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THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION

From WORLDS OF IF Magazine

Edited by
FREDERIK POHL

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KURT VONNEGUT, Jr.

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EVERYTHING was perfectly swell. There were no prisons, no slums, no insane asylums, no cripples, no poverty, no wars.

All diseases were conquered. So was old age.

Death, barring accidents, was an adventure for volunteers.

The population of the United States was stabilized at forty-million souls.

One bright morning in the Chicago Lying-in Hospital, a man named Edward K. Wehling, Jr., waited for his wife to give birth. He was the only man waiting. Not many people were born a day any more.

Wehling was fifty-six, a mere stripling in a population whose average age was one hundred and twenty-nine.

X-rays had revealed that his wife was going to have triplets. The children would be his first.

Young Wehling was hunched in his chair, his head in his hand. He was so rumpled, so still and colorless as to be virtually invisible. His camouflage was perfect, since the waiting room had a disorderly and demoralized air, too. Chairs and ashtrays had been moved away from the walls. The floor was paved with spattered dropcloths.

The room was being redecorated. It was being redecorated as a memorial to a man who had volunteered to die.

A sardonic old man, about two hundred years old, sat on a step-ladder, painting a mural he did not like. Back in the days when people aged visibly, his age would have been guessed at thirty-five or so. Aging had touched him that much before the cure for aging was found.

The mural he was working on depicted a very neat garden. Men and women in white, doctors and nurses, turned the soil, planted seedlings, sprayed bugs, spread fertilizer.

Men and women in purple uniforms pulled up weeds, cut down

plants that were old and sickly, raked leaves, carried refuse to trash-burners.

Never, never, never — not even in medieval Holland nor old Japan — had a garden been more formal, been better tended. Every plant had all the loam, light, water, air and nourishment it could use.

A hospital orderly came down the corridor, singing under his breath a popular song:

If you don't like my kisses, honey,
Here's what I will do:
I'll go see a girl in purple,
Kiss this sad world toodleoo.
If you don't want my lovin',
Why should I take up all this space?
I'll get off this old planet,
Let some sweet baby have my place.

The orderly looked in at the mural and the muralist. "Looks so real," he said, "I can practically imagine I'm standing in the middle of it."

"What makes you think you're not in it?" said the painter. He gave a satiric smile. "It's called 'The Happy Garden of Life,' you know."

"That's good of Dr. Hitz," said the orderly.

HE was referring to one of the male figures in white, whose head was a portrait of Dr. Benjamin Hitz, the hospital's Chief Obstetrician. Hitz was a blindingly handsome man.

"Lot of faces still to fill in," said the orderly. He meant that the faces of many of the figures in the mural were still blank. All blanks were to be filled with portraits of important people on either the hospital staff or from the Chicago Office of the Federal Bureau of Termination.

"Must be nice to be able to make pictures that look like something," said the orderly.

The painter's face curdled with scorn. "You think I'm proud of this daub?" he said. "You think this is my idea of what life really looks like?"

"What's your idea of what life looks like?" said the orderly.

The painter gestured at a foul dropcloth. "There's a good picture of it," he said. "Frame that, and you'll have a picture a damn sight more honest than this one."

"You're a gloomy old duck, aren't you?" said the orderly.

"Is that a crime?" said the painter.

The orderly shrugged. "If you don't like it here, Grandpa —" he said and he finished the thought with the trick telephone number that people who didn't want to live any more were supposed to call. The zero in the telephone number he pronounced "naught."

The number was: "2 B R O 2 B."

It was the telephone number of an institution whose fanciful sobriquets included: "Automat," "Birdland," "Cannery," "Catbox," "De-louser," "Easy-go," "Good-bye, Mother," "Happy Hooligan," "Kiss-me-quick," "Lucky Pierre," "Sheepdip," "Waring Blendor," "Weep-no-more" and "Why Worry?"

"To be or not to be" was the telephone number of the municipal gas chambers of the Federal Bureau of Termination.

THE painter thumbed his nose at the orderly. "When I decide it's time to go," he said, "it won't be at the Sheepdip."

"A do-it-yourselfer, eh?" said the orderly. "Messy business, Grandpa. Why don't you have a little consideration for the people who have to clean up after you?"

The painter expressed with an obscenity his lack of concern for the tribulations of his survivors. "The world could do with a good deal more mess, if you ask me," he said.

The orderly laughed and moved on.

Wehling, the waiting father, mumbled something without raising his head. And then he fell silent again.

A coarse, formidable woman strode into the waiting room on spike heels. Her shoes, stockings, trench coat, bag and overseas cap were all purple, purple the painter called "the color of grapes on Judgment Day."

The medallion on her purple musette bag was the seal of the Service Division of the Federal Bureau of Termination, an eagle perched on a turnstile.

The woman had a lot of facial hair — an unmistakable mustache, in fact. A curious thing about gas-chamber hostesses was that, no matter how lovely and feminine they were when recruited, they all sprouted mustaches within five years or so.

"Is this where I'm supposed to come?" she said to the painter.

"A lot would depend on what your business was," he said "You aren't about to have a baby, are you?"

"They told me I was supposed to pose for some picture," she said. "My name's Leora Duncan." She waited.

"And you dunk people," he said.

"What?" she said.

"Skip it," he said.

"That sure is a beautiful picture," she said. "Looks just like heaven or something."

"Or something," said the painter. He took a list of names from his smock pocket. "Duncan, Duncan, Duncan," he said, scanning the list. "Yes — here you are. You're entitled to be immortalized. See any faceless bodies here you'd like me to stick your head on? We've got a few choice ones left."

She studied the mural bleakly. "Gee," she said, "they're all the same to me. I don't know anything about art."

"A body's a body, eh?" he said. "All righty. As a master of fine art, I recommend this body here." He indicated a faceless figure of a woman who was carrying dried stalks to a trash-burner.

"Well," said Leora Duncan "that's more the disposal people, isn't it? I mean, I'm in service. I don't do any disposing."

The painter clapped his hands in mock delight. "You say you don't know anything about art, and then you prove in the next breath that you know more about it than I do! Of course the sheave-carrier is wrong for a hostess! A snipper, a pruner — that's more your line." He pointed to a figure in purple, who was sawing a dead branch from an apple tree. "How about her?" he said. "You like her at all?"

"Gosh —" she said, and she blushed and became humble — "that — that puts me right next to Dr. Hitz."

"That upsets you?" he said.

"Good gravy, no!" she said. "It's — it's just such an honor."

"Ah. You admire him?" he said.

"Who doesn't admire him?" she said, worshiping the portrait of Hitz. It was the portrait of a tanned, white-haired, omnipotent Zeus, two hundred and forty years old. "Who doesn't admire him?" she said again. "He was responsible for setting up the very first gas chamber in Chicago."

"Nothing would please me more," said the painter, "than to put you next to him for all time. Like sawing off a limb?"

"That is kind of like what I do," she said. She was demure about what she did. She made people comfortable as she killed them.

AND, while Leora Duncan was posing for her portrait, into the waitingroom bounded Dr. Hitz himself. He was seven feet tall, and he boomed with importance, accomplishments, and the joy of living.

"Well, Miss Duncan! Miss Duncan!" he said, and he made a joke. "What are you doing here?" he said. "This isn't where the people leave. This is where they come in!"

"We're going to be in the same picture together," she said shyly.

"Good!" said Dr. Hitz heartily. "And, say, isn't that some picture."

"I sure am honored to be in it with you," she said.

"Let me tell you," he said, "I'm honored to be in it with you. Without women like you, this wonderful world we've got wouldn't be possible."

He saluted her and moved toward the door that led to the delivery rooms. "Guess what was just born," he said.

"I can't," she said.

"Triplets!" he said.

"Triplets!" she said. She was exclaiming over the legal implications of triplets.

The law said that no new-born child could survive unless the parents of the child could find someone who would volunteer to die. Triplets, if they were all to live, called for three volunteers.

"Do the parents have three volunteers?" said Leora Duncan.

"Last I heard," said Dr. Hitz, "they had one, and were trying to scrape another two up."

"I don't think they made it," she said. "Nobody made three appointments with us. Nothing but singles going through today, unless somebody called in after I left. What's the name?"

"Wehling," said the waiting father, sitting up, red-eyed and frowzy. "Edward K. Wehling, Jr., is the name of the happy father-to-be."

He raised his right hand, looked at a spot on the wall, gave a hoarsely wretched chuckle. "Present," he said.

"Oh, Mr. Wehling," said Dr. Hitz, "I didn't see you."

"The invisible man," said Wehling.

"They just phoned me that your triplets have been born," said Dr. Hitz. "They're all fine, and so is the mother. I'm on my way in to see them now."

"Hooray," said Wehling emptily.

"You don't sound very happy," said Dr. Hitz.

"What man in my shoes wouldn't be happy?" said Wehling. He

gestured with his hands to symbolize carefree simplicity. "All I have to do is pick out which one of the triplets is going to live, then deliver my maternal grandfather to the Happy Hooligan, and come back here with a receipt."

DR. Hitz became rather severe with Wehling, towered over him. "You don't believe in population control, Mr. Wehling?" he said.

"I think it's perfectly keen," said Wehling tautly.

"Would you like to go back to the good old days, when the population of the Earth was twenty billion — about to become forty billion, then eighty billion, then one hundred and sixty billion? Do you know what a drupelet is, Mr. Wehling?" said Hitz.

"Nope," said Wehling, sulkily.

"A drupelet, Mr. Wehling, is one of the little knobs, one of the little pulpy grains of a blackberry," said Dr. Hitz. "Without population control, human beings would now be packed on this surface like drupelets on a blackberry! Think of it!"

Wehling continued to stare at the same spot on the wall.

"In the year 2000," said Dr. Hitz, "before scientists stepped in and laid down the law, there wasn't even enough drinking water to go around, and nothing to eat but seaweed — and still people insisted on their right to reproduce like jackrabbits. And their right, if possible, to live forever."

"I want those kids," Wehling said quietly. "I want all three of them."

"Of course you do," said Dr. Hitz. "That's only human."

"I don't want my grandfather to die, either," said Wehling.

"Nobody's really happy about taking a close relative to the Catbox," said Dr. Hitz gently, sympathetically.

"I wish people wouldn't call it that," said Leora Duncan.

"What?" said Dr. Hitz.

"I wish people wouldn't call it 'the Catbox,' and things like that," she said. "It gives people the wrong impression."

"You're absolutely right," said Dr. Hitz. "Forgive me." He corrected himself, gave the municipal gas chambers their official title, a title no one ever used in conversation. "I should have said, 'Ethical Suicide Studios,' " he said.

"That sounds so much better," said Leora Duncan.

"This child of yours — whichever one you decide to keep, Mr. Wehling," said Dr. Hitz. "He or she is going to live on a happy,

roomy, clean, rich planet, thanks to population control. In a garden like that mural there." He shook his head. "Two centuries ago, when I was a young man, it was a hell that nobody thought could last another twenty years. Now centuries of peace and plenty stretch before us as far as the imagination cares to travel."

He smiled luminously.

The smile faded as he saw that Wehling had just drawn a revolver.

Wehling shot Dr. Hitz dead. "There's room for one — a great big one," he said.

And then he shot Leora Duncan. "It's only death," he said to her as she fell. "There! Room for two."

And then he shot himself, making room for all three of his children.

Nobody came running. Nobody, seemingly, heard the shots.

The painter sat on the top of his stepladder, looking down reflectively on the sorry scene.

THE painter pondered the mournful puzzle of life demanding to be born and, once born, demanding to be fruitful . . . to multiply and to live as long as possible — to do all that on a very small planet that would have to last forever.

All the answers that the painter could think of were grim. Even grimmer, surely, than a Catbox, a Happy Hooligan, an Easy Go. He thought of war. He thought of plague. He thought of starvation.

He knew that he would never paint again. He let his paintbrush fall to the dropcloths below. And then he decided he had had about enough of life in the Happy Garden of Life, too, and he came slowly down from the ladder.

He took Wehling's pistol, really intending to shoot himself.

But he didn't have the nerve.

And then he saw the telephone booth in the corner of the room. He went to it, dialed the well-remembered number: "2 B R O 2 B."

"Federal Bureau of Termination," said a very warm voice.

"How soon could I get an appointment?" he asked.

"We could probably fit you in late this afternoon, sir," she said, "It might even be earlier, if we get a cancellation."

"All right," said the painter, "fit me in, if you please." And he gave her his name, spelling it out.

"Thank you, sir," said the hostess. "Your city thanks you; your country thanks you; your planet thanks you. But the deepest thanks of all is from future generations." END

CORDWAINER SMITH

From Gustible's Planet

SHORTLY after the celebration of the four thousandth anniversary of the opening of space, Angary J. Gustible discovered Gustible's planet.

The discovery turned out to be a tragic mistake.

Gustible's planet was inhabited by highly intelligent life-forms. They had moderate telepathic powers. They immediately mind-read Angary J. Gustible's entire mind and life history, and embarassed him very deeply by making up an opera concerning his recent divorce.

The climax of the opera portrayed his wife throwing a teacup at him. This created an unfavorable impression concerning Earth culture, and Angary J. Gustible, who held a reserve commission as a Sub-chief of the Instrumentality, was profoundly embarassed to find that it was not the higher realities of Earth which he had conveyed to these people, but the unpleasant intimate facts that human beings tried to forget.

As negotiations proceeded, other embarrassments developed.

In physical appearance the inhabitants of Gustible's planet, who called themselves Apicians, resembled nothing more than oversize ducks, ducks four feet to four feet six in height. At their wing tips, they had developed juxtaposed thumbs. They were paddle-shaped and sufficed to feed the Apicians.

Gustible's planet matched Earth in several respects: in the dishonesty of the inhabitants, in their enthusiasm for good food, in their instant capacity to understand the human mind. Before Gustible began to get ready to go back to Earth, he discovered that the Apicians had copied his ship. There was no use hiding this fact. They had copied it in such detail that the discovery of Gustible's planet meant the simultaneous discovery of Earth . .

By the Apicians.

THE implications of this tragic development did not show up until the Apicians followed him home. They had a planoforming ship capable of traveling in non-space just as readily as his.

The most important feature of Gustible's planet was its singularly close match to the biochemistry of Earth. The Apicians were the first intelligent life-forms ever met by human beings who were at once capable of smelling and enjoying everything which human beings smelled and enjoyed, capable of following any human music with forthright pleasure and capable of eating and drinking everything in sight.

The very first Apicians on Earth were greeted by somewhat alarmed ambassadors who discovered that an appetite for Munich beer, Camembert cheese, tortillas and enchiladas, as well as the better grades of chow mein, far trascended any serious cultural, political or strategic interests which the new visitors might have.

Arthur Djohn, a Lord of the Instrumentality who was acting for this particular matter, delegated an Instrumentality agent named Calvin Dredd as the chief diplomatic officer of Earth to handle the matter.

Dredd approached one Schmeckst, who seemed to be the Apician leader. The interview was an unfortunate one.

Dredd began by saying, "Your Exalted Highness, we are delighted to welcome you to Earth —"

Schmeckst said, "Are those edible?" and proceeded to eat the plastic buttons from Calvin Dredd's formal coat, even before Dredd could say though not edible they were attractive.

Schmeckst said, "Don't try to eat those, they're not very good."

Dredd, looking at his coat sagging wide open, said, "May I offer you some food?"

Schmeckst said, "Indeed, yes."

And while Schmeckst ate an Italian dinner, a Peking dinner, a red-hot peppery Szechuanese dinner, a Japanest sukiyaki dinner, two British breakfasts, a smorgasbord and four complete servings of diplomatic-level Russian zakouska, he listened to the propositions of the Instrumentality of Earth.

THESE did not impress him. Schmeckst was intelligent despite his gross and offensive eating habits. He pointed out: "We two worlds are equal in weapons. We can't fight. Look," said he to Calvin Dredd in a threatening tone.

Calvin Dredd braced himself, as he had learned to do. Schmeckst also braced him.

For an instant Dredd did not know what had happened. Then he realized that in putting his body into a rigid and controlled posture he had played along with the low grade but manipulable telepathic powers of the visitors. He was frozen rigid till Schmeckst laughed and released him.

Schmeckst said, "You see, we are well matched. I can freeze you. Nothing short of utter desperation could get you out of it. If you try to fight us, we'll lick you. We are going to move in here and live with you. We have enough room on our planet. You can come and live with us too. We would like to hire a lot of those cooks of yours. You'll simply have to divide space with us."

That really was all there was to it. Arthur Djohn reported back to the Lords of the Instrumentality that, for the time being, nothing could be done about the disgusting people from Gustible's planet.

They kept their greed within bounds — by their standards. A mere seventy-two thousand of them swept the Earth, hitting every wine shop, dining hall, snack bar, soda bar and pleasure center in the world. They ate popcorn, alfalfa, raw fruit, live fish, birds on the wing, prepared foods, cooked and canned foods, food concentrates and assorted medicines.

Outside of an enormous capacity to hold many times what the human body could tolerate in the way of food, they showed very much the same effects as persons. Thousands of them got various local diseases, sometimes called by such undignified names as the Yangtze rapids, Delhi belly, the Roman groanin' or the like. Other thousands became ill and had to relieve themselves in the fashion of ancient emporers. Still they came.

Nobody liked them. Nobody disliked them enough to wish a war.

Actual trade was minimal. They bought large quantities of foodstuffs, paying in rare metals. But their economy on their own planet produced very little which the world itself wanted. The cities of mankind had long since developed to a point of comfort and corruption where a relatively mono-cultural being, such as the citizens of Gustible's planet, could not make much impression. The word "Apician" came to have unpleasant connotation of bad manners, greediness and prompt payment.

Prompt payment was considered rude in a credit society, but after all it was better than not being paid at all.

THE tragedy of the relationship of the two groups came from the unfortunate picnic of the lady Ch'ao, who prided herself on having ancient Chinesian blood. She decided that it would be possible to satiate Schmeckst and the other Apacians to a point at which they would be able to listen to reason. She arranged a feast which, for quality and quantity, had not been seen since previous historic times, long before the many interruptions of war, collapse and rebuilding of culture. She searched the museums of the world for recipes.

The dinner was set forth on the telescreen of the entire world. It was held in a pavilion built in the old Chinesian style. A soaring dream of dry bamboo and paper walls, the festival building had a thatched roof in the true ancient fashion. Paper lanterns with real candles illuminated the scene. The fifty selected Apician guests gleamed like ancient idols. Their feathers shone in the light and they clicked their paddle-like thumbs readily as they spoke, telepathically and fluently, in any Earth language which they happened to pick out of the heads of their hearers.

The tragedy was fire. Fire struck the pavilion, wrecked the dinner.

The lady Ch'ao was rescued by Calvin Dredd. The Apicians fled. All of them escaped, all but one. Schmeckst suffocated.

He let out a telepathic scream which was echoed in the living voices of all the human beings, other Apicians and animals within reach, so that the television viewers of the world caught a sudden cacophony of birds shrilling, dogs barking, cats yowling, otters screeching and one lone panda letting out a singularly high grunt. Then Schmeckst perished.

The pity of it . . .

The Earth leaders stood about, wondering how to solve the tragedy. On the other side of the world, the Lords of the Instrumentality watched the scene.

What they saw was amazing and horrible. Calvin Dredd, cold, disciplined agent that he was, approached the ruins of the pavilion. His face was twisted in an expression which they had difficulty in understanding. It was only after he licked his lips for the fourth time, and they saw a ribbon of drool running down his chin, that they realized he had gone mad with appetite. The lady Ch'ao followed close behind, drawn by some remorseless force.

She was out of her mind. Her eyes gleamed. She stalked like a cat. In her left hand she held a bowl and chopsticks.

The viewers all over the world watching the screen could not understand the scene. Two alarmed and dazed Apicians followed the humans, wondering what was going to happen.

Calvin Dredd made a sudden reach. He pulled out the body of Schmeckst.

The fire had finished Schmeckst. Not a feather remained on him. And then the flash fire, because of the peculiar dryness of the bamboo and the paper and the thousands upon thousands of candles, had baked him.

The television operator had an inspiration. He turned on the smell-control.

Throughout the planet Earth, where people had gathered to watch this unexpected and singularly interesting tragedy, there swept a smell which mankind had forgotten. It was an essence of roast duck.

Beyond all imagining, it was the most delicious smell that any human being had ever smelled. Millions upon millions of human mouths watered. Throughout the world people looked away from their sets to see if there were any Apicians in the neighborhood. Just as the Lords of the Instrumentality ordered the disgusting scene cut off, Calvin Dredd and the lady Ch'ao began eating the roast Apician Schmeckst.

WITHIN twenty-four hours most of the Apicians on Earth had been served, some with cranberry sauce, others baked, some fried Southern style. The serious leaders of Earth dreaded the consequences of such uncivilized conduct. Even as they wiped their lips and asked for one more duck sandwich they felt that this behaviour was difficult beyond all imagination.

The blocks that the Apicians had been able to put on human action did not operate when they were applied to human beings who, looking at an Apician, went deep into the recesses of their personality and were animated by a mad hunger which transcended all civilization.

The Lords of the Instrumentality managed to round up Schmeckst's deputy and a few other Apicians and to send them back to their ship.

The soldiers watching them licked their lips. The captain tried to see if he could contrive an accident as he escorted his state visitors. Unfortunately, tripping Apicians did not break their necks, and the Apacians kept throwing violent mind blocks to save themselves.

One of the Apicians was so undiplomatic as to ask for a chicken salad sandwich and almost lost a wing, raw and alive, to a soldier whose appetite had been re-stimulated by reference to food.

The Apicians went back, the few survivors.

They liked Earth well enough and Earth food was delicious, but it was a horrible place when they considered the cannibalistic human beings who lived there — so cannibalistic that they ate ducks.

The Lords of the Instrumentality were relieved to note that when the Apicians left they closed the space lane behind them.

No one quite knows how they closed it, or what defenses they had. Mankind, salivating and ashamed, did not push the pursuit hotly. Instead, people tried to make up chicken, duck, goose, Cornish hen, pigeon, sea-gull and other sandwiches to duplicate the incomparable taste of a genuine inhabitant of Gustible's planet.

None were quite authentic and people, in their right minds, were not uncivilized enough to invade another world solely for getting the inhabitants as tidbits.

The Lords of the Instrumentality were happy to report to one another and to the rest of the world at their next meeting that the Apicians had managed to close Gustible's planet altogether, had had no further interest in dealing with Earth and appeared to possess just enough of a technological edge on human beings to stay concealed from the eyes and the appetites of men.

Save for that the Apicians were almost forgotten. A confidential secretary of the Office of Interstellar Trade was astonished when the frozen intelligences of a methane planet ordered forty thousand cases of Munich beer. He suspected them of being jobbers, not consumers. But on the instructions of his superiors he kept the matter confidential and allowed the beer to be shipped.

It undoubtedly went to Gustible's planet, but they did not offer any of their citizens in exchange.

The matter was closed. The napkins were folded. Trade and diplomacy were at an end. **END**

BRIAN W. ALDISS

In The Arena

THE reek and noise at the back of the circus were familiar to Javlin Bartramm. He felt the hard network of nerve in his solar plexus tighten.

There were crowds of the reduls here, jostling and staring to see the day's entry arrive. You didn't have to pay to stand and rubber-neck in the street; this lot probably couldn't afford seats for the arena. Javlin looked away from them in scorn. All the same, he felt some gratification when they sent up a cheeping cheer at the sight of him. They loved a human victim.

His keeper undid the cart door and led him out, still chained. They went through the entrance, from blinding sunshine to dark, into the damp unsavory warren below the main stadium. Several reduls were moving about here, officials mainly. One of two called good luck to him; one chirped, "the crowd's in a good mood today, vertebrate." Javlin showed no response.

His trainer, Ik So Baar, came up, a flamboyant redul towering above Javlin. He wore an array of spare gloves strapped across his orange belly. The white tiara that fitted round his antennae appeared only on sports days.

"Greetings, Javlin. You look in the rudest of health. I'm glad you are not fighting me."

"Greetings, Ik So." He lsipped the lip-whistle into his mouth so that he could answer in a fair approximation of the redul language. "Is my opponent ready to be slain? Remember I go free if I win this bout — it will be my twelfth victory in succession."

"There's been a change in the program, Javlin. Your Sirian opponent escaped in the night and had to be killed. You are entered in a double double."

Javlin wrenched at his chains so hard that the keeper was swung off balance.

"Ik So! You betray me! How much Cajsh have I won for you? I will not fight a double double."

There was no change of expression on the insect mask.

"Then you will die, my pet vertebrate. The new arrangement is not my idea. You know by now that I get more cash for having you in a solo. Double double it has to be. Keeper, Cell 107 with him!"

Fighting against his keeper's pull, Javlin cried, "I've got some rights, Ik So. I demand to see the arena promoter."

"Pipe down, you stupid vertebrate! You have to do what you're ordered. I told you it wasn't my fault."

"Well, for God's sake, who am I fighting with?"

"You will be shackled to a fellow from the farms. He's had one or two preliminary bouts; they say he's good."

"From the farms . . ." Javlin broke into the filthiest redulian oaths he knew. Ik So came back towards him and slipped one of the metal gloves on to his forepincers; it gave him a cruel tearing weapon with a multitude of barbs. He held it up to Javlin's face.

"Don't use that language to me, my mammalian friend. Humans from the farms or from space, what's the difference? This young fellow will fight well enough if you muck in with him. And you'd better muck in. You're billed to battle against a couple of yillibeeth."

Before Javlin could answer, the tall figure turned and strode down the corridor, moving twice as fast as a man could walk.

Javlin let himself be led to Cell 107. The warder, a worker-redul with a gray belly, unlocked his chains and pushed him in, barring the door behind him. The cell smelt of alien species and apprehensions.

Javlin went and sat down on the bench. He needed to think.

HE knew himself for a simple man — and knew that that knowledge meant the simplicity was relative. But his five years of captivity here under the reduls had not been all wasted. Ik So had trained him well in the arts of survival; and when you came down to brass tacks, there was no more proper pleasure in the universe than surviving. It was uncomplicated. It carried no responsibilities to anyone but yourself.

That was what he hated about the double double events, which till now he had always been lucky enough to avoid. They carried a responsibility to your fellow fighter.

From the beginning he had been well equipped to survive the

gladitorial routine. When his scoutship, the *Plunderhorse,* had been captured by redul forces five years ago, Javlin Bartramm was duelling master and judo expert, as well as Top Armament Sergeant. The army ships had a long tradition, going back some six centuries, of sport aboard; it provided the ideal mixture of time-passer and needed exercise. Of all the members of the *Plunderhorse*'s crew who had been taken captive, Javlin was — as far as he knew — the only survivor after five years of the insect race's rough games.

Luck had played its part in his survival. He had liked Ik So Baar. Liking was a strange thing to feel for a nine-foot armored grasshopper with forearms like a lobster and a walk like a tyrannosaurus's run, but a sympathy existed between them — and would continue to exist until he was killed in the ring, Javlin thought. With his bottom on the cold bench, he knew that Ik So would not betray him into a double double. The redul had had to obey the promoter's orders. Ik So needed his twelfth victory, so that he could free Javlin to help him train the other species down at the gladiatorial farm. Both of them knew that would be an effective partnership.

So. Now was the time for luck to be with Javlin again.

He sank to his knees and looked down at the stone, brought his forehead down on to it, gazed down into the earth, into the cold ground, the warm rocks, the molten core, trying to visualize each, to draw from them attributes that would help him: cold for his brain, warm for his temper, molten for his energies.

Strengthened by prayer, he stood up. The redul workers had yet to bring him his armor and the partner he was to fight with. He had long since learnt the ability to wait without resenting waiting. With professional care, he exercised himself slowly, checking the proper function of each muscle. As he did so, he heard the crowds cheer in the arena. He turned to peer out of the cell's further door, an affair of tightly set bars that allowed a narrow view of the combat area and the stands beyond.

There was a centaur out there in the sunlight, fighting an Aldebaran bat-leopard. The centaur wore no armor but an iron cuirass; he had no weapons but his hooves and his hands. The bat-leopard, though its wings were clipped to prevent it flying out of the stadium, had dangerous claws and a great turn of speed. Only because its tongue had been cut out, ruining its echo-location system, was the contest anything like fair. The concept of fairness was lost upon the reduls, though; they preferred blood to justice.

Javlin saw the kill. The centaur, a gallant creature with a human-like head and an immense gold mane that began from his eyebrows, was plainly tiring. He eluded the bat-leopard as it swooped down on him, wheeling quickly round on his hind legs and trampling on its wing. But the bat-leopard turned and raked the other's leg with a slash of claws. The centaur toppled hamstrung to the ground. As he fell, he lashed out savagely with his forelegs, but the bat-leopard nipped in and tore his throat from side to side above the cuirass. It then dragged itself away under its mottled wings, like a lame prima donna dressed in a leather cape.

The centaur struggled and lay still, as if the weight of whistling cheers that rose from the audience bore him down. Through the narrow bars, Javlin saw the throat bleed and the lungs heave as the defeated one sprawled in the dust.

"What do you dream of, dying there in the sun?" Javlin asked.

He turned away from the sight and the question. He sat quietly on the bench and folded his arms.

When the din outside told him that the next bout had begun, the door opened and a young human was pushed in. Javlin did not need telling that this was to be his partner in the double double against the yillibeeth.

It was a girl.

"YOU'RE Javlin?" she said. "I know of you. My name's Awn."

He kept himself under control, his brows drawn together as he stared at her.

"You know what you're here for?"

"This will be my first public fight."

Her hair was clipped short as a man's. Her skin was tanned and harsh, her left arm bore a gruesome scar, She held herself lithely on her feet. Though her body looked lean and hard, even the thick one-piece gown she wore to thigh length did not conceal the feminine curves of her body. She was not pretty, but Javlin had to admire the set of her mouth and her cool gray gaze.

"I've had some stinking news this morning, but Ik So Baar never broke it to me that I was to be saddled with a woman," he said.

"Ik probably didn't know — that I'm a woman, I mean. The reduls are either neuter or hermaphrodite, unless they happen to be a rare queen. Didn't you know that?"

He spat. "You can't tell me anything about reduls."

She spat. "If you knew, why blame me? You don't think I like being here? You don't think I asked to join the great Javlin?"

Without answering he bent and began to massage the muscles of his calf. Since he occupied the middle of the bench, the girl remained standing. She watched him steadily. When he looked up again, she asked, "What or who are we fighting?"

No surprise was left in him. "They didn't tell you?"

"I've only just been pushed into this double double, as I imagine you have. I asked you, what are we fighting?"

"Just a couple of yillibeeths."

He injected unconcern into his voice to make the shock of what he said the greater. He massaged the muscles of the other calf. An aphrohale would have come in very welcome now. These crazy insects had no equivalent of the terrestrial prisoner-ate-a-hearty-breakfast routine. When he glanced up under his eyebrows, the girl stood motionless, but her face had gone pale.

"Know what the yillibeeths are, little girl?"

She didn't answer, so he went on, "The reduls resemble some terrestrial insects. They go through several stages of development, you know; reduls are just the final adult stage. Their larval stage is rather like the larval stage of the dragon fly. It's aquatic and it's big. It's armored. It's called a yillibeeth. That's what we are going to be tied together to fight, a couple of big hungry yillibeeth. Are you feeling like dying this morning, Awn?"

Instead of answering, she turned her head away.

"Oh, no! No crying in here, for Earth's sake!" he said. He got up, yelled through the passage door, "Ik So, Ik So, you traitor, get this bloody woman out of here!" . . . recalled himself, jammed the lip-whistle in his mouth and was about to call again when Awn caught him a backhanded blow across the face.

She faced him like a tiger.

"You creature, you cowardy apology of a man! Do you think I weep for fear? I don't weep. I've lived nineteen years on this damned planet in their damned farms. Would I still be here if I wept? No — but I mourn that you are already defeated."

He frowned into her blazing face.

"You don't seriously think you make me a good enough match for us to go out there and kill a couple of yillibeeth?"

"Damn your conceit, I'm prepared to try."

"Fagh!" He thrust the lip-whistle in his mouth, and turned back to the door. She laughed at him bitterly, jeeringly.

"You're a lackey to these insects, aren't you Javlin? If you could see what a fool you look with that phoney beak of yours stuck on your mouth."

HE let the instrument drop to the end of its chain. Grasping the bars, he leaned forward against them and looked at her over his shoulder.

"I was trying to get this contest called off."

"Don't tell me you haven't already tried. I have."

To that he had no answer. He went back and sat on the bench. She returned to her corner. They both folded their arms and stared at each other.

"Why don't you look out into the arena instead of glaring at me? You might pick up a few tips." When she did not answer, "I'll tell you what you'll see. You can see the rows of spectators and a box where some sort of bigwig sits. I don't know who the bigwig is. It's never a queen — as far as I can make out, the queens spend their lives underground, turning out eggs at the rate of fifty a second. Not the sort of life Earth royalty would have enjoyed in the old days. Under the bigwig's box there is a red banner with their insect hieroglyphs on. I asked Ik So once what the hieroglyphs said. He told me they meant — well, in a rough translation — *The Greatest Show on Earth.* It's funny isn't it?"

"You must admit we do make a show."

"No, you miss the point. You see, that used to be the legend of circuses in the old days. But they've adopted it for their own use since they invaded Earth. They're boasting of their conquest."

"And that's funny?"

"In a sort of way. Don't you feel rather ashamed that this planet which saw the birth of the human race should be overrun by insects?"

"No. The reduls were here before me. I was just born here. Weren't you?"

"No, I wasn't. I was born on Washington IV. It's a lovely planet. There are hundreds of planets out there as fine and varied as Earth once was — but it kind of rankles to think this insect brood rules Earth."

"If you feel so upset about it, why don't you do something?"

He knotted his fists together. You should start explaining history

and economics just before you ran out to be chopped to bits by a big rampant thing with circular saws for hands?

"It would cost mankind too much to reconquer this planet. Too difficult. Too many deaths just for sentiment. And think of all those queens squirting eggs at a rate of knots; humans don't breed that fast. Humanity has learnt to face facts."

She laughed without humor.

"That's good. Why don't you learn to face the fact of me?"

Javlin had nothing to say to that; she would not understand that directly he saw her he knew his hope of keeping his life had died. She was just a liability. Soon he would be dying, panting his juices out into the dust like that game young centaur . . . only it wouldn't be dust.

"We fight in two foot of water," he said. "You know that? The yillibeeth like it. It slows our speed a bit. We might drown instead of having our heads bitten off."

"I can hear someone coming down the corridor. It may be our armor," she said coolly.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"You can't wait to die, Javlin, can you?"

THE bars fell away on the outside of the door, and it opened. The keeper stood there. Ik So Baar had not appeared as he usually did. The creature flung in their armor and weapons and retreated, barring the door again behind him. It never ceased to astonish Javlin that those great dumb brutes of workers had intelligence.

He stooped to pick up his uniform. The girl's looked so light and small. He lifted it, looking from it to her.

"Thank you," she said.

"It looks so small and new."

"I shouldn't want anything heavier."

"You've fought in it?"

"Twice." There was no need to ask whether she had won.

"We'd better get the stuff strapped on, then. We shall know when they are getting ready for us; you'll hear the arena being filled with water. They're probably saving us for the main events at noon."

"I didn't know about the two feet of water."

"Scare you?"

"No. I'm a good swimmer. Swam for fish on the slave farm."

"You caught fish with your bare hands?"

"No, you dive down and stab them with a sharp rock. It takes practice."

It was a remembered pleasure. She'd actually swum in one of Earth's rivers. He caught himself smiling back into her face.

"Ik So's place is in the desert," he said, making his voice cold. "Anyhow, you won't be able to swim in the arena. Two foot of muddy stinking water helps nobody. And you'll be chained on to me with a four-foot length of chain."

"Let's get our armor on, then you'd better tell me all you know. Perhaps we can work out a plan of campaign."

As he picked up the combined breastplate and shoulder guard, Awn untied her belt and lifted her dress over her head. Underneath she wore only a ragged pair of white briefs. She commenced to take those off.

Javlin stared at her with surprise — and pleasure. It had been years since he had been within hailing distance of a woman. This one — yes, this one was a beauty.

"What are you doing that for?" he asked. He hardly recognized his own voice.

"The less we have on the better in that water. Aren't you going to take your clothes off?"

He shook his head. Embarrassed, he fumbled on the rest of his kit. At least she wouldn't look so startling with her breastplate and skirt armor on. He checked his long and short swords, clipping the one into the left belt clip, the other into the right. They were good swords, made by redul armorers to terrestrial specifications. When he turned back to Awn, she was fully accoutred.

Nodding in approval, he offered her a seat on the bench beside him. They clattered against each other and smiled.

Another bout had ended in the arena. The cheers and chirrups drifted through the bars to them.

"I'm sorry you're involved in this," he said with care.

"I was lucky to be involved in it with you." Her voice was not entirely steady, but she controlled it in a minute. "Can't I hear water?"

He had already heard it. An unnatural silence radiated from the great inhuman crowd in the circus as they watched the stuff pour in. It would have great emotional significance for them, no doubt, since they had all lived in water for some years in their previous life stage.

"They have wide-bore hoses," he said. His own voice had an irritating tremor. "The arena fills quite rapidly."

"Let's formulate some sort of plan of attack then. These things, these yillibeeths must have some weaknesses."

"And some strengths! That's what you have to watch for."

"I don't see that. You attack their weak points."

"We shall be too busy looking out for their strong ones. They have long segmented gray bodies — about twenty segments, I think. Each segment is of chitin or something tough. Each segment bears two legs equipped with razor combs. At tail end and top end they have legs that work like sort of buzz saws, cut through anything they touch. And there are their jaws, of course."

THE keeper was back. Its antennae flopped through the grating and then it unbolted the door and came in. It bore a length of chain as long as the cell was wide. Javlin and Awn did not resist as it locked them together, fitting the bracelets on to Javlin's right arm and Awn's left.

"So." She stared at the chain. "The yillibeeths don't sound to have to many weak points. They could cut through our swords with their buzz saws?"

"Correct."

"Then they could cut through this chain. Get it severed near one of our wrists, and the other has a better long distance weapon than a sword. A blow over the head with the end of the chain won't improve their speed. How fast are they?"

"The buzz saws takes up most of their speed. They're nothing like as fast as the reduls. No, you could say they were pretty sluggish in movement. And the fact that the two of them will also be chained together should help us."

"Where are they chained?"

"By the middle legs."

"That gives them a smaller arc of destruction than if they were chained by back or front legs. We are going to slay these beasts yet, Javlin! What a murderous genus it must be to put its offspring in the arena for the public sport."

He laughed.

"Would you feel sentimental if you had a million babies?"

"I'll tell you that when I've had the first of them. I mean, if I have the first of them."

He put his hand over hers. His voice was soft.

"No if. We'll kill the bloody larvae okay."

"Get the chain severed, the one of us with the longest bit of chain goes in for the nearest head, the other fends off the other brute. Right?"

"Right."

"There was a worker redul at the outer door now, the door that led to the arena. He flung it open and stood there with a flaming torch, ready to drive them out if they did not emerge.

"We've — come to it then," she said. Suddenly she clung to him.

"Let's take it at a run, love," he said.

Together, balancing the chain between them, they ran towards the arena. The two yillibeeths were coming out from the far side, wallowing and splashing. The crowd stretched up toward the blue sky of earth, whistling their heads off. They didn't know what a man and woman could do in combination. Now they were going to learn.

END

FRANK HERBERT

Egg and Ashes

FOR a week now the Siukurnin had hung above the hunters' camp disguised as a pine cone. One of the ropes holding their tent fly passed within inches of it, and when the cold evening wind blew, as it was doing now, the rope hummed. This created a masking harmonic that had to be filtered out (along with many other "noises") before the Siukurnin could concentrate on the vibrations coming from the figures around the fire.

Already imprinted and stored in the Siukurnin's subcellar structure was a long catalogue of light-reflected *shapes* and vibration meanings from this place and the other places. It knew that when one of the carbon life-forms moved to the nearby flowing liquid, the creature was going to the *water*. (And that was one of the vibrations for the great heaving expanse of liquid beyond the mountains to the east.) And it knew that when one of these creatures became dormant for the night (low vibration period), that was *sleep*.

Oh, there were so *many* vibration meanings.

The Siukurnin tried reproducing the vibrations for *sleep* and *water* at a subaural level, gloried in its growing mastery of these subtelties. An aroma of coffee and broiled meat arose from the fire. The Siukurnin listened to these for a moment, savoring the full roundness of the vibration spectrum in this enchanting place. As yet it had not thought of the necessity for a non-*chilitigish* vibration to refer to itself.

(You must understand that when it thought of itself at this stage (which was seldom), it did not think: "I am a Siukurnin." In the first place, a natural mechanism inhibited prolonged introspection. In the second place, "Siukurnin" is a make-do vibration — a limited auditory approach to the actual "term" that is used only in communicating with creatures who do not hear into the visual spectrum, and who are not yet able to detect the *chilitigish* spectrum. Since

this is only a start at communication, it's perfectly all right for you to think of this creature as a "Siukurnin," but you should keep in mind that there's a limitation.)

BEFORE coming to this hunters' camp, the Siukurnin had spent two weeks as a false rivet head in the wardroom of a long gray warship. It had left the warship as a coating of "film" on a garbage container, and had arrived here in the pine glade as a length of "wire" in the trunk lid of a used car that had been sold to one of the hunters.

Between the garbage container and the used car there had been several other shape-aliases, all characterized by solid color and smoothness and all difficult to reproduce. The Siukurnin looked on its present pine cone form almost as a rest.

Once started on its repertoire of new vibration meanings, the Siukurnin was like a *lilim* with a new *arabeğ*, or, as you might say, like a child with a new toy. Presently, it recalled the period on the warship. "Now hear this! Now hear this!" it chanted too low to be detected by the figure beneath it.

Darkness folded over the camp in the pines trees and the fire flickered low. The upright creatures retired into their tent. (To *sleep*, you understand.) Among these creatures was on identified by the primitive (non-*chiliğish*) vibration: "Sam."

Now the Siukurnin listened to the soughing of the wind through the branches around it, to the scrabbling of night creatures — and once there was a figurative scream of skunk odor nearby. Much later, the Siukurnin defied its inhibitions, tried to recall a time before the awakening at the warship. Only faint fog memory came: a sensation of swimming upward through dark *water*.

The effort of memory brought the inhibition mechanism into action. Destructive hunger gnawed at the Siukurnin. It sensed changes going on within its structure — a maturation of sorts.

To put down the hunger, the Siukurnin imagined itself as one of the flying creatures to be *seen* in the delightful harmonics of sky above it — soaring . . . soaring . . .

But this, too, became its self-image insisted on revolving into a red-gold winged thing unfamiliar to these skies (but feeling disquietingly familiar to the Siukurnin).

Dawn crystalled the peaks to the east, brought stirrings that aroused the Siukurnin from its reverie. A figure emerged from the ten, yawned, stretched. The Siukurnin matched light vibrations

and sound vibrations for the figure and in its own way "recognized" the hunter, Sam. There were checkered harmonics with merging of long and short olfactory-visual waves punctured by great sound-meaning vibrations.

"Chilly this morning," said the hunter. "Wish I could stay in the sack like you bums."

From the tent came another voice: "You lost a fair and square toss, Sam. Get that fire goin'."

A connoisseur sense within the Siukurnin came to full alert. It felt that this crude creature carried some supremely desirable element. In a sense, the Siukurnin "crouched."

The hunter put a hand on the fly rope, glanced at the false pine cone. "Yeah," he said. "You'll burn like pitch." He reached up, touched the "cone," felt sudden warmth, then nothing. The "cone" was gone. He shook his hand, looked around the ground, back to the tree. Nothing. "I'll be danged," he muttered. He scratched the palm that had touched the "cone."

"That fire goin' yet?" demanded the voice from the tent.

Sam shook his head. "No, I was going to pick a pine cone to help start the fire and the darn thing disappeared."

"You're getting old, grampaw," came the voice from the tent. "Better buy some glasses when we get back to town."

Another voice intruded from the tent: "Will you guys quit yakking? I'm trying to sleep!"

For the Siukurnin there had been an instant of languor. Then it had felt itself changing uncontrollably, spreading out over the hand of the carbon life-form, seeping immediately through pores, between cells, into a vein. It stretched out — no more than six cells in diameter — reaching . . . reaching . . .

A long, thin thread explored the length of the vein. (You'll appreciate that the vibrations here were magnificent in their contrapuntal relationship: little hissings and squealings and lappings played against a superb background throb. There were also a few moments of delicate adjustment before the leucocytes ceased their ravening attack.)

IN its own way, the Siukurnin danced for joy. Its hunger became only a faint beckoning: a dim sort of knowledge that end-of-hunger was at hand.

And there came a trickle of memory from before the upward

swimming and those first moments of awareness on the warship. There was not enough recollection to frighten it with the thought that its own little egg of ego might be overwhelmed . . . just enough to whet its curiosity.

(All Siukurnin are fully endowed with a curiosity that cannot be inhibited, you know. And *chilitigish* awareness makes this faculty even more potent.)

The Siukurnin swam, crawled, wriggled, elongated and squeezed. Down, outward, upward. It had to filter out part of the "music" around it now: wheezings in the great air sacs, gurglings and sloshings, cracklings and swishings. All *so* distracting. One of its elements enwebbed the host's vocal cords ("Great Vibrators" to a Siukurnin). Another part interfingered the speech centers of the brain. Cilia reached out to the eye surfaces and the eyelid veins, contacting the exterior.

It was distracting at first to discover how all the vibrations were separated by different sense organs: then temptation became irresistible. (Who can hurl blame for this?) The Siukurnin coordinated its contact with speech centers and vocal cords.

Across the pine glade a human voice shouted: "Now hear this! Now hear this! Water! Sleep! Fire! Eat!"

Oh, it was an exhilarating sensation!

Two of the upright creatures, the other hunters, tumbled from the tent. One called: "It's about time you got . . ." It broke off. There was no fire. Only Sam standing terror-eyed beside the firepit, left hand to throat, right hand outthrust as though to push something away.

Then Sam swayed, collapsed.

In the hospital room, gross vibrations had been dampened to a remote hush. Slatted blinds were closed against raw morning sunlight. The bedside lamp had been turned off. But there still was a soft harmonic reflection from cream-colored walls that mingled with the even hiss of sleep breathing.

Sam lay on his back in the room's single bed, eyes closed. His chest under a green humming of blanket rose and fell gently. Somewhere, a pumping motor throbbed its obbligato. Distantly, stiff little shuntings and paintings and screechings told of city traffic. Ether trailed its solo virtuosity through the air, riding on a wave of disinfectant. A nurse's heels along the hall added an abrupt random rhythm that wove back and forth . . . back and forth through the

other vibrations in a way that excited the connoisseur sense of the figure on the bed.

(After all, the long, virtual silence of the migration had now been recalled. In a sense, it was *starved* for these new and wonderful "noises".)

Outside the half-opened door of the room, a doctor could be heard talking to Beverly, Sam's wife. The doctor was tall, a beak-nosed shape: pink and blond with white on white echoing across the image. Acrid little shouts came from his hands, clinkings from his pockets, and a buzzing of tobacco rode gently upon the inundations of his breath.

There had been a strange *dual* recognition of Beverly: a sense of familiarity with her dark hair, soft curve of cheeks, alert gray-green eyes. (The Sam-memories, of course.) And there had been added to this a pungent explosion of perfume-base powder (still familiar, yes, but heightened to an indescribable pitch), plus a glissando of gold necklace on green coat on green suit, all played against a bright beating of gold-bronze buttons. (And there was much more, but without *chilitigish* awareness in the reader, the effects are meaningless.)

The doctor's voice carried a drum quality as he uttered cautious reassurances. "There is no doubt that it's some type of narcolepsy," he said. "But there's no enlargement of the lymphatic glands. His pulse and respiration are normal. Temperature's up, but not dangerously. I'm inclined to suspect this may be a reaction due to nervous strain. Has he been working very hard?"

Narcolepsy, narcolepsy, narcolepsy," whispered the Siukurnin with its Sam-lips.

Well . . . they weren't exactly Sam-lips now. They were much more accurately Sam (to the Siukurnin power) lips.

You just have to understand that single-ego orientation sets up difficult problems in communications here. What you would consider odd and irresitible things had been happening to Sam and Siukurnin. Cilia of Siukurnin had gone creeping and seeking of their own volition. It was now a great thin net spread throughout the host. Wherever it touched nerve cells — in brain and elsewhere — subtle displacements occurred at the subcellar level. New memories (Sam-memories) filtered into Siukurnin. And Siukurnin memories, of course, filtered back to Sam. (This is one of those processes that just cannot be confined to a one-way circuit.)

THINGS had gone so far that Siukurnin had displaced the temporary migration-ego. And Sam — "he" now thought of himself as a kind of "needle" at the end of an extremely long thread. You see, the "thread" was the Siukurnin ego-memory-chain, its past so ancient that the Sam-ego was staggered.

(If you open up a Siukurnin-past you find that it is other creatures stretched out to a virtually meaningless number. This is a fascinating infinity process in which a quite satisfactory internal relationship has been worked out.)

Fully awakened, Siukurnin now understood the necessity mechanism that had blanked out ego-memory-chain awareness. There is such a temptation in the migration period to turn inward upon the merged multiplicity, encyst all distracting processes, and just think and think and . . .

You can see how this would be a kind of death. (Strictly speaking, Siukurnin do not fear death, although they are vulnerable during the "flight-of-joy" vector in their life cycle.)

Both Sam and Siukurnin were completely merged now. Sam-Siukurnin $^{(\text{ego-memory-chain}+x)}$ lay in the meaningful vibration core of the hospital room. Neither "unit" could now undo what had happened — nor wanted to undo it. Oh, there had been some Sam-resistance at first. Quite natural.

But Siukurnin revealed how a reluctant host's flesh could be incinerated without stopping the merging process. (And there were all those memories laid out in the open to prove this!) The other capture memories were a compelling agrument, too.

The process is so *drearily* repetitive — except for the new life with its fascinating vibration meaning, of course.

And now you know how it happens. Not painful (except for some initial shocks). Not harmful to the host-ego. And not to be resisted.

In fact, this is being written in the hope that the rest of you will see (what an *odd* sensory division) how foolish it is to resist.

There's no point in resistance.

You cannot fight the inevitable.

Besides, you will find the merging a very rewarding experience. And if you stop to think about it, this is not the first time your kind has encountered us (although never before in such numbers as our present migration). You do have your legend of the Phoenix. According to your legend, this was a great red-gold "bird" that returned to Heliopolis in ancient Egypt every five hundred years (a rea-

sonable Siukurnin-host life span), there to be reborn from its own ashes.

Naturally, the flesh of a dead host has to be incinerated to free the Siukurnin web for its "flight-of-joy." To think of the Phoenix as a "bird" was somewhat of an oversimplication, you understand. But we're sure you'll enjoy the flying sensation and the act of creating your new egg — especially when you view the experience with full *chilitigish* awareness. END

FRITZ LEIBER

The Snowbank Orbit

I

THE pole stars of the other planets cluster around Polaris and Octans, but Uranus spins on a snobbishly different axis between Aldebaran and Antares. The bull is her coronet and the Scorpion her footstool. Dear blowzy old bitch-planet, swollen and pale and cold, mad with your Shakespearean moons, white-mottled as death from Venerean Plague, spinning on your side like a poisoned pregnant cockroach, rolling around the sun like a fat drunken floozie with green hair rolling on the black floor of an infinite barroom, what a sweet last view of the Solar System you are for a cleancut young spaceman . . .

Grunfeld chopped off that train of thought short. He was young and the first Interstellar War had snatched him up and now it was going to pitch him and twenty other Joes out of the System on a fast curve breaking around Uranus — and so what! He shivered to get a little heat and then applied himself to the occulted star he was tracking through *Prospero's* bridge telescope. The star was a twentieth planetary diameter into Uranus, the crosslines showed — a glint almost lost in pale green. That meant its light was bulleting 1600 miles deep through the seventh planet's thick hydrogen atmosphere, unless he were seeing the star on a mirage trajectory — and at least its depth agreed with the time since rim contact.

At 2000 miles he lost it. That should mean 2000 miles plus of hydrogen soup above the methane ocean, an America-wide layer of gaseous gunk for the captain to play the mad hero in with the fleet.

Grunfeld didn't think the captain wanted to play the mad hero. The captain hadn't gone space-simple in any obvious way like Croker and Ness. And he wasn't, like Jackson, a telepathy-racked visionary entranced by the Enemy. Worry and responsibility had

turned the captain's face into a skull which floated in Grunfeld's imagination when he wasn't actually seeing it, but the tired eyes deep-sunk in the dark sockets were still cool and perhaps sane. But because of the worry the captain always wanted to have the last bit of fact bearing on the least likely maneuver, and two pieces of evidence were better than one. Grunfeld found the next sizable star due to occult. Five-six minutes to rim contact. He floated back a foot from the telescope, stretching out his thin body in the plane of the ecliptic — strange how he automatically assumed that orientation in free fall! He blinked and blinked, then rested his eyes on the same planet he'd been straining them on.

The pale greenish bulk of Uranus was centered in the big bridge spaceshield against the black velvet dark and bayonet-bright stars, a water-splotched and faded chartreuse tennis ball on the diamond-spiked bed of night. At eight million miles she looked half the width of Luna seen from Earth. Her whitish equatorial bands went from bottom to top, where, Grunfeld knew, they were spinning out of sight at three miles a second — a gelid waterfall that he imagined tugging at him with ghostly green gangrenous fingers and pulling him over into a hydrogen Niagara.

Half as wide as Luna. But in a day she'd overflow the port as they whipped past her on a near miss and in another day she'd be as small as this again, but behind them, sunward, having altered their outward course by some small and as yet unpredictable angle, but no more able to slow *Prospero* and her sister ships or turn them back at their 100 miles a second than the fleet's solar jets could operate at this chilly distance from Sol. G'by, fleet. G'by, C.C.Y. spaceman.

GRUNFELD looked for the pale planet's moons. Miranda and Umbriel were too tiny to make disks, but he distinguished Ariel four diameters above the planet and Oberon a dozen below. Spectral sequins. If the fleet were going to get a radio signal from any of them, it would have to be Titania, occulted now by the planet and the noisy natural static of her roiling hydrogen air and seething methane seas — but it had always been only a faint hope that there were survivors from the First Uranus Expedition.

Grunfeld relaxed his neck and let his gaze drift down across the curving star-bordered forward edge of *Prospero's* huge mirror and the thin jutting beams of the port lattice arm to the dim red-lit

gages below the spaceshield.

Forward Skin Temperature seven degrees Kelvin. Almost low enough for helium to crawl, if you had some helium. *Prospero's* insulation, originally designed to hold out solar heat, was doing a fair job in reverse.

Aft (sunward) Skin Temperature 75 degree Kelvin. Close to that of Uranus' sunlit surface. Check.

Cabin Temperature 43 degree Fahrenheit. Brr! The Captain was a miser with the chem fuel remaining. And rightly . . . if it were right to drag out life as long as possible in the empty icebox beyond Uranus.

Gravities of Acceleration zero. Many other zeros winked teasingly at Grunfeld.

The four telltales for the fleet unblinkingly glowed dimmest blue — one each for *Caliban, Snug, Moth,* and *Starveling,* following *Prospero* in line astern on slave automatic — though for months inertia had done all five ships' piloting. Once the buttons had been green, but they'd wiped that color off the boards because of the Enemy.

The gages still showed their last maximums. Skin 793 Kelvin, Cabin 144 Fahrenheit, Gravs 3.2. All of them hit almost a year ago, when they'd been ace-ing past the sun. Grunfeld's gaze edged back to the five bulbous pressure suits, once more rigidly upright in their braced racks, that they'd been wearing during that stretch of acceleration inside the orbit of Mercury. He started. For a moment, he'd thought he saw the dark-circled eyes of the captain peering between two of the bulging black suits. Nerves. The captain had to be in his cabin, readying alternate piloting programs for Copperhead, just in case they were needed.

Suddenly Grunfeld jerked his head back toward the spaceshield — so violently that his body began very slowly to spin in the opposite direction. This time he'd thought he saw the Enemy's green flashing near the margin of the planet — bright green, viridian, far vivider than that of Uranus herself. He drew himself to the telescope and feverishly studied the area. Nothing at all. Nerves again. If the Enemy were much nearer than a light-minute, Jackson would esp it and give warning. The next star was still three minutes from rim contact. Grunfeld's mind retreated to the circumstances that had brought *Prospero* (then only *Mercury One*) out here, so far from their home base.

II

WHEN the First Interstellar War erupted, the pioneer fleets of Earth's nations had barely pushed their explorations beyond the orbit of Saturn. Except for the vessels of the International Meteor Guard, spaceflight was still a military enterprise of America, Russia, England and the other mega-powers.

During the first months the advantage lay wholly with the slim black cruisers of the Enemy, who had an antigravity which allowed them to hover near planets without going into orbit; and a frightening degree of control over light itself. Indeed, their principal weapon was a tight beam of visible light, a dense photonic stiletto with an effective range of several Jupiter diameters in vacuum. They also used visible light, in the green band, for communication as men use radio, sometimes broadcasting it and sometimes beaming it loosely in strange abstract pictures that seemed part of their language. Their gravity-immune ship moved by reaction to photonic jets the tightness of which rendered them invisible except near the sun, where they tended to ionize electronically dirty volumes of space. It was probably this effective invisibility, based on light-control, which allowed them to penetrate the Solar System as deep as Earth's orbit undetected, rather than any power of travel in time or subspace, as was first assumed. Earthmen could only guess at the physical appearance of the Enemy, since no prisoners were taken on either side.

Despite his impressive maneuverability and armament, the Enemy was oddly timid about attacking live planets. He showed no fear of the big gas planets, in fact hovering very close to their turgid surfaces, as if having some way of fueling from them.

Near Terra the first tactic of the black cruisers after destroying Lunostrovok and Circumluna, was to hover behind the moon, as though sharing its tide-lockedness — a circumstance that led to a sortie by Earth's Combined Fleet, England and Sweden excepted.

At the wholly disastrous Battle of the Far Side, which was visible in part to naked-eye viewers on Earth, the Combined Fleet was annihilated. No Enemy ship was captured, boarded, or seriously damaged — except for one which, apparently by a fluke, was struck by a fission-headed anti-missile and proceeded after the blast to "burn", meaning that it suffered a slow and puzzling disintegration, accompanied by a dazzling rainbow display of visible radiation.

This was before the "stupidity" of the enemy with regard to small atomic missiles was noted, or their allergy to certain radio wave bands, and also before Terran telepaths began to claim cloudy contact with Enemy minds.

Following Far Side, the Enemy burst into activity, harrying Terran spacecraft as far as Mercury and Saturn, though still showing great caution in maneuver and making no direct attacks on planets. It was as if a race of heavily armed marine creatures should sink all ocean-going ships or drive them to harbor, but make no assaults beyond the shore line. For a full year Earth, though her groundside and satellite rocketyards were furiously busy, had no vehicle in deep space — with one exception.

AT the onset of the War a fleet of five mobile bases of the U.S. Space Force were in Orbit to Mercury, where it was intended they take up satellite positions prior to the prospecting and mineral exploitation of the small sun-blasted planet. These five ships, each with a skeleton five-man crew, were essentially Ross-Smith space stations with a solar drive, assembled in space and intended solely for space-to-space flight inside Earth's orbit. A huge paraboloid mirror, its diameter four times the length of the ship's hull, superheated at its focus the hydrogen which was ejected as a plasma at high exhaust velocity. Each ship likewise mounted versatile radio-radar equipment on dual lattice arms and carried as ship's launch a two-man chemical fuel rocket adaptable as a fusion-headed torpedo.

After Far Side, this "tin can" fleet was ordered to by-pass Mercury and, tacking on the sun, shape and orbit for Uranus, chiefly because that remote planet, making its 84-year circuit of Sol, was currently on the opposite side of the sun to the four inner planets and the two nearer gas giants Jupiter and Saturn. In the empty regions of space the relatively defenseless fleet might escape the attention of the Enemy.

However, while still accelerating into the sun for maximum boost, the fleet received information that two Enemy cruisers were in pursuit. The five ships cracked on all possible speed, drawing on the solar drive's high efficiency near the sun and expending all their hydrogen and most material capable of being vaporized, including some of the light-metal hydrogen storage tanks — like an old steamer burning themselves to win a race. Gradually the curving course

that would have taken years to reach the outer planet flattened into a hyperbola that would make the journey in 200 days.

In the asteroid belt the pursuing cruisers turned aside to join in the crucial Battle of the Trojans with Earth's largely new-built, more heavily and wisely armed Combined Fleet — a battle that proved to be only a prelude to the decisive Battle of Jupiter.

Meanwhile the five-ship fleet sped onward, its solar drive quite useless in this twilight region even if it could have scraped together the needed boilable ejectant mass to slow its flight. Weeks became months. The ships were renamed for the planet they were aimed at. At least the fleet's trajectory had been truly set.

Almost on collision course it neared Uranus, a mystery-cored ball of frigid gas 32,000 miles wide coasting through space across the fleet's course at a lazy four miles a second. At this time the fleet was traveling at 100 miles a second. Beyond Uranus lay only the interstellar night, into which the fleet would inevitably vanish . . .

UNLESS, Grunfeld told himself . . . unless the fleet shed its velocity by ramming the gaseous bulk of Uranus. This idea of atmospheric braking on a grand scale had sounded possible at first suggestion, half a year ago — a little like a man falling off a mountain or from a plane and saving his life by dropping into a great thickness of feathery new-fallen snow.

Supposing her solar jet worked out here and she had the reaction mass, *Prospero* could have shed her present velocity in five hours, decelerating at a comfortable one G.

But allowing her 12,000 miles of straight-line travel through Uranus' frigid soupy atmosphere — and that might be dipping very close to the methane sea blanketing the planet's hypothetical mineral core — *Prospero* would have two minutes to shed her velocity.

Two minutes — at 150 Gs.

Men had stood 40 and 50 Gs for a fractional second.

But for two minutes . . . Grunfeld told himself that the only surer way to die would be to run into a section of the Enemy fleet. According to one calculation the ship's skin would melt by heat of friction in 90 seconds, despite the low temperature of the abrading atmosphere.

The star Grunfeld had been waiting for touched the hazy rim of Uranus. He drifted back to the eyepiece and began to follow it in as the pale planet's hydrogen muted its diamond brilliance.

III

IN the aft cabin, lank hairy-wristed Croker pinned another blanket around black Jackson as the latter shivered in his trance. Then Croker turned on a small light at the head of the hammock.

"Captain won't like that," plump pale Ness observed tranquilly from where he floated in womb position across the cabin. "Enemy can feel a candle of *our* light, captain says, ten million miles away." He rocked his elbows for warmth and his body wobbled in reaction like a pollywog's.

"And Jackson hears the Enemy think . . . and Heimdall hears the grass grow," Croker commented with a harsh manic laugh. "Isn't an Enemy for a billion miles, Ness." He launched aft from the hammock. "We haven't spotted their green since Saturn orbit. There's nowhere for them."

"There's the far side of Uranus," Ness pointed out. "That's less than ten million miles now. Eight. A bare day. They could be there."

"Yes, waiting to bushwack us as we whip past on our way to eternity," Croker chuckled as he crumpled up against the aft port, shedding momentum. "That's likely, isn't it, when they didn't have time for us back in the Belt?" He scowled at the tiny white sun, no bigger a disk than Venus, but still with one hundred times as much light as the full moon pouring from it — too much light to look at comfortably. He began to button the inner cover over the port.

"Don't do that," Ness objected without conviction. "There's not much heat in it but there's some." He hugged his elbows and shivered. "I don't remember being warm since Mars orbit."

"The sun gets on my nerves," Croker said. "It's like looking at an arc through a pinhole. It's like a high, high jail light in a cold concrete yard. The stars are highlights on the barbed wire."

"You ever in jail?" Ness asked. Croker grinned.

WITH the tropism of a fish, Ness began to paddle toward the little light at the head of Jackson's hammock, flicking his hands from the wrists like flippers. "I got one thing against the sun," he said quietly. "It's blanketing out the radio. I'd like to get one more message from Earth. We haven't tried rigging our mirror to catch radio waves. I'd like to hear how we won the battle of Jupiter."

"If we won it," Croker said.

"Our telescopes show no more green around Jove," Ness reminded

him. "We counted 27 rainbows of Enemy cruisers 'burning.' Captain verified the count."

"Repeat: if we won it." Croker pushed off and drifted back toward the hammock. "If there was a real victory message, they'd push it through, even if the sun's in the way and it takes three hours to catch us. People who win, shout."

Ness shrugged as he paddled. "One way or the other, we should be getting the news soon from Titania station," he said. "They'll have heard."

"If they're still alive and there ever was a Titania Station," Croker amended, backing air violently to stop himself as he neared the hammock. "Look, Ness, we know that the First Uranus Expedition arrived. At least they set off their flares. But that was three years before the War and we haven't any idea of what's happened to them since and if they ever managed to set up housekeeping on Titania — or Ariel or Oberon or even Miranda or Umbriel. At least if they built a station could raise Earth I haven't been told. Sure thing *Prospero* hasn't heard anything . . . and we're getting close."

"I won't argue," Ness said. "Even if we raise 'em, it'll just be hello-goodby with maybe time between for a battle report."

"And a football score and a short letter from home, ten seconds per man as the station fades." Croker frowned and added, "If the Captain had cottoned to my idea, two of us at any rate could have got off this express train at Uranus."

"Tell me how," Ness asked drily.

"How? Why, one of the ship's launches. Replace the fusion-head with the cabin. Put all the chem fuel in the tanks instead of divvying it between the ship and the launch."

"I haven't the brain for math Copperhead has, but I can subtract," Ness said, referring to *Prospero's* piloting robot. "Fully fueled, one of the launches has a max velocity change in free-fall of 30 miles per second. Use it all in braking and you've only taken 30 from 100. The launch is still going past Uranus and out of the system at 70 miles a second."

"You didn't hear all my idea," Croker said. "You put piggyback tanks on your launch and top them off with the fuel from the other four launches. Then you've 100 miles of braking *and a* maneuvering reserve. You only need to shed 90 miles, anyway. Ten miles a second's the close circum-Uranian velocity. Go into the circum Uranian orbit and wait for Titania to send their jeep to pick you up.

Have to start the maneuver four hours this side of Uranus, though. Take that long at 1 G to shed it."

"Cute," Ness conceded. "Especially the jeep. But I'm glad just the same we've got 70 per cent of our chem fuel in our ships' tanks instead of the lauches. We're on such a bull's eye course for Uranus — Copperhead really pulled a miracle plotting our orbit — that we may need a sidewise shove to miss her. If we slapped into that cold hydrogen soup at our 100 mps —"

Croker shrugged. "We still could have dropped a couple of us," he said.

"CAPTAIN'S got to look after the whole fleet," Ness said. "You're beginning to agitate, Croker, like you was Grunfeld — or the captain himself."

"But if Titania Station's alive, a couple of men dropped off would do the fleet some good. Stir Titania up to punch a message through to Earth and get a really high-speed retrieve-and-rescue ship started out after us. *If* we've won the War."

"But Titania Station's dead or never was, not to mention its jeep. And we've lost the Battle of Jupiter. You said so yourself," Ness asserted owlishly. "Captain's got to look after the whole fleet."

"Yeah, so he kills himself fretting and the rest of us die of old age in the outskirts of the Solar System. Join the Space Force and See the Stars! Ness, do you know how long it'd take us to reach the nearest star — except we aren't headed for her — at our 100 mps? Eight thousand years!"

"That's a lot of time to kill," Ness said. "Let's play chess."

Jackson sighed and they both looked quickly at the dark unlined face above the cocoon, but the lips did not flutter again, or the eyelids. Croker said, "Suppose he knows what the Enemy looks like?"

"I suppose," Ness said. When he talks about them it's as if he was their interpreter. How about the chess?"

"Suits. Knight to King Bishop Three."

"Hmm. Knight to King Knight Two, Third Floor."

"Hey, I meant flat chess, not three-D," Croker objected.

"That thin old game? Why, I no sooner start to get the position really visualized than the game's over."

"I don't want to start a game of three-D with Uranus only 18 hours away."

Jackson stirred in his hammock. His lips worked "They . . ." he

breathed. Croker and Ness instantly watched him. "They . . ."

"I wonder if he is really inside the Enemy's mind?" Ness said, staring at Jackson.

"He thinks he speaks for them," Croker replied and the next instant felt a warning touch on his arm and looked sideways and saw dark-circled eyes in a skull-angular face under a battered cap with a tarnished sunburst. Damn, thought Croker, how does the captain always know when Jackson's going to talk. He always shows up when Jackson begins moving.

"They are waiting for us on the other side of Uranus," Jackson breathed. His lips trembled into a smile and his voice grew a little louder, though his eyes stayed shut. "They're welcoming us, they're our brothers." The smile died. "But they know they got to kill us, they know we got to die." After saying this Jackson finally relaxed his tightened muscles.

The hammock with its tight-swathed form began to move past Croker and he snatched at it. The captain pushed off from him for the hatch leading forward.

GRUNFELD was losing the new star at 2200 miles into Uranus when he saw the two viridian flares flashing between it and the rim. Each flash was circled by a fleeting bright green ring, like a mist halo. He thought he'd be afraid when he saw that green again, but what he felt was a jolt of excitement that made him grin. With it came a touch on his shoulder. He thought, the captain always knows.

"Ambush," he said. "At least two cruisers."

He yielded the eyepiece to the captain. Even without the telescope he could see those incredibly brilliant flickers. He asked himself if the Enemy was already gunning for the fleet through Uranus.

The blue telltales for *Caliban* and *Starveling* began to blink.

"They've seen it too," the captain said. He snatched up the mike and his next words rang through the *Prospero.*

"Rig ship for the snowbank orbit! Snowbank orbit with stinger! Mr. Grunfeld, raise the fleet."

Aft, Croker muttered. "Rig our shrouds, don't he mean? Rig shrouds and firecrackers mounted on Fourth of July rockets. Let's go out in a blast of light."

Ness said. "Cheer up. Even the longest strategic withdrawal in history has to end some time."

IV

THREE quarters of a day later Grunfeld felt a spasm of futile fear and revolt as the pressure suit closed like a thick-fleshed carnivorous plant on his drugged and tired body. Relax, he told himself. Fine thing if you cooked up a fuss when even Croker didn't. He thought of forty things to recheck. Relax, he repeated — the work's over; all that matters is in Copperhead's memory tanks now, or will be as soon as the captain's suited up.

The suit held Grunfeld erect, his arms at his sides — the best attitude, except he was still facing forward, for taking high G, providing the ship herself didn't start to tumble. Only the cheekpieces and visor hadn't closed in on his face — translucent hand-thick petals as yet unfolded. He felt the delicate firm pressure of built-in fingertips monitoring his pulses and against his buttocks the cold smooth muzzles of the jet hypodermics that would feed him metronomic drugs during the high-G stretch and stimulants when they were in freefall again. When.

He could swing his head and eyes just enough to make out the suits of Croker and Ness to either side of him and their profiles wavy through the jutting misty cheekpieces. Ahead to the left was Jackson — just the back of his suit, like a black snowman standing at attention, pale-olive-edged by the great glow of Uranus. And to the right the captain, his legs suited but his upper body still bent out to the side as he checked the monitor on his suit, with its glowing blue button and the manual controls that would lie under his hands during the maneuver.

Beyond the captain was the spaceshield, the lower quarter of it still blackness and stars, but the upper three-quarters filled with the onrushing planet's pale mottled green that now had the dulled richness of watered silk. They were so close that the rim hardly showed curvature. The atmosphere must have a steep gradient, Grunfeld thought, or they'd already be feeling decel. That stuff ahead looked more like water than any kind of air. It bothered him that the captain was still half out of his suit.

There should be action and shouted commands, Grunfeld thought, to fill up these last tight-stretched minutes. Last orders to the fleet, port covers being cranked shut, someone doing a countdown on the firing of their torpedo. But the last message had gone to the fleet minutes ago. Its robot pilots were set to follow *Prospero* and imitate,

nothing else. And all the rest was up to Copperhead. Still . . .

Grunfeld wet his lips. "Captain," he said hesitatinly. "Captain?"

"Thank you, Grunfeld." He caught the edge of the skull's answering grin. "We *are* beginning to hit hydrogen," the quiet voice went on. "Forward skin temperature's up to 9 K."

Beyond the friendly skull, a great patch of the rim of Uranus flared bright green. As if that final stimulus had been needed, Jackson began to talk dreamily from his suit.

"They're still welcoming us and grieving for us. I begin to get a little more now. Their ship's one thing and they're another. Their ship is frightened to death of us. It hates us and the only thing it knows to do is to kill us. They can't stop it, they're even less than passengers. . ."

The captain was in his suit now. Grunfeld felt a rush of cold air. The cabin refrigeration system had started up, carrying heat to the lattice arms. Intended to protect them from solar heat, it would now do what it could against the heat of friction.

The straight edge of Uranus was getting hazier. Even the fainter stars shone through, spangling it. A bell jangled and the pale green segment narrowed as the steel meteor panels began to close in front of the spaceshield. Soon there was only a narrow vertical ribbon of green — *bright* green as it narrowed to a thread — then for a few seconds only blackness except for the dim red and blue beads and semi-circles, just beyond the captain, of the board. Then the muted interior cabin lights glowed on.

JACKSON droned: "They and their ships come from very far away, from the edge. If this is the continuum, they come from the . . . discontinuum, where they don't have stars but something else and where gravity is different. Their ships came from the edge on a gust of fear with the other ships, and our brothers came with it though they didn't want to . . ."

And now Grunfeld thought he began to feel it — the first faint thrill, less than a cobweb's tug, of *weight*.

The cabin wall moved sideways. Grunfeld's suit had begun to revolve slowly on a vertical axis.

For a moment he glimpsed Jackson's dark profile — all five suits were revolving in their framework. They locked into position when the men in them were facing aft. Now at least retinas wouldn't pull forward at high-G decel, or spines crush through thorax.

The cabin air was cold on Grunfeld's forehead. And now he was sure he felt weight — maybe five pounds of it. Suddenly aft was *up*. It was as if he were lying on his back on the spaceshield.

A sudden snarling roar came through his suit from the beams bracing it. He lost weight, then regained it and a little more besides. He realized it was their torpedo taking off, to skim by Uranus in the top of the atmosphere and then curve inward the little their chem fuel would let them, homing toward the Enemy. He imagined its tiny red jet over the great gray-green glowing plain. Four more would be taking off from the other ships — the fleet's feeble sting. Like a bee's, just one, in dying.

The cheekpieces and foreheadpiece of Grunfeld's suit began to close on his face like layers of pliable ice.

Jackson called faintly, "*Now* I understand. Their ship —" His voice was cut off.

Grunfeld's ice-mask was tight shut. He felt a small surge of vigor as the suit took over his breathing and sent his lungs a gush of high-oxy air. Then came a tingling numbness as the suit field went on, adding an extra prop against decel to each molecule of his body.

But the weight was growing. He was on the moon now . . . now on Mars . . . now back on Earth . . .

The weight was stifling now, crushing — a hill of invisible sand. Grunfeld saw a black pillow hanging in the cabin above him aft. It had red fringe around it. It grew.

There was a whistling and shaking. Everything lurched torturingly, the ship's jets roared, everything recovered, or didn't.

The black pillow came down on him, crushing out sight, crushing out thought.

THE universe was a black tingling, a limitless ache floating in a larger black infinity. Something drew back and there was a dry fiery wind on numb humps and ridges — the cabin air on his face, Grunfeld decided, then shivered and started at the thought that he was alive and in freefall. His body didn't feel like a mass of internal hemorrhages. Or did it?

He spun slowly. It stopped. Dizziness? Or the suits revolving forward again? If they'd actually come through —

There was a creaking and cracking. The ship contracting after frictional heating?

There was a faint stink like ammonia and formaldehyde mixed.

A few Uranian molecules forced past plates racked by turbulence?

He saw dim red specks. The board? Or last flickers from ruined retinas? A bell jangled. He waited, but he saw nothing. Blind? Or the meteor guard jammed? No wonder if it were. No wonder if the cabin lights were broken.

The hot air that had dried his sweaty face rushed down the front of his body. Needles of pain pierced him as he slumped forward out of the top of his opening suit.

Then he saw the horizontal band of stars outlining the top of the spaceshield and below it the great field of inky black, barely convex upward, *that must,* he realized, *be the dark side of Uranus.*

Pain ignored, Grunfeld pushed himself forward out of his suit and pulled himself past the captain's to the spaceshield.

The view stayed the same, though broadening out: stars above, a curve-edged velvet plain below. They were orbiting.

A pulsing, color-changing glow from somewhere showed him twisted stumps of the radio lattices. There was no sign of the mirror at all. It must have been torn away, or vaporized completely, in the fiery turbulence of decel.

New maxs showed on the board: Cabin Temperature 214 F, Skin Temperature 907 K, Gravs 87.

Then in the top of the spacefield, almost out of vision, Grunfeld saw the source of the pulsing glow: two sharp-ended ovals flickering brightly all colors against the pale starfields.

"The torps got to 'em," Croker said, pushed forward beside Grunfeld to the right.

"I did find out at the end," Jackson said quietly from the left, his voice at last free of the trance-tone. "The Enemy ships weren't ships at all. They were (there's no other word for it) space animals. We've always thought life was a prerogative of planets, that space was inorganic. But you can walk miles through the desert or sail leagues through the sea before you notice life and I guess space is the same. Anyway the Enemy was (what else can I call 'em?) space-whales. Inertialess space-whales from the discontinuum. Space-whales that ate hydrogen (that's the only way I know how to say it) and spat light to move and fight. The ones I talked to, our brothers, were just their parasites."

"That's crazy," Grunfeld said. "All of it. A child's picture."

"Sure it is," Jackson agreed.

From beyond Jackson, Ness, punching buttons, said, "Quiet."

The radio came on thin and wailing with static: "Titania Station calling fleet. We have jeep and can orbit in to you. The two Enemy are dead — the last in the System. Titania Station calling fleet. We have jeep fueled and set to go —"

Fleet? thought Grunfeld. He turned back to the board. The first and last blue telltales still glowed for *Caliban* and *Starveling*. Breathe a prayer, he thought, for *Moth* and *Snug*.

Something else shone on the board, something Grunfeld knew had to be wrong. Three little words: SHIP ON MANUAL.

The black rim of Uranus ahead suddenly brightened along its length, which was very slightly bowed, like a section of a giant new moon. A bead formed toward the center, brightened, and then all at once the jail-yard sun had risen and was glaring coldly through its pinhole into their eyes.

They looked away from it. Grunfeld turned around.

The austere light showed the captain still in his pressure suit, only the head fallen out forward, hiding the skull features. Studying the monitor box of the captain's suit, Grunfeld saw it was set to inject the captain with power stimulants as soon as the Gravs began to slacken from their max.

He realized who had done the impossible job of piloting them out of Uranus.

But the button on the monitor, that should have glowed blue, was as dark as those of *Moth* and *Snug*.

Grunfeld thought, now he can rest. END

A. E. VAN VOGT

The Expendables

I

ONE hundred and nine years after leaving Earth, the spaceship, *Hope of Man,* went into orbit around Alta III.

The following "morning" Captain Browne informed the shipload of fourth and fifth generation colonists that a manned lifeboat would be dropped to the planet's surface.

"Every member of the crew must consider himself expendable," he said earnestly. "This is the day that our great grandparents, our forefathers, who boldly set out for the new space frontier so long ago, looked forward to with unfaltering courage. We must not fail them."

He concluded his announcement over the intercom system of the big ship by saying that the names of crew members of the lifeboat would be given out within the hour. "And I know that every real man aboard will want to see his name there."

John Lesbee, the fifth of his line aboard, had a sinking sensation as he heard those words — and he was not mistaken.

Even as he tried to decide if he should give the signal for a desperate act of rebellion, Captain Browne made the expected announcement.

The commander said, "And I know you will all join him in his moment of pride and courage when I tell you that John Lesbee will lead the crew that carries the hopes of man in this remote area of space. And now the others —"

He thereupon named seven of the nine persons with whom Lesbee had been conspiring to seize control of the ship.

Since the lifeboat would only hold eight persons, Lesbee recognized that Browne was dispatching as many of his enemies as he could. He listened with a developing dismay, as the commander

ordered all persons on the ship to come to the recreation room. "Here I request that the crew of the lifeboat join me and the other officers on stage. Their instructions are to surrender themselves to any craft which seeks to intercept them. They will be equipped with instruments whereby we here can watch, and determine the stage of scientific attainments of the dominant race on the planet below.

LESBEE hurried to his room on the technicians' deck, hoping that perhaps Tellier or Cantlin would seek him out there. He felt himself in need of a council of war, however brief. He waited five minutes, but not one member of his conspiratorial group showed.

Nonetheless, he had time to grow calm. Peculiarly, it was the smell of the ship that soothed him most. From the earliest days of his life, the odor of energy and the scent of metal under stress had been perpetual companions. At the moment, with the ship in orbit, there was a letting up of stress. The smell was of old energies rather than new. But the effect was similar.

He sat in the chair he used for reading, eyes closed, breathing in that complex of odors, product of so many titanic energies. Sitting there, he felt the fear leave his mind and body. He grew brave again, and strong.

Lesbee recognized soberly that his plan to seize power had involved risks. Worse, no one would question Browne's choice of him as the leader of the mission. "I am," thought Lesbee, "probably the most highly trained technician ever to be on this ship." Browne Three had taken him when he was ten, and started on the long grind of learning that led him, one after the other, to master the mechanical skills of all the various technical departments. And Browne Four had continued his training.

He was taught how to repair relay systems. He gradually came to understand the purposes of countless analogs. The time came when he could visualize the entire automation. Long ago, the colossal cobweb of electric instruments within the walls had become almost an extension of his nervous sytem.

During those years of work and study, each daily apprenticeship chore left his slim body exhausted. After he came off duty, he sought a brief relaxation and usually retired to an early rest.

He never did find the time to learn the intricate theory that underlay the ship's many operations.

His father, while he was alive, had made numerous attempts to

pass his knowledge on to his son. But it was hard to teach complexities to a tired and sleepy boy. Lesbee even felt slightly relieved when his parent died. It took the pressure off him. Since then, however, he had come to realize that the Browne family, by forcing a lesser skill on the descendant of the original commander of the ship had won their greatest victory.

As he headed finally for the recreation room, Lesbee found himself wondering: Had the Brownes trained him with the intention of preparing him for such a mission as this?

His eyes widened. If that was true, then his own conspiracy was merely an excuse. The decision to kill him might actually have been made more than a decade ago, and light years away. . .

AS the lifeboat fell toward Alta III, Lesbee and Tellier sat in the twin control chairs and watched on the forward screen the vast, misty atmosphere of the planet.

Tellier was thin and intellectual, a descendant of the physicist Dr. Tellier who had made many speed experiments in the early days of the voyage. It had never been understood why spaceships could not attain even a good fraction of the speed of light, let alone velocities greater than light. When the scientist met his untimely death, there was no one with the training to carry on a testing program.

It was vaguely believed by the trained personnel who succeeded Tellier that the ship had run into one of the paradoxes implicit in the Lorenz-Fitzgerald Contraction theory.

Whatever the explanation, it was never solved.

Watching Tellier, Lesbee wondered if his companion and best friend felt as empty inside as he did. Incredibly, this was the first time he — or anyone — had been outside the big ship. "We're actually headed down," he thought, "to one of those great masses of land and water, a planet."

As he watched, fascinated, the massive ball grew visibly bigger.

They came in at a slant, a long, swift, angling approach, ready to jet away if any of the natural radiation belts proved too much for their defense systems. But as each stage of radiation registered in turn, the dials showed that the lifeboat machinery made the proper responses automatically.

The silence was shattered suddenly by an alarm bell.

Simultaneously, one of the screens focused on a point of rapidly moving light far below. The light darted toward them.

Lesbee caught his breath. It was a missile.

But the shining projectile veered off, turned completely around, took up position several miles away, and began to fall with them.

His first thought was: "They'll never let us land," and he experienced an intense disappointment.

Another signal brrred from the control board.

"They're probing us," said Tellier tensely.

An instant after the words were uttered, the lifeboat seemed to shudder and to stiffen under them. It was the unmistakable feel of a tractor beam. Its field clutched the lifeboat, drew it, held it.

The science of the Alta III inhabitants was already proving itself formidable.

Underneath him the lifeboat continued its movement.

The entire crew gathered around and watched as the point of brightness resolved into an object, which rapidly grew larger. It loomed up close, bigger than they.

There was a metallic bump. The lifeboat shuddered from stem to stern.

Even before the vibrations ceased Tellier said, "Notice they put our airlock against theirs."

Behind Lesbee, his companions began that peculiar joking of the threatened. It was a coarse comedy, but it had enough actual humor suddenly to break through his fear. Involuntarily he laughed.

Then, momentarily free of anxiety, aware that Browne was watching and that there was no escape, he said, "Open the airlock! Let the aliens capture us as ordered."

II

A few minutes after the outer airlock was opened, the airlock of the alien ship folded back also. Rubberized devices rolled out and contacted the Earth lifeboat, sealing off both entrances from the vacuum of space.

Air hissed into the interlocking passageway between the two craft. In the alien craft's lock, an inner door opened.

Again Lesbee held his breath.

There was a movement in the passageway. A creature ambled into view. The being came forward with complete assurance, and pounded with something he held at the end of one of his four leathery arms on the hull.

The creature had four legs and four arms, and a long thin body held straight up. It had almost no neck, yet the many skin folds between the head and the body indicated great flexibility was possible.

Even as Lesbee noted the details of its appearance, the being turned his head slightly, and its two large expressionless eyes gazed straight at the hidden wall receptor that was photographing the scene, and therefore straight into Lesbee's eyes.

Lesbee blinked at the creature, then tore his gaze away, swallowed hard, and nodded at Tellier. "Open up!" he commanded.

The moment the inner door of the Earth lifeboat opened, six more of the four-legged beings appeared one after another in the passageway, and walked forward in the same confident way as had the first.

All seven creatures entered the open door of the lifeboat.

As they entered their thoughts came instantly into Lesbee's mind...

AS Dzing and his boarding party trotted from the small Karn ship through the connecting airlock, his chief officer thought a message to him.

"Air pressure and oxygen content are within a tiny percentage of what exists at ground level on Karn. They can certainly live on our planet."

Dzing moved forward into the Earth ship, and realized that he was in the craft's control chamber. There, for the first time, he saw the men. He and his crew ceased their forward motion; and the two groups of beings — the humans and the Karn — gazed at each other.

The appearance of the two-legged beings did not surprise Dzing. Pulse viewers had, earlier, penetrated the metal walls of the lifeboat and had accurately photographed the shape and dimension of those aboard.

His first instruction to his crew was designed to test if the strangers were, in fact, surrendering. He commanded: "Convey to the prisoners that we require them as a precaution to remove their clothing."

. . . Until that direction was given, Lesbee was still uncertain as to whether or not these beings could receive human thoughts as he was receiving theirs. From the first moment, the aliens had conducted their mental conversations *as if* they were unaware of the thoughts of the human beings. Now he watched the Karn come

forward. One tugged suggestively at his clothing. And there was no doubt.

The mental telepathy was a one-way flow only — from the Karn to the humans.

He was already savoring the implications of that as he hastily undressed . . . It was absolutely vital that Browne did not find it out.

Lesbee removed all his clothes; then, before laying them down, took out his notebook and pen. Standing there naked, he wrote hurriedly:

"Don't let on that we can read the minds of these beings."

He handed the notebook around, and he felt a lot better as each of the men read it, and nodded at him silently.

Dzing communicated telepathically with someone on the ground. "These strangers," he reported, "clearly acted under command to surrender. The problem is, how can we now let them overcome us without arousing their suspicion that this is what we want them to do?"

Lesbee did not receive the answer directly. But he picked it up from Dzing's mind: "Start tearing the lifeboat apart. See if that brings a reaction."

THE members of the Karn boarding party went to work at once. Off came the control panels; floor plates were melted and ripped up. Soon instruments, wiring, controls were exposed for examination. Most interesting of all to the aliens were the numerous computers and their accessories.

Browne must have watched the destruction; for now, before the Karn could start wrecking the automatic machinery, his voice interjected:

"Watch out, you men! I'm going to shut your airlock and cause your boat to make a sharp right turn in exactly twenty seconds."

For Lesbee and Tellier that simply meant sitting down in their chairs, and turning them so that the acceleration pressure would press them against the backs. The other men sank to the ripped-up floor, and braced themselves.

Underneath Dzing, the ship swerved. The turn began slowly, but it propelled him and his fellows over to one wall of the control room. There he grabbed with his numerous hands at some handholds that had suddenly moved out from the smooth metal. By

the time the turn grew sharper, he had his four short legs braced, and he took the rest of the wide swing around with every part of his long, sleek body taut.

His companions did the same.

Presently, the awful pressure eased up, and he was able to estimate that their new direction was almost at right angles to what it had been.

He had reported what was happening while it was going on. Now, the answer came: "Keep on destroying. See what they do, and be prepared to succumb to anything that looks like a lethal attack."

Lesbee wrote quickly in his notebook: "Our method of capturing them doesn't have to be subtle. They'll make it easy for us — so we can't lose."

Lesbee waited tensely as the notebook was passed around. It was still hard for him to believe that no one else had noticed what he had about this boarding party.

Tellier added a note of his own: "It's obvious now that these beings were also instructed by their leader to consider themselves expendable."

And that settled it for Lesbee. The others hadn't noticed what he had. He sighed with relief at the false analysis, for it gave him that most perfect of all advantages: that which derived from his special education.

Apparently, he alone knew enough to have analyzed what these creatures were.

The proof was in the immense clarity of their thought. Long ago, on earth, it had been established that man had a faltering telepathic ability, which could be utilized consistently only by electronic amplification *outside* his brain. The amount of energy needed for the step-up process was enough to burn out brain nerves, if applied directly.

Since the Karn were utilizing it directly, they couldn't be living beings.

Therefore, Dzing and his fellows were an advanced robot type.

The true inhabitants of Alta III were not risking their own skins at all.

Far more important to Lesbee, he could see how he might use these marvellous mechanisms to defeat Browne, take over the *Hope of Man,* and start the long journey back to Earth.

III

HE had been watching the Karn at their work of destruction, while he had these thoughts. Now, he said aloud: "Hainker, Graves."

"Yes?" The two men spoke together.

"In a few moments I'm going to ask Captain Browne to turn the ship again. When he does, use our specimen gas guns!"

The men grinned with relief. "Consider it done," said Hainker.

Lesbee ordered the other four crewmen to use the specimen-holding devices at top speed. To Tellier he said, "You take charge if anything happens to me."

Then he wrote one more message in the notebook: "These beings will probably continue their mental intercommunications after they are apparently rendered unconscious. Pay no attention, and do not comment on it in any way."

He felt a lot better when that statement also had been read by the others, and the notebook was once more in his possession. Quickly, he spoke to the screen:

"Captain Browne! Make another turn, just enough to pin them."

And so they captured Dzing and his crew.

As he had expected, the Karn continued their telepathic conversation. Dzing reported to his ground contact: "I think we did that rather well."

There must have been an answering message from below, because he went on, "Yes, commander. We are now prisoners as per your instructions, and shall await events . . . The imprisoning method? Each of us is pinned down by a machine which has been placed astride us, with the main section adjusted to the contour of our bodies. A series of rigid metal appendages fasten our arms and legs. All these devices are electronically controlled, and we can of course escape at any time. Naturally, such action is for later . . ."

Lesbee was chilled by the analysis; but for expendables there was no turning back.

He ordered his men: "Get dressed. Then start repairing the ship. Put all the floor plates back except the section at G-8. They removed some of the analogs, and I'd better make sure myself that it all goes back all right."

When he had dressed, he reset the course of the lifeboat, and called Browne. The screen lit up after a moment, and there staring

back at him was the unhappy countenance of the forty-year-old officer.

Browne said glumly: "I want to congratulate you on your accomplishments. It would seem that we have a small scientific superiority over this race, and that we can attempt a limited landing."

Since there would never be a landing on Alta III, Lesbee simply waited without comment as Browne seemed lost in thought

The officer stirred finally. He still seemed uncertain. "Mr. Lesbee," he said, "as you must understand, this is an extremely dangerous situation for me — and —" he added hastily — "for this entire expedition."

What struck Lesbee, as he heard these words, was that Browne was not going to let him back on the ship. But he had to get aboard to accomplish his own purpose. He thought: "I'll have to bring this whole conspiracy out into the open, and apparently make a compromise offer."

He drew a deep breath, gazed straight into the eyes of Browne's image on the screen and said with the complete courage of a man for whom there is no turning back: "It seems to me, sir, that we have two alternatives. We can resolve all these personal problems either through a democratic election or by a joint captaincy, you being one of the captains and I being the other."

TO any other person who might have been listening the remark must have seemed a complete non sequitur. Browne, however, understood its revelance. He said with a sneer, "So you're out in the open. Well, let me tell you, Mr. Lesbee, there was never any talk of elections when the Lesbees were in power. And for a very good reason. A spaceship requires a technical aristocracy to command it. As for a joint captaincy, it wouldn't work."

Lesbee urged his lie: "If we're going to stay here, we'll need at least two people of equal authority — one on the ground, one on the ship."

"I couldn't trust you on the ship!" said Browne flatly.

"Then you be on the ship," Lesbee proposed. "All such practical details can be arranged."

The older man must have been almost beside himself with the intensity of his own feelings on this subject. He flashed, "Your family has been out of power for over fifty years! How can you still feel that you have any rights?"

Lesbee countered, "How come you still know what I'm talking about?"

Browne said, a grinding rage in his tone, "The concept of inherited power was introduced by the first Lesbee. It was never planned."

"But here you are," said Lesbee, "yourself a beneficiary of inherited power."

Browne said from between clenched teeth: "It's absolutely ridiculous that the Earth government which was in power when the ship left — and every member of which has been long dead — should appoint somebody to a command position . . . and that now his descendant think that command post should be his, and his family's for all time!"

Lesbee was silent, startled by the dark emotions he had uncovered in the man. He felt even more justified, if that were possible, and advanced his next suggestion without a qualm. His voice didn't betray the anxiety he felt.

"Captain, this is a crisis. We should postpone our private struggle. Why don't we bring one of these prisoners aboard so that we can question him by use of films, or play acting? Later, we can discuss your situation and mine."

He saw from the look on Browne's face that the reasonableness of the suggestion, *and its potentialities,* were penetrating.

Browne said quickly, "Only you come aboard — and with one prisoner only. No one else!"

Lesbee felt a dizzying thrill as the man responded to his bait. He thought: "It's like an exercise in logic. He'll try to murder me as soon as he gets me alone and is satisfied that he can attack without danger to himself. But that very scheme is what will get me aboard. And I've got to get on the ship in order to carry out *my* plan."

Browne was frowning. He said in a concerned tone: "Mr. Lesbee, can you think of any reason why we should not bring one of these beings aboard?"

Lesbee shook his head. "No reason, sir," he lied.

Browne seemed to come to a decision. "Very well. I'll see you shortly, and we can then discuss all of the many additional details."

Lesbee dared not say another word. He nodded, and broke the connection, disturbed, uneasy.

"But,' he thought, "what else can we do?"

HE turned his attention to the part of the floor that had been left open for him. Quickly, he bent down and studied the codes on the programming units, as if he were seeking exactly the right ones that had originally been in those slots.

He found the series he wanted: an intricate system of cross-connected units that had been originally designed to program a remote-control landing system, an advanced Waldo mechanism capable of landing the craft on a planet and taking off again, all directed on the pulse level of human thought.

He slid each unit of the series into its sequential position and locked it in.

Then, that important task completed, he picked up the remote control attachment for the series and casually put it in his pocket.

He returned to the control board and spent several minutes examining the wiring and comparing it with a wall chart. A number of wires had been torn loose. These he now re-connected, and at the same time he managed with a twist of his pliers to short-circuit a key relay of the remote control pilot.

Lesbee replaced the panel itself loosely. There was no time to connect it properly. And, since he could easily justify his next move, he pulled a cage out of the storeroom. Into this he hoisted Dzing, manacle and all.

Before lowering the lid he rigged into the cage a simple resistor that would prevent the Karn from broadcasting on the human thought level. The device was simple merely in that it was not selective. It had an on-off switch which triggered, or stopped, energy flow in the metal walls on the thought level.

When the device was installed, Lesbee slipped the tiny remote control for *it* into his other pocket. He did not activate the control. Not yet.

From the cage Dzing telepathed: "It is significant that these beings have selected me for this special attention. We might conclude that it is a matter of mathematical accident, or else that they are very observant and so noticed that I was the one who directed activities. Whatever the reason, it would be foolish to turn back now."

A bell began to ring. As Lesbee watched, a spot of light appeared on one of the screens. It moved rapidly toward some crossed lines in the exact center of the screens. Inexorably, then, the *Hope of Man* as represented by the light, and the lifeboat moved toward their fateful rendezvous.

IV

BROWNE'S instructions were: "Come to Control Room Below!" Lesbee guided his powered dolly with the cage on it out of the big ship's airlock P — and saw that the man in the control room of the lock was Second Officer Selwyn. Heavy brass for such a routine task. Selwyn waved at him with a twisted smile as Lesbee wheeled his cargo along the silent corridor.

He saw no one else on his route. Other personnel had evidently been cleared from this part of the vessel. A little later, grim and determined, he set the cage down in the center of the big room and anchored it magnetically to the floor.

As Lesbee entered the captain's office, Browne looked up from one of the two control chairs and stepped down from the rubber-sheathed dais to the same level as Lesbee. He came forward, smiling, and held out his hand. He was a big man, as all the Brownes had been, bigger by a head than Lesbee, good-looking in a clean-cut way. The two men were alone.

"I'm glad you were so frank," he said. "I doubt if I could have spoken so bluntly to you without your initiative as an example."

But as they shook hands. Lesbee was wary and suspicious. Lesbee thought: "He's trying to recover from the insanity of his reaction. I really blew him wide open."

Browne continued in the same hearty tone: "I've made up my mind. An election is out of the question. The ship swarming with untrained dissident groups, most of which simply want to go back to Earth."

Lesbee, who had the same desire, was discreetly silent.

Browne said, "You'll be ground captain; I'll be ship captain. Why don't we sit down right now and work out a communique on which we can agree and that I can read over the intercom to the others?"

As Lesbee seated himself in the chair beside Browne, he was thinking: "What can be gained from publicly naming me ground captain?"

He concluded finally, cynically, that the older man could gain the confidence of John Lesbee — lull him, lead him on, delude him, destroy him.

Surreptitiously Lesbee examined the room. Control Room Below was a large square chamber adjoining the massive central engines. Its control board was a duplicate of the one on the bridge located at the top of the ship. The great vessel could be guided equally

from either board, except that pre-emptive power was on the bridge. The officer of the watch was given the right to make Merit decisions in an emergency.

Lesbee made a quick calculation and deduced that it was First Officer Miller's watch on the bridge. Miller was a staunch supporter of Browne. The man was probably watching them on one of his screens, ready to come to Browne's aid at a moment's notice.

A few minutes later, Lesbee listened thoughtfully as Browne read their joint communique over the intercom, designating him as ground captain. He found himself a little amazed, and considerably dismayed, at the absolute confidence the older man must feel about his own power and position on the ship. It was a big step, naming his chief rival to so high a rank.

Browne's next act was equally surprising. While they were still on the viewers, Browne reached over, clapped Lesbee affectionately on the shoulders and said to the watching audience:

"As you all know, John is the only direct descendant of the original captain. No one knows exactly what happened half a hundred years ago when my grandfather first took command. But I remember the old man always felt that only he understood how things should be. I doubt if he had any confidence in *any* young whippersnapper over whom he did not have complete control. I often felt that my father was the victim rather than the beneficiary of my grandfather's temper and feeling of superiority."

Browne smiled engagingly. "Anyway, good people, though we can't unbreak the eggs that were broken then, we can certainly start healing the wounds, without—" his tone was suddenly firm— "negating the fact that my own training and experience make me the proper commander of the ship itself."

He broke off. "Captain Lesbee and I shall now jointly attempt to communicate with the captured intelligent life form from the planet below. You may watch, though we reserve the right to cut you off for good reason." He turned to Lesbee. "What do you think we should do first, John?"

Lesbee was in a dilemma. The first large doubt had come to him, the possibility that perhaps the other was sincere. The possibility was especially disturbing because in a few moments a part of his own plan would be revealed.

He sighed and realized that there was no turning back at this stage.

He thought: "We'll have to bring the entire madness out into the open, and only then can we begin to consider agreement as real."

Aloud he said in a steady voice, "Why not bring the prisoner out where we can see him?"

As the tractor beam lifted Dzing out of the cage, and thus away from the energies that had suppressed his thought waves, the Karn telepathed to his contact on Alta III:

"Have been held in a confined space, the metal of which was energized against communication. I shall now attempt to perceive and evaluate the condition and performance of this ship —"

At that point, Browne reached over and clicked off the intercom. Having shut off the audience, he turned accusingly to Lesbee, and said, "Explain your failure to inform me that these beings communicate by telepathy."

The tone of his voice was threatening. There was a hint of angry color in his face. It was the moment of discovery.

LESBEE hesitated, and then simply pointed out how precarious their relationship had been. He finished frankly, "I thought by keeping it a secret I might be able to stay alive a little longer, which was certainly not what you intended when you sent me out as an expendable."

Browne snapped, "But how did you hope to utilize? —"

He stopped. "Never mind," he muttered.

Dzing was telepathing again:

"In many ways this is mechanically a very advanced type ship. Atomic energy drives are correctly installed. The automatic machinery performs magnificently. There is massive energy screen equipment and they can put out a tractor beam to match anything we have that's mobile. But there is a wrongness in the energy flows of this ship, which I lack the experience to interpret. Let me furnish you some data . . ."

The data consisted of variable wave measurements, evidently — so Lesbee deduced — the wave-lengths of the energy flows involved in the "wrongness."

He said in alarm at that point, "Better drop him into the cage while we analyze what he could be talking about."

Browne did so — as Dzing telepathed: "If what you suggest is true, then these beings are completely at our mercy —"

Cut off!

Browne was turning on the intercom. "Sorry I had to cut you good people off," he said. "You'll be interested to know that we have managed to tune in on the thought pulses of the prisoner and have intercepted his calls to someone on the planet below. This gives us an advantage." He turned to Lesbee. "Don't you agree?"

Browne visibly showed no anxiety, whereas Dzing's final statement flabbergasted Lesbee. ". . . *completely at our mercy* . . ." surely meant exactly that. He was staggered that Browne could have missed the momentous meaning.

Browne addressed him enthusiastically, "I'm excited by this telepathy! It's a marvelous short-cut to communication, if we could build up our own thought pulses. Maybe we could use the principle of the remote-control landing device which, as you know, can project human thoughts on a simple, gross level, where ordinary energies get confused by the intense field needed for the landing."

What interested Lesbee in the suggestion was that he had in his pocket a remote control for precisely such mechanically produced thought pulses. Unfortunately, the control was for the lifeboat. It probably would be advisable to tune the control to the ship landing system also. It was a problem he had thought of earlier, and now Browne had opened the way for an easy solution.

He held his voice steady as he said, "Captain, let me program those landing analogs while you prepare the film communication project. That way we can be ready for him either way."

Browne seemed to be completely trusting, for he agreed at once.

At Browne's direction, a film projector was wheeled in. It was swiftly mounted on solid connections at one end of the room. The cameraman and Third Officer Mindel — who had come in with him — strapped themselves into two adjoining chairs attached to the projector, and were evidently ready.

WHILE this was going on, Lesbee called various technical personnel. Only one technician protested. "But, John," he said, "that way we have a double control — with the lifeboat having pre-emption over the ship. That's very unusual."

It was unusual. But it was the lifeboat control that was in his pocket where he could reach it quickly; and so he said adamantly, "Do you want to talk to Captain Browne? Do you want his okay?"

"No, no." The technician's doubts seemed to subside. "I heard you being named joint captain. You're the boss. It shall be done."

Lesbee put down the closed-circuit phone into which he had been talking, and turned. It was then he saw that the film was ready to roll, and that Browne had his fingers on the controls of the tractor beam. The older man stared at him questioningly.

"Shall I go ahead?" he asked.

At this penultimate moment, Lesbeee had a qualm.

Almost immediately he realized that the only alternative to what Browne planned was that he reveal his own secret knowledge.

He hesitated, torn by doubts. Then: "Will you turn that off?" He indicated the intercom.

Browne said to the audience, "We'll bring you in again on this in a minute, good people." He broke off the connection and gazed questioningly at Lesbee.

Whereupon Lesbee said in a low voice, "Captain, I should inform you that I brought the Karn aboard in the hope of using him against you."

"Well, that is a frank and open admission," the officer replied very softly.

"I mention this," said Lesbee, "because if you had similar ulterior motives, we should clear the air before proceeding with this attempt at communication."

A blossom of color spread from Browne's neck over his face. At last he said slowly, "I don't know how I can convince you, but I had no schemes."

Lesbee gazed at Browne's open countenance, and suddenly he realized that the officer was sincere. Browne had accepted the compromise. The solution of a joint captaincy really was agreeable to him.

Sitting there, Lesbee experienced an enormous joy. Seconds went by before he realized what underlay the intense pleasurable excitement. It was simply the discovery that — communication worked. You could tell your truth and get a fair hearing . . . if it made any sense.

It seemed to him that his truth had made a lot of sense. He was offering Browne peace aboard the ship. Peace at a price, of course; but still peace. And in this severe emergency Browne recognized the entire validity of the solution.

So it was now evident to Lesbee.

Without further hesitation he told Browne that the creatures who had boarded the lifeboat, were robots — not alive at all.

BROWNE was nodding thoughtfully. Finally he said: "But I don't see how this could be utilized to take over the ship."

Lesbee said patiently, "As you know, sir, the remote landing control system includes five principal ideas which are projected very forcibly on the thought level. Three of these are for guidance — up, down and sideways. Intense magnetic fields, any one of which could partially jam a complex robot's thinking processes. The fourth and fifth are instruction to blast either up or down. The force of the blast depends on how far the control is turned on. Since the energy used is overwhelming those simple commands would take pre-emption over the robot. When that first one came aboard, I had a scan receiver — nondetectable — on him. This registered two power sources, one pointing forward, one backward, from the chest level. That's why I had him on his back when I brought him in here. But the fact is I could have had him tilted and pointing at a target, and activated either control four or five, thus destroying whatever was in the path of the resulting blast. Naturally, I took all possible precautions to make sure this did not happen until you had indicated what you intended to do. One of these precautions would enable us to catch this creature's thoughts without —"

As he was speaking, he eagerly put his hand into his pocket, intending to show the older man the tiny on-off control device by which — when it was off — they would be able to read Dzing's thoughts without removing him from the cage.

He stopped short in his explanation, because an ugly expression had come suddenly into Browne's face.

The big man glanced at Third Officer Mindel. "Well, Dan," he said, "do you think that's it?"

Lesbee noticed with shock that Mindel had on sound amplifying earphones. He must have overheard every word that Browne and he had spoken to each other.

Mindel nodded. "Yes, Captain," he said. "I very definitely think he has now told us what we wanted to find out."

Lesbee grew aware that Browne had released himself from his acceleration safety belt and was stepping away from his seat. The officer turned and, standing very straight, said in a formal tone:

"Technician Lesbee, we have heard your admission of gross dereliction of duty, conspiracy to overthrow the lawful government of this ship, scheme to utilize alien creatures to destroy human beings, and confession of other unspeakable crimes. In this extremely

dangerous situation, summary execution without formal trial is justified. I therefore sentence you to death and order Third Officer Dan Mindel to —"

He faltered, and came to a stop.

V

TWO things had happened as he talked, Lesbee squeezed the "off" switch of the cage control, an entirely automatic gesture, convulsive, a spasmodic movement, result of his dismay. It was a mindless gesture. So far as he knew consciously, freeing Dzing's thoughts had no useful possibility for him. His only real hope — as he realized almost immediately — was to get his other hand into his remaining coat pocket and with it manipulate the remote-control landing device, the secret of which he had so naively revealed to Browne.

The second thing that happened was that Dzing, released from mental control, telepathed:

"Free again — and this time of course permanently! I have just now activated by remote control the relays that will in a few moments start the engines of this ship, and I have naturally re-set the mechanism for controlling the rate of acceleration —"

His thoughts must have impinged progressively on Browne, for it was at that point that the officer paused uncertainly.

Dzing continued: "I have verified your analysis. This vessel does not have the internal energy flows of an interstellar ship. These two-legged beings have therefore failed to achieve the Light Speed Effect which alone makes possible trans-light velocities. I suspect they have taken many generations to make this journey, are far indeed for their home base, and I'm sure I can capture them all."

Lesbee reached over, tripped on the intercom and yelled at the screen: "All stations prepare for emergency acceleration! Grab anything!"

To Browne he shouted: "Get to your seat — *quick!*"

His actions were automatic responses to danger. Only after the words were spoken did it occur to him that he had no interest in the survival of Captain Browne. And that in fact the only reason the man was in danger was because he had stepped away from his safety belt, so that Mindel's blaster would kill Lesbee without damaging Browne.

Browne evidently understood his danger. He started toward the

control chair from which he had released himself only moments before. His reaching hands were still a foot or more from it when the impact of Acceleration One stopped him. He stood there trembling like a man who had struck and invisible but palpable wall. The next instant Acceleration Two caught him and thrust him on his back to the floor. He began to slide toward the rear of the room, faster and faster, and because he was quick and understanding he pressed the palms of his hands and his rubber shoes hard against the floor and so tried to slow the movement of his body.

Lesbee was picturing other people elsewhere in the ship desperately trying to save themselves. He groaned, for the commander's failure was probably being duplicated everywhere.

Even as he had that thought, Acceleration Three caught Browne. Like a rock propelled by a catapult he shot toward the rear wall. It was cushioned to protect human beings, and so it reacted like rubber, bouncing him a little. But the stuff had only momentary resilience.

Acceleration Four pinned Browne halfway into the cushioned wall. From its imprisoning depths, he managed a strangled yell.

"Lesbee, put a tractor beam on me! Save me! I'll make it up to you. I —"

Acceleration Five choked off the words.

The man's appeal brought momentary wonder to Lesbee. He was amazed that Browne hoped for mercy . . . after what had happened.

Browne's anguished words did produce one effect in him. They reminded him that there was something he must do. He forced his hand and his arm to the control board and focussed a tractor beam that firmly captured Third Officer Mindel and the cameraman. His intense effort was barely in time. Acceleration followed acceleration, making movement impossible. The time between each surge of increased speed grew longer. The slow minutes lengthened into what seemed an hour, then many hours. Lesbee was held in his chair as if he were gripped by hands of steel. His eyes felt glassy; his body had long since lost all feeling.

He noticed something.

The rate of acceleration was different from what the original Tellier had prescribed long ago. The actual increase in forward pressure each time was less.

He realized something else. For a long time, no thoughts had come from the Karn.

SUDDENLY, he felt an odd shift in speed. A physical sensation of slight, very slight, angular movement accompanied the maneuver.

Slowly, the metal-like bands let go of his body. The numb feeling was replaced by the pricking as of thousands of tiny needles. Instead of muscle-compressing acceleration there was only a steady pressure.

It was the pressure that he had in the past equated with gravity.

Lesbee stirred hopefully, and when he felt himself move, realized what had happened. The artificial gravity had been shut off. Simultaneously, the ship had made a half turn within its outer shell. The drive power was now coming from below, a constant one gravity thrust.

At this late moment, he plunged his hand into the pocket which held the remote control for the pilotless landing mechanism — and activated it.

"That ought to turn on his thoughts," he told himself savagely.

But if Dzing was telepathing to his masters, it was no longer on the human thought level. So Lesbee concluded unhappily.

The ether was silent.

He now grew aware of something more. The ship smelled different: better, cleaner, purer.

Lesbee's gaze snapped over to the speed dials on the control board. The figures registering there were unbelievable. They indicated that the spaceship was traveling at a solid fraction of the speed of light.

Lesbee stared at the number incredulously. "We didn't have time!" he thought. "How could we go so fast so quickly — in hours only to near the speed of light!"

Sitting there, breathing hard, fighting to recover from the effects of that prolonged speed-up, he felt the fantastic reality of the universe. During all this slow century of flight through space, the *Hope of Man* had had the potential for this vastly greater velocity.

He visualized the acceleration series so expertly programmed by Dzing as having achieved a shift to a new state of matter in motion. The "light speed effect," the Karn robot had called it.

"And Tellier missed it," he thought.

All those experiments the physicist had performed so painstakingly, and left a record of, had missed the great discovery.

Missed it! And so a shipload of human beings had wandered for so many generations through the black unfriendly depths of interstellar space.

ACROSS the room Browne was climbing groggily to his feet. He muttered, ". . . Better get back to . . . control chair . . . I must maintain my . . ."

He had taken only a few uncertain steps when a realization seemed to strike him. He looked up then, and stared wildly at Lesbee. "Oh!" he said. The sound came from the gut level, a gasp of horrified understanding.

As he slapped a complex of tractor beams on Browne, Lesbee said, "That's right, you're looking at your enemy. Better start talking. We haven't much time."

Browne was pale now. But his mouth had been left free and so he was able to say huskily, "I did what any lawful government does in an emergency. I dealt with treason summarily, taking time only to find out what it consisted of."

Lesbee had had another thought, this time about Miller on the bridge. Hastily, he swung Browne over in front of him. "Hand me your blaster," he said.

"Stock first."

He freed the other's arm, so that he could reach into the holster and take it out.

Lesbee felt a lot better when he had the weapon. But still another idea had come to him. He said harshly, "I want to lift you over to the cage, and I don't want First Officer Miller to interfere. Get that, *Mister* Miller!"

There was no answer from the screen.

Browne said uneasily, "Why over to the cage?"

Lesbee did not answer right away. Silently he manipulated the tractor beam control until Browne was in position. Having gotten him there, Lesbee hesitated. What bothered him was, why had the Karn's thought impulses ceased?

He had an awful feeling that there was something very wrong indeed.

He gulped, and said, "Raise the lid!"

Again, he freed Browne's arm. The big man reached over gingerly, unfastened the catch, and then drew back and glanced questioningly at Lesbee.

"Look inside!" Lesbee commanded.

Browne said scathingly, "You don't think for one second that—" He stopped, for he was peering into the cage. He uttered a cry: "He's gone!"

VI

LESBEE discussed the disappearance with Browne. It was an abrupt decision on his part to do so. The question of where Dzing might have got to was not something he should merely turn over in his own head.

He began by pointing at the dials from which the immense speed of the ship could be computed, and then, when that meaning was absorbed by the older man, said simply, "What happened? Where did he go? And how could we speed up to just under 186,000 miles a second in so short a time?"

He had lowered the big man to the floor, and now he took some of the tension from the tractor beam but did not release the power. Browne stood in apparent deep thought. Finally, he nodded. "All right," he said, "I know what happened."

"Tell me."

Browne changed the subject, said in a deliberate tone, "What are you going to do with me?"

Lesbee stared at him for a moment unbelievingly. "You're going to withhold this information?" he demanded.

Browne spread his hands. "What else can I do? Till I know my fate, I have nothing to lose."

Lesbee suppressed a strong impulse to rush over and strike his prisoner. He said finally, "In your judgment is this delay dangerous?"

Browne was silent, but a bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. "*I* have nothing to lose," he repeated.

The expression in Lesbee's face must have alarmed him, for he went on quickly, "Look, there's no need for you to conspire any more. What you really want is to go home, isn't it? Don't you see, with this new method of acceleration, we can make it to Earth in a few *months!*"

He stopped. He seemed momentarily uncertain.

Lesbee snapped angrily. "Who are you trying to fool? Months! We're a dozen light years in actual distance from Earth. You mean years, not months."

Browne hesitated then: "All right, a few years. But at least not a lifetime. So if you'll promise not to scheme against me further, I'll promise —"

"*You'll* promise!" Lesbee spoke savagely. He had been taken aback by Browne's instant attempt at blackmail. But the momentary

sense of defeat was gone. He knew with a stubborn rage that he would stand for no nonsense.

He said in an uncompromising voice, "Mister Browne, twenty seconds after I stop speaking, you start talking. If you don't I'll batter you against these walls. I mean it!"

Browne was pale. "Are you going to kill me? That's all I want to know. Look —" his tone was urgent — "we don't have to fight any more. We can go home. Don't you see? The long madness is just about over. Nobody has to die."

Lesbee hesitated. What the big man said was at least partly true. There was an attempt here to make twelve years sound like twelve days, or at most twelve weeks. But the fact was, it *was* a short period compared to the century-long journey which, at one time, had been the only possibility.

HE thought: "Am I going to kill him?" It was hard to believe that he would, under the circumstances. All right. If not death, then what? He sat there uncertain. The vital seconds went by, and he could see no solution. He thought finally, in desperation: "I'll have to give in for the moment. Even a minute thinking about this is absolutely crazy."

He said aloud in utter frustration, "I'll promise you this. If you can figure out how I can feel safe in a ship commanded by you I'll give your plan consideration. And now, mister, start talking."

Browne nodded. "I accept that promise," he said. "What we've run into here is the Lorenz-Fitzgerald Contraction Theory. Only it's not a theory any more. We're living the reality of it."

Lesbee argued, "But it only took us a few hours to get to the speed of light."

Browne said, "As we approach light speed, space foreshortens and time compresses. What seemed like a few hours would be days in normal time and space."

What Browne explained then was different rather than difficult. Lesbee had to blink his mind to shut out the glare of his old ideas and habits of thought, so that the more subtle shades of super-speed phenomena could shine through his awareness.

The time compression — as Browne explained it — was gradational. The rapid initial series of accelerations were obviously designed to pin down the personnel of the ship. Subsequent increments would be according to what was necessary to attain ultra-speed.

Since the drive was still on, it was clear that some resistance was being encountered, perhaps from the fabric of space itself.

It was no time to discuss technical details. Lesbee accepted the remarkable reality and said quickly, "Yes, but where is Dzing?"

"My guess," said Browne, "is that he did not come along."

"How do you mean?"

"The space-time foreshortening did not affect him."

"But —" Lesbee began blankly.

"Look," said Browne harshly, "don't ask me how he did it. My picture is, he stayed in the cage till after the acceleration stopped. Then, in a leisurely fashion, he released himself from the electrically locked manacles, climbed out, and went off to some other part of the ship. He wouldn't have to hurry since by this time he was operating at a rate of, say, five hundred times faster than our living pace."

Lesbee said, "But that means he's been out there for hours — his time. What's he been up to?"

Browne admitted that he had no answer for that.

"But you can see," he pointed out anxiously, "that I meant what I said about going back to Earth. We have no business in this part of space. These beings are far ahead of us scientifically."

His purpose was obviously to persuade. Lesbee thought: "He's back to *our* fight. That's more important to him than any damage the real enemy is causing."

A vague recollection came of the things he had read about the struggle for power throughout Earth history. How men intrigued for supremacy while vast hordes of the invader battered down the gates. Browne was a true spiritual descendant of all those mad people.

Slowly, Lesbee turned and faced the big board. What was baffling to him was, what could you do against a being who moved five hundred times as fast as you did?

VII

HE had a sudden sense of awe, a picture . . . At any given instant Dzing was a blur. A spot of light. A movement so rapid that, even as the gaze lighted on him, he was gone to the other end of the ship — and back.

Yet Lesbee knew it took time to traverse the great ship from end to end. Twenty, even twenty-five minutes, was normal walking time for a human being going along the corridor known as Center A.

It would take the Karn a full six seconds there and back. In its way that was a significant span of time, but after Lesbee had considered it for a moment, he felt appalled.

What could they do against a creature who had so great a time differential in his favor?

From behind him, Browne said, "Why don't you use against him that remote landing control system that you set up with my permission?"

Lesbee confessed: "I did that, as soon as the acceleration ceased. But he must have been — back — in the faster time by then."

"That wouldn't make any difference," said Browne.

"Eh!" Lesbee was startled.

Browne parted his lips evidently intending to explain, and then he closed them again. Finally he said, "Make sure the intercom is off."

Lesbee did so. But he was realizing that Browne was up to something again. He said, and there was rage in his tone, "I don't get it, and you do. Is that right."

"Yes," said Browne. He spoke deliberately, but he was visibly suppressing excitement. "I know how to defeat this creature. That puts me in a bargaining position."

Lesbee's eyes were narrowed to slits. "Damn you, no bargain. Tell me, or else!"

Browne said, "I'm not really trying to be difficult. You either have to kill me, or come to some aggreement. I want to know what that agreement is, because of course I'll do it."

Lesbee said, "I think we ought to have an election."

"I agree!" Browne spoke instantly. "You set it up." He broke off. "And now release me from these tractors and I'll show you the neatest spacetime trick you've ever seen, and that'll be the end of Dzing."

Lesbee gazed at the man's face, saw there the same openness of countenance, the same frank honest that had preceded the execution order, and he thought, "What can he do?"

He considered many possibilities, and thought finally, desperately: "He's got the advantage over me of superior knowledge — the most undefeatable weapon in the world. The only thing I can really hope to use against it in the final issue is *my* knowledge of a multitude of technician-level details."

But — what could Browne do against Lesbee.

He said unhappily to the other, "Before I free you, I want to lift

you over to Mindel. When I do, you get his blaster for me."

"Sure," said Browne casually.

A few moments later he handed Mindel's gun over to Lesbee. So that wasn't it.

Lesbee thought: "There's Miller on the bridge — can it be that Miller flashed him a ready signal when my back was turned to the board?"

Perhaps, like Browne, Miller had been temporarily incapacitated during the period of acceleration. It was vital that he find out Miller's present capability.

LESBEE tripped the intercom between the two boards. The rugged, lined face of the first officer showed large on the screen. Lesbee could see the outlines of the bridge behind the man and, beyond, the starry blackness of space. Lesbee said courteously, "Mr. Miller, how did you make out during the acceleration?"

"It caught me by surprise, Captain. I really got a battering. I think I was out for a while. But I'm all right now."

"Good," said Lesbee. "As you probably heard, Captain Browne and I have come to an agreement, and we are now going to destroy the creature that is loose on the ship. Stand by!"

Cynically, he broke the connection.

Miller was there all right, waiting. But the question was still, what could Miller do? The answer of course was that Miller could pre-empt. And — Lesbee asked himself — what could *that* do?

Abruptly, it seemed to him, he had the answer.

It was the technician's answer that he had been mentally straining for.

He now understood Browne's plan. They were waiting for Lesbee to let down his guard for a moment. Then Miller would pre-empt, cut off the tractor beam from Browne and seize Lesbee with it.

For the two officers it was vital that Lesbee did not have time to fire the blaster at Browne. Lesbee thought: "It's the only thing they can be worried about. The truth is, there's nothing else to stop them."

The solution was, Lesbee realized with a savage glee, to let the two men achieve their desire. But first —

"Mr. Browne," he said quietly, "I think you should give your information. If I agree that it is indeed the correct solution, I shall release you and we shall have an election. You and I will stay right here till the election is over."

Browne said, "I accept your promise. The speed of light is a constant, and does not change in relation to moving objects. That would also apply to electromagnetic fields."

Lesbee said, "Then Dzing was affected by the remote-control device I turned on."

"Instantly," said Browne. "He never got a chance to do anything. How much power did you use?"

"Only first stage," said Lesbee. "But the machine-driven thought pulses in that would interfere with just about every magnetic field in his body. He couldn't do another coherent thing."

Browne said in a hushed tone, "It's got to be. He'll be out of control in one of the corridors, completely at our mercy." He grinned. "I told you I knew how to defeat him — because, of course, he was already defeated."

Lesbee considered that for a long moment, eyes narrowed. He realized that he accepted the explanation, but that he had preparations to make, and quickly — before Browne got suspicious of his delay.

He turned to the board and switched on the intercom. "People," he said, "strap yourselves in again. Help those who were injured to do the same. We may have another emergency. You have several minutes, I think, but don't waste any of them. In any event, we must be prepared."

He cut off the intercom, and he activated the closed-circuit intercom of the technical station. He said urgently, "Special instruction to Technical personnel. Report anything unusual, particularly if strange thought forms are going through your mind. Report these forms and your location to me."

He had an answer to that within moments after he finished speaking. A man's twangy voice came over: "I keep thinking I'm somebody named Dzing, and I'm trying to report to my owners. Boy, am I incoherent!"

"Where is this?"

"D — 4 — 19."

Lesbee punched the buttons that gave them a TV view of that particular ship location. Almost immediately he spotted a shimmer near the floor.

After a moment's survey he ordered a heavy-duty blaster brought to the corridor. By the time its colossal energies ceased, Dzing was only a darkened area on the flat surface.

WHILE these events were progressing, Lesbee had kept one eye on Browne and Mindel's blaster firmly gripped in his left hand. Now he said, "Well, sir, you certainly did what you promised. Wait a moment while I put this gun away, and then I'll carry out my part of the bargain."

He started to do so, then, out of pity, paused.

He had been thinking in the back of his mind about what Browne had said earlier: that the trip to Earth might only take a few months. The officer had backed away from that statement, but it had been bothering Lesbee ever since.

If it were true, then it was indeed a fact that nobody need die!

He said quickly, "What was your reason for saying that the journey home would only take — well — less than a year?"

"It's the tremendous time compression," Browne explained eagerly. The distance as you pointed out is over 12 light-years. But with a time ration of 3, 4, or 500 to one, we'll make it in less than a month. When I first started to say that, I could see that the figures were incomprehensible to you in your tense mood. In fact, I could scarcely believe them myself."

Lesbee said, staggered, "We can get back to Earth in a couple of weeks — my God!" He broke off, said urgently, "Look, I accept you as commander. We don't need an election. The status quo is good enough for any short period of time. Do you agree?"

"Of course," said Browne. "That's the point I've been trying to make."

As he spoke, his face was utterly guileless.

Lesbee gazed at that mask of innocence, and he though hopelessly: "What's wrong? Why isn't he really agreeing? Is it because he doesn't want to lose his command so quickly."

Sitting there, unhappily fighting for the other's life, he tried to place himself mentally in the position of the commander of a vessel, tried to look at the prospect of a return to view. It was hard to picture such a reality. But presently it seemed to him that he understood.

He said gently, feeling his way, "It would be kind of a shame to return without having made a successful landing anywhere. With this new speed, we could visit a dozen sun systems, and still get home in a year."

The look that came into Browne's face for a fleeting moment told Lesbee that he had penetrated to the thought in the man's mind.

The next instant, Browne was shaking his head vigorously. "This is no time for side excursions," he said. "We'll leave explorations of new star systems to future expeditions. The people of this ship have served their term. We go straight home."

Browne's face was now completely relaxed. His blue eyes shone with truth and sincerity.

There was nothing further that Lesbee could say. The gulf between Browne and himself could not be bridged.

The commander had to kill his rival, so that he might finally return to Earth and report that the mission of the *Hope of Man* was accomplished.

VIII

IN the most deliberate fashion Lesbee shoved the blaster into the inner pocket of his coat. Then, as if he were being careful, he used the tractor beam to push Browne about four feet away. There he set him down, released him from the beam, and — with the same deliberateness — drew his hand away from the tractor controls. Thus he made himself completely defenseless.

It was the moment of vulnerability.

Browne leaped at him, yelling: "Miller — pre-empt!"

First Officer Miller obeyed the command of his captain.

What happened then, only Lesbee, the technician with a thousand bits of detailed knowledge, expected.

For years it had been observed that when Control Room Below took over from Bridge, the ship speeded up slightly. And when Bridge took over from Control Room Below, the ship slowed instantly by the same amount — in each instance, something less than half a mile an hour.

The two boards were not completely synchronized. The technicians often joked about it, and Lesbee had once read an obscure technical explanation for the discrepancy. It had to do with the impossibility of ever getting two metals refined to the same precision of internal structure.

It was the age-old story of, no two objects in the universe are alike. But in times past, the differential had meant nothing. It was a technical curiosity, an interesting phenomenon of the science of metallurgy, a practical problem that caused machinists to curse good-naturedly when technicians like Lesbee required them to make a

replacement part.

Unfortunately for Browne, the ship was now traveling near the speed of light.

His strong hands, reaching toward Lesbee's slighter body, were actually touching the latter's arm when the momentary deceleration occured as Bridge took over. The sudden slow-down was at a much faster rate than even Lesbee expected. The resistance of space to the forward movement of the ship must be using up more engine power than he had realized; it was taking a lot of thrust to maintain a one gravity acceleration.

The great vessel slowed about 150 miles per hour in the space of a second.

Lesbee took the blow of that deceleration partly against his back, partly against one side — for he had half-turned to defend himself from the bigger man's attack.

Browne, who had nothing to grab on to, was flung forward at the full 150 miles per hour. He struck the control board with an audible thud, stuck to it as if he were glued there; and then, when the *Hope of Man* was again speeding along at one gravity — his body slid down the face of the board, and crumpled into a twisted position on the rubberized dais.

His uniform was discolored. As Lesbee watched, blood seeped through and dropped to the floor.

"ARE you going to hold an election?" Tellier asked. The big ship had turned back under Lesbee's command and had picked up his friends. The lifeboat itself, with the remaining Karn still aboard, was put into an orbit around Alta III and abandoned.

The two young men were sitting now in the Captain's cabin.

After the question was asked, Lesbee leaned back into his chair, and closed his eyes. He didn't need to examine his total resistance to the suggestion. He had already savored the feeling that command brought.

Almost from the moment of Browne's death, he had observed himself having the same thoughts that Browne had voiced — among many others, the reasons why elections were not advisable aboard a spaceship. He waited now while Eleesa, one of his three wives — she being the younger of the two widows of Browne — poured wine for them, and went softly out. Then he laughed grimly.

"My good friend," he said, "we're all lucky that time is so com-

pressed at the speed of light. At 500-times compression, any further exploration we do will require only a few months, or years at most. And so I don't think we can afford to take the chance of defeating at an election the only person who understands the details of the new acceleration method. Until I decide exactly how much exploration we shall do, I shall keep our speed capabilities a secret. But I did, and do, think one other person should know where I have this information documented. Naturally, I selected First Officer Tellier."

"Thank you, sir," the youth said. But he was visibly thoughtful as he sipped his wine. He went on finally, "Captain, I think you'd feel a lot better if you held an election. I'm sure you could win it."

Lesbee laughed tolerantly, shook his head. "I'm afraid you don't understand the dynamics of government," he said. "There's no record in history of a person who actually had control, handing it over."

He finished with the casual confidence of absolute power. "I'm not going to be presumptuous enough to fight a precedent like that!"

END

LESTER DEL RAY

Spawning Ground

THE Starship *Pandora* creaked and groaned as her landing pads settled unevenly in the mucky surface of the ugly world outside. She seemed to be restless to end her fool's errand here, two hundred light years from the waiting hordes on Earth. Straining metal plates twanged and echoed through her hallways.

Captain Gwayne cursed and rolled over, reaching for his boots. He was a big, rawboned man, barely forty; but ten years of responsibility had pressed down his shoulders and put age-feigning hollows under his reddened eyes. The starlanes between Earth and her potential colonies were rough on the men who traveled them now. He shuffled toward the control room.

Lieutenant Jane Corey looked up, nodding a blonde head at him as he moved toward the ever-waiting pot of murky coffee. "Morning, Bob. You need a shave."

"Yeah." He swallowed the hot coffee without tasting it, then ran a hand across the dark stubble on his chin. It could wait. "Anything new during the night?"

"About a dozen blobs held something like a convention a little ways north of us. They broke up about an hour ago and streaked off into the clouds." The blobs were a peculiarity of this planet about which nobody knew anything. They looked like overgrown fireballs, but seemed to have an almost sentient curiosity about anything moving on the ground. "And our two cadets sneaked out again. Barker followed them, but lost them in the murk. I've kept a signal going to guide them back."

Gwayne swore softly to himself. Earth couldn't turn out enough starmen in the schools, so promising kids were being shipped out for training as cadets on their twelfth birthday. The two he'd drawn, Kaufman and Pinelli, seemed to be totally devoid of any sense of caution.

Of course there was no obvious need for caution here. The blobs hadn't seemed dangerous, and the local animals were apparently all herbivorous and harmless. They were ugly enough, looking like insects in spite of their internal skeletons, with anywhere from four to twelve legs each on their segmented bodies. None acted like dangerous beasts.

But *something* had happened to the exploration party fifteen years back, and to the more recent ship under Hennessy that was sent to check up.

HE turned to the port to stare out at the planet. The Sol-type sun must be rising, since there was a dim light. But the thick clouds that wrapped the entire world diffused the rays into a haze. For a change, it wasn't raining, though the ground was covered by thick swirls of fog. In the distance, the tops of shrubs that made a scrub forest glowed yellow-green. Motions around them suggested a herd of feeding animals. Details were impossible to see through the haze. Even the deep gorge where they'd found Hennessy's carefully buried ship was completely hidden by the fog.

There were three of the blobs dancing about over the grazing animals now, as they often seemed to do. Gwayne stared at them for a minute, trying to read sense into the things. If he had time to study them But there was no time.

Earth had ordered him to detour here, after leaving his load of deep-sleep stored colonists on Official World 71, to check on any sign of Hennessy. He'd been here a week longer than he should have stayed already. If there was no sign in another day or so of what had happened to the men who'd deserted their ship and its equipment, he'd have to report back.

He would have left before, if a recent landship hadn't exposed enough of the buried ship for his metal locators to spot from the air by luck. It had obviously been hidden deep enough to foil the detectors originally.

"Bob!" Jane Corey's voice cut through his pondering. "Bob, there are the kids!"

Before he could swing to follow her pointing finger, movement caught his eye.

The blobs had left the herd. Now the three were streaking at fantastic speed to a spot near the ship, to hover excitedly above something that moved there.

He saw the two cadets then, heading back to the waiting ship, just beyond the movement he'd seen through the mist.

Whatever was making the fog swirl must have reached higher ground. Something began to heave upwards. It was too far to see clearly, but Gwayne grabbed the microphone, yelling into the radio toward the cadets.

They must have seen whatever it was just as the call reached them. Young Kaufman grabbed at Pinelli, and they swung around together.

Then the mists cleared.

Under the dancing blobs, a horde of things was heading for the cadets. Shaggy heads, brute bodies vaguely man-like! One seemed to be almost eight feet tall, leading the others directly toward the spacesuited cadets. Some of the horde were carry spears or sticks. There was a momentary halt, and then the leader lifted one arm, as if motioning the others forward.

"GET the jeeps out!" Gwayne yelled at Jane. He yanked the door of the little officers' lift open and jabbed the down button. It was agonizingly slow, but faster than climbing down. He ripped the door back at the exit deck. Men were dashing in, stumbling around in confusion. But someone was taking over now — one of the crew women. The jeeps were lining up. One, at the front, was stuttering into life, and Gwayne dashed for it as the exit port slid back.

There was no time for suits or helmets. The air on the planet was irritating and vile smelling, but it could be breathed. He leaped to the seat, to see that the driver was Doctor Barker. At a gesture, the jeep rolled down the ramp, grinding its gears into second as it picked up speed. The other two followed.

There was no sign of the cadets at first. Then Gwayne spotted them, surrounded by the menacing horde. Seen from here, the things looked horrible in a travesty of manhood.

The huge leader suddenly waved and pointed toward the jeeps that were racing toward him. He made a fantastic leap backwards. Others swung about, two of them grabbing up the cadets. The jeep was doing twenty miles an hour now, but the horde began to increase the distance, in spite of the load of the two struggling boys! The creatures dived downward into lower ground, beginning to disappear into the mists.

"'Follow the blobs," Gwayne yelled. He realized now he'd been a fool to leave his suit; the radio would have let him keep in contact with the kids. But it was too late to go back.

The blobs danced after the horde. Barker bounced the jeep downward into a gorge. Somewhere the man had learned to drive superlatively; but he had to slow as the fog thickened lower down.

Then it cleared to show the mob of creatures doubling back on their own trail to confuse the pursuers.

There was no time to stop. The jeep plowed through them. Gwayne had a glimpse of five-foot bodies tumbling out of the way. Monstrously coarse faces were half hidden by thick hair. A spear crunched against the windshield from behind, and Gwayne caught it before it could foul the steering wheel. It had a wickedly beautiful point of stone.

The creatures vanished as Barker fought to turn to follow them. The other jeeps were coming up, by the sound of their motors, but too late to help. They'd have to get to the group with the cadets in a hurry or the horde would all vanish in the uneven ground, hidden by the fog.

A blob dropped down, almost touching Gwayne.

He threw up an instinctive hand. There was a tingling as the creature seemed to pass around it. It lifted a few inches and drifted off.

Abruptly, Barker's foot ground at the brake. Gwayne jolted forward against the windshield, just as he made out the form of the eight-foot leader. The thing was standing directly ahead of him, a cadet on each shoulder.

The wheels locked and the jeep slid protestingly forward. The creature leaped back. But Gwayne was out of the jeep before it stopped, diving for the figure. It dropped the boys with a surprised grunt.

THE arms were thin and grotesque below the massively distorted shoulders, but amazingly strong. Gwayne felt them wrench at him as his hands locked on the thick throat. A stench of alien flesh was in his nose as the thing fell backwards. Doc Barker had hit it seconds after the captain's attack. Its head hit rocky ground with a dull, heavy sound, and it collapsed. Gwayne eased back slowly, but it made no further move, though it was still breathing.

Another jeep had drawn up, and men were examining the cadets.

Pinelli was either laughing or crying, and Kaufman was trying to break free to kick at the monster. But neither had been harmed. The two were loaded onto a jeep while men helped Barker and Gwayne stow the bound monster on another before heading back.

"No sign of skull fracture. My God, what a tough brute!" Barker shook his own head, as if feeling the shock of the monster's landing.

"I hope so," Gwayne told him. "I want that thing to live — and you're detailed to save it and revive it. Find out if it can make sign language or draw pictures. I want to know what happened to Hennessy and why that ship was buried against detection. This thing may be the answer."

Barker nodded grimly. "I'll try, though I can't risk drugs on an alien metabolism." He sucked in on the cigarette he'd dug out, then spat sickly. Smoke and this air made a foul combination. "Bob, it still makes no sense. We've scoured this planet by infra-red, and there was no sign of native villages or culture. We should have found some."

"Troglodytes, maybe," Gwayne guessed. "Anyhow, send for me when you get anything. I've got to get this ship back to Earth. We're overstaying our time here already."

The reports from the cadets were satisfactory enough. They'd been picked up and carried, but no harm had been done them. Now they were busy being little heroes. Gwayne sentenced them to quarters as soon as he could, knowing their stories would only get wilder and less informative with retelling.

If they could get any story from the capture creature, they might save time and be better off than trying to dig through Hennessy's ship. That was almost certainly spoorless by now. The only possible answer seemed to be that the exploring expedition and Hennessy's rescue ship had been overcome by the aliens.

It was an answer, but it left a lot of questions. How could the primitives have gotten to the men inside Hennessy's ship? Why was its fuel dumped. Only men would have known how to do that. And who told these creatures that a space ship's metal finders could be fooled by a little more than a hundred feet of solid rock? They'd buried the ship cunningly, and only the accidental slippage had undone their work.

Maybe there would never be a full answer, but he had to find something — and find it fast. Earth needed every world she could make habitable, or mankind was probably doomed to extinction.

THE race had blundered safely through its discovery of atomic weapons into a peace that had lasted two hundred years. It had managed to prevent an interplanetary war with the Venus colonists. It had found a drive that led to the stars, and hadn't even found intelligent life there to be dangerous.

But forty years ago, observations from beyond the Solar System had finally proved that the sun was going to go nova.

It wouldn't be much of an explosion, as such things go — but it would render the whole Solar System uninhabitable for millenia. To survive, man had to colonize.

And there were no worlds perfect for him, as Earth had been. The explorers went out in desperation to find what they could; the terra-forming teams did what they could. And then the big starships began filling worlds with colonists, carried in deep sleep to conserve space.

Almost eighty worlds. The nearest a four month journey from Earth and four more months back.

In another ten years, the sun would explode, leaving man only on the footholds he was trying to dig among other solar systems. Maybe some of the strange worlds would let men spread his seed again. Maybe none would be spawning grounds for mankind in spite of the efforts. Each was precious as a haven for the race.

If this world could be used, it would be nearer than most. If not, as it now seemed, no more time could be wasted here.

Primitives could be overcome, maybe. It would be ruthless and unfair to strip them of their world, but the first law was survival.

But how could primitives do what these must have done?

He studied the spear he had salvaged. It was on a staff made of cemented bits of smaller wood from the scrub growth, skillfully laminated. The point was of delicately chipped flint, done as no human hand had been able to do for centuries.

"Beautiful primitive work," he muttered.

Jane pulled the coffee cup away from her lips and snorted. "You can see a lot more of it out there," she suggested.

He went to the port and glanced out. About sixty of the things were squatting in the clearing fog, holding lances and staring at the ship. They were perhaps a thousand yards away, waiting patiently. For what? For the return of their leader — or for something that would give the ship to them?

Gwayne phoned Barker. "How's the captive coming?"

Barker's voice sounded odd, but Gwayne didn't notice.

"Physically fine. You can see him. But—"

Gwayne dropped the phone and headed for the little sick bay. He swore at Doc for not calling him at once, and then at himself for not checking up sooner. Then he stopped at the sound of voices.

There was the end of a question from Barker and a thick, harsh growling sound that lifted the hair along the nape of Gwayne's neck. Barker seemed to understand, and was making a comment as the captain dashed in.

The captive was sitting on the bunk, unbound and oddly unmenacing. The thick features were relaxed and yet somehow intent. He seemed to make some kind of a salute as he saw Gwayne enter, and his eyes burned up unerringly toward the device on the officer's cap.

"Haarroo, Cabbaan!" the thing said.

"CAPTAIN Gwayne, may I present your former friend, Captain Hennessy?" Barker said. There was a grin on the doctor's lips, but his face was taut with strain.

The creature nodded slowly and drew something from the thick hair on its head. It was the golden comet of a captain.

"He never meant to hurt the kids — just to talk to them," Barker cut in quickly. "I've got some of the story. He's changed. He can't talk very well. Says they've had to change the language around to make the sounds fit, and he's forgotten how to use what normal English he can. But it gets easier as you listen. It's Hennessy."

Gwayne had his own ideas on that. It was easy for an alien to seize on the gold ornament of a captive earthman, even to learn a little English, maybe. But Hennessy had been his friend.

"How many barmaids in the Cheshire Cat? How many pups did your oldest kid's dog have? How many were brown?"

The lips contorted into something vaguely like a smile, and the curiously shaped fingers that could handle no human-designed equipment spread out.

Three. Seven. Zero.

The answers were right.

By the time the session was over, Gwayne had begun to understand the twisted speech from inhuman vocal cords better. But the story took a long time telling.

When it was finished, Gwayne and Barker sat for long minutes in silence. Finally Gwayne drew a shuddering breath and stood up. "Is it possible, Doc?"

"No," Barker said flatly. He spread his hands and grimaced. "No. Not by what I know. But it happened. I've looked at a few tissues under the microscope. The changes are there. It's hard to believe about their kids. Adults in eight years, but they stay shorter. It can't be a hereditary change — the things that affect the body don't change the germ plasm. But in this case what changed Hennessy is real, so maybe the fact that the change is passed on is as real as he claims."

Gwayne led the former Hennessy to the exit. The waiting blobs dropped down to touch the monstrous man, then leaped up again. The crowd of monsters began moving forward toward their leader. A few were almost as tall as Hennessy, but most were not more than five feet high.

The kids of the exploring party . . .

BACK in the control room, Gwayne found the emergency release levers, set the combinations and pressed the studs. There was a hiss and gurgle as the great tanks of fuel discharged their contents out onto the ground where no ingenuity could ever recover it to bring life to the ship again.

"He'd have to tell the men and women of the crew later, after he'd had time to organize things and present it all in a way they could accept, however much they might hate it at first. But there was no putting off giving the gist of it to Jane.

"It was the blobs," he summarized it. "They seem to be amused by men. They don't require anything from us, but they like us around. Hennessy doesn't know why. They can change our cells, adapt us. Before men came, all life here had twelve legs. Now they're changing that, as we've seen.

"And they don't have to be close to do it. We've all been outside the hull. It doesn't show yet — but we're changed. In another month, Earth food would kill us. We've got to stay here. We'll bury the ships deeper this time, and Earth won't find us. They can't risk trying a coloney where three ships vanish, so we'll just disappear."

Nobody would know. Their children — odd children who would mature in eight years — would be primitive savages in three generations. The Earth tools would be useless, impossible for the hands so radically changed. Nothing from the ship would last. Books could never be read by the new eyes. And in time, Earth wouldn't even be a memory to this world.

She was silent a long time, staring out of the port toward what must now be her home. Then she sighed. "You'll need practice, but the others don't know you as well as I do, Bob. I guess we can fix it so they'll believe it all. And it's too late now. But we haven't really been changed yet, have we?"

"No," he admitted. Damn his voice! He'd never been good at lying. "No. They have to touch us. I've been touched, but the rest could go back."

She nodded. He waited for the condemnation, but there was only puzzlement in her face. "Why?"

And then, before he could answer, her own intelligence gave her the same answer he had found for himself. "The spawning ground!"

It was the only thing they could do. Earth needed a place to plant her seed, but no world other than Earth could ever be trusted to preserve that seed for generation after generation. Some worlds already were becoming uncertain.

Here, though, the blobs had adapted men to the alien world instead of men having to adapt the whole planet to their needs. Here, the strange children of man's race could grow, develop and begin the long trek back to civilization. The gadgets would be lost for a time. But perhaps some of the attitudes of civilized man would remain to make the next rise to culture a better one.

"We're needed here," he told her, his voice pleading for the understanding he couldn't yet fully give himself. "These people need as rich a set of bloodlines as possible to give the new race strength. The fifty men and women on this ship will be needed to start them with a decent chance. We can't go to Earth, where nobody would believe or accept the idea — or even let us come back. We have to stay here."

She smiled and moved toward him, groping for his strength. "Be fruitful," she whispered. "Be fruitful and replenish an Earth."

"No," he told her. "Replenish the stars."

But she was no longer listening, that part could wait.

Some day, though, their children would find a way to the starlanes again, looking for other worlds. With the blobs to help them, they could adapt to most worlds. The unchanged spirit world would lead them through all space, and the changing bodies would claim worlds beyond numbering.

Some day, the whole universe would be a spawning ground for the children of men! END

ROBERT BLOCH

Talent

IT is perhaps a pity that nothing is known of Andrew Benson's parents.

The same reasons which prompted them to leave him as a foundling on the steps of the St. Andrews Orphanage also caused them to maintain a discreet anonymity. The event occurred on the morning of March 3rd, 1943 — the war era, as you probably recall — so, in a way, the child may be regarded as a wartime casualty. Similar occurrences were by no means rare during those days, even in Pasadena, where the Orphanage was located.

After the usual tentative and fruitless inquiries, the good sisters took him in. It was there that he acquired his first name, from the patron and patronymic saint of the establishment. Then "Benson" was added some years later, by the couple who eventually adopted him.

It is difficult, at this late date, to determine what sort of a child Andrew was. Orphanage records are sketchy, at best, and Sister Rosemarie, who acted as supervisor of the boys' dormitory, is long since dead. Sister Albertine, the primary grades teacher of the Orphanage School, is now — to put it as delicately as possible — in her senility, and her testimony is necessarily colored by knowledge of subsequent events.

That Andrew never learned to talk until he was almost seven years old seems incredible. The forced gregariousness and the conspicous lack of individual attention characteristic of orphanage upbringing would make it appear as though the ability to speak is necessary for actual survival in such an environment. Scarcely more credible is Sisters Albertine's theory that Andrew *knew* how to talk but merely refused to do so.

For what it is worth, she remembers him as an unusually precocious youngster, who appeared to possess an intelligence and

understanding far beyond his years. Instead of employing speech, however, he relied on pantomime, an art at which he was so brilliantly adept (if Sister Albertine is to be believed) that his muteness was hardly noticed.

"He could imitate anybody," she declares. "The other children, the Sisters, even the Mother Superior. Of course I had to punish him for *that*. But it was remarkable, the way he was able to pick up all the little mannerisms and facial expressions of another person, just at a glance. And that's all it took for Andrew. Just a glance.

"Visitor's Day was Sunday. Naturally, Andrew never had any visitors, but he liked to hang around the corridor and watch them come in. And afterwards, in the dormitory at night, he'd put on a regular performance for the other boys. He could impersonate every single man, woman or child who'd come to the orphanage that day — the way they walked, the way they moved, every action and gesture. Even though he never said a word, nobody made the mistake of thinking Andrew was mentally deficient. For a while, Dr. Clement had the idea he might be a mute."

DR. Roger Clement is one of the few persons who might be able to furnish more objective data concerning Andrew Benson's early years. Unfortunately, he passed away in 1954; victim of a fire which also destroyed his home and office files.

It was Dr. Clement who attended Andrew on the night that he saw his first motion picture.

The date was 1949, some Saturday evening in the late fall of the year. The Orphanage received and showed one film a week, and only children of school age were permitted to attend. Andrew's inability — or unwillingness — to speak had caused some difficulty when he entered primary grades that September, and several months went by before he was allowed to join his classmates in the auditorium for the Saturday night screenings. But it is known that he eventually did so.

The picture was the last (and probably the least) of the Marx Brothers movies. Its title was *Love Happy*, and if it is remembered by the general public at all today, that is due to the fact that the film contained a brief walk-on appearance by a then unknown blonde bit player named Marilyn Monroe.

But the Orphanage had other reasons for remembering it. *Love Happy* was the picture that sent Andrew into his trance.

Long after the lights came up again in the auditorium, the child sat there, immobile, his eyes staring glassily at the blank screen. When his companions noticed and sought to arouse him he did not respond. One of the Sisters (possibly Sister Rosemarie) shook him. He promptly collapsed in a dead faint. Dr. Clement was summoned, and he administered to the patient. Andrew Benson did not recover consciousness until the following morning.

And it was then that he talked.

He talked immediately, he talked perfectly — but he did not talk in the manner of a six-year-old child. The voice that issued from his lips was that of a middle-aged man. It was a nasal, rasping voice, and even without the accompanying grimaces and facial expressions it was instantly and unmistakably recognizable as the voice of Groucho Marx.

Andrew Benson mimicked Groucho in his *Sam Grunion* role to perfection, word for word. Then he "did" Chico Marx. After that he relapsed into silence again. For a moment it was thought he had reverted to his mute phase. But it was an eloquent silence, and soon he was imitating Harpo. In rapid succession, Andrew created recognizable vocal and visual portraits of Raymond Burr, Melville Cooper, Eric Blore and the other actors who played small roles in the picture. His impersonations seemed uncanny to his companions. Even the Sisters were impressed.

"Why, he even *looked* like Groucho," Sister Albertine insists.

IGNORING the question of how a towheaded moppet of six can achieve a physical resemblance to Groucho Marx without make-up, it is nevertheless an established fact that Andrew Benson gained immediate celebrity as the official mimic of the Orphanage.

From that moment on, he talked regularly, if not freely. That is to say, he replied to direct questions. He recited his lessons in the classroom. He responded with the outward forms of politeness required by Orphanage discipline. But he was never loquacious, or even *communicative,* in the ordinary sense. The only time he became spontaneously articulate was immediately following the showing of the weekly movie.

There was no recurrence of his initial seizure, but each Saturday night show brought in its wake a complete dramatic recapitulation by the gifted youngster. During the fall of '49 and the winter of '50, Andrew Benson saw many movies. There was *Sorrowful Jones,* with

Bob Hope; *Tarzan's Magic Fountain; The Fighting O'Flynn; The Life of Riley; Little Women,* and a number of other films, current and older. Naturally, these pictures were subject to approval by the Sisters before being shown. Movies emphasizing violence were not included. Still, several westerns reached the Orphanage screen, and it is significant that Andrew Benson reacted in what was to become a characteristic fashion.

"Funny thing," declares Albert Dominguez, who attended the Orphanage during the same period as Andrew Benson and is one of the few persons located who is willing to admit, let alone discuss, the fact. "At first Andy imitated everybody — all the men, that is. He never imitated none of the women. But after he started to see Westerns, it got so he was choosey, like. He just imitated the villains. I don't mean like when us guys was *playing* cowboys — you know, when one guy is the sheriff and one is a gun-slinger. I mean, he imitated villains all the time. He could talk like 'em, he could even *look* like 'em. We use to razz hell out of him, you know? But it never seemed to bother him."

It is probably as a result of the "razzing" that Andrew Benson, on the evening of May 17th, 1950, attempted to slit the throat of Frank Phillips with a table-knife. Still, Albert Dominguez claims that the older boy offered no provocation. His view is that Andrew Benson was exactly duplicating the screen role of a western desperado in an old Charles Starrett movie.

The incident was hushed up and no action taken by the Orphanage staff.

We have little information on Andrew Benson's growth and development between the summer of 1950 and the autumn of 1955. Dominguez left the Orphanage, nobody else appears willing to testify, and Sister Albertine had retired to a rest-home. As a result, there is nothing available concerning what may well have been Andrew's crucial, formative years. The meager records of his classword seem satisfactory enough, and there is nothing to indicate that he was a disciplinary problem to his instructors. In June of 1955 he was photographed with the rest of his classmates upon the occasion of graduation from Eight Grade.

His face is a mere blur, an almost blank smudge in a sea of preadolescent countenances. What he actually looked like at that age is hard to tell.

The Bensons thought that he resembled their son, David.

LITTLE David Benson had died of polio in 1953. Two years later his parents came to St. Andrews Orphanage seeking to adopt a boy. They had David's picture with them. They were frank to state that they sought a physical resemblance as a guide to making their choice.

Did Andrew Benson see that photograph? Did — as has been subsequently theorized by certain irresponsible alarmists — he see certain *home movies* which the Bensons had taken of their child?

We must confine ourselves to the known facts; which are, simply, that Mr. and Mrs. Louis Benson, of Pasadena, California, legally adopted Andrew Benson, aged 12, on December 9th, 1955.

Andrew Benson went to live in their home, as their son. He entered the public high school. He became the owner of a bicycle. He received an allowance of one dollar a week. And he went to the movies.

Andrew Benson went to the movies, and there were no restrictions at all. For several months, that is. During this period he saw comedies, dramas, westerns, musicals, melodramas. He *must* have seen melodramas. Was there a film, released early in 1956, in which an actor played the role of a gangster who pushed a victim out of a second story window?

Knowing what we do today, we must suspect that there must have been. But at the time, when the actual incident occurred, Andrew Benson was exonerated. He and the other boy had been "scuffling" in a classroom after school, and the boy had "accidentally fallen." At least, this is the *official* version of the affair. The boy — now Pvt. Raymond Schuyler, USMC — maintains to this day that Benson deliberately tried to kill him.

"He was spooky, that kid," Schuyler insists. "None of us ever really got close to him. It was like there was nothing to get close to, you know? I mean, he kept changing off. From one day to the next you could never figure out what he was going to be like. Of course, we all knew he imitated these movie actors. He was only a freshman but already he was a big shot in the dramatic club. But he imitated *all* the time. One minute he'd be real quiet, and the next, wham! You know that story, the one about Jekyll and Hyde? Well, that was Andrew Benson. Afternoon he grabbed me, we weren't even talking to each other. He just came up to me at the window and I swear to God he changed right before my eyes. It was if he all of a sudden got about a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier, and his face was

real wild. He pushed me out of the window, without one word. Of course, I was scared spitless, and maybe I just *thought* he changed. I mean, nobody can actually do a thing like that, can they?"

This question, if it arose at all at the time, remained unanswered. We do know that Andrew Benson was brought to the attention of Dr. Hans Fahringer, child psychiatrist and part-time guidance counselor at the school, and that his initial examination disclosed no apparent abnormalities of personality or behavior-patterns. Dr. Fahringer did, however, have several long talks with the Bensons. As a result Andrew was forbidden to attend motion pictures. The following year. Dr. Fahringer voluntarily offered to examine young Andrew. Undoubtedly his interest had been aroused by the amazing dramatic abilities the boy was showing in his extra-curricular activities at the school.

ONLY one such interview ever took place, and it is to be regretted that Dr. Fahringer neither committed his findings to paper nor communicated them to the Bensons before his sudden, shocking death at the hands of an unknown assailant. It is believed (or was believed by the police, at the time) that one of his former patients, committed to an institution as a psychotic and subsequently escaped, may have been guilty of the crime.

All that we know is that it occurred some short while following a local re-run of *Man in the Attic*. In this film Jack Palance essayed the role of Jack the Ripper.

It is interesting, today, to examine some of the so-called "horror movies" of those years, including the re-runs of earlier vehicles starring Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, Peter Lorre and a number of other actors.

We cannot say with any certainty, of course, that Andrew Benson was violating the wishes of his foster-parents and secretly attending motion pictures. But *if* he did, it is quite likely that he would frequent the smaller neighborhood houses, many of which specialized in re-runs. And we *do* know, from the remarks of fellow-classmates during those high-school years, that "Andy" was familiar — almost omnisciently so — with the mannerisms of these performers.

The evidence is often conflicting. Joan Charters, for example, is willing to "swear on a stack of Bibles" that Andrew Benson, at the age of 15, was "a dead ringer for Peter Lorre — the same bug eyes and everything." Whereas Nick Dossinger, who attended classes with

Benson a year later, insists that he "looked just like Boris Karloff."

Granted that adolescence may bring about a considerable increase in height during the period of a year, it is nevertheless difficult to imagine how a "dead ringer for Peter Lorre" could metamorphize into an asthenic Karloff type.

A mass of testimony is available concerning Andrew Benson during those years, but almost all of it deals with his phenomenal histrionic talent and his startling skill at "ad lib" impersonation of motion picture actors. Apparently he had given up mimicking his associates and contemporaries almost entirely.

"He said he liked to do actors better, because they were bigger," said Don Brady, who appeared with him in the Senior Play. "I asked him what he meant by 'bigger' and he said it was just that. Actors were *bigger* on the screen. Sometimes they were twenty feet tall. He said, 'Why bother with little people when you can be big?' He was a real offbeat character, that one."

The phrases recur. "Oddball." "Screwball." "Real gone." They are picturesque, but hardly enlightening. And there seems to be little recollection of Andrew Benson as a friend or classmate, in the ordinary roles of adolescence. It's the imitator who is remembered, with admiration, and frequently, with distaste.

"He was so good he scared you. But that's when he was doing those impersonations, of course. The rest of the time, you scarcely knew he was around."

"Classes? I guess he did all right. I didn't notice him much."

"Andrew was a fair student. He could recite when called upon, but he never volunteered. His marks were average. I got the impression he was rather withdrawn."

"No, he never dated much. Come to think of it, I don't think he went out with girls at all. I never paid much attention to him, except when he was on stage, of course."

"I wasn't really what you call close to Andy. I don't know anybody who seemed to be friends with him. He was so quiet, outside of the dramatics. And when he got up there, it was like he was a different person. He was real great, you know? We all figured he'd end up at the Pasadena Playhouse."

THE reminiscences of his contemporaries are frequently apt to touch upon matters which did not directly involve Andrew Benson. The years 1956 and 1957 are still remembered, by high

school students of the area in particular, as the years of the curfew. It was a voluntary curfew, of course, but it was nevertheless strictly observed by most of the female students during the period of the "werewolf murders" — that series of savage, still-unsolved crimes which terrorized the community for well over a year. Certain cannibalistic aspects of the five young women led to the "werewolf" appelation on the part of the sensation-mongering press. The *Wolf Man* series made by Universal had been revived, and perhaps this had something to do with the association.

But to return to Andrew Benson: he grew up, went to school, and lived the normal life of a dutiful step-son. If his foster-parents were a bit strict, he made no complaints. If they punished him because they suspected he sometimes slipped out of his room at night, he made no complaints or denials. If they seemed apprehensive lest he be disobeying their set injunctions not to attend the movies, he offered no overt defiance.

The only known clash between Andrew Benson and his family came about as a result of their flat refusal to allow a television set in their home. Whether or not they were concerned about the possible encouragement of Andrew's mimicry or whether they had merely developed an allergy to Lawrence Welk is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, they balked at the acquisition of a TV receiver. Andrew begged and pleaded, pointing out that he "needed" television as an aid to a future dramatic career. His argument had some justification for, in his senior year, Andrew had indeed been "scouted" by the famous Pasadena Playhouse, and there was even some talk of a future professional career without the necessity of formal training.

But the Bensons were adamant on the television question; they remained adamant right up to the day of their death.

This unfortunate circumstance occurred at Balboa, where the Bensons owned a small cottage and maintained a little cabin-cruiser. The elder Bensons and Andrew were heading for Catalina Channel when it overturned in choppy waters. Andrew managed to cling to the craft until rescued, but his foster-parents were gone. It was a common enough accident; you've probably seen something like it in the movies a dozen times.

Andrew, just turned eighteen, was left an orphan once more — but an orphan in full possession of a lovely home, and with the expectation of coming into a sizable inheritance when he reached twenty-

one. The Benson estate was administered by the family attorney, Justin L. Fowler, and he placed young Andrew on an allowance of forty dollars a week — an amount sufficient for a recent graduate of high school to survive on, but hardly enough to maintain him in luxury.

IT is to be feared that violent scenes were precipitated between the young man and his attorney. There is no point in recapitulating them here, or in condemning Fowler for what may seem — on the surface — to be the development of a fixation.

But up until the night that he was struck down by a hit-and-run driver in the street before his house, Attorney Fowler seemed almost obsessed with the desire to prove that the Benson lad was legally incompetent, or worse. Indeed, it was his investigations which led to the uncovering of what few facts are presently available concerning the life of Andrew Benson.

Certain other hypotheses — one hesitates to dignify them with the term, "conclusions" — he apparently extrapolated from these meager findings, or fabricated out of thin air. Unless, of course, he did manage to discover details which he never actually disclosed. Without the support of such details there is no way of authenticating what seem to be fantastic conjectures.

A random sampling, as remembered from various conversations Fowler had with the authorities, will suffice.

"I don't think the kid is even human, for that matter. Just because he showed up on those orphanage steps, you call him a foundling. Changeling might be a better word for it. Yes, I know they don't believe in such things any more. And if you talk about life-forms from other planets, they laugh at you and tell you to join the Fortean Society. So happens I'm a member in good standing.

"Changeling? It's probably a more accurate term than the narrow meaning implies. I'm talking about the way he *changes* when he sees these movies. No, don't take my word for it — ask anyone who's ever seen him act. Better still, ask those who never saw him on a stage, but just watched him imitate movie performers in private. You'll find out he did a lot more than just *imitate*. He *became* the actor. Yes, I mean he underwent an actual physical transformation. Chameleon. Or some other form of life. Who can say?

"No, I don't pretend to understand it. I know it's not 'scientific' according to the way *you* define science. But that doesn't mean it's

impossible. There are a lot of life-forms in the universe, and we can only guess at some of them. Why shouldn't there be one that's abnormally sensitive to mimicry?

"You know what effect the movies can have on so-called 'normal human beings, under certain conditions. It's a hypnotic state, this movie-viewing, and you can ask the psychologists for confirmation. Darkness, concentration, suggestion — all the elements are present. And there's post-hypnotic suggestion, too. Again, psychiatrists will back me up on that. Most people tend to identify with various characters on the screen. That's where our hero-worship comes in, that's why we have western-movie fans, and detective fans, and all the rest. Supposedly ordinary people come out of the theatre and fantasy themselves as the heroes and heroines they saw up there on the screen; imitate them, too.

"That's what Andrew Benson did, of course. Only suppose he could carry it one step further? Suppose he was capable of *being* what he saw portrayed? And he chose to *be* the villains? I tell you, it's time to investigate those killings of a few years back, all of them. Not just the murder of those girls, but the murder of the two doctors who examined Benson when he was a child, and the death of his foster-parents, too. I don't think any of these things were accidents. I think some people got too close to the secret, and Benson put them out of the way.

"Why? How should I know why? Any more than I know what he's looking for when he watches the movies. But he's looking for something, I can guarantee that. Who knows what purpose such a life-form can have, or what he intends to do with his power? All I can do is warn you."

IT is easy to dismiss Attorney Fowler as a paranoid type, though perhaps it is unfair, in that we cannot evaluate the reasons for his outburst. That he knew (or believed he knew) something is self-evident. As a matter of fact, on the very evening of his death he was apparently about to set down his findings on paper.

Deplorably, all that he ever set down was a preamble. It is a quotation from Eric Voegelin, concerning rigid pragmatic attitudes of "scientism", so-called:

"The assumption (1) that the mathematized science of a natural phenomena is a model science ought to conform; (2) that all realms of being are accessible to the methods of sciences of phenomena;

and (3) that all reality which is not accessible to sciences of phenomena is either irrevelant or, in the more radical form of the dogma, illusionary."

But Attorney Fowler is dead, and we must deal with the living.

With Max Schick, for example. He is the motion picture and television agent who visited Andrew Benson at his home shortly after the death of the elder Bensons, and offered him an immediate contract.

"You're a natural," Schick declared. "Never mind with the Pasadena Playhouse bit. I can spot you right now, believe me! With what you got, we'll back Brando right off the map! Of course, we gotta start small, but I know just the gimmick. Main thing is to establish you in a starring slot right away. None of this stock-contract jazz, get me? The studios aren't handing 'em out in the first place, and even if you landed one, you'd end up on Cloud Nowhere. No, the deal is to get you a lead and billing right off the bat. And like I said, I got the angle.

"We go to a small indie producer, get it? Must be a dozen of 'em operating right now, and all of 'em making the same thing. Only one kind of picture that combines low budgets with big grosses, and that's a science fiction movie. You've seen them.

"Yeah, you heard me, a science fiction movie. Whaddya mean, you never saw one? Are you kidding? How *about* that? You mean you never saw any science fiction pictures at *all?*

"Oh, your folks, eh? Had to sneak out? And they only show that kind of stuff at the downtown houses?

"Well look, kid, it's about time, that's all I can say. It's about time! Hey, just so's you know what we're talking about, you better get on the ball and take in one right away.

"Sure, I'm positive, there must be one playing a downtown first run now. Why don't you go this afternoon? I got some work to finish up here at the office — run you down in my car, you can go on to the show, meet me back there when you get out.

"Sure, you can take the car after you drop me off. Be my guest."

SO Andrew Benson saw his first science fiction movie. He drove there and back in Max Schick's car. Coincidentally enough, it was the late afternoon of the day when Attorney Fowler became a hit-and-run victim. Schick has good reason to remember Andrew Benson's reappearance at his office just after dusk.

"He had a look on his face that was out of this world," Schick says.

" 'How'd you like the picture? I ask him.

" 'It was wonderful,' he tells me. 'Just what I've been looking for all these years. And to think I didn't know.'

" 'Didn't know what?' I ask. But he isn't talking to me any more. You can see that. He's talking to himself.

" 'I thought there must be something like that,' he says. 'Something better than Dracula, or Frankenstein's monster, or all the rest. Something bigger, more powerful. Something I could really be. And now I know. And now I'm going to.' "

Max Schick is unable to maintain coherency from this point on. But his direct account is not necessary. We are, unfortunately, all too well aware of what happened next.

Max Schick sat there in his chair and watched Andrew Benson *change*.

He watched him *grow*. He watched him put forth the eyes, the stalks, the writhing tentacles. He watched him twist and tower, filling the room and then *overflowing* until the flimsy stucco walls collapsed and there was nothing but the green, gigantic horror, the sixty-foot-high monstrosity that may have been born in a screenwriter's brain or have been spawned beyond the stars, but certainly existed and drew nourishment from realms far from a three-dimensional world or three-dimensional concepts of sanity.

Max Schick will never forget that night and neither, of course, will anybody else.

That was the night the monster destroyed Los Angeles. **END**

ALGIS BUDRYS

Die, Shadow

I

I'VE come a long, long way to die alone, David Greaves thought as *Defiance* tumbled through the misty shroud of Venus, hopelessly torn apart by the explosion in her engines. On the console in front of him, the altimeter was one of the last few meaningful instruments, and it told him there were only a few tortured miles remaining before the ship he had brought this far — had spent his fortune in building when no government would yet consider risking a manned rocket on his flight — would smash down to its doom on a planet no man had ever walked.

Battered and tossed in his seat by the ship's crazy tumbling, Greaves tensed the oak-hard muscles of his arms and thrust himself up to his feet. He wasn't dead yet and. if the slim chance paid off, he'd still be present to laugh in the government's face when the first, safe, cautious official venture finally made its way across the emptiness between Earth and the Sun's second planet.

Dragging himself from handhold to handhold, his tendons cracking with the strain, he levered himself toward the Crash Capsule, forced open its hatch and pulled himself through, while the winds of Venus tore at the shattered hull and the scream of *Defiance's* passage through the murky sky rose to a savage howl.

Outside the cloud-lashed hull there were no stars. Below, no one knew what sort of jungle, or sea, or desert of whipping poison sand might lie in wait. Greaves had not cared when he set out, and did not care now. If men had always waited to be sure, if all the adventurers of mankind had waited until the signposts had gone up, the cave bears would still be the dominant form of life on Earth, and races undreamed of might never know such a thing as man to contest their sway over the Universe.

I'll live to see my share of that, Greaves thought as he pulled the capsule's hatch shut and dropped into the special padding that, in theory, would cushion much of the impact. *Or else I'll know that I tried.* He tripped the lever that would flood the capsule with Doctor Eckstrom's special anesthetic — the experimental compound that might — just barely might — offer a chance.

AS the hiss of the yellow-tinged, acrid gas became louder and louder in his ears, David Greaves thought again of the almost obsessive lengths to which he had gone in making sure that there would be such a thing as the capsule. The entire project — the decision to build the ship, to sacrifice for it the personal fortune he had built up in his meteoric rise from obscurity to being one of the world's most dynamic and certainly youngest industrialists—had been marked by his fanatical persistence and dedication. But that dream had come first, and the fortune second — the sole purpose of his career, from its very beginnings when he was only another engineer test pilot, had simply been to accumulate the means so the *Defiance* could be built. But the ship had been three-quarters complete when he conceived the idea for the capsule. He could not even now remember exactly when or how he had decided that he must have some device that would protect him from a crash and — here was the vital thing he insisted upon — to keep him alive, no matter how injured, no matter how long might be necessary, until rescuers could reach him.

For him to even think in terms of rescuers — of depending on others — was totally uncharacteristic. For him to divert a major position of his dwindling resources from work on the ship itself, and push toward the elaborate design of the capsule was, in some lights, again uncharacteristically foolish. But he had done it, and now . . .

. . . Now the anesthetic created by the man some said was a medical genius and some said was a quack had flooded over him.

He could feel the first effect — the calm, the drowsy peace. By the time the *Defiance* smashed into the ground — very soon now — his metabolism would have slowed to a carefully metered rate. It would take hours for his heart to beat once. To him it would seem as if each day was only a few minutes. The jagged nerve-flashes of pain would be only a faraway slow tingle; the blink of an eye would encompass hours of actual time, and he would lie here, safe, asleep,

until he was taken out into the air, where slowly the effects would wear off.

Meanwhile, there was more than enough gas compressed into the capsule's tanks to keep him perfectly relaxed for a hundred years. The valve — a simple device he had sketched out in five minutes, as if the design had been part of his mind for many years — would continue to meter out the supply at the optimum rate and pressure.

It was only now — perhaps a hundred feet from impact, perhaps only a hundred hairs-breadths — that he suddenly saw the flaw in the design.

He struggled to reach the valve, in a useless reflex, for there would have been nothing he could have done, no matter how much time remained. Then he fell back, a twisted grin on his face. *I've come a long, long way to trap myself,* he laughed in his drowsing mind, as the ship crashed, and the capsule, torn from *Defiance's* side, rebounded like a cannon shell from Heaven upon the outraged soil of Venus, and the overhead clouds sprang into flamed reflection from the blast of *Defiance's* end.

In the capsule, the valve controlling the flow from the illeggically copious supply of anesthetic snapped off cleanly. David Greave's lungs jolted to the impact as a century's dosage of high-pressure gas delivered its one giant hammerblow of sleep . . . Of sleep like death . . .

Of sleep so slow, so majestic, that only the eternally ageless body might testify to life. Of sleep without end, without motion, until . . .

II

THE woman — the sensuous ivory-skinned woman with eyes like dark jewels and hair like midnight framing her red-lipped face — kissed him again and then drew back to touch his cheek.

"Wake," she whispered softly. "Wake, sleeper."

David Greaves looked up at her through slowly dawning eyes. The scent of spices was in his nostrils. As the woman's hair brushed his face again, the fragrance increased.

"My name is David Greaves," he said, and looked up at the sky and then around him.

There was now no envelope of cloud to hide the face of this planet from the Sun; no such shroud as had concealed the Venus of his day in dazzling white without and muffled it in somber black

within. This sky was ruddy, ruddy with the light of the day's last moments. and the clouds through which the sunset burned were only cravon-strokes of ochre across the orange sky.

He lay in state, facing that sunset, on some sort of black metal couch which supported him on a multitude of sweeping, back-bent arms. Beneath him, a dozen low broad steps of olive-green polished stone led down to a long forum, flagged with the same gold-veined, masterfully fitted paving. Around the court ran a low wall, again of stone; friezed, and burnished to a dull glow. From the wall, tall slim pillars thrust into the air.

And atop each pillar, cast and carved in black metal washed by the lingering light, crouched a monster.

No single artist could have created such a bestiary of gargoyles. Some he could trace in their evolution — the vulpine, the crustacean, the insectile. Fangs and pincers slit the cool, invigorating breeze that flowed over the court. Antennae quivered and hummed in the air, and a myriad legs were poised in tension, forever prepared to leap. Others were beyond any creation he knew of — limbs and wings contorted into shapes that had, undoubtedly, been taken by living things . . . in lives unimaginable to any man. And all of them, imaginable or not, faced torward him forever.

At the foot of each pillar, mounted in a cresset on the wall at its base, burned a torch. And so, when the night fell, then the shadows of all these monsters would be cast upward onto the stars, and he would lie sleeping in the pooled light of the torches, while all around him these creatures stood watch.

How many nights had he lain here? How many centuries to wash the fog of sleep out of every nook and cranny of his lungs, when each breath might take a thousand years — ten thousand?

BUT he was not done with studying his surroundings. He had heard sound when he turned his head. Now the sound was a rising murmur as he lifted his shoulders to look down the length of the court of monsters toward the far end. There were people there. They had been seated on stone tiers that rose up toward a collonaded temple. There he could see an altar through the open sides and, on that altar, a flame that burned bright and unwinking against the outline of the lowering Sun.

The people were rising to their feet. From them came an open-throated murmur that became a cry of savage joy.

"Who are they?" he asked the woman as he sat up and felt his body stretch with power cramped too long, as he squared back his shoulders and peered through the twilight in the court of monsters.

"Your worshippers, David Greaves," she said, standing beside him among the many arms of his couch. "The people whose last hope you are." She added softly: "My name, though you did not ask, is Adelie." She paused. "I, too, am one of your worshippers. Wherever there are human being, throughout the Universe, you are worshipped."

He looked at her more closely. There was a lift to one black-winged eyebrow that was less reverent than a god might like, though a man could have no quarrel with it. She stood gracefully on sandaled feet, dressed in a single white garment girdled around her waist by a belt made of the same metal in which the monsters were cast. He saw that the clasp was shaped into a profile of his own face. And he saw from the wear that it showed that it was old — older than she could be, older perhaps than this court. This . . . shrine? He wondered how many priestesses had worn that belt.

How many of *his* priestesses.

He frowned and got down, feeling the touch of the day-warmed stone on his bare feet. He was dressed, he saw, in a black kilt and nothing else. He returned his glance to the worshippers and saw that the men were dressed similarly, and that the women wore flowing, calf-length, translucently light robes like Adelie's.

There was motion at one corner of his eye, and he turned his head sharply to see the arms of the couch sweeping down, folding and bending against its sides. Now he saw that he had been cradled in the arms of a great black metal beast. It crouched atop the dais. Its head was bent supplicatingly, bright oily metal barely visible at the joinings of its mechanical body.

He glanced quickly up at the monsters atop their columns. "Are they all like that?" he asked Adelie.

An old man's gruff voice answered him from the other side of the beast-couch. "They won't spring down to devour you — you needn't be afraid of *that*." Two men came into view, one old, one young and very slim. The old one rapped the couch with his knuckles. "This tended you in your sleep. It is made in the shape of the most ferocious race that ever rivaled Man. It is now extinct — as are all those others up there, for the same reason."

The thin young man — very pale, very long of limb — stretched

his broad, tight mouth into a smile that covered his face without mirth. "*Not the* most ferocious, Vigil."

"Your kind will learn about that," the old man snapped.

"Not from you and yours," the slim man said lightly.

Greaves turned to Adelie, who waited, poised, while old Vigil and the young man quarreled. "Tell me the situation," Greaves said.

Adelie's lips parted. But the old man interrupted.

The situation is that you have been awakened needlessly and would best go back to sleep at once. My daughter and these fanatical sheep —" he waved an angry arm at the standing worshippers — "have forced me to permit this. But in fact Humanity neither needs you nor wants you awake."

"Oh, on the contrary," the young man said. "Humanity needs its gods very badly at this hour. But you are only a man, not so?"

Greaves looked from one to the other — the leather-skinned old man with his mop of ringleted white hair, the young one who was human in appearance but somehow claimed some other status. "Who are you two?"

"I am Vigil, your guardian, and this is —"

"I am Mayron of The Shadows," the young man said, and he held himself as carelessly as before, but his face looked directly into Greave's. "See my eyes."

There was nothing there. Only darkness speckled by pinpoints of light; thick, sooty darkness like oil smoke, and sharp lights that burned through it without illuminating it.

"Mayron that was First of Men," Vigil said bitterly.

"Mayron that is First of Shadows," the empty-skinned thing replied proudly, and began to weep great, black tears that soon emptied it, so that the skin drooped on the pave and a black cloud in the shape of a man stood sparkling in the dusk before Greaves. "Mayron that will again be First of Men, when all men are shadows. Mayron that is already First of many men. And which of us is a god, David Greaves?"

Adelie's face glowed with excitement. Her red lips were parted breathlessly. The crowd on the tiers had loosed a great, wailing moan, which hung over the court of conquered monsters as the first stars became visible on the far horizon.

Greaves took a deep breath. He could feel his body tensing itself, the muscles rippling, as though his hide needed comfort.

"Which of us is a god, man?" Mayron repeated softly, his voice coming from the entire cloud. "What is it you can do against me, you whose entire virtue rests on doing nothing?"

"That would depend on what was expected of me at this moment," Greaves said.

"This moment?" Mayron chuckled. "At *this* moment, nothing."

"In that case, get out of my court and come back when there's something to do."

Mayron laughed, throwing his head back, the laughter high and insolent. "How like a god! How very like the real thing."

Greaves frowned. "If you were a man, once, you might remember how that feels." But the laugh had bothered him.

"Oh, I remember. And tomorrow we fight, man." Laughing, Mayron bent and picked up the skin he had discarded. He crumpled it by the waist in one fist, and brandished it negligently at the worshippers. They shrank back with a moan of horror as he strode toward the far wall. At the wall, he flipped the white, fluttering thing over, and as a cloud passed through the stone. Perhaps on the other side he put on his human form again. Greaves could not tell. The sun was down, and only a little light glowed on the far horizon. The torches guttered in the court of monsters, and the worshippers were hurrying up the steps, out through the temple and away.

III

Greaves, Adelie and Vigil stood beside the beast-couch. "All right," Greaves said. "Now there are things I want to know, and I want no quarrels, Vigil."

"And by what right do you order me around?" the old man growled. "You may be a god to some, but you are not *my* god."

"You owe it to me atheist. If I were awakened today, at this pat moment, I could have been awakened before. I wasn't. You kept me asleep, guardian, when I could have been free as any other man. So, you owe me."

The old man grunted. "You're brave with Mayron and brave with me. But all men are brave, each in his own way. We need no gods."

"But you have one."

Adelie touched his arm. "You have lived from the beginning of human history. And you were a great hero. That much the legends tell us. You were braver than any man, and for your bravery, you

could not die. While other heros conquered the stars and, in time, died, you lived on. While enemy after enemy was beaten by Man, and the victorious men died, you lived on. The stars and all worlds became ours. Men loved and begat, and men died, but you lived on. It seemed to us that as long as you lived, all men would have something to remember — how great Man is; what the reward of courage can be. It seemed only fitting that we should bring to you the trophies of our achievements. It seemed only right to believe that you had survived to some purpose — that a day would come when Man would need his greatest hero."

"Precisely," Vigil snorted. "Man worships nothing but himself. You were a convenient symbol. It did no harm. It may have done some good. Of course, the chuckleheads took it all literally. And so — thanks to Man's stupid persistence in breeding idiots as well as men with some brains, you, whoever you are, whatever kind of filibustering bravo you actually were, have become the focus of a cult populated by the credulous, the neurotic and those who profit by them. I hope you are grateful for your legacy!"

Greaves looked up at the stars. There were some constellations that might have been the ones he knew, distorted by his transit to another viewpoint . . . or by time. He was no astronomer.

I've come a long way, he thought, *and I wonder what the end of it will be.* "Those who profit from the credulous, hmm?" he said to Vigil.

"I am your guardian and I have guarded you. As many others have done before me, from various motives. This is not your first court, nor your tenth. The ritual around you is compounded from thousands of years of hogwash, as witness my worshipful daughter who inherits a post from some time when every venturing hero had to have a leman patiently awaiting his return. My duties were originally medical. But the couch has been attending to that — with some exceptions — for centuries. And you may be assured, Man's history has not been one unbroken triumph, nor his civilization any steady upward climb. But we built while you slumbered. I had thought to prevent your besmirching Man's greatness with your cheap legend."

"Or perhaps he was afraid of the god he denies," Adelie murmured, her eyes glowing warmly.

Greaves looked from her to her father. "So she believe in me and you do not," he said to Vigil. "But it may be you're not entirely

sure — and from the looks she gives me, it may be she isn't either." He grinned crookedly. "Man may have climbed, but I assure you he hasn't changed."

HE smiled at the looks on both their faces. Divinity was new to him, but humanity was not. If these two had thought perhaps they had some dull-witted barbarian here — the one for his faith in his faithlessness, the other for her pleasures — it had been time their error was corrected.

"Old man, god or not I have been called out . . . whether it pleases you or not. And I won't willingly lay me down to sleep again until *I* think it's time. So you had better tell me what all this is about, or I will blunder around and perhaps break something you're fond of."

Adelie laughed.

Vigil swung his arm sharply towards her. "This would-be courtesan was once Mayron's great love, when he was First of us all. Because he could find nothing to conquer for her in all the Universe, he began dabbling beyond it. Oh, he found it, didn't he, my child?"

"Be careful, Father," Adelie spat. "The worshippers follow *me* now that I've awakened him as promised, and you —"

"Quiet," Greaves said mildly. "He was telling me something."

"That I was," Vigil said angrily, while his daughter's look at Greaves was the least sure it had ever been, "and for all the need you have of it, I might as well not. But if I may say it once and get it said, I can then go to my meal and the two of you will be free to amuse yourselves. Mayron discovered the Shadows, when his machines touched some continuum beyond this one, and the Shadows ate him. But like the fox that lost his tail in the trap and then cozened other foxes with the lie that it was better so and fashionable besides. Mayron made a virtue of his slavery. Those who give themselves up to the Shadows never rest and never hunger. They know no barrier. And no love. No joy. No noble sorrow. An untailed fox is safe from catching by the tail. A Shadow has no spirit, no humanity, no — soul. But there are always dunderheads. Mayron has them, and down in that city of his down there —" the old man waved at the horizon, but all Greaves could see from where he stood were the glowing tops of what he took to be three fitfully active volcanoes — "he has a city full of dunderheaded shadows who go to some temple he has built and enter the Shadow chamber

to be changed. The admission is easily gained; the price of freedom from human care is humanity."

"And up here," Greaves said, "other dunderheads come to gain what in exchange for what?"

"Gain at least some sort of affirmation at the cost of remaining men!" the old man growled. "If they are simple, at least they are human! And even an intelligent man can see the value in what is embodied here."

"As witness yourself. Yes."

"*I* didn't want to wake you up! We know enough so you could have been awakened centuries ago. But to what purpose? To turn another hooligan loose to upset civilization, and lose the symbol of that precious thing? When Man himself can rescue himself? But, no, this superstition-ridden tramp I wish I'd strangled in her cradle — *she* stirred the worshippers up, she arranged the combat between yourself and Mayron, she —"

"When and where?"

"What?"

"This fight Mayron and you have both spoken of."

"Tomorrow at noon. In the city. But there's no need for it. Tomorrow Mayron dies, and the other Shadows die. You can watch or not — as long as you stay out of the way."

Greaves looked at Adelie. "Your daughter, Vigil, does not look much impressed."

"Impressed! Impressed!" The old man was nearly dancing with rage. "I'll *show* you! Come with me." Vigil turned without looking back and pattered rapidly down the steps of the dais, his calloused feet slapping indignantly on the time-buffed stones.

Greaves frowned after him. Then he jerked his head to Adelie. "Come on," he said, and they, too, walked quickly down the length of the court of the conquered monsters. And for the first time since their creation the pillared gargoyles did not have to bear the sight of Man.

THE scent of Adelie's fragrance was in Greave's nostrils again as they followed the old man through the temple, past the altar where the eternal flame burned bright enough to sting. He said nothing to her. She volunteered no words of her own. But she walked close enough to brush his thigh with hers. Greaves smiled appreciatively.

Vigil led them to a small chamber in one wing of the temple. He flung open the door with a clatter of bolts in a concealed lock, and pointed inside. "Look — the two of you. It's not just Mayron who can dabble with machines. For every clever man, there is another just as clever."

A gun of green metal was mounted on a pedestal in the center of the chamber. Slim and graceful as a wading bird with one extended leg, it poised atop its mount and sang quietly of power and intent to kill. The friezed walls of the chamber hummed in harmonic response to the idle melody of the gun. Greaves felt his hackles rising unreasonably, and he very nearly growled with outrage at the sight of it.

"Tomorrow at noon," Vigil said in a high, triumphant voice, "the weapon will be swung to point through that window and down on Mayron's city. And when it is done, there will not be a single Shadow alive down there."

Greaves walked to the window in the chamber's far wall and looked down. But it was dark below; nothing to mark the outlines of a city as cities had been in the time he remembered. The temple apparently stood atop a high hill, with the city in a great valley at its foot, but again all Greaves could see were three glowing mountaintops across the way, and beyond them, the night sky.

Then suddenly one of the volcanoes flared for an instant, and the few overhead clouds reflected redly down into the valley.

Greaves caught his breath. The city had emerged black and immense, extending for miles, its lightless towers like the spine-bones of a beast half-eaten and rotting in a tidal pool. Then the light was gone, and once again there was nothing visible down there — if the undead beast had chosen to bestir itself and steathily move on some errand of the night, no one standing here could have known until it was too late.

"So that's the city of the Shadows," Greaves said.

"The city that was once the First City of Man," Vigil said bitterly. "That Mayron has made into an outpost of Hell. Where no man dares live; where they say that those with Shadows, once they were in sufficient number, dragged women and children into the Chamber of Shadows so that their men, heartbroken, joined them when their Shadow-children returned to plead with them."

"And this gun of yours is going to do what to them?" he asked.

"Kill them."

"I know that. How?" Greaves stared at the old man through narrowing eyes.

"A beam of power, made of the stuff that spins within all things — a pure force of this continuum."

"You mean this thing is some kind of particle emitter — an electron or photon gun?"

"OUR science need not concern itself with crudities like names, barbarian. This gun was made as a song or a poem is made — in the mind of a man who dreams weapons where another man might dream bridges . . . and when the gun finds its fruition, tomorrow when Mayron expects no mightier enemy than you, then the beam will sweep that city, and when its stops Mayron's city will be a tomb for empty skins. And Man will build another First City, and those who fled shall have a place again, and —"

"Who built — who *dreamed* — this piece of ironmongery?" Greaves growled. "Who was the poet — you?"

"Yes! Why not? Do you think because I am an old man —"

"A heedlessly spiteful one who hasn't stopped to think."

"Stopped to think! *Look!*" Vigil seized the torch at the doorway and lifted it high. "Did you think I wasn't sure? That the weapon has not been tested?"

Now Greaves could see why the gun sang rather than rested in quiet patience. A Shadow hung against the far wall, supported by its outstretched arms, its hands sunken wrist-deep in the stone. And though it jerked its legs and struggled feebly to be free, the hands remained trapped. Under the sound of the idling gun, he could distinguish a quiet, thing, whimpering.

Adelie laughed softly to herself.

Vigil crowed: "He cannot move — what little strength remains to him is needed for bare existence . . . if I were to touch that control —

"The weapon is at its lowest setting — it has incomparably more power than that; it has the power of all the Universe in it — and look what it can do when it is barely tapped in to its source of power!"

Greaves rumbled in his throat. Suddenly the gun's song was more than he could stand. He barely seemed to move, but Vigil had time to shout, the outraged cry beginning to echo in the chamber when suddenly there came the snap of rending metal, and a choked stammer from the gun. And then Greaves had the gun in his hands,

completely torn from its pedestal. He threw it out into the night in a bright flash of fire that bathed them all in a thundercap of light. Greaves stared after it, his teeth bared, the horrid sound of his hatred still rumbling within him. When that had dwindled, leaving him with his heavy chest heaving for aid, the trapped Shadow had vanished, no doubt to tell Mayron that Humanity's godling had gone insane.

Adelie was very pale. Vigil was trying to speak.

And that from the old man was enough to bring back the first scarlet edge of the fury he had turned on the gun.

"Close your mouth!" Greaves commanded him. "I have to go fight Mayron tomorrow, and I don't want another word out of you. Go find something useless to do. Adelie, I want a bath, some food and drink. Right now!"

IV

DURING the night, he asked Adelie: "I'm supposed to fight him with my hands, is that it? Or with simple weapons of some kind? And this will prove to the worshippers all over the Universe or to the Shadows that either my or Mayron's way of life is right?"

"Yes," she said. "And you *are* very strong. I'm sure you will win. I was sure when I suggested it to Mayron. He's so completely confident — I knew I could trick him into it."

Later, he asked her: "Tell me — was there a famous weapon poet in First City?" And he took her hand, not letting go of it. When she asked him, once, hesitantly, why he had broken the gun, he answered honestly: "Because it seemed hateful." And other than that, they said very little to each other during that night, and whatever they did say had as much truth in it as all the things they had said or he had been told from the first moment of his awakening. He did not sleep. For one thing, he felt no need of it. For another, he was frightened. He did not want to be a Shadow . . .

In the morning he had forgotten fear. Steps led from the temple to a pathway that wound toward the city. He stood for a moment at their head, with the altar burning behind him, and then stepped out into the morning, with Adelie and Vigil following.

There were people waiting out there. They lined the path, murmuring among themselves. As he strode along they fell in line behind him, leaving behind the temporary shelters they had put

up when they fled from the city and took refuge here.

"Sheep," Vigil snorted as he padded through the dust beside Greaves. "All right, *let* them see you brought down. I'll make another gun — if your stupidity hasn't robbed me of the time I need — and then they'll see . . ."

"I'm sure that if I lose today, Mayron will give you all the time you need. Maybe he'll even send the same Shadow poet back to you with whatever story you'll believe this time," Greaves said, with disgust in his voice.

"What —?" Vigil stammered.

"What did he tell you? That he would create the gun for you because he hated the Shadows, even though he was a Shadow? Did he tell you how he remembered how fine it was to be a man? Is *that* the story you believed? You simple, credulous murderer! And you repaid him by testing it on him. As he well suspected you might. It's not only humans who can be brave. Or sacrifice themselves for the ferocity of their race. Or were you too busy taking Humanity's name in vain to ever consider that? *You* never dreamed that gun. Not you — you may be foolish, but you don't hate this Universe?"

Vigil was blinking at him. "What —?"

Adelie laughed. "Last night, father. He asked me about weapon poets. There's no use trying to lie out of it."

Greaves smiled at her. "That's right. I asked you, and from that moment on you knew I was cleverer than Mayron thinks. But you never got away to tell him that, did you? You know," he said thoughtfully. "you'd better hope I win today. Mayron won't be too fond of you if I give him any more shocks."

Adelie grinned. "I thought of that. But if you win, he dies. And if you die . . .?

"You will have had your glory anyway. You will have engineered the battle of the gods, and dabbled in other pleasures, too?" Greaves was still smiling, but Adelie's eyes grew wider. "Maybe it'll be that simple, Adelie. But who can tell what's on the minds of your gods, hmm?"

And so David Greaves strode into the city of Shadows, followed by a fearful multitude and two badly shaken people. He walked down a broad avenue at whose end something black bulked and glimmered, while things with black-filled eyes stood watching thin-lipped

And as he walked he showed none of his fear.

HE stopped at the end of the avenue, with the tall tower looming over him, and stood facing the Temple of Shadows. There was no sign of life in the square black opening that served as a door for the featureless stone block, dark but not as dark as a Shadow.

He threw back his head and called: "Mayron!"

The worshippers huddled around him. Vigil, like them, was throwing anxious looks over his shoulders as the city's Shadows crowded closer.

Adelie murmured: "There he is."

And he was, trotting lightly down the steps, smiling. He wore his human skin as naturally as if it were more than a cloak, and Greaves had to look hard to see that when he smiled his lips stretched but no teeth showed.

"Well, Man in all your pride. Are you ready?"

"Ready as any man. How do you propose to go about this?"

"Adelie didn't tell you?"

"She told me as much as I asked. I didn't ask much. Could you suggest any way I could have refused the conditions, no matter what they are? That loses the fight right there. Wasn't I supposed to understand that? Do you think politics is a recent invention.?"

"Fierce, fierce," Mayron murmured. "Well spoken." He chuckled. "When I was a man, I would have liked you."

"Get to the business Mayron."

The Shadow put up his hand. "Not so fast. Perhaps we can arrive at some —"

"Arrive at nothing. Put up or shut up. Vigil no longer has that monstrous gun and there's no point in this for you today. But there is for *me*, and you don't have much time to realize that." He glowered at the Shadow, feeling the rage, feeling the onrush of the bright white exaltation when the body moves too fast for the brain to speak, when what directs the body is the reflex founded on the silent knowledge of the brain's deep layers, where the learning has no words.

Mayron frowned. His head was cocked to one side. If he had had eyes, he would have been peering at Greaves' face. But he said nothing; he had lost the moment, and now Greaves used it.

"You scum," Greaves said, his voice booming through the Temple square for all the Shadows to hear. "A weapon that drains the power of this continuum! You leech — you would have had that doddering old man put all my stars out!"

And now the moment was at its peak, and Greaves screamed with

rage, so that the faces of the towers were turned into sounding boards and the shout crackled in the air like thunder. He jumped forward, one sweeping arm tossing Mayron out of his way and flailing for balance, while Greaves charged into the Chamber of Shadows.

AND now the fear — the great devouring fear that came like fangs in his belly but did not stop him. Now the fear as he burst through the acolytes and into the black, light-shot sphere that quivered at the focus of Mayron's machine. As he stood there, feeling the suck not of one voracious universe but many — all the universes that had eaten the overcurious Mayron and sent back a Judas goat in his skin to conquer what belonged to Man. Feeling the icy cold, and the energy-hunger that could suck Man's Universe dry and still leave a hunger immeasurable.

But the rage — the rage that came to him, that came to the god uncounted generations of men had made while David Greaves lay sleeping but his deepest mind lay awake, feeling, feeling the faith, knowing the splendor of what Man had done — The rage that could make a god, that could give a creature like David Greaves the power to create, to dream a man — to make a David Greaves who would lie waiting, to become a god . . .

That rage went forth.

And in parallel continuums of life unimaginable, the dawn of Apocalypse burst upon suns unnameable and worlds unheard-of — the true Shadows. The god was David Greaves again, when the rage had passed — that image which Man himself had made stood blazing his fury in the Chamber of Shadows, and the Universe of Man was free and safe. But in the places of the Shadows there was no hope, no joy, no place of refuge. Mankind had come forth.

One last snap of the fangs — one moment when the death-spurred Shadows almost had their greatest prize of all — and then it was over. Greaves turned and strode out of the blasted Chamber, and the acolytes cowered, covering their eyes.

DAVID Greaves appeared on the temple steps, and began walking slowly down, his legs shaking with exhaustion. Adelie watched him coming toward her. Around her, Shadows that once had been men were men again, but at her feet Mayron lay without his skin, and though her father had fled, she did not dare go without learning what the look on David Greave's face meant for her. END

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

The Shipshape Miracle

IF Cheviot Sherwood ever had believed in miracles, he believed in them no longer. He had no illusions now. He knew exactly what he faced.

His life would come to an end on this uninhabited backwoods planet and there'd be none to mourn him, none to know. Not, he thought, that there would be any mourners. Although there were those who would be glad to see him, who would come running if they knew where he might be found.

These were people, very definitely, that Sherwood had no desire to see.

His great, one might say his overwhelming, desire not to see them could account in part for his present situation, since he had taken off from the last planet of record without filing plans and lacking clearance.

Since no one knew where he might have headed and since his radio was junk, there was no likelihood at all that anyone would find him — even if they looked, which would be a matter of some doubt. Probably the most that anyone would do would be to send out messages to other planets to place authorities on the alert for him.

And since his spaceship, for the lack of a certain valve for which he had no replacement, was not going anywhere, he was stuck here on this planet.

If that had been all there had been to it, it might not have been so bad. But there was a final irony that under other circumstances (if it had been happening to someone else, let's say), would have kept Sherwood in stitches of forthright merriment for hours on end at the very thought of it. But since he was the one involved, there was no merriment.

For now, when he could gain no benefit, he was potentially rich beyond even his own most greedy and most lurid dreams.

On the ridge above the camp he'd set up beside his crippled spaceship lay a strip of clay-cemented conglomerate that fairly reeked with diamonds. They lay scattered on the hillside, washed out by the weather; they were mixed liberally in the gravel of the tiny stream that wended through the valley. They could be picked up by the basket. They were of high quality, there were several, the size of human skulls, that probably were priceless.

Sherwood was of a hardy, rough and tumble breed. Once he became convinced of his situation he made the best of it. He made his camp into a home and laid in supplies — digging roots, gathering nuts, drying fish and making pemmican. If he was to be cast in the role of a Robinson Crusoe, he proposed to be comfortable.

In his spare time he gathered diamonds, dumping them in a pile outside his shack. And in the idle afternoons or the long evenings, he sat beside his campfire and sorted them out — washing them free of clinging dirt and grading them according to their size and brilliance. The very best of them he put into a sack, designed for easy grabbing if the time should ever come when he might depart.

Not that he had any hope this would come about.

Even so, he was a man who planned against contingencies. He always tried to have some sort of loop-hole. Had this not been the case, his career would have ended long before, at any one of a dozen times or places. That it apparently had come to an end now could be attributed to a certain lack of foresight in not carrying a full complement of spare parts. Although perhaps this was understandable, since never before in the history of space flight had that particular valve which now spelled out Sherwood's doom ever misbehaved.

Perhaps it was well for him that he was not an introspective man. If he had been given to much searching thought, he might have found himself living with his past, and there were places in his past that were far from pretty.

He was lucky in many other ways, of course. The planet was not a bad one, a sort of New England planet with a rocky, tumbled terrain, forested by scrubby trees and distinctly terrestrial. He might just as easily been marooned upon a jungle planet or one of the icy planets or any of another dozen different kinds that were not tolerant of life.

So he settled in and made the best of it and didn't even bother to count off the days. For he knew what he was in for.

He counted on no miracle.

THE miracle he had not counted on came late one afternoon as he sat, cross-legged, sorting out his latest haul of priceless diamonds.

The great black ship came in from the east across the rolling hills. It whistled down across the ridges and settled to the ground a short distance from Sherwood's crippled ship and his shack.

It was no patrol vessel, although in his position, Sherwood would have welcomed even one of these. It was a kind of ship he'd never seen before. It was globular and black and it had no identifying marks on it.

He leaped to his feet and ran toward the ship. He waved his arms in welcome and whooped with his delight. He stopped a hundred feet away when he felt the first whiff of the heat that had been picked up by the vessel's hull in its plunge through atmosphere.

"Hey in there!" he yelled.

And the ship spoke to him. "You need not yell," it told him. "I can hear you well."

"Who are you?" asked Sherwood.

"I am the Ship," the voice told him.

"Quit fooling around," yelled Sherwood, "who are you?"

For the sort of answer it had given was foolishness. Of course was the ship. It was someone in the ship, talking to him through a speaker in the hull.

"I have told you," said the Ship. "I am the Ship."

"But there is someone speaking to me."

"The Ship is speaking to you."

"All right, then," said Sherwood. "If you want it that way, it's okay with me. Can you take me out of here? My radio is broken and my ship disabled."

"Perhaps I can," said the Ship. "Tell me who you are."

Sherwood hesitated for a moment, and then he told who he was, quite truthfully. For it suddenly had occurred to him that this ship was as much an outlaw as himself. It had no markings and all ships must have markings.

"You say you left your last port without proper clearance?"

"Yes," said Sherwood. "There were certain circumstances."

"And no one knows where you are? No one's looking for you?"

"How could they?" Sherwood asked.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Just anywhere," said Sherwood. "I have no preference."

FOR even if they should land him somewhere where he had no wish to be, he still would have a running chance. On this planet he had no chance at all.

"All right," said the Ship. "You can come aboard."

A hatch came open in the hull and a ladder began running out.

"Just a second," Sherwood shouted. "I'll be right there."

He sprinted to the shack and grabbed his sack of the finest diamonds, then legged it for the ship. He got there almost as soon as the ladder touched the ground.

The hull still was crackling with warmth, but Sherwood swarmed up the ladder, paying no attention.

He was set for life, he thought. Unless —

And then the thought struck him that they might take the diamonds from him. They could pretend it was payment for his passage. Or they could simply take them without an excuse of any sort at all.

But it was too late now. He was almost in the hatch. To drop the sack of diamonds now would do no more than arouse suspicion and would gain him nothing.

It came of greediness, he thought. He did not need this many diamonds. Just a half dozen of the finest dropped into his pockets would have been enough. Enough to buy him another ship so he could return and get a load of them.

But he was committed now. There was nothing he could do except to see it through.

He reached the hatch and tumbled through it. There was no one waiting. The inner lock stood open and there was no one there.

He stopped to stare at the emptiness and behind him the retracting ladder rumbled softly and the hatch hissed to a close.

"Hey," he shouted, "where is everyone?"

"There is no one here," the voice said, "but me."

"All right," said Sherwood. "Where do I go to find you?"

"You have found me," said the Ship. "You are standing in me."

"You mean . . ."

"I told you," said the Ship. "I said I was the Ship. That is what I am."

"But no one . . ."

"You do not understand," said the Ship. "There is no need of anyone. I am myself. I am intelligent. I am part machine, part human. Rather, perhaps, at one time I was. I have thought, in recent

years, the two of us have merged so we're neither human nor machine, but something new entirely."

"You're kidding me," said Sherwood, beginning to get frightened. "There can't be such a thing."

"Consider," said the Ship, "a certain human who had worked for years to build me and who, as he finished me, found death was closing in . . ."

"Let me out!" yelled Sherwood. "Let me out of here! I don't want to be rescued. I don't want . . ."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Sherwood, it is rather late for that. We're already out in space."

"Out in space! We can't be! It isn't

"Of course it is," the Ship told him. You expected thrust. There was no thrust. We simply lifted."

"NO ship," insisted Sherwood, "can get off a planet . . ."

"You're thinking, Mr. Sherwood, of the ships built by human hands. Not of a living ship. Not of an intelligent machine. Not of what becomes possible with the merging of a man and machine."

"You mean you built yourself?"

"Of course not. Not to start with. I was built with human hands to start with. But I've redesigned myself and rebuilt myself, not once, but many times. I knew my capabilities. I knew my dreams and wishes. I made myself the kind of thing that I was capable of being — not the halfway, makeshift thing that was the best the human race could do."

"The man you spoke of," Sherwood said. "The one who was about to die . . ."

"He is part of me," said the Ship. "If you must think of him as a separate entity, he, then, is talking to you. For when I say 'I', I mean both of us, for we've become as one."

"I don't get it," Sherwood told the Ship, feeling the panic coming back again.

"He built me, long ago, as a ship which would respond, not to the pushing of a lever or the pressing of a button, but to the mental commands of the man who drove me. I was to become, in effect, an extension of that man. There was a helmet that the man would wear and he'd think into the helmet."

"I understand," said Sherwood.

"He'd think into the helmet and I was so programmed that I'd

obey his thoughts. I became, in effect, a man, and the man became in effect the ship he operated."

"Nice deal," Sherwood said enthusiastically, never being one upon whom the niceties of certain advantages were ever lost.

"He finished me and he was about to die and it was a pity that such a one should die — one who had worked so hard to do what he had done. Who'd given up so much. Who never had seen space.

"No," said Sherwood, in revulsion, knowing what was coming. "No, he'd not done that."

"It was a kindness," said the Ship. "It was what he wanted. He managed it himself. He simply gave up his body. His body was a worthless hulk that was about to die. The modifications to accommodate a human brain rather than a human skull were quite elementary. And he has been happy. We have both of us been happy."

Sherwood stood without saying anything. In the silence he was listening for some sound, for any kind of tiny rattle or hum, for anything at all to tell him the ship was operating. But there was no sound and no sense of motion of any sort.

"Happy," he said. "Where would you have found happiness? What's the point of all this?"

"That," the Ship said solemnly, "is a bit hard to explain."

Sherwood stood and thought about it — the endless voyaging through space without a body — with all the desires, all the advantages, all the capabilities of a body gone forever.

"There is nothing for you to fear," said the Ship. "You need not concern yourself. We have a cabin for you. Just down the corridor, the first door to your left."

"I thank you," Sherwood said, although he was nervous still.

If he had a choice, he told himself, he'd stayed back on the planet. But since he was here, he'd have to make the best of it. And there were, he admitted to himself, certain advantages and certain possibilities that needed further thought.

HE went down the corridor and pushed on the door. It opened on the cabin. For a spaceship it looked comfortable enough. A little cramped, of course, but then all cabins were. Space is at a premium on any sort of ship.

He went in and placed his sack of diamonds on the bunk that hinged out from the wall. He sat down in the single metal chair that stood beside the bunk.

"Are you comfortable, Mr. Sherwood?" asked the Ship.

"Very comfortable," he said.

It was going to be all right, he told himself. A very crazy setup, but it would be all right. Perhaps a little spooky and a bit hard to believe, but probably better, after all, than staying marooned, back there on the planet. For this would not last forever. And the planet could have been, most probably would have been, forever.

It would take a while to reach another planet, for space was rather sparsely populated in this area. There would be time to think and plan. He might be able to work out something that would be to his great advantage.

He leaned back in the chair and stretched out his legs. His brain began to click in a ceaseless scurrying back and forth, nosing from every angle all the possibilities that existed in this setup.

It was nice, he thought — the entire operation. The Ship undoubtedly had figured out some angles for itself which no human yet had thought of.

There were a lot of things to do. He'd have to learn the capabilities of the Ship and give close study to its personality, seeking out its weak points and its strength. Then he'd have to plan his strategy and be careful not to give away his thinking. He must not move until he was entirely ready.

There might be many ways to do it. There might be flattery or there might be a business proposition or there might be blackmail. He'd have to think on it and study and follow out the line of action that seemed to be the best.

He wondered at the Ship's means of operation. Anti-gravity, perhaps. Or a fusion chamber. Or perhaps some method which had not been so far considered as a source of power.

He got up from the chair and paced, three paces across the room and back, restlessly pondering odds.

Yes, he thought, it would be a nice kind of ship to have. More than likely there was nothing in all of space that could touch it in speed and maneuverability. Nothing that could overhaul it should he ever have to run. It could apparently be set down anywhere. It was probably self-repairing, for the Ship had spoken of redesigning and of rebuilding itself. With the memory of his recent situation still fresh inside his mind, this was comforting.

There must be a way to get the Ship, he told himself. There had to be a way to get it. It was something that he needed.

He could buy another ship, of course; with the diamonds in the sacking he could buy a fleet of ships. But this was the one he wanted.

MAYBE it had been pure luck this Ship had picked him up. For any other legal ship would probably turn him over to the authorities at its next port of call, but this Ship didn't seem to mind who he was or what his record might be. Any other ship that was not entirely legal would have grabbed off, not only the diamonds that he had but his discovery of the diamond field. But this particular Ship had no concern with diamonds.

What a setup, he thought. A human brain and a spaceship tied together, so closely tied together that their identities had merged. He shivered at the thought of it, for it was a gruesome thing.

Although perhaps it had not meant too much to that old man who was about to die. He had traded an aged and death-marked body for many years of life. Perhaps life as a part of a space-traveling machine was better than no life at all.

How many years, he wondered, had it been since that old man had translated himself into something else than human? A hundred? Five hundred? Perhaps even more than that.

In those years where had he been and what might he have seen?

And, most pertinent of all, what thoughts had run through and congealed and formed within his mind? What was life like for him? Not a human sort of life, of course, not a human viewpoint, but something else entirely.

Sherwood tried to imagine what it might be like, but gave up in dismay. It would necessarily be a negation of everything he lived for — all the sensual pleasure, all the dreams of gain and glory, all the neat behavior patterns he had set up for himself, all his self-made rules of conduct, and of conscience.

A miracle, he thought. As a matter of fact, there'd been two miracles. The first had been when he had been able to set his ship down without a crackup when the valve had failed. He had come in close above the planet's surface to find a place to land — and suddenly the valve went out and the engine failed and there he'd been, plunging just above the rough terrain. Then suddenly he had glimpsed a place where a landing might be just barely possible and had fought the controls madly to hit that certain spot and finally had hit it — alive.

It had been a miracle that he had made the landing; and the

coming of the Ship to rescue him had been the second miracle.

The bunk dropped down flat against the wall and his sack of diamonds was dumped onto the floor.

"Hey, what goes on?" yelled Sherwood. Then he wished he had not yelled, for it was quite clear exactly what had happened. The support that held the bunk had not been snapped properly into place and had given way, letting down the bunk.

"Something wrong, Mr. Sherwood?" asked the Ship.

"No, not a thing," said Sherwood. "My bunk fell down. I guess it startled me."

He bent down to pick up the diamonds. As he did, the chair quietly and efficiently slid back against the wall, folded itself up and slid into a slight depression that exactly fitted it.

Squatted to pick up the diamonds, Sherwood watched the chair in horrified fascination, then swiftly spun around. The bunk no longer hung against the wall, also had fitted itself into another niche.

Cold fear speared into Sherwood. He rose swiftly to his feet, turning like a man at bay. He stood in a bare cubicle. With both the bunk and chair retracted, he stood within four bare walls.

He sprang toward the door and there wasn't any door. There was only wall.

He staggered back into the center of the cubicle and spun around to view each wall in turn. There was no door in any of the walls. The metal went up from floor to ceiling without a single break.

The walls began to move, closing in on him.

HE watched, incredulous, frozen, thinking that perhaps he'd imagined the moving of the walls.

But it was not imagination. Slowly, inexorably, the walls were closing in. Had he put out his arms, he could have touched them on either side of him.

"Ship!" he said, fighting to keep his voice calm.

"Yes, Mr. Sherwood."

"You are malfunctioning. The walls are closing in."

The walls began to move, closing in on him.

function. My brain grows tired and feeble. It is not the body only — the brain also has its limits. I suspected that it might, but I could not know. There was a chance, of course, that separated from the poison of a body, it might live in its bath of nutrients forever."

"No!" rasped Sherwood, his breath strangled, "No, not me!"

"Who else?" asked the Ship. "I have searched for years and you are the first who fitted."

"Fitted!" Sherwood screamed.

"Why, of course," the Ship said calmly, happily. "A man who would not be missed. No one knowing where you were. No one hunting for you. No one who will miss you. I had hunted for someone like you and had despaired of finding one. For I am humane. I would cause no one grief or sadness."

The walls kept closing in.

The Ship seemed to sigh in metallic contentment.

"Believe me, Mr. Sherwood," it said, "finding you was a very miracle."

FREDERIK POHL

The Five Hells of Orion

I

HIS name was Herrell McCray and he was scared. As best he could tell, he was in a sort of room no bigger than a prison cell. Perhaps it was a prison cell. Whatever it was, he had no business in it; for five minutes before he had been spaceborne, on the Long Jump from Earth to the thriving colonies circling Betelgeuse Nine. McCray was ship's navigator, plotting course corrections — not that there were any, ever; but the reason there were none was that the check-sightings were made every hour of the long flight. He had read off the azimuth angles from the computer sights, automatically locked on their beacon stars, and found them correct; then out of long habit confirmed the locking mechanism visually. It was only a personal quaintness; he had done it a thousand times. And while he was looking at Betelgeuse, Riegel and Saiph . . . it happened.

The room was totally dark, and it seemed to be furnished with a collection of hard, sharp, sticky and knobby objects of various shapes and number of inconvenient sizes. McCray tripped over something that rocked under his feet and fell against something that clattered hollowly. He picked himself up, braced against something that smelled dangerously of halogen compounds, right through his space-tunic, against something that vibrated as he touched it.

McCray had no idea where he was, and no way to find out.

Not only was he in darkness, but in utter silence as well. No. Not quite utter silence.

Somewhere, just at the threshold of his senses, there was something like a voice. He could not quite hear it, but it was there. He sat still as he could, listening: it remained elusive.

Probably it was only an illusion.

But the room itself was hard fact. McCray swore violently.

It was crazy and impossible. There simply was no way for him to get from a warm, bright navigator's cubicle on *Starship Jodrell Bank* to this damned, dark, dismal hole of a place where everything was out to hurt him and nothing explained what was going on. He cried aloud in exasperation: "If I could only *see!*"

He tripped and fell against something that was soft, slimy and, like baker's dough, not at all resilient.

A flickering halo of pinkish light appeared. He sat up, startled. He was looking at something that resembled a suit of medieval armor.

IT was, he saw in a moment, not armor but a spacesuit. But what was the light? And what were these other things in the room?

Wherever he looked, the light danced along with his eyes. It was like having tunnel vision or wearing blinders. He could see what he was looking at, but he could see nothing else. And the things he could see made no sense. A spacesuit, yes; he knew that he could construct a logical explanation for that with no trouble — maybe a subspace meteorite striking the *Jodrell Bank,* an explosion, himself knocked out, brought here in a suit . . . well, it was an explanation with more holes than fabric, like a fisherman's net, but at least it was rational.

How to explain a set of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire?* A space-ax? Or the old-fashioned child's rocking-chair, the chemistry set — or, most of all, the scrap of gaily printed fabric that, when he picked it up, turned out to be a girl's scanty bathing suit? It was slightly reassuring. McCray thought, to find that most of the objects were more or less familiar. Even the child's chair — why, he'd had one more or less like that himself, long before he was old enough to go to school. But what were they doing here?

Not everything he saw was familiar. The walls of the room itself were strange. They were not metal or plaster or knotty pine; they were not papered, painted or overlaid with stucco. They seemed to be made of some sort of hard organic compound, perhaps a sort of plastic or processed cellulose. It was hard to tell colors in the pinkish light. But they seemed to have none. They were "neutral" — the color of aged driftwood or unbleached cloth.

Three of the walls were that way, and the floor and ceiling. The fourth was something else. Areas in it had the appearance of gratings; from them issued the pungent, distasteful halogen odor. They

might be ventilators, he thought; but if so the air they brought in was worse than what he already had.

McCray was beginning to feel more confident. It was astonishing how a little light made an impossible situation bearable, how quickly his courage flowed back when he could see again.

He stood still, thinking. Item, a short time ago — subjectively it seemed to be minutes — he had been aboard the *Jordell Bank* with nothing more on his mind than completing his check-sighting and meeting one of the female passengers for coffee. Item, apart from being shaken up and — he admitted it — scared damn near witless, he did not seem to be hurt. Item, wherever he was now, it became, not so much what had happened to him, but what had happened to the ship?

He allowed that thought to seep into his mind. Suppose there had been an accident to the *Jodrell Bank*.

He could, of course, be dead. All this could be the fantasies of a cooling brain.

McCray grinned into the pink-lit darkness. The thought had somehow refreshed him, like icewater between rounds, and with a clearing head he remembered what a spacesuit was good for.

It held a radio.

He pressed the unsealing tabs, slipped his hand into the vacant chest of the suit and pulled out the hand mike. "This is Herrell McCray," he said, "calling the *Jodrell Bank*."

No response. He frowned. "This is Herrel McCray, calling *Jodrell Bank*."

"Herrell McCray, calling anybody, come in, please."

But there was no answer.

Thoughtfully he replaced the microphone. This was ultrawave radio, something more than a million times faster than light, with a range measured, at least, in hundreds of light-years. If there was no answer, he was a good long way from anywhere.

Of course, the thing might not be operating.

He reached for the microphone again —

He cried aloud.

The pinkish lights went out. He was in the dark again, worse dark than before.

For before the light had gone, McCray had seen what had escaped his eyes before. The suit and the microphone were clear enough in the pinkish glimmer; but the hand — his own hand, cupped to

hold the microphone — he had not seen at all. Nor his arm. Nor, in one fleeting moment of study, his chest.

McCray could not see any part of his own body at all.

II

SOMEONE else could. Someone was watching Herrell McCray with the clinical fascination of a biochemist observing the wigglings of paramecia in a new antibiotic — and with the prayerful emotions of a starving, shipwrecked, sailor, watching the inward bobbing drift of a wave-born cask that *may* contain food.

Suppose you call him "Hatcher" (and suppose you call it a "him.") Hatcher was not exactly male, because his race had no true males; but it did have females and he was certainly not that. Hatcher did not in any way look like a human being, but they had features in common.

If Hatcher and McCray had somehow managed to strike up an acquaintance, they might have got along very well. Hatcher, like McCray, was an adventurous soul, young, able, well-learned in the technical sciences of his culture. Both enjoyed games — McCray baseball, poker and three-dimensional chess; Hatcher a number of sports which defy human description. Both held positions of some importance — considering their ages — in the affairs of their respective worlds.

Physically they were nothing alike. Hatcher was a three-foot, hard-shelled sphere of jelly. He had "arms" and "legs", but they were not organically attached to "himself." They were snakelike things which obeyed the orders of his brain as well as your mind can make your toes curl; but they did not touch him directly. Indeed, they worked as well a yard or a quarter-mile away as they did when, rarely, they rested in the crevices they had been formed from in his "skin." At greater distances they worked less well, for reasons irrelevant to the Law of Inverse Squares.

Hatcher's principal task at this moment was to run the "probe team" which had McCray under observation, and he was more than a little excited. His members, disposed about the room where he had sent them on various errands, quivered and shook a little; yet they were the calmest limbs in the room; the members of the other team were in a state of violent commotion.

The probe team had had a shock.

"Paranormal powers," muttered Hatcher's second in command, and the others mumbled agreement. Hatcher ordered silence, studying the specimen from Earth.

After a long moment he turned his senses from the Earthman. "Incredible — but it's true enough," he said. "I'd better report. Watch him," he added, but that was surely unnecessary. Their job was to watch McCray, and they would do their job; and even more, not one of them could have looked away to save his life from the spectacle of a creature as odd and, from their point of view, hideously alien as Herrell McCray.

HATCHER hurried through the halls of the great buried structure in which he worked, toward the place where the supervising council of all probes would be in permanent session. They admitted him at once.

Hatcher identified himself and gave a quick, concise report:

"The subject recovered consciousness a short time ago and began to inspect his enclosure. His method of doing so was to put his own members in physical contact with the various objects in the enclosure. After observing him do this for a time we concluded he might be able to see and so we illuminated his field of vision for him.

"This appeared to work well for a time. He seemed relatively undisturbed. However, he then reverted to physical-contact, manipulating certain appurtenances of an artificial skin we had provided for him.

"He then began to vibrate the atmosphere by means of resonating organs in his breathing passage.

"Simultaneously, the object he was holding, attached to the artificial skin, was discovered to be generating paranormal forces."

The supervising council rocked with excitement. "You're sure?" demanded one of the councilmen.

"Yes, sir. The staff is preparing a technical description of the forces now, but I can say that they are electromagnetic vibrations modulating a carrier wave of very high speed, and in turn modulated by the vibrations of the atmosphere caused by the subject's own breathing."

"Fantastic," breathed the councillor, in a tone of dawning hope. "How about communicating with him, Hatcher? Any progress?"

"Well . . . not much, sir. He suddenly panicked. We don't know why; but we thought we'd better pull back and let him recover."

The council conferred among itself for a moment. Hatcher waiting. It was not really a waste of time for him; with the organs he had left in the probe-team room, he was in fairly close touch with what was going on — knew that McCray was once again fumbling among the objects in the dark, knew that the team-members had tried illuminating the room for him briefly and again produced the rising panic.

Still, Hatcher fretted. He wanted to get back.

"Stop fidgeting," commanded the council leader abruptly. "Hatcher, you are to establish communication at once."

"But, sir . . ." Hatcher swung closer, his thick skin quivering slightly, he would have gestured if he had brought members with him to gesture with. "We've done everything we dare. We've made the place homey for him —" actually, what he said was more like, *we've warmed the biophysical nuances of his enclosure* — "and tried to guess his needs; and we're frightening him half to death. We *can't* go faster. This creature is in no way similar to us, you know. He relies on paranormal forces — heat, light, kinetic energy — for his life. His chemistry is not ours, his processes of thought are not ours, his entire organism is closer to the inanimate rocks of a sea-bottom than to ourselves."

"Understood, Hatcher. In your first report you stated these creatures were intelligent."

"Yes, sir. But not in our way."

"But in *a* way, and you must learn that way. I know." One lobster-claw shaped member drifted close to the councillor's body and raised itself in an admonitory gesture. "You want time. But we don't have time, Hatcher. Yours is not the only probe team working. The Central Masses team has just turned in a most alarming report."

"Have they secured a subject?" Hatcher demanded jealously.

The councillor paused. "Worse than that, Hatcher. I am afraid their subjects have secured one of them. One of them is missing."

There was a moment's silence. Frozen, Hatcher could only wait. The council room was like a tableau in a museum until the councillor spoke again, each council member poised over his locus-point, his members drifting about him.

Finally the councillor said, "I speak for all of us, I think. If the Old Ones have seized one of our probers our time margin is considerably narrowed. Indeed, we may not have any time at all. You must do everything you can to establish communication."

"But the danger to the specimen —" Hatcher protested.

"— is no greater," said the councillor, "than the danger to every one of us if we do not find allies *now*."

HATCHER returned to his laboratory gloomily. It was just like the council to put the screws on; they had a reputation for demanding results at any cost — even at the cost of destroying the only thing you had that would make results possible.

Hatcher did not like the idea of endangering the Earthman. It cannot be said that he was emotionally involved; it was not pity of sympathy that caused him to regret the dangers in moving too fast toward communication. Not even Hatcher had quite got over the revolting physical differences between the Earthman and his own people. But Hatcher did not want him destroyed. It had been difficult enough getting him here.

Hatcher checked through the members that he had left with the rest of his team and discovered that there were no immediate emergencies, so he took time to eat. In Hatcher's race this was accomplished in ways not entirely pleasant to Earthmen. A slit in the lower hemisphere of his body opened, like a purse, emitting a thin, pussy, fetid fluid which Hatcher caught and poured into a disposal trough at the side of the eating room. He then stuffed the slit with pulpy vegetation the texture of kelp; it closed, and his body was supplied with nourishment for another day.

He returned quickly to the room.

His second in command was busy, but one of the other team workers reported — nothing new — and asked Hatcher's appearance before the council. Hatcher passed the question off. He considered telling his staff about the disappearance of the Central Masses team member, but decided against it. He had not been told it was secret. On the other hand, he had not been told it was not. Something of this importance was not lightly to be gossiped about. For endless generations the threat of the Old Ones had hung over his race, those queer, almost mythical beings from the Central Masses of the galaxy. One brush with them, in ages past, had almost destroyed Hatcher's people. Only by running and hiding, bearing one of their planets with them and abandoning it — with its population — as a decoy, had they arrived at all.

Now they had detected mapping parties of the Old Ones dangerously near the spiral arm of the galaxy in which their planet

was located, they had begun the Probe Teams to find some way of combating them, or of fleeing again.

But it seemed that the Probe Teams themselves might be betraying their existence to their enemies —

"Hatcher!"

The call was urgent; he hurried to see what it was about. It was his second in command, very excited. "What is it?" Hatcher demanded.

"Wait . . ."

Hatcher was patient; he knew his assistant well. Obviously something was about to happen. He took the moment to call his members back to him for feeding; they dodged back to their niches on his skin, fitted themselves into their vestigial slots, poured back their wastes into his own circulation and ingested what they needed from the meal he had just taken . . . "Now!" cried the assistant. "Look!"

At what passed among Hatcher's people for a viewing console an image was forming. Actually it was the assistant himself who who formed it, not a cathode trace or projected shadow; but it showed what it was meant to show.

Hatcher was startled. "Another one! And — is it a different species? Or merely a different sex?"

"Study the probe for yourself," the assistant invited.

Hatcher studied him frostily; his patience was not, after all, endless. "No matter," he said at last. "Bring the other one in."

And then, in a completely different mood, "We may need him badly. We may be in the process of killing our first one now."

"Killing him, Hatcher?"

Hatcher rose and shook himself, his mindless members floating away like puppies dislodged from suck. "Council's order," he said. "We've got to go into Stage Two of the project at once."

III

BEFORE Stage Two began, or before Herrell McCray realized it had begun, he had an inspiration.

The dark was absolute, but he remembered where the spacesuit had been and groped his way to it, and, yes, it had what all spacesuits had to have. It had a light. He turned it on.

Light. White, flaring, Earthly light, that showed everything — even himself.

"God bless," he said, almost beside himself with joy. Whatever that pinkish, dancing halo had been, it had thrown him into a panic; now that he could see his own hand again, he could blame the weird effects on some strange property of the light.

At that moment he heard the click that was the beginning of Stage Two.

He switched off the light and stood for a moment, listening.

For a second he thought he heard the far-off voice, quiet, calm and almost hopeless, that he had sensed hours before; but then that was gone. Something else was gone. Some faint mechanical sound that had hardly registered at the time, but was not missing. And there was, perhaps, a nice new sound that had not been there before; A very faint, an almost inaudible elfin hiss.

McCray switched the light on and looked around. There seemed to be no change.

And yet, surely, it was warmer in here.

He could see no difference; but perhaps, he thought, he could smell one. The unpleasant halogen odor from the grating was surely stronger now. He stood there, perplexed.

A tinny little voice from the helmet of the space suit said sharply, amazement in its tone, "McCray is that you? Where the devil are you calling from?"

He forgot smell, sound and temperature and leaped for the suit. "This is Herrell McCray," he cried. "I'm in a room of some sort, apparently on a planet of approximate Earth mass. I don't know —"

"McCray!" cried the tiny voice in his ear. "Where are you? This is *Jodrell Bank* calling. Answer, please!"

"I *am* answering, damn it," he roared. "What took you so long?"

"Herrell McCray," droned the tiny voice in his ear, "Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, this is *Jodrell Bank* responding to your message, acknowledge please. Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray . . ."

It kept on, and on.

McCray took a deep breath and thought. Something was wrong. Either they didn't hear him, which meant the radio wasn't transmitting, or — no. That was not it; they *had* heard him, because they were responding. But it seemed to take them so long . . .

Aruptly his face went white. Took them so long! He cast back in his mind, questing for a fact, unable to face its implication. When was it he called them? Two hours ago? Three?

Did that mean — did it *possibly* mean — that there was a lag

of an hour or two each way? Did it, for example, mean that at the speed of his suit's pararadio, millions of times faster than light, it took *hours* to get a message to the ship and back?

And if so . . . where in the name of heaven was he?

HERRELL McCray was a navigator, which is to say, a man who has learned to trust the evidence of mathematics and instrument readings beyond the guesses of his "common sense." When *Jodrell Bank*, hurtling faster that light in its voyage between stars, made its regular position check, common sense was a liar. Light bore false witness. The line of sight was trustworthy directly forward and directly after — sometimes not even then — and it took computers, sensing their data through instruments, to comprehend a star bearing and convert three fixes into a position.

If the evidence of his radio contradicted common sense, common sense was wrong. Perhaps it was impossible to believe what the radio's message implied; but it was not necessary to "believe," only to act.

McCray thumbed down the transmitter button and gave a concise report of his situation and guesses. "I dont know how I got here. I don't know how long I've been gone, since I was unconscious for a time. However, if the transmission lag is a reliable indication —" he swallowed and went on — "I'd estimate I am something more than five hundred light-years away from you at this moment. That's all I have to say, except for one more word: Help."

He grinned sourly and released the button. The message was on its way, and it would be hours before he could have a reply. Therefore he had to consider what to do next.

He mopped his brow. With the droning, repetitious call from the ship finally quiet, the room was quiet again. And warm.

Very warm, he thought tardily; and more than that. The halogen stench was strong in his nostrils again.

Hurriedly McCray scrambled into the suit. By the time he was sealed down he was coughing from the bottom of his lungs, deep, tearing rasps that pained him, uncontrollable. Chlorine or flourine, one of them was in the air he had been breathing. He could not guess where it had come from; but it was ripping his lungs out.

He flushed the interior of the suit out with a reckless disregard for the wastage of his air resreve, holding his breath as much as he could, daring only shallow gasps that made him retch and gag. After

a long time he could breath, though his eyes were spilling tears.

He could see the fumes in the room now. The heat was building up.

Automatically — now that he had put it on and so started its serve-circuits operating — the suit was cooling him. This was a deep-space suit, regulation garb when going outside the pressure hull of an FTL ship. It was good up to at least five hundred degrees in thin air, perhaps three or four hundred in dense. In thin air or in space it was the elastic joints and couplings that depolymerized when the heat grew to great; in dense air, with conduction pouring energy in faster than the cooling coils could suck it out and hurl it away, it was the refrigerating equipment that broke down.

McCray had no way of knowing just how hot it was going to get. Nor, for that matter, had the suit been designed to operate in a corrosive medium.

All in all it was time for him to do something.

AMONG the debris on the floor, he remembered, was a five-foot space-ax, tungsten-steel blade and springy aluminum shaft.

McCray caught it up and headed for the door. It felt good in his gauntlets, a rewarding weight; any weapon straightens the back of the man who holds it, and McCray was grateful for this one. With something concrete to do he could postpone questioning. Never mind why he had been brought here; never mind how. Never mind what he would, or could, do next; all those questions could recede into the background of his mind while he swung the ax and battered his way out of this poisoned oven.

Crash-clang! The double jolt ran up the shaft of the ax, through his gauntlets and into his arm; but he was making progress, he could see the plastic — or whatever it was — of the door. It was chipping out. Not easily, very reluctantly; but flaking out in chips that left a white powdery residue.

At this rate, he thought grimly, he would be an hour getting through the door. Did he have an hour?

But it did not take an hour. One blow was luckier than the rest; it must have snapped the lock mechanism. The door shook and slid ajar. McCray got the thin of the blade into the crack and pried it wide. He was in another room, maybe a hall, large and bare.

McCray put the broad of his back against the broken door and pressed it as nearly closed as he could; it might not keep the gas and heat out, but it would retard them.

The room was again unlighted — at least to McCray's eyes. There was not even that pink pseudo-light that had baffled him; here was nothing but the beam of his suit lamp. What it showed was cryptic. There were evidences of use: shelves, box contraptions that might have been cupboards, crude level surfaces attached to the walls that might have been workbenches. Yet they were queerly contrived, for it was not possible to guess from them much about the creatures who used them. Some were near the floor, some at waist height, some even suspended from the ceiling itself. A man would need a ladder to work at these benches and McCray, staring, thought briefly of many-armed blind giants or shapeless huge intelligent amoebae, and felt, with a shudder, the skin prickle at the back of his neck.

He tapped half-heartedly at one of the closed cupboards, and was not surprised when it proved as refractory as the door. Undoubtedly he could batter it open, but it was not likely that much would be left of its contents when he was through — and there was a matter of time.

But his attention was diverted by a gleam from one of the benches. Metallic parts lay heaped in a pile. He poked at them with a stiff-fingered gauntlet; they were oddly familiar. They were, he thought, very much like the parts of a bullet-gun, from the ancient past.

In fact, they were. He could recognize barrel, chamber, trigger, even a couple of cartridges, neatly opened and the grains of powder stacked beside them. It was an older, clumsier model than the kind he had seen in survival locker, on the *Jodrell Bank* — and abruptly wished he were carrying now — but it was a pistol. Another trophy, like the strange assortment in the other room? He could not guess. But the others had been more familiar; they all have come from his own ship. He was prepared to swear that nothing like this antique had been aboard.

The drone began again in his ear, as it had at five-minute intervals all along:

"Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, this is Jodrell Bank calling Herrell McCray . . ."

And louder, blaring, then fading to normal volume as the AVC circuits toned the signal down, another voice.

A woman's voice, crying out in panic and fear: *Jodrell Bank!* Where are you? *Help!*"

IV

HATCHER'S second in command said: "He has got through the first survival test. In fact, he broke his way out! What next?"

"Wait," Hatcher ordered sharply. He was watching the new specimen and a troublesome thought had occurred to him. The new one was female and seemed to be in pain; but it was not the pain that disturbed Hatcher, it was something far more immediate.

"I think," he said slowly, "that they are in contact."

His assistant vibrated startlement.

"I know," Hatcher said, "but watch. Do you see? He is going straight toward her."

Hatcher, who was not human, did not possess truly human emotions; but he did feel amazement when he was amazed, and fear when there was cause to be afraid. These specimens, obtained with so much difficulty, needed so badly, were his responsibility. He knew the issues involved much better than any of his helpers. They could only be surprised at the queer antics of the aliens with attacheded limbs and strange powers. Hatcher knew that this was not a freak show, but a matter of life and death. He said, musing:

"This new one, I cannot communicate with her, but I get — almost — a whisper, now and then. The first one, the male, nothing. But this female is perhaps not quite mute."

"Then shall we abandon him and work with her?"

Hatcher hesitated. "No," he said at last. "The male is responding well. Remember that when last this experiment was done every subject died; he is alive at least. But I am wondering. We can't quite communicate with the female —"

"But?"

"But I'm not sure that others can't."

THE woman's voice was at such close range that McCray's suit made a useful RDF set. He located her direction easily enough, shielding the tiny built-in antenna with the tungsten-steel blade of the axe while she begged him to hurry. Her voice was heavily accented, with some words in a language he did not recognize. She seemed to be in shock.

McCray was hardly surprised at that; he had been close enough to shock himself. He tried to reassure her as he searched for a way out of the hall, but in the middle of a word her voice stopped.

He hesitated, hefting the ax, glancing back at the way he had come. There had to be a way out, even if it meant chopping through a wall.

When he turned around again there was a door. It was oddly shaped and unlike the door he had hewn through, but clearly a door all the same, and it was open.

McCray regarded it grimly. He went back in his memory with meticulous care. Had he not looked at this very spot a matter of moments before? He had. And had there been an open door then? There had not. There hadn't been even a shadowy outline of the three-sided, uneven opening that stood there now.

Still, it led in the proper direction. McCray added one more inexplicable fact to his file and walked through. He was in another hall — or tunnel — rising quite steeply to the right. By his reckoning it was the proper direction. He labored up it, sweating under the weight of the suit, and found another open door, this one round, and behind it —

Yes, there was the woman whose voice he had heard.

It was a woman, all right. The voice had been so strained that he hadn't been positive. Even now, short black hair might not have proved it, and she was lying face down but the waist and hips were a woman's, even though she wore a bulky, quilted suit of coveralls.

He knelt beside her and gently turned her face.

She was unconscious. Broad, dark face, with no make-up; she was apparently in her late thirties. She appeared to be Chinese.

She breathed, a little raggedly but without visible discomfort; her face was relaxed as though she were sleeping. She did not rouse as he moved her.

He realized she was breathing the air of the room they were in.

His instant first thought was that she was in danger of asphyxiation; he started to leap up to get, and put her into, the small flimsy space suit he saw slumped in a corner. At second thought he realized that she would not be breathing so comfortably if the air were full of the poisonous reek that had driven him out of the first room.

There was an obvious conclusion to be drawn from that; perhaps he could economize on his own air reserve. Tentatively he cracked the seal of his faceplate and took a cautious breath. The faint reek of halogen was still there, but it was not enough even to make his eyes water, and the temperature of the air was merely warm.

He shook her, but she did not wake.

He stood up and regarded her thoughtfully. It was a disappointment. Her voice had given him hope of a companion, someone to talk things over with, to compare notes — someone who, if not possessing any more answers than himself, could at least serve as a sounding-board in the give-and-take of discussion that might make some sort of sense out of the queerness that permeated this place.

What he had instead was another burden to carry, for she was unable to care for herself and surely he could not leave her.

HE slipped off the helmet absently and pressed the buttons that turned off the suit's cooling units, looking around the chamber. It was bare except for a litter of irrelevant human articles — much like the one in which he himself had first appeared, except that the articles were not *Jodrell Bank's*. A woven cane screen, some cooking utensils, a machine like a desk calculator, some books — he picked up one of the books and glanced at it. It was printed on coarse paper, and the text was in ideographs, Chinese, perhaps; he did not know Oriental languages.

McCray knew that the *Jodrell Bank* was not the only FTL vessel in this volume of space. The Betelgeuse run was a busy one, as FTL shipping lanes went: Almost daily departures from some point on Earth to one of the colonies, with equal traffic in the other direction.

Of course, if the time-lag in communication did not lie, he was no longer anywhere within that part of the sky; Betelgeuse was only a few hundred light-years from Sol, and subspace radio covered that distance in something like fifty minutes. But suppose the woman came from another ship; perhaps a Singapore or Tokyo vessel on the same run. She might easily have been trapped as he was trapped. And if she were awake, he could find out from her what had happened, and thus learn something that might be of use.

Although it was hard to see what might be of use in these most unprecedented and unpleasant circumstances.

The drone from *Jodrell Bank* began again: "Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, Herrell McCray, this is *Jodrell Bank* responding —"

He turned the volume down but did not dare turn it off. He had lost track of time and couldn't guess when they would respond to his last message. He needed to hear that response when it came. Meanwhile, what about his fellow-captive?

Her suit was only a flimsy work-about model, as airtight as his

but without the bracing required for building jet propulsors into it. It contained air reserves enough, and limited water; but neither food nor emergency medical supplies.

McCray had both of these, of course. It was merely one more reason why he could not abandon her and go on . . . if, that is, he could find some reason for going in one direction preferably to another, and if a wall would open again to let him go there.

He could give her an injection of a stimulant, he mused. Would that improve the situation? Not basically, he decided, with some regret. Sleep was a need, not a luxury; it would not help her to be awakened chemically, when body was demonstrating its need for rest by refusing to wake to a call. Anyway, if she were not seriously injured she would wake of her own accord.

He checked pulse and eye-pupils; everything normal, no evidence of bleeding or somatic shock.

So much for that. At least he had made one simple decision on his own, he though with grim humor. To that extent he had reestablished his mastery of his own fate, and it made him feel a touch better.

Perhaps he could make some more. What about trying to find a way out of this place, for instance?

IT was highly probable that they would not be able to stay here indefinitely, that was the first fact to take into account. Either his imagination was jumpy, or the reek of halogens was a bit stronger. In any case there was no guarantee that this place would remain habitable any longer than the last, and he had to reckon with the knowledge that a space-suit's air reserve was not infinite. These warrens might prove a death trap.

McCray paused, leaning on the haft of his ax, wondering how much of that was reason and how much panic. He knew that he wanted, more than anything, to get out of this place, to see sky and stars, to be where no skulking creatures behind false panels in the walls, or peering through televiewers concealed in the furnishings, could trick and trap him. But did he have any reason to believe that he would be better off somewhere else? Might it not be even that this place was a sort of vivarium maintained for his survival — that the leak of poison gases and heat in the first room was not a deliberate thrust at his safety, but a failure of the shielding that alone could keep him alive?

He didn't know, and in the nature of things could not. But paradoxically the thought that escape might increase his danger made him all the more anxious to escape. He wanted to know. If death was waiting for him outside his chamber, McCray wanted to face it — now — while he was still in good physical shape.

While he was still sane. For there was a limit to how many phenomena he could store away in the back of his mind; sooner or later the contradictions, the puzzles, the fears would have to be faced.

Yet what could he do with the woman? Conceivably he could carry her; but could he also carry her suit? He did not dare take her without it. It would be no kindness to plunge her into another atmosphere of poison, and watch her die because he had taken her from her only hope of safety. Yet the suit weighed at least fifty pounds. His own was slightly more; the girl, say, a hundred and thirty. It added up to more mass than he could handle, at least for more than a few dozen yards.

The speaker in his helmet said suddenly: "Herrell McCray, this is *Jodrell Bank*. Your transmission received. We are vectoring and ranging your signal. Stand by. We will call you again in ten minutes." And, in a different tone: "God help you, Mac. What the devil happened to you?"

It was a good question. McCray swore uselessly because he didn't know the answer.

He took wry pleasure in imagining what was going on aboard *Jodrell Bank* at that moment. At least not all the bewilderment was his own. They would be utterly baffled. As far as they were concerned, their navigator had been on the bridge at one moment and the next moment gone, tracelessly. That in itself was a major puzzle; the only way off an FTL ship in flight was in the direction called "suicide." That would have been their assumption, all right, as soon as they realized he was gone and checked the ship to make sure he was not for some reason wandering about in a cargo hold or unconscious in a closet after some hard-to-imagine attack from another crewman. They would have thought that somehow,crazily, he had got into a suit — there was the suit — and jumped out of a lock. But there would have been no question of going back to look for him. True, they could have tracked his subspace radio if he had used it. But what would have been the good of that? The first question, an all but unanswerable one, would be how long ago he had jumped. Even if they knew that, *Jodrell Bank*, making more than

five hundred times light speed, could not be stopped in fewer than a dozen light-years. They could hardly hope to return to even approximately the location in space where he might have jumped; and there was no hope of reaching a position, stopping, casting about, starting again — the accelerations were too enormous, a man too tiny a dustmote.

And, of course, he would have been dead in the first place, anyway. The transition from FTL drive to normal space was instantly fatal except within the protecting shield of a ship's engines.

So they would have given him up and, hours later — or days, for he had lost track of time — they would have received his message. What would they make of that?

He didn't know. After all, he hardly knew what he made of it.

The woman still slept. The way back was still open. And he could tell by sniffing the air that the poisons in the atmosphere were still gaining. Ahead there was nothing but blank walls, and the clutter of useless equipment. Stolidly McCray closed his mind and waited.

The signal came at last.

"Mac, we have verified your position." The voice was that of Captain Tillingher, strained and shaking. "I don't know how you got there, but unless the readings lie you're a hell of a long way off. The bearing is identical with Messier object M-42 and the distance —" raggedly — "is compatible. About a thousand light years from us, Mac. One way or another, you've been kidnapped. I — I —"

The voice hesitated, unable to say what it could not accept as fact but could not deny. "I think," it managed at last, "that we've come across those super-beings in space that we've wondered about."

HATCHER'S detached limbs were quivering with excitement — and with more than excitement, because he was afraid. He was trying to conceal from the others just how afraid he was.

His second in command reported: "We have the second subject out of consciousness. How long do you want us to keep her that way?"

"Until I tell you otherwise! How about the prime subject?"

"We can't tell, Hatcher. But you were right. He is in communication with others, it seems, and by paranormal means." Hatcher noted the dismay in what his assistant said. He understood the dismay well enough. It was one thing to work on a project involving paranormal forces as an exercise in theory. It was something else entirely to see them in operation.

But there was more cause for dismay than that, and Hatcher alone knew just how bad the situation was. He summoned one of his own members to him and impressed on it a progress report for the Council. He sent it floating through the long warrens of his people's world, ordered his assistants back to their work and closed in his thoughts to consider what had happened.

These two creatures, with their command of forces in the paranormal — i.e., the electromagnetic — spectrum, seemed able to survive in the environments prepared for them. That was step one. No previous team had done as well. This was not the first time a probe team of his race had snatched a warmblooded biped from a spaceship for study — because their operation forces, psionic in nature, operated in non-Euclidean ways, it was easiest for them to make contact with the crew of a ship in the non-Euclidean space of FTL drive.

But it was the first time that the specimens had survived. He reviewed the work they had already done with the male specimen. He had shown himself unable to live in the normal atmospheric conditions of Hatcher's world; but that was to be expected, after all, and the creature had been commendably quick about getting out of a bad environment. Probably they had blundered in illuminating the scene for him, Hatcher conceded. He didn't know how badly he had blundered, for the concept of "light" from a general source, illuminating not only what the mind wished to see but irrelevant matter as well, had never occurred to Hatcher or any of his race; all of their senses operated through the mind itself, and what to them was "light" was a sort of focusing of attention. But although something about that episode which Hatcher failed to understand had gone wrong, the specimen had not been seriously harmed by it. The specimen was doing well. Probably they could now go to the hardest test of all, the one which would mean success or failure. Probably they could so modify the creature as to make direct communication possible.

And the other specimen?

Hatcher would have frowned, if he had had brow muscles to shape such an expression — or a brow to be shaped. The female specimen was the danger. His own people knew how to shield their thoughts. This one evidently did not. It was astonishing that the Old Ones had not already encountered these bipeds, so loosely guarded was their radiation — when they radiated at all, of course, for only a

few of them seemed to possess any psionic power worth mentioning.

Hatcher hastily drove that thought from his mind, for what he proposed to do with the male specimen was to give him that power.

And yet there was no choice for Hatcher's people, because they were faced with disaster. Hatcher, through his communications from the Council, knew how close the disaster was. When one of the probers from the Central Masses team disappeared, the only conclusion that could be drawn was the Old Ones had discovered them. They needed allies; more, they needed allies who had control of the electromagnetic forces that made the Old Ones so potent and so feared.

In the male and female they had snatched out of space they might have found those allies. But another thought was in Hatcher's mind: Suppose the Old Ones found them too?

Hatcher made up his mind. He could not delay any longer.

"Open the way to the surface," he ordered. "As soon as possible take both of them to where we can work."

THE object Captain Tillinger had called "M-42" was no stranger to Herrell McCray. It was the Great Nebula in Orion, in Earth's telescopes a fuzzy patch of light, in cold fact a great and glowing cloud of gas. M-42 was not an external galaxy, like most of the "nebulae" in Messier's catalogue, but it was nothing so tiny as a single sun either. Its hydrogen mass spanned dozen of light-years. Imbedded in it — growing in it, as they fed on the gas that surrounded them — were scores of hot, bright new suns.

New suns. In all the incongruities that swarmed around him McCray took time to consider that one particular incongruity. The suns of the Orion gas cloud were of the spectral class called "B" — young suns, less than a thousandth as old as a Sol. They simply had not been in existence long enough to own stable planetary systems — much less planets which themselves were old enough to have cooled, brewed chemical complexes and thus in time produced life. But surely he was on a planet .

Wasn't he?

McCray breathed a deep sigh and for one more time turned his mind away from unprofitable speculations. The woman stirred slightly. McCray knelt to look at her; then, on quick impulse, opened his medical kit, took out a single-shot capsule of a stimulant and slipped it neatly into the exposed vein of her arm.

In about two minutes, she would be awake. Good enough, thought McCray; at least he would have someone to talk to. Now if only they could find a way out of this place. If a door would open, as the other door had, and —

He paused, staring.

There was another door. Open.

He felt himself swaying, threw out an arm and realized that he was . . . falling? Floating? Moving toward the door, somehow, not as though he were being dragged, not as though he were walking, but surely and rather briskly moving along.

His feet were not touching the ground.

It wasn't a volitional matter. His intentions had nothing to do with it. He flailed out, and touched nothing; nor did he slow his motion at all. He fought against it, instinctively; and then reason took over and he stopped.

The woman's form lifted from the floor ahead of him. She was still unconscious. From the clutter on the floor, her lightweight space suit rose, too; suit and girl, they floated ahead of him, toward the door and out.

McCray cried out and tried to run after them. His legs flailed and, of course, touched nothing; but it did seem that he was moving faster. The woman and her suit were disappearing around a bend, but he was right behind them.

He became conscious of the returning reek of gases. He flipped up the plate of his helmet and lunged at the girl, miraculously caught her in one hand and, straining, caught the suit with the other.

Stuffing her into the suit was hard, awkward work, like dressing a doll that is too large for its garments; but he managed it, closed her helmet, saw the flexible parts of her suit bulge out slightly as its automatic pressure regulators filled it with air.

They drove along, faster and faster, until they came to a great portal, and out into the blinding radiance of a molten copper sky.

GATHERED in a circle were a score or more of Hatcher's people. McCray didn't know they were Hatcher's people, of course. He did not know even that they were animate beings, for they lacked all the features of animals that he had been used to. No eyes. No faces. Their detached members, bobbing about seemingly at random, did not appear to have any relation to the irregular spheres that were their owners.

The woman got unevenly to her feet, her faceplate staring toward the creatures. McCray heard a smothered exclamation in his suitphones.

"Are you all right?" he demanded sharply. The great crystal eye turned round to look at him.

"Oh, the man who spoke to me." Her voice was taut but controlled. The accent was gone; her control was complete. "I am Ann Mei-Ling, of the *Woomara*. What are — those?"

McCray said, "Our kidnappers, I guess. They don't look like much, do they?"

She laughed shakily, without answering. The creatures seemed to be waiting for something, McCray thought; if indeed they were creatures and not machines, or — or whatever one might expect to find, in the impossible event of being cast away on an improbable planet of an unexplored sun. He touched the woman's helmet reassuringly, raising his arms.

"Hello," he said. "I am Herrell McCray."

He waited.

He half turned; the woman watched him. "I don't know what to do next," he confessed.

"Sit down," she said suddenly. He stared. "No, you must! They want you to sit down."

"I didn't hear —" he began, then shrugged. He sat down.

"Now lie stretched out and open your face mask."

"*Here?* Listen — Ann — Miss Mei-Ling, whatever you said your name was! Don't you feel the heat? If I crack my mask —"

"But you must." She spoke very confidently. "It is *s'in fo* — what do you call it — telepathy, I think. But I can hear them. They want you to open your mask. No it won't kill you. They understand what they are doing."

She hesitated, then said, with less assurance, "They need us, McCray. There is something . . . I am not sure, but something bad. They need help, and think you can give it to them. So open your helmet as they wish, please."

McCray closed his eyes and grimaced; but there was no help for it, he had no better ideas. And anyway, he thought, he could close it again quickly enough if these things had guessed wrong.

The creatures moved purposefully toward McCray, and he found himself the prisoner of a dozen unattached arms. Surprised, he struggled, but helplessly; no, he would not be able to close the

plate again! . . . But the heat was no worse. Somehow they were shielding him.

A tiny member, like one of the unattached arms but much smaller, writhed through the air toward him, hesitated over his eyes and released something tinier still, something so small and so close that McCray could not focus his eyes upon it. It moved deliberately toward his face.

The woman was saying, as if to herself, "The thing they fear is — far away, but — oh, no! My God!"

There was a terrible loud scream, but McCray was not quite sure he heard it. It might have been his own, he thought crazily; for that tiny floating thing had found his face and was burrowing deep inside, and the pain was beyond belief.

THE pain was incredible. It was worse than anything he had ever felt, and it grew . . . and then it was gone.

What it was that the spheroidal aliens had done to his mind McCray had no way of learning. He could only know that a door had been opened. An opaque screen was removed. He was free of his body.

He was more than free, he was extended — increased — enlarged. He was inside the body of an alien, and the alien was in him. He was also outside both, looking at them.

McCray had never felt anything like it in his life. It was a situation without even a close analogue. He had had a woman in his arms, he had been part of a family, he had shared the youthful sense of exploration that comes in small, eager groups: These were the comparisons that came to his mind. This was so much more than any of these things. He and the alien — he and, he began to perceive, a number of aliens — were almost inextricably mingled. Yet they were separate, as one strand of colored thread in a ball of yarn is looped and knotted and intertwined with every other strand, although it retains its own integrity. He was in and among many minds, and outside them all.

McCray thought: This is how a god must feel.

V

HATCHER would have laughed — if he had lips, larynx or mouth to laugh with. He would have laughed in pure exultation, and,

indeed, his second in command recognized the marionette quivering of his detached limbs as a shout of glee. "We've done it," cried the assistant, catching his delight. "We've made the project work!"

"We've done a great deal more than that," exulted Hatcher. "Go to the supervisors, report to them. Pass on the word to the Central Masses probe. Maintain for the alien the pressure and temperature value he needs —"

"And you, Hatcher?"

"I'm going with him — out in the open! I'm going to show him what *we* need!"

HATCHER. McCray recognized that this was a name — the name of the entity closest to himself, the one that had somehow manipulated his forebrain and released the mind from the prison of the skull. "Hatcher" was not a word but an image, and in the image he saw a creature whose physical shape was unpleasant, but whose instincts and hopes were like his own.

He saw more than that. This Hatcher was trying to persuade him to move. To venture farther. To come with him . . .

McCray allowed himself to be led and at once he was outside not only of his own body but of all bodies. He was free in space.

The entity that had been born of Herrell McCray was now larger than a sun. He could see, all around him, the wonder and beauty of the great gas cloud in which his body rested, on one tiny planet of one trivial star. His sense of time was not changed from what it had been — he could count the pulses of his own body, still thudding in what, however remote, was his ear — but he could see things that were terribly slow and vast. He could see the motion of the streamers of gas in the cloud as light-pressure drove them outward. He could hear the subtle emanations of ion clashing with hurtling ion. He could see the great blue new suns tunneling through the cloud, building their strength out of the diffuse contaminated hydrogen that made the Orion nebula, leaving relatively clear "holes" behind them. He could see into the gas and through it. He could perceive each star and gassy comet; and he could behold the ordered magnificence of the galaxy of stars, and the universe of galaxies, beyond.

The presence beside him was urging him to look beyond, into a denser, richer region of suns. McCray, unsure of his power, stretched toward it — and recoiled.

There was something there which was terrifying, something cold and restless tl.at watched him come toward it with the eyes of a crouched panther awaiting a deer.

The presence beside him felt the same terror. McCray knew. He was grateful when Hatcher allowed him to look away from the central clusters and return to the neighborhood of his body.

Like a child's toy in a diminishing glass, McCray could see the planet he had left.

But it was no planet. It was not a planet, but a great irregular sphere of metal, honeycombed and warrened. He would have thought it a ship, though huge, if it had had engines or instruments . . . No. It *was* a ship. Hatcher beside him was proof that these creatures needed neither, not in any Earthy sense, at least. They themselves were engines, with their power to move matter apart from the intervention of other matter. They themselves were instruments, through the sensing of force, that was now within his own power.

A moment's hesitant practice, and McCray had the "planet" in the palm of his hand — not a real palm, not a real hand; but it was there for his inspection. He looked at it and within it and saw the interior nests of Hatcher's folk, found the room where he had been brought, traced his course to the surface, saw his own body in its spacesuit, saw beside it the flaccid suit that had held the strange woman's body . . .

The suit was empty.

The suit was empty, and in the moment of that discovery, McCray heard a terrible wailing cry — not in his ears, in his mind — from the aliens around him. The suit was empty. They discovered it the same moment as he. It was wrong and it was dangerous; they were terrified.

The companions presence beside him receded into emptiness. In a moment McCray was back in his own body, and the gathering members let him free.

VI

SOME hundreds of light-years away, the *Jodrell Bank* was making up lost time on its Betelgeuse run.

Herrell McCray swept the long line from Sol to Betelgeuse, with his perceptions that were not his eyes and his touch that was not of matter, until he found it. The giant ship, fastest and hugest of

mankind's star vessels, was to him a lumbering tiny beetle.

It held friends and something else — something his body needed — air and water and food. McCray did not know what would happen to him if, while his mind was out in the stars, his body died. But he was not anxious to find out.

McCray had not tried moving his physical body, but with what had been done to his brain he could now do anything within the powers of Hatcher's people. As they had swept him from ship to planet, so he could now hurl his body back from planet to ship. He flexed muscles of his mind that had never been used before, and in a moment his body was slumped on the floor of the *Jodrell Bank's* observation bubble. In another moment he was in his body, opening his eyes and looking out into the astonished face of Chris Stoerer, his junior navigator. "God in heaven," whispered Stoerer, "it's you!"

"It is," McCray said hoarsely, through lips that were parched and cracked, sitting up and trying the muscles of the body. It ached. He was bone-weary. "Give me a hand out of this suit, will you?"

It was not easy to be a mind in a body again, McCray discovered. Time had stopped for him. He had been soaring the star-lanes in his released mind for hours; but while his mind had been liberated, his body, back on Hatcher's "planet", had continued its slow metabolism, its steady devouring of its tissues, its inevitable progress towards death. When he had returned to it he found its pulse erratic and its breathing ragged. A grinding knot of hunger seethed in its stomach. It muscles ached.

Whatever might become of his mind, it was clear that his body would die, if it were unfed and uncared-for much longer. So he had brought it back to the *Jodrell Bank*. He stood up and avoided Chris's questions: "Let me get something to eat, and then get cleaned up a little." (He had discovered that his body stank.) "Then I'll tell tell you everything you want to know — you and the captain, and anybody else who wants to listen. And we'll have to send a dispatch to Earth, too, because this is important . . . But, please, I only want to tell it once." Because — he did not say — I may not have time to tell it again.

For those cold and murderous presences in the clustered inner suns had reached out as casually as a bear flicking a salmon out of a run and snatched the unknown woman from Hatcher's planet. They could reach anywhere in the galaxy their thoughts roamed.

They might easily follow him here.

IT was good to be human again, and McCray howled with pain and joy as the icy needle-spray of the showers cleansed his body. He devoured the enormous plates of steak and potatoes the ship's galley shoved before him, and drank chilled milk and steaming black coffee in alternate pint mugs. McCray let the ship surgeon look him over, and laughed at the expression in the man's eyes. "I know I'm a little wobbly," he said. "It doesn't matter, Doc. You can put me in the sickbay as long as you like, as soon as I've talked to the captain. I won't mind a bit. You see, I won't be there —" and he laughed louder, and would not explain.

An hour later, with food in his belly and something from the surgeon's hypospray in his bloodstream to clear his brain, he was in the captain's cabin, trying to spell out in words that made sense the incredible story of (he discovered) eight days since he had been abducted from the ship.

Looking at the ship's officers, good friends, companions on a dozen planetside leaves, McCray started to speak, stumbled and was for a moment without words. It was too incredible to tell. How could he make them understand?

They would have to understand. Insane or not, the insane facts had to be explained to them. However queerly they might stare, they were intelligent men. They would resist but ultimately they would see.

He settled his problem by telling them baldly and plainly, without looking at their faces and without waiting for their questions, everything that had happened. He told them about Hatcher and about the room in which he had come to. He told them about the pinkish light that showed only what he concentrated on — and explained it to them, as he understood it at first; about Hatcher's people, and how their entire sense-world was built up of what humans called E.S.P., the "light" being only the focusing of thought, which sees no material objects that it is not fixed on. He told them of the woman from the other ship and the cruel, surgical touch on his brain that had opened a universe to him. He promised that the universe would open for them as well. He told them of the deadly unknowable danger to Hatcher's people — and to themselves — that lay at the galaxy's core. He told them how the woman had disappeared, and told them she was dead — at the hands of the Old Ones from the Central Masses — a blessing to her. McCray explained, and a blessing to all of them; for although her mind would

yield some of its secrets even in death, if she were alive it would be their guide, and the Old Ones would be upon them.

He did not wait for them to react.

He turned to the ship's surgeon. "Doc, I'm all yours now, body and soul . . . cancel that. Just body!"

And he left them, to swim once more in space.

IN so short a time McCray had come to think of this as life, and a sort of interregnum. He swept up and out, glancing back only to see the ship's surgeon leaping forward to catch his unconscious body as it fell and then he was in space between the stars once more.

Here, 'twixt Sol and Betelgeuse, space was clear, hard and cold, no diffuse gas cloud, no new, growing suns. He "looked" toward Hatcher's world, but hesitated and considered.

First or last, he would have to look once more upon the inimical presences that had peered out at him from the Central Masses. It might as well be now.

His perceptions alert, he plunged toward the heart of the galaxy.

Thought speeds where light plods. The mind of Herrell McCray covered light-millenia in a moment. It skipped the drifty void between spiral arms, threaded dust clouds, entered the compact central galactic sphere to which our Earth's sector of the galaxy is only a remote and unimportant appendage. Here a great globular cluster of suns massed around a common center of gravity. McCray shrank himself to the perspective of a human body and stared in wonder. Mankind's Sol lies in a tenuous, stretched-out arm, thinly populated by stellar standards: if Earth had circled one of these dense-clustered suns, what a different picture of the sky would have greeted the early shepherds! Where Man's Earthbound eyes are fortunate to count a thousand stars in a winter sky, here were tens of thousands, bright enough to be a Sirius or a Capella at the bottom of a sink of atmosphere like Earth's — tens of billions of stars in all, whirling close to each other, so that star greets star over distances that are hardly more than planetary. Sol's nearest neighbor star is four light-years away. No single sun in this dense, gyrating central mass was as much as one light-year from its fellows.

Here were suns that had been blazing with mature, steady light when Sol was a mere contracting mass of hydrogen — whose planets had cooled and spawned life before Earth's hollows cupped the first scalding droplets that were the beginning of seas.

McCray had not understood all of what Hatcher had tried to communicate to him, but he had caught the terror in Hatcher's thoughts. Hather's people had fled from these ancients many millenia before — fled and hidden in the heart of the Orion gas cloud, their world and all. Yet even there they were not safe. They knew that in time the Old Ones would find them. And it was this fear that had led them to kidnap humans, seeking allies in the war that could not forever be deferred.

Hatcher's people were creatures of thought. Man was the wielder of physical forces — "paranormal" to Hatcher, as teleportation and mindseeing were "paranormal" to McCray. The Old Ones had mastered both.

McCray paused at the fringe of the cluster, waiting for the touch of contemptuous hate. It came and he recoiled a thousand light-years.

To battle the Old Ones would be no easy match — yet time might work for the human race. Already they controlled the electromagnetic spectrum, and hydrogen fusion could exert the force of suns. With Hatcher's help — and his own — man would free his mind as well; and perhaps the Old Ones would find themselves against an opponent as mighty as themselves.

He drew back from the Central Masses, no longer afraid, and swept out to see Hatcher's planet. It was gone.

IN the great gas cloud the tunneling blue suns swept up their graze of hydrogen, untroubled by planets. Themselves too young to have solid satellites, Hatcher's adopted world removed again, they were alone.

It was for a moment, a panicky thought. McCray realized what they had done. Hatcher's greatest hope had been to find another race to stand between his people and the Old Ones. And they had found it!

Now Hatcher's world could hide again and wait until the battle had been fought for them.

With a face light-years across, with a brain made up of patterns in the ether, McCray grinned wryly.

"Maybe they made the right choice," he thought, considering. "Maybe they'd only be in the way when the showdown comes." And he sought out *Jodrell Bank* and his body once more, preparing to return to being human . . . and to teach his fellow-humans to be gods. **END**

JAMES H. SCHMITZ

An Incident On Route 12

PHIL Garfield was thirty miles south of the little town of Redmon on Route Twelve when he was startled by a series of sharp, clanking noises. They came from under the Packard's hood.

The car immediately began to lose speed. Garfield jammed down the accelerator, had a sense of sick helplessness at the complete lack of response from the motor. The Packard rolled on, getting rid of its momentum, and came to a stop.

Phil Garfield swore shakily. He checked his watch, switched off the headlights and climbed out into the dark road. A delay of even half an hour here might be disastrous. It was past midnight, and he had another hundred and ten miles to cover to reach the small private airfield where Madge waited for him and the thirty thousand dollars in the suitcase on the Packard's front seat.

If he didn't make it before daylight . . .

He thought of the bank guard. The man had made a clumsy play at being a hero, and that had set off the fool woman who'd run screaming into their line of fire. One dead, Perhaps two. Garfield hadn't stopped to look at an evening paper.

But he knew they were hunting for him.

He glanced up and down the road. No other headlights in sight at the moment, no light from a building showing on the forested hills. He reached back into the car and brought out the suitcase, his gun, a big flashlight and the box of shells which had been standing beside the suitcase. He broke the box open, shoved a handful of shells and the .38 into his coat pocket, then took suitcase and flashlight over to the shoulder of the road and set them down.

There was no point in groping about under the Packard's hood. When it came to mechanics, Phil Garfield was a moron and well aware of it. The car was useless to him now . . . except as bait.

But as bait it might be very useful.

Should he leave it standing where it was? No, Garfield decided. To anybody driving past it would merely suggest a necking party, or a drunk sleeping off his load before continuing home. He might have to wait an hour or more before someone decided to stop. He didn't have the time. He reached in through the window, hauled the top of the steering wheel towards him and put his weight against the rear window frame.

The Packard began to move slowly backwards at a slant across the road. In a minute or two he had it in position. Not blocking the road entirely, which would arouse immediate suspicion, but angled across it, lights out, empty, both front doors open and inviting a passerby's investigation.

Garfield carried the suitcase and flashlight across the right-hand shoulder of the road and moved up among the trees and undergrowth of the slope above the shoulder. Placing the suitcase between the bushes, he brought out the .38, clicked the safety off and stood waiting.

Some ten minutes later, a set of headlights appeared speeding up Route Twelve from the direction of Redmon. Phil Garfield went down on one knee before he came within range of the lights. Now he was completely concealed by the vegetation.

The car slowed as it approached, braking nearly to a stop sixty feet from the stalled Packard. There were several people inside it; Garfield heard voices, then a woman's loud laugh. The driver tapped his horn inquiringly twice, moved the car slowly forward. As the headlights went past him, Garfield got to his feet among the bushes, took a step down towards the road, raising the gun.

Then he caught the distant gleam of a second set of headlights approaching from Redmon. He swore under his breath and dropped back out of sight. The car below him reached the Packard, edged cautiously around it, rolled on with a sudden roar of acceleration.

THE second car stopped when still a hundred yards away, the Packard caught in the motionless glare of its lights. Garfield heard the steady purring of a powerful motor.

For almost a minute, nothing else happened. Then the car came gliding smoothly on, stopped again no more than thirty feet to Garfield's left. He could see it now through the screening bushes — a big job, a long, low four-door sedan. The motor continued to purr. After a moment, a door on the far side of the car and slammed shut.

A man walked quickly out into the beam of the headlights and started towards the Packard.

Phil Garfield rose from his crouching position, the .38 in his right hand, flashlight in his left. If the driver was alone, the thing was now cinched! But if there was somebody else in the car, somebody capable of fast, decisive action, a slip in the next ten seconds might cost him the sedan, and quite probably his freedom and life. Garfield lined up the .38's sights steadily on the center of the approaching man's head. He let his breath out slowly as the fellow came level with him in the road and squeezed off one shot.

Instantly he went bounding down the slope to the road. The bullet had flung the man sideways to the pavement. Garfield darted past him to the left, crossed the beam of the headlights, and was in darkness again on the far side of the road, snapping on his flashlight as he sprinted up to the car.

The motor hummed quietly on. The flashlight showed the seats empty. Garfield dropped the light, jerked both doors open in turn, gun pointing into the car's interior. Then he stood still for a moment, weak and almost dizzy with relief.

There was no one inside. The sedan was his.

The man he had shot through the head lay face down on the road, his hat flung a dozen feet away from him. Route Twelve still stretched out in dark silence to the east and west. There should be time enough to clean up the job before anybody else came along. Garfield brought the suitcase down and put it on the front seat of the sedan, then started back to get his victim off the road and out of sight. He scaled the man's hat into the bushes, bent down, grasped the ankles and started to haul him towards the left side of the road where the ground dropped off sharply beyond the shoulder.

The body made a high, squealing sound and began to writhe violently.

SHOCKED, Garfield dropped the legs and hurriedly took the gun from his pocket, moving back a step. The squealing noise rose in intensity as the wounded man quickly flopped over twice like a struggling fish, arms and legs sawing about with startling energy. Garfield clicked off the safety, pumped three shots into his victim's back.

The grisly squeals ended abruptly. The body continued to jerk for another second or two, then lay still.

Garfield shoved the gun back into his pocket. The unexpected interruption had unnerved him; his hands shook as he reached down again for the stranger's ankles. Then he jerked his hands back, and straightened up, staring.

From the side of the man's chest, a few inches below the right arm, something like a thick black stick, three feet long, protruded now through the material of the coat.

It shone, gleaming wetly, in the light from the car. Even in that first uncomprehending instant, something in its appearance brought a surge of sick disgust to Garfield's throat. Then the stick bent slowly halfway down its length, forming a sharp angle, and its tip opened into what could have been three blunt, black claws which scrabbled clumsily against the pavement. Very faintly, the squealing began again, and the body's back arched up as if another sticklike arm were pushing desperately against the ground beneath it.

Garfield acted in a blur of horror. He emptied the .38 into the thing at his feet almost without realizing he was doing it. Then, dropping the gun, he seized one of the ankles, ran backwards to the shoulder of the road, dragging the body behind him.

In the darkness at the edge of the shoulder, he let go of it, stepped around to the other side and with two frantically savage kicks sent the body plunging over the shoulder and down the steep slope beyond. He heard it crash through the bushes for some seconds, then stop. He turned, and ran back to the sedan, scooping up his gun as he went past. He scrambled into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut behind him.

His hands shook violently on the steering wheel as he pressed down the accelerator. The motor roared into life and the big car surged forward. He edged is past the Packard, cursing aloud in horrified shock, jammed the accelerator and went flashing up Route Twelve, darkness racing beside and behind him.

WHAT had it been? Something that wore what seemed to be a man's body like a suit of clothes, moving the body as a man moves, driving a man's car . . . roach-armed, roach-legged itself!

Garfield drew a long, shuddering breath. Then, as he slowed for a curve, there was a spark of reddish light in the rear-view mirror.

He stared at the spark for an instant, braked the car to a stop, rolled down the window and looked back.

Far behind him along Route Twelve, a fire burned. Approximate-

ly at the point where the Packard had stalled out, where something had gone rolling off the road into the bushes . . .

Something, Garfield added mentally, that found fiery automatic destruction when death came to it, so that its secrets would remain unrevealed.

But for him the fire meant the end of a nightmare. He rolled the window up, took out a cigarette, lit it, and pressed the accelerator . . .

In incredulous fright, he felt the nose of the car tilt upwards, headlights sweeping up from the road into the trees.

Then the headlights winked out. Beyond the windshield, dark tree branches floated down towards him, the night sky beyond. He reached frantically for the door handle.

A steel wrench clamped silently about each of his arms, drawing them in against his sides, immobilizing them there. Garfield gasped, looked up at the mirror and saw a pair of faintly gleaming red eyes watching him from the rear of the car. Two of the things . . . the second one stood behind him out of sight, holding him. They'd been in what had seemed to be the trunk compartment. And they had come out.

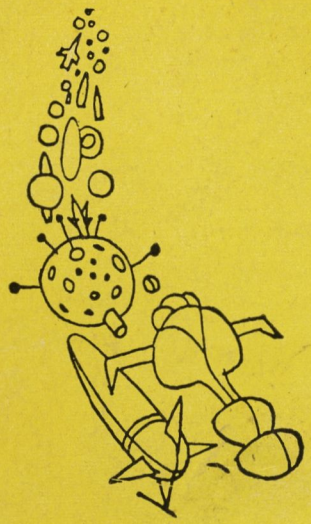
The eyes in the mirror vanished. A moist, black roach-arm reached over the back of the seat beside Garfield, picked up the cigarette he had dropped, extinguished it with rather horribly human motions, then took up Garfield's gun and drew back out of sight.

He expected a shot, but none came.

One doesn't fire a bullet through the suit one intends to wear . . .

It wasn't until that thought occurred to him that tough Phil Garfield began to scream. He was still screaming minutes later when, beyond the windshield, the spaceship floated into view among the stars.

END



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