A Fawcett Gold Medal Book

d1628
50c

ANOTHER PART OF THE GALAXY

Six far-out voyages to distant worlds by

POUL ANDERSON
PAUL ASH
J. F. BONE
J. T. McINTOSH
EDGAR PANGBORN
and
ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

Edited by
GROFF CONKLIN

WE UNCONDITIONALLY GUARANTEE

each of the far-out worlds in this book to be among the most ingenious and provocative ever created by the human imagination.

WE FURTHER GUARANTEE

that a visit to any one of them will reward you with a universe of reading pleasure, and that a visit to all will multiply your pleasure by a factor of infinity.

WE NATURALLY CANNOT GUARANTEE
that you will ever want to come down to Earth again after your visit.

Other Fawcett Gold Medal Books edited by Groff Conklin:

13 GREAT STORIES OF SCIENCE FICTION

12 GREAT CLASSICS OF SCIENCE FICTION

FIVE UNEARTHLY VISIONS

ANOTHER PART OF THE GALAXY

edited by Groff Conklin

A FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL BOOK
Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Conn.
Member of American Book Publishers Council, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

"Act III. Scene V. Another Part of the Forest"

—That (in some editions at least) is the stage direction in Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* surely one of his most entrancing plays, and one from which it is a pleasure to twist out the title of this new anthology of "possible worlds." Scene V is that wonderful episode where Rosalind, in her male disguise, scolds Phebe for spurning her faithful lover Silvius: "Thank heaven, fasting, for a good man's love," she says to Phebe, and goes on, "For I must tell you friendly in your ear / sell where you can; you are not for all markets"—a pertinent comment on the foolish vanity of some women.

(. . . But what has this to do with science fiction? Not a thing; why should it?) (It should also be recalled that the American dramatist Lillian Hellman used the actual stage direction as the title of one of her plays some years back.)

Anyhow, it is in "another part of the Galaxy," indeed, that you will find yourself in this collection—several other parts, as a matter of fact. Starting from our own inconspicuous and remote-from-the-center solar system in this enormous aggregation of stars, our authors take you millions of parsecs away to distant planets where they show man putting his imprint on whatever forms of life he finds there, and also taking with him all the foibles and frailties of the human species.

Whether or not *Homo sapiens* will ever be able to venture beyond the confines of his own sun is one of those hard questions to which the present answer, as far as science has been able to look today (not necessarily very far, to be sure), is a reluctant "No." But as recently as 1900, Important People were saying that heavier-than-air flight

was impossible; and as for television—!

However, the story teller need not particularly worry whether his story is possible or not; this is just as true of science fiction as it is of "As You Like It." The thing is that the fun is in the story telling—and story hearing or reading—not in the story's possibility. At least this is true in works of science fiction and fantasy. It may not be true of "serious" novels—which is probably one reason why many of us do not read "serious" novels very often. Too imprisoning.

The real meat and drink in all science fiction—and in tales of the Galaxy in particular—is the way they stretch the mind, expand the imagination, and, of course, make possible a generous amount of commentary on man's actual state through the means of satire, serious or comic. (Not all the stories in this book are satiric, of course; but some are.) This is why it has been such a pleasure to edit this little collection, just as I am sure you will find it pleasant to read. Any other part of our Galaxy is fascinating to contemplate; and here are a few fictional views for you to examine.

GROFF CONKLIN

CONTENTS

THE RED HILLS OF SUMMER

BY EDGAR PANGBORN

A not infrequent complaint against science fiction is that it usually does not deal with real-seeming people, but rather with caricatures, serious or otherwise; animated dolls performing deeds of derring-do or various and sundry other kinds of deeds. One of the reasons I am so fond of "Red Hills of Summer" is that—as in all of Edgar Pangborn's fiction, science or otherwise—the people are genuine human beings, vividly real. Pangborn's truly novelistic talent for character, which I think is a kind of artist's empathy for his puppets, is particularly well developed in this tale of the first voyage of man into the interstellar spaces of our Galaxy.

In it he has his small group of completely believable people plan for the first landing on the soil of a planet belonging to another star. He has a landing party undertake it; and he pictures the logical and yet quietly heroic techniques of new-planet exploration which one member of that party carries out. They are techniques that seem almost inevitable if—a big if— the first planet man encounters turns out to be of the sort pictured here. As for the likelihood of that being possible in "true fact," your editor deposeth not . . .

I

Miranda caught my hand, her own soft small hands gone hard with tension. Captain Madison on the speaker's platform had mentioned the pilot mission, and possible lethal elements on the shining dot below us—bacteria, viruses, qualities of the lower atmosphere not discoverable from orbit. It had not dawned on me till then that my troubled Miranda might be desiring the pilot mission for herself and me. For the last year she had been in the shadow of private unhappiness, often remote even when she was in my arms.

Below us. For the first time in fifteen years that word below was more than a reference to the place where your feet happened to be. It possessed a meaning in relation to the ship, to me as a unit of living matter, to black-haired Miranda.

Madison's square face recaptured my attention. I had first glimpsed it at the beginning of the voyage, when I came aboard with the unsparing eyes of a boy of twelve. That year he was thirty-five. Now at fifty he looked little changed—more tired, hair grayer, voice flatter. Who wouldn't be tired, after the job of bringing our enormous sphere into a safe orbit? My own healthy red-haired carcass felt exhausted too, from the excitement that had churned in all of us since the planet was sighted and we knew we must decide whether to risk a descent. We were in the meeting-room now, all three hundred, to make that decision.

I, David Leroy, am not a scientist nor a technician. Miranda and I were Randies—chosen like most of the kids for good health and what the Builders' Directives solemnly call Random Talents. There's a pride in it. You discover the virtues of comprehensive wide-ranging ignorance.

Captain Rupert Madison was saying: "If we go on,

I don't suppose any of you, even children born in space, would live to see the end of the journey. The distances are too vast, Earth-type planets too far apart. The chance of finding another as promising as this one, within our lifetime, is small. The other choice is to go down—and stay."

It was that simple. A huge frail sphere like ours, built to transport a colony for generations if necessary, doesn't land anywhere. You don't take it into atmosphere. Compartmented and honeycombed, spheres within spheres down to the core where the computer hummed its mathematical daydreams, the ship *Galileo* was designed for one purpose only: to bear our splinter fragment of humanity away from a world that humanity had apparently ruined, away to some cleaner place where the sickness in our germ plasm might work itself out—perhaps, always perhaps, and only after many generations. That errand performed, the emptied shell of Galileo would shine on as a satellite, a golden moon circling a second-chance world.

When you live in close awareness of it for fifteen years, even the new curse of Cain can become a commonplace. But I had been obliged to learn it was not so for Miranda. Her trouble was there, a sense of futility forced on her by the radiation sickness of Earth: for what, her heart said, is the point of a million years of human evolution if it must end not even with a bang, only with the whimper of babies born armless, distorted, blind? She had grown terrified of the times when she couldn't *care* about anything. "Not even about you, Davy . . ."

Captain Madison was hammering home the truth of no return, speaking of what it requires—in terms of industry, labor, raw materials—to build just one launching center like the twelve that toiled eight years to send the bits and pieces of this vessel out of Earth's gravity. Earth had bled herself white for her children, after men once and for all faced the probability of racial extinction. They would build another *Galileo,* and another; would go on doggedly building, all else subordinated, so long as any courage and equipment remained. "The gravity of that

planet down there is a bit greater than the gravity of Earth. Launching centers!" Madison said.

"I remember. That was my life, you know, from teens into thirties, beginning as a grease monkey at Cape Kennedy . . . Well, you know the arithmetic: three hundred colonists don't reproduce a technology that was based on a population of three billion.

"The know-how? We have it all, in the microfilm library. Raw materials, yes—down there we'll find the same minerals, same general chemical pattern. But the building of launching centers, new ships, the reconquest of space if you want that inflated language—let's say it just might be an enterprise of our great-great-grandchildren, if we have any, if enough of them are healthy and active human beings, and if space travel happens to be what they want most, at any cost, in their own far-off time."

Nobody sighed or fidgeted, as many would have done if this had been another pep-talk by our Psychometric Coordinator Cecil Dorman, known to Miranda and me and others of the irreverent as Cecil Psycho.

"The planet is habitable," said Captain Madison, "so far as we know from orbit study." Miranda felt my look but would not return it; her hands grasping mine were cold. "So far as we know," he repeated, "in advance of the pilot mission—which will consist of two men and two women who will go down, maintain radio contact at least four weeks, and make the final tests we can't make up here. Your only vote in this meeting, I suppose, will be to decide whether the pilot mission starts at all—remembering that whatever they find, those four volunteers can't come back."

Behind me, I heard the suave voice of Andrea del Sentiero—fifty-eight, the only colonist older than Madison. His official title was Historian. "Does anything in the latest studies suggest a civilization?"

"Nothing, sir. Forest, savannah, large lakes, marshes, deserts, mountain ranges running generally north and south, a few of the summits snow-capped." He was talk-

ing for all of us, who had had only brief chances at the telescopes; the view-plate in the panel behind him gave a low magnification, the planet a blur of blue and reddish green. "Six continental land masses paired north and south, three main oceans, polar caps small and broken up. Bound to be dense tropics near the equator, the rest sub-tropical, with narrow temperate zones. No roads in the open areas, nothing like cities. No vessels on the seas, river mouths surrounded by the same vegetation that covers most of the land. The reddish green deepens on the seaward slopes of the hills, but that suggests—Dr. Bunuan agrees—a result of rainfall, not intelligent agriculture. Dr. Bunuan thinks we may find something like Earth in the time of dinosaurs. He calls that a half-educated guess."

"Quarter-educated," the biologist's mellow voice corrected him.

Captain Madison grinned. "If you insist, José. No, Andrea, if there's life at the social, technological level it would have to be hidden under forest cover—unlikely."

"Yes," said del Sentiero. "I have no other questions."

"Maybe something to add?"

"Only two things," said the Historian. "One, that my vote will be for going down and making the best of it. Two, that the pilot mission ought to be a privilege of the old."

Captain Madison winced. "You mean, why risk the young?"

Del Sentiero said nothing. I knew, without seeing, the stoical Latin shrug, the dark eyes contemplating eternity, the mild outward motion of eloquent hands.

"Anyone may volunteer for it," said Madison heavily, and he shut his eyes, his face freezing into difficult calm. "Responsibility for choosing the four is on me, Andrea, nowhere else." His eyes flew open, probing here and there. "Questions? Discussion?"

I had expected that Paul Cutter would seize this moment to sound off on the revision of the model constitution, which could not even begin to function until after a landing. The constitution was an attempt of the Builders to

suggest the framework of such government as a colony of 300 might be expected to need. Mirthless and lonely Paul Cutter had grappled with it, conceiving amendment after amendment, identifying his unhappy self with each improvement to the point of monomania. He ate and drank the constitution, slept and got up with it. At any time his blaring monologue might nail you to the wall explaining how it *must* be amended or the whole expedition would Betray the Human Heritage.

Paul was younger than Miranda and myself, a boy of ten at the start of the voyage. Some hereditary slant made him grow from a normal-looking child into a small bandy-legged man, gnarled, not misshapen but seeming so, a bulging head connected by a weak neck to a tight barrel of torso. A bore, comical and ugly through no fault of his own. He had chosen psychology as his field of specialization, becoming a noisy satellite of Cecil Dorman. Unfortunately for Paul's ambitions, not Dorman but the learned, humorous and peaceful Dr. Carey was boss of the Psychology Department. (*Galileo* was certainly in its way a college; I still think of it so.) Paul Cutter never earned a title: a Randy still, the fact no source of pride to him but an ingrowing pain.

I saw Cutter in the front row, big head alertly cocked. Nothing happened. No fresh amendment, no bray of earnest argument. Maybe Cecil Dorman had persuaded him to let the constitution wait a minute or two . . .

We were voting, by a simple show of hands. No opposition. No one could bear the thought of another fifteen years, or another generation, or another century, in space. But I remember that when my own hand went up I was not thinking of that, but of red-green seaward hills, and of the sound of ocean that might resemble what I had heard when I was a boy at Martha's Vineyard watching the loud hurry and change of waves under the sudden winds of September.

I believe this was the only unanimous decision ever taken by the colonists of the planet Demeter.

Madison was speaking evenly: "The pilot mission. You

know the Builders' Directives. You know the necessity. We can't take down the whole colony to be destroyed by something not discoverable from orbit. We haven't the means to break out of gravity and come back. Directives recommend the mission consist of two men and two women. Partly to avoid trusting the judgment of one volunteer. Partly because one sex might be immune to a lethal factor that would kill the other. Partly on the chance that the four might pull through with their survival equipment, and multiply, even if they had to tell the rest of us to stay away. So I want four guinea-pigs. Whoever they are, they'll be four individuals whom we love and can't spare. I am now calling for them."

This was the way it came, like all great questions, not with trumpets but plainly spoken and quiet as morning. I thought at first there was also a question in Miranda's brown-eyed gaze, one not weighted toward yes or no. Then I understood she was not asking me: *Are you going to stand up?* She was silently saying: *I must do this, I'm driven from within. Whether you stand up or not, Davy, I must and I will.*

I took her hand again and I was on my feet.

Five or six other couples were standing, and a surprising number, ten or a dozen, stood up alone. I heard a murmuring, voices here and there attempting the unsayable, as Rupert Madison looked us over through his captain's mask.

I supposed he would choose the volunteers from among the Randies. Breezy Arthur Clay for instance, standing alone two rows ahead of us, solemn as I had never seen him. Or Joe and Miriam Somers, solidly married with the formalities Miranda had never quite wanted for us, decent, unexciting Joe and Miriam who rather thought they'd like to be farmers if we ever landed. Or Laurette Vieuxtemps, a housewife temperament but not committed to any man, religious, reservedly sweet.

Madison told a few of them—all specialists—to sit down. Then he appeared to have reached a private impasse, brooding in his loneliness. Fussy and dapper Cecil Dorman, on the platform with him, leaned forward sug-

gesting something, and shriveled in Madison's glare. Madison would not be saying again, in words, where responsibility lay, but the Psychometric Coordinator was just the one guy who wouldn't understand it unless he got his nose rubbed in it twice. Madison sighed and spoke names.

Just names. No request to sit down.

"Paul Cutter." I was unready to understand. I had not noticed till then that Paul Cutter had risen; his squat form had been hidden by Art Clay. "Laurette Vieuxtemps . . ." Miranda's fingers gripped tightly. I did understand. "Miranda Klein . . . David Leroy."

II

David Leroy, pilot. I had a title . . .

I don't recall much about the entry into atmosphere. I remember a tight-sealed pocket of heat skimming interminably above a world that gradually expanded in the viewplates above my controls. I remember fear, doubt of my own skill based on nothing but years of theoretical drill without experience. Most clearly, I recall Captain Madison's voice, linked to me by the tenuous nerve of radio, a true part of me, the one part that remained unshaken.

I had known there would be breaks in communication —static interference, other difficulties—and there was one when Madison was on the other side of the planet. No foreknowledge can prepare you for such a loneliness. Yet I'd always been lonely, like Miranda, like everyone else, a single human planet in the galaxy of the human race.

Then Madison, remote and *above,* in an orbit become incredibly *swift* relative to my *slow,* was speaking again. I was able to give him a much lower temperature reading, a respectably diminished altitude. He said: "You're past the worst. How do you feel?"

"Fine, dandy and lonesome." I glanced in the mirror that gave me the cabin. "Others in good shape. Colonizing with no pain."

"You'll be over that plateau in six minutes, then test

your power. Better not use it much till you're down to say 90,000—but that's up to you, Davy. From here on you play it by the seat of your pants."

"I'll do that, Captain."

"We won't try calling from the blind side again. Re-establish contact 0940 hours *Galileo* time." Then with some dry noise that might have been static: "See you, boy."

Below me, ocean and red-green land, an infinity of brooding day. I found the 40-mile oval of my target, and tested the power in a long cautious turn—no trouble. Trust the Builders for that.

The Builders? There was no one, no one at all to trust except Miranda Klein, Laurette Vieuxtemps, Paul Cutter and myself. The Builders were finished with us, had done their magnificent best fifteen years ago, and by now many of them would be dead, and, groping somewhere through the unthinkable reaches, there might be a *Galileo II,* even a *Galileo III.* I would not think now about the Builders, who had known they could have no reward except consciousness of a piece of good work completed . . .

Our chosen landing spot was a roughly oval plateau, 40 miles at the greatest length, on one of the three continents of the southern hemisphere. It had been selected by the Council of *Galileo*—del Sentiero presiding, we four volunteers awkwardly attending. The choice had to be partly arbitrary, for the photographic map showed little to suggest that any one spot in the temperate belts would be better than another. I favored the notion of an island, but kept my Randy mouth shut. Del Sentiero suggested the same thing and was overruled: aircraft fuel would give out before our technology could replace it, the building of ships might be difficult, we might even find no suitable timber. And a plateau is, in a way, an island.

My turn carried us out over the sea, then inland, miles above the white summits of a mountain range that rose to the west of our plateau. I cut the power and we drifted soundless in the thickening air.

The plateau lay 30 miles in from the sea. Vegetation

covered most of it, but reddish-white patches suggested open ground, possibly sand. We had noticed the same pinkish tinge on many of the ocean beaches. Easy for landing (I hoped) and an easy mark for *Galileo* to hold in observation. Westward for 500 miles spread the random masses of the mountains, our plateau a midget among their numberless foothills.

Prevailing winds in the southern hemisphere blew westward as on Earth; Dr. Bunuan was surely right in assuming plentiful rainfall on the seaward slopes. The region west of the range was no desert, however, but deep forest, 800 miles of it, divided by the silver furrow of a river flowing south. That forest ended at another, narrower range, following the continent's western shore. Our plateau stood at the 45th parallel south, where the continent dwindled in a triangular pattern rather like South America. No land bridge to the continent in the northern hemisphere, and no continental mass at the south polar region, but a myriad scattered islands, and drift ice, and occasional stretches of blue sea all the way to the pole.

"Handling right?" I had known Paul Cutter would be the first and only one to forget Madison's order about letting me alone on this job. I didn't mind the distraction; the little ship was gliding with almost no need of attention. I did mind the jitters in Paul's crashing voice.

I said: "Yes. You people happy back there?"

"Happy as three ticks on a dog—you're the dog." The voice I wanted, Miranda's. It went on, cool but not too sharp: "Let's keep a cork in it, Paul—the man's busy."

Wounded to the core, Paul boomed: "Sorry! Sorry!"

Two birds, or creatures in the shape of birds, were circling between me and the plateau, as a hawk soars, with unmoving wings. Frightened perhaps by our descending gleam, they sped away downwind—at least I thought, from the gust of speed without wing-motion, that they were heading downwind, and I tried to remember the games of seagulls over Martha's Vineyard. Only the color returned to me and the sense of an airy freedom, the taste of salt wind, the brown ghost of a Portuguese boy who used to play with me.

The smooth course of the ship told me nothing—maybe no wind at all was blowing. Maybe it was blowing some other way at a lower altitude. I saw no wind-motion of the forest, but I was still too high to be certain.

And too low to look down any longer on the mountain-tops. They were above me and would remain above me.

The spot of open ground I had selected for landing was the only one beginning at an edge of the plateau. If the wind was right—where *was* the wind?—I would circle out beyond the edge, come in slightly above it, and still have two miles clear for a landing. With this trim vessel, Madison said, I could manage with less than a thousand yards. But where was the wind?

The time to swing out beyond the plateau was now, right now. The plane made the turn in graceful ease—and dropped, hideously.

I think I yelled it was just an air pocket. But when I lurched out of it we were bound straight for the sullen wall of the plateau. In panic I somehow slammed the power on in time, and ran scared up a channel of hell like a dragonfly on fire. We cleared the cliff by a yard and shot a thousand feet up before I had the wits to level off and cut the jets. Paul was howling: "God Almighty, you almost—"

Miranda's voice came small and cold: "Have a tranquillizer, Paul, it's on the house. Have you noticed, by the way, we're all right?"

I began talking myself, though, when I realized I'd forgotten to lower the landing gear. The talk did me good. I got the gear down. I soared out further beyond the plateau, came in higher, ready for the air pocket, hitting it again and coming out happy, skittering over half a mile of reddish white and touching down in a landing soft as a baby's kiss. Miranda said: "Davy, when you get around to it, explain me some of those nouns and adjectives, huh? I thought I knew 'em all."

We equalized the pressure, a difference too small to bother the eardrums, and breathed the unknown atmosphere—nothing to gain by delaying. It was wild, warm,

the freshness wholly sweet. I could have sat there half an hour doing nothing but breathe the air of Demeter—and wondering whether in a few weeks we would be voting on that name, a poetic whim of Andrea del Sentiero.

The stuff outside was mostly sand, sparse red grains mingled with the white. Miranda whispered: "Be first to set your foot on it." It seemed unimportant, a thing I might do to please her—until I had done it. Then absurd pride startled me, and I held up my arms for her.

Laurette and Paul emerged, Laurette moving away from us, looking toward the mountains in the west—praying I think, or merely wanting a small time of solitude. She had talked with the chaplain during most of our last hour on *Galileo*. Miranda and I had spent that time with the half dozen friends who had been closest to us through the voyage—not saying goodbye; they all wanted to take it for granted they would rejoin us in four weeks. Paul Cutter had employed the hour furiously writing in a corner of the common room—some intense document which he delivered into Madison's keeping. "Not to be opened," he blared for all of us to hear, "except in the event that *Galileo* must proceed without us." Captain Madison took it gravely, probably with no smothered impulse to laugh, and shook hands with the hero.

Impossible that I could ever have looked down on those mountain peaks. Yet I had done so. I would remember it.

Miranda kicked off her right shoe, pressed her bare foot in the reddish sand, drew it away, gazed curiously at the dainty human imprint. I asked: "Are you caring now?"

She held my shoulder, putting back the shoe; watched me a while with midnight eyes; said: "I think I am . . . Let's walk off a way."

We approached the somber edge of the woods. "You'd know it," I said, "wouldn't you, dear? You wouldn't just think."

"Maybe." She was frowning gravely at the sand, not wanting to touch me or be touched. "You've felt it your-

self, Davy, that emptiness. Impulse to give up because nothing can make much difference."

"Sometimes. I found I could push it away by studying something new—holing up in the library—talking to del Sentiero."

"I couldn't. Not the last year anyway. It was partly the ship, the monotony. Suspended animation." She looked about rather blindly into the depth of morning. "We're —home, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't only the ship. I kept thinking, even if we can have a baby, there'll be—ah, what do the damn Directives call it?—70 per cent chance of normal birth. I remember hearing my father say that even the 70 per cent was a sort of statistician's lie. The dice are loaded, Davy. . . . I loved Earth. You did too. I know. Inside me somewhere I've got every word you ever said about Martha's Vineyard. . . . Davy, it's just barely possible I'm pregnant. I can't be sure, hasn't been time, quite." She wanted nearness then, twisting her fingers in my shirt, clinging, suddenly crying. "Let it be true, Davy! Let it be right, not a—not a 30-per-center. I'd care—I'd care *then!*"

It meant nothing to Paul Cutter that she was crying in my arms. I felt his tap on my shoulder, his brazen voice exploding: "Who is leader?"

Miranda laughed; looked past me at the little man and laughed, with brimming eyes—which puzzled the hell out of him. Simply Paul's way. He was incapable of understanding other people's urgencies.

I straightened my face, suggesting that for the moment we hardly needed leadership: we all knew what work was to be done, maybe we'd already done the biggest part by breathing the air and continuing to live. I looked at my watch. "*Galileo* will be calling in fifteen minutes. Until then why don't we just look around? Only we'd better break out some armament, I suppose."

I should have thought of that sooner, too. The bland quiet here made the idea of guns downright obscene. Nothing was stirring. Two bird-like things soared high

overhead, maybe curious at the alien brightness of our plane. The lack of vegetation at this landing spot puzzled me. In places the ground was clay instead of sand; small stones resembling the granites and composites of Earth lay here and there. Nothing suggested animal life. In a spot higher than the rest of the open land, I noticed a boulder thrusting from the ground and a wraith of vapor rising from it to dissolve in the still air. A geyser, perhaps, that periodically flooded the area, killing plant life. The trees, and the rim of very dark grass between them and the open ground, looked rich and healthy.

The trees were in the pattern of Earth, but I saw no such complex of a thousand species as in forests of the old world. One type was completely dominant, a broadleaf tree averaging fifty feet in height, thick-trunked, spreading only at the top, the young leaves and twigs red as maple buds, the mature leaves a hemlock green with wide red veining. The grass was like Earth's except for its darkness, shading almost to a cobalt blue; it grew hardly a foot high, dense as carpet-pile. We had seen that color solid in most of the open areas of the plateau, and it was the characteristic hue of the savannahs elsewhere on the planet.

We opened a storage compartment of the plane. Paul and I slung light carbines; Miranda strapped on a .32 automatic. The bullets for all three were designed to fragment on impact, releasing an anesthetic poison that would stop anything if the wound failed to—anything with an Earth-type bloodstream. Laurette Vieuxtemps, when I called her, smiled and shook her head.

"Will you stand by the radio then, Laurette, till they call in?"

"Yes." She was good with instruments, deft and careful; delicate tests on soil and plants would be part of her work. She returned to the plane, after a last glance at the hills, their red-green mystery, cloud-trailing spires brilliant with snow.

I said: "I don't like carrying this thing either, Laurette. But just at first I don't want any of us wandering out here unarmed."

Laurette nodded amiably. And Paul Cutter said with some clang of bitterness: "Well, Dave, you've answered my question."

"I'm not leader unless you all three agree to it."

I think I spoke with friendliness. I meant to; we had need of it. His face, turned toward me in the mild heat of the sun of Demeter, had gone opaque. Miranda's arm slid around me; she studied the ground, perhaps waiting. Paul said politely, with none of his normal stridency: "Four weeks, they said. I agree you should be leader, for four weeks."

III

At the close of the second day we imagined we knew a little about that plateau. I had hedge-hopped over it twice, beginning to enjoy the plane, except for the always rugged instant of landing.

I flew alone both times—no sense risking two lives with an inexperienced pilot. In the first one I proved that the only part of the plateau safe for the larger landing ships of *Galileo* was the one I had first chosen. Then I indulged myself in a 30-mile flight to the sea above the course of a small river that skirted the northern base of the plateau and wound down through the piedmont past rolling land, meadow and forest, meeting the ocean at a harbor a mile wide. Madison wanted to know more about that harbor.

A small hilly island stood twenty miles out to sea from it, hazy and purple in the sun. It pulled me, called me. I was thinking, I know, of Martha's Vineyard. I thought also of fuel, danger, the need of my people for this plane and for me too; and I did not go.

On my flight to the harbor I noticed a few tawny deerlike animals bounding into the woods away from the shadow of the plane, and some flying creatures, none very close. On the way back something different showed itself, night-black, lizard-shaped, basking in a sunny meadow. I circled down for a better look. Hugely unconcerned, it did not retreat when I skimmed over it sixty feet up. Not

dead, for I saw the great triangle of the head moving, and a twitch of a saurian tail. I shot up then; the sudden clamor of the jets did not disturb it. I guessed the length at twenty-five feet.

We slept in the plane on the first night. My second flight, next day, was for study of a smaller open area two miles from our landing site, that looked reasonable for a camp. It was a clearing of level dark grass half a mile square with a brook slipping across the northern side, widening to a pond near the edge of the woods. I landed and explored.

The pond-water shone deep ruby, reflecting red-leaved bushes. I found the banks pockmarked with prints of small divided hoofs, and noticed one set of tracks with pads and claw-marks, not frighteningly large. Mammals or something like them lived in this land, knew fear, ate each other, bred, died. I remembered my black lizard, his vastness curved rather like a question-mark.

The forms would be new to me. The forms themselves would change, must already have done so through millions of years in the manner of Earth. So far as I knew, so far as I know today, the meaning, if there was one, would be the same.

I was bothered by the absence of anything like humanly edible plants. Maybe the forest would take care of that. Here I found only the short grass and a few of the red-leaved bushes that grew by the pond. I brought a shovel from the plane and drove it into the sod. The loosened earth displayed brown worms, legless grubs, nothing like ants or beetles. In any such region on Earth I would have encountered a hundred forms of insect life. Grasshoppers would have shot up around my feet; bees and flies would have buzzed near me; beetles would have scampered away from the shovel. The grassblades should have been scarred by the nibbling of tiny mouths; butterflies ought to have been drifting and fluttering in innocent splendor.

No bugs. I supposed I could do without them . . .

The earth under the grass was dark, rich-looking, with

a pleasing aromatic smell. We must learn what it could do. I collected a sample of pond water for testing and returned to the others. That was near noon of the second day.

By evening we had moved to that clearing and set up our camp around a light dome shelter—astonishingly large, strong against storms, capable of lasting indefinitely under any conditions the Builders could imagine for a planet that was bound to be much like their own.

We set out a wire-covered pen for a pair of rabbits, potential food. Those, and a few mice and rats for experiment, were the only animals that shared the pilot mission. From *Galileo* would come sheep, chickens, a few precious cattle of a recently developed breed hardly bigger than goats. Other animals would arrive (if anything arrived to join us) in the form of frozen ova and sperm that our skill might or might not be able to bring to maturity—still a rudimentary art when we left Earth.

These outside bunnies were pilot bunnies. Our three other pairs must get along on *Galileo* rations until we were sure the first pair was thriving. Laurette set up her miniature laboratory for soil and water tests. Paul Cutter dug magnificently until the light began to fail. I felt now a kind of permanency and sense of achievement, and Miranda felt it too, working like a little dynamo at whatever came to hand.

Toward sundown I roved the whole clearing again, with the carbine, not wanting it until I noticed the sun of Demeter slipping beyond the mountains, then pleased enough to be carrying that slim bit of functional wickedness. Once or twice I heard small life scuttering away in the grass, but if Demeter was blessed with field mice I didn't see them. We had set our camp not too near the pond; we wanted the wild things to continue using it if they would. As I approached it now, I thought I glimpsed some of those "deer" slipping into the shadows. Later we must shoot a few, for science if not for food. I felt no fear, only pleasure and curiosity, when a night flier, like a bat or bird, hurried over me and flickered into evening light above the trees. . . .

And before dawn on the third day, Miranda was ill.

She woke me before sunrise, during Paul's tour of guard duty. I could barely see her face. She was speaking soberly, carefully, as if describing someone else's trouble—pain in the right leg, in the right foot a numbness that had started as an itching, and now the beginning of fever, headache, nausea.

Under the light of my lantern, the sole of her right foot looked inflamed, but at that time I found no break in the skin; the leg was reddened up to the knee. She said she was afraid of blacking out, and her voice was blurring—but it was Miranda who had the wits to remember how she had made that barefoot imprint on the sand of our landing place.

By mid-morning, near the time of our next radio contact with *Galileo,* she was unconscious. No signs of pain or delirium. She was unreachable, breathing too rapidly in a fevered sleep.

We had given her MH-12, for lack of anything better, and because it's the most generally useful and safe of the antibiotics developed on Earth. Then Laurette had searched the medical information in our "library"—*Galileo's* great microfilm library cut to the essentials. We could expect no precise help there, since the diseases of Earth would not be paralleled closely enough for proper guidance, but what Laurette found concerning Earth's tropical fevers did give me the idea of searching Miranda's foot with a hand-lens. I discovered a puncture so small that without the lens I had missed it completely. It seemed to be a true eschar with a definite center. It could have been made by an infinitesimal wood or mineral sliver, admitting some poison latent in the ground, or it could have been the bite of an organism hidden under the sand or too tiny to see. For what it was worth, and so far as I could endure it, I might then consider the scrub typhus that was endemic in some regions of Earth's tropics, a rickettsial disease carried by a mite no bigger than a grain of pepper.

I remembered my black lizard in the meadow. I would

take him on any time in preference to this. No man is born with any skill at fighting shadows. You have to learn it, and always the hard way.

I could not look at the implications. I could only stand by and wait for Miranda to come back to me; to bring back, if it might be so, the meaning and the purpose I knew I was losing. It was not a case of thinking how I loved her: that was deep-down, bloodstream knowledge requiring no thought, and to think of it then would have made me even more useless in trying to help her.

I was with her—needing to fight, and no antagonist; needing to talk with her, and she could not know it—when I heard the noise of Paul Cutter, subdued because it came from within the plane. Laurette had just rejoined me by Miranda's cot in the shelter; Paul would be talking to *Galileo,* and a black uneasiness vaguely telepathic nudged me to rise. "Stay with her, Laurette," I said, and hurried for the plane.

I saw him at the radio, the prominent, somehow pathetic cords at the back of his neck, his heavy head wobbling a little, his voice attempting a casualness denied by that tremor and by his sweating hands. He was saying: "Yes, the rabbits go for the grass and they're thriving. What? . . . Oh sure, everyone's fine. We—"

He jumped a foot when my fingers dug at his shoulder. I nodded at the transmitter, and he croaked: "Here's Leroy—wants to talk to you." He lurched away, but an animal warning of danger reached me—perhaps he made some half-completed motion. I drew the automatic I was carrying and held it aimed at his heart while I talked to the Captain.

Paul slumped to his haunches and dropped his face on his knees. I told Madison as quickly as I could about Miranda, and he said: "I'll switch you to Dr. Dana, he's right here—then I want to talk to you again, Dave."

Dr. Dana helped me—just the voice and the manner. I could imagine I was in touch with the three thousand years of his tradition; out of space, that was Hippocrates talking. He questioned me, approving what we had done, suggesting other supportive measures. He admitted no

other important measures were possible, since we knew nothing of the disease, hence nothing of the prognosis. He agreed it might be similar in some ways to Earth's tropical fevers, though when I mentioned scrub typhus he roared at me to forget that. But then he mentioned methods of searching the dead sand area for a guilty organism if there was one, and warned against letting Demeter's earth come in contact with our skins; so he would be reviewing his knowledge of the rickettsial diseases, and the snarling statistics of mortality. Well, Paul and I in our digging had both shoved our hands in the dirt several times. It flickered through my mind that Paul himself might be ill. He was sick enough, avoiding the cold eye of the .32, but not with fever.

Madison was back. "Dave, why did Paul say everyone was fine?"

"Oh—didn't realize the seriousness. It's all new this morning, Captain. Laurette and I have been caring for her, while Paul was getting on with the work."

I suppose Madison knew I was lying, and knew Paul Cutter had to be my problem. Paul flashed me a sick and haunted thank-you-for-nothing glare. I gave Madison the rest of the report—water pure, test animals in good shape, no time yet for much aerial reconnaissance outside the plateau. At the close Madison said: "Dave, if you possibly can, be on hand yourself when we're due to call in."

"I'll do that, Captain."

"Soon as Miranda wakes up, give her my love. See you, Davy."

I closed the transmitter; studied the man suffering beyond the gunsights, and holstered the automatic. "Why, Paul?"

He was on his feet and swaying. "Why don't you shoot?"

"No cause, now. You were ready to jump me till I made the report. That was in your face . . . Why?"

"I'm ashamed," he said. "Is that enough?"

"Look: you knew I'd be reporting next time, if not now."

The tremor of his head ceased, his mouth steadied to

tightness. A man of twenty-five, he looked forty. "Maybe I thought by that time you'd—understand."

"Or maybe you only saw them leaving, abandoning us, and didn't think."

"Have it your way."

"Paul, while there's any chance at all, they'll never abandon us."

"You're wrong there." He knotted his hands, white-knuckled. "They'll go. Dr. Carey will influence them. Dr. God-Almighty Carey will see to that if no one else does." I scolded myself for failing to recognize the paranoid pattern sooner; or maybe I was wrong now, and seeing spooks. I made a note that I must talk to Carey at the next contact. "Dave—I've said, I'm ashamed. I was afraid and foolish, and I admit it. Isn't that enough?"

"I suppose it is." It was true—he was sick with shame, and other inward disasters; but did shame fit the pattern? I thought, the hell with patterns—the poor devil was human; leave it at that. Of course he was also profoundly hating me. Because I had seen him in an act of dishonesty and betrayal, he would always hate me. I said: "Let's get on with the work."

He stumbled out of the cabin and resumed digging away sod for our test plot in open ground. Attacking it rather—driving the bright blade into the green face of an enemy.

Late in the morning of our fourth day on Demeter, Miranda recovered consciousness. Her fever had risen to a peak of 106° during an interminable night, when the green-white moon of Demeter was to me no longer enchanting, only sickly and baleful. Then, about dawn, the fever rapidly subsided. Miranda came back to me. I could forget about scrub typhus. I could sweep away all the horrors, because I saw memory and understanding and awareness of my kiss.

"How long, Davy? What's the time?"

"You've been out for one day of twenty-six hours. The computer upstairs has dreamed up a calendar for us—got it yesterday. This is Friday morning—sorry fresh out of fish."

"They know of course?"

"Yes, and since you're recovering it won't make any difference."

"So what's the man crying about?"

"Stardust up my nose—itches. How about your foot—does that itch now?"

"Little bit. No numbness. Feels about all right." Under the lens, the puncture spot looked healed, like any tiny injury.

"You got a bite. I'm going after the beast soon as you're up and around—earth samples, and so on. We'll run down the little devil." She couldn't smile much, but she was trying. "He won't stop anything."

"That's right, Bud—we'll rise above bugs and stuff." She was trying, but then her eyes dilated, she winced and turned her face away from me. "Ask Laurette to come, will you please?"

"Yes—what is it?"

"Oh, damn everything!"

"What is it, Miranda?"

"Don't you know?" I suppose I did. "My baby—it was going to be my—my—Demeter's killed my baby."

IV

Saturday morning Miranda was able to sit up without help, and eat. She said she felt nothing wrong except exhaustion. She blamed that on the gravity of Demeter, but I think it was the after-effect of fever; we other three had adjusted to the gravity with almost no effort. Then after a decent meal, an hour of her old love Sibelius on the tapes, and another hour of just sitting with me in the temperate sunlight, Miranda let me talk to her, and suggest that she had not been pregnant at all. Rejecting the idea at first in despair, she presently came around to accepting it, and I felt she was at least half convinced that Demeter had nothing to do with our disappointment. Just before she fell asleep beside me in the sunshine, she murmured: "False-alarm Miranda. From here on out I'm going to try to behave like a rational mammal. But it's uphill work—you know? . . ."

Sunday morning Miranda climbed into the cabin of the plane, wanting to do it without the help of my arm, and talked to Captain Madison and Dr. Dana, rejoining me with a new quiet resembling cheerfulness.

Paul Cutter was speaking to me only when necessary, and with an intense politeness that affected me like a split fingernail. He made a point of asking, in private, for "official" permission to carry his carbine. There was no danger in him for the present. My leadership had become an immediate fact; I knew Paul felt terror at the thought of having to assume responsibility if anything happened to me. Actually he wouldn't have had to: Laurette would have stood aloof while Miranda assumed it, and Caliban-as-hero would have minded the chores.

When Miranda promised to loaf and rest, I took off that Sunday morning to blaze a trail alone through the woods to the dead-sand area. Miranda's recovery and her new calm had brought the kind of joy where recklessness bubbles near the surface. It had brought me to a burgeoning love for this one planet among all the stars. In such a mood the foot can slip—mine didn't. I went slowly, mindful of my blazes on the wood of these ancient trees.

The forest was all one hush, cool under the thickness of the canopy. I walked on a carpet formed from the rotted wood and leaves of centuries. Almost no undergrowth. At one place, a tree had fallen from old age; here a hundred saplings of the same species had already shot up high at the touch of the sun. Therefore they grew from seed; therefore the trees ought to bear *some* kind of fruit in their season, whenever that was.

Rarely and far apart, I noticed trees with holes high off the ground—natural holes left by the fall of dead branches and rotting of the sapwood. They were occupied. The corner of my eye caught a squirrely character popping into one of them, and I was aware of the scrutiny of harmless eyes.

After the first mile my ears told me of something larger following. I tried quick turns but learned nothing—once,

maybe, a hint of motion retiring behind the reddish column of a tree-trunk. Anyhow not a twenty-five-foot lizard.

I was humming for a while—Schubert's *Die Forelle* I think it was, or some other memory of Earth equally light and happy.

Observing Dr. Dana's instructions, I was covered except for my face, and I took care not to let that be brushed by branches, though I was fairly sure the enemy I hunted lived under the sand. Close-fitting leggings, shirt tucked in, gloves. I carried a shovel, carbine, hand-ax, a sack with several small bags that could be tightly sealed, and a cage with four white mice.

Not much of a load. I supposed I could drop everything but the carbine, fast, but though I caught a few more dim sounds, nothing bothered me. If whatever followed me possessed anything like my kind of wits, it would know I was aware of its presence.

I came out on the dead sand near that vapor column idly rising from the fissured rock. The vapor gave off a slight sulfur smell. It drifted up with no pulsation, no force. Some age-old dirty business in the gut of Demeter, a planet that never asked for us. Yet I loved her.

Apologetically I set the wire-bottom cage of mice out on a patch of sand, with a cloth to shade them from the sun. Poor little rascals, as martyrs to science they even had their bellies shaved, to make it easier for our enemy to bite them—if it would, if there was such an enemy. I filled the small bags with samples of the sand, the clay patches, the good-seeming earth near the woods, the sod, the forest mold itself. One bag still empty, I searched for Miranda's barefoot print. It had been blurred by a breeze that must have stirred the sand at the edges without obliterating it. No rain had fallen since we landed. Nothing had made tracks out on this desolate ground. The ruts of our plane, our shoe-prints, patches where the jets had blasted sand hollows in take-off—all still plain to read.

For reasons of sentiment or superstition I took my final sample from a spot as near Miranda's footprint as I could set the shovel without destroying the mark—bad science, no excuse offered.

Nothing had followed me out here. If anything watched from the edge of the woods I caught no sense of it.

I had been away from the unfortunate mice for twenty minutes. As I removed the cloth they looked fair enough, but when I raised the cage a midget drop of blood splashed on the sand. I held the cage above the level of my eyes. Two of the mice flitted about in natural nervousness. The others were sluggish, and on the shaved belly of one of them I saw another blood-drop form and fall. No sign of normal coagulation.

I spread the cloth, drove in the shovel where the cage had rested, and spilled out the sand with care. That's where I found the thing, a worm two inches long gorged with blood. With a gloved fingertip I stirred the sand and found another, not distended, thin as a fine hair and barely visible, the same pinkish-white color as the sand. Exposed, the things moved feebly, obscene head ends lifting and blindly searching, mouth parts apparent as specks of black.

I drew the cloth into the form of a bag, tied it tightly for my collection and started home.

On the way back through the woods I tried to puzzle it out. If nothing ventured on that sand, where did the worms find their natural food supply? Subterranean maybe—burrowing animals, grubs, other worms. I could leave all that to Dr. Bunuan, but it teased my curiosity, reminding me how mystery is always with us. I could not live long enough to see our colony (if there was to be a colony) become more than a trifling spot of intrusion on a most ancient planet. If we had grandchildren to the seventh generation, this world would remain imperfectly explored—and yet some of them would certainly hunger for space flight.

We never really learned much about the beautiful planet Earth.

Twice I stopped to search the forest mold for more of the hair-worms. I found none, but did find more of the stocky brown worms than in the sod of our clearing. They were active, burrowing, wriggling, hunting. I saw one attack a grub. Grasping organs shot out from either side of

the worm's head and squeezed the grub helpless while the mouth consumed it. Maybe these brown fellows ate the poison hair-worms.

I glanced up from the vanishing grub, and saw what was lying flat along a branch that overhung my trail.

That clawed track by the pond had deceived me about the size of its maker. The paws were disproportionately large, the animal itself lean as an ocelot, not much bigger. The claws, hooked for efficient climbing and piercing, were relatively immense, partly retractile, though less so than a cat's. The creature was hairless, with a reddish-brown skin obscure against the color of the branch. I saw a narrow-nosed head, like a fox's except that the external ears were mere flaps of skin close to the skull. It had the wonderful deep eyes of a beast that must be mainly nocturnal.

I could bypass that part of the trail and circle around. I said aloud: "Would that sit all right with you, Jackson?"

Jackson winced at the sound of my voice—he shouldn't have, after hearing my no-account baritone murder *Die Forelle*—and flattened himself, or herself, close to the branch. I took up the carbine, seeing the narrow head begin a measuring motion from side to side. The hindquarters quivered, the motion of the head ceased in a frozen readiness. Not happy about that, I said: "Look, I'm not a deer. I'm not even a darling."

After all, I suppose Jackson could hardly have forgiven that. He was fifteen feet above the ground, six yards from the muzzle of the carbine. He could jump it with no strain and evidently had it in mind. The mouth opened and closed on interesting daggers of orange teeth. My sights steadied on the narrow head. I said: "Sorry, Jackson!" and fired.

Beginner's luck. Jackson shuddered, dropped and lay twitching, orange-red blood gushing from the shattered head. I turned the body over with my foot. Not ugly nor beautiful, just strange. The sex organs puzzled me—female I thought, but peculiar. I tied the body to my sack, finding it curiously light. We learned later that the bones are partly hollow, and most of the viscera lighter than the corresponding tissues of Earth animals.

Dissection and observation in the next few days also demonstrated that Jackson, the timid and stupid creatures resembling deer, and the mouse-like animals nesting in the grass, are mammals, in the sense that they bear their young alive and nurse them. And they are functional hermaphrodites. Demeter hasn't arranged for boy to meet girl. Well, we're here to fix that.

The brains, even to my uneducated eye, look primitively smooth.

Maybe we can fix that too . . .

We found poison hair-worms in all the samples of sand and clay from the open ground, none at all in the sod or forest mold. The two lively mice from my cage remained lively—not bitten, apparently. Of the other two, one went into stupor the following day, and died. The one that had been bleeding did not die. Its wound clotted normally soon after my return to camp, and after a period of sluggishness the mouse recovered with no observable after-effects.

We repeated the experiment with other mice—couldn't spare many—and hair-worms from my samples. The results were the same. Under Laurette's guidance, Miranda gladly introduced a brown worm to a hair-worm, with delightful results. In sixty seconds, no hair-worm, the brown guy acting as contented as I do after a mince pie.

Conclusion, given me over the radio by Dr. Bunuan: "You've got a lovely little thing there, boy. Apparently the poison is, or is associated with, an anti-coagulant that probably helps the worm to feed. If the bite is interrupted, likely the poison stays in the wound, enters the bloodstream, generates some kind of systemic toxin. But if your trichinoid critter finishes the drink, I suggest he sucks back most of the poison with the blood and everybody's happy. And let me say, Davy, you people have put through a handsome little preliminary study." O my Miranda, burning that night with a fever of 106° and far away! But there was a sweet healthiness in the biologist's way of speaking; he had not forgotten the pain and terror any more than I had. I reserve judgment on physicists, but I'll drink beer with a biologist any day of the week—if

we can make beer on Demeter. "Very handsome, Davy. I wish I was there."

I transmitted his remarks to Paul Cutter. Paul was alone in the clearing outside the shelter, with nothing much to do. We had dug as large a test plot as we needed, the seeds from Earth had been planted—in fact it was almost time for the radishes, rye-grass and other quick-sprouting plants to show themselves if they were going to. I passed on Dr. Bunuan's comment mostly for something pleasant to say. Paul had shown a polite interest in our study of the worms, saying that he had no talent himself for technician's work.

Paul faced me gravely, listened with bent head to my recital of Dr. Bunuan's words, nodded amiably, and replied: "The fundamental error is in the very first clause—as I tried so many times to make plain. If the colony is to be defined as a *republic,* in that opening clause, you bypass and throw away the entire experience of the 19th and 20th Centuries of Earth history, which is absurd. May I remind you that at the time of the founding of the United States of America, the word 'democracy' was a *bad* word, a term of *opprobrium?"* He smacked his fist into his palm; the tawny grazers could have heard his voice and quivered to the vibration half a mile away in the woods. "Now manifestly I am no Marxian. The Russian experiment, for all its important achievements, was ethically and politically a dead end. And why? Because dictatorship supervened. Because in Russia the essence of social democracy was never in effect, once more the cause of the common man was lost. Now in the very first amendment I proposed, or I should say *tried* to propose—"

I heard him out . . .

V

Rain fell heavily all through our sixteenth day on Demeter; warm rain without a wind; we huddled miserably in the shelter. Laurette put in the time mending some of our clothes. Paul read, glued to the scanner—politics I

guess, or psychology. Miranda played chess with me, and listened to Sibelius.

Our seeds from Earth had rotted. The day before we had dug up a few—squash, corn, garden pea, bean seeds, all sodden pulp without life. But here and there a wheat kernel showed a feeble sprout. Even the busy grubs in Demeter's earth had not wanted them.

Of course, one can get along on a carnivorous diet. If our rabbits could flourish on Demeter's grass, probably the sheep and cattle from *Galileo* could do the same. I had shot two of the deer-like animals. We tried the meat on the white rats and then ate of it without harm—muttony and rank, but not impossible.

The rain stopped after sunrise of the seventeenth day. I took off for a wider reconnaissance. Captain Madison had suggested this after learning of the failure of our seeds. Somewhere in the meadows or hills there ought to be edible plants worth a try. Captain Madison had also made it plain that nothing so far reported had discouraged him; his intention was to bring the whole colony down at the end of our four weeks. "Keep in your calculations, Davy, that we'll bring machines and three hundred pairs of hands."

It didn't sound like talk for my morale. And I wondered, I think for the first time, what the mere fact of the pilot mission might be doing to those who remained on the ship. . . .

I left the plateau behind me and flew north, a broadening morning on my right hand. The world glittered from the rain, the forest a field of diamonds. At five thousand feet, I saw that island twenty miles out from the river mouth shining like dawn made tangible.

Del Sentiero's suggestion of an island for the colony had been overruled; but shouldn't I at least go and look? Wasn't I playing it by the seat of my pants, accepted leader of the pilot mission?

Accepted anyway by Miranda and partly by Laurette Vieuxtemps. Paul Cutter was still at his brittle play-acting, ludicrously deferring to me, contriving each time to drop

a hint that my "glory" would end. He seemed unworried about a bloody nose—may have craved one.

With Laurette, the question of leadership hardly arose, for she was sensible, hard-working; given another year on *Galileo* she would have earned a title. There hadn't been more than two or three occasions when it was up to me to tell her what to do, and those unimportant. She was inevitably remote from us in her religious faith, which answered a need in her mind not present in my own. Unlike our kind, perpetually worried chaplain, Laurette paid Miranda and me the rare courtesy of not trying to change our agnosticism. She may have been privately sorry for us, but we were spared hearing about it. We were friends; we got along in the limited area of mental contact.

Again I did not go to look at my island. Perhaps I was afraid that its summoning beauty was an effect of haze, distance, memory and irrelevant dreams . . . Some of the time as I flew north I was reliving a moment of the day before, when Miranda grinned at me across the shambles of the chessboard and said: "The things that happen when your knights break loose are pitiful, that's all. I find myself caring deeply about that butchered pawn, Captain Leroy." Caring—she wasn't talking about chess. She proved that in the night, when the rain tapped on the roof of our shelter, and she was whispering we'd try again, maybe our child would be the first to be conceived on the planet Demeter. . . .

The seaward slopes of the foothills had changed color after the rain. From an even, reddish green they had become a riot of tomato-scarlet splashes. I supposed—and I was wrong—that the downpour must have brought some plant into sudden blossoming.

I skimmed past the hills searching for a level place to land. Not so easy; the terrain was nearly all sloping, vegetation thick. The radio was with me: I had thought it safer to leave it installed in the plane, on the chance we might have to take off from the plateau in a hurry. Now I could picture myself abandoning a wrecked plane and the only means of communicating with *Galileo*. I could observe a lost human fool groping back twenty-odd miles

through unknown forest, no armament except the .32 at my hip, no assurance that I could scale the walls of the plateau if I reached it. Even snug in the perfectly functioning plane, wasn't I a very naked creature in a lonely place? But I think any planet is a lonely place.

At four hundred feet I learned it was no blooming of flowers down there. The brilliance was that of scarlet fruit, on great tangles of low-growing bushes unlike any we had found on the plateau.

Evidently, while it grows, the fruit of those bushes wears a dull powdery bloom. The samples I later secured carried traces of it. It must be that in the final ripening the bloom loosens, washed away by the rain, so that when the hills break out in a sudden gleaming it's time for harvest.

The lizards were at it.

On every hillside where the fruit was shining, a dozen or more of those monsters writhed and scampered on short saurian legs. They paid no heed to the plane, nor to the hundreds of small bird-like creatures that darted about sharing the meal. It was hot holiday for the lizards in the genial sun; their black enormous jaws munched and slobbered, dripping scarlet. Here and there about the slopes, gorged pairs were breeding. When I cut the jets for brief glides I could hear the bellowing and roaring, smashing of bushes and the monstrous slap of black primordial flesh against flesh.

Just hungry and lusty hermaphrodite vegetarians having themselves a Mesozoic ball. But not too good for a little thin-hided foreign mammal who hadn't been invited. I climbed back to a thousand feet and began to get mad. They were first comers by several million years, had a right to the red lush stuff and needed it. But so did I.

A few miles further on I located a small valley in a pocket of the hills, with enough level ground for landing. The eastern of the two slopes closing it in bore the red splashes; the lizards were present there too, but not so numerously. I noticed only five or six as I circled down. If I dared climb that slope on foot for a hundred yards, I would be at the edge of the area where the bushes grew.

It became a thing that had to be done. I don't believe

I was trying to prove anything. I haven't much patience with heroes. I'm afraid many of them have been in the pattern of Paul Cutter, ridden by the devil of one idea, and legend has supplied the pleasing part of the picture after silence took them. I'm simply a Randy who loves the idea of staying alive. I just wanted some of that fruit for my people and me.

The clamor of the beasts surged up to me as soon as I shut off the jets. Only a few, they made uproar enough for a convention. I lit nicely, coming to rest in the shadow of a tall solitary tree, and knew I must start at once, or hesitation would demoralize me. I took a sack for the fruit, and my .32, which might at least make me look like a hero later if one of the boys happened to step on me.

I was counting on the dullness of a primitive brain in a saurian hulk, too dim even for curiosity about the plane. I forgot that while the lizards were enjoying rich food and love, something else might be planning to enjoy the lizards. And, yes, there was a slight error of a few million years, for which I had no excuse after shooting mammals on the plateau. If Demeter's evolution has paralleled Earth's as closely as I think, those "lizards" are a survival from long ago. I was mistaking pseudo-Cenozoic for quasi-Mesozoic—Dr. Bunuan wouldn't have liked that.

At the base of that eastern slope the grass admitted some vegetation different from any I had so far seen. Many individual plants—call them weeds—were bushy, some taller than my head. This tall growth thickened as I climbed. For several yards I glimpsed no more of the revels up yonder, only heard the sodden gurgling and the roaring.

In the thicket I won a good look at one of the small flying animals clinging to a tall weed. It let me blunder within ten feet and then sailed off swift and airy. Not a bird; furry, with small teeth; the size of a big robin. The triangular wings are anchored, not to the hind foot like a bat's, but to the animal's side just below a rather large rib-cage. The free hind legs pull up in flight and vanish in the belly-fur. It seemed to me that two of the modified

phalanges were projecting beyond the upper angle of the wing, but I couldn't be sure. Maybe they hang themselves up to sleep, like bats.

At the upper limit of the thicket I halted to watch through the leaves. The nearest of the red-fruited bushes were still at some distance. I would have to step out in the open—not nice, but better than scuttling back from the riot empty-handed and licked. I told myself those jolly black nightmares were not aggressive. Their enormous grappling—just sex, Demeter style. I'd heard of sex.

The lizards' vision might be dim; maybe that was why they had ignored the plane. Really there was nothing terrible about them except their size. They wouldn't smell me—a light breeze blew toward me down the slope, bringing me their musky reek.

I crawfished into the sunlight holding open the mouth of my sack, and snatched at the red pear-shaped fruit, a little thieving mammal making off with whatever wasn't nailed down. The fruit, big and firm, separated readily from the stems, warm with sunshine, aromatic like muskmelon, smooth and delightful in the hand.

The lizards paid no attention, though the bushes where I was pilfering their steak and potatoes stood hardly twenty yards from the spot where the nearest one of them lurched about alone. And when the other beast crashed out of deep bushes up there on my left, the only lizard that acted aware of the attack was that nearest one—when he was knocked flat by the rushing impact, stricken in the belly by orange fangs.

Earth-born, I thought of it as a bear—shaggy block of body, massive head, thick long-clawed legs. The color was dull cinnamon. It was more than half the length of the lizard it assaulted, and taller—I suppose about the size of the brown Kodiak bears of Alaska. Now, being still alive, I peacefully remember, from boyhood reading, someone's statement that if a Kodiak bear stood upright inside an ordinary house his head would poke well into the second story—so it wouldn't do you much good to hightail into the bathroom and slam the door.

That killer was majestically casual, rearing over the lizard, driving down both forepaws as a bear might grab a log, twitching the black monster over on its back with impudent ease and tearing open the pale belly with a swipe of orange tusks. Then I think it sheared the muscles of the hind legs, the stabbing bites too swift for my eye to follow. The lizard's legs quit threshing; they twitched without effort or purpose. I saw no teeth in the howling cavern of the lizard's mouth. And while the bear began to feed on the slow-dying thing, the other lizards up the slope continued gorging and mating.

I'm not sure a small mammal from Earth's 21st Century should have witnessed that kind of death. No more significant than other kinds, but at this moment of writing I tend to remember it too much: the gaudy mess of it, the other lizards' unconcern, the mindless cruelty that was not cruelty at all but only single-minded hunger. For a second or two there in the sun I myself was lizard and bear, killer and killed, knowing down in the gut how it was for both of them.

After all, in the home cave of one of my great-grandfathers, Homo Pekinensis, there was a rather messy assortment of human bones, well gnawed; difficult to hush up that kind of family history.

I backed slowly into the thicket, once more Homo Quasi-sapiens. I had my peewee .32 out; my left hand clung to the sack with its couple of dozen lumps of scarlet treasure. Some noise I made must have caused the bear's head to swing. It saw me and stood quiet, measuring me with little wicked orange-veined eyes. A chunk of the lizard's liver hung dripping from its under jaw.

No use trying to freeze; it knew I was alive and interesting. It turned unhurriedly to study me. The piece of liver, bigger than my head, dropped to the ground. Not losing sight of me, the bear snuffed it, swallowed it in a gulp, and walked toward me, head swaying from side to side. Under stress one still observes: for the record, the pair of upper teeth that would be called canine in an Earth animal are about ten inches long, and slant outward; I

believe the ends thrusting down beyond the under jaw have a slicing edge on the inner side.

I fired twice, trying for the eyes. Then I was in the thicket, reeling to one side as the crazed roaring mass plunged for the spot where I had been, and shuddered past me down the hill. It fell, rose on its hind legs to an impossible height, fell again rolling, scrabbling pitiably at its head with both paws, as a human being might clutch at a mortal wound. It should have been dead or helpless from the anesthetic poison in those bullets. But it would not die.

I followed. My body was sick and shaking. When the beast fell the second time, I managed to control my right hand and place more shots. One of them pierced the spine, for the bear plainly could not rise. But since it could not even then die, I must suppose the poison of those bullets has no rapid effect in the bloodstream of the animals of Demeter. The deer-like things, and the ocelot-like thing, I had shot on the plateau received heart or head wounds severe enough to account for the way they toppled over without a struggle. That bear was still trying to crawl toward me, hauling with vast forelegs, when I stepped close and put him out with a bullet that shattered the skull.

My wits came back, too gradually. I knew I was hearing something beside the commotion of the lizards up the hill. I pawed at the sweat dribbling into my eyes. Well, of course—that shrill imperious buzz could only be our radio in the plane. *Galileo* calling, report overdue.

My left hand was locked in a grip on that sack or I might have lost it. I remembered it as I reached the plane and flung it in ahead of me. I croaked: "Leroy to *Galileo,* over."

"Where the *hell* were you?" Madison was shouting. "You all right?"

"Yes. Recon, away from plane, sorry, ran into bit of delay."

"All right."

"Sure. I just—"

He cut in sharply: "Where are you? Where's the plane?"

"I'm about thirty miles north of the plateau. Went to look for edible plants, found 'em too I think. I—"

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"What's the fog, Davy? We can't even find the plateau."

"Fog?" I was panting, sick and stupid. "Fog, on the plateau?"

VI

Madison said carefully: "There are several areas of thick fog over the region of the plateau and south of there. They were still developing when we got your territory in the sights ten minutes ago. Now they seem to have stopped spreading. I'm watching a white blur the same size and shape as the plateau. I can see five other fog areas along the foothills to the south, none up where you must be. Over."

"I'm taking off." I did, my hands thinking for me. The jets roared and I was climbing.

"I think I see you—sun on the wings. In a valley, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"You'll see the fog from six or seven thousand, then save your fuel. And don't get nerved up—it looks like ordinary fog, milky white. I don't see how it could be smoke, starting in so many different places at once. . . . What about that geyser you reported? Are there others like it on the plateau?"

I had seen none; there could have been. A few of the open areas on the plateau were blank sand instead of grass. There could have been fissures with no vapor columns to reveal them. I remembered and mentioned the rain of the day before. "Could that have touched off something?"

Madison said: "Dr. Matsumoto thought of it when we saw the fog. He's sweating it out—I'm no geologist, Davy. He says it's reasonable—if a heavy seepage of water reached something hot underground, you might get a vapor

cover like that. If it's just water vapor, it ought to dissipate fairly soon in this sunlight. Is there any wind?"

"Hardly any."

Now I could see it in the south, a horror of sluggishly heaving white where I had left my people at work and cheerful in a sparkling morning. And once again I glimpsed my island, far to the left, twenty miles out to sea. No fog there. A fringe of beach was peacefully gleaming; the low hills stood tranquil under the sun.

"You've reported there's never much wind."

"Only day before yesterday, wind and some overcast, the day before the rain. Inshore and offshore breezes night and morning, but at the camp we've hardly noticed them; the trees shut them away. . . . I'm at eight thousand and going down. I've got the landmarks beyond the plateau that show me where the camp is."

"You can't try to land till it clears—hell, what am I saying? You don't need to be told."

I didn't need to be told, but I wanted his voice, or failing that, my own. I reported on the morning's flight, the bushes on the hills, the shift to scarlet and the reason for it. I told him of the lizards' festival, the thing I had killed, the fruit with me in the plane cabin.

"There'll be food," he said, "and ways of growing more. Ways of doing without most of the things we knew on Earth."

"Including war."

"Including war, I hope, though not the causes of it, which were bound to travel with us, Davy. Look, I must say again, I must make sure you understand—there's been nothing in the reports to change my mind. And this fog doesn't, no matter what the reason for it is. This is our planet and we must take it, never mind your damn dinosaurs and cave bears and hair-worms—that's all duck soup. Don't worry about it." He sounded tired, and hoarse. "Where are you now?"

"About five miles to go. It looks like—just fog."

"What matters," he said, "is our people. The ways of living we must find. New problems. What to do about

the—30-per-centers. A lot of things not in the Builders' Directives, Davy."

"We make our own, don't we?"

"Of course. And the Builders knew that. All they could give us were sketches—history. You know, Davy, I'm rather ashamed, how ignorant of history I was until three or four years ago, when Andrea began to get through my engineer's crust. Well . . . With this world we must somehow do better." Then when I most needed to hear him, his voice was cut short by a cough. He spoke two or three more words, blurred as if he had turned his face away from the transmitter. I caught the meaningless hum of other voices near him.

Confusion and then silence from the control room of *Galileo*. Seething below me, a white nothing of fog.

Down in that sea of blindness, Miranda and the others —I couldn't think. I climbed high with full power and drifted down again. If they were alive they would hear the jets. Why shouldn't they be alive? It was only fog—only fog. If it meant some upheaval from underground, that would have happened before, at other rains—but animals and plants lived on the plateau. Why shouldn't my people be alive?

Meanwhile *Galileo* was slipping away to the blind side of the world. I called them a few times. Then at last: "*Galileo* to Leroy." I knew that voice.

"Receiving."

"Del Sentiero, David. The Captain was called away. One of the patches of fog south of you is clearing. Can you find anything yet?"

"Not yet. Thought I saw treetops, but can't be sure. I'm climbing again, to try it from six thousand."

"David, consider this an order, as if Captain Madison were transmitting it. When the fog clears, if you find the worst has happened and the others are lost—though there's no reason I can see to expect it—you will then do everything possible to keep your own self alive, and you will assist the rest of the colony in coming down. . . . Are you hearing me?"

"Yes. The rest of the—"

"We're coming down. Tomorrow or the day after."

"But—"

"Forget the four weeks. I can't give you details—no time, we'll soon be out of range. See anything yet?"

"Treetops—yes—it can't be anything else—yes!" I was babbling. The plane had gone dangerously low. I shot up away from the white confusion, but the spots of darkness I had seen could only be treetops.

Del Sentiero was saying: "You'll find them. Just fog. One place south of you looks almost normal. Did a minute ago, I mean. We're out of sight now." His voice was smooth but faint. I lost some other words in a crackle of static. They would be slipping to the other side, presently watching the depth of Demeter's night.

I rechecked the outer landmarks. The tallest trees near our clearing grew by the pond. I saw those tops rising from the swirl of fog and recognized them, dripping, steaming with a thinner vapor in the sun.

Then at the top of the tallest tree—motion, a flutter of white and blue. Why, on all the world of Demeter I don't suppose there's more than one such bit of color, and that one is a blouse Miranda wears. I was shouting like an idiot as I dipped the plane to let her know I had seen it. Then I swept around and rose—not high this time, no need.

Cottony white smothered the clearing still, but it was dwindling. Soon I made out the upper half of our dome shelter. I could find time now to fret about *Galileo,* and Captain Madison. He couldn't have been called away by trouble with the ship, could he? My ignorant mind pecked at the notion of an error in the orbit—then I was going down into a rolling ground-fog, knowing that the fog was no more than four or five feet thick on the landing strip. I touched down, and stepped into vapor barely waist-high, walked through it over the invisible grass.

Miranda was still waving her blouse like a flag as we ran to each other in the mist, speaking the same stumbling words and not by chance: "What am I without you?"

The damp air carried a faint reek of sulfur and something unidentifiable; not a sharp irritant, merely unpleasant. Some fog swirled to my nostrils; I breathed it with no apparent harm, as Miranda talked in a roughened, uncomfortable voice.

"The others must be all right. I breathed it, I'm alive. I think they're still in the shelter. I'd gone to the pond for drinking water when it began. I thought, just evaporation from wet ground, then it came thicker, I couldn't see my way back to the shelter. Couldn't see a foot ahead, eyes watered." I saw they were still slightly inflamed; her cute nose was reddened; but she was alive. "I called, I guess they didn't hear—it choked me some, couldn't make much noise. People can't live here, Davy, if this happens."

"No, but I've found a place where they can. Our island —wait till you see—no fog there." I couldn't talk well either.

She was rubbing her face in my shirt. "Couldn't think of anything but that tree."

"Good thinking."

"At the top, it was all around me still, but I knew you'd be coming back. I just hung on—"

I said: "How else would we ever win Demeter . . . ?"

Laurette was in the shelter, in her "room"—we used that word for the plastic-walled compartments that gave us a bit of privacy—and she was alone. I shouted for Paul and heard no answer. Laurette was red-eyed, rednosed, from the vapor I think, and not from tears. As Miranda hurried in, Laurette looked up from the table where she sat, indifferently, almost as if puzzled by Miranda's urgency.

"Laurette, come out of this! It's clearing outside. Davy's got back." Laurette blinked; Miranda shook her. "What's the matter? Come out into the air, it's much clearer outside."

Laurette stood up then drowsily and left the shelter with us. She gazed about the clearing, where now the fog was no more than a heaving, milky blur over the grass. She said: "We go on living a while?"

"Laurette, what's happened?"

"Why, nothing, Miranda." She was not speaking impatiently. "I understand it now, that's all. We weren't meant to come here."

"Not meant"—for once in my life I saw Miranda angry. She started once or twice to speak, then only said, with too much restraint: "Forgive me if I don't think you're that much wiser than the rest of us."

"Nothing to forgive." Laurette spoke gently, and with the note of forgiveness. "I'm not, dear, it's not *my* wisdom. You see, we've all been very stupid. The radiation sickness back on Earth—that was the judgment. We should have understood then."

Miranda's brown eyes went incandescent, then quiet. "Well," she said, "maybe you'd still better forgive me, for understanding my own little speck of life rather differently."

I noticed a table outside the shelter, part of Laurette's laboratory equipment, overturned, solutions spilled, glassware broken. No great damage except the loss of several hours of good work. I asked: "Did Paul do that? Where is he, Laurette?"

"No," she said remotely, "I did it. I'm sorry—I guess I got a bit emotional: silly of me. I know you don't look at these things the way I do. Paul—I don't know. He went off somewhere, into the fog." She shrugged, turning more matter-of-fact, more like the girl we had known. "I won't disgrace you again. I can see we're nothing but naughty children fighting against the will of God, but since we're still alive—well, that must be His will too—somehow. I won't say any more about it—you can't see it my way, you don't understand. . . . I couldn't see for sure, David, but I think Paul went—that way." She pointed toward the pond.

"You two stay together while I find him. That's an order . . ."

I found him soon, by the noise of his footsteps, a small man blundering toward me through misty tree-shadows, halting when he saw me, frowning with folded arms but letting me approach, too unhappy to be absurd. His mouth was tight, his inflamed eyes steady on me and aloof.

"Leroy—did Captain Madison order you to go on that flight this morning?"

"Order me?" I was stupidly puzzled. "No. He suggested it . . . How do you feel?"

"As you can see, I am still alive." He tapped a foot on the ground, brooding, watching me. "He suggested it —I suppose after a conference with Dr. Matsumoto?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I know—I'm not supposed to be able to figure things out . . . I dare say, as soon as you reported that vapor coming out of the rock, Matsumoto guessed what might happen after a rain. Then he, and Carey of course, and Madison—oh well, let it go. You're just a sort of—innocent tool, Leroy. You know that, don't you?"

In a way, I blame Paul's paranoid state at that time partly on the fog. I don't know its chemical qualities—I suppose our experts will study it when the colony comes down—but I do know one true name for the thing that rode that mist: Fear. Laurette had retreated, in her fashion. Paul had retreated, into this. Miranda—just hung on. And I was by force of circumstances a pilot. With a Randy's scattered knowledge of everything in general and nothing in particular, I groped after what I ought to do here and now. I said: "Paul, the colony is coming down tomorrow or the day after. Del Sentiero just told me so."

"Del Sentiero!" Something blazed up cleanly in him—courage or hope or common sense—and a great deal of the misery and sour suspicion drained away. I take no credit for it; I hadn't remembered that del Sentiero was one of the few he admired and, more important, trusted. "Well!—that's different! Tomorrow? They're not waiting?"

"No. The ship went out of range before del Sentiero could explain it, but I got that much for sure. And I've found a place where there's no fog, an island. We're going there now, soon as we can pack up—let's get going."

"An island." He liked that too. He rubbed his face, and smiled, and delivered the greatest understatement so far made on the planet Demeter: "I suppose my judgment isn't always too good, Dave, and I've been under a—sort of strain."

"Sure," I said. "Let's move." I bumped his shoulder, and we walked peacefully back to the plane, damn near friends.

Today is the 21st of June, and the sound of ocean beyond our shelter is the music I remember from childhood.

It is not the month of June on the planet Earth. Andrea del Sentiero (whom I shall see tomorrow) suggested we might give that name to our first month here, because in the old world June was a month of beauty and beginnings, an end to the troubling dangerous time of spring.

The orbit of Demeter and the phases of the green moon give us a year of fourteen four-week months. We can name the others as we please, when June is over. Next year, if the bushes grow that quickly from the seed I took, the hills of this island will redden with the harvest of early summer. But this is the 21st of June in the Year One.

The island is quiet. I miss the morning and evening music of the birds I remember. I miss the butterflies and moths, the dragonflies. We shall gradually learn about other creatures of Demeter, and our children—if we can have them—will feel no such nostalgia.

A firm beach two miles long faces the mainland, and two promontories like the horns of a crescent create a bay there; it would be a good harbor for boats of shallow draft. I landed on the beach. The larger landing ships from *Galileo* can touch down on the water and ride in easily. East of the crescent, the island is an oval block of about thirty square miles, the only level land in small mountain valleys of the interior. I noticed lakes and streams, one large enough to be called a river. No red fruit grows on the slopes. I believe it will.

We flew low over every part of the island before landing. Miranda spotted a few "deer." No larger forms; no lizards. The bears could be living here—if they are they'll have to go the hard way. We have searched samples of the beach sand for hair-worms and found none. They may be here but didn't Captain Madison himself call that sort of thing duck soup?

We had the shelter up, under tree cover at the edge

of the beach, when *Galileo* called in again. It was Andrea del Sentiero. Even that early, I could honestly give him a good report of the island, and he told me once more that the colony would come down without waiting for the four weeks. I asked for three or four days to explore and make sure, and he agreed—I may have spent too much of that time in writing up this sketchy personal account. But we know the island is good. As for shortening the pilot mission—well, those people up there voted so.

In a sense, they voted against the Builders' Directives, or at least against the logic of the pilot mission, which so far as I can see is still perfectly unanswerable—as logic. Against it, our people mount the equally unanswerable logic of love. They said in effect that since we four had come down, they could do nothing but follow.

Del Sentiero said: "David, with regard to Captain Madison . . ."

The silence hurt. I said: "What?"

"I'm sorry, I was hunting for words, but there are none of the kind I need. I suggest you remember the legend of Moses. It happened very quickly, David. A coronary —he'd been getting warnings; no one else knew of it except Dr. Dana. After that coughing spell—I guess you heard it—he turned to us and said: 'Davy's going down, but the fog is clearing.' Then I think his eyes troubled him, because he stood up and tried to move nearer the view-plate. I reached him before he fell. He said: 'We'll do better—we must.'

"That was all, David—but I think he was satisfied that we would. . . . You agree?"

"Yes."

And I do. Laurette may see us as the naughty rebellious children of God. Paul may spin visions of a perfect state that can never exist except inside the sanctuary of a lonely mind. Miranda will just hang on. And I think we shall be able to deal with each other in charity, more or less, and mind our campfires.

BIG SWORD
BY PAUL ASH

It has been said that our Galaxy is so huge, and contains so many stars with their array of planets, that practically every conceivable—and many inconceivable—variations on the theme of life should exist somewhere in its vastness. Most of the planets will, of course, be empty of any living matter —and, indeed, be completely uninhabitable. Some, though, like Lambda in this story, may have their own individual and probably unique life forms.

The field of science fiction has produced, over the past few decades, a bewilderingly various number of imaginative inventions on the theme of life in the universe; but few as ingenious as the one you will encounter in this tale. It utilizes one of our own Earth's most bizarre methods of achieving the continuity of life that is race immortality, and for the same cause, as you will see. There is no reason on earth or off it why there should not be parallels of that sort between the ways of our own fauna and flora and those of planets millions of light years distant from us, in actual reality as well as in fiction.

By the way, the pseudonymous British author, Paul Ash, has also published two science fiction stories in Analog *under the name of "Pauline Ashwell"—which is also a pseudonym! How is that for a "double cover?"*

He was taller than the tallest by nearly an inch, because the pod that hatched him had hung on the Tree more than twenty days longer than the rest, kept from ripening by all the arts at the People's command. The flat spike sheathed in his left thigh was, like the rest of him, abnormally large: but it was because he represented their last defense that they gave him the name, if a thought-sign can be called that, of "Big Sword."

He was a leader from his birth, because among the People intelligence was strictly proportional to size. They had two kinds of knowledge: Tree-knowledge, which they possessed from the moment they were born; and Learned-knowledge, the slow accumulation of facts passed on from one generation to another with the perfect accuracy of transmitted thought, which again was shared by all alike. The Learned-knowledge of the People covered all the necessities that they had previously experienced: but now they were faced with a wholly new danger and they needed somebody to acquire the Learned-knowledge to deal with it. So they made use of the long-known arts that could delay ripening of the pods on the Tree. These were not used often, because neighboring pods were liable to be stunted by the growth of an extra-large one, but now there was the greatest possible need for a leader. The Big Folk, after two years of harmlessness, had suddenly revealed themselves as an acute danger, one that threatened the life of the People altogether.

Tree-knowledge Big Sword had, of course, from the moment of his hatching. The Learned-knowledge of the People was passed on to him by a succession of them sitting beside him in the treetops while his body swelled and hardened and absorbed the light. He would not grow any larger: the People made use of the stored energy of sunlight for their activities, but the substance of their

bodies came from the Tree. For three revolutions of the planet he lay and absorbed energy and information. Then he knew all that they could pass on to him, and was ready to begin.

A week later he was sitting on the edge of a clearing in the forest, watching the Big Folk at their incomprehensible tasks. The People had studied them a little when they first appeared in the forest, and had made some attempt to get in touch with them, but without success. The Big Folk used thought all right, but chaotically: instead of an ordered succession of symbols there would come a rush of patterns and half-patterns, switching suddenly into another set altogether and then returning to the first, and at any moment the whole thing might be wiped out altogether. Those first students of the People, two generations ago, had thought that there was some connection between the disappearance of thought and the vibrating wind which the Big Folk would suddenly emit from a split in their heads. Big Sword was now certain that they were right, but the knowledge did not help him much. After the failure of their first attempts at communication the People, not being given to profitless curiosity, had left the Big Folk alone. But now a totally unexpected danger had come to light. One of the Big Folk, lumbering about the forest, had cut a branch off the Tree.

When they first arrived the Big Folk had chopped down a number of trees—ordinary trees—completely and used them for various peculiar constructions in the middle of the clearing, but that was a long time ago and the People had long since ceased to worry about it. Two generations had passed since it happened. But the attack on the Tree itself had terrified them. They had no idea why it had been made and there was no guarantee that it would not happen again. Twelve guardians had been posted round the Tree ready to do anything possible with thought or physical force to stave off another such attack, but they were no match for the Big Folk. The only safety lay in making contact with the Big Folk and telling them why they must leave the Tree of the People alone.

Big Sword had been watching them for two days now

and his plan was almost ready. He had come to the conclusion that a large part of the difficulty lay in the fact that the Big People were hardly ever alone. They seemed to go about in groups of two or three and thought would jump from one to another at times in a confusing way: then again you would get a group whose thoughts were all completely different and reached the observer in a chaotic pattern of interference. The thing to do, he had decided, was to isolate one of them. Obviously the one to tackle would be the most intelligent of the group, the leader, and it was clear which one filled that position: he stood out among his companions as plainly as Big Sword. There were one or two factors to be considered further, but that evening, Big Sword had decided, he would be ready to act.

Meanwhile the Second Lambdan Exploratory Party had troubles of their own. Mostly these were the professional bothers that always accompany scientific expeditions; damaged equipment, interesting sidelines for which neither equipment nor workers happened to be available, not enough hours in the day. Apart from that there was the constant nag of the gravitation, twenty per cent higher than that of Earth, and the effect, depressing until you got used to it, of the monochromatic scenery, laid out in darker and lighter shades of black and gray. Only the red soil and red rocks varied that monotony, with an effect which to Terrestrial eyes was somewhat sinister. Nevertheless, the Expedition were having fewer troubles than they expected. Lambda, apparently, was a thoroughly safe planet. Whatever those gray-and-black jungles might look like it appeared that they had nothing harmful in them.

At thirty light-years away from Earth most personal troubles had got left behind. John James Jordan, however, the leader of the party, had brought his with him. His most urgent responsibility was in the next cabin, in bed and, it was to be hoped, asleep.

There was no doubt about it, a man who made his career in space had no business to get married. Some men,

of course, could take their wives with them: there were three married couples on the expedition, though they were with the first party at base on the coast. But for a spaceman to marry a woman and leave her at home didn't make sense.

He wondered, now, what he had thought he was doing. Marriage had been a part of that hectic interval between his first expedition and his second, when he had arrived home to find that space exploration was News and everybody wanted to know him. He had been just slightly homesick, that first time. The idea of having somebody to come back to had been attractive.

The actual coming back, three years later, had not been so good. He had had time to realize that he scarcely knew Cora. Most of their married life seemed to have been spent at parties: he would arrive late, after working overtime, and find Cora already in the thick of it. He was going to have more responsibility preparing for the third expedition: he was going to have to spend most of his time on it. He wondered how Cora was going to take it. She had never complained when he wasn't there, during the brief period of their married life: but somehow what he remembered wasn't reassuring.

Just the same, it was a shock to find that she had divorced him a year after his departure—one of the first of the so-called "space divorces." It was a worse shock, though, to find that he now had a two-year-old son.

The rule in a space divorce was that the divorced man had the right to claim custody of his children, providing that he could make adequate arrangements for them during his absence. That would have meant sending Ricky to some all-year-round school. There was no sense to that. Cora's new husband was fond of him. Jordan agreed to leave Ricky with his mother. He even agreed, three years later on his next leave, not to see Ricky—Cora said that someone had told the little boy that her husband was not his real father and contact with somebody else claiming that position was likely to upset him.

Once or twice during his Earth-leaves—usually so crammed with duties that they made full-time exploration

look like a holiday—Jordan got news of Cora. Apparently she was a rising star in the social world. He realized, gradually, that she had married him because for a brief time he had been News, and could take her where she wanted to be. He was vaguely relieved that she had got something out of their marriage: it was nice that somebody did. He was prepared to grant her doings the respect due to the incomprehensible. Nevertheless he was worried, for a moment, when he heard that she had been divorced yet again and remarried—to a prominent industrialist this time. He wondered how Ricky had taken it.

His first actual contact with Cora in about seven years came in the form of a request from her lawyer that he should put his signature to an application for entrance to a school. Merely a formality. The insistence on that point roused his suspicions and he made some inquiries about the school in question.

Half an hour after getting answers he had found Cora's present address, booked a passage on the Transequatorial Flight and canceled his engagements for the next twenty-four hours.

He was just in time to get aboard the flier. He had taken a bundle of urgent papers with him and he had three hours of flight in which to study them, but he hardly tried to do so. His conscience felt like a Lothornian cactus-bird trying to break out of the egg.

Why on Earth, why in Space, why in the Universe hadn't he taken some sort of care of his son?

He had never visited Antarctica City before and he found it depressing. With great ingenuity somebody had excavated a building-space in the eternal ice and filled it with a city which was an exact copy of all the other cities. He wondered why anybody had thought it worth while.

Cora's house seemed less a house than an animated set for a stereo on The Life of the Wealthy Classes. It had been decorated in the very latest style—he recognized one or two motifs which had been suggested by the finds of the First Lambdan Expedition, mingled with the usual transparent furniture and electrified drapes. He was con-

templating a curious decorative motif, composed of a hooked object which he recognized vaguely as some primitive agricultural implement and what looked like a pileman's drudge—but of course that particular mallet-shape had passed through innumerable uses—when Cora came in.

Her welcome was technically perfect: it combined a warm greeting with just a faint suggestion that it was still open to her to have him thrown out by the mechman if it seemed like a good idea. He decided to get the business over as soon as possible.

"What's the matter with Ricky, Cora? Why do you want to get rid of him?"

Cora's sparkle-crusted brows rose delicately.

"Why, Threejay, what a thing to say?"

The idiotic nickname, almost forgotten, caught him off balance for a moment, but he knew exactly what he wanted to say.

"This school you want to send him to is for maladjusted children. It takes complete responsibility, replacing parents —you wouldn't be allowed to see him for the next three years at least."

"It's a very fine school, Threejay. Camillo insisted we should send him to the best one available."

Camillo must be the new husband.

"Why?" repeated Jordan.

The welcome had drained right out of Cora's manner. "May I ask why this sudden uprush of parental feeling? You've never shown any interest in Ricky before. You've left him to me. I'm not asking you to take any responsibility. I'm just asking you to sign that form."

"Why?"

"Because he's unbearable! Because I won't have him in the house! He pries round—there's no privacy. He finds out everything and then uses it to make trouble. He's insulted half our friends. Camillo won't have him in the house and neither will I. If you don't want him to go to that school, perhaps you'll suggest an alternative."

Jordan was shaken, but tried not to show it. "I'd like to see him, Cora."

As swiftly as it had arisen Cora's rage sank out of sight. "Of course you can see him, Threejay!" She turned to the wall-speaker and murmured briefly into it. "Who knows, maybe the sight of a really, truly father is all he needs! You can just have a nice fatherly chat with him before you have to catch your flier back, and then he'll settle down and turn into a model citizen."

The door slid open and a boy came quietly in. He was a very neat and tidy boy, small for his age, with a serious, almost sad expression. He said gently, "Good morning, Cora."

Cora spoke over her shoulder. "Ricky, dear, who do you think this is?"

Ricky looked at the vistor and his eyes widened.

"You . . . you're Dr. Jordan, aren't you? You wrote that book about Cranil—it's called 'The Fossil Planet.' And I saw you on the stereo two nights ago. You were talking about that place where all the forests are gray and black. And—" Ricky stopped with his mouth half open. His face went blank.

"That's who I am," said Jordan gravely.

"I know." Ricky swallowed. "But you're here . . . I mean . . . this sounds silly, but I suppose . . . I mean, you wouldn't be my father, would you?"

"Don't put on an act, Ricky," said Cora harshly. "You know perfectly well he's your father."

Ricky turned rather white. He shook his head. "No, honestly. I knew my father's name was Jordan, but I just didn't connect it up. I say—" he stopped short.

"Yes, Ricky?"

"I suppose you wouldn't have time to talk to me a little? About Lambda, I mean. Because I really am interested—not just kid stuff. I want to be a xenobiologist."

Cora laughed, a delicate metallic sound.

"Why be so modest, Ricky? After all, he's your father. He's apparently decided it's time he took an interest in you. He's due back to that place that fascinates you so much in a week or two, so I don't see how he'll do that unless he takes you with him. Why not ask him to?"

Ricky went scarlet and then very pale. He looked quickly away, but not before Jordan had had time to see the eager interest in his face replaced by sick resignation.

"Why shouldn't you take him, Threejay?" went on Cora. "These Mass-time ships have lots of room. You've decided that it's time you were responsible for him instead of me. Those books he reads are full of boys who made good in space. Why don't you—"

"Yes, why don't I?" said Jordan abruptly.

"Don't!" said Ricky sharply. "Please, don't! Honestly, I know it's a joke . . . I mean I don't read that kid stuff now . . . but—"

"No joke," said Jordan. "As Cora says, there's lots of room. Do you want to come?"

And I'd had my psycho check only the week before, reflected Jordan, and they didn't find a thing.

He noticed suddenly that a report was moving through the scanner on his desk—the latest installment of Woodman's researches on the sexual cycles of Lambdan freshwater organisms. He'd intended to read that tonight instead of mulling over all this stuff about Ricky.

He pushed the switch back to the beginning, but it was no use. He remembered how he had felt—how Cora's needling had made him feel—and how Ricky had looked when he grasped that the proposal was serious. No chance at all of backing out then—not that he had wanted to. It was true that, with Mass-time flight, there was plenty of room; one feature of the drive was that within certain limits the bigger the ship the faster it would go. And he had complete authority over the selection of personnel for this second expedition, which was to reinforce the team already settled on Lambda. Ricky's inclusion was taken with a surprising lack of concern by the rest of the staff. And it had looked as though his insane action was working out all right. Until the last two days Ricky had been no trouble at all.

If anything, Ricky had been too desperately anxious to keep out of the way and avoid being a nuisance, but he had seemed completely happy. Jordan's project of

getting to know him had never got very far, because his time was fully occupied, but Ricky had spent the weeks before blast-off mainly in the Interstellar Institute, chaperoned by young Woodman, who had taken a fancy to him. Jordan had taken time out once or twice during that period to worry over the fact that he was hardly seeing the boy, but once they got aboard ship it would be different.

Once aboard ship, absorbed in checking stores and setting up projects to go into operation as soon as they landed, it was—once the party's settled and working, it'll be different. He'd have some time to spare.

Unfortunately that hadn't been soon enough. He should have paid some attention to Cora. She wouldn't have got worked up like that over nothing. She had said Ricky made trouble. He'd done that all right. And Jordan had known nothing about it till it attained the dimensions of a full-blown row.

Rivalry on the expedition was usually friendly enough. Unfortunately Cartwright and Penn, the two geologists, didn't get on. They had different methods of working and each was suspicious of the value of the other's work. But without Ricky they wouldn't have come to blows on it.

Quite accidentally the riot had been started by Ellen Scott. As soil specialist she had an interest in geology. Talking to Cartwright she had happened to say something about the date of the Great Rift. Cartwright had shot out of his chair.

"Ellen—where did you get that idea? Who told it to you?"

Ellen looked surprised.

"I thought you did, Peter. The Great Rift's your pet subject. If you didn't, I suppose it was Penn."

"I haven't mentioned it to anyone. I only worked it out a couple of days ago. It's in my notes now, on my desk. Penn must have been going through them. Where is he?"

"Calm down, Peter!" Ellen got to her feet in astonishment. "Probably he worked it out too—you may have mentioned something that set him on the track. He must

have mentioned it to me in the last few days, I think . . . that is, if he was the one who told me." She looked puzzled. "I don't remember discussing it with him. No, I believe—" she broke off suddenly and refused to say any more. Cartwright, unmollified, strode off to look for Penn. Dr. Scott departed in search of Ricky.

"Ricky, do you remember a day or two ago we were talking about the Great Rift?"

Ricky looked up from the microscope he was using.

"Sure," he said. "Why?" His smile faded and he began to look worried. "What's happened?"

"You remember you said something about the date—that it was about fifteen thousand years ago? You did say that, didn't you?"

Ricky's expression had faded to a watchful blank, but he nodded.

"Well, who told you that? How did you know?"

"Somebody said it," said Ricky flatly. He did not sound as though he expected to be believed.

Ellen Scott frowned.

"Listen, Ricky. Dr. Cartwright's got the idea that somebody must have looked through the papers on his desk and read that date. He says he didn't mention it to anyone. There may be trouble. If you did get curious and took a look at his notes—well, now is the time to say so. It's not a good thing to have done, of course, but nobody'll pay much attention once it's cleared up."

"I didn't look," said Ricky wretchedly. "I don't remember how I knew, but I didn't look. Honestly not."

Unfortunately by that time Cartwright and Penn had already started arguing which ended with both of them crashing through the wall of the dining cabin—which had not been built to take assaults of that kind—and throwing Barney the cook into a kind of hysterics. After that Jordan came on the scene.

Ricky had come and told him about it all. At least, he'd said that he had somehow learned that the date of the Great Rift had been fixed, and had mentioned it to Dr. Scott while they were talking about geology. He didn't

know how he had learned it. He denied looking through Cartwright's papers.

It was something that he had told the story, but then he must have thought that Ellen Scott would if he didn't.

Jordan's thoughts wandered off to Ellen for a moment. She was another person who believed that people who chose to work on alien planets must avoid personal ties. How right she was.

Nothing more had happened. Cartwright and Penn seemed to be on somewhat better terms, having purged their animosity. But Ricky had been going round with a haunted and hopeless look on his face and Jordan was going crazy trying to think up an approach to the matter which would not drive the boy still further away from him. But if he really made a habit of prying into private papers—and Cora had accused him of just that, after all —something must be done about it.

But what?

Jordan sighed, turned the viewer back to the beginning again and started to concentrate on Woodman's report. He had read three frames when the silence was split by a terrified bellow from the direction of the forest.

"Uelph! Uelph! Dewils. Uelph!"

Jordan shot through the door, grabbing a flashlight on the way. It was hardly needed: three moons were in the sky and their combined light was quite enough to show him the huge shape blundering among the cabins.

"Barney!" he shouted. "Stand still! What's the matter?"

Barney—seventeen stone on Earth, over twenty on Lambda—came to a halt and blinked at the flashlight. He put up a huge hand, feeling at his face. He seemed to be wearing some sort of mask or muffler over his mouth—otherwise he was draped in flannelette pajamas of brilliant hue and was barefooted. He ripped off the muffler—whatever it was—and threw it away. His utterance was a little clearer, but not much.

"Dewils in a voresh. Caught eee. Woot ticky tuff on a wouth."

He was gasping and sweating and Jordan was seriously

worried. Barney was a superb cook, but he was apt to get excited and the extra gravitation of Lambda produced a slight strain on his heart. At that moment Ricky appeared like a silent shadow at his father's elbow.

"What's the matter with him?" As usual the boy looked neat and alert, although at the moment he was wearing pajamas and a robe. Jordan gestured towards his cabin.

"Take Barney in there and see what's sticking his mouth up." Several other people had appeared by this time, including Ellen Scott in a brilliant robe and Woodman in rumpled pajamas. Jordan sent Ellen to switch on the overhead floods and organized a search party.

Half an hour later Barney's mouth had been washed free from the gummy material which had been sticking his lips together and he was in some shape to explain.

"I woke up suddenly lying out in the forest. All damp it was." He groaned faintly. "I can feel my lumbago coming on already. I was lyin' flat on my back and there was somethin' over my arms—rope or somethin'. My mouth was all plastered up and there was a thing sittin' on my chest. I got a glimpse of it out of the crack of me eyes, and then it went. There was more of them round. They was shoutin'."

"Shouting?" repeated Jordan. "You mean just making a noise?"

"No sir, they was shouting in English. I couldn't hear what, but it was in words all right. They said 'People.' That was the only word I got, but that's it right enough. 'People.' Then I got my arms free and started to swipe around. I got hold of one of them and it stung me and I let it go."

He pointed to a neat puncture wound in the flesh at the base of his thumb. Jordan got out antiseptics and bathed it.

"I got up and ran back," Barney went on. "I was only a little way into the forest—I could still see the lights here. I ran as hard as I could but me feet kept slippin'." The light of remembered panic was in his eyes. "They stuck somethin' over me mouth—I couldn't breathe. It took me hours to get it off. I dunno what it was."

"It was a leaf," said Woodman. He produced a large leaf, perhaps twenty inches long: it was dark gray and one surface was smeared with a dully shining substance. "It's been coated with some kind of vegetable gum."

"But how did you get into the forest, Barney?" demanded Dr. Scott.

Barney shook his head miserably.

"He walked," said another of the party. "On his own. Tracks of his feet in the mud. You've been sleepwalking, Barney."

"Then where did he get the gag?" demanded Woodman. "This gum comes from a plant which is quite rare and there aren't any within a hundred yards of the clearing. Besides, we found the place where he'd been lying. A couple of saplings were bent over and the ends shoved in the mud—those were used to hold his arms down, I reckon. No, he was attacked all right, but what did it?"

"I suppose," said Dr. Scott slowly, "this couldn't have been somebody's idea of a joke?"

There was a brief silence. Ricky looked up suddenly and caught his father's eye. His face went rigid, but he said nothing.

"We shall have to assume it wasn't," said Jordan. "That means precautions. We always assumed that Lambda was a safe planet. Apparently we were wrong. Until we know what happened no one goes out alone. Those of you who have observations to make outside will have to work in pairs and with your radios turned on. We'll arrange for a monitor on all the individual frequencies. The floods had better stay on tonight and we'll have a patrol—three men keeping in touch. Two hours for each of us. Doc, will you see to Barney?"

The medical officer nodded and took Barney off to his cabin, and its specially-strengthened bunk. Jordan looked thoughtfully at his son.

"You'd better get back to bed, Ricky. Unless you have anything to contribute."

Ricky was standing stiffly upright. "I haven't," he said.

"Get along, then. Now about this patrol—"

Jordan put himself on the first shift of the patrol—he

wouldn't be able to sleep. Why in Space had he brought Ricky? Either he had brought him into danger or—worse—Ricky was somehow at the bottom of this. He spent a good deal of time running errands for Barney. He had not seemed to mind it, but how did you tell what a boy was thinking? Might he have thought it funny to send big Barney lumbering in panic through the forest? And how could he have done it?

Jordan remembered that Ricky had once been found reading the article on Hypnosis in the Terrestrial Encyclopedia.

And if Ricky was innocent, what could be at the bottom of that ludicrous and inefficient attack?

In the top of the tallest tree available, Big Sword waited for daylight and brooded over the failure of his plan.

It was easy enough to get the biggest of the Big Folk into the forest. He had discovered that for part of the time they lay folded out flat in their enclosures, with their eyes shut, and during this time they were more sensitive to suggestion than when they were active. Big Sword, whose own eyes had an internal shutter, found eyelids rather fascinating: he had been tempted to experiment with Barney's but had refrained. He thought bitterly that he might as well have done so.

He had summoned twelve of the People and all of them thinking together had got the Big Person to its feet and walking. It had occurred to Big Sword that the receptiveness of the Big Person might be improved if they got it to lie down again. He had further decided that, in view of the blanking-out of thought when the creatures began to blow through their face-split, this aperture had better be shut.

That, he now knew, had been a mistake. No sooner was the gummed leaf in place on the Big Person's face than its eyes had popped open and showed every sign of coming right out of its face. There had been just warning enough in its thoughts for the band of People to hop out of range, except for Big Sword, who had had to use his spike for the first time in his life, to get free.

Then the great arms had swung dangerously about and the creature had thrashed to its feet. After that there was no hope of making contact. Its mind was in a turmoil, making the People actively uncomfortable: they had retreated as far as they could, until the interwoven lives of trees and other forest creatures were sufficiently interposed to reduce the Big Person's thoughts to a comfortable intensity.

Big Sword had been surprised by the low level of intelligence shown by the Big Person. It had made no effort at all to understand him—its thoughts were a much worse muddle than any of the others he had investigated. Perhaps he had made a mistake? Perhaps size among these monsters was not directly connected with intelligence? Or perhaps it was an inverse relationship?

Big Sword was suddenly desperately thirsty and tired. He slid into the rain-filled cup of an enormous leaf—to soak up water through the million mouths of his skin and make his plans afresh.

The camp next morning was subdued and rather weary. Nobody had got their full sleep. Now there was all the awkward business of rearranging a full-time research program so that nobody should have to go into the forest alone. The lurking menace which last night had provided a formidable thrill, this morning was nothing more than a vague, dreary uneasiness. Furthermore there was always the possibility that it would turn out to be nothing more than the work of an ingenious kid with a distorted sense of humor. And nobody liked to think what that would do to Jordan.

The working parties dispersed. Those whose work took them to the laboratory sheds tried to concentrate on it. Ricky, who had decided that this was not a morning for wrestling with lessons, slipped off to see if Barney wanted any odd jobs done, and was sent to pick fresh beans in the hydroponics shed.

The mechanical job helped to keep his mind steady. Having once got out of a nightmare, it was creeping round him again. This time with a difference.

There had got to be an explanation somewhere.

When he had left the house in Antarctica he had seemed to leave all his troubles behind. No more need to keep a continual watch on himself, in case he let something out. No more temptation, when in spite of himself he had put his foot in it again, to come out with something really startling and see what they could do about it. He was free. He had been free for months.

Then it started happening all over again. He had heard all sorts of scientific gossip—people here talked shop all the time. How was he to know what he'd heard and what he hadn't? How could he stop this happening again, now that whatever it was had followed him out here?

There was just one ray of hope. He couldn't possibly have had anything to do with what happened to Barney. If he could only find out what did that, some real solid explanation he could show everybody, then he might somehow be able to tell someone of the way he seemed to pick up knowledge without noticing it, knowledge he had no right to have—

Anyway, doing something was better than just sitting and waiting for things to go wrong again.

He delivered the beans to the kitchen and wandered out. The raw, red earth of the clearing shone like paint in the sun. In places he could still see the traces of Barney's big feet, going and coming, leading into the forest. There, among the black leaves and blacker shadows, lurked some real, genuine, tangible menace you could go for with a stick. There was a good supply of sticks stacked by his father's cabin for the benefit of the working parties. Ricky provided himself with one.

Big Sword had finished drinking—or bathing, whichever way you looked at it—and had climbed out of the diminished pool in the leaf-cup to spread his membranes in the sun. He looked like a big bat, lying spread out on the leaf. The black webs that stretched between his arms and legs and his sides would snap back into narrow rolls when he wanted to move, but when he extended them to catch the sunlight they covered a couple of square

feet. They absorbed all the light in the visible range and well into the ultraviolet and infrared. Like most organisms on Lambda, Big Sword supported himself by a very efficient photosynthesis.

He had only just begun to make up for the wear and tear of the night—continuous activity in the dark was exhausting—when he felt the call out of the forest.

"Longfoot is going, Big Sword. Longfoot is going on the Journey. You wished to see. Come quickly!"

Big Sword's membranes snapped into thin ridges along his arms and legs and he bounded off among the trees. The Long Journey was mysterious to him, as it was to all of the People before the urge actually came to them—but the rest were content to leave it as a mystery. Big Sword wanted to know more.

He came in flying leaps to the edge of the forest, where the trees stopped short on the edge of the Great Rift. Some twenty or so of the People were gathered on the edge of the sheer cliff. Longfoot sat among them, his legs twitching occasionally with the urge to be off. As Big Sword arrived Longfoot shot to his feet, eager to depart.

"Where are you going?" demanded Big Sword. "What will you find over there, Longfoot? Why do you want to cross the waste, with no water and no shade? You will be dried to a stick before you get halfway across."

But Longfoot's mind was shut off; he had no longer any interest in Big Sword, or the People, or the danger to the Tree. He did not know why he had to go down on to the waste of boulders and small stones, but the urge could no longer be resisted. He dropped over the edge of the cliff, bouncing from ledge to ledge until he reached the bottom, and set off across the wide, rock-strewn plain, along the lines of shadow cast by the newly-risen sun.

Big Sword watched him sadly. He himself was nearly a year away from feeling that call which had come to Longfoot, and the thought of his own journeying did not trouble him yet. He had been warned early of the dangers of going out on to the waste and, with the habit of logical

thought strongly cultivated in him, he was troubled about what would happen. The waste stretched almost as far as he could see—at least twelve miles. At the end of it was the dark line which might have been a far-off continuation of the Forest. But why Longfoot should have wished to go there, or the many thousands of the People who had made that journey before him, Big Sword could not see.

He went back into the forest and found another perch on the edge of the clearing. Few of the Big People were in sight. He was conscious of vague alarms emanating from those who were within reach—it was an emotion foreign to his experience, but he disliked it. He wondered how to set about detaching a specimen from the group, since the direct method had proved unsuitable.

He became suddenly and sharply aware that one had detached itself already and was coming slowly towards him.

Ricky had seen the little black figure sail out of the shadows and land on an equally black leaf. It took all his concentration to make it out when it had stopped moving, but he at last managed to fix its position. Slowly, casually, he wandered towards it, observing it out of the corner of his eye.

Its body was a blob perhaps four inches long and its head about half of that, joined on by a short neck. It rested on its bent fore-limbs and the hind legs stuck up like those of a grasshopper; they looked to be at least twice as long as trunk and head together. As he sidled closer Ricky could make out the big convex eyes, gray with black slitlike pupils, filling more than half the face. Ricky knew the fauna list of Lambda by heart; this creature was not on it. It must be one of Barney's "little devils" all right.

The creature sat quietly on its big leaf as he approached, with no sign of having noticed him. Now it was just within his reach if he stretched up. One more step and he would be right under it—ahhhh!

He had only begun to grab when Big Sword bounced

over his head, landed lightly on the ground behind him and leaped sideways into another tree.

Ricky turned, slowly, and began his careful stalk again. He was murmuring softly to himself, coaxing words derived from rabbit- and guinea-pig owners of his acquaintance: "Come on, come on! Come to uncle. He won't hurt you. Nothing to be afraid of. Come on, you little brute. Come—"

Big Sword sailed away from his grasping hand to land on a branch ten feet farther into the forest.

Ricky had entirely forgotten the prohibition on leaving the clearing; he had forgotten everything except the desire to get hold of this creature, to have it close enough to examine, to hold it gently in his hands and get it tame. His stick lay forgotten on the earth outside the forest.

Big Sword was getting irritated and slightly flustered. It was easy enough to avoid getting caught, but he didn't wish to play tag with this creature, he wanted to tame it, to make it understand him. And its mind seemed to be shut. What was more, every so often it would begin that infuriating blowing process which seemed to drain away its thoughts out of his reach. To know when it was going to grab he had to watch it the whole time. Finally he took refuge on a branch ten feet above its head and sat down to consider.

Ricky, at the bottom of the tree, was experiencing all the emotions of a dog which has treed a squirrel and now has to persuade it to come within reach. Apparently he was licked. If only the little beast would drop on to that branch there—where that applelike object was—and begin to eat it, perhaps, so that it could forget he was there . . .

Suddenly, the little brute did. At least it dropped to the lower branch and put its long-fingered hands on the round knob. Ricky's mouth opened in amazement.

His hands itched, but he kept them firmly at his sides. Perhaps he had been standing there so long that it had forgotten about him and thought he was part of the landscape. Perhaps if he spread his arms out very, very slowly it would take them for branches and—

Something like a small explosion happened inside his head. He blinked and gasped, forgetting all about immobility. He froze again hastily, expecting the creature to be out of sight. But it was still there.

Big Sword observed this reaction to his vehement negative with stirrings of hope. The idea of doing what this creature wanted, as a means of starting communication by demonstration, had seemed a singularly forlorn one. But the Big Creature had clearly noticed *something.*

Big Sword decided that it was time to try a suggestion of his own. He thought—hard—on the proposition that the Big Creature should turn around and look the other way.

The Big Creature ducked its head and blinked its eyes again. Big Sword got the impression that these reactions were caused by the strength of his thought. He tried again, gently.

Something was getting through. Weakly, faintly he felt a negative reply. The Big Creature refused to turn its back.

Big Sword put out another suggestion. Let the Big Creature take one step sideways, away from him.

Hesitantly, the Big Person did. Big Sword copied its direction in a joyful leap and ended on a level with the creature's head.

The next thought reached him, fuzzy but comprehensible. "If you understand me, put your hands on top of your head."

Watching suspiciously for any sudden move, Big Sword obeyed. The posture was not one he could keep up for long without losing his balance, but he felt the sudden surge of excitement in the Big Creature and was encouraged.

"Now watch! I shall sit down on the ground. Do you understand what that means? I'm going to sit down."

The Big Creature folded up in an awkward way; its knees were on the wrong side of its body, but Big Sword recognized the operation. He followed it with a thought of his own.

"I will spread my membranes out."

The Big Creature's astonishment was a dazzling shock and he put out a protest. In reply came something which could be an apology. He sharpened his thoughts and put out the next one with all the clearness at his command.

"We have proved that we can make contact. Now we have to practice thinking to and fro until we understand clearly."

He had just felt the other's incoherent agreement when the interruption began. Another of the Big Creatures came lumbering between the trees.

"Ricky! Scatter my stuffing, what are you doing here? You'll be in the doghouse for sure. Do you want Barney's little black devils to carry you away?"

Ricky scrambled to his feet in alarm.

"Sorry, Dr. Woodman, I forgot. I was . . . looking at things and I came in here without thinking. I'm awfully sorry."

"No harm done. Come out before we have any more alarms and excursions."

Big Sword felt an impulse of despair from the Big Creature which he had at last succeeded in taming; it seemed to regret this interruption even more than he did. It was anxious that the second Big Creature should not see him, so he remained still, one dark shape among many and effectively invisible; but he sent a thought after the tame one: "Come again! I will be on the edge of the clearing. Come again!" and was nearly knocked over by the energy of its reply.

Woodman marched Ricky firmly out of the forest.

"Now you're here you may as well be useful. I want to go up to my pet pool and I can't find a chaperone. If I've timed it rightly, we should find something interesting up there."

Ricky summoned up a show of polite interest. Normally he would have been delighted.

"Is it the pseudohydras again?"

"That's right. Remember when we saw them catching those things like two-tailed torpedoes?"

"Yes, but you said all the ones in the pool had been eaten now."

"They have. Here we are. Don't lean over like that—they won't like your shadow. Lie down. So!"

Ricky lay on his belly and stared down into the transparent water. Except where it was shadowed it reflected the brilliant blue of the sky; the only thing on Lambda that had a familiar color. He felt, suddenly, stirrings of homesickness, but they vanished quickly. Homesick, when the most wonderful thing possible had just happened? Nonsense!

He concentrated on the pseudohydras. They lived just where the pool overflowed into a small brown stream. Each consisted mainly of a network of branching white threads, up to six inches long, issuing from a small blobby body anchored on the stones. There were perhaps fifty of them, and together their tentacles made a net across the mouth of the stream which nothing larger than a wheat-grain could escape. The sluggish waters of the stream must all pass through this living mesh, carrying anything unlucky enough to swim out of the pool; the tentacles were immensely sticky and could hold struggling creatures several times the size of the pseudohydra's own body, until the flesh of the tentacles had flowed slowly around them and enclosed them in a capsule whose walls slowly digested them away.

"See there?" whispered Woodman.

Here and there one of the tentacles ended in a transparent, hard-edged blob. Small dark cigar-shaped objects jerked uneasily within it, perhaps a dozen in each little case.

"It's caught some more torpedoes!" whispered Ricky. "Little tiny ones this time."

"Not caught," answered Woodman. "I thought they'd be ripe today! Watch that one—it's nearly ready to split."

A few minutes later the capsule indicated did split. The tiny torpedo shapes, three or four millimeters long, spilled out into the water. They hovered uncertainly, veering here and there under the uneven propulsion of the

water-jets emerging from the two-pronged hind end. Ricky gasped.

"It's let them go! And look—there's one rubbing against a tentacle and not getting caught. What's happened?"

Two of the little torpedo shapes came together. They jerked uncertainly round each other, then swiveled to lie parallel. They moved off together.

Others were paired already. One pair separated as Ricky watched them. Two little torpedoes shot off crazily. One came right under his eyes and he saw that it was emitting a faint milky stream.

Woodman's hand came down, holding a pipette. The torpedo veered off. Woodman sucked up a drop of water and held out the pipette.

"There," he said softly. Tiny specks, barely visible, floated in the drop.

"Eggs," said Woodman.

"Eggs! But—these are babies. The other ones were much bigger."

"So they were, Ricky. Do you know what these are going to hatch into? More torpedoes? Not on your life! Unless there's something else crazy about the life cycle, these will hatch into little pseudohydras."

Ricky rolled over to stare at him. "But what are the big torpedoes, then?"

"This is how I see it. You know about the reproductive cycles in Coelenterates, back on Earth? Especially hydroids like Obelia and so on? The sessile ones reproduce by budding for a while. Then they start to produce buds which don't turn out like the parents. Those break off and go swimming away on their own. They feed and get big and in the end they produce eggs or sperm, and the fertilized eggs produce a new sessile generation. Well, here the free-living forms—the torpedoes—are ready to lay eggs as soon as they're released. They mate a few minutes after hatching and lay eggs as soon as they're fertilized. But after that they aren't finished. They go swimming around the pool and feed and get fat. And when they're full grown, they come swimming back to

the old pseudohydras, and the pseudohydras eat them and use the food to produce a whole new crop of little torpedoes. Get it?"

Ricky scowled. "What a disgusting animal."

"Nonsense! It's a beautiful piece of natural economy. Don't be a snob, Ricky. Just because no terrestrial organism evolved this way you think it's unethical. Some Earth creatures beat pseudohydra hollow for nastiness—think of some of the parasites. Think of the barnacles, degenerate males parasitic on the female. There just aren't any ethics in evolution except that the species shall survive, if you call that an ethic."

Ricky looked at him doubtfully. "We've evolved. And we bother about other species, too."

Woodman nodded. "We try to—some of us. But our survival has meant that a good many other species didn't."

Something else occurred to Ricky. "This sort of whatsit—alternate generations—has evolved lots of times on Earth, hasn't it?"

"Sure. Dozens of different lines evolved it independently, not to mention all the Lambdan forms that have it, and a few on Arcturus III, and some on Roche's—it's one of the basic dodges, apparently. One stage makes the most of the *status quo* and the other acts as an insurance against possible changes. Once a well-balanced set of hereditary characters has appeared it can repeat itself fast by asexual reproduction, without the disorganization of chromosome reassortment and so on. On the other hand, should conditions change, a sexually produced population has a much better chance of showing up a few adaptable forms. Some lines of life have dropped the sexual stage, just as some have dropped the asexual, but it probably doesn't pay in the long run."

"How does a stage get dropped?"

Woodman considered. "I suppose the first stage might go like this: one single asexual stage—one of these pseudohydras, for instance—happens to get isolated. Say all the rest in the pool die off. It can produce its little torpedoes, but there are no mates for them. The pseudohydra goes on reproducing asexually—you've seen how they split

down the middle—and in the end a mutant form occurs which doesn't waste its substance producing useless torpedoes and that breeds faster than the others and in the end replaces them. That's just one way it could happen. In one of the African lakes there used to be annual swarms of jellyfish, all male. One single asexual stage must have got trapped in that lake, God knows how long ago, and it went on producing those useless male jellyfish century after century, while asexual reproduction kept the species going."

"What happened to it?"

Woodman scowled. "Silly fools polluted the lake with industrial waste and the jellyfish died out. Come on, it's time for lunch."

Ellen Scott put away the last of her soil samples and scowled thoughtfully at her apparatus. Tensions in the camp were mounting and everyone was snapping at everybody else. One party had decided that Barney's adventure was somehow due to Ricky, and wanted to call off the precautions that hindered their work. The other stuck to it that Ricky could not have organized it and that precautions were still necessary. Anyway, who in the other party was prepared to tell Doc that there was no danger in the forest except for his son?

Ellen told herself that she was neutral. She didn't know whether or not Ricky was behind their troubles and didn't much care, if only he would leave off tearing his father's nerves to pieces. She had heard a little gossip about him on Earth after it had been announced that he was to join the expedition, and though she had discounted it at the time, after the business of Cartwright's report she was inclined to believe it.

People whose work lay in space had no business with marriage and children. She had decided that for herself years ago. You could run planetary research properly, or you could run a family properly. Not both. Children were part of life on Earth, the settled pattern of security, with which she had grown so bored, was necessary to

them. When they were older, perhaps—Ricky had seemed perfectly happy at first.

But what on Lambda was the matter with him now? He'd been going around in a dream ever since the night of Barney's adventure. Starting suddenly to talk to himself, breaking off with equal suddenness and an air of annoyance. He didn't seem now to be particularly worried by the suspicions floating around the camp, although he seemed the sort of sensitive boy to be desperately upset by them. In fact over that affair with Cartwright he had been upset, and this affair was worse.

And Jordan was obviously heading for a nervous breakdown if this went on much longer.

Ricky, lying in his cabin and theoretically taking his afternoon rest—imposed because of Lambda's longer day—had come to the conclusion that it was time to tell his father about his Research. Despite his absorption in his overwhelming new interest, he was vaguely aware that the grown-ups were getting bothered. For another he could now "talk" fluently with Big Sword and haltingly with the rest of the People; he knew what they wanted and there was no excuse for delaying any longer. Besides, the results of Research were not meant to be kept to oneself, they were meant to be free to everyone.

He allowed himself to think for a moment about the possibilities of his newly-discovered power. Of course, people had been messing about with telepathy for centuries, but they had never got anywhere much. Perhaps only a fully-developed telepath, coming of a race to which telepathy was the sole method of communication, could teach a human being how to control and strengthen his wayward and uncertain powers. Or perhaps, thought Ricky, the people who were really capable of learning the trick got into so much trouble before they could control it that they all simply shut it off as hard as they could, so that the only ones who tried to develop it were those in whom it never became strong enough to do anything useful. He himself had now, at last, learned how to shut off his awareness of other minds; it was the first necessity for clear reception that one should be able to deafen

oneself to all minds except one. It occurred to him that he'd better make that point clear straight off: that he was not going to eavesdrop on anyone else's thoughts. Never again.

But obviously the thing had terrific potentialities for research, not only into the difficult and thorny problem of the connection between mind and matter, or into contact with alien races. Why, he could probably find out what really went on in the minds of terrestrial animals, those that had minds; and he could find out what it was that people experienced in a Mass-Time field, which they could never properly remember afterwards, and—oh, all sorts of things!

Ricky got up from his bunk. His father ought to be free at this moment; it was the one time of day he kept to himself, unless an emergency happened. Quite unconsciously Ricky opened his mind to thoughts from that direction, to see whether it was a good time to visit his father's cabin.

The violence of the thought he received nearly knocked him over. What on Lambda was stirring old Doc J. up to such an extent? And—bother, he was talking to somebody—Woodman, apparently. Ricky, unlike Big Sword, could still pick up thought at the moment when it drained into the level of speech, but even for him it was highly indistinct. He strained, trying to catch the cause of all his commotion. Woodman had found something—something unpleasant—something—

Ricky dashed out of the cabin door and crossed the half-dozen yards that separated his hut from his father's. Just outside the voices were clearly distinct; Woodman was speaking excitedly and loudly.

"It was absolutely devilish! Oh, I suppose it was physical—some sort of miasma—in fact it nearly knocked me down, but it felt just exactly as though somebody were standing and hating me a few yards off. Like that feeling you get after space 'flu, as though nobody loves you, only this was magnified about a million times—the most

powerful depressant ever, and absolutely in the open air, too."

"Where was this?"

"The eighth sector—just about here."

He was evidently pointing to a map. Cold with apprehension, Ricky deliberately tried to probe into his father's mind, to see just what they were looking at. The picture was fuzzy and danced about, but he could see the pointer Jordan was using—the ivory stylus he always carried, and—yes, that was the clearing in the forest that housed the Tree itself! The guards about it had been all too successful in their efforts to keep intruders away.

Jordan laughed harshly. "Do you remember that we scheduled this planet as safe?" He got to his feet. "First Barney encounters devils and now you've discovered the Upas Tree. You're sure this gas or whatever it is came from the plants?"

"I'm certain it was this one particular tree. It's by itself in the middle of an open space. The feeling began when I was six feet from it. It has big pods—they may secrete the toxic stuff. Though it must be intermittent—I collected a branch once before and didn't feel anything. Perhaps it's seasonal."

"Well, it'll have to come down." Ricky, horrified, felt his father's savage satisfaction at coming across an enemy he could deal with. "Ellen wants to push her soil examinations out in that direction—it's the only sector we haven't covered yet and a good many people want to work there."

Ricky straightened from his crouching position under the window and appeared like a jack-in-the-box over the sill.

"You mustn't, Doc! Honestly you mustn't. That Tree's terribly important. It's only—"

"Ricky!" Jordan lunged to his feet, scattering objects across his desk. "Were you listening to my conversation?"

Ricky turned white. "Yes, I was, but—"

"Go to your cabin."

Woodman made a move to intervene, but Jordan brushed it aside.

"I'll speak to you later. For the moment, you'll go to your cabin and stay there, until I have time to deal with you."

Woodman thought that Ricky was about to make some further protest, but after a moment's tension he turned and bolted.

Jordan picked up the stylus with a trembling hand.

"I'll come with you and investigate this thing at once, Woodman. We'll need masks and an air-sampler, and we may as well take one of those portable detection kits. Can you draw them from the store, please, and be ready in ten minutes. Get a blaster, too."

Woodman thought of arguments and decided against them. Old Jordan had been stewing up for something like this for the last week and it was probably better to let him get it out of his system. When it came to the point Jordan wouldn't start destroying things without careful consideration; he was too good a scientist for that. Woodman didn't know why Ricky was so concerned, but he himself would take good care that a possibly unique specimen wasn't damaged in a hurry. He went for the equipment.

Jordan hesitated at the entrance to Ricky's cabin. He heard a slight movement within, and moved on. He was still trembling with a fury that he only half understood, and knew that he was in no state to conduct a delicate interview, or even to think straight. Better leave the boy alone until he had got things sorted out in his own mind.

Ricky, lying tense on his bunk, "listened" with all his power. Old Woodman didn't really approve of this expedition, made in such a hurry. Good. Doc. J. was half aware that his own brain wasn't working straight. Good again. Ricky spared a moment to wish that he had given more thought to his father during the last week, but it was too late for that now. Even if Jordan didn't take a blaster to the Tree straight off the People were still perched on the thin edge of disaster. For the first time since he had understood what Big Sword wanted him to

do, Ricky began to doubt whether it could be done. Were people going to listen to him? Were Doc. J. and Woodman and Miss Ellen and the rest of them really any different from Cora and Camillo and all the other people on Earth who didn't even try to understand?

No, there was only one way to make the People safe—if it would work. And he'd *got* to take it. Because this was his own fault for not telling Doc. J. sooner. He'd acted like a silly kid, wanting to keep his secret to himself just a little longer. Well, now he was not going to act like a silly kid. He was going to put things right, if he could—righter than they were before. With any luck it would be hours before anyone missed him. He might even be able to do what he wanted and call back on his transmitter to explain before they found that he had gone.

Ricky was already out of the clearing before Jordan, who had started out with Woodman, turned back to speak to Dr. Scott.

"Ellen, I've left Ricky in his cabin. We had a . . . disagreement. I think he's better left to himself just now, but would you mind going to his cabin in an hour or so, to see that he's all right?"

"Of course, John. But what—?"

"No time now. I'll explain later. Thank you, Ellen. Good-by."

There was no undergrowth in the forest but the branches were extremely thick and the darkness beneath them almost complete. Jordan, following Woodman through the trees at the slow pace enforced by these conditions, felt his anger drain away and a deep depression take its place. What sort of showing had he made, either as a father or as the head of the expedition? This particular episode was quite idiotic. There was nothing in Woodman's report to call for this immediate dash into the forest. He should at least have stopped to find out what Ricky knew about it—and now that he was cooling off, Ricky's anxiety seemed more and more puzzling. If it weren't that to turn back would make him look even more of a fool than he did already, he would have given up and gone to find out what the boy knew.

In front of him Woodman came to a halt.

"That's it, sir! That's the Tree! But—there's no feeling about it now."

Jordan brushed past him.

"Stay here. Be ready to put your mask on." He walked slowly forward until he was right under the branches of the Tree.

On either side of the clearing, sitting in the treetops, the Guardians consulted anxiously.

"We must not try to drive them away," the Contact said. "Yes, we must do as he suggested."

Jordan looked up at the branches and dared them to depress him.

"I don't feel anything," he said at last. "Woodman, are you certain this is the right tree?"

"Well, I was, sir." Woodman approached it in growing doubt. "All these little clearings are so much alike, I could have—no, it is the right one! I tied my handkerchief to this branch for a marker, before I bolted. Here it is."

The Guardians gave the telepathic equivalent of a sigh and started on the next line of defense.

"You know, sir—" Woodman was carefully deferential—"I've never seen another specimen like this. After all, this little bit of the Forest is pretty well cut off—the Rift on one side, the Mountains on the other and the River in the south. This type of soil doesn't even extend as far as the River. You might get forms here which were unique—relics, or species evolved since the Rift opened. I don't feel we ought to destroy it without very good reason."

Jordan scowled up at the nearest pod.

"I wasn't proposing to destroy it here and now! If the thing is a potential menace we must find out about it, that's all. I must say I don't . . . what's that?"

The sound of snapping twigs could be heard back along the path. Woodman started down it with Jordan at his heels; it was so dark that he was almost on top of Dr. Scott before he saw her.

"John! Thank goodness. Listen, you've got to come back at once. It's . . . it's Ricky. He's gone. I went to his

cabin like you said, and he wasn't there. He isn't anywhere in camp. He's gone."

There was a flurry in the camp, but it was an organized flurry. Jordan, white and sick-looking, nevertheless had himself well under control. Important facts were sorted out quickly.

Three parties working on the east side of the clearing could swear that Ricky had not passed them.

Various delicate gadgets which responded violently to the movement of humans anywhere near them were rigged in the wood to the north, which was taboo in consequence. They showed no sign of disturbance.

That left the south and the west. South was a stretch of about eight miles of forest, unbroken until it reached the big river. West was about half a mile of forest, fairly well explored, and then the Great Rift.

"There'd be no sense in going that way." Jordan laid a pointer on the map to indicate the Rift; he noticed in a detached way that his hand was quite steady. "It doesn't lead anywhere. There's just one place he could be making for, if we assume him to have an intelligible plan, and that is the First Base on the coast. The one way he could possibly get there would be to get to the river and float down it on one of the log-rafts—we saw plenty of them coming down while we were at the base."

"But the rapids—" said somebody.

"Has anyone reason to suppose that Ricky knew about the rapids?" Beads of sweat stood out on Jordan's forehead. No one answered. "We have to find him before he gets there. Unless any of you can suggest another way he might be trying to go."

Nobody cared to suggest that Ricky, if he had flung off in blind panic, might be headed nowhere in particular under the shade of the black trees. On the south side the paths went only for half a mile or so, and if he left them he could be lost within a hundred yards of the camp. They had already tried to pick up the tracker he was supposed to carry, but he had evidently switched it off or thrown it away.

The geologist, Penn, spoke suddenly from the back of the group.

"How about the Rift? It interested him. He might try to get across."

"That's possible," said Jordan. "On the Rift he'd be relatively easy to spot. That's why I propose to leave it till later. We have only one heliflier. If he's gone through the forest to the River we have to catch him at once. He's been gone two and a half hours. If he went straight to the nearest point of the river he might be there by now. The heliflier's the only chance. I can patrol the whole stretch and spot him as soon as he comes to it. If he hasn't reached it by dawn, I'll go back and fly over the Rift. If he does happen to be there, he won't take much harm in that time."

"There are two helifliers," someone suggested.

"No," said Jordan sharply. "The other is unsafe."

Not all the party were to join the hunt at once.

"There are only a few profitable lines," said Jordan. "We don't want everybody exhausted at the same time. This may be more than one day's search. And some of you have long-term observations to continue." He raised his hand, stilling a protest. "If to take all of you would increase the . . . the speed with which we are likely to find Ricky by one per cent, or half that, I'd take you all. But I won't ruin several months' work for nothing."

In the end several parties set out through the trees south and one went west. Jordan had already taken the one serviceable heliflier and departed. They had arranged an automatic sound-signal to go off every half hour in the clearing, in case Ricky was lost and trying to find his way back, and there were flares and a searchlight for when it became dark.

Ellen Scott had been left behind as part of the "reinforcements." She managed to catch Woodman before his party left.

"You used the second heliflier, didn't you? What's wrong with it?"

Woodman grimaced. "It failed to co-operate over landing. I got down intact by the skin of my incisors and had

to walk home—we fetched it finally on the truck. I found a rough patch on one of the power planes and cleaned it up. That may or may not have been the cause of the trouble. We haven't got checking equipment here and nobody's tried it out the hard way. Leave it alone, Ellen. When those things are good they're very very good. Once they act up—leave them alone. It wouldn't be any use over the Forest and Doc. J. won't miss anything on the River."

"How about the Rift?"

"Why should he go there? He was upset but he wasn't crazy. No, he must have set out for the base camp—probably thinks he'll be treated as a hero if he gets there. I'll give him heroics next time we meet."

Ellen was occupied for the next hour with various laboratory jobs to be done for members of the search party. Reports came in every few minutes over the radio, but they were all negative. The ground was hard dry. If Ricky had stuck to the broken trails, he would leave no sign. Even off them, he was small enough to walk under the trees where a grown man would have had to push his way through. There were three chances: to see him from the air, to get a fix on his radio, and to come upon him among the trees. And however systematic the searchers were they knew perfectly well that they could only do that by chance.

Unless one could guess where he had gone. Jordan thought he had guessed.

Ellen prowled restlessly about. What would Ricky have done? Nothing had been taken from his room; had he set out without any equipment at all?

She went to the kitchen. Barney was muddling around among his store-cupboards, in a very bad mood. He had wanted to go with the search parties and had been turned down.

"Barney," said Ellen quickly, "did Ricky take any food?"

"That's what I'm trying to check, Miss. There's some biscuits gone, I think. He could have taken them, or it

could have been anyone this afternoon. And I think one of the big canteens has gone, but I suppose a search party took it."

"They didn't," said Ellen sharply. "There are always plenty of streams, apart from the pools in the leaves. They only took small water bottles."

"One of the big canteens has gone," repeated Barney obstinately. "And one of the water bottles isn't, if you take my meaning—Ricky did not take one of those, I mean, I've accounted for them. The canteen I can't account for. But Ricky wouldn't lumber himself up with that," he added morosely. "He couldn't carry it if it was more than half full, and he knows about the streams as well as anybody. No, I reckon someone pinched it for a collecting tin or something. That's how it goes in this place, and now we can see what comes of it. You can't keep a proper check on anything—"

But Dr. Scott had gone.

She waited, fuming, until the party which had gone west came back.

"Yes, we looked over the Rift all right," said the leader morosely. "Hell, Ellen, the whole place is a heat-trap. With the haze and flickers visibility is about twenty yards. Even from the air you wouldn't see anything, unless maybe when the shadows get longer and before they get too long. Jordan wouldn't see anything if he did fly over it now. Besides, why should the kid have gone into that oven?"

Ellen turned away. Why should Ricky have gone that way? But why should he have taken a big canteen, unless he was going to cross a waterless area? If he had taken it, of course. But there were plenty of containers in the stores for scientific work.

Ricky had been interested in the Rift, certainly. He had been asking questions about it yesterday—one of the few times lately he had shown interest in anything at all.

But visibility in the Rift was bad now. When the shadows were longer—

Jordan called over the radio. He had been flying up

and down the river and the adjacent forest for the last hour and a half. Ricky had been gone about four hours.

There were three hours of daylight left.

Two hours later the situation was unchanged. To the parties in the forest night would make little difference; they were using lights already. Jordan proposed to stay in the air—one or other of the moons would be in the sky most of the night. There was about one hour of daylight left.

Ellen Scott listened to his report, and those of the search parties. Then she went briskly to the place where the one remaining heliflier was parked. She found another member of the expedition contemplating it gloomily.

"Come away from there, Phil," she said severely.

"Oh, hell, Ellen, there's a seventy-five per cent chance the thing's all right. Woodman said he'd fixed up a rough plane, didn't he?" The man turned away nevertheless. "What in Space did Jordan want to bring that kid here for?"

Ten minutes later he shot out of his cabin, where he had been dispiritedly collecting together the makings of a drink, in time to see the heliflier rise gently into the air and disappear towards the west.

Although the shadows were beginning to lengthen the Rift was like a furnace. The water in the canteen was hot. Ricky and Big Sword sat in the slightly cooler earth on the north of a boulder and contemplated the forest lying away to the left—not the forest they knew, but the strange trees of the farther side.

Big Sword's goggle eyes did not register emotion, but Ricky could feel the stir of curiosity in him. Big Sword was already reaching out to new streams, new treetops, new bare places that would be warm in the sun. For himself Ricky could only think about the two miles remaining to be walked.

He had hopelessly underestimated the time it would take him to pick his way through eight miles of boulders, too hot for the hand, walking on sliding shingle; he had managed less than two miles an hour. But now he had

to get on. He stirred himself, got Big Sword perched again on his shoulder and re-strapped the canteen, lighter now but still a burden.

He had gone perhaps a dozen strides when the shadow of the heliflier came up behind and settled over his head.

Ricky started to run. There was no sense to it, and Big Sword disliked the effects, but he ran just the same, with the water sloshing about on his back. The shadow of the flier slid forward a hundred yards and it began to come down over a comparatively level place. Ricky swerved sideways. He heard a shout echo among the boulders, but the echo of combined relief and exasperation in his mind rang louder.

"Ricky! Stop and talk! Whatever it is, I'll help. There's no sense in running. If I get in touch with your father, there'll be another flier and several people here in twenty minutes. Stop! Listen to me, will you, you—"

The shouts echoed on for a moment, but the thought had stopped.

Dr. Scott came whirling up through hot red mists to find herself lying beside a fire. A very hot fire, in a stone fireplace. It didn't make sense. Warm water was being sloshed across her face and there was a murmur of voices—two of them.

"She hit her head. That's all. She fainted. She'll come round in a minute. Then you'll hear her. It isn't sleep, no—not exactly. What's the matter? Why don't you—"

The second voice was no more than a vague murmur of curiosity; it was beginning to sound irritated as well.

Ellen remembered that she had been running among a lot of boulders and had twisted her foot. No doubt she had hit her head when she fell; certainly it ached. But what had she been doing that for?

She opened her eyes.

Ricky's anxious face hung directly above her and he was pouring water from his cupped hand on to her forehead. Beside him was—

Ellen winced and shut her eyes.

"Dr. Scott. Please!" Ricky sounded worried. "Are you hurt?"

"Delirious, I think," said Ellen faintly. She opened her eyes again. "Where did it go?"

Ricky's face was a study in doubt and other emotions. Ellen put a hand to the aching spot on the back of her head and began very cautiously to sit up.

"Come on, Ricky," she said firmly. "Who were you talking to?"

"Aloud?" said Ricky, in tones of surprise. "Oh, so that's why he couldn't hear."

Ellen shut her eyes again. "I'm the one with concussion, not you," she pointed out. "Who couldn't hear?"

"Well, his *name's* Big Sword," said Ricky doubtfully. "More or less, that is. He says he's coming back, anyway."

Ellen opened her eyes once more. They focused on the region of Ricky's right ear. Laid gently over it was a skinny black hand with four long, many-jointed fingers. A slender arm stole into view, attached to what might have been a medium-sized potato that had happened to grow black. On top of this was perched a head about the size of a large egg. The greater part of this was occupied by two large light-gray eyes with slit pupils and dully shining surfaces. They goggled at her solemnly.

Once again she was aware of a vague murmur of curiosity, not divisible into words.

Ellen drew a deep breath. "Ricky, this . . . this friend of yours. Why did you bring him here?"

Ricky studied her face earnestly. "It was my idea, not his, Dr. Scott. I wanted to get to the forest over there. To the other side of the Rift."

"But why?"

Ricky shook his head.

"It wasn't that at all. It was my idea, I tell you, not Big Sword's. He didn't . . . didn't hypnotize me. He wouldn't have done it to Barney except that he couldn't think of any thing else to do. And I've absolutely got to get there now!"

Ellen sat up and stared at him. "All right, Ricky.

Listen, you tell me the reason. If it's a good one . . . well, I must let your father know you're safe. But I won't tell him where you are. I'll fly you to the forest, and then back. How about that?"

Ricky breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes," he said. "Is Doc. J. very worried?"

"Worried? Listen, make it quick. I'm going to call him in ten minutes, whatever. What are you doing here?"

Ricky sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. "The idea began with the jellyfish, really," he said. "The male jellyfish in the lake."

The heliflier had completed the fifth sweep down the river to the Sea; back up the river to the rapids, where many rafts of floating vegetation broke up and re-formed, making Jordan's heart jump as he hovered above them; on up the river to the point he had fixed as farthest east. It was no good to fly over the forest; he had found that he could not pick up the search parties when he knew they were directly below him. The River was his only hope.

Nearly time to make another report. His hand was on the button of the radio when the speaker came suddenly to life.

"Calling all search parties. John Jordan please answer. Can you hear?"

Jordan's voice came out as a harsh croak. "I hear. Is he—"

"Ricky's safe. He's with me now. Turn everyone home. But—listen. He had a good reason for going off as he did. He had something to do and it's not finished. So I'm not going to tell you where we are."

Jordan shouted something incoherent, but her voice overrode him.

"It's important, John. I don't know if it will come off, but he must have a chance to try. You can probably find out where we are, but—don't come. Do you understand?"

"Ellen, is he really all right? And are you?"

"Sure I'm all right. We're going to remain all right. We'll be back some time next morning. Oh, and Ricky

says"—her voice broke off for a moment—"Ricky says he is very sorry to have worried you, honestly he is, but it was urgent, and will you please not do anything to damage that Tree." There was a moment's silence. "John? You haven't done something to it already?"

"I haven't, no."

"Don't let anyone touch it. Good night, John. Sleep well."

"Ellen—"

The speaker clicked and was silent.

The helifliers were designed for sleeping in, in an emergency, but they were not air-conditioned. Ellen felt the compress on her head, which had long ceased to be cold, and envied bitterly Ricky's ability to sleep under these conditions. A faint gleam of light from button-sized surfaces a couple of yards off showed that Big Sword was still sitting and watching as he had been doing ever since they lay down. Ellen wished bitterly that she had had the sense to lie beside the refrigerator so that she could get more cold water without having to lift her aching head.

The gray buttons moved. She felt small, strong fingers tugging gently at the compress. She lifted the pressure of her head and felt it go. There was a sound of faint movement and the click of the refrigerator door, with a momentary blast of lovely cold air. A few minutes later the compress, beautifully cold now, was poked carefully back under her head. She felt the thistledown touch of skinny fingers against her cheek.

"Thank you," she murmured, and then, remembering, she repeated it inside her head, "Thank you, Big Sword."

They had flown at dawn and the heliflier sat among the boulders at the foot of the cliff. Ellen and Ricky sat beside it, shivering a little in the morning cold, and waited.

Ellen looked at Ricky's intent face. He could not hear strange members of the People distinctly, she had gathered, but he could usually detect their presence.

"What does it feel like?" she asked abruptly.

"Hearing thoughts?" Ricky considered. "It feels like thinking. You can't really tell other thoughts from your own—unless they've been specially directed. That's what made it all so very difficult."

"I see." Ellen sighed. What on Earth, or of it, could Ricky's future be? True telepaths would not fit in Earth's scheme of things.

"I used to pick up thoughts all the time," Ricky went on. "I didn't know that until I found out how to shut them off. It was a sort of fuzzy background to my thinking. Do you know, I think all real thinkers must be people with no telepathy, or else they learn to shut it right off. Now I can do that I think much clearer."

"So you don't overhear thoughts accidentally now?" Ellen felt encouraged.

"No, I don't. I only get directed thoughts. I'm not going to overhear anyone ever again, it's just a nuisance."

"Stick to that. I don't think uncontrolled telepathy is much good to a human being."

"It isn't. I tell you what, I think there are two ways of evolving communication, telepathy and communication between senses, and people who are good at the one aren't good at the other. I'll never be a real good communicator like the People, my mind doesn't work the right way. But I'll be good enough to be useful for research. I'm going to—" Ricky broke off, seized his companions' arm and pointed.

Ellen looked up at the cliff. It was about thirty feet high, here, with only a couple of six-inch ledges to break the sheer drop. Black foliage overhung it in places.

"There!" whispered Ricky. Slowly there came into view a black head the size of an egg—a black head in which eyes shone gray.

"Is he coming back?" whispered Ellen. "Has he given up, then?"

There was a faint rustling among the leaves. Ricky's grip tightened painfully on her arm.

A second black head appeared beside the first.

"You see," said Ricky anxiously, "I didn't really think

you'd just go and destroy the Tree straight off, but I couldn't be sure. And everyone was angry with me about one thing or another and I didn't know if they'd listen."

"Speaking for myself," said Woodman, "there were one or two moments when if I'd had a blaster handy the Tree would have been done for there and then."

"So you were just taking out insurance," said Jordan.

"Yes, because if we found other Trees the species would continue anyway. Big Sword and I meant to ask you to help about that, later—the Journey, I mean—only then I thought we'd better try that straight away in case I was stopped later. I thought if I could *show* people it was better than telling them."

"Isn't Big Sword coming?" said another of the party. The whole of the expedition, including even Barney, was seated around a square table raised on trestles in the center of the clearing. Ricky nodded.

"As soon as we're ready," he said. "Now, if you like. But he says if too many people think at him at once it may hurt, so he wants you to be ready to start talking if I give the signal."

"What about?" said Cartwright.

"Anything. Anything at all. Shall I call him?"

There was half a minute's expectant silence. Then lightly as a grasshopper Big Sword flew over Ellen's head and landed with a slight bounce in the center of the table.

There was a simultaneous forward movement of heads as everybody bent to look at him, and he sat up and goggled out of pale bulging eyes. Then—

Most of them felt the sharp protest of discomfort before Ricky waved his hand. Nobody had really thought out what to say and there was a moment of silence, then somebody began to talk about the weather, the statistician began on the multiplication table, Jordan found himself muttering, " 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves . . ."—after a minute or so only Ricky was still silent.

"He says he'll go to one person after another, but the rest keep talking," reported Ricky presently. "You can ask him to do things if you like."

Solemnly Big Sword went round the table, sitting for a few moments in front of each person, snapping out his membranes, revolving to present his back view, and then going on.

"That's him!" said Barney as Big Sword came to a halt in front of him. "But how did he sting me?"

The spindly hand whipped to Big Sword's flat thigh and flashed back holding a flat gray spike two and a half inches long. He held it out and Barney fingered the point in a gingerly fashion.

"That's the sword, is it?" murmured Woodman. "Do they secrete it, Ricky?"

"I think so, but I haven't asked him."

Woodman breathed out a long sigh.

"This," he said, "is the answer to a biologist's prayer."

Big Sword bounced suddenly back into the middle of the table. "He's tired," said Ricky. "He says he'll send someone else another day." Ricky yawned uncontrollably as Big Sword took a flying leap off the table and hopped across the clearing. He had had a hard day the day before and a very early start this morning and a lot of excitement since.

"Can we just have the story straight?" said the statistician suddenly. "The biological story, I mean. You people may have been able to follow it through all the interruptions, but I didn't. I gathered that Ricky had discovered the female of the species, but that's all. How did they get lost?"

"I'll tell it," said Jordan, looking at Ricky, who was nodding sleepily, "and Ricky can correct me. Big Sword's people are the active and intelligent offspring of an organism which to all intents and purposes is a large tree. They are produced by an asexual budding process inside pods. When they are a year or so old they are seized by the urge to migrate across the Rift. They never knew why, and probably none of them ever got across. It occurred to Ricky that alternation of generations usually turns out to have sex at the bottom of it. Big Sword's People couldn't reproduce themselves—they simply

hatched from the Tree. So Ricky thought that there might be another Tree on the other side of the Rift which produced females. And when I very foolishly considered destroying the Tree because of Woodman's experience, he thought he had to go and find them straight off, so that at least the species would survive. And I'm glad to say he was quite right—they were there."

"You mean to say," said Cartwright, "that the Tree has been producing People for the last fifteen thousand years without a sexual generation at all?"

"Not necessarily," said Woodman. "There may have been several on this side of the Rift at first, and this Tree may be the last offspring of a small population. It must have been an outlier, if so, because the migration was so firmly set for the west."

"And there's another tree on the far side which produces females?"

"There are two female trees and three that bear males, but two of the male ones are very old and have few offspring, and none of the seeds have been fertile for at least fifty generations. Apparently not many come to full maturity at the best of times, but this outcross may really save the species."

"And what exactly is the plan?" demanded the statistician. "To ferry them across? What will they do when we leave?"

"No," said Jordan. "We don't propose to interfere more than we have to. The tragedy of the whole process was that the People who took the Journey almost certainly died on the way. Twelve miles in the sun, with no water, was too much for them. We propose to provide a green belt—a black belt rather—along the migration route. Tiven is looking into the possibilities—"

Tiven looked up from his slide rule. "Easy as π," he said cheerfully. "We can make the channel in a week, once we get the digger from First Base, and a cooker for concrete, and there are any number of streams which run down to the Waste and then vanish underground. It's just a question of training one of them in the way it should

go, and protecting it from evaporation in the first year or two until the vegetation gets thick enough."

The conversation flowed on. But Ricky, his head resting on the table, was already asleep.

Jordan stood at the edge of the Rift and looked over the embryo river-valley that Tiven had designed. Seedlings had been planted along the channel, in earth transported for that purpose, and were already taking hold. The revolving sun-cutters designed to protect them at this stage and to stop excessive evaporation gave the whole thing a mechanical air at present, but they would be done within a year or two; they were designed to go to dust then, so that even if the expedition had to leave they would not be left. There are places for poorly-built things!

Two of the People shot down the cliff a little to one side and disappeared into the shade along the channel.

"Are they off on the Journey?" said Ellen Scott.

"I don't think so. They go singly, as a rule. No, I think . . . look there!"

There were four People now at the end of the line of saplings. Two were presumably the ones who had passed a few minutes before; the other two were linked hand in hand and bore across their shoulders a kind of yoke with a long pod dangling from it. The two from the near side of the Forest had taken the hands of the newcomers and were helping them up the cliff.

"This is the result of your soil report, I think," said Jordan. "Woodman says that one reason for the lack of germination on the other side is the exhaustion of the few pockets of suitable soil. I wonder whether it was the necessity of finding the right soil, as well as of looking after the seedling, that led them to develop intelligence?"

The two newcomers had reached the top of the cliff. They seemed hardly to notice the helpers, nor did the latter seem to expect it. The burdened couple moved slowly along, pausing every now and then to investigate the soil. They stopped close to Ellen's feet and prodded carefully.

"Not here, little sillies!" she murmured. "Farther in."

Jordan smiled. "They've got plenty of time. One couple planted their pod just under one of Branding's tripods; trying not to step on them drove him nearly crazy. He had to move the whole lot in the end. It takes them weeks sometimes to find a spot that suits them."

"Continuing the species," said Ellen thoughtfully. "I always thought it sounded rather impersonal."

Jordan nodded. "The sort of thing you can take or leave," he agreed. "I used to think that you could either explore space or you could . . . well, continue the species is as good a way of putting it as any. Not both."

"I used to think that, too."

"Once it was true. Things have changed, even in the last few years. More and more people are organizing their lives to spend the greater part of them away from Earth. Soon there's going to be a new generation whose home isn't on Earth at all. Children who haven't been to Terrestrial schools, or played in Terrestrial playrooms, or watched the Terrestrial stereos, or—"

"Suffered the benefits of an advanced civilization?"

"Exactly. How do you feel about it, Ellen? Or . . . that's a shirker's question. Ellen Scott, will you marry me?"

"So as to propagate the species?"

"Blast the species! Will you marry me?"

"What about Ricky?"

"Ricky," said Jordan, "has been careful to let me know that he thinks it would be a very suitable match."

"The devil he has! I thought—"

"No telepathy involved. If everyone else knows I love you, why shouldn't he? Ellen—did I say please, before? Ellen, please, will you marry me?"

There was a silence. Depression settled on Jordan. He had no right to feel so sure of himself. Ellen was ten years younger and had a career to think of. He had made a mess of one marriage already and had a half-grown son. He had taken friendliness for something else and jumped in with both feet much too soon. He had made a fool of himself—probably.

"Well?" he said at last.

Ellen looked up and grinned.

"I was just making sure. I'm not quite certain I could take being married to a telepath—which you are not, my dear. Absolutely not. Of course I'm going to."

Ricky, with Big Sword on his shoulder, was strolling along a path in the sun. He saw his father and Dr. Scott return to the camp arm in arm, and nodded with satisfaction. About time, too. Now perhaps Doc. J. would stop mooning around and get on with his work for a change. He'd had Ricky and Woodman's last report on the biology of the People for two weeks without making the slightest attempt to read it, and it was full of interesting things.

Just for a moment, Ricky wondered what it was like to get all wrapped up in one individual like that. No doubt he'd find out in time. It would have to be somebody interested in real things, of course—not an Earth-bound person like poor Cora.

Meanwhile he was just fourteen and free of the Universe, and he was going to have fun.

Big Sword, from his perch on Ricky's shoulder, noticed the couple with the pod. He saw that this one was fertile, all right—the shoot was beginning to form inside it. One of them was an old friend from this side of the Rift, but it was no good trying to talk to him—his mind would be shut. The whole process of taking the Journey, finding a mate and taking care of one's seedling was still a mystery to Big Sword in the sense that he could not imagine what it felt like. Just now he was not very interested. He had nearly a year in which to find out things, especially things about the Big People who, now they were domesticated, had turned out to be so useful, and he was going to enjoy that and not speculate about the Journey, and what it felt like to take it.

Because, eventually, the call would come to him, too, and he would set off up the new little stream to the other side of the Rift where the trees of the Strangers grew. And then he would know.

FIRST LADY

BY J. T. McINTOSH

Once the depths of the Galaxy have been probed and certain planets have been found to be habitable by man, there will be an explosion of exploration from the Center to the Rim.

And perhaps a cautious pattern of exploitation will emerge, encouraged by certain catastrophic events early on in the history of space. First there will be all-male colonization, because the hazards of planet-opening are such that no one would want to expose women to them. Then the colony is expanded and stabilized, still without women, while meticulous medical studies are made.

Then finally comes the introduction of Woman—the Great Mother. And in this last event you have the makings of an awe-inspiring story, here told in beautifully human, quietly understated terms: so that only by giving your full thought to the idea can you comprehend the truly fantastic drama of the concept. This is Big Stuff!

"First Lady," first published in 1953, has been anthologized in the author's home country, England, and also in Germany and the Netherlands. Only now has it "made it" in the United States. It's about time!

We were just a few hours from Lotrin, and I looked at Shirley and Ellen and wondered how we were going to settle the problem in time. It wasn't a life-and-death matter; probably none of us was going to die, whatever happened. It would be one way out, of course, for us all to commit suicide. But I couldn't see any of us doing that, including Shirley, even if she knew what we knew. Suicide is never the answer to a problem, it's only at best a compromise with it.

We weren't just looking at each other. We were talking, arguing, ranting, dramatizing. Ellen was doing the talking, arguing, ranting and dramatizing, now that she had to take an interest again in what was going on. Shirley was never a talker, and I'm a good listener. Besides, the problem was less Ellen's than it was Shirley's and mine, and often the people who talk most are those who are least involved.

I'm one of those people who always have an unconcerned, mildly interested alter ego, observing what's going on, sifting it, hauling up memories and comparing the present with the past. I found it quite easy, while Ellen talked, to run rapidly through our whole association with Shirley, right from the beginning back on Earth.

She was expecting us, actually waiting for us, so there wasn't much chance of our getting an informal look at her. On the way, Ellen was irritated, as usual. Being Ellen, she was keeping me informed on her view of the situation. She drove, keeping her eyes on the road, but throwing out occasional asides.

"We aren't just messengers," she muttered.

"Anyone at all would have done," she grumbled.

"We've never had to do anything I liked less," she complained.

Silently, I agreed with that, at least.

We were Terran Control agents and we were doing a job that someone had to do. In itself, it was simple and rather boring, which was behind Ellen's complaint that we weren't just messengers. But there was more than simplicity and boredom in it. Much more. The trouble was that we knew exactly what *was* in it. Sometimes we had been sent out, blind, to do very different jobs for TC, and we hadn't liked that. This time we knew what we were doing and, if anything, we liked it less.

"There are more important things we might be doing than escorting an overgrown schoolgirl to Lotrin," Ellen beefed.

I quoted ironically from the newscasts. "But what a girl," I said nasally. "What a history she's going to have. What a life story she will one day be able to write."

"Save that for the great galactic public," Ellen snapped. "Anyway, this girl is ordinary. Picked out because she's ordinary, normal, average, typical."

She drew up outside the small-town maisonette where the future First Lady of Lotrin lived. She stopped in her usual way, with a furious jerk of four locked wheels. She didn't wait for me, but was out and crunching up the gravel path while the car was still rocking.

We thought at first there was nobody home, and Ellen sneered something about cold feet. But when we went around the back, there was the girl, pretending not to see us. She was draped on a garden seat, wearing a playsuit and reading a book.

"Just to show she doesn't care," said Ellen.

Ellen, this once, was dead right. Shirley Judson—we'd seen pictures of her, and this was the girl, all right—was good-looking. Where she was just attractive, not beautiful, was where current standards of beauty deviated from the norm. Make no mistake about it, there was nothing in Shirley's looks to stop a million men from falling in love with her.

Yet Ellen muttered: "Not chosen for her looks, anyway."

I threw an expressive glance at her. Why will women insist on giving their worthless opinions of other women's attractiveness or homeliness? It wasn't a million *women* who were supposed to fall in love with Shirley.

We moved over to her and introduced ourselves. Shirley didn't notice exactly when it became impossible to pretend any more that she hadn't seen us, and give up the pretense, so I suppose technically it's still going on yet.

There was casual, pointless conversation—*not* about Lotrin. We didn't bow and express our pleasure to meet the First Lady of Lotrin. In fact, just to make sure there was no misunderstanding, we put her very much in her place. At any rate, Ellen did. At first.

Ellen always looks like something straight out of *Vogue,* and in all modesty I can say I have seen worse-looking men of thirty-five than me. Shirley was a very young twenty-one, and her playsuit, as Ellen soon demonstrated to her without saying a word, was two mistakes. Wearing a playsuit was wrong, and wearing that particular playsuit was wronger.

Shirley was keyed up almost to breaking-point, naturally enough. Her nostrils were white, she was breathing quickly and shallowly, and somehow one knew her voice was coming out two tones higher than usual. But that couldn't be helped; the playsuit could. It had been meant to show she was completely at her ease, unimpressed by the solemnity of the occasion, and not in the least scared of us. It did pretty much the opposite.

Instead of seeing the nervousness of her hands and face, four curious eyes noted the nervousness of her whole body. And the white frilly rompers suggested child when she wanted to be mature and at no disadvantage with us. And if we wanted to be nasty, which Ellen nearly always does with other women, it was only necessary to look at Shirley's legs or shoulders and then away, with faint distaste, to make it obvious that there was something wrong

with the legs, or the display of them, without giving the girl anything she could answer.

I haven't covered everything, but you can imagine the general lines of the situation. Anyway, Ellen made the most of it. I tried to counteract the effect a little, but no one has ever been able to counteract Ellen.

Then suddenly, just as the girl was about to cry, Ellen said, "Joe, take a walk," in an unexpectedly brisk tone, and jerked her head.

Meekly, I went up the garden.

I stopped where I could still see them, but not hear what they said. The funny thing about Ellen is that people don't hate her the way they should. Other people strive hard for affection and don't get it; Ellen seems to put in a lot of good solid work to be hated, only it doesn't turn out that way.

She was very careful with Shirley, I saw, not even touching her at first. Then they were all over each other in that curious way women have. Shirley was crying by this time, of course. Her white shoulders and chestnut hair were mixed up with Ellen's blue frock, and there was a tangle of bare arms and chic elbow-length gloves.

And for some reason I had a lump in my throat.

I wasn't in the next part much. I wasn't around because Shirley spent most of the next two months in bra and panties or less, being poked and tapped by doctors, getting massages, doing violent exercises and being checked and doublechecked, slipping in and out of dresses, blouses, skirts, slacks and almost every other form of feminine attire.

One might have thought that clothes wouldn't matter much to the First Lady of Lotrin, who would be literally the first woman to set foot on the planet, certainly the last for a long time, and possibly the last ever. But Shirley was going to represent her whole sex on Lotrin. She would have to be supremely feminine, and a few crates of clothes, even if they had to be transported hundreds of light-years at fabulous cost, as these would be, were not regarded

by Terran Control as a luxury. They really weren't for Shirley. They were for Lotrin.

I wasn't there, but Ellen was, so I naturally heard all about it. I heard the story of every examination, every test, every checkup, every experiment; the details of Shirley's trousseau were inflicted on me, down to the last clip and lace curlicue. Ellen was bored with the whole business and she didn't see why my being a man should excuse me from being bored with them, too.

So if anyone wants to know anything at all about what happens to a First Lady—any First Lady—before she leaves the New York TC center, just ask me. Nothing too minute, too intimate. The story of the testing and preparation and coaching and beautifying and swearing in and final passing of a First Lady is yours for the asking.

Of course it isn't very interesting.

I haven't said much about Terran Control. First of all, the name—it means control of everything from and by Earth. Some say it's a clumsy and unworkable system, bound to fall apart eventually. Maybe it is, but it won't collapse during this generation or the next. Meantime, what TC says goes. And as far as Shirley was concerned, Ellen and I were TC; we represented it.

I always say as little for or against TC as possible. This isn't because my job depends on keeping my mouth shut. TC is an autocracy, but not that kind.

When you've got a big job in hand, like, say, colonizing a galaxy, there's only one good way of doing it. Before you start, there may be plenty of ways. Again, if you start and fail, you may try another way. But, if you start and don't fail, you have to keep on the way you began. I'm not going to argue about it; I'm just saying what I believe.

One of the points of TC's way was this: the human race must stay human. There have been enough civil wars without creating new races so that there can be new race wars. The Martian War showed what can happen when men become not-men and somewhere else men stay men. As it happened, the men won—there are no Martians left.

There never will be Martians again while TC rules colonization. Humans can't live on Mars and stay human. Mars is a plague spot, and the ruins of human habitation on the red planet crumble to dust.

Venus is another matter. So are the Aldebaran worlds, and the other scattered worlds named for themselves, not their suns—Jenta, Smith, Babylon, Eyrie, Nostral, Hover, Gluckstein, Fortan, Jissel, Maple. Others, like Mars—Robinson, Dahlia, Mantor, Arka—are crossed out, forgotten names. Just plague spots. Dead, most of them. Some, unfortunately, are only dying.

Others still—Civnet, Lotrin, Martin, Beckland, Everest, Red Dawn—have question marks after them. It takes a long time to remove a question mark. But, broadly, the query begins to fade at a set point. After that a world may still turn out to be a plague spot, but that's liable to be a gradual business. People can be taken out and settled elsewhere. Their strain will be watched, they may even be sterilized, but they will still be regarded as men.

The set point is the birth of the first child conceived and delivered on the world under study. Scientists and doctors do everything but take the poor kid to pieces. Then they deliver their verdict. They say go ahead, or go ahead cautiously, or wait a while, or hold everything, or stop, or . . .

But no one likes to examine that end of the scale too closely.

And that's the main reason why the First Lady is so important. She's the chosen mother of that first child. The father is chosen, too, of course.

TC is matchmaker as well as godfather.

Shirley and some Lotrin settler whose name I didn't know were the future of Lotrin. The shape of Shirley's life, and the destiny of a whole world, depended on a child she would have by a man she was going out to marry, but had never met.

It was a queer situation, though not new any longer. The First Lady of Jenta was dead a long while; so was the First Lady of Smith. The First Lady of Babylon was over a hundred, and still, it was said, went for a swim

in a mountain stream every morning. Eyrie's First Lady was ninety-three. Nostral's was not only First Lady, but President of Nostral as well. So on down to Maple's First Lady, who could still wear a playsuit like Shirley's, and to better effect, from what I'd been told.

I'm not, if I can help it, going to say anything about the First Ladies of Robinson, Dahlia, Mantor or Arka.

I told you those places are plague spots.

It must have been that curious power of divination they call feminine intuition that made Ellen call Shirley an overgrown schoolgirl before she had even met her, when she had only seen a photograph or two of the girl. For that's what Shirley was. I don't know whether TC has a definite pattern for the choice of First Ladies which includes an emotional maturity index; I haven't met many First Ladies. But if there is a pattern, and Shirley fitted it, a First Lady must be rather shy, quiet, inexperienced, above all virginal—an overgrown schoolgirl, as a matter of fact.

One might have thought a First Lady should be dynamic, reckless, or a hundred per cent glamor. TC apparently didn't agree. I don't mean that Shirley was timid, incapable of recklessness, and sexless. She was—homy. One could see her as somebody's sister, somebody's girl friend, somebody's wife. Not as an official, a TC agent like Ellen and me, a dancehall girl, an athlete. Not as anything that needed drive or responsibility or amorality.

It's difficult to describe Shirley at all, because anything you say about her, you have to qualify. If you say she was shy, you have to add that she wasn't *very* shy. And if she wasn't brilliant, you couldn't describe her as stupid.

Likewise, when she insisted on traveling incognito to avoid a great sendoff at New York, she could have been persuaded, and when the time came, I think she wished we hadn't given in so easily. She would never seek the limelight, but when she found herself in it, she would be capable of enjoying it.

There were no cheering crowds and reporters and photographers when we left from New York spaceport.

Shirley was traveling as Ellen's sister. She seemed to like the part. She had a crush on Ellen good and hard.

TC was used to misleading the press. One might have thought some smart newsman would put two and two together and work out that since Lotrin's First Lady was about due to go out, and since this ship, in the course of its four-month tour, was going to touch Lotrin, and since Shirley had most of the hallmarks of a First Lady, it might be worth investigating her a little. But TC announced officially that the First Lady wasn't chosen yet, and circulated privately a rumor that she *was* chosen and would go on the next ship.

The newspapermen rejected the statement and accepted the rumor. And if anyone checked over the passenger list of the *Sardonia,* he would have seen that we were going out to settle the Aldebaran section.

Shirley looked around with interest. "It's a wonderful ship," she said, gazing up at the smooth hull.

"Is it?" murmured Ellen, obviously surprised that anyone should think it was wonderful. "Just wait till you get inside. You'll find that every foot has only nine inches. You'll get used to that, but when you reach the Moon, you'll discover the foot has shrunk to seven inches. On the next tender it'll be five, and when you're on the liner it'll come down to four."

Shirley stared at her. "Isn't this the *Sardonia?"*

"Sometimes I wonder where you've been living these last twenty-one years. Tell her, Joe."

Pencil skirts were in again; Ellen hobbled toward the tender. She could talk like that to Shirley. If I tried it, the tears would come. I wondered how many gallons Shirley had wept since TC first found her. Most of them, according to Ellen, were about her mother, and they were usually down Ellen's dress.

"This is only a tender to take us to the Moon, Shirley," I said. "Curiously, it's power-to-weight ratio is much higher than that of the ship that will take us all those light-years. On the Moon there'll be another check and another tender

will take us to the *Sardonia,* which by that time will be orbiting around the Moon."

I took Shirley's arm and steered her after Ellen. No one had any time for us; spaceships have no room for flunkeys.

"The starships never land anywhere," I went on. "They're assembled in space, and when, despite all the safeguards, they're eventually saturated with radiation leakage, they're destroyed in space."

"I can't make you and Ellen out," said Shirley suddenly, showing how much good my lecturette for children had done. "Do you love her, Joe?"

I grinned wryly. "Shirley, sometimes you're too shy to say perfectly ordinary things, and other times you're a little too frank. Outside of novels, people don't go around asking people if they love other people."

"But do you," she insisted, "since I've asked it?"

"First define love," I said. "When you've done that to my satisfaction, ask me again. Then if you get an answer in the morning, see if it's the same answer in the afternoon, and the next day, and next week."

"You're married, I suppose?"

"Why should you suppose that?"

She seemed taken back. "You are living together," she said. "Aren't you?"

"We certainly work together, but that doesn't mean we're married."

She was silent while we climbed to the airlock and began to sidle along the narrow passage.

"I think I know what you are," she said. "You're secret agents. The way you don't answer questions shows you're used to it."

"That's a point," I said agreeably.

A few minutes later—it was a slow business moving along that passage—Shirley stated emphatically from behind me: "You're Joe Dell and she's Ellen Dell."

"That settles it, then," I observed. "We must be married."

"Don't you ever give a fact away, free?"

I half turned and looked down at her reprovingly.

"Weren't you listening? I told you about the tenders and the *Sardonia*—"

"Which I could have got from the steward. He can't tell me if you love Ellen."

"Well, that makes two of us," I said easily. "Neither can I."

"You *won't*, anyway."

We had almost caught up with Ellen, and she stopped at that and waited.

"He won't what?" she said.

I was between them, so they could hardly see each other at all. Corridors on spaceships have to be seen to be believed. Ellen and Shirley might have passed each other, but only at the cost of buttons and tears and bruises, and that's no exaggeration. If I had to pass anyone, we could only do it by climbing over each other.

Shirley was silent. She was ready to ask questions of me, but not of Ellen. Not that kind of question.

"It doesn't matter," I said, "since it's settled that I *won't*."

Ellen accepted that, for the moment. She had found our room.

"Yours is around the corner, Shirley," she said. "Come and I'll show you how things work."

I backed into the cabin to get out of the way, and they went past. Shirley gave me a last searching, puzzled glance.

Fitting into the routine of space travel again is always pretty much the same. Ellen made the same grumbles, phrased differently. This time she wondered ironically why they didn't feed us on condensed milk and shortbread and make sure we starved. Remarked that you rubbed your head before you got up in anticipation of the bump. Said she realized at last why spacegirls on magazine covers wore tights—they couldn't squeeze through spaceship doors wearing anything else. Suggested we come to some arrangement whereby I breathed out when she breathed in.

Shirley, to whom it was all new, took it very much for granted. That is, she noticed with surprise how little room

there was, adjusted herself to the new conditions and forgot the whole thing.

When we were on the second tender, taking us out to the *Sardonia,* I asked Ellen: "How much does Shirley know?"

She didn't feel like being sarcastic, for once, so she cut out everything but what I wanted to know.

"Not much," she said. "Shirley doesn't know she's got to marry this character—let's call him Bill. She thinks she does, but she doesn't realize how absolutely inescapable it is that she must marry him and no one else. She doesn't know that she must be kind—but not too kind—to the million others. No doubt she has her own ideas on that. What she doesn't realize is that she must be the perfect, flawless figurehead, the dreamgirl, the model for all women, at once the vestal virgin, the perfect wife, everybody's sister, everybody's sweetheart and everybody's mother."

"I know what you mean," I said. "Not everyone would."

"One thing," Ellen observed, "she probably does realize. She knows about the baby."

I pressed my foot urgently against hers.

"I suppose she knows," Ellen went on reflectively, "that if it's a monster, her whole future and Bill's and Lotrin's collapses. And not only collapses, but into a rather nasty little puddle. Yes, she probably knows that. I don't think she's really faced it, but who could? Certainly not me. I'll stay in TC and be asked to do the impossible and get shot at and maybe beaten up occasionally. But I'm glad I'm a few years too old to be asked to be a First Lady."

Shirley came right into the room. It had been a good touch on Ellen's part to drop these hints about our normal employment. Since neither of us had done anything of the sort before, it would convince Shirley that Ellen didn't know she was there.

Shirley was white, but strictly under control.

"So you're taking me to Lotrin" she said clearly, "to do something you wouldn't do yourself?"

Ellen turned and met her gaze. She didn't look startled

that Shirley had heard her; it would have been out of character, anyway.

"That's right, Shirley," she said quietly.

I really thought there was going to be a scene. It was all between Ellen and Shirley. It was Ellen whom Shirley worshiped, not me. I could see Shirley deciding that Ellen was false and everything was, too, and you couldn't trust anyone or anything. I saw her being ashamed of all the times she had cried before Ellen, who all the while had been thinking she was mad and a fool to be doing what she was doing.

Then Shirley whirled and went out.

"Better go after her, hadn't you?" I said.

"I've gone after her often enough."

"But she may . . ."

"She may do what?"

"Anything. Kill herself."

"If she's going to kill herself, she'd better do it now, not when she's reached Lotrin and has actually been installed."

I was silent, thinking. Shirley wouldn't kill herself, of course. Girls as delicately balanced as that would never be chosen as First Ladies. She would have much worse things to face than Ellen's defection.

I knew why Ellen had spoken as she had. Ellen was no part of Shirley's life on Lotrin. If Shirley was pinning a lot on Ellen and Ellen's opinion of her and First Ladies in general, the sooner it was unpinned, the better. So Ellen tore it off.

Besides, of course, Ellen was fed up playing nursemaid.

"Just for curiosity," I said, "when were you shot at in the line of duty?"

"On Maple, fool. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, that. But the shot was meant for me."

"A lot of difference that would have made to me if it killed me."

"And when were you last beaten up?"

"Nostral. When you were looking for the house."

I didn't pursue that. On that occasion, Ellen certainly

ran into my arms as she had never done before or since, and had stayed in bed for days afterward alleging nervous exhaustion. The thing about Ellen is that if she was *nearly* beaten up, she would talk about it at every opportunity, with all the details of what did happen and what might have happened, but if she *was* beaten up, she would shut up like a clam.

I filed away the conclusion that she had probably had a tough time on Nostral, and I hadn't known about it before—it had happened two years ago—meant nothing. Not when you know the first thing about Ellen.

I came back to what I thought was safer ground: "A few years too old?"

"I'm twenty-five," Ellen remarked calmly.

It wasn't impossible, though that meant she was only eighteen when I first met her. Just unlikely. So I left it at that. It was unlike Ellen to give away even that much. Twenty years hence, I could say that according to her own figures she was now forty-five.

But this isn't the story of Ellen. Not directly, at any rate.

We hardly saw Shirley when we were changing over to the *Sardonia*. Ellen's attitude was that she had seen Shirley through the first part, and it was my turn now. She might have to take over again just before we reached Lotrin and clear up the mess I had made, but meantime she was going to have a rest from Shirley Judson.

That's Ellen.

If anything was to be done about Shirley, I would have to do it. I waited until the ship was well clear of the Moon and then went to look for Shirley, whom we had only seen at mealtimes.

The *Sardonia* was nosing about, stopping and darting like a fish. Passengers weren't supposed to walk about at this stage. They were told to lie down or at least sit down. For the effect of the ship's motion was that, one moment, "down" was the floor, the next the left-hand wall, then the wall in front, then the wall behind. Of course it was never a full gravity; if you liked to take a chance, you

could drop lightly on your feet on floor, walls and ceiling. The beds all swiveled with the changes in equilibrium.

Apparently Shirley was taking her chance with the gravity, because she wasn't in her cabin.

There was no room for social life on the *Sardonia*. The only place that held a fair number of people was the dining room, and, as the ship carried four hundred people, the dining room was on shift duty twenty-four hours a day. So, if Shirley wasn't in her own room, she was in someone else's.

I considered the matter. Shirley had had a shock. Torn from the life she had grown used to in twenty-one years, she had set up Ellen as her model and guide. Ellen had allowed this until we were irrevocably on our way, then abdicated. What she had said was nothing; she could have won back Shirley's adoration any time she cared, but she hadn't bothered.

What would Shirley do? She would feel nothing mattered. Nobody cared. She might as well enjoy herself—show Ellen she didn't care, either. In the limited field offered by the *Sardonia,* there was only one thing she could do.

I considered some more. If Shirley was going to throw herself at some man's head, the likelihood was that it would be someone on the same meal shift, someone she had at least seen and talked to. I picked Glen Mavor. Mavor was a shy youngster going out to Civnet to settle. Civnet, right on the outposts of Terran settlement, wasn't near the First Lady stage yet.

I sought out Mavor. I tapped on his door, but walked right in. I was right. Shirley was there, lounging against a wall. Mavor was sitting on the bed. When I came in, the place was crowded.

"Hallo, Shirley," I said. "I thought you might be here."

The ship made one of its sudden darts and Shirley and I somersaulted and landed on the ceiling, Shirley in a swirl of legs and skirt. She laughed. Mavor didn't have to move, because the bed kept its equilibrium.

I saw the situation. Shirley was unconcerned, happy in a reckless way. Mavor was interested, excited, but very

nervous. He might not know the intracacies of the situation, but he knew he was going to a world which wouldn't see a woman for a long time, and that Shirley was ready and willing to offer consolation in advance.

This wasn't the Shirley Judson we had met in the garden. This Shirley was more vital, and about twenty times as attractive, because now she was trying to be attractive.

Innocence is an attitude of mind, not mere absence of experience. Shirley now, arms behind her and head thrown back against the wall, was far from innocent. Nothing much had happened to her experience, but a lot to her attitude of mind. She had chosen a thin canary-yellow blouse for two obvious reasons, and her scarlet skirt hugged her waist and hips and then flared carelessly, its work done.

Shirley couldn't go around like that for long looking for trouble without finding it. Something had to be done.

"Mavor," I said quietly, "I'm going to tell you a secret."

Mavor, a good-looking young fellow, glanced at Shirley, but she only smiled and surveyed her ankles. He turned back to me.

"I don't know if I want to hear any secrets," he said.

"This one you hear all the same. And you keep it. It doesn't really matter now whether you keep it or not, but it would be more convenient if everyone on the ship didn't know it just yet. Shirley, you see, is the First Lady of Lotrin."

I knew I had been right to tell him when I saw his expression.

"I only mention it," I said casually, "because when people are playing with dynamite, they at least ought to know it's dynamite. Coming, Shirley?"

There was another upheaval. This time Shirley landed on top of Mavor, her arms round his neck. It might have been an accident, but it was no accident when she pulled his face to hers and kissed him. That wasn't for Mavor's benefit at all, but for mine.

She disentangled herself at her leisure and followed me. I took her to her own room.

"Why did you tell him that?" she asked. She didn't mind; she was just curious.

"To keep him out of your way," I said grimly. "He won't touch you with a grappling pole now. He's scared."

"Why?"

"You don't know much about TC, do you? It carries a lot of guns of different calibers. No one twists TC's tail for fun."

"You mean Terran Control would victimize Glen?"

"What for?"

It was a good question. It upset even the new, more confident Shirley. "I mean if . . ."

"If what?" I demanded.

"Why shouldn't I have a good time while I can, before I get to my prison?"

"Nothing against having a good time. Unless the form it takes might have an adverse effect on the future."

"I don't care about the future. There may be no future."

We had reached her room. I passed it, pushed her inside and followed her in. We sat on the bed, where we could watch the gyrations of the walls with indifference.

"What's the ship doing?" she abruptly wanted to know.

"Looking for the rails," I told her. I didn't want to talk about the ship, but I was ready to play along with Shirley to a certain extent.

"The *rails?*"

"Sure. You know space travel is composed of two very different parts. Hoisting yourself free of a planet and then of a satellite of some kind, and then maneuvering about clumsily like this. The other part is as slick and wonderful as this is primitive and slow. At this rate, you'd take twenty thousand years to reach Aldebaran, let alone Lotrin."

"But it only takes a few weeks!"

"That's what I'm telling you," I said patiently. "It's slick and wonderful. There aren't really any rails, of course, but it's something like that. We're looking for a field that starts about here and stretches all the way to Aldebaran. A beam. The Catterick Field, they call it. We've passed

through it several times already—why we keep nosing about like this is that we have to be fair and square in the middle of it, and it's pretty tight. Only a few miles across."

"The ship isn't a mile wide."

"No. But if there was the slightest error, how many million miles would be needed to show it up? Ever hear of inertia, Shirley?"

"That's laziness."

"You can put it that way. The laziness of matter. When it's still, matter can't be bothered to move, and it's a devil of a job to make it. And, when it's moving, it can't be bothered to make any effort to stop, and you have the same job all over again stopping it.

"Now the *Sardonia's* engines generate enough power to take us to Lotrin in a few weeks without the Catterick Field—only the ship wouldn't go with the engines at that acceleration. It would disintegrate. And at a fraction of that speed, we'd all be crushed to pulp. Just now, no acceleration of more than ten feet a second is being put on."

For demonstration purposes, I caught her by the waist, raised her against about a third Earth gravity and pushed her into the center of the room just as the ship shot one way and then another.

"And that can be quite hectic," I remarked, as Shirley bounced and somersaulted to the opposite wall.

She had dressed for this sort of thing, I observed, with canary lingerie which was meant to make an interesting flurry as her legs thrashed about. I caught her unceremoniously by the waistband and hauled her back on the bed beside me.

"Imagine what it would be like if the acceleration were ten *miles* a second," I went on. "Or a thousand miles. Or ten thousand."

"I can't," she said truthfully.

"Obviously, if you're going to travel hundreds of light-years at a time, you've got to do something about inertia. Suppose there were no inertia on Earth. That's impossible

actually, because the field only operates in a vacuum. But if it wasn't, and gravity and air resistance remained the same, you could run at top speed from a standing start. If you wanted to turn and go back, you'd do it in one stride."

"Nonsense," said Shirley, "you would strain a muscle or something."

"No. That's inertia. If you're running at fifteen miles an hour and try to make your muscles stop you dead, certainly you'll tear something. But if there's no inertia, you could turn with one toe and be running the other way. Gravity and air resistance would not matter much. It's inertia you've got to counter."

Shirley was tired of the whole subject and showed it.

I went on grimly: "When we're firmly in the center of this field, which is maintained from the Moon, by the way, we'll start off with the Catterick Field energized. Then there won't be any gravity. No inertia. Only a trickle let through so that we can still walk about, not a millionth of the real force. The ship will be able to start and stop in a split second. It won't do more than a few hundred miles an hour at first, because we may still not be properly on the rails. When the captain's satisfied we are, we'll be off at the speed of light. Then bigger and bigger multiples of that till we reach Aldebaran. Then dead stop. We—"

"I'm going to have a shower," Shirley announced.

"You mean you want me to leave?"

"Stay if you like, as long as you don't go on gabbing about the Cat-whatever-it-is Field."

The shower was a minute cubicle in the opposite wall. There was no sink; if you wanted to wash, you had to take a whole shower.

I might have told Shirley that I had seen and read and done a lot more than she had, and that if she really wanted to shock or upset me, she would have to go much further than she was ready to do—go around shooting people, for instance, or tampering with the engines, or trying to climb out into space.

But that might give her ideas, and anyway she wanted me to protest. So I hoisted myself up and made for the

door, knowing she didn't really want to be left alone, with Glen Mavor almost certainly crossed off from now on.

"See you later," I said.

Shirley's reckless phase fizzled out. Glen Mavor *was* crossed off and she wasn't really sorry. She was fundamentally level-headed. She started speaking to Ellen again instead of ignoring her when we ate. Ellen took her tentative advances as she had taken her resentment, calmly and without reference to the past. But the old adoration was gone. It was me Shirley addressed most of her attention to, not Ellen.

Time passes quickly when every day is the same, even more quickly when there is no day. We all slept about twelve hours out of twenty-four. Sustained exercise was almost impossible, and Ellen again had her usual worry about putting on weight. She did the usual thing about it—shut me out of the cabin and exercised grimly, deliberately, systematically. She wouldn't let anyone see her swinging her arms and pedaling on her back. Shirley was politely shown out, too, once or twice.

"She saw me doing that sort of thing often enough," Shirley objected once. "Is she made differently from other women, or what?"

This was a far cry from her earlier worship of Ellen, which I thought was not a bad thing.

"Oh, no," I said.

"She couldn't have knock knees or a pot belly or anything?"

"Nothing like that. She'll sunbathe in a swimsuit in the right surroundings, but only when she can be perfect. Ellen is the one perfect thing in a lot of imperfect worlds."

"Do *you* think she's perfect?"

"What I think doesn't count. I meant can you imagine seeing Ellen touching her toes and swinging over to try to do it backward? You may know she's doing it, but can you imagine *seeing* it?"

She couldn't.

Shirley and I were thus thrown in each other's company a lot. But we discovered a certain similarity in tempera-

ment with regard to passing time together which Ellen would never have understood. We would lounge comfortably in Shirley's room reading or considering life or even dozing, without saying a word. We each had company, but we didn't have to talk.

And then Shirley finished that phase, too. I was reading a novel when she put her head between me and the book and kissed me.

It may sound like a confession, but that really did startle me. Because when she did that, a lot of other things slipped into place.

She had wanted to know, when we were just on our way, whether I loved Ellen. Whether we were married. She had quarreled with Ellen. She had let me stop an affair with Glen Mavor, and hadn't seemed to care. She had tried to upset me, put me off stroke. She became catty about Ellen. She spent nearly all her waking hours in my company.

Just when my brain was about to take over once more, it was sent reeling again by the realization that Shirley wasn't any more ready for this clinch than I was.

That's what they mean when they talk about love as a little-understood though prevalent disease. I had no possible reason or excuse for falling for Shirley, I hadn't meant to do it, it had never occurred to me that I *could* do it. And here we were. With Shirley in my arms, I wasn't going to move or think, if I could help it, because, once the moment ended, I was going to have to face a lot of things I didn't want to face. Shirley probably felt exactly the same. So we clung and felt our hearts beating together and tried to stop time.

We succeeded no better than anyone ever has. I felt I was hurting Shirley and released my grip slightly. In turn, she took one arm from my neck and dropped it to my side. So, a little at a time, we broke it up.

We pretended it was just one of those things that happen when you don't actually take steps to prevent it, meaning little or nothing. We didn't talk about it at all, and went on acting exactly as before.

Except—perhaps I'm biased, but Shirley really seemed to become a hundred per cent prettier. I don't think that's bias, for Ellen remarked one day that she didn't know why she'd once said Shirley wasn't chosen for her looks, anyway. But it must have been bias that made me think Shirley was really quite intelligent and had good taste and could make a good TC agent.

Still Shirley and I never talked about Lotrin. Until the very last day when the bubble burst.

We were still untold light-years from Lotrin, but only a few hours. We had not, of course, landed anywhere; we stopped several times and tenders came out to the *Sardonia,* but that affected us not at all except that there were different faces at mealtimes.

Someone once said that the poor have large families because, cooped up in a small space, they haven't much else to do. But Shirley and I, despite that one lapse, were so sure of ourselves that we spent nearly all our time together in a space no larger than a big cupboard. There was nothing of sex in our talk, and, though we couldn't avoid touching each other accidentally, there was never a hint of sensuality in the contact between Shirley and me.

That day, Shirley was reading and I was sitting on the floor wondering what assignment Ellen and I would be given next—still in the determined pretense that this was just a job which would be over and all but forgotten very soon. I wondered again why TC had given us the job of taking Shirley out to Lotrin. But that was a train of thought that led in a direction I didn't like, and I jerked my head as one does when in search of distraction—any distraction.

Shirley's red slipper caught my eye, which then drifted up her legs. Shirley had good legs, but her skirt was tucked modestly under her and I couldn't even see to the knee. I was unreasonably irritated. Why did she have to pull her skirt about her like that? It was like shielding a letter from you as you passed, as if you were trying to read it. Uncalled for. I wasn't sitting on the floor so that

I could see her legs. I hadn't even thought of her legs until I saw she was hiding them primly like a spinster.

I reached out and touched Shirley's ankle, but, at the touch, anything I'd had in mind went away abruptly. She threw aside her book and slid down into my arms.

We petted like teen-age lovers, just as nervous and excited. Suddenly Shirley threw herself back, eyes closed, waiting.

And it had exactly the opposite effect on me of what it was supposed to have.

"Look, Shirley," I said harshly. "This is impossible."

She sat up, her back against the bed.

"Don't you know what a First Lady is?" I demanded. "She's a symbol. A goddess. A whole new world depends on her, loves her and would die for her. She's more of a sovereign than any queen in history."

"Lotrin can have another First Lady," said Shirley sharply. "I'm going to abdicate right away."

"You can't. Weeks ago, it was disclosed on Earth that the First Lady of Lotrin was Shirley Judson, who was on her way there. It hasn't anything like the importance to Earth that it has to Lotrin, but it's known. It can't be hushed up. Suppose you go back. Lotrin will hear the story eventually. Some other girl goes—a second-best, not the real First Lady, a substitute for a failure or a coward. What chance will she have? Suppose TC covers up and sends out another girl as Shirley Judson with some story to explain the delay. *She'll* know. She'd have to be the best actress in the Galaxy to keep up the pretense all the rest of her life."

"Why didn't you think of that before?"

"I knew it all along."

"Nobody can make me be a good First Lady. I can ruin Lotrin. I would."

"Ruin a world because you didn't get your own way? Because you went back on your word?"

We were both being unfair, of course. We went around in circles for a while longer, blaming everything on each other, but not in hot anger—rather with a sort of hopeless knowledge that what I had said was true.

The TC colonization system is all built into a solid pyramid. At the bottom are the real pioneers, the men who take a chance on death or glory, poverty or fabulous wealth. They go to a world and shape it into a place for men to live. As time goes by and they prosper, there are more and more of them. A hundred men, a thousand, a hundred thousand. But no women. Everybody knows that. It's accepted.

Every new world may be life-blood or canker. If the canker ever has to be cut out, it must be possible to do it cleanly and completely. No women. The world settled, examined, explored, tested, tried out in every way. Early diseases and allergies and maladies conquered. Five hundred thousand men, a million.

And no women. TC controls all space travel, not only interstellar travel. No woman can possibly reach a virgin world.

Then the First Lady. The real beginning. Recognition. Reward. Promise. Hope.

That's one side.

The other side is that if the world turns out to be canker, the First Lady can easily be sterilized, along with the unfortunate child, if it happens to be female. That's the end. The world must die, for there are no more women. Everybody knows and accepts that, too.

It's a crazy structure of luck and fear and wild hope, but a solid structure. I could no more buck it than Shirley could. She was Lotrin's First Lady and there was no escape.

But Shirley and I weren't really considering the issues, only toying with them. When I saw that, I said: "Let's get Ellen in on this."

Shirley jumped. "Are you mad?"

When we had been pretending to ourselves and to each other that we had merely been carried away once by the heat of the moment, we had naturally pretended very hard to Ellen that not even that had ever happened.

"She's got to come into this," I said, "Unless we can decide here and now that you and I are finished."

I hoped Shirley would say we could. I was afraid she might say it. She said nothing.

So I said, "Stay here," and went for Ellen.

I didn't even knock. Ellen's arms were above her head, swinging one way and then the other. She dropped her arms and looked at me in fury.

"It's important," I said. "Shirley and I need your help. Never mind making yourself smart. Just come."

I didn't tell her anything until we were wedged in Shirley's room. Then I told her that Shirley and I were in love. Ellen's frown cleared away as if by magic. This was interesting. It was a break in routine. It was a problem, a challenge.

But she couldn't help sighing and saying: "I knew something would happen when I stopped running the show. I didn't know it would be this. I don't know everything."

"You think you do," Shirley flashed.

Ellen turned a cold eye on her. "Is that attitude going to help?" she asked. "Aren't you just putting it on to show you've outgrown your childish crush on me?"

That was meant to make Shirley about two inches high. It failed because Shirley knew she was somebody. Merely being a First Lady was nothing, but now she had someone in love with her.

"I'm not ashamed that I once thought you were wonderful," she retorted. "You're a great actress. You can even act the part of a decent human being."

Ellen smiled. That smile showed Ellen's real talent. Come to think of it, Shirley was right. That's what Ellen is above all else—an actress—the kind I'd been talking about.

"That's not hard," she said quietly. "Honestly, Shirley, have you ever met anyone who wasn't basically a decent human being?"

Shirley hadn't. That was her good luck; it was like Ellen to play on it.

"Now let's get the position clear," Ellen went on. "Is it settled that Shirley isn't going to be Lotrin's First Lady, and what we're looking for is some way out of it?"

Nobody spoke. "Well, let's make up our minds," Ellen insisted pleasantly, after a long pause. "Shirley, think about your mother."

"That's you all over!" Shirley burst out. "Any weapon —anything's fair to you! It's not safe for anyone to have feelings, because you'll twist them and use them against them—"

"All right, don't think about your mother. Count her out of it. You've already made up your mind that you'll probably never see her again, anyway."

There was another long silence. Then Shirley said: "Suppose I think about her. What am I supposed to think?"

"You were an ordinary girl, quite happy on Earth, content to stay there. Some TC men came along and talked to you, persuaded you to take a few tests, and then threw their bombshell. You could be important. You could rule a whole planet of men. Only it meant leaving Earth, leaving your mother, and the answer had to be yes or no, not maybe."

"They made me go!"

"They would be persistent, I admit. First Ladies don't grow on trees. But did you really believe you couldn't say no?"

No answer.

"Well, you could be somebody," Ellen continued reflectively, "or you could give up the chance. You love your mother. You didn't want to leave her. You thought of giving it up. You didn't, as history will bear out, really care about space and progress and mankind and all the big things like that. People don't, though it makes a good story. The real question was, could you give up an opportunity like that?"

In case by any chance I haven't said so before—Ellen has personality. She had both of us hanging on her words. Me a little less than Shirley, of course, but still enough.

"You couldn't," said Ellen, "There were things you had to give up, a lot of things. Things I don't know about. Things no one but you will ever know about."

I saw what was coming. I had been long enough seeing it; but, then, I had been pretty unreasonable in a lot of ways lately.

"Never mind whether it's possible or not," said Ellen. "The question's still the same. Are you going to give

up the things you have to give up to be a First Lady? Or are you going to give up being a First Lady?"

"I'm not going to give up Joe," declared Shirley defiantly.

Ellen nodded as if that was perfectly reasonable. "All right. The question is, then, have you got Joe?" She looked at me.

I avoided her eye. "You won't understand this," I said, "but I have really fallen for Shirley."

"Oh, I understand that, all right. Do you see any future in it?"

"I've already told Shirley that I don't."

"I've tried to be fair to Shirley," Ellen said, "but I can be a lot tougher with you and still be fair. You know better."

I might have known that when I went to Ellen with a problem, she would throw it right back in my lap.

The real difference between Shirley and me wasn't age or sex, but the fact that I knew TC. I wanted Shirley and I'd have moved Heaven and Earth for her. But I knew I couldn't move TC.

I had one last doomed try. "You talk about Shirley giving up a chance, Ellen. A chance to be a tragic queen? Suppose Lotrin won't support human life and let it stay human. Wouldn't she be better off—if she—"

"Cut it out," retorted Ellen. She turned to Shirley. "Listen, Shirley, Joe's doing this because he's a fool. He can't help that. It's too late to do anything about Joe. But you're doing it because you're afraid. At the last moment, only a few hours from Lotrin, you suspect you can't face what may happen there."

"You admitted you couldn't either," said Shirley.

"I didn't say I could. You did, so leave me out of it. Knowing you're alone, you turned to Joe, who's a fool, and made your problem his. I'm a woman, too, remember —I know the technique. You were afraid and Joe was around and, after all, you were picked out for a whole world to fall in love with—not only Joe, who's a fool. I don't blame you. You did a good job, helped by the fact that I was too busy with something else to have any

time for either of you. And it was left to Joe, who's a fool, to find a way out for both of you. Joe—"

"Who's a fool," I supplied.

Ellen made an impatient gesture. "Joe should have told you something. TC should have told you. But now I'll tell you.

"Shirley, TC has the best brains of all humanity. Not running things, but finding out facts. The best scientific brains.

"Listen, Shirley, this is important. In a sense, nearly every First Lady is a sham. Yes, you're meant to go to Lotrin and have a baby, and doctors and scientists and psychologists will very honestly and thoroughly test it for any deviation from the human norm. But do you really think TC needs that?"

This, as they say, was the pay-off. At the back of my mind, I had known when I went for Ellen that she would tell Shirley at least some of the truth. But I had hoped that the thing could be worked out some other way.

Ellen didn't need to play for effect now. Shirley was rigid with attention.

Ellen shook her head. "No, Shirley, the people who examine the world before it's colonized may not be sure what it will do to men, but after a few thousand have lived on a world for a year, and a hundred thousand or so for years, and a million are finally settled there, the scientists know a lot more about the place and its effect on human physical structure than any single experiment can tell them. You know a First Lady is a symbol. Well, that also applies to the test. The first birth.

"TC knows already what it's going to show. TC always knows. But, so long as people are unreasonable and superstitious and unscientific and emotionally immature, this symbolic test will be needed. The proof that a world is safe or unsafe.

"But it isn't proof to TC. It's confirmation of more than a ninety per cent probability, which is reasonable certainty in your language and mine. You can see that, can't you? Doesn't it make sense?"

"Yes," Shirley grudgingly admitted.

"And you want to know about Lotrin. Well, even you couldn't be told. And, now that I'm telling you, listen and keep it to yourself. The whole TC system is built on the First Ladies. Don't even tell Bill, or whatever his name turns out to be. He doesn't know. Nobody knows but TC.

"You were never in any danger, Shirley. Lotrin is safe. Your child will be like any other woman's child on any human world. I tell you TC *knows*. Now are you going to cling to Joe?"

I actually landed with Shirley. Ellen couldn't because the First Lady regulations were inflexible. No woman could even visit a world like Lotrin for as much as five minutes, except the First Lady.

I saw what Shirley's arrival did to the place. Alextown was the main population center of Lotrin, and literally every inhabitant was there to welcome her. I can't describe the scene—you would think I was mad.

Have you ever seen or heard what a flag or a cross or just a sign can do to people living in the valley between life and death?

Well, imagine the symbol isn't a flag or a cross or just a sign, but a living, breathing, beautiful girl in a world which no woman has ever trod.

And still you won't be within light-years of the reality.

When I said good-by to her, she had to make an obvious effort to bring her attention back to me. It wasn't that her thinking herself in love with me had been as light and casual and false as all that. I was already just an episode in an entirely irrelevant past, and it didn't matter in the least how important an episode I had been.

Ellen was waiting when I got back to the *Sardonia*—waiting, apparently, to look into my eyes.

"I don't know how I got through it," I said dully.

"I don't know, either," Ellen confessed with that incredible sympathy of hers which had won Shirley twice. "Let me say it first, Joe. This is the last time we ever do anything like this."

"It's the last time for everyone. That's why we got the job, because no one will ever do it twice. And there can

only be a few human beings in any generation foul enough to do it once."

All of what Ellen had told Shirley was true except the end.

TC naturally did know what was going to happen before the First Lady went out. Not long before—not until the world was pretty fully colonized and there was a lot of data to work on. We knew before we saw Shirley. We hadn't like the job, but we agreed it was necessary. Lotrin still had to have a First Lady. Colonists who had worked and sweated and slaved to build a new world wouldn't believe a test tube. They wouldn't listen calmly when they were told there could be no more colonists and their world was condemned without the real test.

But they would believe their own eyes when they saw Shirley's child. Ellen had told it the wrong way around.

Shirley had believed I had fallen in love with her because a woman is always ready to believe that of any man. She couldn't guess that the real reason was that I couldn't go on spending so much time with her and getting to know her without being so damn sorry for her that—

No, Ellen was no worse than me. She told the lie, but I acted it.

"It isn't ninety per cent, of course," Ellen reminded me. "Only about seventy-five. There is a chance . . ."

I nearly demanded, "Would you take it?" But I didn't. She would. Yes, Ellen would take one chance in four, for a world. It had been another lie when she told Shirley she wouldn't—a devious lie to rid Ellen of Shirley's affection before Ellen had to return it.

So it wasn't too bad really, I tried to convince myself. Ellen would do it. Ellen, my wife.

I also tried to interest myself again in the fact that Ellen was one of the most beautiful women ever born. That was why people loved her against all reason, I told myself. I didn't often admit it, but Ellen was . . .

When I looked at Ellen, though, gazing silently at me, all I could see was Shirley's face.

INSIDEKICK

BY J. F. BONE

Psychologists have a nice complicated term for what this story really is: it's nothing more nor less than a "hypnogogic hallucination," a self-induced dream-just-before-sleeping, meant to actually put you to sleep. Such a dream takes the form of a visualization of such propositions as "How nice it would be if I could play the piano better than anyone in the world," or, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could control people's actions from a distance?"—that sort of thing.

As a matter of fact, a lot of the very best science fiction stories might just as well be called hypnogogic hallucinations, carefully brought out of the dark by their authors, washed, sterilized, ironed, and starched a bit so that they can stand daytime presentation in public.

And this is one of the very best examples of the type. It takes place on another distant planet, this one teeming with novel life forms, including one that is the symbiotic vehicle of Our Hero's dreams of omnipotence, which it makes come true. It's fun for him—and fun to read, too, for don't we all love fairy stories, even when they are disguised with a panoply of space ships and evil corporations and space patrols and unspeakable purveyors of "narcotics"? You bet we do!

Shifaz glanced furtively around the room. Satisfied that it was empty except for Fred Kemmer and himself, he sidled up to the Earthman's desk and hissed conspiratorially in his ear, "Sir, this Johnson is a spy! Is it permitted to slay him?"

"It is permitted," Kemmer said in a tone suitable to the gravity of the occasion.

He watched humorlessly as the Antarian slithered out of the office with a flutter of colorful ceremonial robes. Both Kemmer and Shifaz had known for weeks that Johnson was a spy, but the native had to go through this insane rigmarole before the rules on Antar would allow him to act. At any rate, the formalities were over at last and the affair should be satisfactorily ended before nightfall. Natives moved quickly enough, once the preliminaries were concluded.

Kemmer leaned back in his chair and sighed. Being the Interworld Corporation's local manager had more compensations than headaches, despite the rigid ritualism of native society. Since most of the local population was under his thumb, counter-espionage was miraculously effective. This fellow Johnson, for instance, had been in Vaornia less than three weeks, and despite the fact that he was an efficient and effective snoop, he had been fingered less than forty-eight hours after his arrival in the city.

Kemmer closed his eyes and let a smile cross his keen features. Under his administration, there would be a sharp rise in the mortality curve for spies detected in the Vaornia-Lagash-Timargh triangle. With the native judiciary firmly under IC control, the Corporation literally had a free hand, providing it kept its nose superficially clean. And as for spies, they knew the chances they took

and what the penalty could be for interfering with the normal operations of corporate business.

Kemmer yawned, stretched, turned his attention to more important matters.

Albert Johnson fumbled hopefully in the empty food container before tossing it aside. A plump, prosaic man of middle height, with a round ingenuous face, Albert was as undistinguished as his name, a fact that made him an excellent investigator. But he was neither undistinguished nor unnoticed in his present position, although he had tried to carry it off by photographing the actions of the local Sanitary Processional like any tourist.

He had been waiting near the Vaornia Arm on the road that led to Lagash since early afternoon, and now it was nearly evening. He cursed mildly at the fact that the natives had no conception of time, a trait not exclusively Antarian, but one which was developed to a high degree on this benighted planet. And the fact that he was hungry didn't add to his good temper. Natives might be able to fast for a week without ill effects, but his chunky body demanded quantities of nourishment at regular intervals, and his stomach was protesting audibly at being empty.

He looked around him, at the rutted road, and at the darkening Vaornia Arm of the Devan Forest that bordered the roadway. The Sanitary Processional had completed the daily ritual of waste disposal and the cart drivers and censer bearers were goading their patient daks into a faster gait. It wasn't healthy to be too near the forest after the sun went down. The night beasts weren't particular about what, or whom, they ate.

The Vaornese used the Vaornia Arm as a dump for the refuse of the city, a purpose admirably apt, for the ever-hungry forest life seldom left anything uneaten by morning. And since Antarian towns had elaborate rituals concerning the disposal of waste, together with a nonexistent sewage system, the native attitude of fatalistic indifference to an occasional tourist or Antarian being

gobbled up by some nightmare denizen of the forest was understandable.

The fact that the Arm was also an excellent place to dispose of an inconvenient body didn't occur to Albert until the three natives with knives detached themselves from the rear of the Sanitary Processional and advanced upon him. They came from three directions, effectively boxing him in, and Albert realized with a sick certainty that he had been double-crossed, that Shifaz, instead of being an informant for him, was working for the IC. Albert turned to face the nearest native, tensing his muscles for battle.

Then he saw the Zark.

It stepped out of the gathering darkness of the forest, and with its appearance everything stopped. For perhaps a micro-second, the three Vaornese stood frozen. Then, with a simultaneous wheep of terror, they turned and ran for the city.

They might have stayed and finished their work if they had known it was a Zark, but at the moment the Zark was energizing a toothy horror that Earthmen called a Bandersnatch—an insane combination of talons, teeth and snakelike neck mounted on a crocodilian body that exuded an odor of putrefaction from the carrion upon which it normally fed. The Bandersnatch had been dead for several hours, but neither the natives nor Albert knew that.

It was a tribute to the Zark's ability to maintain pseudo-life in a Bandersnatch carcass that the knifemen fled and a similar panic seized the late travelers on the road. Albert stared with horrified fascination at the monstrosity for several seconds before he, too, fled. Any number of natives with knives were preferable to a Bandersnatch. He had hesitated only because he didn't possess the conditioned reflexes arising from generations of exposure to Antarian wildlife.

He was some twenty yards behind the rearmost native, and, though not designed for speed, was actually gaining upon the fellow, when his foot struck a loose cobblestone in the road. Arms flailing, legs pumping desper-

ately to balance his toppling mass, Albert fought manfully against the forces of gravity and inertia.

He lost.

His head struck another upturned cobble. His body twitched once and then relaxed limply and unconscious upon the dusty road.

The Zark winced a little at the sight, certain that this curious creature had damaged itself seriously.

Filled with compassion, it started forward on the Bandersnatch's four walking legs, the grasping talons crossed on the breast in an attitude of prayer. The Zark wasn't certain what it could do, but perhaps it could help.

Albert was mercifully unconscious as it bent over him to inspect his prone body with a purple-lidded pineal eye that was blue with concern. The Zark noted the bruise upon his forehead and marked his regular breathing, and came to the correct conclusion that, whatever had happened, the biped was relatively undamaged. But the Zark didn't go away. It had never seen a human in its thousand-odd years of existence, which was not surprising since Earthmen had been on Antar less than a decade and Zarks seldom left the forest.

Albert began to stir before the Zark remembered its present condition. Not being a carnivore, it saw nothing appetizing about Albert, but it was energizing a Bandersnatch, and, like all Zarks, it was a purist. A living Bandersnatch would undoubtedly drool happily at the sight of such a tempting tidbit, so the Zark opened the three-foot jaws and drooled.

Albert chose this precise time to return to consciousness. He turned his head groggily and looked up into a double row of saw-edged teeth surmounted by a leering triangle of eyes. A drop of viscid drool splattered moistly on his forehead, and as the awful face above him bent closer to his own, he fainted.

The Zark snapped its jaws disapprovingly. This was not the proper attitude to take in the presence of a ferocious monster. One simply didn't go to sleep. One should attempt to run. The biped's act was utterly illogical. It needed investigation.

Curiously, the Zark sent out a pseudopod of its substance through the open mouth of its disguise. The faintly glittering thread oozed downward and struck Albert's head beside his right eye. Without pausing, the thread sank through skin and connective tissue, circled the eyeball and located the optic nerve. It raced inward along the nerve trunk, split at the optic chiasma, and entered the corpora quadrigemina where it branched into innumerable microscopic filaments that followed the main neural paths of the man's brain, probing the major areas of thought and reflex.

The Zark quivered with pleasure. The creature was beautifully complex, and, more important, untenanted. He would make an interesting host.

The Zark didn't hesitate. It needed a host; giving its present mass of organic matter pseudo-life took too much energy. The Bandersnatch collapsed with a faint slurping sound. A blob of iridescent jelly flowed from the mouth and spread itself evenly over Albert's body in a thin layer. The jelly shimmered, glowed, disappeared inward through Albert's clothing and skin, diffusing through the subcutaneous tissues, sending hair-like threads along nerve trunks and blood vessels until the threads met other threads and joined, and the Zark became a network of protoplasmic tendrils that ramified through Albert's body.

Immediately the Zark turned its attention to the task of adapting itself to its new host. Long ago it had learned that this had to be done quickly or the host did not survive. And since the tissues of this new host were considerably different from those of the Bandersnatch, a great number of structural and chemical changes had to be made quickly. With some dismay, the Zark realized that its own stores of energy would be insufficient for the task. It would have to borrow energy from the host—which was a poor way to start a symbiotic relationship. Ordinarily, one gave before taking.

Fortunately, Albert possessed considerable excess fat, an excellent source of energy whose removal would do no harm. There was plenty here for both Albert and itself. The man's body twitched and jerked as the Zark's protean

cells passed through the adaptive process, and as the last leukocyte recoiled from tissue that had suddenly become normal, his consciousness returned. Less than ten minutes had passed, but they were enough. The Zark was safely in harmony with its new host.

Albert opened his eyes and looked wildly around. The landscape was empty of animate life except for the odorous carcass of the Bandersnatch lying beside him. Albert shivered, rose unsteadily to his feet and began walking toward Vaornia. That he didn't run was only because he couldn't.

He found it hard to believe that he was still alive. Yet a hurried inspection convinced him that there wasn't a tooth mark on him. It was a miracle that left him feeling vaguely uneasy. He wished he knew what had killed that grinning horror so opportunely. But then, on second thought, maybe it was better that he didn't know. There might be things in the Devan Forest worse than a Bandersnatch.

Inside the city walls, Vaornia struck a three-pronged blow at Albert's senses. Sight, hearing and smell were assaulted simultaneously. Natives slithered past, garbed in long robes of garish color. Sibilant voices cut through the evening air like thin-edged knives clashing against the grating screech of the ungreased wooden wheels of dak carts. Odors of smoke, cooking, spices, perfume and corruption mingled with the all-pervasive musky stench of unwashed Vaornese bodies.

It was old to Albert, but new and exciting to the Zark. Its taps on Albert's sense organs brought a flood of new sensation the Zark had never experienced. It marveled at the crowded buildings studded with jutting balconies and ornamental carvings. It stared at the dak caravans maneuvering with ponderous delicacy through the swarming crowds. It reveled in the colorful banners and awnings of the tiny shops lining the streets, and the fluttering robes of the natives. Color was something new to the Zark. Its previous hosts had been color blind, and the symbiont wallowed in an orgy of bright sensation.

If Albert could have tuned in on his fellow traveler's emotions, he probably would have laughed. For the Zark was behaving precisely like the rubbernecking tourist he himself was pretending to be. But Albert wasn't interested in the sights, sounds or smells, nor did the natives intrigue him. There was only one of them he cared to meet—that slimy doublecrosser called Shifaz who had nearly conned him into a one-way ticket.

Albert plowed heedlessly through the crowd, using his superior mass to remove natives from his path. By completely disregarding the code of conduct outlined by the IC travel bureau, he managed to make respectable progress toward the enormous covered area in the center of town that housed the Kazlak, or native marketplace. Shifaz had a stand there where he was employed as a tourist guide.

The Zark, meanwhile, was not idle despite the outside interests. The majority of its structure was busily engaged in checking and cataloguing the body of its host, an automatic process that didn't interfere with the purely intellectual one of enjoying the new sensations. Albert's body wasn't in too bad shape. A certain amount of repair work would have to be done, but despite the heavy padding of fat, the organs were in good working condition.

The Zark ruminated briefly over what actions it should take as it dissolved a milligram of cholesterol out of Albert's aorta and strengthened the weak spot in the blood vessel with a few cells of its own substance until Albert's tissues could fill the gap. Its knowledge of human physiology was incomplete, but it instinctively recognized abnormality. As a result, it could help the host's physical condition, which was a distinct satisfaction, for a Zark must be helpful.

Shifaz was at his regular stand, practicing his normal profession of guide. As Albert approached, he was in the midst of describing the attractions of the number two tour to a small knot of fascinated tourists.

"And then, in the center of the Kazlak, we will come to the Hall of the Brides—Antar's greatest marriage

market. It has been arranged for you to actually see a mating auction in progress, but we must hurry or—" Shifaz looked up to see Albert shouldering the tourists aside. His yellow eyes widened and his hand darted to his girdle and came up with a knife.

The nearest tourists fell back in alarm as he hissed malevolently at Albert, "Stand back, Earthman, or I'll let the life out of your scaleless carcass!"

"Doublecrosser," Albert said, moving in. One meaty hand closed over the knife hand and wrenched while the other caught Shifaz alongside the head with a smack that sounded loud in the sudden quiet. Shifaz did a neat backflip and lay prostrate, the tip of his tail twitching reflexively.

One of the tourists screamed.

"No show today, folks," Albert said. "Shifaz has another engagement." He picked the Antarian up by a fold of his robe and shook him like a dirty dustcloth. A number of items cascaded out of hidden pockets, among which was an oiled-silk pouch. Albert dropped the native and picked up the pouch, opened it, sniffed, and nodded.

It fitted. Things were clearer now.

He was still nodding when two Earthmen in IC uniform stepped out of the crowd. "Sorry, sir," the bigger of the pair said, "but you have just committed a violation of the IC-Antar Compact. I'm afraid we'll have to take you in."

"This lizard tried to have me killed," Albert protested.

"I wouldn't know about that," the IC man said. "You've assaulted a native, and that's a crime. You'd better come peaceably with us—local justice is rather primitive and unpleasant."

"I'm an Earth citizen—" Albert began.

"This world is on a commercial treaty." The guard produced a blackjack and tapped the shot-filled leather in his palm. "It's our business to protect people like you from the natives, and if you insist, we'll use force."

"I don't insist, but I think you're being pretty high-handed."

"Your objection has been noted," the IC man said,

"and will be included in the official report. Now come along or we'll be in the middle of a jurisdictional hassle when the native cops arrive. The corporation doesn't like hassles. They're bad for business."

The two IC men herded him into a waiting ground car and drove away. It was all done very smoothly, quietly and efficiently. The guards were good.

And so was the local detention room. It was clean, modern and—Albert noted wryly—virtually escape-proof. Albert was something of an expert on jails, and the thick steel bars, the force lock, and the spy cell in the ceiling won his grudging respect.

He sighed and sat down on the cot which was the room's sole article of furniture. He had been a fool to let his anger get the better of him. IC would probably use this brush with Shifaz as an excuse to send him back to Earth as an undesirable tourist—which would be the end of his mission here, and a black mark on a singularly unspotted record.

Of course, they might not be so gentle with him if they knew that he knew they were growing tobacco. But he didn't think that they would know—and if they had checked his background, they would find that he was an investigator for the Revenue Service. Technically, criminal operations were not his affair. His field was tax evasion.

He didn't worry too much about the fact that Shifaz had tried to kill him. On primitive worlds like this, that was a standard procedure—it was less expensive to kill an agent than bribe him or pay honest taxes. He was angry with himself for allowing the native to trick him.

He shrugged. By all rules of the game, IC would now admit about a two per cent profit on their Antar operation rather than the four per cent loss they had claimed, and pay up like gentlemen—and he would get skinned by the Chief back at Earth Central for allowing IC to unmask him. His report on tobacco growing would be investigated, but with the sketchy information he possessed, his charges would be impossible to prove—and IC would have plenty of time to bury the evidence.

If Earth Central hadn't figured that the corporation owed it some billion megacredits in back taxes, he wouldn't be here. He had been dragged from his job in the General Accounting Office, for every field man and ex-field man was needed to conduct the sweeping investigation. Every facet of the sprawling IC operation was being checked. Even minor and out-of-the-way spots like Antar were on the list—spots that normally demanded a cursory once-over by a second-class business technician.

Superficially, Antar had the dull unimportance of an early penetration. There were the usual trading posts, pilot plants, wholesale and retail trade, and tourist and recreation centers—all designed to accustom the native inhabitants to the presence of Earthmen and their works—and set them up for the commercial kill, after they had acquired a taste for the products of civilization. But although the total manpower and physical plant for a world of this size was right, its distribution was wrong.

A technician probably wouldn't see it, but to an agent who had dealt with corporate operations for nearly a quarter of a century, the setup felt wrong. It was not designed for maximum return. The Vaornia-Lagash-Timargh triangle held even more men and material then Prime Base. That didn't make sense. It was inefficient, and IC was not noted for inefficiency.

Not being oriented criminally, Albert found out IC's real reason for concentration in this area only by absentmindedly lighting a cigarette one day in Vaornia. He had realized almost instantly that this was a gross breach of outworld ethics and had thrown the cigarette away. It landed between a pair of Vaornese walking by.

The two goggled at the cigarette, sniffed the smoke rising from it, and with simultaneous whistles of surprise bent over to pick it up. Their heads collided with some force. The cigarette tore in their greedy grasp as they hissed hatefully at each other for a moment, before turning hostile glares in his direction. From their expressions, they thought this was a low Earthie trick to rob them of their dignity. Then they stalked off, their neck scales ruf-

fled in anger, shreds of the cigarette still clutched in their hands.

Even Albert couldn't miss the implications. His tossing the butt away had produced the same reaction as a deck of morphine on a group of human addicts. Since IC wouldn't corrupt a susceptible race with tobacco when there were much cheaper legal ways, the logical answer was that it wasn't expensive on this planet—which argued that Antar was being set up for plantation operations—in which case tobacco addiction was a necessary prerequisite and the concentration of IC population made sense.

Now tobacco, as any Earthman knew, was the only monopoly in the Confederation, and Earth had maintained that monopoly by treaty and by force, despite numerous efforts to break it. There were some good reasons for the policy, ranging all the way from vice control to taxable income, but the latter was by far the most important. The revenue supported a considerable section of Earth Central as well as the huge battle fleet that maintained peace and order along the spacelanes and between the worlds.

But a light-weight, high-profit item like tobacco was a constant temptation to any sharp operator who cared more for money than for law, and IC filled that definition perfectly. In the Tax Section's book, the Interworld Corporation was a corner-cutting, profit-grabbing chiseler. Its basic character had been the same for three centuries, despite all the complete turnovers in staff. Albert grinned wryly. The old-timers were right when they made corporations legal persons.

Cigarettes which cost five credits to produce and sold for as high as two hundred would always interest a crook, and, as a consequence, Earth Central was always investigating reports of illegal plantations. They were found and destroyed eventually, and the owners punished. But the catch lay in the word "eventually." And if the operator was a corporation, no regulatory agency in its right mind would dare apply the full punitive power of the law. In that direction lay political suicide, for nearly half the population of Earth got dividends or salaries from them.

That, of course, was the trouble with corporations. They invariably grew too big and too powerful. But to break them up as the Ancients did was to destroy their efficiency. What was really needed was a corporate conscience.

Albert chuckled. That was a nice unproductive thought.

Fred Kemmer received the news that Albert had been taken to detention with a philosophic calm that lasted for nearly half an hour. By morning, the man would be turned over to the Patrol in Prime Base. The Patrol would support the charge that Albert was an undesirable tourist and send him home to Earth.

But the philosophic calm departed with a frantic leap when Shifaz reported Johnson's inspection of the oiled-silk pouch. Raw tobacco was something that shouldn't be within a thousand parsects of Antar; its inference would be obvious even to an investigator interested only in tax revenues. Kemmer swore at the native. The entire operation would have to be aborted now and his dreams of promotion would vanish.

"It wasn't my supply," Shifaz protested. "I was carrying it down to Karas at the mating market. He demands a pack every time he puts a show on for your silly Earthie tourists."

"You should have concealed it better."

"How was I to know that chubby slob was coming back alive? And who'd have figured that he could handle me?"

"I've told you time and again that Earthmen are tough customers when they get mad, but you had to learn it the hard way. Now we're all in the soup. The Patrol doesn't like illicit tobacco planters. Tobacco is responsible for their pay."

"But he's still in your hands and he couldn't have had time to transmit his information," Shifaz said. "You can still kill him."

Kemmer's face cleared. Sure, that was it. Delay informing the Patrol and knock the snoop off. The operation and Kemmer's future were still safe. But it irked him that he had panicked instead of thinking. It just went

to show how being involved in major crime ruined the judgment. He'd have Johnson fixed up with a nice hearty meal—and he'd see that it was delivered personally. At this late date, he couldn't afford the risk of trusting a subordinate.

Kemmer's glower became a smile. The snoop's dossier indicated that he liked to eat. He should die happy.

With a faint click, a loaded tray passed through a slot in the rear wall of Albert Johnson's cell.

The sight and smell of Earthly cooking reminded him that he hadn't anything to eat for hours. His mouth watered as he lifted the tray and carried it to the cot. At least IC wasn't going to let him starve to death, and if this was any indication of the way they treated prisoners, an IC jail was the best place to be on this whole planet.

Since it takes a little time for substances to diffuse across the intestinal epithelium and enter the circulation, the Zark had some warning of what was about to happen from the behavior of the epithelial cells lining Albert's gut. As a result, a considerable amount of the alkaloid was stopped before it entered Albert's body—but some did pass through, for the Zark was not omnipotent.

For nearly five minutes after finishing the meal, Albert felt normally full and comfortable. Then hell broke loose. Most of the food came back with explosive violence and cramps bent him double. The Zark turned to the neutralization and elimination of the poison. Absorptive surfaces were sealed off, body fluids poured into the intestinal tract, and anti-substances formed out of Albert's energy reserve to neutralize whatever alkaloid remained.

None of the Zark's protective measures were normal to Albert's body, and with the abrupt depletion of blood glucose to supply the energy the Zark required, Albert passed into hypoglycemic shock. The Zark regretted that, but it had no time to utilize his other less readily available energy sources. In fact, there was no time for anything except the most elemental protective measures. Conse-

quently the convulsions, tachycardia, and coma had to be ignored.

Albert's spasms were mercifully short, but when the Zark was finished, he lay unconscious on the floor, his body twitching with incoordinate spasms, while a frightened guard called in an alarm to the medics.

The Zark quivered with its own particular brand of nausea. It had not been hurt by the alkaloid, but the pain of its host left it sick with self-loathing. That it had established itself in a life-form that casually ingested deadly poisons was no excuse. It should have been more alert, more sensitive to the host's deficiencies. It had saved his life, which was some compensation, and there was much that could be done in the way of restorative and corrective measures that would prevent such a thing from occurring again—but the Zark was unhappy as it set about helping Albert's liver metabolize fat to glucose and restore blood sugar levels.

The medic was puzzled. She had seen some peculiar conditions at this station, but hypoglycemic shock was something new. And, being unsure of herself, she ordered Albert into the infirmary for observation. The guard, of course, didn't object, and Kemmer, when he heard of it, could only grind his teeth in frustration. He was on delicate enough ground without making it worse by not taking adequate precautions to preserve the health of his unwilling guest. Somehow that infernal snoop had escaped again. . . .

Albert moved his head with infinite labor and looked at the intravenous apparatus dripping a colorless solution into the vein in the elbow joint of his extended left arm. He felt no pain, but his physical weakness was appalling. He could move only with the greatest effort, and the slightest exertion left him dizzy and breathless. It was obvious that he had been poisoned, and that it was a miracle of providence that he had survived. It was equally obvious that a reappraisal of his position was in order. Someone far higher up the ladder than Shifaz was responsible for this latest attempt on his life. The native

couldn't possibly have reached him in the safety of IC's jail.

The implications were unpleasant. Someone important feared him enough to want him dead, which meant that his knowledge of illicit tobacco was not as secret as he thought. It would be suicide to stay in the hands of the IC any longer. Somehow he had to get out and inform the Patrol.

He looked at the intravenous drip despondently. If the solution was poisoned, there was no help for him. It was already half gone. But he didn't feel too bad, outside of being weak. It probably was all right. In any event, he would have to take it. The condition of his body wouldn't permit anything else.

He sighed and relaxed on the bed, aware of the drowsiness that was creeping over him. When he awoke, he would do something about this situation, but he was sleepy now.

Albert awoke strong and refreshed. He was as hungry as he always was before breakfast. Whatever was in that solution, it had certainly worked miracles. As far as he could judge, he was completely normal.

The medic was surprised to find him sitting up when she made her morning rounds. It was amazing, but this case was amazing in more ways than one. Last night he had been in a state of complete collapse, and now he was well on the road to recovery.

Albert looked at her curiously. "What was in that stuff you gave me?"

"Just dextrose and saline," she said. "I couldn't find anything wrong with you except hypoglycemia and dehydration, so I treated that." She paused and eyed him with a curiosity equal to his own. "Just what do you think happened?" she asked.

"I think I was poisoned."

"That's impossible."

"Possibly," Albert conceded, "but it might be an idea to check that food I left all over the cell."

"That was cleaned up hours ago."

"Convenient, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you mean by that," she said. "Someone in the kitchens might have made a mistake. Yet you were the only case." She looked thoughtful. "I think I will do a little checking in the Central Kitchen, just to be on the safe side." She smiled a bright professional smile. "Anyway, I'm glad to see that you have recovered so well. I'm sure you can go back tomorrow."

She vanished through the door with a rustle of white dacron. Albert, after listening a moment to make sure that she was gone, rose to his feet and began an inspection of his room.

It wasn't a jail cell. Not quite. But it wasn't designed for easy escape, either. It was on the top floor of the IC building, a good hundred feet down to the street below. The window was covered with a steel grating and the door was locked. But both window and door were designed to hold a sick man rather than a healthy and desperate one.

Albert looked out of the window. The building was constructed to harmonize with native structures surrounding it, so the outer walls were studded with protuberances and bosses that would give adequate handholds to a man strong enough to brave the terrors of the descent.

Looking down the wall, Albert wavered. Thinking back, he made up his mind.

Fred Kemmer was disturbed. By all the rules, Albert Johnson should be dead. But Shifaz had failed, and that fool guard *had* to call in the medics. It was going to be harder to get at Johnson, now that he was in the infirmary, but he had to be reached.

One might buy off an agent who was merely checking on tax evasion, but tobacco was another matter entirely. Kemmer wished he hadn't agreed to boss Operation Weed. The glowing dreams of promotion and fortune were beginning to yellow around the edges. Visions of the Penal Colony bothered him, for if the operation went sour, he would do the paying. He had known that when he took the job, but the possibility seemed remote then.

He shook his head. It wasn't that bad yet. As long as Johnson hadn't communicated with anyone else and as long as he was still in company hands, something could be done.

Kemmer thought a while, trying to put himself in Johnson's place. Undoubtedly the spy was frightened, and undoubtedly he would try to escape. And since it would be far easier to escape from the infirmary than it would be from detention, he would try as soon as possible.

Kemmer's face cleared. If Johnson tried it, he would find it wasn't as easy as he thought.

With characteristic swiftness, Kemmer outlined his plans and made the necessary arrangements. A guard was posted in the hall with orders to shoot if Johnson tried the door of his room, and Kemmer himself took a stand in the building across the street, facing the hospital, where he could watch the window of Albert's room. As he figured it, the window was the best bet. He stroked the long-barreled blaster lying beside him. Johnson still hadn't a chance, but these delays in disposing of him were becoming an annoyance.

Cautiously, Albert tried the grating that covered the window. The Antarean climate had rusted the heavy screws that fastened it to the casing. One of the bars was loose. If it could be removed, it would serve as a lever to pry out the entire grating.

Albert twisted at the bar. It groaned and squealed. He nervously applied more pressure, and the bar moved slowly out of its fastenings.

The Zark observed his actions curiously. Now why was its host twisting that rod of metal out of the woodwork? It didn't know, and it was consumed with curiosity. It had found no way to communicate with its host so that some of the man's queer actions could be understood; in the portions of the brain it had explored, there were no portals of communication. However, there still was a large dormant portion, and perhaps here lay the thing it sought. The Zark inserted a number of tendrils

into the blank areas, probing, connecting synapses, opening unused pathways, looking for what it hoped existed.

The results of this action were completely unforeseen by the Zark, for it was essentially just a subordinate ego with all the lacks which that implied—and it had never before inhabited a body that possessed a potentially first-class brain. With no prior experience to draw upon, the Zark couldn't possibly guess that its actions would result in a peculiar relationship between the man and the world around him. And if the Zark had known, it probably wouldn't have cared.

Albert removed the bar and pried out the grating. With only a momentary hesitation, he lowered himself over the sill until his feet struck an ornamental knob on the wall. He glanced quickly down. There was another protuberance about two feet below the one on which he was standing. Pressing against the wall, he inched one foot downward until it found the foothold. With relief, he shifted his weight to the lower foot, and as he did a wave of heat enveloped his legs. The protuberance came loose from the wall with a grating noise mixed with the crackling hiss of a blaster bolt, and Albert plunged toward the street below.

As the pavement rushed at him, he had time for a brief, fervent wish that he were someplace else. Then the thought was swallowed in an icy blackness.

Fred Kemmer lowered the blaster with a grin of satisfaction. He had figured his man correctly, and now the spy would be nothing to worry about. He watched the plummeting body—and gasped with consternation, for less than ten feet above the pavement, Albert abruptly vanished!

There is such a thing as too much surprise, too much shock, too much amazement. And that precisely was what affected Albert when he found himself standing on the street where the IC guards had picked him up. By rights, he should have been a pulpy smear against the pavement beneath the infirmary window. But he was not. He didn't question why he was here, or consider how he had man-

aged to avoid the certain death that waited for him. The fact was that he had done it, somehow. And that was enough.

It was almost like history repeating itself. Shifaz was at his usual stand haranguing another group of tourists. It was the same spiel as before, and almost at the same point of the pitch. But his actions upon seeing Albert were entirely different. His eyes widened, but this time he slid quietly from his perch on the cornerstone of the building and disappeared into the milling crowd.

Albert followed. The fact that Shifaz was somewhere in that crowd was enough to start him moving, and, once started, stubbornness kept him going, plowing irresistibly through the thick swarm of Vaornese. Reason told him that no Earthman could expect to find a native hidden among hundreds of his own kind. Their bipedal dinosaurlike figures seemed to be cast out of one mold.

A chase through this crowd was futile, but he went on deeper into the Kazlak, drawn along an invisible trail by some unearthly sense that told him he was right. He was as certain of it as that his name was Albert Johnson. And when he finally cornered Shifaz in a deserted alley, he was the one who was not surprised.

Shifaz squawked and darted toward Albert, a knife glittering in his hand. Albert felt a stinging pain across the muscles of his left arm as he blocked the thrust aimed at his belly, wrenched the knife from the native's grasp, and slammed him to the pavement.

Shifaz bounced like a rubber ball, but he had no chance against the bigger and stronger Earthman. Albert knocked him down again. This time the native didn't rise. He lay in the street, a trickle of blood oozing from the corner of his lipless mouth, hate radiating from him in palpable waves.

Albert stood over him, panting a little from the brief but violent scuffle. "Now, Shifaz, you're going to tell me things," he said heavily.

"You can go to your Place of Punishment," Shifaz snarled. "I shall say nothing."

"I can beat the answers out of you," Albert mused

aloud, "but I won't. I'll just ask you questions, and every time I don't like your answer, I'll kick one of your teeth out. If you don't answer, I guarantee that you'll look like an old grandmother."

Shifaz turned a paler green. To lose one's teeth was a punishment reserved only for females. He would be a thing of mockery and laughter—but there were worse things than losing teeth or face. There was such a thing as losing one's life, and he knew what would happen if he betrayed IC. Then he brightened. He could always lie, and this hulking brute of an Earthman wouldn't know—couldn't possibly know. So he nodded with a touch of artistic reluctance. "All right," he said, "I'll talk." He injected a note of fear into his voice. It wasn't hard to do.

"Where did you get that tobacco?" Albert asked.

"From a farm," Shifaz said. That was the truth. The Earthman probably knew about tobacco and there was no need to lie, yet.

"Where is it?"

Shifaz thought quickly of the clearing in the forest south of Lagash where the green broadleaved plants were grown, and said, "It's just outside of Timargh, along the road which runs south." He waited tensely for Albert's reaction, wincing as the Earthman drew his foot back. Timargh was a good fifty miles from Lagash, and if this lie went over, he felt that he could proceed with confidence.

It went over. Albert replaced his foot on the ground. "You telling the truth?"

"As Murgh is my witness," Shifaz said with sincerity.

Albert nodded and Shifaz relaxed with hidden relief. Apparently the man knew that Murgh was the most sacred and respected deity in the pantheon of Antar, and that oaths based upon his name were inviolable. But what the scaleless oaf didn't know was that this applied to Antarians only. As far as these strangers from another world were concerned, anything went.

So Albert continued questioning, and Shifaz answered,

sometimes readily, sometimes reluctantly, telling the truth when it wasn't harmful, lying when necessary. The native's brain was fertile and the tissue of lies and truth hung together well, and Albert seemed satisfied. At any rate, he finally went away, leaving behind a softly whistling Vaornese who congratulated himself on the fact that he had once more imposed upon this outlander's credulity. He was so easy to fool that it was almost a crime to do it.

But he wouldn't have been so pleased with himself if he could have seen the inside of Albert's mind. For Albert knew the truth about the four-hundred-acre farm south of Lagash. He knew about the hidden curing sheds and processing plant. He knew that both Vaornese and Lagashites were deeply involved in something they called Operation Weed, and approved of it thoroughly either from sheer cussedness or addiction. He had quietly read the native's mind while the half-truths and lies had fallen from his forked tongue. And, catching Shifaz' last thought, Albert couldn't help chuckling.

At one of the larger intersections, Albert stopped under a flaming cresset and looked at his arm. There was a wide red stain that looked black against the whiteness of his pajamas. That much blood meant more than a scratch, even though there was no pain—and cuts on this world could be deadly if they weren't attended to promptly.

He suddenly felt alone and helpless, wishing desperately for a quiet place where he could dress his wound and be safe from the eyes he knew were inspecting him. He was too conspicuous. The pajamas were out of place on the street. Undoubtedly natives were hurrying to report him to the IC.

His mind turned to his room in the hostel with its well-fitted wardrobe and its first-aid kit—and again came that instant of utter darkness—and then he was standing in the middle of his room facing the wardrobe that held his clothing.

He felt no surprise this time. He knew what had happened. Something within his body was acting like a tiny

Distorter, transporting him through hyperspace in the same manner that a starship's engine room warped it through the folds of the normal space-time continuum. There was nothing really strange about it. It was a power which he *should* have—which any normal man should have. The fact that he didn't have it before was of no consequence, and the fact that other men didn't have it now merely made *them* abnormal.

He smiled as he considered the possibilities which these new powers gave him. They were enormous. At the very least, they tripled his value as an agent. Nothing was safe from his investigation. The most secret hiding places were open to his probings. Nothing could stop him, for command of hyperspace made a mockery of material barriers.

He chuckled happily as he removed his pajama jacket and reached for the first-aid kit. From the gash in his sleeve, there should be a nasty cut underneath, and it startled him a little that there was no greater amount of hemorrhage. He cleaned off the dried blood—and found nothing underneath except a thin red bloodless line that ran halfway around his arm. It wasn't even a scratch.

Yet he had felt Shifaz' blade slice into his flesh. He knew there was more damage than this. The blood and the slashed sleeve could tell him that, even if he didn't have the messages of his nerves. Yet now there was no pain, and the closed scratch certainly wasn't the major wound he had expected. And this *was* queer, a fact for which he had no explanation. Albert frowned. Maybe this was another facet of the psi factors that had suddenly become his.

He wondered where they had come from. Without warning, he had become able to read minds with accuracy and do an effective job of teleportation. About the only things he lacked to be a well-rounded psi were telekinetic powers and precognition.

His frown froze on his face as he became conscious of a sense of unease. They were coming down the hall—two IC guardsmen. He caught the doubt and certainty in their minds—doubt that he would be in his room,

certainty that he would be ultimately caught, for on Antar there was no place for an Earthman to hide.

Albert slipped into the first suit that came to hand, blessing the seam tabs that made dressing a moment's work. As the guards opened the door, he visualized the spot on the Lagash road where he had encountered the Bandersnatch. It was easier than before. He was standing in the middle of the road, the center of the surprised attention of a few travelers, when the guards entered his room.

The bright light of Antar's golden day came down from a cloudless yellow sky. In the forest strip ahead, Albert could hear a faint medley of coughs, grunts and snarls as the lesser beasts fed upon the remains of yesterday's garbage. Albert moved down the road, ignoring the startled natives. This time he wasn't afraid of meeting a Bandersnatch or anything else, for he had a method of escape that was foolproof. Lagash was some thirty miles ahead, but in the lighter gravity of Antar, the walk would be stimulating rather than exhausting.

He went at a steady pace, occasionally turning his glance to the road, impressing sections of it upon his memory so that he could return to them via teleport if necessary. He found that he could memorize with perfect ease. Even the positions of clumps of grass and twigs were remembered with perfect clarity and in minute detail. The perfection of his memory astonished and delighted him.

The Zark felt pleased with itself. Although it had never dreamed of the potential contained in the host's mind, it realized that it was responsible for the release of these weird powers, and it enjoyed the new sensations and was eager for more. If partial probing could achieve so much, what was the ultimate power of this remarkable mind? The Zark didn't know, but, like a true experimenter, it was determined to find out—so it probed deeper, opening still more pathways and connecting more synapses with the conscious brain.

It was routine work that could be performed auto-

matically while the rest of the Zark enjoyed the colorful beauty of the Antarian scenery.

With the forest quickly left behind him, Albert walked through gently rolling grassland dotted with small farms and homesteads. It was a peaceful scene, similar to many he had seen on Earth, and the familiarity brought a sense of nostalgic longing to be home again. But the feeling was not too strong, more intellectual than physical, for the memories of Earth were oddly blurred.

Time passed and the road unreeled behind him. Once he took to the underbrush to let a humming IC ground car pass, and twice more he hid as airboats swept by overhead, but the annoyances were minor and unimportant.

When hiding from the second airboat, he disturbed a kelit in the thick brush growing beside the road. The little insect-eater chittered in alarm and dashed off to safety across the highway. And Albert, looking at it, was conscious not only of the external shape but the internal as well!

He could see its little heart pounding in its chest, and the pumping bellows of the pink lungs that surrounded it. He was aware of the muscles pulling and relaxing as the kelit ran, and the long bones sliding in their lubricated joints. He saw the tenseness of the abdominal organs, felt the blind fear in the creature's mind. The totality of his impressions washed through him with a clear wave of icy shock.

Grimly, he shrugged it off. He had ESP. He ought to have expected it—it was the next logical step. He scrambled back to the road and walked onward a little faster, until the battlements of Lagash came in sight.

The Lagash Arm was farther from the city than was that of Vaornia, and as he came to the strip of jungle, he turned his eyes upon the empty parklike arcades between the trees. The last edible garbage had long since been consumed and the greater and lesser beasts had departed for the cooler depths of the forest, but Albert was conscious of life. It was all around him, in the trees with

the ringed layers of their trunks and the sap flowing slowly upward through the cambium layer beneath their scaly bark, in the insects feeding upon the nectar of the aerial vine blossoms, in the rapid photosynthetic reactions of the leaves.

His gaze, turning aloft, was conscious of the birds and the tiny arboreal mammals. He saw the whole forest with eyes filled with wonder at its life and beauty. It was the only right way to see.

At the proper distance from Lagash, he plunged off boldly across country and entered the main area of the forest, reflecting wryly as he did so that he was probably the first human in the short history of Antarian exploration who had gone into one of the great forests with absolute knowledge that he would come out of it alive. And, as so often happens to men who have no fear, trouble avoided him.

He followed the directions he had obtained from Shifaz and found the plantation without trouble. He could hardly miss it, because its size was far from accurately expressed in the native's memory. Skillfully concealed beneath an overhanging network of aerial vines whose camouflage made it invisible from the air, concealing the tobacco plants from casual detector search, the plantation extended in row upon narrow row, the irregular strips of fields separated by rows of trees from which the camouflage was hung. A fragile electric fence encircled the area, a seemingly weak defense, but one through which even the greatest Antarian beast would not attempt to pass.

Albert whistled softly under his breath at what he saw, recorded it in his memory. Then, having finished the eyewitness part of his task, he recalled a section of road over which he had passed, and pushed.

The return journey to Vaornia was experimental in nature, as Albert tried the range of his powers. His best was just short of twenty miles and the journey which had taken him eight hours was made back in somewhat less than twenty minutes, counting half a dozen delays and backtracks.

There was no question about where Albert would go next. He had to get evidence, and that evidence lay in only one place—in the local office of the Inter-world Corporation in Vaornia.

A moment later, he stood in the reception room looking across the empty desks at the bright square of light shining through the glassite paneled door of Fred Kemmer's office. It was past closing hours, but Kemmer had a right to be working late. Right now, he was probably sweating blood at the thought of what would happen if Albert had finally managed to escape him. The Corporation would virtuously disown him and leave him to face a ten-year rap in Penal Colony. Albert almost felt sorry for him.

Albert let his perception sense travel through the wall and into Kemmer's room. His guess was right—the local boss was sweating.

He checked Kemmer's office swiftly, but the only thing that interested him was the big vault beside the desk. He visualized the interior of the vault and pushed himself inside. Separated from Kemmer by six inches of the hardest metal known to Man, he quietly leafed through the files of confidential correspondence until he found what he wanted. He didn't need a light. His perception worked as well in the dark as in the daylight.

There was enough documentary evidence in the big vault to indict quite a few more IC officials than Kemmer—and perhaps investigation of *their* files would provide more leads to even higher officials. Wherever Kemmer was going, Albert had the idea that he wouldn't be going alone.

Albert selected all the incriminating letters and documents he could find and packed the micro-files in his jacket. Finally, bulging with documentary information, he pushed back into the streets.

It was late enough for few natives to be on the streets, and his appearance caused no comment. Apparently unnoticed, he moved rapidly into the Kazlak, searching for a place to hide the papers he had stolen. What he had learned of Vaornia made him cautious. He checked con-

stantly for spies, but there wasn't a native in sensing range.

He ducked into the alleyway where he had caught Shifaz. His memory of it had been right. There was a small hole in one of the building walls, partly covered with cracked plaster, and barely visible in the darkness. The gloom of the Kazlak scarcely varied with night or day, as the enormous labyrinth of covered passages and building walls was pierced with only a few ventilation holes. Cressets at the main intersections burned constantly, their smokeless flames lighting the streets poorly.

He wondered idly how he had managed to remember the way to this place, let alone the little hole in the wall, as he stuffed the micro-files into its dark interior. He finished, turned to leave, and was out on the main tunnel before he became aware of the IC ground cars closing in upon him.

The Corporation was really on the beam, their spies everywhere. But they didn't know his abilities. He visualized and pushed. They were going to be surprised when he vanished—but he didn't vanish.

The expression of shocked surprise was still on his face as the stat gun blast took him squarely in the chest.

He was tied to a chair in Fred Kemmer's office. He recognized it easily, although physically he had never been inside the room. His head hurt as a polygraph recorder was strapped to his left arm, and behind him, beyond his range of vision, he could sense another man and several machines. In front of him stood Fred Kemmer with an expression of satisfaction on his face.

"Don't start thinking you're smart," Kemmer said. "You're in no position for it."

"You've tried to kill me three times," Albert reminded him.

"There's always a fourth time."

"I don't think so. Too many people know."

"Precisely my own conclusion," Kemmer said, "but there are other ways. Brainwashing's a good one."

"That's illegal!" Albert protested. "Besides—"

"So what?" Kemmer cut him off. "It's an illegal universe."

Albert probed urgently at the IC man's mind, hoping to find something he could turn to his advantage, but all he found were surface thoughts—satisfaction at having gotten the spy where he could do no harm, plans for turning Albert into a mindless idiot, thoughts of extracting information—all of which had an air of certainty that was unnerving. Albert had badly underestimated him. It was high time to leave here, if he could.

Albert visualized an area outside Vaornia, and, as he tried to push, a machine hummed loudly behind him. He didn't move. Mistake, Albert thought worriedly, I'm not going anywhere—and he knows I'm scared.

"It won't do you any good," Kemmer said. "It didn't take too much brains to figure you were using hyperspace in those disappearing acts. There's an insulating field around that chair that'd stop a space yacht." He leaned forward. "Now—what are your contacts, and who gave you the information on where to look?"

Albert saw no reason to hide it, but there was no sense in revealing anything. The Patrol had word of his arrest by now and should be here any moment.

It was as though Kemmer had read his mind. "Don't count on being rescued. I stopped the Patrol report." Kemmer paused, obviously enjoying the expression on Albert's face. "You know," he went on, "there's a peculiar fact about nerves that maybe you don't know. A stimulus sets up a brief neural volley lasting about a hundredth of a second. Following that comes a period of refractivity lasting perhaps a tenth of that time while the nerve repolarizes, and then, immediately after repolarization, there is an extremely short period of hypersensitivity."

"What's that to do with me?" Albert asked.

"You'll find out if you don't answer promptly and truthfully. That gadget on your arm is connected to a polygraph. Now do you want to make a statement?"

Albert shook his head. He was conscious of a brief pain in one finger, and the next instant someone tore the

finger out of his hand with red hot pincers. He screamed. He couldn't help it. This punishment was beyond agony.

"Nice, isn't it?" Kemmer asked as Albert looked down at his amputated finger that still was remarkably attached to his hand. "And the beauty of it is that it doesn't even leave a mark. Of course, if it's repeated enough, it will end up as a permanent paralysis on the part stimulated. Now once again—who gave you that information?"

Albert talked. It was futile to try to deceive a polygraph and he wanted no more of that nerve treatment—and then he looked into Kemmer's mind again and discovered what went into brainwashing. The shock was like ice water. Hypersensitive stimulation, Kemmer was thinking gleefully, would reduce this fat slob in the chair to a screaming mindless lump that could be molded like wet putty.

Albert felt helpless. He couldn't run and he couldn't fight. But he wasn't ready to give up. His perception passed over and through Kemmer with microscopic care, looking for some weakness, something that could be exploited to advantage. Kemmer *had* to have a vulnerable point.

He did.

There was a spot on the inner lining of the radial vein in Kemmer's left arm. He had recently received an inoculation, one of the constant immunizing injections that were necessary on Antar, for there was a small thrombus clinging to the needle puncture on the inner wall of the vessel. Normally it was unimportant and would pass away in time and be absorbed, but there were considerable possibilities for trouble in that little blob of red cells and fibrin if they could be loosened from their attachment to the wall.

Hopefully, Albert reached out. If he couldn't move himself, perhaps he could move the clot.

The thrombus stirred and came free, rushing toward Kemmer's heart. Albert followed it, watching as it passed into the pulmonary artery, tracing it out through the

smaller vessels until it stopped squarely across a junction of two arterioles.

Kemmer coughed, his face whitening with pain as he clutched at his chest. The pain was a mild repayment for his recent agony, Albert thought grimly. A pulmonary embolism shouldn't kill him, but the effects were disproportionate to the cause and would last a while. He grinned mercilessly as Kemmer collapsed.

A man darted from behind the chair and bent over Kemmer. Fumbling in his haste, he produced a pocket communicator, stabbed frantically at the dial and spoke urgently into it. "Medic! Boss's office—hurry!"

For a second, Albert didn't realize that the hum of machinery behind him had stopped, but when he did, both Albert and the chair vanished.

The Zark realized that its host had been hurt again. It was infuriating to be so helpless. Things kept happening to Albert which it couldn't correct until too late. There were forces involved that it didn't know how to handle; they were entirely outside the Zark's experience. It only felt relief when Albert managed to regain his ability to move—and, as it looked out upon the familiar green Antarian countryside, it felt almost happy. Of course Albert was probably still in trouble, but it wasn't so bad now. At least the man was away from the cause of his pain.

It was a hell of a note, Albert reflected, sitting beside the road that led to Lagash and working upon the bonds that tied him to the chair. He had managed to get out of Kemmer's hands, but it appeared probable that he would get no farther. As things stood, he couldn't transmit the information he had gained—and by this time probably every IC office on the planet was alerted to the fact that Earth Central had a psi-type agent on Antar—one who was not inherently unstable, like those poor devils in the parapsychological laboratories on Earth. They would be ready for him with everything from Distorter screens to Kellys.

He didn't underestimate IC now. Whatever its morals

might be, its personnel was neither stupid nor slow to act. He was trapped in this sector of the planet. Prime Base was over a thousand miles away, and even if he did manage to make his way back to it along the trade routes, it was a virtual certainty that he would never be able to get near a class I communicator or the Patrol office. IC would have ample time to get ready for him, and no matter what powers he possessed, a single man would have no chance against the massed technology of the corporation.

However, he could play tag with IC in this area for some time with the reasonable possibility that he wouldn't get caught. If nothing else, it would have nuisance value. He pulled one hand free of the tape that held it to the chair arm and swiftly removed the rest of the tape that bound him. He had his freedom again. Now what would he do with it?

He left the chair behind and started down the road toward Lagash. There was no good reason to head in that particular direction, but at the moment one direction was as good as another until he could plan a course of action. His brain felt oddly fuzzy. He didn't realize that he had reached the end of his strength until he dropped in the roadway.

To compensate for the miserable job it had done in protecting him from poison and neural torture, the Zark had successfully managed to block hunger and fatigue pains until Albert's overtaxed body could stand no more. It realized its error after Albert collapsed. Sensibly, it did nothing. Its host had burned a tremendous amount of energy without replenishment, and he needed time to rest and draw upon less available reserves, and to detoxify and eliminate the metabolic poisons in his body.

It was late that afternoon before Albert recovered enough to take more than a passing interest in his surroundings. He had a vague memory of hiring a dak cart driver to take him down the road. The memory was apparently correct, because he was lying in the back of a cargo cart piled high with short pieces of cane. The cart was moving at a brisk pace despite the apparently

leisurely movements of the dak between the shafts. The ponderous ten-foot strides ate up distance.

He was conscious of a hunger that was beyond discomfort, and a thirst that left his mouth dry and cottony. It was as though he hadn't eaten or drunk for days. He felt utterly spent, drained beyond exhaustion. He was in no shape to do anything, and unless he managed to find food and drink pretty soon, he would be easy pickings for IC.

He looked around the cart, but there was nothing except the canes on which he lay. There wasn't even any of the foul porridgelike mess that the natives called food, since native workers didn't bother about eating during working hours.

He turned over slowly, feeling the hard canes grind into his body as he moved. He kept thinking about food —about meals aboard ship, about dinners, about Earth restaurants, about steak, potatoes, bread—solid heartening foods filled with proteins, fats and carbohydrates.

Carbohydrates—the thought stuck in his mind for some reason. And then he realized why.

The canes he was lying on in the cart were sugar cane! He had never seen them on Earth, but he should have expected to find them out here—one of Earth's greatest exports was the seeds from which beet and cane sugar were obtained.

He pulled a length of cane from the pile and bit into one end. His depleted body reached eagerly for the sweet energy that filled his mouth.

With the restoration of his energy balance came clearer and more logical thought. It might be well enough to make IC spend valuable time looking for him, but such delaying actions had no positive value. Ultimately he would be caught, and his usefulness would disappear with his death. But if he could get word to the Patrol, this whole business could be smashed.

Now if he made a big enough disturbance—it might possibly even reach the noses of the Patrol. Perhaps by

working through the hundred or so tourists in Vaornia and Lagash, he could—

That was it, the only possible solution. The IC might be able to get rid of one man, but it couldn't possibly get rid of a hundred—and somewhere in that group of tourists there would be one who'd talk, someone who would pass the word. IC couldn't keep this quiet without brainwashing the lot of them, and that in itself would be enough to bring a Patrol ship here at maximum blast.

He chuckled happily. The native driver, startled at the strange sound, turned his head just in time to see his passenger vanish, together with a bundle of cane. The native shook his head in an oddly human gesture. These foreigners were strange creatures indeed.

Albert, thin, pale, but happy, sat at a table in one of the smaller cafeterias in Earth Center, talking to the Chief over a second helping of dessert. The fearful energy drain of esper activity, combined with the constant dodging to avoid IC hunting parties, had made him a gaunt shadow—but he had managed to survive until a Patrol ship arrived to investigate the strange stories told by tourists, of a man who haunted the towns of Lagash and Vaornia, and the road between.

"That's all there was to it, sir," Albert concluded. "Once I figured it out that not even IC could get away with mass murder, it was easy. I just kept popping up in odd places and telling my story, and then, to make it impressive, I'd disappear. I had nearly two days before IC caught on, and by then you knew. The only trouble was getting enough to eat. I damn near starved before the Patrol arrived. I expect that we owe quite a few farmers and shopkeepers reparations for the food I stole."

"They'll be paid, providing they present a claim," the Chief said. "But there's one thing about all this that bothers me. I know you had no psi powers when you left Earth on this mission. Just where did you acquire them?"

Albert shook his head. "I don't know," he said, "Unless they were latent and developed in Antar's peculiar

climatic and physical conditions. Or maybe it was the shock of that meeting with the Bandersnatch. All I'm sure of is that I didn't have any until after that meeting with Shifaz."

"Well, you certainly have them now. The Parapsych boys are hot on your tail, but we've stalled them off."

"Thanks. I don't want to imitate a guinea pig."

"We owe you at least that for getting us a case against IC. Even their shysters won't be able to wiggle out of this one." The Chief smiled. "It's nice to have those lads where they can be handled for a change."

"They do need a dose of applied conscience," Albert agreed.

"The government also owes you a bonus and a vote of thanks."

"I'll appreciate the bonus," Albert said as he signaled for the waitress. "Recently, I can't afford my appetite."

"It's understandable. After all, you've lost nearly eighty pounds."

"Wonder if I'll ever get them back," Albert muttered as he bit into the third dessert.

The Chief watched enviously. "I wouldn't worry about that," he said. "Just get your strength back. There's another assignment for you, one that will need your peculiar talents." He stood up. "I'll be seeing you. My ulcer can't take your appetite any more." He walked away.

Inside Albert, the Zark alerted. A new assignment! That meant another world and new sensations. Truly, this host was magnificent! It had been a lucky day when he had fallen in running from the Bandersnatch. The Zark quivered with delight—

And Albert felt it.

Turning his perception inward to see what might be wrong, he saw the Zark for the first time.

For a second, a wave of repulsion swept through his body, but as he comprehended the extent of that protoplasmic mass so inextricably intertwined with his own, he realized that this thing within him was the reason for his new powers. There could be no other explanation.

And as he searched farther, he marveled. The Zark was unspecialized in a way he had never imagined—an amorphous aggregation of highly evolved cells that could imitate normal tissues in a manner that would defy ordinary detection. It was something at once higher yet lower than his own flesh, something more primitive yet infinitely more evolved.

The Zark had succeeded at last. It had established communication with its host.

"Answer me, parasite," Albert muttered subvocally. "I know you're there—and I know you can answer!"

The Zark gave the protean equivalent of a shrug. If Albert only knew how it had tried to communicate—no, there was no communication between them. Their methods of thought were so different that there was no possible rapport.

It twitched—and Albert jumped. And for the first time in its long life, the Zark had an original idea. It moved a few milligrams of its substance to Albert's throat region, and after a premonitory glottal spasm, Albert said very distinctly and quite involuntarily, "All right. I am here."

Albert froze with surprise, but when the shock passed, he laughed. "Well, I asked for it," he said. "But it's like the story about the man who talked to himself—and got answers. Not exactly a comforting sensation."

"I'm sorry," the Zark apologized. "I do not wish to cause discomfort."

"You pick a poor way to keep from doing it."

"It was the only way I could figure to make contact with your conscious mind—and you desired that I communicate."

"I suppose you're right. But while it is nice to know that I really have a guardian angel, I'd have felt better about it if you had white robes and wings and were hovering over my shoulder."

"I don't understand," the Zark said.

"I was trying to be funny. You know," Albert continued after a moment, "I never thought of trying to perceive myself. I wonder why. I guess because none of the medical examinations showed anything different from normal."

"I was always afraid that you might suspect before I could tell you," the Zark replied. "It was an obvious line of reasoning, and you *are* an intelligent entity—the most intelligent I have ever inhabited. It is too bad that I shall have to leave. I have enjoyed being with you."

"Who said anything about leaving?" Albert asked.

"You did. I could feel your revulsion when you became aware of me. It wasn't nice, but I suppose you can't help it. Yours is an independent race, one that doesn't willingly support—" the voice hesitated as though searching for the proper word—"fellow travelers," it finished.

Albert grinned. "There are historical precedents for that statement, but your interpretation isn't quite right. I was surprised. You startled me."

He fell silent, and the Zark, respecting the activity of his mind, forbore to interrupt.

Albert was doing some heavy thinking about the Zark. Certainly it had protected him on Antar, and with equal certainty it must have been responsible for the psi owners he possessed. He owed it a lot, for without its help he wouldn't have survived.

There was only one thing wrong.

Sexless though it was, the Zark must possess the characteristics of life, since it was obviously alive. And those characteristics were unchanging throughout the known universe. The four vital criteria defined centuries ago were still as good today as they were then—growth, metabolism, irritability—and *reproduction*. Despite its lack of sex, the Zark must be capable of producing others of its kind, and while he didn't mind supporting one fellow traveler, he was damned if he'd support a whole family of them.

"That need never bother you," the Zark interrupted. "As an individual, I am very long-lived and seldom reproduce. I can, of course, but the process is quite involved —actually it involves making a twin out of myself—and it is not necessary. Besides, there cannot be two Zarks in one host. My offspring would have to seek another."

"And do they have your powers?"

"Of course. They would know all I know, for a Zark's memory is not concentrated in specialized tissue like your brain."

A light began to dawn in Albert's mind. Maybe this was the answer to the corporate conscience he had been wishing for so wistfully on Antar. "Does it bother you to reproduce?" he asked.

"It is annoying, but not painful—nor would it be too difficult after a pattern was set in my cells. But why do you ask this?"

"The thought just occurred to me that there are quite a few people who could use a Zark. A few of the more honest folks would improve this Confederation's moral tone if they had the power—and certainly psi powers in law enforcement would be unbeatable."

"Then you would want me to reproduce?"

"It might be a good idea if we can find men who are worthy of Zarks. I could check them with my telepathy and perhaps we might—"

"Let me warn you," the Zark interjected. "While this all sounds very fine, there are difficulties, even with a host as large as yourself. I shall need more energy than your body has available in order to duplicate myself. It will be hard for you to do what must be done."

"And what is that?"

"Eat," the Zark said, "great quantities of high energy foods." It shuddered at the thought of Albert overloading his digestive tract any more than he had been doing the past week.

But Albert's reaction went to prove that while their relationship was physically close, mentally they were still far apart. Albert, the Zark noted in astonishment, didn't regard it as an ordeal at all.

THE LIVE COWARD

BY POUL ANDERSON

The seemingly insurmountable problems of our own planet, as of this year of publication 1966, pale into utter insignificance when one tries to imagine those facing a law-enforcing agency trying to keep peace on a galactic scale. Poul Anderson has, over the years, developed quite a thesis in his stories on the subject: the thesis that on such a scale peace usually is not kept or enforced, it is bought.

In other words, his Galactic Patrol, operating on what is unquestionably one of the most discouraging Orders from Headquarters that a police force ever received—i.e., never to kill—finds other ways of maintaining the peace among the thousands? millions? who knows? of inhabited planets constituting the Galactic Federation.

They are, understandably, devious ways, as you will discover as you read. Financial indeed; but also involving an immense variety of non-lethal skullduggery, devious persuasion, and out-and-out—let's face it—dishonesty. Not a pretty way for a policeman to act? We put them out of the Force here on earth for operating in such a fashion. But maybe we're doing it wrong, and Anderson has the right idea?

The fugitive ship was pursued for ten light-years, Then, snapping in and out of subspace drive with a reckless disregard of nearby suns and tracer-blocking dust clouds, it shook the Patrol cruiser.

The search that followed was not so frantic as the danger might seem to warrant. Haste would have done no good; there are a million planetary systems affiliated with the League, and their territory includes several million more too backward for membership. Even a small planet is such a wilderness of mountains, valleys, plains, forests, oceans, ice-fields, cities, and loneliness—much of it often quite unexplored—that it was hopeless to ransack them meter by meter for a single man. The Patrol knew that Varris' boat had a range of three hundred parsecs, and in the course of months and man-years of investigation it was pretty well established that he had not refueled at any registered depot. But a sphere two thousand light-years across can hold a lot of stars.

The Patrol offered a substantial reward for information leading to the arrest of Samel Varris, human, from the planet Caldon (No. so-and-so in the Pilots' Manual), wanted for the crime of inciting to war. It circulated its appeal as widely as possible. It warned all agents to keep an eye or a feeler or a telepathic organ out for a man potentially still capable of exploding a billion living entities into radioactive gas. Then it waited.

A year went by.

Captain Jakor Thymal of the trading ship *Ganash,* operating out of Sireen in the primitive Spiral Cluster area, brought the news. He had seen Varris, even spoken to the fellow. There was no doubt of it. Only one hitch: Varris had taken refuge with the king of Thunsba, a barbarous state in the southern hemisphere of a world known to the Galactics—such few as had ever heard of

it—as Ryfin's Planet. He had gotten citizenship and taken the oath of service as a royal guardsman. Loyalty between master and man was a powerful element in Thunsban morality. The king would not give up Varris.

Of course, axes and arrows were of small use against flamers. Perhaps Varris could not be taken alive, but the Patrol could kill him without whiffing very many Thunsbans. Captain Thymal settled complacently back to wait for official confirmation of his report and the blood money. Nothing ever occurred to him but that the elimination of Varris would be the simplest of routine operations.

Like hell!

Wing Alak eased his flitter close to the planet. It hung in cloudy splendor against a curtain of hard, needle-sharp spatial stars, the Cluster sky. He sat gloomily listening to the click and mutter of instruments as Drogs checked surface conditions.

"Quite terrestroid," said the Galmathian. His antennae lifted in puzzlement above the round, snouted face and the small black eyes. "Why did you bother testing? It's listed in the Manual."

"I have a nasty suspicious mind," said Alak. "Also an unhappy one." He was a thin, medium-tall human with the very white skin that often goes with flaming red hair. His Patrol uniform was as dandified as regulations allowed.

Drogs hitched three meters of green, eight-legged body across the cabin. His burly arms reached out to pick up the maps in three-fingered hands. "Yes . . . here's the Thunsba kingdom and the capital city . . . what's it called? . . . Wainabog. I suppose our quarry is still there; Thymal swore he didn't alarm him." He sighed. "Now I have to spend an hour at the telescope and identify which place is what. And you can sit like my wife on an egg thinking beautiful thoughts!"

"The only beautiful concept I have right now is that all of a sudden the Prime Directive was repealed."

"No chance of that, I'm afraid . . . not till a less bloodthirsty race than yours gets the leadership of the League."

"Less? You mean more, don't you? 'Under no circumstances whatsoever may the Patrol or any unit thereof kill any intelligent being.' If you do—" Alak made a rather horrible gesture. "Is that bloodthirsty?"

"Quite. Only a race with as gory a past as the Terrans would go to such extremes of reaction. And only as naturally ferocious a species could think of making such a commandment the Patrol's great top secret . . . and bluffing with threats of planet-wide slaughter, or using any kind of chicanery to achieve its ends. Now a Galmathian will run down a farstak in his native woods and jump on its back and make a nice lunch while it's still running . . . but he wouldn't be able to imagine coldbloodedly sterilizing an entire world, so he doesn't have to ban himself from honest killing even in self-defense." Drogs' caterpillar body hunched itself over the telescope.

"Get thee behind me, Satan . . . and don't push!" Alak returned murkily to his thoughts. His brain was hypnotically stuffed with all the information three generations of traders had gathered about Thunsba. None of it looked hopeful.

The king was—well, if not an absolute monarch, pretty close to being one, simply because the law had set him over the commons. Like many warlike barbarians, the Thunsbans had a quasi-religious reverence for the letter of the law, if not always for its spirit. The Patrol had run head-on into two items of the code: (a) the king would not yield up a loyal guardsman to an enemy, but would fight to the death instead; (b) if the king fought, so would the whole male population, unmoved by threats to themselves or their mates and cubs. Death before dishonor! Their religion, which they seemed quite fervent about, promised a roisterous heaven to all who fell in a good cause, and a suitably gruesome hell for oathbreakers.

Hm-m-m . . . there was a powerful ecclesiastical organization, and piety had not stopped a good deal of conflict between church and throne. Maybe he could work through the priesthood somehow.

The outworld traders who came to swap various manufactured articles for the furs and spices of Ryfin's Planet

had not influenced the local cultures much. Perhaps they had inspired a few wars and heresies, but on the whole the autochthones were content to live in the ways of their fathers. The main effect of trading had been a loss of superstitious awe—the strangers were mighty, but they were known to be mortal. Alak doubted that even the whole Patrol fleet could bullyrag them into yielding on so touchy a point as Varris' surrender.

"What I can't understand," said Drogs, "is why we don't just swoop down and give the city a blanket of sleep-gas." This mission had been ordered in such tearing haste that he had been given only the most nominal briefing; and on the way here, he had followed his racial practice of somnolence—his body could actually "store" many days' worth of sleep.

His free hand gestured around the flitter. It was not a large boat, but it was well equipped, not only with weapons—for bluffing—but with its own machine shop and laboratory.

"Metabolic difference," said Alak. "Every anaesthetic known to us is poisonous to them, and their own knockout chemicals would kill Varris. Stun beams are just as bad—supersonics will scramble a Ryfinnian's brain like an egg. I imagine Varris picked this world for a bolt-hole just on that account."

"But he didn't know we wouldn't simply come down and shoot up the den."

"He could make a pretty shrewd guess. It's a secret that we never kill, but no secret that we're reluctant to hurt innocent bystanders." Alak scowled. "There are still a hundred million people on Caldon who'd rise—bloodily—against the new government if he came back to them. Whether he succeeded or not, it'd be a genocidal affair and a big loss of face to the Patrol."

"Hm-m-m . . . he can't get far from this world without more fuel; his tanks must be nearly dry. So why don't we blockade this planet and make sure he never has a chance to buy fuel?"

"Blockades aren't that reliable," said Alak. Drogs had never been involved in naval operations, only in surface

work. "We could destroy his own boat easily enough, but word that he's alive is bound to leak back to Caldon now. There'd be attempt after attempt to run the blockade and get him out. Sooner or later, one would succeed. We're badly handicapped by not being allowed to shoot to hit. No, damn it, we've got to lift him, and fast!"

His eyes traveled wistfully to the biochemical shelves. There was a potent drug included, a nembutal derivative, hypnite. A small intra-muscular injection could knock Varris out; he would awaken into a confused, passive state and remain thus for hours, following any lead he was given. Much useful information about his conspiracy could be extracted.

Alak felt more handcuffed than ever before in his pragmatist life. The blaster at his waist could incinerate a squad of Thunsban knights—but their anachronistic weapons weren't so ridiculous when he wasn't allowed to use the blaster.

"Hurry it up," he said on a harsh note. "Let's get moving—and don't ask me where!"

A landing field had been made for the traders just outside the walls of Wainabog. Those bulked thick and gray, studded with turrets and men-at-arms, over a blue landscape of rolling fields and distant hills. Here and there Alak saw thatch-roofed hamlets; two kilometers from the town was a smaller community, also fortified, a single great tower in its middle crowned with a golden X. It must be the place mentioned in the trader narratives. Grimmoch Abbey, was that the name?

It was not too bad a mistranslation to speak of abbeys, monks, knights, and kings. Culturally and technologically, Thunsba was fairly close to medieval Europe.

Several peasants and townsfolk stood gaping at the flitter as Alak emerged. Others were on their way. He swept his gaze around the field and saw another spaceboat some distance off—must be Varris', yes, he remembered the description now—twelve liveried halberdiers guarded it.

Carefully ignoring the drab-clad commons, Alak waited for the official greeters. Those came out in a rattle of plate

armor, mounted on yellow-furred animals with horns and shoulder humps. A band of crossbowmen trotted in their wake and a herald wearing a scarlet robe blew his trumpet in their van. They pulled up with streaming banners and thunderous hoofs; lances dipped courteously, but eyes had a watchful stare behind the snouted visors of their helmets.

The herald rode forth and looked down at Alak, who was clad in his brightest dress uniform. "Greeting to you, stranger, from our lord Morlach, King of all Thunsba and Defender of the West. Our lord Morlach bids you come sup and sleep with him." The herald drew a sword and extended it hilt first. Alak ran hastily through his lessons and rubbed his forehead against the handle.

They were quite humanoid on Ryfin's Planet—disturbingly so, if you hadn't seen as many species as Alak. It was not the pale-blue skin or the violet hair or the short tails which made the difference: always, in a case like this, the effect was of a subtler wrongness. Noses a shade too long, faces a trifle too square, knees and elbows held at a peculiar angle—they looked like cartoon figures brought to life. And they had a scent of their own, a sharp mustardy odor. Alak didn't mind, knowing full well that he looked and smelled as odd to them, but he had seen young recruits get weird neuroses after a few months on a planet of "humanoids to six points of classification."

He replied gravely in the Thunsban tongue: "My lord Morlach has my thanks and duty. I hight Wing Alak, and am not a trader but an envoy of the traders' king, sent hither on a mission most delicate. I pray the right to see my lord Morlach as soon as he grant."

There was more ceremony, and a number of slaves were fetched to carry Alak's impressive burden of gifts. Then he was offered a mount, but declined—the traders had warned him of this little joke, where you put an outworlder on a beast that goes frantic at alien smells. With proper haughtiness he demanded a sedan chair, which was an uncomfortable and seasick thing to ride but had more dignity. The knights of Wainabog enclosed him and

he was borne through the gates and the cobbled avenues to the fortresslike palace.

Inside, he did not find the rude splendor he had expected, but a more subtle magnificence, really beautiful furnishings. Thunsba might throw its garbage out in the streets, but had excellent artistic taste. There were a hundred nobles in the royal audience chamber, a rainbow of robes, moving about and talking with boisterous gestures. Servants scurried around offering trays of food and liquor. A small orchestra was playing: the saw-toothed music hurt Alak's ears. A number of monks, in gray robes and with hoods across their faces, stood unspeaking along the walls, near the motionless men-at-arms.

Alak advanced under gleaming pikes and knelt before the king. Morlach was burly, middle-aged, and long-bearded, wearing a coronet and holding a naked sword on his lap. At his left, the place of honor—most of this species were left-handed—sat an older "man," clean-shaven, hook-nosed, bleak-faced, in yellow robe and a tall bejeweled hat marked with a golden X.

"My duty to you, puissant lord Morlach. Far have I, unworthy Wing Alak of Terra, come to behold your majesty, before whom the nations tremble. From my king unto you, I bear a message and these poor gifts."

The poor gifts made quite a heap, all the way from clothes and ornaments of lustrous synthetic to flashlights and swords of manganese steel. Ryfin's Planet couldn't legally be given modern tools and weapons—not at their present social stage of war and feudalism—but there was no ban on lesser conveniences which they couldn't reproduce anyhow.

"Well met, Sir Wing Alak. Come, be seated at my right." Morlach's voice rose, and the buzzing voices, already lowered in curiosity, stopped at once. "Be it known to all men, Sir Wing Alak is in truth my guest, most holy and inviolable, and all injuries to him, save in lawful duel, are harms to me and my house which the Allshaper bids me avenge."

The nobles crowded closer. It was not a very formal court, as such things go. One of them came to the front

as Alak mounted the high seat. The Patrolman felt a tingle along his back and a primitive stirring in his scalp.

Samel Varris was dressed quite like the other aristocrats, a gaudy robe of puffed and slashed velvet, hung with ropes of jewels. Alak guessed correctly that a royal guardsman ranked very high indeed, possessing his own lands and retinue. Varris was a big dark man with arrogant features and shrewd eyes. Recognition kindled in him, and he strode forward and made an ironic bow.

"Ah, Sir Wing Alak," he said in Thunsban. "I had not awaited the honor of your calling on me yourself."

King Morlach huffed and laid a ringed hand on his sword. "I knew not you twain were acquainted."

Alak covered an empty feeling with his smoothest manner. "Yes, my lord, Varris and I have jousted erenow. Indeed, my mission hither concerns him."

"Came you to fetch him away?" It was a snarl, and the nobility of Wainabog reached for their daggers.

"I know not what he has told you, my lord—"

"He came hither because foemen had overwhelmed his own kingdom and sought his life. Noble gifts did he bring me, not least of them one of the flame-weapons your folk are so niggardly with, and he gave wise redes by which we hurled back the armies of Rachanstog and wrung tribute out of their ruler." Morlach glared from lowered brows. "Know then, Sir Wing Alak, that though you are my guest and I may not harm you, Sir Varris has taken oaths as my guardsman and served right loyally. For this I have given him gold and a broad fief. The honor of my house is sacred . . . if you demand he be returned to his foes, I must ask that you leave at once and when next we meet it shall be the worse for you!"

Alak pursed his lips to whistle, but thought better of it. Handing out a blaster—! It was unimportant in itself, the firearm would be useless once its charge was spent, but as a measure of Varris' contempt for Galactic law—

"My lord," he said hastily, "I cannot deny I had such a request. But it was never the intent of my king or myself to insult your majesty. The request will not be made of you."

"Let there be peace," said the high priest on Morlach's left. His tone was not as unctuous as the words: here was a fighter, in his own way, more intelligent and more dangerous than the brawling warriors around him. "In the name of the Allshaper, we are met in fellowship. Let not black thoughts give to the Evil an entering wedge."

Morlach swore.

"In truth, my lord, I bear this envoy no ill will," smiled Varris. "I vouch that he is knightly, and wishes but to serve his king as well as I seek to serve yourself. If my holy lord abbot"—the title was nearly equivalent—"calls peace on this hall, then I for one will abide by it."

"Yes . . . a sniveling shavechin to whine peace when treachery rises," growled Morlach. "You have enough good lands which should be mine, Abbot Gulmanan—keep your greasy fingers off my soul, at least!"

"What my lord says to me is of no consequence," answered the cleric thinly. "But if he speaks against the Temple, he blasphemes the Allshaper."

"Hell freeze you, I'm a pious man!" roared Morlach. "I make the sacrifices—for the Allshaper, though, not for his fat-gutted Temple that would push me off my own throne!"

Gulmanan flushed purple, but checked himself, bit narrow lips together and made a bridge of his bony fingers. "This is not the time or place to question where the ghostly and the worldly authorities have their proper bounds," he said. "I shall sacrifice for your soul, my lord, and pray you be led out of error."

Morlach snorted and called for a beaker of wine. Alak sat inconspicuously till the king's temper had abated. Then he began to speak of increased trade possibilites.

He had not the slightest power to make treaties, but he wanted to be sure he wasn't kicked out of Wainabog yet.

Heavily dosed with anti-allergen, Alak was able to eat enough of the king's food to cement his status as guest. But Drogs brought him a case of iron rations when the Galmathian came to attend his "master" in the assigned palace apartment.

The human sat moodily by the window, looking out at the glorious night sky of clotted stars and two moons. There was a fragrant garden beneath him, under the bleak castle walls. Somewhere a drunken band of nobles was singing—he had left the feast early and it was still carousing on. A few candles lit the tapestried dankness of the room; they were perfumed, but not being a Ryfinnian he did not enjoy the odor of mercaptan.

"If we got several thousand husky Patrolmen," he said, "and put them in armor, and equipped them with clubs, we might slug our way in and out of this place. Right now I can't think of anything else."

"Well, why don't we?" Drogs hunched over a burbling water pipe, cheerfully immune to worry.

"It lacks finesse. Nor is it guaranteed—these Thunsbans are pretty hefty too, they might overpower our men. If we used tanks or something to make ourselves invincible, it'd be just our luck to have some gallant fathead of a knight get squashed under the treads. Finally, with the trouble at Sannanton going on, the Patrol can't spare so large a force—and by the time they can, it might well be too late. Those unprintable traders must have told half the League that Varris has been found. We can look for a rescue attempt from Caldon within a week."

"Hm-m-m . . . according to your account the local church is at loggerheads with the king. Maybe it can be persuaded to do our work for us. Nothing in the Prime Directive forbids letting entities murder each other."

"No—I'm afraid the Temple priests are only allowed to fight in self-defense, and these people never break a law." Alak rubbed his chin. "You may have the germ of an idea there, though. I'll have to—"

The gong outside the door was struck. Drogs humped across the floor and opened.

Varris came in, at the head of half a dozen warriors. Their drawn blades gleamed against flickering shadow.

Alak's blaster snaked out. Varris grinned and lifted his hand. "Don't be so impetuous," he advised. "These boys are only precautionary. I just wanted to talk."

Alak took out a cigarette and puffed it into lighting. "Go on, then," he invited tonelessly.

"I'd like to point out a few things, that's all." Varris was speaking Terran; the guards waited stolidly, not understanding, their eyes restless. "I wanted to say I'm a patient man, but there's a limit to how much persecution I'll stand for."

"Persecution. And the massacres at New Venus?"

Fanaticism smoldered in Varris' eyes, but he answered quietly: "I was the legitimately chosen dictator. Under Caldonian law, I was within my rights. It was the Patrol which engineered the revolution. It's the Patrol which now maintains a hated colonialism over my planet."

"Yes—until such time as those hellhounds you call people have had a little sense beaten into them. If you hadn't been stopped, there'd be more than one totally dead world by now." Alak's smile was wintry. "You'll comprehend that for yourself, once we've normalized your psyche.

"You can't cleanly execute a man." Varris paced tiger-fashion. "You have to take and twist him till everything that was holy to him has become evil and everything he despised is good. I'll not let that happen to me."

"You're stuck here," said Alak. "I know your boat is almost out of fuel. Incidentally, in case you get ideas, mine is quite thoroughly boobytrapped. All I need do is holler for reinforcements. Why not surrender now and save me the trouble?"

Varris grinned. "Nice try, friend, but I'm not that stupid. If the Patrol could have sent more than you to arrest me, it would have done so. I'm staying here and gambling that a rescue party from Caldon will arrive before your ships get around to it. The odds are in my favor."

His finger stabbed out. "Look here! By choice, I'd have my men cut you down where you stand—you and that slimy little monster. I can't, because I have to live up to the local code of honor; they'd throw me out if I broke the least of their silly laws. But I can maintain a large enough bodyguard to prevent you from kidnaping me, as you've doubtless thought of doing."

"I had given the matter some small consideration," nodded Alak.

"There's one other thing I can do, too. I can fight a duel with you. A duel to the death—they haven't any other kind."

"Well, I'm a pretty good shot."

"They won't allow modern weapons. The challenged party has the choice, but it's got to be swords or axes or bows or—something provided for in their law." Varris laughed. "I've spent a lot of time this past year, practicing with just such arms. And I went in for fencing at home. How much training have you had?"

Alak shrugged. Not being even faintly a romantic, he had never taken much interest in archaic sports.

"I'm good at thinking up nasty tricks," he said. "Suppose I chose to fight you with clubs, only I had a switchblade concealed in mine."

"I've seen that kind of thing pulled," said Varris calmly. "Poison is illegal, but gimmicks of the kind you mention are accepted. However, the weapons must be identical. You'd have to get me with your switchblade the first try—and I don't think you could—or I'd see what was going on and do the same. I assure you, the prospect doesn't frighten me at all.

"I'll give you a few days here to see how hopeless your problem is. If you turn your flitter's guns on the city, or on me . . . well, I have guns, too. If you aren't out of the kingdom in a week—or if you begin to act suspiciously before that time—I'll duel you."

"I'm a peaceable man," said Alak. "It takes two to make a duel."

"Not here, it doesn't. If I insult you before witnesses, and you don't challenge me, you lose knightly rank and are whipped out of the country. It's a long walk to the border, with a bull whip lashing you all the way. You wouldn't make it alive."

"All right," sighed Alak. "What do you want of me?"

"I want to be let alone."

"So do the people you were going to make war on last year."

"Good night." Varris turned and went out the door. His men followed him.

Alak stood for a while in silence. Beyond the walls, he could hear the night wind of Ryfin's Planet. Somehow, it was a foreign wind, it had another sound from the rushing air of Terra. Blowing through different trees, across an unearthly land—

"Have you any plan at all?" murmured Drogs.

"I had one." Alak clasped nervous hands behind his back. "He doesn't *know* I won't bushwhack him, or summon a force of gunners, or something lethal like that. I was figuring on a bluff—but it seems he has called me. He wants to be sure of taking at least one Patrolman to hell with him."

"You could study the local *code duello,*" suggested Drogs. "You could let him kill you in a way which looked like a technical foul. Then the king would boot him out and I could arrest him with the help of a stun beam."

"Thanks," said Alak. "Your devotion to duty is really touching."

"I remember a Terran proverb," said Drogs. Galmathian humor can be quite heavy at times. " 'The craven dies a thousand deaths, the hero dies but once.' "

"Yeh. But you see, I'm a craven from way back. I much prefer a thousand synthetic deaths to one genuine case. As far as I'm concerned, the live coward has it all over the dead hero—" Alak stopped. His jaw fell down and then snapped up again. He flopped into a chair and cocked his feet up on the windowsill and ran a hand through his ruddy hair.

Drogs returned to the water pipe and smoked imperturbably. He knew the signs. If the Patrol may not kill, it is allowed to do anything else—and sublimated murder can be most fascinatingly fiendish.

In spite of his claims to ambassadorial rank, Alak found himself rating low—his only retinue was one ugly nonhumanoid. But that could be useful. With their faintly contemptuous indifference, the nobles of Wainabog didn't care where he was.

He went, the next afternoon, to Grimmoch Abbey.

An audience with Gulmanan was quickly granted. Alak crossed a paved courtyard, strolled by a temple where the hooded monks were holding an oddly impressive service, and entered a room in the great central tower. It was a large room, furnished with austere design but lavish materials, gold and silver and gems and brocades. One wall was covered by bookshelves, illuminated folios, many of them secular. The abbot sat stiffly on a carved throne of rare woods. Alak made the required prostration and was invited to sit down.

The old eyes were thoughtful, watching him. "What brought you here, my cub?"

"I am a stranger, holy one," said the human. "I understand little of your faith, and considered it shame that I did not know more."

"We have not yet brought any outworlder to the Way," said the abbot gravely. "Except, of course, Sir Varris, and I am afraid his devotions smack more of expediency than conviction."

"Let me at least hear what you believe," asked the Patrolman with all the earnestness he could summon in daylight.

Gulmanan smiled, creasing his gaunt blue face. "I have a suspicion that you are not merely seeking the Way," he replied. "Belike there is some more temporal question in your mind."

"Well—" They exchanged grins. You couldn't run a corporation as big as this abbey without considerable hardheadedness. But Alak persisted in his queries. It took an hour to learn what he wanted to know.

Thunsba was monotheistic. The theology was subtle and complex, the ritual emotionally satisfying, the commandments flexible enough to accommodate ordinary fleshly weaknesses. Nobody doubted the essential truth of the religion; but its Temple was another matter.

As in medieval Europe, the church was a powerful organization, international, the guardian of learning and the gradual civilizer of a barbarous race. It had no secular clergy—every priest was a monk of some degree, inhabiting a large or small monastery. Each of these was ruled by

one officer—Gulmanan in this case—responsible to the central Council in Augnachar city; but distances being great and communications slow, this supreme authority was mostly background.

The clergy were celibate and utterly divorced from the civil regime, with their own laws and courts and punishments. Each detail of their lives, down to dress and diet, was minutely prescribed by an unbreakable code—there were no special dispensations. Entering the church, if you were approved, was only a matter of taking vows; getting out was not so easy, requiring a Council decree. A monk owned nothing; any property he might have had before entering reverted to his heirs, any marriage he might have made was automatically annulled. Even Gulmanan could not call the clothes he wore or the lands he ruled his own: it all belonged to the corporation, the abbey. And the abbey was rich; for centuries, titled Thunsbans had given it land or money.

Naturally, there was conflict between church and king. Both sought power, both claimed overlapping prerogatives, both insisted that theirs was the final authority. Some kings had had abbots murdered or imprisoned, some had gone weakly to Canossa. Morlach was in-between, snarling at the Temple but not quite daring to attack it.

". . . I see." Alak bowed his head. "Thank you, holy one."

"I trust your questions are all answered?" The voice was dry.

"Well, now . . . there are some matters of business—" Alak sat for a moment, weighing the other. Gulmanan seemed thoroughly honest; a direct bribe would only be an insult. But honesty is more malleable than one might think—

"Yes? Speak without fear, my cub. No words of yours shall pass these walls."

Alak plunged into it: "As you know, my task is to remove Sir Varris to his own realm for punishment of many evil deeds."

"He has claimed his cause was righteous," said Gulmanan noncommittally.

"And so he believes. But in the name of that cause, he was prepared to slay more folk than dwell on this entire world."

"I wondered about that—"

Alak drew a long breath and then spoke fast. "The Temple is eternal, is it not? Of course. Then it must look centuries ahead. It must not let one man, whose merits are doubtful at best, stand in the way of an advancement which could mean saving thousands of souls."

"I am old," said Gulmanan in a parched tone. "My life has not been as cloistered as I might have wished. If you are proposing that you and I could work together to mutual advantage, say so."

Alak made a sketchy explanation. "And the lands would be yours," he finished.

"Also the trouble, my cub," said the abbot. "We already have enough clashes with King Morlach."

"This would not be a serious one. The law would be on our side."

"Nevertheless, the honor of the Temple may not be compromised."

"In plain words, you want more than I've offered."

"Yes," said Gulmanan bluntly.

Alak waited. Sweat studded his body. What could he do if an impossible demand was made?

The seamed blue face grew wistful. "Your race knows much," said the abbot. "Our peasants wear out their lives, struggling against a miserly soil and seasonal insect hordes. Are there ways to better their lot?"

"Is that all? Certainly there are. Helping folk progress when they wish to is one of our chief policies. My . . . my king would be only too glad to lend you some technicians—farmwrights?—and show you how."

"Also . . . it is pure greed on my part. But sometimes at night, looking up at the stars, trying to understand what the traders have said—that this broad fair world of ours is but a mote spinning through vastness beyond comprehension—it has been an anguish in me that I do not know how that is." Now it was Gulmanan who leaned forward and shivered. "Would it be possible to . . . to

translate a few of your books on this science astronomic into Thunsban?"

Alak regarded himself as a case-hardened cynic. In the line of duty, he had often and cheerfully broken the most solemn oaths with an audible snap. But this was one promise he meant to keep though the sky fell down.

On the way back, he stopped at his flitter, where Drogs was hiding from a gape-mouthed citizenry, and put the Galmathian to work in the machine shop.

A human simply could not eat very much of this planet's food; he would die in agony. Varris had taken care to have a food-synthesizer aboard his boat, and ate well that night of special dishes. He did not invite Alak to join him, and the Patrolman munched gloomily on what his service imagined to be an adequate, nutritious diet.

After supper, the nobles repaired to a central hall, with a fireplace at either end waging hopeless war on the evening chill, for serious drinking. Alak, ignored by most, sauntered through the crowd till he got to Varris. The fugitive was conversing with several barons; from his throne, King Morlach listened interestedly. Varris was increasing his prestige by explaining some principles of games theory which ought to guarantee success in the next war.

". . . And thus, my gentles, it is not that one must seek a certain victory, for there is no certainty in battle, but must so distribute his forces as to have the greatest *likelihood* of winning—"

"Hogwash!" snapped Alak. The Thunsban phrase he used was more pungent.

"You disagree, then, sir?" inquired a native.

"Not exactly," said the Patrolman. "It is not worth disagreeing with so lunkheaded a swine as this baseborn Varris."

His prey remained impassive. There was no tone in the voice: "I trust you will retract your statement, sir."

"Yes, perhaps I should," agreed Alak. "It was too mild. Actually, of course, as is obvious from a single glance at his bloated face, Sir Varris is a muckeating sack of lip-

wagging flatulence whose habits I will not even try to describe since they would make a barnyard blush."

Silence hit the hall. The flames roared up the chimneys. King Morlach scowled and breathed heavily, but could not legally interfere. The warriors dropped hands to their knives.

"What's your purpose?" muttered Varris in Terran.

"Naturally," said Alak in Thunsban, "if Sir Varris does not dispute my assertions, there is no argument."

The Caldonian sighed. "I will dispute them on your body tomorrow morning," he answered.

Alak's foxy face broke into a delighted grin. "Do I understand that I am being challenged?" he asked.

"You do, sir. I invite you to a duel."

"Very well." Alak looked around. Every eye in the place was welded to him. "My lords, you bear witness that I have been summoned to fight Sir Varris. If I mistake me not, the choice of weapons and ground is mine."

"Within the laws of single combat," rumbled Morlach venomously. "None of your outworld sorceries."

"Indeed not." Alak bowed. "I choose to fight with my own swords, which are lighter than your claymores but, I assure you, quite deadly if one does not wear armor. Sir Varris may, of course, have first choice of the pair. The duel will take place just outside the main gate of Grimmoch Abbey."

There was nothing unusual about that. A badly wounded contestant could be taken in to the monks, who were also the local surgeons. In such a case, he was allowed to recover, after which a return engagement was fought. In the simple and logical belief that enmities should not be permitted to fester, the Thunsban law said that no duel was officially over till one party had been killed. It was the use of light swords that caused interest.

"Very good," said Varris in a frosty voice. He was taking it well; only Alak could guess what worries—*what trap is being set?*—lay behind those eyes. "At dawn tomorrow, then."

"Absolutely not," said Alak firmly. He never got up before noon if he could help it. "Am I to lose my good

sleep on account of you? We will meet at the time of Third Sacrifice." He bowed grandly. "Good night, my lord and gentles."

Back in his apartment, he went through the window and, with the help of his small antigrav unit, over the wall and out to his boat. Varris might try to assassinate him as he slept.

Or would the Caldonian simply rely on being a better swordsman? Alak knew that was the case. This might be his last night alive.

A midafternoon sun threw long streamers of light across blue turf and the walls of Grimmoch Abbey. There was a hundred-meter square cleared before the gate; beyond that, a crowd of lords and ladies stood talking, drinking, and betting on the outcome. King Morlach watched ominously from a portable throne—he would not thank the man who did away with the useful Sir Varris. Just inside the gateway, Abbot Gulmanan and a dozen monks waited like stone staints.

Trumpets blew, and Alak and Varris stepped forth. Both wore light shirts and trousers, nothing else. An official frisked them ceremoniously for concealed weapons and armor. The noble appointed Master of Death trod out and recited the code. Then he took a cushion on which the rapiers were laid, tested each, and extended them to Varris.

Alak's blade felt light and supple in his fingers. His vision and hearing were unnaturally clear, it was as if every grass blade stood out sharp before him. Perhaps his brain was storing data while it still could. Varris, one hundred forty meters off, loomed like a giant.

"And now, let the Allshaper defend the right!"

Another trumpet flourish. The duel was on.

Varris walked out, not hurrying. Alak went to meet him. They crossed blades and stood for a moment, eyes thrusting at eyes.

"Why are you doing this?" asked the refugee in Terran. "If you have some idiotic hope of killing me, you might as well forget it. I was a fencing champion at home."

"These shivs are gimmicked," said Alak with a rather forced grin. "I'll let you figure out how."

"I suppose you know the penalty for using poison is burning at the stake—" For a moment, there was a querulous whine in the voice. "Why can't you leave me alone? What business was it ever of yours?"

"Keeping the peace is my business," said Alak. "That's what I get paid for, anyhow."

Varris snarled. His blade whipped out. Alak parried just in time. There was a thin steel ringing in the air.

Varris danced gracefully, aggressively, a cold intent on his face. Alak made wild slashes, handling his rapier like a broadsword. Contempt crossed Varris' mouth. He parried a blow, riposted, and Alak felt pain sting his shoulder. The crowd whooped.

Just one cut! Just one cut before he gets me through the heart! Alak felt his chest grow warm and wet. A flesh wound, no more. He remembered that he'd forgotten to thumb the concealed button in his hilt, and did so with a curse.

Varris' weapon was a blur before his eyes. He felt another light stab. Varris was playing with him! Coldly, he retreated, to the jeers of the audience, while he rallied his wits.

The thing to do . . . what the devil did you call it, riposte, slash *en avant?* Varris came close as Alak halted. The Patrolman thrust for his left arm. Varris blocked that one. Somehow, Alak slewed his blade around and pinked the outlaw in the chest.

Now—God help me, I have to survive the next few seconds! The enemy steel lunged for his throat. He slapped it down, clumsily, in bare time. His thigh was furrowed. Varris sprang back to get room. Alak did the same.

Watching, he saw the Caldonian's eyes begin helplessly rolling. The rapier wavered. Alak, deciding he had to make this look good, ran up and skewered Varris in the biceps—a harmless cut, but it bled with satisfactory enthusiasm. Varris dropped his sword and tottered. Alak got out of the way just as the big body fell.

The nobles were screaming. King Morlach roared. The

Master of Death rushed out to shove Alak aside. "It is not lawful to smite a fallen man," he said.

"I . . . assure you . . . no such intention—" Alak sat down and let the planet revolve around him.

Abbot Gulmanan and the monks stooped over Varris, examining with skilled fingers. Presently the old priest looked up and said in a low voice that somehow cut through the noise: "He is not badly hurt. He should be quite well tomorrow. Perhaps he simply fainted."

"At a few scratches like that?" bawled Morlach. "Master, check that red-haired infidel's blade! I suspect poison!"

Alak pressed the retracting button and handed over his sword. While it was being inspected, Varris was borne inside the abbey and its gate closed on him. The Master of Death looked at both weapons, bowed to the king, and said puzzledly:

"There is no sign of poison, my lord. And after all, Sir Varris had first choice of glaives . . . and these two are identical, as far as I can see . . . and did not the holy one say he is not really injured?"

Alak swayed erect. "Jussa better man, tha's all," he mumbled. "I won fair an' square. Lemme go get m' hurts dressed— I'll see y' all in the morning—"

He made it to his boat, and Drogs had a bottle of Scotch ready.

It took will power to be at the palace when the court convened—not that Alak was especially weakened, but the Thunsbans started their day at a hideous hour. In this case, early rising was necessary, because he didn't know when the climax of his plot would be on him.

He got a mixed welcome, on the one hand respect for having overcome the great Sir Varris—at least in the first round—on the other hand, a certain doubt as to whether he had done it fairly. King Morlach gave him a surly greeting, but not openly hostile; he must be waiting for the doctors' verdict.

Alak found a congenial earl and spent his time swapping dirty jokes. It is always astonishing how many of the classics are to be found among all mammalian species.

This is less an argument for a prehistoric Galactic Empire than for the parallelism of great minds.

Shortly before noon, Abbot Gulmanan entered. Several hooded monks followed him, bearing weapons—most unusual—and surrounding one who was unarmed. The priest lifted his hand to the king, and the room grew very quiet.

"Well," snapped Morlach, "what brings you hither?"

"I thought it best to report personally on the outcome of the duel, my lord," said Gulmanan. "It was . . . surprising."

"Mean you Sir Varris is dead?" Morlach's eyes flared. He could not fight his own guest, but it would be easy enough to have one of his guardsmen insult Wing Alak.

"No, my lord. He is in good health, his wounds are negligible. But—somehow the grace of the Allshaper fell on him." The abbot made a pious gesture; as he saw Alak, one eylid drooped.

"What mean you?" Morlach dithered and clutched his sword.

"Only this. As he regained consciousness, I offered him ghostly counsel, as I always do to hurt men. I spoke of the virtues of the Temple, of sanctity, of the dedicated life. Half in jest, I mentioned the possibility that he might wish to renounce this evil world and enter the Temple as a brother. My lord, you can imagine my astonishment when he agreed . . . nay, he insisted on deeding all his lands and treasure to the abbey and taking the vows at once." Gulmanan rolled his eyes heavenward. "Indeed, a miracle!"

"What?" It was a shriek from the king.

The monk who was under guard suddenly tore off his hood. Varris' face glared out. "Help!" he croaked. "Help, my lord! I've been betrayed—"

"There are a dozen brothers who witnessed your acts and will swear to them by the mightiest oaths," said the abbot sternly. "Be still, Brother Varris. If the Evil has re-entered your soul, I shall have to set you heavy penances."

"Witchcraft!" It whispered terribly down the long hall.

"All men know that witchcraft has no power inside the walls of a sacred abbey," warned Gulmanan. "Speak no heresies."

Varris looked wildly about at the spears and axes that ringed him in. "I was drugged, my lord," he gasped. "I remember what I did, yes, but I had no will of my own—I followed this old devil's words—" He saw Alak and snarled. *"Hypnite!"*

The Patrolman stepped forth and bowed to the king. "Your majesty," he said, "Sir Varris-that-was had first choice of blades. But if you wish to inspect them again, I have them here."

It had been easy enough, after all: two swords with retractible hypodermic needles, only they wouldn't do you any good unless you knew of them and knew where to press. The flitter's machine shop could turn one out in a couple of hours.

Alak handed them to the king from beneath his cloak. Morlach stared at the metal, called for a pair of gauntlets, and broke the blades in his hands. The mechanism lay blatant before him.

"Do you see?" cried Varris. "Do you see the poisoned darts? Burn that rogue alive!"

Morlach smiled grimly. "It shall be done," he said.

Alak grinned, and inwardly his muscles tightened. This was the tricky point. If he couldn't carry it off, it meant a pretty agonizing death. "My lord," he answered, "that were unjust. The weapons are identical, and Sir Varris-that-was had first choice. It is permitted to use concealed extra parts, and not to warn of them."

"Poison—" began Morlach.

"But this was not poison. Does not Varris stand hale before you all?"

"Yes—" Morlach scratched his head. "But when the next engagement is fought, *I* shall provide the swords."

"A monk," said Gulmanan, "may not have private quarrels. This novice is to be returned to his cell for fasting and prayer."

"A monk may be released from his vows under certain conditions," argued Morlach. "I shall see to it that he is."

"Now hold!" shouted Wing Alak in his best Shakespearean manner. "My lord, I have won the duel. It were unlawful to speak of renewing it—for who can fight a dead man?"

"*Won* it?" Varris wrestled with the sturdy monks gripping his arms. "Here I stand, alive, ready to take you—"

"My lord king," said Alak, "May I state my case?"

The royal brow knotted, but: "Do so," clipped Morlach.

"Very well." Alak cleared his throat. "First, then, I fought lawfully. Granted, there was a needle in each sword of which Sir Varris had not been warned, but that is allowable under the code. It might be said that I poisoned him, but that is a canard, for as you all see he stands here unharmed. The drug I used has only a temporary effect and thus is not, by definition, a poison. Therefore, it was a lawful and just combat."

"But not a completed battle," Morlach said.

"Oh, it was, my lord. What is the proper termination of a duel? Is it not that one party die as the direct result of the other's craft and skill?"

"Yes . . . of course—"

"Then I say that Varris, though not poisoned, died as an immediate consequence of my wounding him. *He is now dead!* For mark you, he has taken vows as a monk —he did this because of the drug I administered. Those oaths may not be wholly irrevocable, but they are binding on him until such time as the Council releases him from them. And . . . a monk owns no property. His worldly goods revert to his heirs. His wife becomes a widow. He is beyond all civil jurisdiction. He is, in short, *legally dead!*"

"But I stand here!" shouted Varris.

"The law is sacred," declared Alak blandly. "I insist that the law be obeyed. And by every legal definition, you are dead. You are no longer Sir Varris of Wainabog, but Brother Varris of Grimmoch—a quite different person. If this fact be not admitted, then the whole structure of Thunsban society must topple, for it rests on the total separation of civil and ecclesiastical law." Alak bowed. "Accordingly, my lord, I am the winner of the duel."

"I concede it," Morlach said at last. "Sir Wing Alak,

you are the victor. You are also my guest, and I may not harm you . . . but you have till sunset to be gone from Thunsba forever." His gaze shifted to Varris. "Be not afraid. I shall send to the Council and have you absolved of your vows."

"That you may do, lord," said Gulmanan. "Of course, until that decree is passed, Brother Varris must remain a monk, living as all monks do. The law does not allow of exceptions."

"True," grumbled the king. "A few weeks only . . . be patient."

"Monks," said Gulmanan, "are not permitted to pamper themselves with special food. You shall eat the good bread of Thunsba, Brother Varris, and meditate on—"

"I'll die!" gasped the outlaw.

"Quite probably you will depart erelong for a better world," smiled the abbot. "But I may not set the law aside— To be sure, I *could* send you on a special errand, if you are willing to go. An errand to the king of the Galactics, from whom I have requested certain books. Sir Wing Alak will gladly transport you."

Morlach sat unstirring. Nobody dared move in all the court. Then something slumped in Varris. Mutely, he nodded. Armed brethren escorted him out to the space-field.

Wing Alak bade the king polite thanks for hospitality and followed them. Otherwise he spoke no word until his prisoner was safely fettered and his boat safely space-borne, with Drogs at the control panel and himself puffing on a good cigar.

Then: "Cheer up, old fellow," he urged. "It won't be so bad. You'll feel a lot better once our psychiatrists have rubbed out those kill-compulsions."

Varris gave him a bloodshot glare. "I suppose you think you're a great hero," he said.

"Lord deliver me, no!" Alak opened a cupboard and took forth the bottle of Scotch. "I'm quite willing to let you have that title. It was your big mistake, you realize. A hero should never tangle with an intelligent coward."

STILL LIFE

BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

No matter how far away from our home world man goes to open up the Galaxy with his faster-than-light ships-of-the-future, it is Eric Russell's firmly-held belief that he will take with him one of the truly besetting sins of a Great Society. This is not the "sin" of corruption, as in the previous story, nor is it the sin of immorality, nor that of war, or any other "ordinary" sin in the books. No, it is the sin of—bureaucracy, of little minds piling up paper work as bastions behind which they can protect their own incompetencies.

Bucking such a bureaucracy successfully is a task for a man of special genius: and that man you will find in this story.

Such a situation is meat, drink, and oxygen for Mr. Russell; and you will, I am sure, be as enraptured as I with his tale of "the smiling soothsayers." (See the last page of this story for the meaning of that reference.)

"What burns me up," said Purcell bitterly, "is the fact that one cannot get anything merely on grounds of dire necessity."

"Yeah," said Hancock, carrying on with his writing.

"If one gets it at all," continued Purcell, warming to his subject, "it is for a reason that has nothing whatever to do with need or urgency. One gets it because and only because one has carefully filled out the correct forms in the correct way, got them signed and countersigned by the proper fatheads and submitted them through the proper channels to the proper people on Terra."

"Yeah," said Hancock, the tip of his tongue moving in sympathy with his pen.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," echoed Purcell in somewhat higher tones. "Can't you say anything but yeah?"

Hancock sighed, ceased writing, mopped his forehead with a sweaty handkerchief. "Look, let's do what we're paid for, shall we? Griping gets us nowhere."

"Well, what are we paid for?"

"Personally, I think that pilots grounded by injuries should be found employment elsewhere. They never settle down to routine work."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"We're here upon Alipan, in the newly settled system of B417," informed Hancock ponderously, "to co-ordinate the inflow of essential supplies, making the best use of cargo space available. We are also here to deal with internal demands for supplies and assign priorities to them."

"Priorities my foot," said Purcell. He snatched up a form and flourished it in midair. "What sort of priority should be given to twenty-four cases of gin?"

"If you bothered to look, you'd see," Hancock gave back. "Class B import. I stamped it myself and you initialed it."

"I must have been momentarily blind. Who says gin gets priority over high-pressure oxygen flasks, for instance?"

"Letheren." Hancock frowned, fiddled with his pen. "Mind you, I don't agree with it myself. I think it's an iniquity. But Letheren is a senior official. As a pilot you may have cocked many a snoot at senior officials and got away with it. But you're not a pilot now. You're just another desk-squatter. As such you'd better learn that it isn't wise to thwart senior officials. They get moved around and up as more senior ones die of fatty degeneration. In five, ten or fifteen years' time Letheren may be my boss. By then I'll be treading on his heels. I won't want him to turn around and kick me in the teeth."

"You really think that after all that time he'd hold it against you because you refused to bring in his gin?" asked Purcell incredulously.

"No, I don't. I'm bringing it in. He'll have no reason to gripe."

"What a system!" said Purcell. He glowered through the window at the B417 sun. Its greenish hue made him feel slightly sick. "I can see now what I suspected years ago; space is slowly but surely being conquered by a few crazy coots not because of Terra but in spite of Terra. It's being done by a small bunch of hotheads who like to zoom around in rocketships. They're getting results in the face of every handicap we can place upon them."

"Having been a pilot you're prejudiced in their favor," said Hancock defensively. "After all, somebody has to do the paperwork."

"I'd agree if the paperwork was necessary and made sense."

"If there wasn't any paperwork, we'd both be out of a job."

"You've got something there. So on this planet there are two thousand of us sitting on our fundaments busily making work for each other. In due time there'll be five thousand, then ten thousand."

"I'm looking forward to it," commented Hancock,

brightening. "It'll mean promotion. And the more subordinates we have the higher our own status."

"That may be so. I won't take it with an easy conscience but I'll take it just the same. Frail human flesh, that's me." Purcell scowled at his desk, went on, "Guess I'm not yet old enough and cynical enough to accept the general waste of time and effort. There are moments when I could go off with a very large bang. This is one of them."

Hancock, who had picked up his pen, put it down again and asked resignedly, "Exactly what irks your reformist spirit right now?"

"There's a fellow here, a bugologist—"

"An entomologist," Hancock corrected.

"You will kindly allow me to choose my own words," Purcell suggested. "This bugologist wants a cobalt-60 irradiation outfit. It weighs three-eighty pounds."

"What for?"

"To clear the Great Forest area of a disease-carrying fly."

"How's he going to do that?"

"According to section D7 of his application form under the heading of REASONS, he says that treated male flies will effectively sterilize all female flies with whom they mate. Also that if he traps, irradiates and frees enough males he can wipe out the species. Also that several centuries ago Terra got rid of screw-worm, tsetse and other flies by precisely the same method. He claims that he can make the whole of the Great Forest area inhabitable, exploitable and save an unknown number of lives. Therefore he asks for top priority."

"That seems reasonable," Hancock conceded.

"You would give his dingus top priority, eh?"

"Certainly. A Class A import."

"That is real nice to know," said Purcell. "I am heartened to find sweet reasonableness sitting behind a desk and wearing oilskin pants." He slung the form across to the other. "Some bead-brained four-eyes has stamped it

Class L. So this bugologist won't get his fly-killer for at least another seven years."

"It wasn't me," protested Hancock, staring at it. "I remember this one now. I got it about four months ago and passed it to Rohm for his approval."

"Why?"

"Because he's in charge of forestry."

"Holy cow!" said Purcell. "What have flies got to do with forestry?"

"The Great Forest area is the responsibility of Rohm's department. Anything pertaining to it must be passed to him."

"And he's stamped it Class L. He must be off his head."

"We cannot assume inefficiency in another department," Hancock pointed out. "There may be a thousand and one things Rohm needs more urgently. Medical supplies for instance."

"Yes, to cure people of the staggers after being bitten by flies," Purcell riposted. "If space-scouts operated the way we work, they'd still be preparing photostats of their birth and marriage certificates in readiness for an attempt on the Moon." He took the form back, eyed it with distaste. "Letheren's gin aggravates me. I have always hated the stuff. It tastes the same way a dead dog smells. If he can wangle a dollop of booze, why can't we wangle a cobalt-60 irradiator?"

"You can't buck the system," declared Hancock. "Not until you're one of the top brass."

"I'm bucking it as from now," Purcell announced. He reached for a fresh form, started filling it in. "I'm making a top priority demand for a fly-killer for Nemo."

"Nemo?" Hancock looked stupified. "What's that?"

Purcell waved a careless hand toward the window. "The newly discovered planet out there."

Shoving back his chair, Hancock waddled to the window and gazed through it a long time. He couldn't see anything. After a while he came back, puffed, mopped his forehead again, reached for the intercom phone.

Purcell snapped, "Put that down!"

Letting go as if it were red-hot, Hancock complained, "If they've started operations on a new planet, Collister's department should have notified us in the proper manner. I object to this sloppy method of passing news along by word of mouth during lunch-hour gossip. Essential information should be transmitted in writing and distributed to all the individuals concerned."

"Collister's crowd know nothing about Nemo."

"Don't they? Why not?"

"I just invented it," said Purcell evenly.

"You *invented* it?"

"That's what I said." Completing the form, Purcell smacked it with a huge red stamp bearing the letters TP, then with a smaller one reading *Consign via Alipan B417.* While Hancock goggled at him he signed it, shoved it into the pneumatic tube. Within four minutes the radio facsimile would be flashed Earthward.

Hancock said, aghast, "You must be mad."

"Crazy like a fox," admitted Purcell, undisturbed.

"They won't accept a requisition for an unregistered planet without official advice of its discovery and notification of its co-ordinates."

"The demand is an advice and I included the co-ordinates."

"They'll check on this," warned Hancock.

"With whom? The department for Nemo?"

"There isn't one," said Hancock.

"Correct. They'll have to check with Yehudi."

"They'll find out sooner or later that they've been taken. There will be trouble. I want you to know, Purcell, that I hereby disclaim all responsibility for this. Officially I know nothing whatever about it. It is solely and wholly your own pigeon."

"Don't worry. I'm willing to accept the full credit for a praiseworthy display of initiative. Anyway, by that time the bugologist will have got his equipment and all the flies will be dead."

Hancock simmered down for five minutes then took on a look of horror as a new thought struck him. "If they

load three-eighty pounds of scientific hardware, it's highly likely that they won't load the gin."

"That's what I like about it."

"Letheren will run amok."

"Let him," said Purcell. "He thinks he's heap big. To me he's just a big heap."

"Purcell, I will accept no responsibility for this."

"So you said before." Then he added with some menace, "Always bear one thing in mind, Hancock—I don't look as daft as I am!"

At Terra the indent landed on Bonhoeffer's desk, he being in charge of the Incoming Mail (Pre-sorting) Department. Bonhoeffer was a real woman's man, big, handsome, muscular, stupid. He owed his eminence solely to the fact that while in ten years the incoming mail had increased by twelve per cent the number of his subordinates had gone up one hundred forty per cent. This was more or less in accordance with the rules laid down by Professor C. Northcote Parkinson.*

Bonhoeffer picked up the form with much reluctance. It was the only item on his desk. The slaves dealt with everything as a matter of daily routine and nothing was brought to his personal attention unless there was something awkward about it. This suited him topnotch; it gave him plenty of time not to think.

So he knew in advance that this particular form contained the subject of an administrative quibble and that he must demonstrate his intelligence by finding it alone and unaided. Slowly and carefully he read it from top to bottom four times. As far as he could see there was nothing wrong with it. This irritated him. It meant that he must summon the individual who had passed the invisible buck and do him the honor of asking his opinion.

He examined the form's top left corner to see who would be thus honored. The initials scrawled thereon were F. Y. That meant the buck-passer was Feodor Yok. He might have expected it. Yok was a clever bum, an office show-

*Parkinson's Law. *circa* 1958.

off. He looked like Rasputin with a crew-cut. And he wore the knowing smirk of a successful ambulance chaser. Bonhoeffer would rather drop dead than ask Yok the time of day.

That made things difficult. He studied the requisition another four times and still it looked plenty good enough to pass any determined faultfinder, even Yok. Then it occurred to him that there was an escape from this predicament. He, too, could transfer the grief, preferably to an eager beaver. It was as easy as that.

Switching his desk-box, he ordered, "Send in Quayle."

Quayle arrived with his usual promptitude. He was built along the lines of a starving jackrabbit and tried to compensate for it with a sort of military obsequiousness. He wore a dedicated look and was the sort of creep who would salute an officer over the telephone.

"Ah, Quayle," began Bonhoeffer with lordly condescension. "I have been watching your progress with some interest."

"Really, sir?" said Quayle, toothy with delight.

"Yes, indeed. I keep a careful eye on everyone though I doubt whether they realize it. The true test of managerial competence is the ability to depute responsibility. To do that one must know and understand the men under one. Naturally some are more competent than others. You gather my meaning, Quayle?"

"Yes, sir," agreed Quayle, straining to expand his halo.

"York has seen fit to bring this requisition form to my attention." Bonhoeffer handed it over. "I was about to transfer it for necessary action when it occurred to me that it would be useful to know whether the question it raises is as obvious to you as it was to Yok and myself, also whether you can be as quick to determine what should be done about it."

Quayle's halo faded from sight while his face took on the look of a cornered rat. In complete silence he studied the form from end to end, reading it several times.

Finally he ventured in uncertain tones, "I can find nothing wrong with it, sir, except that it is a demand

for Nemo. I don't recall seeing that planet upon the supply list."

"Very good, Quayle, very good," praised Bonhoeffer. "And what do you think should be done about it?"

"Well, sir," continued Quayle, vastly encouraged but still weak at the knees, "since the requisition emanates from Alipan, which is on the list, I'd say that it is valid so far as our department is concerned. Therefore I would pass it to the scientific division for confirmation of the reasons given and the correctness of the specification."

"Excellent, Quayle. I may as well say that you have come up to my expectations."

"Thank you, sir."

"I am a great believer in giving encouragement where it is deserved." Bonhoeffer bestowed a lopsided smile upon the other. "Since you have the form in your hands you may as well deal with it. Yok brought it in but I prefer that you handle it in person."

"Thank you, sir," repeated Quayle, the halo bursting forth in dazzling glory. He went out.

Bonhoeffer lay back and gazed with satisfaction at the empty desk.

In due course—meaning about three weeks—the scientific division swore and deposed that there really was such an article as a cobalt-60 irradiator and that it could in fact cause flies to indulge in futile woo. Quayle therefore attached this slightly obscene certificate to the requisition and passed it to the purchasing department for immediate attention.

He felt fully justified in doing this despite that the mysterious Nemo was still absent from the official supply list. After all, he had been authorized by Bonhoeffer to take the necessary action and the scientific division had duly certified that there was something with which to act. He was covered both ways, coming and going. In effect, Quayle was fire-proof, a much-to-be-desired state of existence.

The form and attached certificate now got dumped on

Stanisland, an irascible character generally viewed as the offspring of a canine mother. Stanisland read them to the accompaniment of a series of rising grunts, found himself in the usual quandary. The purchasing department was supposed to know the prime sources of everything from peanuts to synthetic hormones. To that end it had a reference library so large that a fully equipped expedition was needed to get anywhere beyond the letter F. The library was used almost solely to demonstrate frenzied overwork whenever a high-ranking senior happened around, the safest place being atop the ladder.

It was easier to ask the right questions in the right places than to go on safari through a mile of books. Moreover Stanisland could admit ignorance of nothing in a room full of comparative halfwits. So he adopted his favorite tactic. Scowling around to make sure nobody was watching, he stuffed the papers into a pocket, got up, hoarsely muttered something about the men's room and lumbered out.

Then he trudged along three corridors, reached a bank of private phone booths, entered one, dialed the scientific division and asked for Williams. He uttered this name with poor grace because in his opinion Williams had been designed by Nature specifically to occupy a padded cell.

When the other came on, he said, "Stanisland, purchasing department, here."

"How's the bile flowing?" greeted Williams, conscious that neither was senior to the other.

Ignoring that, Stanisland went on, "You have issued certificate D2794018 against a cobalt-60 irradiator on demand by Alipan."

"I don't take your word for it," said Williams. "Give me that number again and wait while I trace the copy."

Stanisland gave it and waited. He stood there about ten minutes knowing full well that Williams was taking one minute to find the copy and allowing him the other nine in which to grow a beard. But he was impotent to do anything about it. Finally Williams came back.

"My, are you still there?" he asked in mock surprise. "Things must be pretty quiet in your department."

"If we were as bone-idle as other departments, we'd have no need to consult them," shouted Stanisland. "We'd have all the time in the world to dig up information for ourselves."

"Aha!" said Williams, nastily triumphant. "You don't know where to get an irradiator, eh?"

"It isn't a question of not knowing," Stanisland retorted. "It's a question of saving time finding out. If I search under C for cobalt, it won't be there. It won't be under I for irradiator either. Nor under S for sixty. In about a week's time I'll discover that it's under H because the correct technical name for it is a hyperdiddlic honey or something like that. Things would be a lot easier if you eggheads would make up your minds to call a spade a plain, ordinary spade and stick to it for keeps."

"Shame," said Williams.

"Furthermore," continued Stanisland with satisfying malice, "every alleged up-to-date supplement to the library comes to us seven years old. Why? Because your crowd keep 'em on file and won't part until they begin to stink."

"We need them to stay up-to-date ourselves," Williams pointed out. "The scientific division cannot afford to be behind the times."

"There you are then," said Stanisland, winning his point. "I don't want to know who was making rudimentary irradiators way back when television was two-dimensional. I want to know who is making them *now*. And I don't want to put in to Abelson an official complaint about delayed data and willful obstruction."

"Are you threatening me, you baggy-eyed tub?" asked Williams.

Stanisland started shouting again. "I don't want to touch Abelson with a ten-foot pole. You know what he's like."

"Yeah, I know, I know." Williams let go a resigned sigh. "Hold on a piece." This time he was gone twelve minutes before he returned and recited a short list of names and addresses.

Reaching his desk, Stanisland rewrote the list more clearly, attached it to the form and certificate, passed the bunch to a junior.

In tones hearable all over the office, he said, "It's a lucky thing that I had the handling of this demand. It so happens that I know all the people who make such a rare piece of apparatus. Now you get their estimates as quickly as possible and submit them to me."

Then he glared happily around at all and sundry, enjoying their dead faces and knowing that they were hating him deep in their hearts. By hokey, he'd shown them who most deserved to be jacked up a grade.

Forman Atomics quoted the lowest price and quickest delivery. A month later they got a request for copy of their authorization as an approved supplier. They mailed it pronto. Three days afterward they were required to send a sworn affidavit that their employees included not less than ten per cent of disabled spacemen. They sent it. Two intelligence agents visited their head office and satisfied themselves that the flag flying from the masthead was a genuine Terran one in substance and in fact.

Meanwhile a subordinate from the Finance (Investigation) Department made search through the files of the Companies (Registered Statistics) Department aided by two juniors belonging to that haven of rest. Between them they made sure that not one dollar of Forman stock was held or controlled by the representative of any foreign power, either in person or by nominee. Admittedly, there was no such thing in existence as a foreign power but that was beside the point.

By now the original requisition had attached to it the following:

1. The scientific division's certificate.

2. An interdepartmental slip signed by Quayle informing Stanisland that the requisition was passed to him for attention.

3. A similar slip signed by Bonhoeffer saying that he had ordered Quayle to do the passing.

4 to 11. Eight quotations for an irradiator, Forman's having been stamped: "Accepted subject to process."

12. A copy of Forman's supply authorization.

13. Forman's affidavit.

14. An intelligence report to the effect that whatever was wrong with Forman's could not be proved.

15. A finance department report saying the same thing in longer words.

Item twelve represented an old and completely hopeless attempt to buck the system. In the long, long ago somebody had made the mistake of hiring a fully paid-up member of Columbia University's Institute of Synergistic Statics. Being under the delusion that a line is the shortest distance between two points, the newcomer had invented a blanket-system of governmental authorizations which he fondly imagined would do away with items thirteen, fourteen and fifteen.

This dastardly attempt to abolish three departments at one fell blow had gained its just reward; a new department had been set up to deal with item twelve while the others had been retained. For creating this extra work the author of it had been hastily promoted to somewhere in the region of Bootes.

Stanisland added the sixteenth item in the shape of his own interdepartmental slip informing Taylor, the head of the purchasing department, that to the best of his knowledge and belief there were no remaining questions to be raised and that it was now for him to place the order. Taylor, who had not been born yesterday, showed what he thought of this indecent haste. Throwing away the overstrained paper-clip, he added his own slip to the wad, secured it with a wide-jawed bulldog fastener and fired it back at Stanisland.

The slip said, "You are or should be well aware that a consignment of this description may not be within the capacity of the Testing (Instruments) Department. If it is not, we shall require a certificate of efficiency from the Bureau of Standards. Take the necessary action forthwith."

This resulted in Stanisland taking a fast walk around

the corridors while the surplus steam blew out of his ears. He had never liked Taylor who obviously enjoyed his seniority and would turn anyone base over apex for the sadistic pleasure of it. Besides, in his spare time the fellow lived the full life breeding piebald mice. With his beady eyes and twitching whiskers he bore close resemblance to his beloved vermin.

When pressure had dropped to the bearable, Stanisland returned to his desk, called a junior and gave him the wad plus a slip reading, "Can you test this thing?"

Within ten days all the papers came back accompanied by the reply. "For emission only. Not for functional purpose. To test for the latter we would require an adequate supply of the proposed subjects, namely and to wit, Nemo flies. Refer to Imports (Pest Control) Departments."

So he phoned through to Chase who was sunbathing by a window and brought him back to his desk and Chase said with unnecessary surliness, "Importation forbidden."

"Can you quote authority for that?" asked Stanisland.

"Certainly," snapped Chase. "See the Bacteriological Defense Act, volume three titled Alien Insects, subsection fourteen under heading of Known Or Suspected Disease Carriers. I quote—"

"You needn't bother," said Stanisland hastily. "I've got to have it in writing anyway."

"All right. Give me those reference numbers again and I'll send you a documentary ban."

"I don't see how the testing department is going to cope in these circumstances."

"That's their worry, not yours," advised Chase. "Be your age!"

In due time—meaning another three weeks—Chase's prohibition arrived properly stamped, signed and countersigned. It got added to the growing bunch. Stanisland was now faced with the very serious question of whether a mere test for emission was adequate and in accordance with the rules. To resolve it one way or the other meant reaching A Decision. And that could be done only by an official in A Position Of Responsibility.

Yeah, Taylor.

At the prospect of consulting Taylor a great sorrow came upon him. It would imply that he, Stanisland, couldn't summon up the nerve. But the alternative was far worse, namely, to exceed his authority. He blanched at the thought of it.

For two days Stanisland let the papers lie around while he tried to think up some other way out. There was no other way. If he dumped the wad on Taylor's desk during his absence and then went sick, Taylor would hold the lot pending his return. If he transferred the file to the next department, it would be bounced back with malicious glee plus a note pointing to the lack of an order. Obviously he had to see Taylor. He had nothing to fear but fear itself.

Finally he steeled himself, marched into Taylor's office, gave him the documents and pointed to the last two items.

"You will see, sir, that an adequate test cannot be performed because of an import restriction."

"Yes, my dear Stanisland," said Taylor, courteous in a thoroughly aggravating manner. "I suspected some difficulty myself."

Stanisland said nothing.

"I am somewhat surprised that you failed to anticipate it," added Taylor pointedly.

"With all respect, sir, I have a lot of work to do and one cannot foresee everything."

"I am more impressed by efficiency than by apologies," commented Taylor in sugar-sweet tones. "And so far as I am concerned the test of efficiency is the ability to handle potentially controversial matters in such a manner that this department, when called upon to do so, can produce documentary justification for everything it has done. In other words, so long as there are no routine blunders within our own department it is not our concern what mistakes may be made in other departments. Do you understand me, my dear Stanisland?"

"Yes, sir," said Stanisland with bogus humility.

"Good!" Taylor lay back, hooked thumbs in armholes, eyed him as if he were a piebald mouse. "Now, have you brought the order in readiness for my signature?"

Stanisland went purple, swallowed hard. "No, sir."

"Why haven't you?"

"It appeared to me, sir, that it would first be necessary to obtain your ruling on whether or not a test for emission is sufficient."

"My ruling?" Taylor raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. "Have you taken leave of your senses? I do not make decisions for other departments, surely you know that?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Anyone with the moral fortitude to look a fact in the face," interrupted Taylor, tapping the papers with a long, thin forefinger, "can see that here we have a written statement from the appropriate department to the effect that this piece of apparatus can be tested. That is all we require. The question of how it is tested or for what it is tested does not concern us in the least. We have enough responsibilities of our own without accepting those properly belonging to other departments."

"Yes, sir," agreed Stanisland, not inclined to argue the matter.

"Already there has been far too much delay in dealing with this requisition," Taylor went on. "The demand is now almost a year old. Disgraceful!"

"I assure you, sir, that it is not my—"

"Cut out the excuses and let me see some action."

"You wish me to write out the order at once, sir?"

"No, you need not bother. Go get your order book, give it to my secretary and tell her that I wish to deal with it personally.

"Very well, sir." Stanisland departed sweating a mixture of ire and relief.

Finding the order book, he took it to the secretary. She was a frozen-faced female who never lost an opportunity to admire his ignorance. She was named Hazel, after a nut.

On the face of it something had now been accomplished. A gadget had been demanded, the demand had been checked, counterchecked and approved, estimates had

been obtained and the order placed. It remained for Forman Atomics to supply the irradiator, the Testing Department to test it, the Shipping (Outward) Department to authorize dispatch to Alipan and the Loading (Space Allocation) Department to put it aboard the right ship.

True, a dozen more departments had yet to handle the growing mass of papers which by now had attained the dignity of a box-file. Between them they'd fiddle around for another two years before the wad was reluctantly consigned to the morgue of the Records (Filing) Department. But all these were strictly post-shipment departments; the days, weeks and months they spent playing with documents did not matter once the consignment was on its way. Any irate hustle-up note from the top brass in Alipan could now be answerd, curtly and effectively, with the bald statement that Action Had Been Taken.

Stanisland therefore composed his soul in bilious peace, satisfied that he had hurdled an awkward obstacle to the accompaniment of no more than a few raspberries from Taylor. He gained some compensation for the latter by reminding everyone in the office that he was peculiarly qualified to advise on rare apparatus without first getting himself lost in the library. Having instilled that fact in their minds he carried on with routine work and began gradually to forget the subject. But he was not left in peace for long.

In more than due time—meaning at least twice three weeks—his telephone shrilled and a voice said, "This is Keith of Inspection Department."

"Yes?" responded Stanisland warily. He had never heard of Keith, much less met him.

"There's a difficulty here," continued Keith, smacking his lips. "I have been on to Loading about it and they've referred me to Shipping who've referred me to Testing who've referred me to Purchasing. I see by the papers that the order was placed by Taylor but that you did the processing."

"What's wrong?" asked Stanisland, immediately recognizing the swift passing of an unwanted buck.

"The manifest of the *Starfire* includes a thing called a

cobalt-60 irradiator for delivery to Alipan. It has been supplied by Forman Atomics against your department's order number BZ12-10127."

"What of it?"

"Testing Department has issued a guarantee that emission is satisfactory," Keith continued. "You know what that means."

Stanisland hadn't the remotest notion of what it meant but was not prepared to say so. He evaded the point by inquiring, "Well, what has it to do with this department?"

"It has got plenty to do with *some* department," Keith retorted. "They can't *all* disclaim responsibility."

Still feeling around in the dark, Stanisland said carefully, "I may have to take this to Taylor or even to Abelson. They will insist on me repeating your complaint in exact terms. Is there any reason why you can't send it round in writing?"

"Yes," said Keith. "There isn't time. The ship takes off this evening."

"All right. Exactly what do you want me to tell Taylor?"

Keith fell into the trap and informed, "This cobalt-60 contraption cannot have satisfactory emission without being radioactive. Therefore it comes under the heading of Noxious Cargo. It cannot be shipped by the *Starfire* unless we are supplied with a certificate to the effect that it is properly screened and will not contaminate adjacent cargo."

"Oh!" said Stanisland, feeling yet again that the only thing between him and the top of the ladder was the ladder.

"Such a certificate should have been supplied in the first place," added Keith, drowning his last spark of decency. "Somebody slipped up. I'm holding a wad three inches thick and everything's here but that."

Annoyed by this, Stanisland bawled, "I fail to see why the production of a non-contaminatory certificate should be considered the responsibility of this department."

"Testing Department say they offered to check for emission only and that you accepted this," Keith gave

back. "The documents show that their statement is correct. I have them here before my very eyes."

"That is sheer evasion," maintained Stanisland. "It is your job to make them take back the apparatus and check it for screening."

"On the contrary," shot back Keith, "it is not, never has been and never will be my job to make good the shortcomings of other departments. The *Starfire* takes off at ten tonight. No certificate, no shipment. Sort it out for yourself." He cut off, effectively preventing further argument.

Stanisland brooded over the injustice of it before he went to see Taylor again, this time looking like hard luck on two feet. Taylor responded by meditating aloud about people who could not paint a floor without marooning themselves in one corner. Then he grabbed the phone and spent ten minutes swapping recriminations with Jurgensen of Testing Department. Jurgensen, a confirmed bachelor, flatly refused to hold the baby.

Giving the waiting Stanisland an evil stare, Taylor now tried to foist the problem onto the Scientific Division. All he got for his pains was a piece of Williams' mind, the piece with the hole in. Muttering to himself, he phoned Keith who promptly gave him the merry ha-ha and repeated in sinister tones his remark about no certificate, no shipment.

Finally Taylor thrust the phone aside and said, "Well, my dear Stanisland, you have made a nice mess of this."

"Me?" said Stanisland, paralyzed by the perfidy of it.

"Yes, you."

This was too much. Stanisland burst out, "But you approved the order and tended to it yourself."

"I did so on the assumption that all routine aspects of the matter had been seen to with the efficiency that I expect from my subordinates. Evidently my faith was misplaced."

"That is hardly fair judgment, sir, because—"

"Shut up!" Taylor ostentatiously consulted his watch. "We have seven hours before the *Starfire* leaves. Neither

the Testing Department nor the Scientific Division will issue the document Keith requires. We have no authority to provide one ourselves. But one must be got from somewhere. You realize that, don't you, Stanisland?"

"Yes, sir."

"Since you are directly responsible for this grave omission it is equally your responsibility to make it good. Now go away and exercise your imagination, if you have any. Come back to me when you have incubated a useful idea."

"I cannot forge a certificate, sir," Stanisland protested.

"It has not been suggested that you should," Taylor pointed out acidly. "The solution, if there is one, must be in accordance with regulations and not open to question by higher authority. It is for you to find it. And don't be too long about it."

Returning to his desk, Stanisland flopped into his chair and chased his brains around his skull. The only result was a boost to his desperation. He gnawed his fingers, thought furiously and always arrived at the same result; nobody, *but* nobody would produce anything in writing to cover up a blunder in another department.

After some time he went for a walk to the phone booths where he could talk in private, called the scientific division and asked for Williams.

"Williams," he said oilily, "I was there when Taylor baited you an hour ago. I didn't like his attitude."

"Neither did I," said Williams.

"You have been of great help to us on many occasions," praised Stanisland with an effort. "I'd like you to know that I genuinely appreciate it even if Taylor doesn't."

"It's most kind of you to say so," informed Williams, letting go a menacing chuckle. "But you still won't cajole from this department a document we are not authorized to give."

"I am not trying to do so," Stanisland assured. "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Taylor tried. He must think we're a bunch of suckers."

"I know," said Stanisland, gratefully seizing the oppor-

tunity thus presented. "To be frank, I wondered whether you'd be willing to help me give Taylor a smack in the eye."

"How?"

"By coming up with some suggestion about how I can get over this noxious cargo business."

"And why should that have the effect of twisting Taylor's arm?"

"He thinks he's got me where he wants me. I'd like to show him he hasn't. Some of these seniors need teaching a thing or two." He paused, added craftily, "Abelson for instance."

The effect of that name in the other's ears clinched the deal and Williams said without a moment's hesitation, "All right, I'll tell you something."

"What is it?" asked Stanisland eagerly.

"No reputable outfit such as Forman's would ship a radioactive apparatus inadequately screened. Probably seventy per cent of that irradiator's weight is attributable to screening. Ask Forman's and they'll tell you—in writing."

"Williams," said Stanisland delightedly. "I'll never forget this."

"You will," contradicted Williams. "But I won't."

Stanisland now phoned Forman's and explained the position in complete detail. Their response was prompt: they would prepare a written guarantee of safety and deliver it by special messenger to Keith within two hours. Stanisland sighed with heartfelt relief. Seemed there were times when the efficiency of private industry almost approached that of bureaucracy.

Over the next few days Stanisland waited with secret pleasure for a call from Taylor. It never came. Unknown to him, Taylor had phoned Keith to find out what had happened, if anything. Taylor then realized that an interview with Stanisland would permit that worthy a moment of petty triumph. It was unthinkable that a senior should permit a subordinate to gloat. He would summon Stanisland into his presence when and only when he had some pretext for throwing him to the crocodiles. So Stanisland

went on waiting, first with growing disappointment, then with dull resignation, finally with forgetfulness.

The weeks rolled on while the wad of papers crawled through various offices and gained in mass at each desk. Then one day it reached the Documents (Final Checking) Department. It now weighed five pounds and was solid with words, figures, stamps, names and signatures.

From this mountain of evidence some assiduous toiler dug out the strange word Nemo. His nose started twitching. He made a few discreet inquiries and satisfied himself that (a) someone had blundered and (b) the cretin was not located within his own office. Then he steered the wad toward the Spatial Statistics Department.

Far away on Alipan a copy of the *Starfire's* manifest landed on Hancock's desk. He scanned it carefully. Most of the stuff had been demanded three to four years ago. But he had a very good memory and the moment his eyes found an irradiator the alarm-bells rang in his brain. He was swift to give the list to Purcell.

"You'd better deal with this."

"Me? Why? You got writer's cramp or something?"

"The ship is bringing an expensive present for a planet that doesn't exist. I don't handle consignments for imaginary worlds."

"Windy, eh?" said Purcell.

"Sane," said Hancock.

Examining the manifest, Purcell grumbled, "It's taken them long enough. Nobody broke his neck to get it here. If scout-pilots moved at the same pace, Lewis and Clark would still be pounding their dogs along the Oregon Trail."

"I am," announced Hancock, "sick and tired of the subject of scout-pilots."

"And where would you have been without them?"

"On Terra."

"Doing what?"

"Earning an honest living," said Hancock.

"Yeah—filling forms," said Purcell.

Hancock let it slide and pretended to be busy.

"Now this is where our right to determine priorities reaches its peak of usefulness," Purcell went on, flourishing the manifest as if it were the flag of freedom. "We issue an overriding priority in favor of our bugologist, his need being greater than Nemo's. The fly-killer will then be transferred to him without argument because nobody questions a proper form, properly filled, properly stamped and properly signed. Thus we shall have served humanity faithfully and well."

"You can cut out every 'we' and 'our'," ordered Hancock. "I am having nothing to do with it." He put on another brief imitation of overwork, added as an afterthought, "I told you before, you can't buck the system."

"I have bucked it."

"Not yet," said Hancock positively.

Taking no notice, Purcell made out the priority, stamped it, signed it, studied it right way up and up-side-down, signed it again.

"I've forged your signature. Do you mind?"

"Yes," yelled Hancock.

"I am receiving you loud and clear." Purcell examined the forgery with unashamed satisfaction. "Too bad. It's done now. What's done can't be undone."

"I'd like you to know, Purcell, that in the event of that document being challenged I shall not hesitate to declare my signature false."

"Quite a good idea," enthused Purcell. "I'll swear mine is false also."

"You wouldn't dare," said Hancock, appalled.

"It'll take 'em at least ten years to figure who's the liar and even then they couldn't bet on it," continued Purcell with indecent gusto. "In the meantime I'll suggest that maybe every document of Alipan's and half of Terra's have phony signatures attributable to subordinates bypassing their seniors in order to avoid criticisms and conceal mistakes. The resulting chaos ought to create work for ten thousand checkers."

"You're off your head," declared Hancock.

"Well, you can keep me company," Purcell suggested.

He exhibited the manifest at distance too far for the other to read. "I've got news for you."

"What is it?"

"No gin."

Hancock sat breathing heavily for quite a time, then said, "You're to blame for that."

"Nuts! I've no say in what Terra loads on or leaves off."

"But—"

"If you've told me once," Purcell went on remorselessly, "you've told me a hundred times that in no circumstances whatever will any department on Alipan accept responsibility for decisions made on Terra. Correct?"

"Correct," agreed Hancock as though surrendering a back tooth.

"All right. You ordered the gin and can prove it. You gave it high priority and can prove it. You're armor-plated front and back. All you need do is go see Letheren and say, 'Sorry, no gin.' When he zooms and rotates you say, 'Terra!' and spit. It's so easy a talking poodle could do it."

"I can hardly wait to watch you get rid of Nemo the same way," said Hancock, making it sound sadistic.

"Nobody has said a word about Nemo. Nobody is the least big curious about Nemo. Finally I, James Walter Armitage Purcell, could not care less about Nemo."

"You will," Hancock promised.

In due time—which on Alipan attained the magnitude of about three months—the intercom speaker squawked on the wall and a voice harshed, "Mr. Purcell of Requisitioning (Priorities) Department will present himself at Mr. Vogel's office at eleven hours."

Hancock glanced at his desk clock, smirked and said, "You've got exactly thirty-seven minutes."

"For what?"

"To prepare for death."

"Huh?"

"Vogel is a high-ranker with ninety-two subordinates.

He controls four departments comprising the Terran Co-ordination Wing."

"What of it?"

"He makes a hobby of personally handling all gripes from Terra. Anyone summoned by Vogel is a gone goose unless he happens to be holding the actual documentary proof of his innocence in his hot little hands."

"Sounds quite a nice guy," Purcell commented, unperturbed.

"Vogel," informed Hancock, "is a former advertising man who got flatfooted toting his billboard around the block. But he's a natural for routine rigmarole. He's climbed high on the shoulders of a growing army of underlings and he's still climbing." He paused, added emphatically, "I don't like him."

"So it seems," said Purcell dryly.

"A lot of people don't like him. Letheren hates the sight of him."

"That so? I don't suppose he's choked with esteem for Letheren either, eh?"

"Vogel loves nothing but power—which in this racket means seniority."

"Hm-m-m!" Purcell thought a bit, went out, came back after twenty minutes, thought some more.

"Where've you been?" asked Hancock.

"Accounts Department."

"Getting your pay while the going is good?"

"No. I have merely satisfied myself that one hundred and five equals seventeen hundred."

"It wouldn't save you even if it made sense." Hancock continued to busy himself with nothing and kept one eye on the clock. When the moment arrived he said, "On your way. I hope you suffer."

"Thanks."

Opening his desk Purcell extracted an enormous roll of paper, tucked it under one arm. He tramped out, found his way to the rendezvous, entered the office. Vogel, dark-eyed, dark-haired and swarthy, studied him without expression.

"Sit down, Purcell." He bared long, sharp teeth and

somehow managed to look like Red Riding Hood's grandmother. "Terra has brought to my attention a demand origination from a planet named Nemo."

"That, sir, is—"

Vogel waved an imperious hand. "Please be silent, Purcell, until I have finished. Your own remarks can come afterward." Again the teeth. "A lot of very valuable time has been spent checking on this. I like to have all the facts before interviewing the person concerned."

"Yes, sir," said Purcell, nursing his roll of paper and looking suitably impressed.

"I have found firstly that Terra's statement is quite correct; such a demand was in fact made and you processed it. Secondly, that the subject of the demand, an irradiator, was transferred by you to an address upon this planet. Thirdly, that no planet discovered before or since the date of this demand has been officially given the name of Nemo." He put hands together in an attitude of prayer. "One can well imagine the trouble and exasperation caused on Terra. I trust, Purcell, that you have a thoroughly satisfactory explanation to offer."

"I think I have, sir," assured Purcell glibly.

"I'll be glad to hear it."

"The whole bother is due to someone on Terra jumping to the erroneous and unjustifiable conclusion that Nemo is the name of a planet when in fact it is a code word used by my department to indicate a tentative priority as distinct from a definite one."

"A tentative priority?" echoed Vogel, raising sardonic eyebrows. "What nonsense is this? Don't you realize, Purcell, that all demands must be rated strictly in order of importance or urgency and that there is no room for indecision? How can anything have a *tentative* priority?"

"I find it rather difficult to tell you, sir," said Purcell, radiating self-righteousness.

"I insist upon an explanation," Vogel gave back.

Assuming just the right touch of pain and embarrassment, Purcell informed, "Since cargo-space is severely

limited the problem of granting priorities is a tough one. And when a senior official practically orders my department to assign to his demand a priority higher than it deserves it follows that, if we obey, something else of similar weight or bulk must accept lower priority than it deserves. But regulations do not permit me to reduce the status of a high-priority demand. Therefore I am compelled to give it a tentative priority, meaning that it will gain its proper loading-preference providing nobody chips in to stop it."

A gleam came into Vogel's eyes. "That is what happened in this case?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"In other words, you claim that you are suffering unwarranted interference with the work of your department?"

"That," said Purcell with becoming reluctance, "is putting it a little stronger than I'd care to do."

"Purcell, we must get to the bottom of this and now is not the time to mince words. Exactly what were you ordered to ship at high priority?"

"Gin, sir."

"Gin?" A mixture of horror and incredulity came into Vogel's face. But it swiftly faded to be replaced by a look of suppressed triumph. *"Who* ordered you to bring in gin?"

"I'd rather not say, sir."

"Was it Letheren?"

Purcell said nothing but assumed the expression of one who sorrows for Letheren's soul.

Gratified by this, Vogel purred. He rubbed his hands together, became positively amiable. "Well, Purcell, it appears to me that you have been guilty of no more than a small oversight. Should you find it necessary to employ code-words as a matter of administrative convenience it is obvious that Terra should be notified through the proper channels. Without regular notification Terra would eventually find itself trying to cope with incomprehensible jargon. An impossible situation as doubtless you now appreciate, eh, Purcell?"

"Yes, sir," said Purcell, humble and grateful.

"But in the present circumstances it would not be wise to advise Terra of the true meaning of Nemo. To do so would be tantamount to admitting that our priority system is being messed up at anybody's whim. I hope you see my point, Purcell."

"I do, sir."

"Therefore I propose to inform Terra that the inclusion of this word was due to a departmental error born of overwork and lack of sufficient manpower." He exposed the teeth. "That will give them something to think about."

"I'm sure it will, sir."

"Purcell, I wish you to drop the use of all code-words except with my knowledge and approval. Meanwhile I shall take the steps necessary to put a stop to any further interference with your department."

"Thank you, sir." Purcell stood up, fumbled with his roll of paper, looked hesitant.

"Is there something else?" asked Vogel.

"Yes, sir." Purcell registered doubt, reluctance, then let the words come out in a rush. "I thought this might be an opportune moment to bring to your attention a new form I have devised."

"A form?"

"Yes, sir." He unrolled it, put one end in Vogel's hands. The other end reached almost to the wall. "This, sir, is a master-form to be filled up with the origin, purpose, details, progress and destination of every other form that has to be filled in. It is, so to speak, a form of forms."

"Really?" said Vogel, frowning.

"By means of this," continued Purcell greasily, "it will be possible to trace every form step by step, to identify omissions or contradictions and to name the individual responsible. Should a form get lost it will be equally possible to find at what point it disappeared and who lost it." He let that sink in, added, "From what I know of interdepartmental confusions, many of which are hidden from senior officials, I estimate that this form will save about twenty thousand man-hours per annum."

"Is that so?" said Vogel, little interested.

"There is one snag," Purcell went on. "In order to save all that work it will be necessary to employ more people. Since their work would be wholly co-ordinatory they would come under your jurisdiction, thus adding to your responsibilities."

"Ah!" said Vogel, perking up.

"In fact we'd have to create a new department to reduce the total of work done. However, I have studied the subject most carefully and I am confident that we could cope with a minimum of thirteen men."

"Thirteen?" echoed Vogel, counting on his fingers. He sat staring at the form while into his face crept a look of ill-concealed joy. "Purcell, I believe you have something here. Yes, I really do."

"Thank you, sir. I felt sure you would appreciate the potentialities. May I leave the form for your consideration?"

"By all means, Purcell." Vogel was now well-nigh jovial. Fondly he stroked the form, his fingers caressing it. "Yes, you must certainly leave it with me." He glanced up, beaming. "If anything is done about this, Purcell, I shall need someone to take charge of this new department. Someone who knows his job and in whom I have the fullest confidence. I cannot imagine a better candidate than yourself."

"It is kind of you to say so, sir," said Purcell with grave dignity.

He took his departure but as he left he turned in the doorway and for a moment their eyes met. A glance of mutual understanding sparked between them.

Back in his own office Purcell plonked himself in a chair and recited, "Whenever two soothsayers meet in the street they invariably smile at each other."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Hancock.

"I was quoting an ancient saying." He held up two fingers, tight together. "Vogel and I are just like that."

"You don't fool me," Hancock scoffed. "Your ears are still red."

"Vogel loves me and I love Vogel. I hit him right in his weak spot."

"He hasn't any weak spots, see?"

"All I did," said Purcell, "was point out to him that if the number of his subordinates should be increased from ninety-two to one hundred and five he'd be automatically jacked up from a Class 9 to a Class 8 official. That would gain him another seventeen hundred smackers per year plus extra privileges and, of course, a higher pension."

"Nobody has to tell Vogel that—he knows it better than anyone."

"All right. Let's say I merely reminded him. In return he was good enough to remind me that a disabled hero bossing twelve underlings is far better off than one sharing an office with a surly bum."

"I neither ask nor expect the true story of your humiliation," growled Hancock. "So you don't have to cover up with a lot of crazy double-talk."

"Some day," offered Purcell, grinning, "it may dawn upon you that it is possible to buck a system, *any* system. All you need do is turn the handle the way it goes—only more so!"

"Shut up," said Hancock, "and talk when you can talk sense."

LEAVE EARTH BEHIND
AND COME EXPLORE

ANOTHER PART OF THE GALAXY

Journey to
unknown worlds
and
discover that,
under a different sun,
all things are new...

FAWCETT WORLD LIBRARY