without even scorching the covers on her bed. Salamander, wasn't it?"

Dr. Arsoldi grinned. "I refuse to answer on the grounds that it might incriminate me."

"And that Morgan Bloomfellow who had his head smashed in on the seventh green at the Hunt Hills Golf Course. There were eight witnesses to swear that there was nobody within fifty yards of him at the time. That was a poltergeist, wasn't it?" Vincent asked.

"Any prosecuting attorney who tried to establish that it was would be hauled away and locked up."

"Admitted," said Peter. "That's why I spent so much time and money tracking you down. I've uncovered eighteen cases in the last two years that look like your work, and in each case there was somebody who gained a great deal by the deaths. I came here to make you a business proposition."

"Sorry," said Dr. Arsoldi. "I've suspended operations. It got too dangerous."

"That's absurd," said Peter. "There isn't a way in the world the law could touch you."

"It's not the law I'm afraid of." Dr. Arsoldi hesitated. "I have a—I suppose you could call him a colleague. When we first started working together, I had to sign a contract. There's a clause in it that's been bothering me lately. Frankly, I've got my wind up and I'm getting out before it's too late."

"Perhaps I can persuade you to reconsider," said Peter. He reached in his briefcase and took out a packet of crisp new hundred dollar bills. "There's three thousand here," he said as he tossed it on the desk. "It's all I can lay my hands on now, but if we can come to an agreement, there'll be lots more."

Dr. Arsoldi stared at the bills and licked his lips as if they had suddenly become dry.

"How much more?"

"Fifty thousand easy. Maybe sixty. I've seen the will."

Dr. Arsoldi reached out to touch the money and then jerked his hand back as if it was red hot.

"I'd like to," he said, "but I'm just plain scared. Last time there was almost a slip-up. I don't ever want to go through that again. Sorry." Reluctantly, he pushed the money back across the desk.

"You've got nothing to worry about," said Peter. "I've got a plan that's foolproof."

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"So was the last one," said Dr. Arsoldi morosely, "and look what almost happened."

"What?"

"Garlic! My colleague and I made it possible for our client to temporarily metamorph into a vampire bat. It looked extremely simple. The finding would be 'death due to chronic pernicious anemia,' and she would inherit. And what happened? Her husband had to work late, so on his way home he stopped off at a little Italian restaurant and filled up on spaghetti and garlic bread. She was barely able to go through with it. If she had been a woman of less determination, I wouldn't be here now." He gave a little shudder. "As it was, she was laid up for a week afterward. The papers said she was prostrate with grief, but actually she was suffering from severe systemic poisoning. You have no idea what garlic can do to a vampire's digestive tract."

Peter looked puzzled. "It would seem to me that once you had supplied the means, your responsibility ended. Suppose she hadn't gone through with it . . . I don't see how that would have affected you."

Dr. Arsoldi coughed nervously. "My colleague would have been upset. You see, my powers have been—well, conditionally delegated to me. He is a non-human being—not a supernatural one, mind you—I'll admit that I haven't yet explained to my own satisfaction just where he comes from, but it's obviously another dimension or a different vibrational level, or something like that. For some obscure reason, he has a special fondness for murderers who aren't caught, so we have an agreement between us—I provide the potential killers, and he provides the means for them to carry out their desires."

"I still don't see what you have to be upset about."

"The clause in the agreement I mentioned says that whenever I make one of these arrangements, I have to stand surety for its successful completion. If it doesn't come off, I'm really in hot water. I didn't realize the danger I was in until my last arrangement almost fell through . . .

"Look," he said, struck by a sudden thought, "for a moderate fee—say, three thousand—I could arrange for you to get in touch with him yourself. That way, any arrangement that was made would be between the two of you, and I wouldn't be involved."

"No, thanks," said Peter. "I'm familiar with what eventually

happens to people who make pacts with the devil. I prefer to work through a middleman. That's why I came to you."

"He's not a devil," said Dr. Arsoldi impatiently. "This is the Twentieth Century. There's no need to postulate the supernatural every time something comes up that's outside the realm of our immediate experience. If you simply assume that he comes from a world with a science far in advance of ours, it makes for a much more acceptable explanation."

"Wherever he comes from, I want no personal dealings with him," said Peter decisively. He reached down and picked up the bundle of bills. "Sorry we couldn't reach an agreement."

"So am I," said Dr. Arsoldi, watching the money disappear with hungry eyes. "But much as I love money, I love living more."

After a sleepless night and a restless morning, the obvious solution suddenly popped into Peter's mind. He rushed downtown to see Dr. Arsoldi.

"I've got it," he said triumphantly.

"Got what?" asked Dr. Arsoldi.

"The perfect safeguard. All you have to do is arrange matters so I couldn't back out if I wanted to! Set some sort of a penalty so severe that I no longer have any choice in the matter."

The doctor's face took on a look of sudden interest. "That's an angle I hadn't thought of . . . What do you have in mind?"

"For the penalty?"

"No, for the operation. My colleague would take care of the other."

"All I need for the perfect murder is a light snowfall."

"Go ahead," said Dr. Arsoldi.

"Every night my cousin takes a walk in the park after dinner. He always takes the same route. He makes a complete circuit of the lake and then comes back across the middle of the commons. Nobody is ever out there at night. When he's found in the morning with his throat torn out, and no tracks in the snow but his own and those of a wolf, I think it would be rather difficult to implicate me in the affair."

"So you want to become a werewolf," said Dr. Arsoldi. "It's a nice idea. I'm sure my colleague would be pleased with it."

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Peter produced the money again. "Is it a deal?"

An obvious struggle went on inside Dr. Arsoldi. Finally it subsided, and he picked up the sheaf of bills and dropped them in his pocket.

"There's a market half a block west," he said. "If you'll run down and pick me up a live chicken, I'll take up this matter with my colleague at once."

There was a slight powdering of snow drifting down from a gray sky when Peter Vincent next saw the good doctor.

"Here's what you asked for," he said, tossing two small packages on the desk. "And don't think finding a sample of wolf blood in New York City is an easy job . . . I tried half the veterinarians in town before I found one who could help me. As luck would have it, he was boarding an animal act whose owner was down with the flu. I passed myself off as a biologist who was working on canine blood types and got a specimen without any trouble. He sent it over by special messenger a half an hour ago."

"And the sample from your cousin?"

"I managed to break a glass at the right time and scratched his hand slightly. I got a little smudge on my handkerchief. It's in the package with the brown wrapping."

Dr. Arsoldi rubbed his hands. "Fine," he said, "fine! Come back in about an hour and I'll have everything ready for you . . ."

When Peter returned, there was a strong odor of brimstone in the air. He sniffed and looked at Dr. Arsoldi questioningly.

"Oh, that," said Dr. Arsoldi. "He evidently comes from some place with an atmosphere containing a high percentage of sulphur dioxide. There's no need to assume that every living thing in the Universe has to be an oxygen breather." He sounded as if he were more interested in convincing himself than he was Peter. "If one postulates a greatly advanced race which has developed a method for warping space that makes instantaneous transmission of material objects possible—"

"What about the chicken?" interrupted Peter.

"That is a bit difficult to explain, I'll admit, but that's no reason to—"

Peter interrupted again. "Did he bring it?"

Dr. Arsoldi nodded and handed him a small bottle containing perhaps an ounce of a colorless liquid.

"Is that all?" said Peter. "I expected something more spectacular."

"You'll find the results impressive enough. Two minutes after you drink it, you'll take on your new form. The rest is up to you."

"Thanks," said Peter, pocketing the bottle. "Keep your eye on the newspapers. This should rate headlines in tomorrow's noon edition."

"I hope there's no slip-up," said Dr. Arsoldi. "Remember, I have to stand surety for you."

"You've got nothing to worry about," said Peter breezily.

"I hope for your sake I haven't. If you suddenly changed your mind, the consequences would be equally unfortunate for you. Your suggestion about arranging things so you couldn't back out was an excellent one. Have you wondered why I wanted a sample of your cousin's blood?"

"I was a bit curious," admitted Peter.

"It was my colleague's idea. He used it in preparing the contents of the bottle I just gave you. Once you make the change, you won't be able to regain human form until you've tasted your cousin's arterial blood."

"I see what you mean," Peter said thoughtfully. "I hope none of the park policemen carry guns loaded with silver bullets."

Peter Vincent checked his watch, opened his bedroom window, removed his clothes, and then, satisfied that everything was ready, tossed down the contents of the little bottle in one gulp.

There was a sudden buzz from the telephone beside his bed. Peter grimaced in annoyance and picked it up.

"Yes?"

"This is Dr. Arnett, down at the Stuyvesant Dog and Cat Hospital. I've just discovered that an unfortunate mistake was made, and I thought I'd better call you at once."

Peter felt a sudden strangeness that warned him that the change was about to begin.

"What mistake?" he asked roughly.

Dr. Arnett sounded most apologetic. "I should have got the specimen myself, but Mrs. Datesman's Angora had a terrible toothache, and you know how Angoras are."

"No, I don't," snapped Peter. "What about the sample?"

"Well, I sent the kennelman to get it, and it seems he got

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

mixed up and drew a specimen from the wrong animal. You see, Mrs. Lincoln's son brought her 'Wolfie' in this morning for a mange treatment, and..."

Peter started to say something, but his vocal chords weren't operating.

"I know it sounds stupid," said Arnett, "but the kennelman thought I said 'Wolfie' instead of wol—"

Peter's ears joined his vocal chords as he felt a sudden twisting slithering change start inside him. It didn't hurt; he just felt different—as if he had suddenly turned into an almost fluid jelly and was about to run out across the floor. All his senses were disconnected. He couldn't see, he couldn't hear; he was lost in a wet and sloppy darkness. Then he felt a sudden surge of rhythmic contractions as the undifferentiated cellular mass that had been his body began to take on a new shape.

Suddenly he could see again—but not very well or very far. And he could breathe—but only with difficulty. He seemed possessed of a severe case of asthma. When his sense of touch returned, it brought with it an intolerable itch on his left side. One hind foot kicked automatically at a large hairless spot where the mange was especially severe, but it didn't do much good. Without thinking, he turned and snapped at the smarting area. That didn't do much good either.

From the telephone that rested on the thick carpet beside him, the voice of Dr. Arnett went on and on in explanation and apology.

Peter didn't wait to hear him out. He had urgent business to attend to.

Anthony Lan walked over to the large picture-window, pulled aside the curtains, and looked out into the darkness.

"Expecting somebody, dear?" asked his wife Muriel.

He shook his head. "I just wanted to see if he was still there."

"Who?"

"Take a look. There beside the elm tree."

Muriel peered out the window. "Why, the poor little fellow! He looks cold. Where did he come from?"

"He followed me home from the park. Darn near scared the life out of me, too. I was crossing the common when I heard a snarl from a slump of bushes off to one side. It

wasn't a very snarly snarl—if you know what I mean—but it gave me a bit of a turn. I swung around and saw him waddling toward me as fast as his legs would carry him, snorting and puffing like a steam engine. When he got almost to me he crouched down and made a leap as if he was trying to get up to lick my face, but he was so old and fat he was barely able to get off the ground. I tried to shoo him away, but he kept following me. Every once in a while he'd make another run and try to jump up on me again."

"Sounds like love at first sight," laughed Muriel. She looked out again at the small white shape that crouched shivering on the snow-covered lawn. "Tony, it's cold out there. We can't leave the poor thing out all night. He'll freeze to death."

"He's old and he's mangy and he probably smells," Anthony grumbled. "He'd be better off out of his misery."

"I don't care," she said. "I'm going to bring him in. I'll call the Animal Rescue League to come around and pick him up in the morning."

When Muriel returned with the animal, she placed it gently down on the rug in the middle of the living room. Anthony sniffed and buried himself behind his newspaper. Peter lay quiet for a moment, soaking in warmth and gathering his strength. Then, with a sudden pistoning of little legs, he hurled himself at his cousin.

The newspaper went flying, and for a moment there was a mad tangle of dog and man.

"Get this beast off me," yelled Anthony.

Muriel finally stopped laughing long enough to go over and pick the small dog up by the scruff of the neck. She held it up.

"He likes you."

"Likes me in a pig's eye! He acted as if he wanted to tear my throat out!"

"With what?" said Muriel. "The poor old fellow hasn't got any teeth." She sat down with the fat little poodle in her lap and patted him on the head. "Maybe he has senile delusions," she said. "Maybe he thinks he's a wolf."

Eleven seconds after the Animal Rescue League put Peter Vincent out of his misery, Dr. Arsoldi's colleague arrived to put him in his.

EMERGENCY RATIONS

"THE OBVIOUS BASE FOR OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS is this deserted little system here."

Kat Zul, the Supreme Commander of the Royal Zardonian fleet stabbed one tentacle at a point on the star map.

"Once we are established there, the whole Solar flank lies open to us. We can raid here—and here—and here—" he indicated sector after sector— "and they will never be able to assemble enough ships in one spot to stop us. What do you think, Sire?"

The Gollen patted his corpulent belly. "There will be good eating. Mind you save the fattest for the royal kitchen." Orange saliva drooled from the corners of both his mouths. "Roasted haunch of human three times a day. How delightful! Remind me to invite you in for dinner some night after you get back."

"Thank you, Sire. I will order reconnaissance patrols out at once. If all is clear we can begin construction of a base within the month. Once our heavy armament is installed, we will be impregnable. You will eat well then, O Mighty One!"

The Gollen of Zardon burped happily, closed his eye, and dreamed of dinner.

A week later a fast courier came screaming back with news of trouble. The Supreme Commander took one good look at the report, grabbed the photographs that came with it, and rushed in to see the Gollen.

"The system is already occupied, Sire! By humans!"

"Fine, send me a brace of plump ones at once."

"Your forgiveness, Highness, but that is impossible. We can't get at them. They have erected a space station, a heavy Z type with protective screens that can stop anything we throw at them. I have blockading squadrons around it now, but we must act quickly. They got an appeal for help off before we were able to blanket their transmitter."

The Gollen paled to a light mauve. "In that case," he said softly, "I shall have you for dinner. If the humans gain control of that system, *our* whole flank lies open to them!"

EMERGENCY RATIONS

"There is yet hope, Sire," said Kat Zul quickly. "The space station is only partially completed and, as far as we can determine, occupied only by a construction crew. None of its defensive armament has been installed yet. Once they drop their screen, we have them. We can fortify the station ourselves, and control of the system will be ours."

The Gollen reached into a silver bowl filled with wiggling *guba*, selected an especially fat one, and bit off its head with his lower mouth.

"Why should they?" he said with his upper one.

"Should they what?"

"Drop their protective screens. Their power piles can keep them energized for the next hundred years."

"Ah, Highness, but screen generators are tricky things. They require constant attention. When no humans are alive to tend them, they will shut off automatically. And within two months there will be no humans left alive. They will all have starved to death. We captured their supply ship yesterday."

"I don't like it. In the first place, a starved human is an inedible human, and in the second, their relief fleet won't take more than a month to get there. I believe you were talking in terms of two months. You'll have to do better than that, Kat Zul, or you'll be fricasee by evening!"

As the stew pot came nearer, Kat Zul thought faster. He barely beat the deadline.

"In this life, Highness," he said pontifically, "it is either eat, or be eaten."

"This is obvious," said the Gollen, "and since for you to eat me would be *lèse majesté*, the second half of your truism is more appropriate to the present occasion. Cook!"

"You don't understand," said Kat Zul in desperation. "In this case we can eat by being ready to be eaten." He retreated around the table. "Listen, please! The robot supply ship we captured was loaded with food. If we wait another two weeks, the humans in the space station will be getting terribly hungry."

"I'm getting mighty hungry right now," said the Gollen. "But I'll listen. Go ahead."

"Among the food on the supply ship we found several hundred cans containing strange clawed creatures in a nutrient solution. They're alive!"

"So?"

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"So we'll remove all the food from the ship except those cans. Then we will open them carefully and remove the animals inside. Next we will replace them with ourselves and have the cans resealed."

"What!"

"A stroke of sheer genius, Highness! In each of the cans will be one of my best fighting men. We will put the robot supply ship back on course and chase it to the space station, firing near-misses all the way. Then they see it coming with us in pursuit, the humans will open their screens enough to let it through. Once they've checked it carefully with their scanners, they'll bring it into the station and unload it at once. They'll be so hungry that the first thing they'll go for will be the food. But when they open the cans, instead of finding little live animals, out will spring my warriors. Ah, Sire, there will be a fine slitting of throats. With the screens shut off, we can arm the station at once, and when the human fleet comes . . ." He laughed exultantly and clicked his razor-sharp forward mandibles together like castanets.

"As you say, Kat Zul, a stroke of sheer genius," said the Gollen. "Have you selected your personal can yet?"

The fleet commander's olfactory feelers stood straight out. "Me? To tell you the truth, Highness, I hadn't planned on being one of the raiding party. The fact is that I suffer from a touch of claustrophobia and . . ."

"Would you rather stay for dinner?"

"Well, Sire . . ."

"Cook!"

"On second thought . . ."

"Hey, Mac."

"Yeah?"

"What'n the hell's *lobster*?"

"Beats me. Why?"

"Somebody sure fouled up back at base. There's about a thousand cans of it on the supply ship—and nothing else."

"Well, open one and find out. I'm hungry!"

"Who isn't? But they're alive. It says so on the can. They're packed away in some sort of nutrient solution."

"So they're alive. There's a law says you can't take them out and kill them?"

"There's a picture on the can."

"So?"

EMERGENCY RATIONS

"They got big claws. Looks like they could take a man's finger off with one good bite. Whatta they mean sending stuff like that out?"

"Look, Pinky, I'm busy. Do what you want but don't bother me. I got to nurse this generator. If it flickers just once, we're done for. Now beat it!"

"O.K. I'll go open one up and see what happens."

There was silence broken only by a chomping of jaws. The eating was good. Kat Zul, the Supreme Commander of the Royal Zardonian fleet, rested motionless at the far end of the table in the place of honor, his belly distended and his eye closed.

At the other end of the table, two hungry mouths opened simultaneously.

"More!"

Pinky beamed cheerfully, picked up the platter on which Kat Zul rested, and passed it down to the two hungry electronics men.

"Help yourselves, boys. There's lot's more where that came from."

He took another piece himself. "This sure beats chicken. The way these things are built, there's enough legs for everybody." He pushed his white chef's cap back on his perspiring forehead and surveyed the little group of technicians and construction men happily. This was a red-letter day. Nobody had ever asked for seconds on his cooking before.

"Pinky."

"Yes, Mac?"

"What do they call these things again?"

"Lobsters. They sure don't look like the pictures on the cans, though. Guess the guy that made up the label was one of these here abstructionists. You know, those characters that don't paint a thing like it is, but like it would be if it was."

"Yeah," said Mac, "Sure." He noticed a bandage on Pinky's right forefinger. "I see ya got nipped after all."

Pinky held his finger up and inspected it with interest. "Sure was a mean cut, almost to the bone it was. And that reminds me, when's one of you mechanical wizards going to fix my can opener for me? For a month I've been after you and all I get is promises."

"Tomorrow, first thing," said Mac.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"Tomorrow, always tomorrow," said Pinky. "Look at that finger. That ain't no bite; it got ripped on the edge of a can. I didn't take no chances on being bitten. I was all set to open the first can when I got to looking at the picture on the label, and the more I looked at it, the less I liked the idea of having something like that running around my galley alive. So ya know what I did?"

"No," said Mac patiently, tearing another leg off the carcass of Kat Zul and munching on it appreciatively.

"Well, you know I mostly cook by intuition . . ."

A collective groan went up from his listeners. Every time Pinky had an inspiration, it usually involved a handful or so of curry powder.

"But this time I decided to go by the book. The recipe said to boil vigorously for twenty minutes, so I did. Once the kettle got boiling good, I tossed in a dozen, can and all. I figured they would cook as well inside the container as outside, and that way I wouldn't have to worry about their claws. They was alive all right, too. You should have heard them batting around inside those cans for the first couple of minutes."

Mac shivered uncomfortably. "Don't seem human somehow to make critters suffer so. Next time you'd better open the cans and kill them first. If you're scared, call me and I'll come down and do the job for you."

"There's no need for that," said Pinky. "Them things can't feel nothing. They ain't got no nervous systems. It says so in the cookbook."

"If that's what it says," said Mac, "I guess it's so. Just keep dishing them out the way you did tonight and I'll be happy." He loosened his belt, leaned back, and sighed contentedly.

Pinky wasn't listening. He could hardly wait until time came to prepare breakfast.

With just a touch a curry . . .

THE BURNING

MOST OF THEM WERE UP IN CENTRAL PARK getting the boxes ready but Hank and I stayed behind. We went over on 27th to bust some windows but we couldn't because all the windows was already busted. So we went into the ACME ELITE BAR AND GRILL, and scrummaged around to see if there was anything that had maybe been overlooked. Hank finally found a bottle back in the corner buried under a heap of ceiling plaster and busted stuff that wasn't worth lugging off for the fires, but it turned out to be one of them NO DEPOSIT, NO RETURN plastic things that didn't make no proper noise at all when he smanged it against the wall.

We fooled around a while more but then I took a look out into the street. When I saw how short the shadows had got, I started getting the jumps. The burning always starts at high noon and there wasn't much time left.

"We'd better be getting on up," I said. "Goofing off on the collecting is one thing, but if the Mother notices we're not there come light-up time, there's going to be hell to pay."

Hank just laughed. "She'll be too twitched up by now to notice anything. This is *her* day. Things are too big to take time out to count the number of drabs in the back row of the clapping section."

I still felt jumpy. Not that I wanted to go, mind you, in spite of what the Mother was always saying about it developing character. Mothers are always talking about Character and The Flag and The Sanctity of American Womanhood and stuff like that, but I notice it's always the little guys who end up getting burnt during Mother's Day ceremonies. And I'm a little guy.

Big Harry sinned with the Mother almost every night when he first got born into the Family but somehow it never got put down in the Book. Otto got put down, though, just like I told Hank he would, and when the Patrol came around they didn't even check his name page, they just went up to his room and got him. But not before me and Hank did considerable sweating because by then we knew it was going to be one of us three. All that morning I don't think five minutes went by without my giving my good luck pin at

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

least one good rub just on the odd chance that it might do some good.

"Look, Hank," I said. "We don't go and the Mother happens to notice it, we're in for it. But good."

"Yeah," he said, "but what if Otto craps out before light-up time? That bum ticker of his is liable to go plonk just from waiting . . . and the Mother likes live meat."

"Better one than two," I said, and grabbed him by the arm and pulled him to his feet. "Come on, let's ramble. The Patrol happens to catch us this far south, we've had it!"

Hank didn't take much pushing. He gets stubborn only when he thinks it's good and safe, and as soon as I said "Patrol" he right away decided that maybe he wasn't. He didn't have much and what he did have he didn't have much chance to use, but like the fellow says, "Something is better than nothing." And nothing's what you got when the Patrol gets through with you.

We girder-walked as far as 58th. I slipped twice but we had a pretty good safety rope linking us and Hank was able to haul me back both times. Working along twisted beams five stories up is a scary business but at least you don't have to worry about out-walkers from other families taking pot shots at you. Ammo's too scarce to waste on drabs and anyway you fall that far and there ain't much left worth taking home.

Past 58th things are too messed up to get through top side so we had to take to the storm sewers. Hank and I had a long argument as to who was to go first and then we flipped and I lost. I started singing the truce song as loud as I could with Hank hitting the refrain on the base parts. Hank's got perfect pitch but you get a real rogue mother out on the prowl and she can be tone deaf as hell, especially if she's got big ideas about snatching enough strays to build up a family of her own. Time was when they only went after the big ones and if a drab was in good voice he could wander all the way up to the 90's on his own if he was so minded, but no more. Since the Council busted up, anything that's still breathing is fair game—except for Mother's Helpers, that is, and they never did count anyway.

We came out at 74th, both a bit winded from the singing, and having to run the last two blocks because there was a sort of commotion in the cross conduit at 72nd that we didn't stick around to find out what it was. We went into the Park

THE BURNING

slantwise, circling around through the trees so we could slide in from the back. With everybody all involved in watching Otto and all it wasn't likely that they'd notice we were coming in late.

Only they weren't watching Otto. They were watching the Mother. Otto was hanging from the stake in a limp way that let you know he was more than just out. His ticker had plonked just like Hank was afraid it would and Mother's Day just isn't Mother's Day without a live one. Even Big Harry looked worried and had slid around behind some of the other kids, only it didn't do him much good because even hunching he stood up a good six inches higher than the rest. There was going to be a replacement for Otto, and fast, and the Mother was just as likely as not to grab the first one she set eye on, even a prime like Big Harry.

Only she didn't.

She went over and spit in Otto's face for not loving her enough and then yelled at us to fall into family formation. There was a certain amount of shoving because everybody was trying to get into the back row but she broke that up in a hurry. Hank and I managed to get in at the far end of the last line, hoping that somebody else might strike her fancy before she got to us. Only we knew better. I looked at Hank and Hank looked at me and even if we were pals and all that each of us was thinking the same thing. Only just hoping it would be him instead of me wasn't enough. I had to do something . . . and fast!

"There's more in the Book on you than there is on me," I says to Hank out of the side of my mouth. "If I was you I'd make a bolt."

"Mother wouldn't like it," he whispered back. "If I was to spoil her celebration she wouldn't love me anymore."

I could see his point. Now that everything has sort of gone to pot, a Mother's love is the only thing a boy can really count on, and the least we can do is try to make her happy on her day. But I could see my point too—namely that it was either Hank or me.

"Once across the park you'd be safe," I said. "The Patrol don't usually operate that far east and if you keep a sharp eye out for rogues you'll be OK." I could see he liked the idea but he was still worrying about the Mother. She was in the last row now and moving toward us steady like. Hank

was really twitching and his face was kind of grey underneath the dirt.

"I can't," he said. "My legs won't work."

I sneaked a quick look at the Mother. She'd stopped and was looking down at us kind of thoughtful like. And I had a feeling she was looking more at me than she was at Hank.

"She's got her eye on you, boy," I said. "If you don't leg it now you're in for a slow burn. Them boxes is still wet from last night's rain."

We were supposed to be at attention but without knowing it I'd pulled my good-luck pin out of my pocket and was rubbing it with my thumb the way I got a habit of when I'm nervous. It's a little gold like pin made in the shape of a funny kind of leaf. There was some writing on it too but I didn't find out what the words was until later.

"It's your funeral, kid," I said.

Just then the Mother let out a yell.

"You! You down at the end!"

She was pointing at me but I swung around to Hank.

"Front and center, kid," I said. "Mama wants you."

He let out a funny little squawk and then went into a sort of bent over half squat like he'd just been kicked in the gut. I let out a yell and grabbed at him, giving him a spin with my right hand so that he ended up pointing toward the trees. Then I came up with my left and jabbed him in the backside with my good-luck pin.

He took off like a prime rogue in mating season and was across the grass and into the trees before anybody rightly knew what was up. Then the Mother started yelling orders and a bunch of primes took off after him. I ran up to her and flopped down and started bawling, "Don't be mad at me, I tried to stop him!" over and over until she belted me a couple.

"He said you didn't have no right!" I said.

That shook her like I hoped it would and got her thinking about him instead of me.

"He *what?*" she said, as if her ears weren't working right.

"He said *what?*"

I made my voice all trembly.

"He said you didn't have no right to burn kids when they hadn't done nothing really bad." I started crying again but the Mother didn't pay me no mind. She just walked away.

The Patrol brought Hank in about an hour later. They'd

THINGS

worked him over to the point where he wasn't up to doing much in the way of complaining.

Afterward we sat around the fire and had a family sing, finishing up as usual with "Silver Threads Among the Gold". The Mother got all teary-eyed and mellow so I took a chance and went up and asked her what the words on my good-luck pin was. She didn't belt me or nothing. She just gave me a sort of lazy grin and said, "*Be Prepared.*"

THINGS

"... AND THE GROUND WAS FROZEN SOLID. It took them two hours before they reached Hawkins' coffin. " 'See,' grunted the coroner as he threw back the lid, 'he's still there. I told you you were seeing things.'

" 'I've got to be sure,' said Van Dusen thickly, and grabbing a smoking lantern from beside the grave, he thrust it down into the open casket.

"A shrill scream tore through the night air and he slumped over—dead! Instead of the heavy features of the man he had killed, Reginald Van Dusen saw HIMSELF!"

There was a sudden ripple of discordant music from the loud-speaker and then the unctuous voice of The Ghoul broke in.

"The coroner called it suicide. And in a way I suppose it was..." His voice trailed off in a throaty chuckle. *"The moral? Only this, dear friends, if you should ever be walking through a strange part of town and come upon a little shop you never saw before, especially a little shop with a sign in the window that says SHOTTLE BOP, WE SELL THRINGS, or something equally ridiculous, remember THE CASE OF THE CLUTTERED COFFIN and run, don't walk, to the nearest morgue. HA HA HA HA HA."*

As the maniacal laughter trailed away, the background music surged up and then skittered out of hearing to make way for the announcer. He only managed to get three words out before Albert Blotz, owner, manager, and sole agent of World Wide Investigations, reached over and turned off the little radio that stood on the window sill beside his desk.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"Boy," he said, "that was really something. Eh, Janie?"

The little crippled girl behind the typist's desk at the other side of the dingy office looked up.

"What?"

"The program. Wasn't it something?"

"Beats me," she said. "I wasn't listening. Somebody has to get some work done around here." She pulled a letter out of her correspondence basket and waved it in the air. "What about this Harris letter? It's been sitting here for a month. After spending the guy's dough the least you can do is write him an answer."

The fat man looked blank. "Harris? Who's he?"

"The fellow in Denver who wanted you to investigate everybody in New York who had had a big and unexpected windfall within the past year."

Blotz snorted impatiently. "That nut! Aw, tell him anything."

"Give me a for-instance."

"Tell him . . ." Blotz leaned heavily back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. "Tell him that World Wide Investigations assigned its best operatives to the case and that in sixteen cases out of twenty . . . No, better make it twenty-nine out of thirty-four . . . That way he'll really feel he's getting his money's worth."

"All right, in twenty-nine out of thirty-four cases what?"

"Don't rush me." Blotz pulled a bottle of cheap blend out of his drawer and eyed the remaining inch regretfully.

"You know the doctor said your heart wouldn't take much more of that."

The fat man shrugged and tossed the liquor down. As his eyes wandered around the office in search of inspiration, they came to rest on the radio.

"That's it!" he exclaimed.

"What's it?"

"The Ghoul! For once crime pays somebody but the actors and the script writers. Tell Harris that in whatever it was out of whatever it was cases, the individuals concerned visited small shops they had never noticed before and were sold objects whose nature they refused to reveal by a strange old man."

Janie looked up from her shorthand pad. "Is that all?"

"No, we need a clincher." He thought for a minute. "How's

THINGS

this? In each case when they went back and tried to find the shop it had disappeared."

"You ought to try writing radio scripts yourself."

"Too much work," said Blotz. "I like the mail order detective business better." He looked regretfully at the empty bottle and then back at Janie. "While you're at it you might as well tell that yokel that for five bills World Wide will find the shop for him and buy him one of those dingbats."

Janie's lips tightened. "Doesn't your conscience ever bother you?"

Blotz let out a nasty laugh. "If it weren't for the suckers I'd have to work for a living. This way it's a breeze. Some old dame in Podunk hasn't heard from her kid since he took off for the big city and gets worried about him. He doesn't answer her letters and then one day she sees my ad in the *Podunk Gazette* and sends me fifty bucks to go look for him. How come you asked?"

"Because mine bothers me. Every day I work here I feel dirtier."

Blotz grinned. "Then quit."

"I've been thinking of that. At least I'd be able to sleep nights."

"But you wouldn't be eating so regular. Face it, kid—nobody is going to hire a gimpy sparrow like you unless he's a big-hearted guy like me. And there ain't many around."

Janie looked from him to the pair of worn crutches that leaned against the wall.

"Yeah," she said as she started punching out the letter to Harris. "Yeah, there sure ain't."

Mr. Blotz's pulse was finally back to normal but he still couldn't tear his eyes away from the crisp green slip of paper that bore the magic figures \$500.00 and the name of a Denver bank.

"He bit," he said in an awed voice. "He really bit. May wonders, and suckers, never cease." He rubbed his fat hands together nervously. "I'd better get this to the bank and cash it before something happens."

Half an hour later he was back, carefully stacking bottles of bonded bourbon into his desk drawers. When they were arranged to his satisfaction, he leaned back and hoisted his feet on the desk.

"Take a letter to Harris."

Janie obediently took out her shorthand pad.

"Usual heading. Eh . . . oh, something like this. 'Pursuant to your instructions, my agents in all the major cities have been instructed to check for little shops they don't remember having seen before. They are to be especially alert for basement stores with dusty signs in the window with wordings like WE SELL THRINGS OR SHOTTLE BOP. Upon discovery they are to enter immediately. If a small aged man appears from the rear of the shop and presses them to buy something, they are to do so. Once they leave they are to make careful note of the shop's location and walk around the block. If when they return the shop has disappeared, they are immediately to send their purchase to you.'"

Blotz paused, took a bottle out of his drawer, and uncapped it. "Put something in about unexpectedly heavy expenses at the end. If we play this right we may be able to tap him again. In the meantime we'd better have something ready to send him just in case."

"What kind of a something?" asked Janie.

"Who cares? Go over on Third and prowl some of those junk shops. Pick up something small—that'll keep the postage down—and old."

The little secretary pulled herself painfully to her feet, draped a threadbare coat over her humped back, and took her crutches from beside her typing desk.

"Just don't go over a dollar," added Blotz quickly.

She started toward the door and then turned and stood blinking at him through thick lensed glasses that made her eyes appear twice their normal size.

"Well?" he barked.

"I haven't got a dollar."

With a pained expression on his face he fumbled in an old coin purse. He reluctantly pulled out a quarter, then another, and then finally another.

"Here," he said, "see what you can do for seventy-five cents."

Blotz was deep in his bottle when Janie finally came hobbling back and placed a small paper-wrapped package on his desk.

"Any change?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It was funny," she ventured. "I mean after what you said about shottles and thrings—"

THINGS

"Well, open it up," he interrupted. "Let's see what Harris is getting for his money."

"—all this shop had in front," she went on hesitantly, "was just one sign. It said: THINGS."

"Poor bastard that owns it, I guess. Some people have funny names," said Blotz. "Go on—open it."

With fingers that trembled slightly she tore off the brown paper wrapping. Inside was a small corroded brass cylinder that on first glance looked like an old plumbing fixture.

"You paid seventy-five cents for that?" said Blotz in annoyance. "They saw you coming, kid." He picked it up and turned it over in his hand. On second look he realized that there was more to it than he had first thought. Through the heavy green patina he could make out a series of strange characters. At one end was a knob that seemed to be made out of a slightly different metal than the cylinder proper.

"I give up, what is it?" he asked. Jane shuddered. "I wish I knew," she said. "I wish I knew."

Blotz frowned and took hold of the knob. He was about to twist it when a sudden thought occurred to him. It might explode or do something equally unpleasant.

"Here, you try it," he said to Janie, "It seems to be stuck."

She reached out a trembling hand and then jerked it back. "I'm afraid. The man in the shop said—"

"Take it!" he barked. "When I tell you to do something, you do it. And no back talk!"

In frightened obedience she took the cylinder and twisted the knob. For a moment nothing happened, and then with an odd flickering she vanished. Before Blotz had a chance to react properly to the sudden emptiness of the office, she was back. At least a not very reasonable facsimile was.

She might have passed for her sister, there was a strong family resemblance, but the pathetic twist in her spine was gone and so was its accompanying hump. She was thirty pounds heavier, and all the pounds were in the right places. She was—and the realization hit Blotz like a hammer blow as he stood gaping at her—one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen.

The first thing she did was to pull off her thick-lensed glasses and throw them in the wastebasket. The first thing Blotz did was to grab a bottle out of his desk. He took several long gulps, shook his head, and shuddered.

"It's when you're half drunk that things get twisty," he

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

mumbled. "I'm just going to sit here with my eyes shut until I'm drunk enough to get back to normal." he counted to twenty slowly as the fireball in his stomach expanded and trickled a semi-sense of well being through his extremities. Then, as the nightmare slowly dispelled, he let out a long sigh of relief and opened his eyes.

She was still there!

There was a strange smile on her face that he didn't like.

"Where . . . ? What . . . ?" Blotz's vocal cords stopped operating and he just sat there and quivered. She laid the little bronze cylinder down on the desk in front of him.

"Here," she said softly. "You can go there too if you want to."

"Where?" whispered Blotz.

"I don't know. It's someplace else, a tremendous place with rooms filled with whirring machines. There was a man there and he asked what I wanted and I told him. So he did a little re-editing and here I am."

"Magic," said Blotz hoarsely. "Black magic, that's what it is. But . . ." His voice trailed off.

"But you don't believe in magic. Is that what you were going to say?" she didn't wait for an answer. "But I do. People like me have to. It's the only way we can keep going. But magic has a funny way of working. Do you know what I was thinking after the little man asked me what I wanted?"

Blotz moistened his thick lips and shook his head as if hypnotized.

"I was thinking that in spite of the way things look, there's just one thing you can always count on."

"Yeah?"

"People always end up getting what they got coming."

Blotz let out a half-hysterical laugh. "Then where's mine? Why does a guy with my brains have to scrabble out a living with a two-bit outfit like this?" He raved on for a minute and then got control of himself. The liquor helped. After he'd taken a couple more gulps from his bottle he still couldn't look what had happened squarely in the face, but with the abatement of the first shock came a gradual return of the old sense of mastery that had made him hire Janie in the first place, rather than some less experienced but more feminine—and amiable—typist.

As an awareness of the physical changes that had taken place began to grow, he found his eyes sliding greedily over

her. The change hadn't extended her dress. The garment that had been more than adequate covering for the twisted and scrawny little body she had occupied up until a few minutes before threatened to split at the thrusting of the rich new curves that strained against it.

"You know, Janie," he said slowly, "seeing as it was my money that got you what you got, that kind of makes me the copyright owner." Grabbing hold of the edge of his desk, he pulled himself to his feet and lurched toward her. When he put one flabby arm around her, she didn't pull away. Emboldened, he let his hand slip down and begin to fumble with the buttons on her blouse.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," she said in a strange voice.

"But you ain't me. That's what makes it so nice for both of us."

His fumbling fingers had managed to unfasten the first button and his thick lips began to march like twin slugs over the soft curve of her shoulder.

She acted as if he were still on the other side of the room.

"It took more courage than I thought I had in me but I asked him to give me just what I deserved."

"Him? Oh, yeah. Well that's me, baby," said Blotz thickly as he went to work on the second button.

"You could have been," she said in the same distant voice.

"That was the chance I was taking."

The second button was obstinate. Blotz gave an impatient yank that caused the worn fabric to rip in his hands. As if aware of them for the first time, she shrugged herself free. As Blotz grunted and grabbed for her, he felt a sudden wrenching, stabbing pain lance through his chest, and then with no transition at all he found himself falling. He slumped against the desk, and as his plump fingers scrabbled against the smooth surface, trying to secure a hold that would keep him from plummeting down into darkness, they touched the worn bronze cylinder. As he slid on down, face purple and eyeballs bulging, more through instinct than conscious volition he found and twisted the serrated knob at one end. There was an immediate release, a translation into someplace else. He was standing again and the pain was gone, but except for a tiny glowing spot in front of him, it was darker than he had ever known before.

"Janie," he whimpered. "Janie."

His voice echoed metallically from distant walls. He turned to run but there was no place to run to, only the darkness. He had a sudden vision of unseen pits and crevasses, and froze where he stood. And then, unable to stand his own immobility, he inched cautiously toward the tiny spot of light, testing the whatever-it-was under his feet with each sliding step.

At last he was able to touch it, a cold luminous circle set in a smooth steel wall at chest height. As he moved his arm toward it, the hand that still held the bronze cylinder jerked forward of its own volition, pulling his arm with it, and plunged into the glowing circle. There was a clicking of relays and then glaring overhead lights went on.

He had been wise to check his footing. He was standing on a catwalk that arched dizzily over a several-acre expanse of strange whirring machinery. There were no guard rails, only a narrow tongue of metal that stretched out from some spot lost in the murky distance until it reached the smooth metal wall before which he stood. Then with a whining sound, a door opened in front of him. An invisible force pushed him through and he found himself in a great vault-like room whose walls were covered with countless tiny winking lights and bank upon bank of intricate controls. As the door clanged shut behind him, a little ball of shimmering light bounced across the floor toward him, expanded, wavered, and then suddenly took the shape of a harassed-faced little man with burning, deep-set eyes and a long white beard.

"Well," he said impatiently, "out with it!"

Blotz didn't say anything for a minute. He couldn't. When he finally got partial control of his vocal chords all that came out was an almost incoherent series of *who's*, *what's* and *how's*. The little man interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

"Stop sputtering," he said testily. "I'm tired of sputtering. This may be new to you but it isn't to me. You're the four-hundred-and-thirty-six-thousand-three-hundred-and-fifty-ninth mortal to get hold of one of the keys, and you're also the four-hundred-and-thirty-six-thousand-three-hundred-and-fifty-ninth sputterer. Damn the M.W. boys, anyway!"

"M.W.?" Blotz was sparring for enough time to get his own thinking organized. What steadied him was the thought that, fantastic as all this was, Janie had been here before him, and Janie had somehow managed to snag herself a jackpot. His

THINGS

first job was to find out enough about the situation to angle it around to his own advantage.

"Mysterious Ways. It's a special department in the home office that specializes in making life more complicated for the Guardians. I'm a Guardian," the little man added gloomily.

"After Reward and Punishment switched their records section over to completely automatic operation, somebody in M.W. came up with the bright idea that humans should still have some sort of a chance for personal attention. So they made up a few widgets like the one you got hold of and scattered them around at random." He gave a dry cough. "Not that you've got much when you do get hold of one. All that comes with it is the right to a little personal re-editing of your future—and even that is controlled by the Prime Directive."

Blotz's eyes narrowed slightly. So he had a right to something. He had something coming that they had to give him. He thought of Janie's sudden metamorphosis and he licked his thick lips.

"The girl that was here before me," he asked eagerly. "Is what happened to her what you call re-editing?"

The little man nodded.

"And I got a right to the same? I mean, you can make me look the way I'd like to instead of the way I do?"

There was another nod. "But—"

"No *but's*," interrupted Blotz rudely. "I want what I got a right to. You get to work on that tape of mine and fix it so I'll have as much on the ball on the male side as Janie has on the female. And toss in a nice fat bankroll while you're at it. Me, I like to travel first-class." He thought for a moment and then held up a restraining hand. "But don't start tinkering until I give you the word. It ain't every day that a guy gets a chance to rebuild himself from the ground up, and I want to be sure that I get all the little details just right."

"But," continued the Guardian as if the interruption had never occurred, "re-editing in your case wouldn't have much point. The heart attack you were having just before the key brought you here was a signal, a warning that the tape which has been recording the significant events of your life has just about reached its end. A few minutes after you return, the automatic rewind will cut in and then your spool will be removed from the recorder and sent over to Reward and Punishment for processing."

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Blotz had always considered himself an atheist—more in self-defense than anything else. The thought of a superior something someplace taking personal note of each of his antisocial actions for purposes of future judgment was one that he had never cared to contemplate. He much preferred the feeling of immunity that came with the belief that man is simply an electrochemical machine that returns to its original components when it finally wears out.

But now! The little man's casual reference to something coming after was disturbing enough to almost override the shock caused by the announcement of his imminent death.

"What's processing?" he asked uneasily. "What are they going to do to me?"

Instead of answering, the Guardian walked over to a control panel and punched a series of buttons. A moment later a large screen over his head lit up.

"The playback starts here."

The screen flickered and then steadied to show a hospital delivery room and a writhing woman strapped to a table.

"What's all this got to do with me?"

"R&R have to start their processing someplace. This is what's planned for your next run-through. In your case I imagine some special arrangements have been made."

They had been. When Blotz started making little mewling noises, the little man reached forward and turned a knob. The screen went dark.

"Had enough?" he asked.

"Yeah," said the other thickly, "but I got to know." He shuddered. "Go ahead and hit the high spots. Nothing could be worse than what I just saw."

The Guardian did. There were things that could be worse. Much worse.

"Why?" whispered Blotz when it was finally over. "Why?"

"Because the ethical universe is just as orderly as the physical one. For each action there is an equal and contrary—though delayed—reaction."

Blotz fought frantically against the hysteria that threatened to engulf him. Always in the past there had been something that could be twisted to his advantage. The present had to be the same. There had to be an angle here. There had to be! Desperately he ran over the events of the past quarter hour, trying to find something that didn't fit the pattern as the little man had presented it.

THINGS

The re-editing! There had to be something in the re-editing!

"Look," he stammered. "You *can* change things. You did for Janie. Why can't you go back over my tape and take out all the really bad things?"

"Because the past can't be changed," said the little man impatiently. "The re-editing that you have a right to applies only to the future. And as I've already pointed out, yours is so limited that any adjustment I might make would have very little meaning."

Blotz took a deep breath and held it. He couldn't afford to panic. Not now. But where was the angle? Given that the past couldn't be changed. Given that once he returned to Earth he had only a half a minute of life left. What then? How could a tape be kept from ending?

Say he'd bugged a bedroom to collect evidence for a divorce case and say he didn't want to miss recording a single squeak. Maybe if he. . . .

Of course!

"I've got a little job for you," he said in a voice that quivered slightly in spite of his best efforts to control it. "I want you to do some splicing."

The little man looked at him in obvious bewilderment.

"Splicing?"

Blotz was still shaky but he was beginning to enjoy himself. "That's what I said. It just occurred to me that if you spliced a second tape on to the end of the one that's just about finished, I could keep on living." He gestured toward the blank screen. "And after your little preview, keeping on living is what I want most to do. The splicing, it can be done, can't it?"

"Can? Of course it can. But I'm not about to," he added angrily. "To begin with, your old body's worn out and I'd have to hunt you up a new one."

"So what? The thing I want to hang on to is the *me*, the part that does the feeling and thinking, the part that *knows*." A snarl came into his voice. "And don't tell me you won't. You've got to!" He waved the bronze cylinder under the little man's nose. "I came up with the brass ring, Buster, and I got a free ride coming."

He stopped suddenly and a look of awe came over his face. "A free ride? And why only one, when I can keep on swapping horses?" He laughed exultantly. "Why, if you keep on

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

splicing? Listen, here's the word. Every time the tape that's running through the recorder is about to reach its end, I want a new one patched on. And make sure that each body I get is well-heeled, healthy, and handsome. Like I said before, I like to travel first class."

The little man seemed on the verge of tears. "It's not a good idea," he said. "It's not a good idea at all. I can barely keep up with my work as it is, and if I have to—"

"But you do have to," said Blotz viciously. "Whether you like it or not, I've just beat the system. Me, little Al Blotz, the guy that used to have to work penny-ante swindles just to keep eating. But no more! What was chalked up against me before is peanuts compared to what's coming. And you know why? Because Reward and Punishment can't process me until my tape comes to an end. And it ain't ever. Never!"

"But—"

"Get going!"

The Guardian threw up his hands in defeat. "It's going to make a lot of extra work for me," he said mournfully, "but if you in—"

"Sure I insist," said Blotz, holding resolutely onto the cylinder. "You can tell Reward and Punishment to go process itself. I got it made."

The little machine that kept track of Mr. Blotz's actions hesitated momentarily when it came to the splice, and then gave a loud click and began to record on the new section of tape.

CLICK!

He woke to something heavy pressing on his chest and an angry buzzing. Blotz—no longer Blotz as far as externals went—opened sleepy eyes and blinked up at the ugly wedge-shaped head that was reared back ready to strike.

"Why didn't you tell me you were expecting company, Carl?" There was a note of savage enjoyment in the soft voice from the other side of the campfire.

Blotz wanted to beg, to plead with the other to save him, but he didn't dare risk the slightest lip movement. The snake was angry. One little motion and it would strike.

"I was going to kill you, Carl," the quiet voice went on. "I was going to damn my immortal soul to save the world from you. But now I don't have to. I'm just a spectator. Sometime before too long you're going to have to move. When you do

TEST AREA

it will be horrible, but it won't last more than a few hours. That's more than you granted the others. Remember my sister, Carl? And how long it took?"

The involuntary movement that was the prelude to agony was accompanied by a momentary feeling of relief. At least before too long it would be over. But with the final convulsion there came a

CLICK!

He was strangling. With a convulsive kick he brought himself to the surface and spat out a mouthful of blood-tinged salt water. To his left small bits of debris bobbed up and down in the oil slick that marked the spot where his cabin cruiser had gone down. He paddled in an aimless circle, unable to strike out because of the splintered rib that lanced into one lung. Almost an hour passed before the first black dorsal fin came circling curiously in.

The Guardian yawned as he looked around for another bit of tape to splice on to the one that was almost finished. Young, healthy, handsome—there were enough odd ends around so that Blotz would never have to worry about dying, never in a million years.

Not dying, that was something else.

CLICK!

TEST AREA

"I ASSURE YOU THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY about!" said Klen. "It's not as if we were attempting to alter our own past. I'll admit that any such attempt could lead to utter disaster. One little push a few million kersogs ago, and the dwarfls might have emerged as the dominant race instead of us. As it turned out, it was touch and go. No, Shiral, I have the perfect test area—the third planet."

Shiral, Chief Coordinator of the Seekers, let a slow ripple of doubt run the length of his gelatinous bulk.

"If my memory serves me, one of your predecessors used the same terminology several millennia ago when he wanted to check some equations he had developed dealing with sub-

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

nuclear fission. When he went back over his calculations to see if he could find out what had gone wrong, he found he'd dropped a quattuodecimal point. But by then it was too late. One of our planets was missing."

"My figures have all been triple-checked," said Klen impatiently. "And even if the old stories about the formation of the Asteroid Belt are true, the disruption of the fifth planet was no particular loss. The only life on it was a primitive sort of lichen."

The Chief Coordinator rippled again, this time more with petulance than skepticism. "I still don't see why you can't leave well enough alone. If your calculations are as conclusive as you claim, why not just accept them as such, and find some other problem to keep you busy."

"But maybe I'm wrong," protested Klen.

"In that case," said the other pontifically, "time travel is still an impossibility, and you'd just be wasting your time. Has it not been written, 'That which *is* needs no proof, and that which *is not* cannot be proven'? And anyway, I don't want any more planets blown up. It upsets the astronomers."

"But . . ." wailed Klen.

"No *but's!*"

"But I couldn't blow anything up with my machine if I wanted to. All that it does is—"

"You're wasting my time!" snapped the Chief Coordinator. "Permission refused."

Klen humped submissively, took one farewell look at the other end of his laboratory, and then taking his nether extremity in his mouth, began to ingest himself.

It took a moment for the Chief Coordinator to realize what was happening. When he did, he gave a double flap of horrified indignation.

"Stop that at once, you crazy idiot!" he shouted. "Have you forgotten the penalty for cannibalism?"

"No," mumbled Klen indistinctly. "The offender is compelled to commit suicide."

"Well?"

"But I *am* committing suicide," said Klen plaintively. He gulped convulsively and another foot of his other end disappeared. "My whole life is in that machine. If I am not to be allowed to find out whether it will work or not, there's no point in going on."

He waited for Shiral's flappings to subside.

TEST AREA

"I won't be intimidated," growled Shiral. Klen opened his jaws to take another bite of himself. "However," the coordinator added hastily, "there's no reason why we can't have a more detailed discussion. And for your information, it isn't civilly or militarily respectful to talk with your mouth full."

A sudden look of hope came into Klen's eye and with a sudden convulsion of stomach muscles, he regurgitated the swallowed extremities.

"How was it?" asked the Chief Coordinator with a rather coarse effort at jocularly, quite possibly interlarded with curiosity.

Klen looked down pensively at the almost digested extremity. "A little on the gamey side," he admitted. "I don't know if my stomach could have tolerated all of me."

The Chief Coordinator had a one-track mind. He waited until the thunder of the great dynamo had crescendoed its way up into inaudibility and then said in an anxious voice, "You're very sure you're not going to blow anything up?"

"Very sure," said Klen patiently. "As I explained before, I am concerned with checking the possibility of time travel—not with subnuclear fission. The energies to be released in this experiment are negligible."

"I guess I'll have to take your word for that," said Shiral dubiously. "But assuming that the machine does work, and you are able to open up a portal a quarter-of-a-million kersogs in the past and give the third planet a couple of good jolts of gamma rays—how are you ever going to be able to prove that you were actually successful?"

"Elementary, my dear Shiral," said Klen smugly. "Watch." He reached over to the controls of his electronic telescope, and after checking a table of calculations, made a series of fine adjustments. A moment later, the great vision screen which occupied all of one wall of his laboratory flickered on. Mirrored in it was a rolling, grassy plain dotted with small knots of long-tusked, hairy animals who were contentedly cropping away at the rich vegetation.

"First we have the third planet as it is at present," he continued. "Now we select a representative sample of the dominant species and observe him carefully."

"Just a minute," protested the Chief Coordinator. "I'm no expert on extra-Martian biology, but I was under the im-

pression that the dominant species use two tentacles for locomotion rather than four."

"I didn't say the grass eaters were dominant. What we're after should be along in a minute." He cranked up the magnification of the screen until their apparent vantage point was only twenty-five feet to the left of a clearly defined path that wound down the bottom of a small ravine. "A family group of them come down every day about this time to drink at the water hole. As soon as they pass, we'll get set and catch them on their way back."

"There's something about that quarter-of-a-million figure that bothers me," said Shiral. "I wish I could remember what it is."

His thinking about it was interrupted a few minutes later when a hairy, beetle-browed figure came shambling down the path followed by his mate and two young.

"Interesting—in a disgusting sort of way," said the Chief Coordinator. "But what do they have to do with testing your hypothesis?"

"If it's right, we should have some sort of immediate evidence. Just watch them closely. I'm hoping that the change will be great enough so that we can spot it."

"What kind of change?"

"It's hard to say. Maybe a little more hair or a little less. If we're really lucky, perhaps an extra digit on each extremity."

Shiral let out a loud slurp of annoyed bewilderment. "Why?"

"Through induced mutation, of course."

"What?"

"Through mutation," Klen repeated. "One way of producing genetic variation is to submit the germ plasm to hard radiation. I've set my machine to open a portal a quarter-of-a-million kersogs in the past. Once the warp is established, several hundred different areas on the third planet will receive short intensive bursts of gamma rays. Some of this little group's progenitors are bound to be affected. What I'm hoping is that the change will be great enough to be externally evident."

"I'm confused," grumbled the Chief Coordinator.

"You shouldn't be." Klen paused and thought for a minute. "Look, suppose a general mutation had been introduced into our own species a long time ago. Let's say that it resulted in

TEST AREA

the young being spawned with six tentacles instead of seven. You and I would have six now, wouldn't we?"

"That is a disgusting suggestion," said Shiral severely.

"Admitted. But it's true, isn't it? We'd be different from our present selves."

The other cogitated for a moment and then gave a reluctant ripple of agreement.

"And if I turned my machine back into our own past and introduced such a mutation, we'd never know about it because, as far as we were concerned, we would have always had six tentacles."

The Chief Coordinator waved his seventh tentacle wildly in the air. "But how could we have always had six when we've always had seven. And if we've always had seven. This is all over my heads. Switch on the machine and let's get it over with!"

Klen gave an excited nod. It seemed to be hours before the little group of Neanderthal men came back up the path from the water hole. As soon as they were centered on the screen, he reached forward and threw the master control switch of his time machine. "From now on it's automatic."

There was a muted humming and then suddenly a loud scream from Shiral.

"Turn it off! Quickly!"

"I can't!" shouted Klen in alarm. "Why?"

"I just remembered what there was about that quarter-of-a-million kersog figure that bothered me. It was just about that time that the physicist Clexal was testing his hypothesis as to the practicability of space flight. He and a small expedition spent some time on the third planet. If they should be in one of the affected areas you'd be introducing a genetic change into our own race."

Klen turned a pale mauve as the full import of what the other had said hit him.

"If they were, the damage is already done!" He began a frenzied inventory of himself and his companion. "One mouth, one eye, two heads, six tentacles . . ." When he finished, he gave a long ripple of relief. "I never want to go through a moment like that again. Either we missed the expedition altogether, or the change isn't great enough to be noticeable. Anyway—"

"Look!" There was a sudden gasp from the Chief Coordinator, and he pointed dramatically at the vision screen.

"The machine worked! Your hypothesis is correct! Time travel is possible!"

The rolling prairie was still there, but the hairy beasts—both four-legged and two-legged—were gone. Instead, a high fence bisected the screen, and in the distance a needle-shaped object with fins at the bottom pointed its nose toward the sky. Far to the left was a clump of low buildings. With shaking tentacles, Klen fumbled with the vision screen controls until they were looking directly through the barred window of one of them.

"Well," said the general in Command of Guided Missile Project H 70, "let's get on with it."

The man in the white smock reached tentatively toward a small, red button and then withdrew his hand.

"I'm almost certain our calculations are right," he said nervously. "But if we've slipped up somewhere, the results could be catastrophic. We've been pushed so fast we haven't had time to check properly."

"You've been right so far," growled the general. "That's good enough for me. You civilians never seem able to understand the necessity for the calculated risk."

The man in the white coat started to protest, but the general cut him off short.

"Get going. That's an order. Those swine on the other side have come up with a big missile that's three times more powerful than our X-bomb. They could wipe out our entire continent with ten of them. That's why we've got to go ahead with this baby of yours. If your figures can be trusted—and I know damn well they can—we'll be secure again. With three of the Brewster Specials, we can pulverize their whole hemisphere."

The general drew himself up.

"Yes, General," sighed the other wearily. "Just as you wish. It's your world." He pressed the red button, and in the distance the silver needle began to rise slowly into the air. "What'll I use for a test area?"

The general took a long, self-assured draw on his cigar. "Don't worry about targets, son. I've had a nice little island tucked away for some time now. It's in the middle of the Pacific, a thousand miles from nowhere. I've been saving it for just such an occasion as this."

TEST AREA

"What's happening?" asked the Chief Coordinator anxiously.

"I don't know." Klen worked busily over the vision screen controls to keep the rapidly accelerating rocket in focus. "I didn't expect an induced mutation to lead to anything like this. Maybe they're experimenting with *space flight*."

"If they are," said the other ominously, "you'd better go back and reverse whatever it was you did. Those Earthlings are a hundred times our size. If they came here, they could gobble us up."

Klen didn't answer. He just sat watching the screen tensely. Slow minutes went by, and then suddenly he let out a shrill buzz of relief. "They're a long way from space flight yet. That rocket expended all its fuel when it was only five hundred miles up. Look, it's falling back to Earth."

As the shining shape plunged down toward a tiny speck of rock that stood all by itself in the middle of the blue ocean, it gained such terrific speed that Klen had difficulty keeping up with it. He finally gave up trying, and swooped down for a close focus on the rocky, little island that was the missile's obvious target. He didn't have long to wait.

"I thought you said you weren't going to blow anything up," said the Chief Coordinator. "By the time you characters finish checking all of your hypotheses, the Solar System is going to be nothing but one big Asteroid Belt. First the fifth planet, now the third! When's all this going to stop?"

Klen gave a sick ripple. "For me, right now." Opening his mouth, he prepared to grab his nether extremity.

"Oh, no, you don't," howled the Chief Coordinator. "If you think you're going to ingest yourself and leave me holding the bag, you've got another think coming. You may die soon, but it's not going to be from overeating. You got me into this. Now get me out!"

"How?" asked Klen with a despairing look at his farther end.

"That's your affair. All that I know is that the Egg Royal is an amateur astronomer. And that as an amateur astronomer, he has been deriving a great deal of pleasure from observing the perturbations in the orbit of the third planet. And now there isn't any third planet left to perturbate . . ." His voice trailed off.

Klen turned pale. The Egg Royal was unpleasant enough when everything was running smoothly. But when he found out that somebody had broken his favorite toy, there would

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

be a loud and prolonged screaming from every official, major or minor, who had the remotest connection with it.

"Look, Klen," the Coordinator said with a calmness he was far from feeling. "Four heads are better than two. Let's both settle down to some serious thinking."

The obvious answer came sooner than either of them could have anticipated.

"Of course!" exclaimed Klen, intertwining all six of his tentacles in his excitement. "Why didn't we think of it before!"

"Think of what before?"

"Moving up fifty thousand kersogs, going back into the past again and giving the third planet another shot of hard radiation. That should introduce enough variants in the past of the Earthlings to cancel out what just happened."

"Go ahead and try it," said Shiral unhappily. "Things couldn't be worse than they are right now."

Two seconds later with a flick the new asteroid belt disappeared, and a green planet shone in its familiar place. The Egg Royal, who had been in his observatory the whole time, sent for the court optometrist to have his eye examined.

"Yes, General," sighed the man in the white coat, "It's your Solar System." He pressed the red button, and in the distance a gigantic silver globe arose from the desert and disappeared. "What will we use for a target?"

The general took a long complacent draw on his cigar. "Don't worry about targets, son. I've had a nice little world tucked away for some time now." He pointed happily at a little red-light point that glowed just above the horizon. "I've been saving it for an occasion just like this."

PRISONER OF LOVE

HALBERT FENIMORE SHIREY, PRIVATE WAR-lock 3rd Class (Provisional), had just got his feet settled comfortably on his desk, and was reaching in the bottom drawer for the traditional fifth, when the battered old incantation detector that stood on the window sill suddenly began to let out a raucous *beep blatt beep blatt beep blatt*.

PRISONER OF LOVE

He winced and then yelled, "Hey, Astrobeth, turn that damn thing off!"

The little blond who was nominally his secretary, but spent most of her time curled up on a sagging old couch reading *True Necromances*, yawned and said petulantly, "Like I told you before, I don't lift a finger until I get at least part of the three months pay you owe me. And if you're going to pay me, you'd better hustle up a paying job. And a paying job is what's beeping at you right now."

Halbert hesitated and then reluctantly got to his feet, walked over to the window, and turned down the volume knob on the detector.

"Look, honey," he said unhappily, "Every time I take on a human job I end up in trouble. Last time I almost got my license suspended."

"Last time you were stupid. Even an apprentice would have had more sense than to try to cast a spell within a restricted area."

"How was I to know it was consecrated ground?" he said defensively.

"Because it was on the map! Now get to work."

He crossed his arms stubbornly and shook his head.

"Then I quit."

He started to argue, and then, realizing that as usual he was getting no place, gave a shrug of defeat. "Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to check and see what's up." He dusted off the crystal ball that stood in the middle of his desk, made a few passes over it, and then looked down into it. Slowly an image began to form—an image of a young and curve-bearing female who knelt before a carefully chalked pentagram. Halbert glanced surreptitiously at his secretary.

"On second thought," he said with an attempt at a casual note, "You're probably right."

Astrobeth started toward him, a suspicious look on her face; but before she could see what was in the crystal, he made another pass that erased the image within it.

"Just a fat old lady," he said quickly. "Drag out my gear and I'll hop down and see what she wants."

"I'll buy the lady part," said Astrobeth, "but I'll give you ten to one she's neither fat nor old." With a sulky look she walked over to a wall cabinet and opened the double doors. A strong odor of stale perspiration, unwashed clothes, and brimstone rolled out into the room. Her nose crinkled in dis-

taste, and as she tossed the box over to Halbert, she said, "Why don't you break down and send that stuff out to the cleaners?"

"Because I wasn't ever going to wear it again, that's why," said Halbert, looking down at the box which had bounced in front of him and spilled open. He bent over and examined the untidy pile that was spread out on the floor and then straightened up, nudging a pair of battered horns as he did so.

"That stuff ain't for pawing," snapped Astrobeth, "it's for wearing. Get into it! If you don't come up with a fat retainer in a hurry, I'm walking out of here."

Halbert had inherited the rig from the former owner of the agency. The hooves were a size too small, the horns didn't want to stay in place, and the over-sized bat wings that strapped to his shoulders were so heavy that he had difficulty standing erect; but after a certain amount of fumbling he managed to get it all on. Astrobeth walked around him, examing him critically. He gasped as one small hand suddenly smacked him in the stomach.

"Look proud!" she barked. "Suck in that gut! Shoulders back! Fangs out! Wings high! And get that tail cocked at a regulation angle! You want her to think you're the real thing, don't you?"

Halbert nodded meekly, twiddled his fingers, and disappeared.

After a brief flicker of darkness he found himself standing in the center of a long low living room which was completely, and expensively, furnished in Helsinki *moderne*. As unobtrusively as possible he straightened his horns, which had slipped slightly askew during transit, and examined his invocator with more than casual interest. She was wearing a clinging transparent garment that left only as much to the imagination as the imagination really needed. This, he thought with satisfaction, was the sort of caper he had dreamed of when he first came into the business. His usual client had hennaed hair, buck teeth, and a double chin. But this one! His eyes ran a quick tour of inspection that gave unqualified approval to everything from her delicately sandled feet to the artfully tousled mop of short cut, red-gold hair that set off slightly slanted, jade-green eyes.

"Hearkening and obedience," he said, making a low salaam.

PRISONER OF LOVE

She eyed him for a moment, seemingly unimpressed, and then said, "Where's Baal?"

"He's busy," said Halbert without thinking.

"He wasn't last time."

A cold and uneasy tremor suddenly ran down Halbert's spine. "Baal!" "Before!" She'd been playing around with the real thing! And the real thing was something no half-worlder wanted even a nodding contact with. The consequences could be too unpleasant.

"I'll go back and see if I can find him," Halbert said hastily.

She gave a determined shake of her head. "There isn't time. You don't look like much but I guess one is as good as another. I've finally decided to sign."

"Sign?"

"The contract," she said impatiently.

"Contract?"

"For my soul, stupid." Her eyes suddenly narrowed. "Say, what's with you, anyway? Baal and I had the deal all worked out."

That was all the word Halbert needed. He wanted out. And fast. The Dark World hadn't tried to do any retail business with humans for over a century—with the rise of the modern superstates they had dropped individual transactions as a losing proposition and had concentrated on developing a mass wholesale trade. But legally they still held the franchise and if they wanted to get nasty about Half World poaching, they could. Under the terms of the original nonintervention agreement, grey magicians who were caught dabbling in the black arts automatically came under the jurisdiction of the Infernal courts.

"Soul?" mumbled Halbert. "Oh, yes, soul. He . . . he changed his mind. In fact he sent me up to tell you to forget all about it."

A hard coldness came into her green eyes. "He did, did he? Well, busy or not busy, I think he and I better have a little talk." She grabbed a piece of chalk from a table and began to draw another pentagram on the floor. Halbert developed a sudden and acute case of tachycardia. It was too late to dematerialize. If Baal did respond to her invocation—and since he had in the past there was no reason to assume that he wouldn't in the future—he'd be able to track Halbert down in no time. And when he did . . . !

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"That is," added Halbert hastily, "to forget about it as far as *he* is concerned. He asked me to take over."

"Why? He seemed to be enjoying himself last time he was here."

Halbert was stumped for a moment. If Astrobeth were here, she'd know what to say. She always did. But she wasn't. He was on his own and he couldn't afford to make a simple slip. He felt his horns start to slide forward again and tossed his head back just in time.

"Experience," he blurted. "He . . . eh . . . felt I needed the experience. You see, I've never done any field work. I'm a computer man with V.S.T.—Venial Sins Tabulation. But somebody in the front office got the bright idea that it would make for better understanding between the records sections and the sales force if we had a little first hand experience with their problems."

The green eyes suddenly thawed and the girl gave a cat-like stretch that sent little tingles running down Halbert's back.

"You know something," she purred, "you're cute. I think we're going to get along fine. Just fine." As she spoke she moved closer to him, making little undulating movements as she smiled up at him. Halbert was tempted, terribly tempted, but his pulse suddenly steadied with the unhappy realization that his horns and the rest of his paraphernalia were too insecurely attached to permit much in the way of gymnastics. He twisted his lips into what he hoped would pass for a lecherous grin.

"Business before pleasure, my dear."

She gave a little *moue* and shrugged. "Whatever you say, junior." Moving lithely across the room, she slid into an oddly angled chair whose seat rose so sharply that the sitter was forced into a foetal position. Resting her chin on her knees she said sweetly: "But before you get any of my blood on the dotted line I'd like a little advance demonstration of the product."

Halbert felt a fresh wave of apprehension sweep over him. "Such as?"

She waved a hand airily. "I don't care. It doesn't have to be complicated . . . just something to prove that you people have the sort of power you claim you have." She puckered her brows for a moment. "Something like . . . oh, say a love potion. If it works I'll sign. Can do?"

PRISONER OF LOVE

Halbert stifled a sudden sigh of relief. His warlock's oath pledged him never to attempt to practice black magic, but matters of this sort fell safely within the gray area in which he was permitted to operate professionally.

"Can do," he said crisply. "Only I'd suggest a spell rather than a potion. It works just as well and you don't have to worry about somebody switching drinks on you." He quickly demonstrated the simple pattern of passes and then gave her the word of power. "To break the spell—and most people want to before too much time passes—just point your finger and say the word backwards."

She gave her knees a little hug. "But what if the person I put it on wanted to break it badly enough to call in an expert like you? I may be traveling in fast company and I'd like to be sure."

"I know my business," said Halbert, a touch of annoyance in his voice, "Baal himself couldn't crack that one."

She looked across at him in wide-eyed admiration. "You're not only cute, junior; you've got talent. Now let's see if I've got it straight." She began to move her hands through the simple sequence of passes. "First I go like this—"

"You're doing fine," said Halbert.

"And then I just point my finger like this—"

"Watch it!" As her finger stabbed in his direction Halbert tried desperately to dematerialize; but before he could, a triumphant "*Verachon!*" rang out and ten thousand volts of something slammed through him and sent him sprawling to the floor. He felt a sudden savage longing boil up inside and, though his conscious mind was still set on escape, he found himself crawling toward her, crooning syrupy snatches of adolescent love songs, his wings dragging awkwardly behind.

She didn't move but an expression of ugly triumph momentarily marred her pixie like face. "Back in the corner, junior," she drawled. "The business is about to begin."

Obediently, Halbert crawled to the far side of the room and then painfully hoisted himself to his feet.

"Now let's see if I slipped up anyplace," she said slowly, half to herself and half to him. "I didn't sign a bill of sale so my soul's still my own. Right?"

Halbert gave a mooncalf nod.

"But in spite of that I have a pet demon who loves me so much that he just couldn't bear not to give me anything I asked for. Right?"

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"I will bring you black panthers and white doves," he crooned. The rational part that remained inside his head, untouched but helpless, winced at the words that were coming out.

"And so," she concluded happily, "I can have anything I want, but I won't have to pay for it." She got briskly to her feet. "So now to work!" She gestured toward a closed door at the far end of the room. "The first item on the agenda is Uncle Henry. He's in there and I want you to do something about him."

Halbert looked at her blankly. "What, oh precious?"

"Well," she said, "I'll tell you. After spending four of the best years of my life playing nursemaid to that puritanical old goat, he cut me off without a cent because he caught me playing hop-scotch with the milkman. Before I could talk him into changing his mind, he keeled over with a coronary. And with that, junior," she said grimly, "two million dollars went down the drain. Your first job is to get it back. After that I'll see if I can't think up something else to keep you busy."

Getting into Uncle Henry wasn't a very pleasant job. To be quite blunt about it, Uncle Henry could have used a little refrigeration during the three days that his niece had been trying to get her pentagram right. But Halbert, after a certain amount of initial gagging, finally made it—just as Mr. Cousins of Cousins, Cousins, Cousins, and Finch came creeping into the room, his nostrils twitching in a most un-Finchlike fashion.

"Changed my mind," Halbert croaked—Uncle Henry's vocal chords were slightly on the mushy side—"Strike out the widows. Strike out the orphans. Leave everything to Myrtle."

"But Mr. Swithens," protested the little lawyer, "just last week you said—"

"Changed my mind. Sound mind. Sound enough to get another lawyer if you give me any trouble."

Mr. Cousins let out a long unhappy sigh. "But you said she—"

"Don't care what I said," interrupted Halbert again. "Blood is thicker than water. Kith and kin. Write it out so I can sign it."

"She gets everything?"

"Everything. All that I ask is a Christian burial." When

PRISONER OF LOVE

Myrtle started to frown he added quickly, "Nothing expensive, of course."

When the necessary signing, sealing, and witnessing had been accomplished, Halbert, per instructions, clutched his heart, gurgled, and rapidly expired. Myrtle collapsed in a chair and began to make noises like a bereaved niece while Mr. Cousins made the necessary phone calls.

There was no trouble with the death certificate. Uncle Henry was obviously dead, in fact so obviously dead that the physician was somewhat confused. But the presence of Mr. Cousins reassured him, so he signed the certificate and left. As soon as he did Myrtle began to pull herself together. "Please," she said, "before *they* come . . . could I have just a few minutes alone with him?"

Mr. Cousins bowed and discretely withdrew. As soon as the door clicked shut, she said, "All right, you, you can come out now."

Halbert slipped out of Uncle Henry with a shuddering gasp of relief. Materializing in his normal form was a rather complicated business, however, because he had no one to help him with his gear. When he popped into sight he suddenly sensed that his horns were on backward, but fortunately Myrtle was too excited to notice.

"Hearkening and obedience, oh fairest of the fair," he heard himself saying.

Myrtle ignored him. She was too busy beaming down at the corpse of Uncle Henry. "Two million dollars," she whispered, "and all mine!" She turned toward Halbert, "Junior, I'm about to have me a ball, and you're going to be tagging along to smooth out the rough spots." She stopped suddenly and began to frown. Then with a little shiver she said, "One of your jobs is going to be to see that Uncle Henry doesn't come back and haunt me." She gave a nervous cough. "You know, I suddenly find myself paying attention to all sorts of things that I used to think were nonsense. Tell me, what's it like down there?"

Halbert didn't answer. He just gave a jerky shudder as tears came to his eyes. It was true that she hadn't really sold her soul, but he had a strong hunch that by the time she was through doing all the things she had in mind, such formal action wouldn't really be necessary.

"Well?"

"I can't bear to think of it."

"Of what?"

"Of that beautiful body slowly turning on a spit, century after century."

Myrtle stiffened but somehow she managed to keep control of herself. She'd had a fair idea of the risk she was running when she'd started all this. The mere fact that her incantations had worked gave a certain indication that at least some of the old beliefs were true. But the shrewd keystone to the whole machination was the foolproof protection she had come up with to shield herself from the usual consequences. Her pet demon wouldn't let *that* happen to her. He loved her too much.

"The thought doesn't appeal to me," she said. "Your next assignment is to go wherever you have to go and do whatever you have to do to keep me out of Hell when the time comes. Two million will take me first-class as long as I'm alive—and with your help I intend to keep going for a long long time—but everything ends sometime. And dull as the prospect is, harp-playing beats roasting a hundred to one.

"But I can't," stammered Halbert. "You don't understand. I—"

"What do you mean, you can't?" she interrupted. "You love me too much to let anything like that happen to me."

Halbert stared at the floor and shuffled his hooves in silent misery.

"DON'T YOU?"

He nodded slowly, in spite of himself.

"Then do it! Now!"

"Harkening and obedience," said Halbert, and disappeared.

Halbert Fenimore Shirey, Private Warlock 3rd Class (*Very Provisional*) sat in hunched-over misery in his battered office chair, staring at a cockroach on the floor. The cockroach stared back. There was a familiar mocking something in the bug's beady eyes that he couldn't quite place. He raised one foot slowly and began to bring it down.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the cockroach piped in a throaty but musical voice. Halbert's leg jerked up as if he had suddenly been given a hot foot.

"Astrobleth!"

The cockroach scuttled to the center of the office and began moving its legs and feelers in a complicated pattern.

PRISONER OF LOVE

There was a sudden moment of expanding darkness, a soft pop, and then a flash of golden breast and thigh before slender fingers could trace a pattern that materialized an abbreviated forest green tunic from thin air.

"Stop staring, stupid," she said as she wiggled into it and then stood staring critically down at the way the garment molded the long curving lines of her body.

He waited as long as he could and then said in an anxious voice, "Well?"

She shook her head gloomily. "We'll have to figure out something else. No sale on that one! Though after this nobody can say I wouldn't go to Hell for you if I had to."

"What happened? Weren't you able to get in?"

"It wasn't that," she said. "I got in all right, right through the main gate, though I couldn't have made it if Cerberus had still been guarding the place. He's been replaced by some sort of new fangled psionic detection gadgets, but I guess they just weren't tuned to cockroaches."

"I was able to slip into the permanent record section without being noticed. In fact, I was even able to sneak a quick look at that female's master card. She's got enough punches in the audit section right now to send her straight down if she doesn't mend her ways in a hurry."

Halbert's face contorted and he began to gnaw already ragged fingernails.

"You never got that upset over me," said Astrobeth bitterly.

"I can't help it. You know I can't help it."

Her voice softened slightly. "I know. But you can't expect me to be ecstatic about your sitting around mooning over another woman, spell or no spell." Walking over to him, she tousled his head roughly. "You poor slob."

She looked at him sadly for a moment and then continued, "But anyway, their records system can't be gimmicked: it's too complex. They went over to complete automation right after the first A-bomb was dropped. They managed to grab off a number of first-rate German computer men before the Russians got to them, and put them to work. They've got a system down there now that makes a human UNIVAC network look like a ruptured abacus. There wasn't anything I could do. If I'd tried to tinker with anything there would have been bells ringing all over the place."

Halbert pulled himself to his feet and tried to square his

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

sagging shoulders. "You might as well break out my gear," he said sadly. "I've got to tell her who I really am."

"And then what?"

"The only thing I can do to save her. I'll make a deal with Baal. Humans just don't have the stamina to take what his boys like to dish out. He'd jump at the chance to give her a blanket exemption in exchange for the fun of spending eternity working me over."

As he started to walk heavily across to the equipment cabinet, Astrobeth grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around.

"Listen, you," she snapped, her eyes blazing with sudden anger. "If you think I'm going to sit by and watch you go to the pits to save some fat bottomed earthling, you've got another think coming!"

Halbert couldn't help himself. Automatically he sprang to Myrtle's defense. "Her breasts are like unto globéd fruit," he chanted. "Her jeweled thighs are pillars of precious ivory, above which twin alabaster moons swing slowly in languorous orbit."

Astrobeth snorted viciously. "If I ever get my claws on her, those twin moons are going to achieve individual escape velocity. Now shut off that drooling while I see if I can't think of some other way out of this mess."

"Anything yet?"

"Nothing," said Astrobeth in a strained voice.

Halbert was still slumped in his chair with his feet on the desk. Astrobeth was stretched out wearily on the lumpy couch.

"I could love you oh so much, loved I not Myrtle more," he said sadly. "And the fact that the logical part of me knows who-what-which-where-and-how doesn't mean anything. Every idea you've come up with would mean hurting her in some way or other, and as long as she has that spell on me I can't let that happen."

For once Astrobeth had no answer. She turned to the wall, her fingers clawing into her disheveled hair and her body shaking convulsively as tormented sobs tore their way out of her. As he watched her, Halbert felt the last faint flicker of hope die away. She had always been the brains of the agency, the one who bailed him out when he got things all snarled up. But now he was on his own.

PRISONER OF LOVE

He felt submerged in a hopeless, helpless, bitterness. Love, the corrosive element! The hooks that he had so innocently forged were biting deep and hauling him, jerking, toward his own destruction. He wanted to make the last gesture, to go over to the sobbing girl and try to comfort her, but even that was forbidden by the poisoned paralysis that clutched at his system. He loved her, he knew that now, even if it was artificially walled away where he couldn't get at it. If he could just tell her about it, it would make things easier for her when he was gone. But he couldn't.

The problem was love.

The solution? There wasn't any. Somebody should tell the poets, he thought bitterly, somebody should tell them that love doesn't conquer all. That no matter how much you loved a person . . . no matter how much you wanted to make her happy . . . when the only answer to her problem was love . . . why then . . . And then the solution slipped calmly and easily into his mind.

But of course . . . love was the answer to his problem too. . . .

"Astrobeth," he said softly. "Everything is going to be all right. I love her."

And with that he disappeared.

With Uncle Henry safely stretched out on a slab waiting his turn at Crawley's Cut-Rate Crematorium, and with a tame and lovesick demon busy scurrying around Hell tucking up loose ends, a female with only twenty-four years under her belt—and under that same belt a waist whose eighteen inches stood in pleasing contrast to the proper thirty-six above and below—and a face to match the two million dollars resting snugly in probate has a legitimate reason to feel somewhat smug about her prospects in life.

Myrtle did.

Especially since, now that the forced austerity of living with Uncle Henry was behind her, she was in a position to satisfy her most pressing needs. The immediate means was due to arrive in five minutes—all six-feet-two of him. She stretched herself lazily, curling her toes in anticipation. When the buzzer sounded she unbuttoned another button and called lazily, "Come in."

The door opened shyly instead of eagerly, and instead of the bronzed tennis pro from Green Hills bounding in with a Pan-like snorting, in with slow and somber steps came Mr.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Cousins of Cousins, Cousins, Cousins, and Finch. Behind him with a spastic but determined stride came Uncle Henry.

Myrtle's toes curled again—but not in anticipation—as he fixed her with one gelatinous eye and croaked, "Changed my mind again. Signed and witnessed. Half to the widows. Half to the orphans." He slid squishily into a chair as Mr. Cousins, looking somewhat distressed, scuttled over to open the windows. Finishing this, the lawyer gave a hasty but polite bow and left.

Myrtle seemed on the verge of panic. "But you can't!" she protested. "You said yourself that the spell couldn't be broken by anyone but me. And I didn't. You can't do this horrible thing—not if you love me."

Uncle Henry wheezed amorously, fell forward out of his chair, and began to crawl toward her on rubbery hands and knees.

"Don't say that, baby doll," he gurgled. "You know I can't stop loving you." He gave her a slack mouthed leer. "Want to play house?"

Shuddering—the open windows didn't help much—she retreated to the far side of the room. "The money!" she said. "If you love me you've got to give it back!"

His knees buckled and he sagged forward onto his bloated stomach. Manfully he kept wriggling toward her, his head hanging over like a cabbage on a broken stalk.

"I can't," he mumbled, gumming each word, "I love you too much. You'd spend your way to perdition. Root of all evil. Camel's eye. This way you'll have a fighting chance for salvation." He let out a gargling sigh and pawed feebly at her ankle. "Chin up, baby, you've always got me. We'll make a fresh start together. You'll be safe from temptation with me around."

It was the last pulpy touch that did it. She let out a caterwauling scream and lurched back. Pointing one trembling finger at him she gasped, "NOHCAREV!"

The husk of Uncle Henry did a buck and wing and then flopped loosely to the floor as Halbert, free at last, cast off the old and left Myrtle far behind.

But only temporarily.

Still two months behind on the rent, Halbert Fenimore Shirey lounged lazily on the lumpy old office couch.

"You answer it," he drawled to Astrobeth, who was

INVASION REPORT

sprawled out comfortably beside him. She yawned and, stretching out one arm, switched off the *beep blatt* of the incantation detector. As Halbert stood up and sauntered over to the desk she gave him a sly grin. "Business or pleasure?"

He made a pass over the crystal ball and looked down into it. Mirrored in its depths he saw a gaunt faced, hollow eyed female kneeling over a chalked pentagram.

"Business," he said. "It looks as if Myrtle is beginning to repent of her sinful ways again."

"In that case," said Astrobeth, "I guess you'd better dust off Uncle Henry."

INVASION REPORT

COLONEL WILLIAM FAUST OF THE SOLAR Guard had no business being where he was at the moment.

He took his wide, leather belt in another notch and eyed himself critically. First, gleaming space boots, then, flaring breeches of midnight black and finally, a soft, snug-fitting, high-collared tunic with the insignia of the Guard which was a crimson lightning flash running diagonally across the front.

On Vega III, the light cruiser Andros of the Imperial Legion hurtled up through the thin atmosphere . . .

The Colonel's hands caressed the smooth butts of the snub-nosed weapons that hung at each hip and then slid away to hang carelessly at his sides. He turned his back to the hatch that led into the control room of the *Glorious*, took two casual steps and then, without warning, spun around as his hands went streaking for his guns. A split-second later, he stood catlike, poised on the balls of his feet, both guns trained steadily on the glaring image of himself that was reflected in the mirror surface of the port.

On Vega III, the light cruiser Andros of the Imperial Legion, hurtled up through the thin atmosphere on a mission of interstellar conquest . . .

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"Faster than ever," said the warlike figure with stern satisfaction and then, holstering his weapons and adjusting his dress helmet to a jaunty angle, he threw open the hatch that led into the control room of the *Glorious* and entered with a measured military stride.

Somebody barked, "Attention!" and ten sets of heels clicked together. Captain Shirey stepped forward and saluted. "All present and accounted for, sir."

The owners of the ten sets of heels had no more business being where they were than did their Colonel. The starship *Glorious* had GOVERNMENT PROPERTY—KEEP OUT painted in foot-high letters on one side of her main entrance port and TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED on the other—warnings that had been blithely ignored by the guard when the headlights of the battered old flyer that had brought them out blinked out the three shorts and three longs that activated the landing lock.

For a few years after her return from Alpha Centauri, a small maintenance crew had been kept on the *Glorious*. But as existence became more and more peaceful and settled and Man slowly adjusted to the idea that there was no longer any place to go, these were withdrawn until, finally, the last watchman was removed as being an unnecessary charge against the public funds.

There was talk, for a while, of mounting a warper on her and turning her into a museum, but nobody was really interested except the youngsters—and youngsters don't have votes—so it was finally decided to leave her circling in her lonely orbit as a perpetual monument to the men who had taken her out for the first and last time.

"At ease!" As his command relaxed, Colonel Faust stepped out of role.

"Look here, gang," he said, "we've worked through those old operational manuals of my grandfather's until we know them backward. I figure it's about time we put some of what we know to work. What would you think of the idea of turning on the big vision screen?"

Captain Shirey looked at him dubiously. "To run the scanners, you've got to have power—and that means turning on the main pile."

"So what, Wimpy? All we have to do is just like the manuals say. We've done it a dozen times in dry runs."

The other still looked doubtful. "If you make a mistake

INVASION REPORT

when you're just pretending, nothing blows up. And anyway, just being up here would get us in enough trouble, if anybody caught us. If we start turning things on and maybe break something, then we'd really catch it. Why can't we just keep on pretending the same way we have been?"

"Because," said his commander patiently, "you can only learn so much by pretending—and we've learned all we can that way. We've got to get some practice done on the real thing if we're going to be ready when the invaders come. There won't be any pretending then, not when you got to stand back and watch your own sister being dragged off to be a slave. You just think about that for a while."

Wimpy dutifully began to think about it but, somehow, the only reaction he could get to the idea of his sister being stolen was one of relief rather than regret. "They take old Emily, they'll be sorry," he said finally.

Bill started to nod agreement, then caught himself. "Look," he said, "four times now we've sneaked out my father's old flyer while he was out of town and slipped up here—and all we've done is pretend. We got to start really running things if we're going to get trained right. The invaders come in and who else is going to stop them? Those pooping, little, police boats with a ten-mile ceiling and maybe one medium paralyzer on them?"

Wimpy still looked doubtful.

"You let me do the worrying," said Bill. "I got more right to be here than most people."

Halfway between Earth and Venus there was a sudden shimmer as the Vegan ship slipped out of warp into normal space. It hung motionless for a minute as the alien commander checked his instruments and his armament.

Looking at it one way, William Faust did have more right than most to be on board the *Glorious*. In his room at home, under his bed, was his great-grandfather's space chest. In it lay the worn diary that recorded the first high hopes when the *Glorious* took off, then the boredom, then the bitterness and disillusionment that came when Alpha Centauri was found to be a barren and lifeless system.

Bill Faust knew it almost by heart, that chronicle of the young man who went out on the first—and last—starship ever to be constructed, of the middle-aged man who arrived,

of the old man who returned to find space-flight a thing of the past and the reports of the expedition that had consumed his life used as final proof of the DeWitt hypothesis that there could be no life on other systems.

There had been a time when those whose dreams were strong enough to stand the shock of crossing over into what adults called "the real world" had some place to go, once they reached the other side. For these, being young was a time of waiting and training for the day when new strength could be tested against whatever lay beyond the safe frontiers. First, seas and continents, then the upper air and the pushing of limits toward the Moon, the planets, until, these once conquered, young eyes turned toward the beckoning beacons of the distant stars themselves.

There had been such a time, but it existed no longer. With the coming of the warpers—those strange contraptions that could so twist the fabric of space that Man and his materials could instantaneously be moved from any place where there was a transmitter to any other where there was a receiver—Mars and Venus were nearer than the corner drugstore. Once they had been set up, space-flight died. There was no point in spending months traveling from one planet to another when one could do it in a fraction of a second, merely by stepping in one door and out the other.

The one star that could be reached had been reached. The *Glorious* had returned to slam shut the last gateway to adventure. As for the other stars, they were distant lonely things that hung so far out of reach that only astronomers any longer viewed them with more than casual interest. The great mathematicians and physicists had proved so conclusively that a faster-than-light drive was impossible, nobody bothered to check their figures any longer.

Life was snug and easy and pleasant—and, above all, sensible. Only the youngsters still dreamed of danger and the search for strange things in far places. And, since the best of the psychologists said that a temporary sojourn into a world of make-believe was important to the growing process, the young ones were permitted to assume such strange warlike disguises as were necessary to take them into imaginary worlds of high adventure—providing, of course, that they weren't too noisy about it and emerged in time for supper with clean hands and clean faces. . . .

INVASION REPORT

"Check pile controls!" As usual, Colonel Faust had won his point.

"All on full safety, sir," said Second Lieutenant Randolph with a most unmilitary quaver in his voice. He was the most junior of the junior officers, a precocious nine-year-old who was four or five years younger than the rest of the Guardsmen and he had an unfortunate habit of bursting into tears during moments of stress. He was already sniffing slightly, when Bill came over to check the control positions against the diagram he'd memorized.

With a curt nod of approval, Colonel Faust went over to his position at the coordination board and grasped the red handle of the master pile control.

"Power on!"

He pulled back slowly until the lever clicked into the normal operation slot. In the pile room of the *Glorious*, control rods slid smoothly back until they were checked by the safety catches. There was a faint hum of transformers as the long-neglected ship warmed to life.

"Battle screen on!"

A Guardsman frowned in concentration and slowly began to throw the switches that linked the great screen with the scanners set in the outer hull. There was a flicker and then a few tiny white spots blinked on to show meteors large enough to be detected. But, aside from these, there was nothing to show that the screen had been powered.

Colonel Faust gave a grunt of satisfaction, rose to his feet and faced his Guardsmen.

"Your attention, gentlemen," he said in a tone of command.

Ten grim-faced Guardsmen leaned forward expectantly as he pointed dramatically to the empty screen.

"As you can see, the Plutonian fleet is approaching in a cone formation with their heaviest ships at the tip. These are carrying a deadly new weapon, the Q-ray. Our mission is to break through the cone and destroy the flagship, from which the Warlord of Pluto is personally directing the operations of his fleet. Earth expects every man to do his duty." He paused and then barked, "*Engage!*"

The Guardsmen hunched at their positions as their imaginations suddenly populated the empty screen with a hurtling cone of enemy ships.

Many were the fierce encounters in the next few hours, and close were the brushes with death. When the *Glorious*

tore through the outer cone of Plutonian ships and came within range of the shimmering web of Q-rays, the Guardsmen reacted to the fiery touch in quite different fashions. Their Colonel had invented the new weapon on the spur of the moment, and there had been no chance for agreement as to just what its effects would be.

Bill remained seated at the coordination board, his face set in a mask of heroic and Promethian suffering. Wimpy, on the other hand, went threshing around on the control room floor, howling that his skin was coming off and that his bones were turning to limp and rubbery things. The rest of the Guards were so impressed by his performance that it wasn't long before the whole contingent, Bill included, were writhing on the floor like wounded snakes.

"The Warlord is making a run for it!" Colonel Faust's voice rang through the general hubbub. "We've got to intercept him. *Stations!*"

Deaf to all but the call of duty, the dying Guardsmen summoned up strength from some hidden reserve and crawled painfully back to their posts on the supposedly rotting stumps of what once had been arms and legs. Colonel Faust fought for five minutes before he was able to reach the master controls. A wavering cheer went up as they once more began to creep up on the ship of the tyrant. He fought back desperately, his great guns hammering shot after shot into the *Glorious*, but still the gallant ship drove on, her mighty drive tubes incandescent under the overload.

"Prepare to ram!"

As the *Glorious* went into her final dive, the game was suddenly terminated by a harsh clangor from the proximity alarm and a red dot jumped into being in the upper left corner of the vision screen. As it crawled toward the center, alarm after alarm went off until the control room was filled with a clanging din.

"Shut those things off!" yelled Bill. Jimmie Ozaki, the Guardsman at the detection station, kicked over a series of switches and the noise suddenly stopped.

"What is it?"

Jimmie stared at the instruments in front of him, as if he'd never seen them before. "If I'm reading these things right, whatever it is would be about fifteen thousand miles out and coming in fast. It just popped up out of no place. So I guess I'm not reading these things right."

INVASION REPORT

Bill went over and made a quick check. "You are."

"Couldn't be a meteor, could it?" asked Wimpy.

Bill shook his head. "If it was, it would show up as a white dot. Red indicates radiation of some sort. The only thing I can figure out is that somebody is out there in a flyer."

"Ain't no flyer can travel that fast," objected Ozaki. "And how come it popped up like it did? Even if it were coasting along with its drive off, its mass would still have registered on the detectors."

Bill stared up at the screen uneasily. "Could be that the scanners are out of kilter somehow. You keep checking, Jimmie."

Five minutes later, it was reported as being only a hundred miles away and slowing rapidly. And then Jimmie Ozaki let out a sudden yell. "It's hitting us with some sort of a high frequency beam. Looks as if it might be in the communication band."

"Try and tune it in, but don't answer."

The Guardsman at the communication station leaned over his controls. A moment later a speaker came to life. A hissing stream of sibilants came from it, sounds like nothing that had ever been produced by human vocal apparatus. The message was repeated twice and then the speaker went silent. So did the Guardsmen.

Bill was the first to speak. There was a nervous smile on his face when he did. "It must be a police boat," he said in a strained voice. "They must of spotted us sneaking up here, and they're trying to throw a scare into us. We're in for it, now."

"That's no police boat, and you know it," whispered Wimpy. "The flyers they got couldn't go out that far, even if they wanted to."

"It's moving in again."

Bill swung quickly to the detection station. "Can you pick that up on visual?"

"I'll try."

The detection screen blanked out for a minute, then lit up again to show a silver speck hanging in darkness.

"Crank her up!"

As power was thrown into the magnifiers, the strange ship swelled in size until it filled half the screen, a gleaming sphere that was like nothing that was recognizable.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"Still think that's a police boat?" said Wimpy in a strained voice.

Bill didn't answer. He watched in horrified fascination as the strange ship hurtled toward the *Glorious*. It looked as if it were on a collision course, but it suddenly began to decelerate and then, finally, curved into a path that put it in orbit around the *Glorious*.

"How close now?"

Ozaki, at the detection station, had trouble getting his eyes off the screen long enough to read his instruments.

"Less than a mile," he said finally.

"What now?" squeaked somebody.

Nobody had an immediate answer. The Guardsmen looked at each other and then at the suddenly strange control room, where everything now seemed to be constructed on a scale several sizes too large for them. It was a place for men, not for boys. They all turned to Bill and waited for him to say something.

For a moment, he couldn't. He was being pulled in two directions at once. Panic tugged at him, panic that threatened momentarily to seize control of his legs and send him bolting to the safety of the old flyer that sat in the landing lock. Against this urge to flee was the dawning realization that they were no longer playing a game which could be discontinued at will. It was like a nightmare where one has suddenly lost the saving knowledge that he can always wake up if things get too bad.

To run or to stand, to retreat from grim reality or to face it—the decision had to be made. Bill was standing on the line that separates the child from the man, and he had to move one way or the other. He looked at the menacing shape on the screen, then at the frightened faces of the other boys who were waiting for him to take the lead.

He dropped his eyes, and it seemed as if the deck plates beneath his feet had turned to glass, so that he could see the smug, defenseless world that stretched out below. A tidy, rational world that had long ago given up such childish things as arms and armies—and spaceships. When he finally spoke, his voice was so low they could hardly hear him.

"We've got to stay," he said.

When the words penetrated, there was a shuffling of feet and a muttering of disagreement. "We shouldn't have come out here in the first place!" said Wimpy.

INVASION REPORT

Second Lieutenant Randolph began to sniffle. "I want to go home," he announced. "Right now!"

"Me too," said Ozaki, "and I'm going. Let's get out of here before it's too late. He started to sidle toward the door. The rest wavered, then began to follow him.

Bill hesitated only a moment, then dashed across the control room and slammed the door shut. "Wait!" he shouted, throwing himself in front of it. "It's already too late. You can't get away now."

Captain Shirey forgot about military courtesy and cocked one hard fist under his superior's nose. "You get out of the way, or you're going to get a bust on the snoot!"

"You've *got* to listen to me," said Bill frantically. "That thing's only a mile away from us, and we're three hundred miles out from Earth. You saw how fast it can go. If it's looking for trouble, do you think it's just going to sit by and let us pull away in that old flyer?"

Wimpy started to answer and then stopped. He let his fist drop slowly to his side. "Maybe you're right," he said slowly. "But if we don't run, then what?"

"Just sit for a while and see what happens. From the way that ship's acting, they must figure the *Glorious* has been abandoned. They'd never have come this close, if they didn't. If they're just snooping around and don't catch on that anybody's in here, maybe they'll just go away."

There were wistful glances toward the door, but after a moment, the whole contingent straggled back to their positions.

As they watched the alien ship, a square hatch opened in its gleaming spherical hull. There was a suggestion of movement and then a long, torpedo-shaped object slowly emerged and floated free alongside the ship. There was something seated on it—something that wasn't human! It wore a wheel-shaped spacesuit with a hemispherical vision dome bulging out from the center.

There was a little spurt of flame from the rear of the torpedo, and then it sped away from the alien ship, twisting and looping about. The thing riding on it moved busily for a moment, adjusting the controls. Then he brought it to a halt with its nose pointing toward the *Glorious*.

"What do you think they're figuring on doing with that?" asked Wimpy in a shaky voice.

"Using it on us."

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

"What for?"

"How many other spaceships does Earth have? Once the *Glorious* is knocked out, there's nothing left that can be used against them."

"But this thing can't fight," protested Wimpy. "And there's nobody left that knows how to run her."

"She could fight once," said Bill grimly. "Maybe she still can. And there is somebody left to run her—us!" He turned his back to the screen and snapped, "*Stations!*" The Guard slowly took on a semblance of order.

"All positions on. And I mean really on! We aren't playing any longer. I want an immediate report on the condition of this tub."

There was hesitation for a moment, then a sudden flurry of action at each position as switches were thrown and instruments read. When they came, the reports weren't very encouraging.

"All drives disconnected."

The *Glorious* couldn't run away.

"No missiles in the racks."

"No shells in the lockers."

The *Glorious* couldn't fight.

"There's got to be *something*," said Bill as he went over to the gunnery station. The Guardsman at the controls looked up unhappily and pointed to the long row of little red plates that registered the number of rounds available for each gun. Each was blinking out the word *EMPTY*. "Turrets and automatic trackers are still operational, but that doesn't help any."

Bill stood thinking a minute. "Maybe it can," he said finally and went back to the coordination board. "Look gang," he said. "What we know and what they know are two different things. They've no way of knowing that those guns aren't loaded. Maybe we can pull a bluff."

"And if we can't?" said somebody.

He shrugged. "Somebody got a better idea? We can't just sit here and let them blow up the ship."

Wimpy let out a sudden shout and pointed toward the screen. Bill spun around and saw the alien was leaving the torpedo and returning to his ship. He felt a sudden dryness in his throat.

"This is it!" he yelled. "All guns on target!"

There was a growl of powerful motors as the turrets, set in blisters along the top and sides of the *Glorious*, swung

INVASION REPORT

swiftly to zero in their long-muzzled guns on the alien ship. There was no reaction for a moment, and then a long burst of sound came from the wall speakers.

"Do you want to answer that?"

Bill shook his head. "Better if we don't talk. Maybe they've got some sort of a translator over there. If I start shooting off my mouth, I might say the wrong thing."

"Bill!" There was a shout from the detection station.

"Yeah?" He didn't look away from the screen. The torpedo still hung motionless, its nose pointed toward the *Glorious*.

"I think they're trying to make visual contact."

"See if you can pick them up." Bill ordered.

There was a flickering in the reproduction cube of the tri-V receiver and, slowly, a distorted replica of the control room of the alien ship began to materialize. Then, as the Guardsman at the communication station struggled with his controls, the scene cleared.

There were seven of them. They weren't humanoid—they looked like huge, furry footballs—but they weren't the slaving monstrosities that Bill and the rest had half expected.

"Turn on our transmitter."

After a brief warm-up period, there was a bouncing of aliens and their own screen lit up. Bill stepped forward, and as sternly as he could, made a stabbing motion toward Earth with a bent forefinger. There was a small commotion while all the fur balls rolled together to form a huddle. Then one of them went bouncing over to a set of controls at the far end of their control room.

"The bluff didn't work," gasped Wimpy. "They're going to blast us with that torp!"

"Not yet," said Bill. "Gunnery!"

"Yes?"

"Automatic trackers on!"

The Guardsman at the gunnery station looked puzzled, but he didn't ask any questions. His hands slid forward and the parabolic mirrors that projected the UHF beams—that had once controlled the guided missiles carried by the *Glorious*—swung until they were centered on the silver sphere.

"Carriers on!"

"Check."

There was a sudden flurry of movement in the alien control rooms as their detectors gave warning of the beams that were

striking their hull. Bill faced the tri-V scanner and held up his hand for attention. There was some more scuttling and then all the aliens faced toward their own screen. Bill withdrew one of the odd-shaped weapons that hung at his hip and held it up so they could see it.

"Get over here, Wimpy."

"What for?"

"Hurry up. And play it straight."

The freckle-faced second in command marched over with a military stride and saluted.

"Q-ray," said Bill. "Get it?"

Wimpy started to protest and then caught himself. "Sounds crazy to me," he muttered, "but you're the boss."

Bill's side-arm was a complicated affair with two short barrels, one capped with a green lens and the other with a red. He held the weapon out to call attention to it and then raised it and pressed a stud on the stock three times. Three burst of red light flared out briefly.

"Give them three quick flips on the missile beams."

The Guardsman hit the cut-off button one, two, three.

Bill's gun flashed red three more times.

"Once more should give them the idea."

Again the carrier beams were clicked on and off.

"Make this good." Bill pointed the weapon deliberately at Wimpy and pressed the stud. Captain Shirey stood at attention, a circle of red light glowing on his chest.

"Now!" There was a sudden green flash as Bill jerked the other trigger.

Immediately Wimpy let out a bloodcurdling yell and then, clawing at his chest, collapsed in a writhing heap on the floor. Bill turned back to the scanner and pointed to his gun again.

"Three more." By the time the barrier beams had struck the other ship twice, chaos had let loose in its control room.

"What's happening?"

It was hard to tell. They were lined up in a row, their pink underbodies tilted toward the ceiling, and weak, little leg-like organs waving wildly.

"I think," said Colonel Faust slowly, "that they're standing on their heads."

But surrender was not negotiated without some difficulty. The alien who seemed to be the commander kept bouncing in and out of one of a pair of metallic cups which projected

INVASION REPORT

from a complex mechanism at one side of the control room. Bill finally got the idea.

"I think they've got some sort of a mechanical translator and they want me to come over."

There was a protest from the floor. "You can't go there!"

"Shut up!" said Bill. "You're supposed to be dead. Do you want to give the whole show away?" Wimpy subsided obediently. "I've got to go over. We can't escort them down and, once they find out that we aren't following, there's nothing to keep them from making a run for it. I'll take the flyer over. There's a three-quarter-size pressure suit in the luggage compartment that I think I can get into. Keep me covered."

"With what?" softly mumbled Wimpy.

Later, with one exception, the Solar Guard stood at attention as a small red dot crawled toward one corner of the detection screen.

"Can I get up now?" said a plaintive voice.

Colonel Bill Faust looked down at the sprawled form of his second in command and then suddenly doubled up and began to emit strangled sound that were half sobs and half laughter. He finally recovered enough to reach down and pull Wimpy to his feet.

"You were real good, Wimpy. Real good!" He went off into another hysterical paroxysm.

Wimpy grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "Stop it! Why did you let them go?"

"They—they . . ." Bill choked, gasped and then tried again. "They couldn't stay any longer. They had to get home for supper."

"They *what*?" gasped Wimpy.

"They had to get home for supper." Bill pointed at the screen. "And there they go."

Faster, the red dot went, and faster still, and then it flicked out of sight.

"I'll bet that's the last time they come snooping around the Reservation," said Bill with a mysterious grin.

"The what?"

"The Reservation. That's this whole star cluster."

Wimpy advanced purposefully and waved a fist threateningly. "Are you going to tell us what happened, or do we have to beat it out of you?"

Bill worked hard to control himself. "Suppose," he said at

last, "that, aside from a few dead systems like Alpha Centauri, the Universe was full of life—and some of the races have had interstellar drives for so long that even the kids' flyers are equipped with them." He looked around at the boys.

"Go ahead," said Wimpy impatiently.

"Don't you get it?"

They all stared at him blankly.

"Well," he continued, "suppose a bunch of kids were out one day, and they went poking around where they had no business being, and they found a big old ship that looked deserted."

"The *Glorious*!"

"So, whenever they could get away, they'd sneak over and play invasion."

"Oh, no!" said Wimpy.

"And then, one day, they decided to run a real all-out offensive, and one of the kids borrowed his father's ship without bothering to ask permission. And right in the middle of the game, the turrets on the ship they thought was deserted suddenly swing around, and they find a couple of dozen space-rifles pointed directly at them. They want to run away, but they're too scared, and to make matters worse, they get a demonstration of a horrible, strange weapon. And we thought *we* were scared!"

There was silence in the control room for a moment as the Guardsmen tried to digest what had happened.

"But what about the torpedo?" asked Wimpy.

Bill patted the elaborate toy that hung at his right hip. "It had as much real punch as this. They were making believe that it was a vortex torpedo—they'd rigged it up with remote controls—but it was really only one of the little flyers that they turn out for the kids over there. It's an old one, but its interstellar drive is still working."

He paused, then said in an offhand manner, "I brought it back with me. It's got an adjustable warp field that'll open up wide enough to handle a ship the size of the *Glorious*, and I—well, it seemed to me that, maybe, it might get space travel going. . . ."

It did.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

THE WALL THAT WENT ALL THE WAY AROUND the World had always been there, so nobody paid much attention to it—except Porgie.

Porgie was going to find out what was on the other side of it—assuming there was another side—or break his neck trying. He was going on fourteen, an age that tends to view the word *impossible* as a meaningless term invented by adults for their own peculiar purposes. But he recognized that there were certain practical difficulties involved in scaling a glassy-smooth surface that rose over a thousand feet straight up. That's why he spent a lot of time watching the eagles.

This morning, as usual, he was late for school. He lost time finding a spot for his broomstick in the crowded rack in the school yard, and it was exactly six minutes after the hour as he slipped guiltily into the classroom.

For a moment, he thought he was safe. Old Mr. Wickens had his back to him and was chalking a pentagram on the blackboard.

But just as Porgie started to slide into his seat, the schoolmaster turned and drawled, "I see Mr. Mills has finally decided to join us."

The class laughed, and Porgie flushed.

"What's your excuse this time, Mr. Mills?"

"I was watching an eagle," said Porgie lamely.

"How nice for the eagle. And what was he doing that was of such great interest?"

"He was riding up on the wind. His wings weren't flapping or anything. He was over the box canyon that runs into the East wall, where the wind hits the Wall and goes up. The eagle just floated in circles, going higher all the time. You know, Mr. Wickens, I'll bet if you caught a whole bunch of eagles and tied ropes to them, they could lift you right up to the top of the wall!"

"That," said Mr. Wickens, "is possible—if you could catch the eagles. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll continue with the lecture. When invoking Elementals of the Fifth Order, care must be taken to . . ."

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Porgie glazed his eyes and began to think up ways and means to catch some eagles.

The next period, Mr. Wickens gave them a problem in Practical Astrology. Porgie chewed his pencil and tried to work on it, but couldn't concentrate. Nothing came out right—and when he found he had accidentally transposed a couple of signs of the zodiac at the very beginning, he gave up and began to draw plans for eagle traps. He tried one, decided it wouldn't work, started another—

"Porgie!"

He jumped. Mr. Wickens, instead of being in front of the class, was standing right beside him. The schoolmaster reached down, picked up the paper Porgie had been drawing on, and looked at it. Then he grabbed Porgie by the arm and jerked him from his seat.

"Go to my study!"

As Porgie went out the door, he heard Mr. Wickens say, "The class is dismissed until I return!"

There was a sudden rush of large, medium, and small-sized boys out of the classroom. Down the corridor to the front door they pelted, and out into the bright sunshine. As they ran past Porgie, his cousin Homer skidded to a stop and accidentally on purpose jabbed an elbow into his ribs. Homer, usually called "Bull Pup" by the kids because of his squat build and pugnacious face, was a year older than Porgie and took his seniority seriously.

"Wait'll I tell Dad about this. You'll catch it tonight!" He gave Porgie another jab and then ran out into the schoolyard to take command of a game of Warlock.

Mr. Wickens unlocked the door to his study and motioned Porgie inside. Then he shut and locked it carefully behind him. He sat down in the high-backed chair behind his desk and folded his hands.

Porgie stood silently, hanging his head, filled with that helpless guilty anger that comes from conflict with superior authority.

"What were you doing instead of your lesson?" Mr. Wickens demanded.

Porgie didn't answer.

Mr. Wickens narrowed his eyes. The large hazel switch that rested on top of the bookcase beside the stuffed owl lifted lightly into the air, drifted across the room, and dropped into his hand.

"Well?" he said, tapping the switch on the desk.

"Eagle traps," admitted Porgie. "I was drawing eagle traps. I couldn't help it. The Wall made me do it."

"Proceed."

Porgie hesitated for a moment. The switch tapped. Porgie burst out, "I want to see what's on the other side! There's no magic that will get me over, so I've got to find something else!"

Tap, went the switch. "Something else?"

"If a magic way was in the old books, somebody would have found it already!"

Mr. Wickens rose to his feet and stabbed one bony finger accusingly at Porgie. "Doubt is the mother of damnation!"

Porgie dropped his eyes to the floor and wished he was someplace else.

"I see doubt in you. Doubt is evil, Porgie, *evil!* There are ways permitted to men and ways forbidden. You stand on the brink of the fatal choice. Beware that the Black Man does not come for you as he did for your father before you. Now, bend over!"

Porgie bent. He wished he'd worn a heavier pair of pants.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir," said Porgie sadly.

Mr. Wickens raised the switch over his head. Porgie waited. The switch slammed—but on the desk.

"Straighten up," Mr. Wickens said wearily. He sat down again. "I've tried pounding things into your head, and I've tried pounding things on your bottom, and one end is as insensitive as the other. Porgie, can't you understand that you aren't supposed to try and find out new things? The Books contain everything there is to know. Year by year, what is written in them becomes clearer to us."

He pointed out the window at the distant towering face of the Wall that went around the World. "Don't worry about what is on the other side of that! It may be a place of angels or a place of demons—the Books do not tell us. But no man will know until he is ready for that knowledge. Our broomsticks won't climb that high, our charms aren't strong enough. We need more skill at magic, more understanding of the strange unseen forces that surround us. In my grandfather's time, the best of the broomsticks wouldn't climb over a hundred feet in the air. But Adepts in the Great Tower worked and worked until now, when the clouds are

low, we can ride right up among them. Someday we will be able to soar all the way to the top of the Wall—”

“Why not now?” Porgie asked stubbornly. “With eagles.”

“Because we’re not *ready*,” Mr. Wickens snapped. “Look at mind-talk. It was only thirty years ago that the proper incantations were worked out, and even now there are only a few who have the skill to talk across the miles by just thinking out their words. Time, Porgie—it’s going to take time. We were placed here to learn the Way, and everything that might divert us from the search is evil. Man can’t walk two roads at once. If he tries, he’ll split himself in half.”

“Maybe so,” said Porgie. “But birds get over the Wall, and they don’t know any spells. Look, Mr. Wickens, if everything is magic, how come magic won’t work on everything? Like this, for instance—”

He took a shiny quartz pebble out of his pocket and laid it on the desk.

Nudging it with his finger, he said:

*“Stone fly,
Rise on high,
Over cloud
And into sky.”*

The stone didn’t move.

“You see, sir? If words work on broomsticks, they should work on stones, too.”

Mr. Wickens stared at the stone. Suddenly it quivered and jumped into the air.

“That’s different,” said Porgie. “You took hold of it with your mind. Anybody can do that with little things. What I want to know is why the words won’t work by themselves.”

“We just don’t know enough yet,” said Mr. Wickens impatiently. He released the stone and it clicked on the desktop. “Every year we learn a little more. Maybe by your children’s time we’ll find the incantation that will make everything lift.” He sniffed. “What do you want to make stones fly for, anyhow? You get into enough trouble just throwing them.”

Porgie’s brow furrowed. “There’s a difference between *making* a thing do something, like when I lift it with my hand or mind, and putting a spell on it so it does the work by itself, like a broomstick.”

There was a long silence in the study as each thought his own thoughts.

Finally Mr. Wickens said, "I don't want to bring up the unpleasant past, Porgie, but it would be well to remember what happened to your father. His doubts came later than yours—for a while he was my most promising student—but they were just as strong."

He opened a desk drawer, fumbled in it for a moment, and brought out a sheaf of papers yellow with age. "This is the paper that damned him—*An Enquiry into Non-Magical Methods of Levitation*. He wrote it to qualify for his Junior Adeptship." He threw the paper down in front of Porgie as if the touch of it defiled his fingers.

Porgie started to pick it up.

Mr. Wickens roared, "Don't touch it! It contains blasphemy!"

Porgie snatched back his hand. He looked at the top paper and saw a neat sketch of something that looked like a bird—except that it had two sets of wings, one in front and one in back.

Mr. Wickens put the papers back in the desk drawer. His disapproving eyes caught and held Porgie's as he said, "If you want to go the way of your father, none of *us* can stop you." His voice rose sternly, "But there is one who can . . . Remember the Black Man, Porgie, for his walk is terrible! There are fires in his eyes and no spell may defend you against him. When he came for your father, there was darkness at noon and a high screaming. When the sunlight came back, they were gone—and it is not good to think where."

Mr. Wickens shook his head as if overcome at the memory and pointed toward the door. "Think before you act. Porgie. Think well!"

Porgie was thinking as he left, but more about the sketch in his father's paper than about the Black Man.

The orange crate with the two boards across it for wings had looked something like his father's drawing, but appearances had been deceiving. Porgie sat on the back steps of his house feeling sorry for himself and alternately rubbing two tender spots on his anatomy. Though they were at opposite ends, and had different immediate causes, they both grew out of the same thing. His bottom was sore as a result of a liberal application of his uncle's hand. His swollen nose came from an aerial crack-up.

He'd hoisted his laboriously contrived machine to the top

of the woodshed and taken a flying leap in it. The expected soaring glide hadn't materialized. Instead, there had been a sickening fall, a splintering crash, a momentary whirling of stars as his nose banged into something hard.

He wished now he hadn't invited Bull Pup to witness his triumph, because the story'd gotten right back to his uncle—with the usual results.

Just to be sure the lesson was pounded home, his uncle had taken away his broomstick for a week—and just so Porgie wouldn't sneak out, he'd put a spell on it before locking it away in the closet.

"Didn't feel like flying, anyway," Porgie said sulkily to himself, but the pretense wasn't strong enough to cover up the loss. The gang was going over to Red Rocks to chase bats as soon as the sun went down, and he wanted to go along.

He shaded his eyes and looked toward the western Wall as he heard a distant halloo of laughing voices. They were coming in high and fast on their broomsticks. He went back to the woodshed so they wouldn't see him. He was glad he had when they swung low and began to circle the house yelling for him and Bull Pup. They kept hooting and shouting until Homer flew out of his bedroom window to join them.

"Porgie can't come," he yelled. "He got licked and Dad took his broom away from him. Come on, gang!"

With a quick looping climb, he took the lead and they went hedge-hopping off toward Red Rocks. Bull Pup had been top dog ever since he got his big stick. He'd zoom up to five hundred feet, hang from his broom by his knees and then let go. Down he'd plummet, his arms spread and body arched as if he were making a swan dive—and then, when the ground wasn't more than a hundred feet away, he'd call and his broomstick would arrow down after him and slide between his legs, lifting him up in a great sweeping arc that barely cleared the treetops.

"Showoff!" muttered Porgie and shut the woodshed door on the vanishing stick-riders.

Over on the work bench sat the little model of paper and sticks that had got him into trouble in the first place. He picked it up and gave it a quick shove into the air with his hands. It dove toward the floor and then, as it picked up speed, tilted its nose toward the ceiling and made a graceful loop in the air. Leveling off, it made a sudden veer to the

left and crashed against the woodshed wall. A wing splintered.

Porgie went to pick it up. "Maybe what works for little things doesn't work for big ones," he thought sourly. The orange crate and the crossed boards had been as close an approximation of the model as he had been able to make. Listlessly, he put the broken glider back on his work bench and went outside. Maybe Mr. Wickens and his uncle and all the rest were right. Maybe there was only one road to follow.

He did a little thinking about it and came to a conclusion that brought forth a secret grin. He'd do it their way—but there wasn't any reason why he couldn't hurry things up a bit. Waiting for his grandchildren to work things out wasn't getting *him* over the wall.

Tomorrow, after school, he'd start working on his new idea, and this time maybe he'd find the way.

In the kitchen, his uncle and aunt were arguing about him. Porgie paused in the hall that led to the front room and listened.

"Do you think I like to lick the kid? I'm not some kind of an ogre. It hurt me more than it hurt him."

"I notice you were able to sit down afterward," said Aunt Olga dryly.

"Well, what else could I do? Mr. Wickens didn't come right out and say so, but he hinted that if Porgie didn't stop mooning around, he might be dropped from school altogether. He's having an unsettling effect on the other kids. Damn it, Olga, I've done everything for that boy I've done for my own son. What do you want me to do, stand back and let him end up like your brother?"

"You leave my brother out of this! No matter what Porgie does, you don't have to beat him. He's still only a little boy."

There was a loud snort. "In case you've forgotten, dear, he had his thirteenth birthday last March. He'll be a man pretty soon."

"Then why don't you have a man-to-man talk with him?"

"Haven't I tried? You know what happens every time. He gets off with those crazy questions and ideas of his and I lose my temper and pretty soon we're back where we started." He threw up his hands. "I don't know what to do with him. Maybe that fall he had this afternoon will do some good. I

think he had a scare thrown into him that he won't forget for a long time. Where's Bull Pup?"

"Can't you call him Homer? It's bad enough having his friends call him by that horrible name. He went out to Red Rocks with the other kids. They're having a bat hunt or something."

Porgie's uncle grunted and got up. "I don't see why that kid can't stay at home at night for a change. I'm going in the front room and read the paper."

Porgie was already there, flipping the pages of his school-books and looking studious. His uncle settled down in his easy chair, opened his paper, and lit his pipe. He reached out to put the charred match in the ashtray, and as usual the ashtray wasn't there.

"Damn that woman," he muttered to himself and raised his voice: "Porgie."

"Yes, Uncle Veryl?"

"Bring me an ashtray from the kitchen, will you please? Your aunt has them all out there again."

"Sure thing," said Porgie and shut his eyes. He thought of the kitchen until a picture of it was crystal-clear in his mind. The beaten copper ashtray was sitting beside the sink where his aunt had left it after she had washed it out. He squinted the little eye inside his head, stared hard at the copper bowl, and whispered:

*"Ashtray fly,
Follow eye."*

Simultaneously he lifted with his mind. The ashtray quivered and rose slowly into the air.

Keeping it firmly suspended, Porgie quickly visualized the kitchen door and the hallway and drifted it through.

"Porgie!" came his uncle's angry voice.

Porgie jumped, and there was a crash in the hallway outside as the bowl was suddenly released and crashed to the floor.

"How many times have I told you not to levitate around the house? If it's too much work to go out to the kitchen, tell me and I'll do it myself."

"I was just practicing," mumbled Porgie defensively.

"Well, practice outside. You've got the walls all scratched up from banging things against them. You know you shouldn't fool around with telekinesis outside sight range until you've mastered full visualization. Now go and get me that ashtray."

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Crestfallen, Porgie went out the door into the hall. When he saw where the ashtray had fallen, he gave a silent whistle. Instead of coming down the center of the hall, it had been three feet off course and heading directly for the hall table when he let it fall. In another second, it would have smashed into his aunt's precious black alabaster vase.

"Here it is, Uncle," he said, taking it into the front room. "I'm sorry."

His uncle looked at his unhappy face, sighed and reached out and tousled his head affectionately.

"Buck up, Porgie. I'm sorry I had to paddle you this afternoon. It was for your own good. Your aunt and I don't want you to get into any serious trouble. You know what folks think about machines." He screwed up his face as if he'd said a dirty word. "Now, back to your books—we'll forget all about what happened today. Just remember this, Porgie: If there's anything you want to know, don't go fooling around on your own. Come and ask me, and we'll have a man-to-man talk."

Porgie brightened. "There's something I have been wondering about."

"Yes?" said his uncle encouragingly.

"How many eagles would it take to lift a fellow high enough to see what was on the other side of the Wall?"

Uncle Veryl counted to ten—very slowly.

The next day Porgie went to work on his new project. As soon as school was out, he went over to the Pulic Library and climbed upstairs to the main circulation room.

"Little boys are not allowed in this section," the librarian said. "The children's division is downstairs."

"But I need a book," protested Porgie. "A book on how to fly."

"This section is only for adults."

Porgie did some fast thinking. "My uncle can take books from here, can't he?"

"I suppose so."

"And he could send me over to get something for him, couldn't he?"

The librarian nodded reluctantly.

Porgie prided himself on never lying. If the librarian chose to misconstrue his questions, it was her fault, not his.

"Well, then," he said, "do you have any books on how to make things fly in the air?"

"What kind of things?"

"Things like birds."

"Birds don't have to be made to fly. They're born that way."

"I don't mean real birds," said Porgie. "I mean birds you make."

"Oh, Animation. Just a second, let me visualize." She shut her eyes and a card catalogue across the room opened and shut one drawer after another. "Ah, that might be what he's looking for," she murmured after a moment, and concentrated again. A large brass-bound book came flying out of the stacks and came to rest on the desk in front of her. She pulled the index card out of the pocket in the back and shoved it toward Porgie. "Sign your uncle's name here."

He did and then, hugging the book to his chest, got out of the library as quickly as he could.

By the time Porgie had worked three-quarters of the way through the book, he was about ready to give up in despair. It was all grown-up magic. Each set of instructions he ran into either used words he didn't understand or called for unobtainable ingredients like powdered unicorn horns and the blood of red-headed female virgins.

He didn't know what a virgin was—all his uncle's encyclopedia had to say on the subject was that they were the only ones who could ride unicorns—but there was a red-head by the name of Dorothy Boggs who lived down the road a piece. He had a feeling, however, that neither she nor her family would take kindly to a request for two quarts of blood, so he kept on searching through the book. Almost at the very end he found a set of instructions he thought he could follow.

It took him two days to get the ingredients together. The only thing that gave him trouble was finding a toad—the rest of the stuff, though mostly nasty and odoriferous, was obtained with little difficulty. The date and exact time of the experiment was important and he surprised Mr. Wickens by taking a sudden interest in his Practical Astrology course.

At last, after laborious computations, he decided everything was ready.

Late that night, he slipped out of bed, opened his bedroom door a crack, and listened. Except for the usual night noises and resonant snores from Uncle Veryl's room, the

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

house was silent. He shut the door carefully and got his broomstick from the closet—Uncle Veryl had relented about that week's punishment.

Silently he drifted out through his open window and across the yard to the woodshed.

Once inside, he checked carefully to see that all the windows were covered. Then he lit a candle. He pulled a loose floorboard up and removed the book and his assembled ingredients. Quickly, he made the initial preparations.

First there was the matter of molding the clay he had taken from the graveyard into a rough semblance of a bird. Then, after sticking several white feathers obtained from last Sunday's chicken into each side of the figure to make wings, he annointed it with a noxious mixture he had prepared in advance.

The moon was just setting behind the Wall when he began the incantation. Candlelight flickered on the pages of the old book as he slowly and carefully pronounced the difficult words.

When it came time for the business with the toad, he almost didn't have the heart to go through with it; but he steeled himself and did what was necessary. Then, wincing, he jabbed his forefinger with a pin and slowly dropped the requisite three drops of blood down on the crude clay figure. He whispered:

*"Clay of graveyard,
White cock's feather,
Eye of toad,
Rise together!"*

Breathlessly he waited. He seemed to be in the middle of a circle of silence. The wind in the trees outside had stopped and there was only the sound of his own quick breathing. As the candlelight rippled, the clay figure seemed to quiver slightly as if it were hunching for flight.

Porgie bent closer, tense with anticipation. In his mind's eye, he saw himself building a giant bird with wings powerful enough to lift him over the Wall around the World. Swooping low over the schoolhouse during recess, he would wave his hands in a condescending gesture of farewell, and then as the kids hopped on their sticks and tried to follow him, he would rise higher and higher until he had passed the ceiling of their brooms and left them circling impotently

below him. At last he would sweep over the Wall with hundreds of feet to spare, over it and then down—down into the great unknown.

The candle flame stopped flickering and stood steady and clear. Beside it, the clay bird squatted, lifeless and motionless.

Minutes ticked by and Porgie gradually saw it for what it was—a smelly clod of dirt with a few feathers tucked in it. There were tears in his eyes as he picked up the body of the dead toad and said softly, "I'm sorry."

When he came in from burying it, he grasped the image of the clay bird tightly in his mind and sent it swinging angrily around the shed. Feathers fluttered behind it as it flew faster and faster until in disgust he released it and let it smash into the rough boards of the wall. It crumbled into a pile of foul-smelling trash and fell to the floor. He stirred it with his toe, hurt, angry, confused.

His broken glider still stood where he had left it on the far end of his work bench. He went over and picked it up.

"At least you flew by yourself," he said, "and I didn't have to kill any poor little toads to make you."

Then he juggled it in his hand, feeling its weight, and began to wonder. It had occurred to him that maybe the wooden wings on his big orange-box glider had been too heavy.

"Maybe if I could get some long, thin poles," he thought, "and some cloth to put across the wings . . ."

During the next three months, there was room in Porgie's mind for only one thing—the machine he was building in the roomy old cave at the top of the long hill on the other side of Arnett's grove. As a result, he kept slipping further and further behind at school.

Things at home weren't too pleasant, either—Bull Pup felt it was his duty to keep his parents fully informed of Porgie's short-comings. Porgie didn't care, though. He was too busy. Every minute he could steal was spent in either collecting materials or putting them together.

The afternoon the machine was finally finished, he could hardly tear himself away from it long enough to go home for dinner. He was barely able to choke down his food, and didn't even wait for dessert.

He sat on the grass in front of the cave, waiting for

darkness. Below, little twinkling lights marked the villages that stretched across the plain for a full forty miles. Enclosing them like encircling arms stretched the dark and forbidding mass of the Wall. No matter where he looked, it stood high against the night. He followed its curve with his eyes until he had turned completely around, and then he shook his fist at it.

Patting the ungainly mass of the machine that rested on the grass beside him, he whispered fiercely, "I'll get over you yet. Old *Eagle* here will take me!"

Old *Eagle* was an awkward, boxkite-like affair; but to Porgie she was a thing of beauty. She had an uncovered fuselage composed of four long poles braced together to make a rectangular frame, at each end of which was fastened a large wing.

When it was dark enough, he climbed into the open frame and reached down and grabbed hold of the two lower members. Grunting, he lifted until the two upper ones rested under his armpits. There was padding there to support his weight comfortably once he was airborne. The bottom of the machine was level with his waist and the rest of him hung free. According to his thinking, he should be able to control his flight by swinging his legs. If he swung forward, the shifting weight should tilt the nose down; if he swung back, it should go up.

There was only one way to find out if his ifs were right. The *Eagle* was a heavy contraption. He walked awkwardly to the top of the hill, the cords standing out on his neck. He was scared as he looked down the long steep slope that stretched out before him—so scared that he was having trouble breathing. He swallowed twice in a vain attempt to moisten his dry throat, and then lunged forward, fighting desperately to keep his balance as his wabbling steps gradually picked up speed.

Faster he went, and faster, his steps turning into leaps as the wing surfaces gradually took hold. His toes scraped through the long grass and then they were dangling in free air.

He was aloft.

Not daring to even move his head, he slanted his eyes down and to the left. The earth was slipping rapidly by a dozen feet below him. Slowly and cautiously, he swung his feet back. As the weight shifted, the nose of the glider rose.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Up, up he went, until he felt a sudden slowing down and a clumsiness of motion. Almost instinctively, he leaned forward again, pointing the nose down in a swift dip to regain flying speed.

By the time he reached the bottom of the hill, he was a hundred and fifty feet up. Experimentally, he swung his feet a little to the left. The glider dipped slightly and turned. Soaring over a clump of trees, he felt a sudden lifting as an updraft caught him.

Up he went—ten, twenty, thirty feet—and then slowly began to settle again.

The landing wasn't easy. More by luck than by skill, he came down in the long grass of the meadow with no more damage than a few bruises. He sat for a moment and rested, his head spinning with excitement. He had flown like a bird, without his stick, without uttering a word. There *were* other ways than magic!

His elation suddenly faded with the realization that, while gliding down was fun, the way over the Wall was *up*. Also, and of more immediate importance, he was half a mile from the cave with a contraption so heavy and unwieldy that he could never hope to haul it all the way back up the hill by himself. If he didn't get it out of sight by morning, there was going to be trouble, serious trouble. People took an unpleasant view of machines and those who built them.

Broomsticks, he decided, had certain advantages, after all. They might not fly very high, but at least you didn't have to walk home from a ride.

"If I just had a great big broomstick," he thought, "I could lift the *Eagle* up with it and fly her home."

He jumped to his feet. It might work!

He ran back up the hill as fast as he could and finally, very much out of breath, reached the entrance of the cave. Without waiting to get back his wind, he jumped on his stick and flew down to the stranded glider.

Five minutes later, he stepped back and said:

*"Broomstick fly,
Rise on high,
Over cloud
And into sky."*

It didn't fly. It couldn't. Porgie had lashed it to the framework of the *Eagle*. When he grabbed hold of the machine

and lifted, nine-tenths of its weight was gone, canceled out by the broomstick's lifting power.

He towed it back up the hill and shoved it into the cave. Then he looked uneasily at the sky. It was later than he had thought. He should be home and in bed—but when he thought of the feeling of power he had had in his flight, he couldn't resist hauling the *Eagle* back out again.

After checking the broomstick to be sure it was still fastened tightly to the frame, he went swooping down the hill again. This time when he hit the thermal over the clump of trees, he was pushed up a hundred feet before he lost it. He curved through the darkness until he found it again and then circled tightly within it.

Higher he went and higher, higher than any broomstick had ever gone!

When he started to head back, though, he didn't have such an easy time of it. Twice he was caught in downdrafts that almost grounded him before he was able to break loose from the tugging winds. Only the lifting power of his broomstick enabled him to stay aloft. With it bearing most of the load, the *Eagle* was so light that it took just a flutter of air to sweep her up again.

He landed the glider a stone's throw from the mouth of his cave.

"Tomorrow night!" he thought exultantly as he unleashed his broomstick. "Tomorrow night!"

There was a tomorrow night, and many nights after that. The *Eagle* was sensitive to every updraft, and with care he found he could remain aloft for hours, riding from thermal to thermal. It was hard to keep his secret, hard to keep from shouting the news, but he had to. He slipped out at night to practice, slipping back in again before sunrise to get what sleep he could.

He circled the day of his fourteenth birthday in red and waited. He had a reason for waiting.

In the World within the Wall, fourteenth birthdays marked the boundary between the little and the big, between being a big child and a small man. Most important, they marked the time when one was taken to the Great Tower where the Adepts lived and given a full-sized broomstick powered by the most potent of spells, sticks that would climb to a full six hundred feet, twice the height that could be reached by the smaller ones the youngsters rode.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

Porgie needed a man-sized stick, needed that extra power, for he had found that only the strongest of updrafts would lift him past the three-hundred-foot ceiling where the lifting power of his little broomstick gave out. He had to get up almost as high as the Wall before he could make it across the wide expanse of flat plain that separated him from the box canyon where the great wind waited.

So he counted the slowly passing days and practiced flying during the rapidly passing nights.

The afternoon of his fourteenth birthday found Porgie sitting on the front steps expectantly, dressed in his best and waiting for his uncle to come out of the house. Bull Pup came out and sat down beside him.

"The gang's having a coven up on top of old Baldy tonight," he said. "Too bad you can't come."

"I can go if I want to," said Porgie.

"How?" said Bull Pup and snickered. "You going to grow wings and fly? Old Baldy's five hundred feet up and your kid stick won't lift you that high."

"Today's my birthday."

"You think you're going to get a new stick?"

Porgie nodded.

"Well, you ain't. I heard Mom and Dad talking. Dad's mad because you flunked Alchemy. He said you had to be taught a lesson."

Porgie felt sick inside, but he wouldn't let Bull Pup have the satisfaction of knowing it.

"I don't care," he said. "I'll go to the coven if I want to. You just wait and see."

Bull Pup was laughing when he hopped on his stick and took off down the street. Porgie waited an hour, but his uncle didn't come out.

He went into the house. Nobody said anything about his new broomstick until after supper. Then his uncle called him into the living room and told him he wasn't getting it.

"But, Uncle Veryl, you promised!"

"It was a conditional promise, Porgie. There was a big if attached to it. Do you remember what it was?"

Porgie looked down at the floor and scuffed one toe on the worn carpet. "I tried."

"Did you really, son?" His uncle's eyes were stern but compassionate. "Were you trying when you fell asleep in school today? I've tried talking with you and I've tried whip-

ping you and neither seems to work. Maybe this will. Now you run upstairs and get started on your studies. When you can show me that your marks are improving, we'll talk about getting you a new broomstick. Until then, the old one will have to do."

Porgie knew that he was too big to cry, but when he got to his room, he couldn't help it. He was stretched out on his bed with his face buried in the pillows when he heard a hiss from the window. He looked up to see Bull Pup sitting on his stick, grinning malevolently at him.

"What do you want?" sniffed Porgie.

"Only little kids cry," said Bull Pup.

"I wasn't crying. I got a cold."

"I just saw Mr. Wickens. He was coming out of that old cave back of Arnett's grove. He's going to get the Black Man, I'll bet."

"I don't know anything about that old cave," said Porgie, sitting bolt upright on his bed.

"Oh, yes, you do. I followed you up there one day. You got a machine in there. I told Mr. Wickens and he gave me a quarter. He was real interested."

Porgie jumped from his bed and ran toward the window, his face red and his fists doubled. "I'll fix you!"

Bull Pup backed his broomstick just out of Porgie's reach, and then stuck his thumbs in his ears and waggled his fingers. When Porgie started to throw things, he gave a final taunt and swooped away toward old Baldy and the coven.

Porgie's uncle was just about to go out in the kitchen and fix himself a sandwich when the doorbell rang. Grumbling, he went out into the front hall. Mr. Wickens was at the door. He came into the house and stood blinking in the light. He seemed uncertain as to just how to begin.

"I've got bad news for you," he said finally. "It's about Porgie. Is your wife still up?"

Porgie's uncle nodded anxiously.

"She'd better hear this, too."

Aunt Olga put down her knitting when they came into the living room.

"You're out late, Mr. Wickens."

"It's not of my own choosing."

"Porgie's done something again," said his uncle.

Aunt Olga sighed. "What is it this time?"

Mr. Wickens hesitated, cleared his throat, and finally

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

spoke in a low, hushed voice: "Porgie's built a machine. The Black Man told me. He's coming after the boy tonight."

Uncle Veryl dashed up the stairs to find Porgie. He wasn't in his room.

Aunt Olga just sat in her chair and cried shrilly.

The moon stood high and silver-lit the whole countryside. Porgie could make out the world far below him almost as if it were day. Miles to his left, he saw the little flickering fires on top of old Baldy where the kids were holding their coven. He fought an impulse and then succumbed to it. He circled the *Eagle* over a clump of trees until the strong rising currents lifted him almost to the height of the Wall. Then he twisted his body and banked over toward the distant red glowing fires.

Minutes later, he went silently over them at eight hundred feet, feeling out the air currents around the rocks. There was a sharp downdraft on the far side of Baldy that dropped him suddenly when he glided into it, but he made a quick turn and found untroubled air before he fell too far. On the other side, toward the box canyon, he found what he wanted, a strong, rising current that seemed to have no upward limits.

He fixed its location carefully in his mind and then began to circle down toward the coven. Soon he was close enough to make out individual forms sitting silently around their little fires.

"Hey, Bull Pup," he yelled at the top of his lungs.

A stocky figure jumped to its feet and looked wildly around for the source of the ghostly voice.

"Up here!"

Porgie reached in his pocket, pulled out a small pebble and chucked it down. It cracked against a shelf of rock four feet from Bull Pup. Porgie's cousin let out a howl of fear. The rest of the kids jumped up and reared back their heads at the night sky, their eyes blinded by firelight.

"I told you I could come to the coven if I wanted to," yelled Porgie, "but now I don't. I don't have any time for kid stuff; I'm going over the Wall!"

During his last pass over the plateau he wasn't more than thirty feet up. As he leaned over, his face was clearly visible in the firelight.

Placing one thumb to his nose, he waggled his fingers and chanted, "nyah, nyah, nyah, you can't catch me!"

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

His feet were almost scraping the ground as he glided over the drop-off. There was an anxious second of waiting and then he felt the sure, steady thrust of the up-current against his wings.

He looked back. The gang was milling around, trying to figure out what had happened. There was an angry shout of command from Bull Pup, and after a moment of confused hesitation they all made for their brooms and swooped up into the air.

Porgie mentally gauged his altitude and then relaxed. He was almost at their ceiling and would be above it before they reached him.

He flattened out his glide and yelled, "Come on up! Only little kids play that low!"

Bull Pup's stick wouldn't rise any higher. He circled impotently, shaking his fist at the machine that rode serenely above him.

"You just wait," he yelled. "You can't stay up there all night. You got to come down some time, and when you do, we'll be waiting for you."

"Nyah, nyah, nyah," chanted Porgie and mounted higher into the moonlit night.

When the updraft gave out, he wasn't as high as he wanted to be, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. He turned and started a flat glide across the level plain toward the box canyon. He wished now that he had left Bull Pup and the other kids alone. They were following along below him. If he dropped down to their level before the canyon winds caught him, he was in trouble.

He tried to flatten his glide still more, but instead of saving altitude, he went into a stall that dropped him a hundred feet before he was able to regain control. He saw now that he could never make it without dropping to Bull Pup's level.

Bull Pup saw it, too, and let out an exultant yell: "Just you wait! You're going to get it good!"

Porgie peered over the side into the darkness where his cousin rode, his pug face gleaming palely in the moonlight.

"Leave him alone, gang," Bull Pup shouted. "He's minel!"

The rest pulled back and circled slowly as the *Eagle* glided quietly down among them. Bull Pup darted in and rode right alongside Porgie.

He pointed savagely toward the ground: "Go down or I'll knock you down!"

Porgie kicked at him, almost upsetting his machine. He wasn't fast enough. Bull Pup dodged easily. He made a wide circle and came back, reaching out and grabbing the far end of the *Eagle's* front wing. Slowly and maliciously, he began to jerk it up and down, twisting violently as he did so.

"Get down," he yelled, "or I'll break it off!"

Porgie almost lost his head as the wrenching threatened to throw him out of control.

"Let go!" he screamed, his voice cracking.

Bull Pup's face had a strange excited look on it as he gave the wing another jerk. The rest of the boys were becoming frightened as they saw what was happening.

"Quit it, Bull Pup!" somebody called. "Do you want to kill him?"

"Shut up or you'll get a dose of the same!"

Porgie fought to clear his head. His broomstick was tied to the frame of the *Eagle* so securely that he would never be able to free it in time to save himself. He stared into the darkness until he caught the picture of Bull Pup's broomstick sharply in his mind. He'd never tried to handle anything that big before, but it was that or nothing.

Tensing suddenly, he clamped his mind down on the picture and held it hard. He knew that words didn't help, but he uttered them anyway:

*"Broomstick stop,
Flip and flop!"*

There was a sharp tearing pain in his head. He gritted his teeth and held on, fighting desperately against the red haze that threatened to swallow him. Suddenly there was a half-startled, half-frightened squawk from his left wingtip, and Bull Pup's stick jerked to an abrupt halt, gyrating so madly that its rider could hardly hang on.

"All right, the rest of you," screamed Porgie. "Get going or I'll do the same thing to you!"

They got, arcing away in terrified disorder. Porgie watched as they formed a frightened semicircle around the blubbering Bull Pup. With a sigh of relief, he let go with his mind.

As he left them behind in the night, he turned his head back and yelled weakly, "Nyah, nyah, nyah, you can't catch me!"

He was only fifty feet off the ground when he glided into the far end of the box canyon and was suddenly caught by the strong updraft. As he soared in a tight spiral, he slumped

down against the arm-rests, his whole body shaking in delayed reaction.

The lashings that held the front wing to the frame were dangerously loose from the manhandling they had received. One more tug and the whole wing might have twisted back, dumping him down on the sharp rocks below. Shudders ran through the *Eagle* as the supports shook in their loose bonds. He clamped both hands around the place where the rear wing spar crossed the frame and tried to steady it.

He felt his stick's lifting power give out at three hundred feet. The *Eagle* felt clumsy and heavy, but the current was still enough to carry him slowly upward. Foot by foot he rose toward the top of the Wall, losing a precious hundred feet once when he spiraled out of the updraft and had to circle to find it. A wisp of cloud curled down from the top of the Wall and he felt a moment of panic as he climbed into it.

Momentarily, there was no left or right or up or down. Only damp whiteness. He had the feeling that the *Eagle* was falling out of control; but he kept steady, relying on the feel for the air he had gotten during his many practice flights.

The lashings had loosened more. The full strength of his hands wasn't enough to keep the wing from shuddering and trembling. He struggled resolutely to maintain control of ship and self against the strong temptation to lean forward and throw the *Eagle* into a shallow dive that would take him back to normalcy and safety.

He was almost at the end of his resolution when with dramatic suddenness he glided out of the cloud into the clear moon-touched night. The up-current under him seemed to have lessened. He banked in a gentle arc, trying to find the center of it again.

As he turned, he became aware of something strange, something different, something almost frightening. For the first time in his life, there was no Wall to block his vision, no vast black line stretching through the night.

He was above it!

There was no time for looking. With a loud *ping*, one of the lashings parted and the leading edge of the front wing flapped violently. The glider began to pitch and yaw, threatening to nose over into a plummeting dive. He fought for mastery, swinging his legs like desperate pendulums as he tried to correct the erratic side swings that threatened to

throw him out of control. As he fought, he headed for the Wall.

If he were to fall, it would be on the other side. At least he would cheat old Mr. Wickens and the Black Man.

Now he was directly over the Wall. It stretched like a wide road underneath him, its smooth top black and shining in the moonlight. Acting on quick impulse, he threw his body savagely forward and to the right. The ungainly machine dipped abruptly and dove toward the black surface beneath it.

Eighty feet, seventy, sixty, fifty—he had no room to maneuver, there would be no second chance—thirty, twenty—

He threw his weight back, jerking the nose of the *Eagle* suddenly up. For a precious second the wings held, there was a sharp breaking of his fall; then, with a loud, cracking noise, the front wing buckled back in his face. There was a moment of blind whirling fall and a splintering crash that threw him into darkness.

Slowly, groggily, Porgie pulled himself up out of the broken wreckage. The *Eagle* had made her last flight. She perched precariously, so near the outside edge of the wall that part of her rear wing stretched out over nothingness.

Porgie crawled cautiously across the slippery wet surface of the top of the Wall until he reached the center. There he crouched down to wait for morning. He was exhausted, his body so drained of energy that in spite of himself he kept slipping into an uneasy sleep.

Each time he did, he'd struggle back to consciousness trying to escape the nightmare figures that scampered through his brain. He was falling, pursued by wheeling, batlike figures with pug faces. He was in a tiny room and the walls were inching in toward him and he could hear the voice of Bull Pup in the distance chanting, "You're going to get it." And then the room turned into a long, dark corridor and he was running. Mr. Wickens was close behind him, and he had long, sharp teeth and he kept yelling, "Porgiel Porgiel!"

He shuddered back to wakefulness, crawled to the far edge of the Wall and, hanging his head over, tried to look down at the Outside World. The clouds had boiled up and there was nothing underneath him but gray blankness hiding the sheer thousand foot drop. He crawled back to his old spot and looked toward the east, praying for the first sign of dawn. There was only blackness there.

THE WALL AROUND THE WORLD

He started to doze off again and once more he heard the voice: "Porgie! Porgie!"

He opened his eyes and sat up. The voice was still calling, even though he was awake. It seemed to be coming from high up and far away.

It came closer, closer, and suddenly he saw it in the darkness—a black figure wheeling above the Wall like a giant crow. Down it came, nearer and nearer, a man in black with arms outstretched and long fingers hooked like talons!

Porgie scrambled to his feet and ran, his feet skidding on the slippery surface. He looked back over his shoulder. The black figure was almost on top of him. Porgie dodged desperately and slipped.

He felt himself shoot across the slippery surface toward the edge of the Wall. He clawed, scrabbling for purchase. He couldn't stop. One moment he felt wet coldness slipping away under him; the next, nothingness as he shot out into the dark and empty air.

He spun slowly as he fell. First the clouds were under him and then they tipped and the star-flecked sky took their places. He felt cradled, suspended in time. There was no terror. There was nothing.

Nothing—until suddenly the sky above him was blotted out by a plummeting black figure that swooped down on him, hawk-like and horrible.

Porgie kicked wildly. One foot slammed into something solid and for an instant he was free. Then strong arms circled him from behind and he was jerked out of the nothingness into a world of falling and fear.

There was a sudden strain on his chest and then he felt himself being lifted. He was set down gently on the top of the Wall.

He stood defiant, head erect, and faced the black figure.

"I won't go back. You can't make me go back."

"You don't have to go back, Porgie."

He couldn't see the hooded face, but the voice sounded strangely familiar.

"You've earned your right to see what's on the other side," it said. Then the figure laughed and threw back the hood that partially covered its face.

In the bright moonlight, Porgie saw Mr. Wickens!

The schoolmaster nodded cheerfully. "Yes, Porgie, I'm the Black Man. Bit of a shock, isn't it?"

Porgie sat down suddenly.

"I'm from the Outside," said Mr. Wickens, seating himself carefully on the slick black surface. "I guess you could call me a sort of observer."

Porgie's spinning mind couldn't catch up with the new ideas that were being thrown at him. "Observer?" he said uncomprehendingly. "Outside?"

"Outside. That's where you'll be spending your next few years. I don't think you'll find life better there, and I don't think you'll find it worse. It'll be different, though, I can guarantee that." He chuckled. "Do you remember what I said to you in my office that day—that Man can't follow two paths at once, that Mind and Nature are bound to conflict? That's true, but it's also false. You can have both, but it takes two worlds to do it.

"Outside, where you're going, is the world of the machines. It's a good world, too. But the men who live there saw a long time ago that they were paying a price for it; that control over Nature meant that the forces of the Mind were neglected, for the machine is a thing of logic and reason, but miracles aren't. Not yet. So they built the Wall and they placed people within it and gave them such books and such laws as would insure development of the powers of the Mind. At least they hoped it would work that way—and it did."

"But—but why the Wall?" asked Porgie.

"Because their guess was right. There is magic." He pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket. "Lift it, Porgie."

Porgie stared at it until he had the picture in his mind and then let his mind take hold, pulling with invisible hands until the keys hung high in the air. Then he dropped them back into Mr. Wickens' hand.

"What was that for?"

"Outsiders can't do that," said the schoolmaster. "And they can't do conscious telepathy—what you call mind-talk—either. They can't because they really don't believe such things can be done. The people inside the Wall do, for they live in an atmosphere of magic. But once these things are worked out, and become simply a matter of training and method, then the ritual, the mumbo-jumbo, the deeply ingrained belief in the existence of supernatural forces will be no longer necessary.

"These phenomena will be only tools that anybody can be

trained to use, and the crutches can be thrown away. Then the Wall will come tumbling down. But until then—"he stopped and frowned in mock severity—"there will always be a Black Man around to see that the people inside don't split themselves up the middle trying to walk down two roads at once."

There was a lingering doubt in Porgie's eyes. "But you flew without a machine."

The Black Man opened his cloak and displayed a small, gleaming disk that was strapped to his chest. He tapped it. "A machine, Porgie. A machine, just like your glider, only of a different sort and much better. It's almost as good as levitation. Mind and Nature . . . magic and science . . . they'll get together eventually."

He wrapped his cloak about him again. "It's cold up here. Shall we go? Tomorrow is time enough to find out what is Outside the Wall that goes around the World."

"Can't we wait until the clouds lift?" asked Porgie wistfully. "I'd sort of like to see it for the first time from up here."

"We could," said Mr. Wickens, "but there is somebody you haven't seen for a long time waiting for you down there. If we stay up here, he'll be worried."

Porgie looked up blankly. "I don't know anybody Outside. I—" He stopped suddenly. He felt as if he were about to explode. "Not my father!"

"Who else? He came out the easy way. Come, now, let's go and show him what kind of man his son has grown up to be. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," said Porgie.

"Then help me drag your contraption over to the other side of the Wall so we can drop it inside. When the folk find the wreckage in the morning, they'll know what the Black Man does to those who build machines instead of tending to their proper business. It should have a salutary effect on Bull Pup and the others."

He walked over to the wreckage of the *Eagle* and began to tug at it.

"Wait," said Porgie. "Let me." He stared at the broken glider until his eyes began to burn. Then he gripped and pulled.

Slowly, with an increasing consciousness of mastery, he lifted until the glider floated free and was rocking gently in the slight breeze that rippled across the top of the great Wall.

Then, with a sudden shove, he swung it far out over the abyss and released it.

The two stood silently, side by side, watching the *Eagle* pitch downward on broken wings. When it was lost in the darkness below, Mr. Wickens took Porgie in his strong arms and stepped confidently to the edge of the Wall.

"Wait a second," said Porgie, remembering a day in the schoolmaster's study and a switch that had come floating obediently down through the air. "If you're from Outside, how come you can do lifting?"

Mr. Wickens grinned. "Oh, I was born Inside. I went over the Wall for the first time when I was just a little older than you are now."

"In a glider?" asked Porgie.

"No," said the Black Man, his face perfectly sober. "I went out and caught myself a half-dozen eagles."

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