

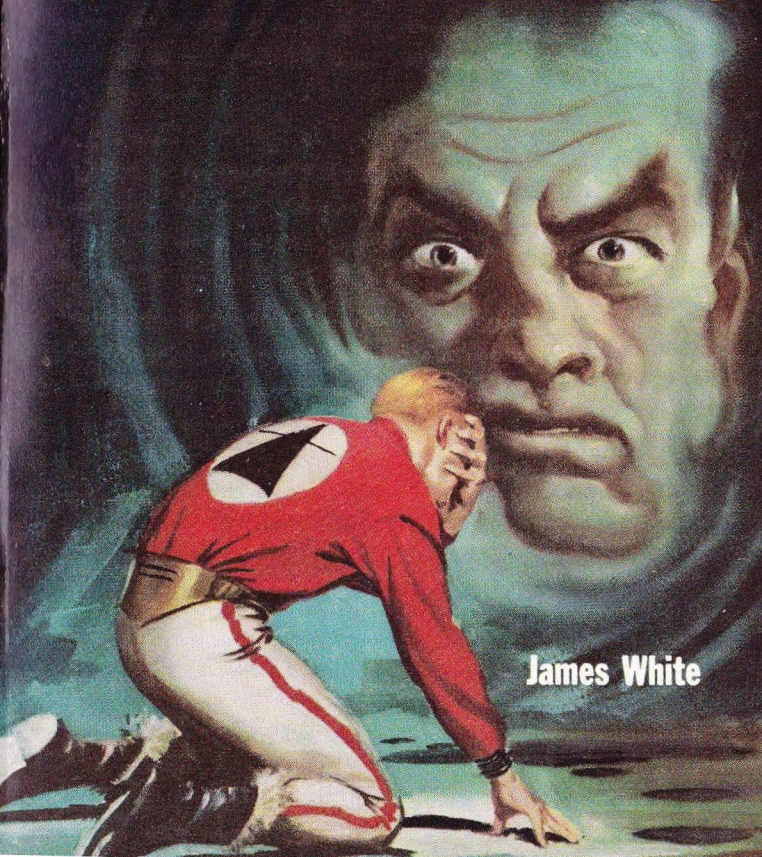
ACE  
PAPERBACK NOVEL  
10c

TWO COMPLETE NOVELS 35c

D-237

THEY PUT OUR WORLD ON TRIAL!

# the SECRET VISITORS



James White



## NO PASSPORTS TO TERRA

When the World Security Organization asked Doctor Lockhart to treat their mysterious prisoner, they hadn't known that the dying old man would reply to their questions in a totally unknown language. They had expected the stranger to reveal some connection between himself and the world war which seemed imminent. But they had been thinking in terms of foreign spies—not alien beings!

Now suddenly they found themselves confronted with a Gargantuan task. . . . They had to find a way to another world, a means of communicating with creatures they could barely imagine. They had to stop a war that was originating in the farthest stars, or else surrender the Earth unconditionally to THE SECRET VISITORS.

---

Turn this book over for  
second complete novel

---

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### DR. LOCKHART

His patients were half-animal, half-spaceship!

### HEDLEY

He wanted to save a country, but first had to save a world.

### CEDRIC

English was his native tongue—seventeenth century English!

### KEELER

The FBI had trained him to expect almost anything, except an invisible enemy.

### KELLY

Hers was an ideal planet—almost.

### JUNIOR

In his hand, a water pistol was a deadly weapon.

***THE  
SECRET  
VISITORS***

by  
JAMES WHITE

ACE BOOKS  
A Division of A. A. Wyn, Inc.  
23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

**THE SECRET VISITORS**

Copyright ©, 1957, by A. A. Wyn, Inc.

All Rights Reserved

---

**MASTER OF LIFE AND DEATH**

Copyright ©, 1957, by A. A. Wyn, Inc.

---

Printed in U.S.A.

## I

THE SUNSET was unbelievable, an explosion of color so breathtaking that its sheer resplendence seemed somehow to be in questionable taste. It was a shade too beautiful, Lockhart thought. Bathed in that amber flood of light, the evening strollers along the Boulevard Saint-Michel were transformed into actors in some colorful, romantic drama instead of the drably commonplace characters that the majority of them were. Almost, it brought warmth to the face of the old man who was dying at the café table across the street.

Lockhart's eyes rested on the old man only long enough to be sure that he was still alive, then he shifted them back to the crowd, the sunset, and to the car containing three of Hedley's men which was parked further along the street. The thought returned then of what he was here to do, and the sunset abruptly lost its appeal; the pulsing bands of fire filling the western sky became nothing more than an interesting group of meteorological phenomena which gave strong indications of rain before morning.

A sharp intake of breath made Lockhart look quickly at the man sharing the café table with him. Hedley was staring anxiously across the street and Lockhart saw the cause of the agent's anxiety at once. Two people were trying to talk to the old man.

The girl looked vaguely Spanish—dark complexion with that peculiar combination of thin, aristocratic nose and wide, full lips. Her hair was dark brown or black, and her figure

## THE SECRET VISITORS

was attracting the appreciative gaze of a passing group of students. Her companion was a small, thin-faced man whose clothing seemed to indicate a certain degree of effeminacy; he was pretty rather than handsome. They were bending over the old man and the girl was apparently asking a question. After a pause she repeated it, louder.

Why, thought Lockhart suddenly, I *know* that girl!

"What's she saying?" Hedley said, holding his voice to a conversational level with difficulty. "What language is it, at least?"

Lockhart shook his head. "She's too far away to tell," he replied. "But I know her—she isn't anyone you're looking for."

Hedley made an annoyed sound. "I'll be the judge of that. How long have you known her?"

"I saw her at a concert," Lockhart said. "We didn't speak." He paused awkwardly, thinking of how this would sound to Hedley, then went on. "It's rather complicated, but I know she isn't the type to be mixed up in this. You see—"

"This is the first time," Hedley cut in, "that one of these old men has been contacted by someone who might be an enemy agent. Maybe they are just a couple of kind-hearted types who think he's sick and want to help, but again, maybe they are nothing of the sort." He exhaled irritably. "So, despite your unsolicited testimonial, Doctor, I'll have them followed."

He took a handkerchief from his breast pocket, shook it out twice and blew his nose. A hundred yards away one of his men got out of the waiting car and merged with the crowd. The couple across the street had unknowingly acquired a shadow, and Lockhart, who was firmly convinced that the agent was wasting his time, kept angrily silent.

Usually Lockhart was not so touchy about things, but Hedley—and the job the agent wanted him to do—had kept him on edge all day.



## THE SECRET VISITORS

Prior to that morning, Lockhart had not seen Hedley since the time during the closing months of the war when an air ambulance had set him down, literally, on the hospital's front lawn. Lockhart had been attached to a south coast Bomber Group at the time, doing his best to repair partially wrecked men so that they could go back to wrecking more aircraft. Hedley had kept him busy that day and most of the following night, he remembered.

The holes in Hedley's legs and side were flesh wounds and not in themselves dangerous, but from his condition upon arrival Lockhart guessed that he must have crawled through about a mile of mud before they had been dressed. With the antibiotics he had been given battling the infection raging through his system, it was no surprise that the patient had been delirious. Consequently, Lockhart had found out a lot he wasn't supposed to know.

Hedley was an Intelligence officer. That, in itself, would not have made Lockhart uncomfortable. What did so was the large number of high-ranking officers who congregated around Hedley's bed, listening to his every mumbled word, and who hung around in relays until the patient had passed out of danger and been transferred somewhere else. Hedley, it seemed, had been an important man.

Before leaving, however, the agent had thanked him, shaken hands, and advised him to keep quiet about anything he may have heard until such times as he was writing his memoirs.

Lockhart had kept quiet long after the need for secrecy was gone—not, he suspected, because he was a close-mouthed type, but simply because Hedley had requested it of him. When Hedley asked, refusal was virtually impossible, and when he ordered something done, Lockhart was sure that it became nothing less than an entry in the pages of future history. With a feeling almost of awe, Lockhart remembered how Hedley had, within ten minutes of meeting him, talked

## THE SECRET VISITORS

him into accepting a rather unpleasant task. A task, moreover, which could leave him open to grave charges of unethical practice.

*Was he a doctor*, Lockhart asked himself suddenly, *or a ghoul . . . ?*

Simply, Hedley wanted the old man across the street watched until, in Lockhart's opinion, he was at the point of death. Only then could the fast-acting poison, which had made previous attempts at questioning these people impossible, be removed, thus allowing the agent a chance to obtain some desperately needed information.

Something was afoot, Hedley had told him; something big, dirty, and the worst threat to peace since the invasion of Poland. The agent had been so deadly serious about the matter that he had been positively frightening. And though Lockhart had agreed to help, he could not quite see how this white-haired old man—and the other like him that Hedley had mentioned—could be a threat to anything.

Lockhart's train of thought came to a sudden stop as the couple across the street straightened and began to move away. For an instant, Lockhart thought that the girl's face showed something like disappointment, but the fading light made it difficult to read features with any degree of accuracy. And when he brought his attention back to the old man, he felt his mouth going dry.

The old man's features had gone suddenly slack, and the eyes had closed. Despite the ruddy glow from that spectacular sunset his face was still and chalk white. Lockhart wet his lips. When he spoke he hardly recognized his own voice.

"Uh . . . Now, I think," he said.

Without speaking, Hedley slid two black leather bags from under their table and pushed the one containing the medical kit toward Lockhart. They rose and crossed the street

## THE SECRET VISITORS

quickly. Lockhart knew what he had to do, but for a moment he hesitated.

There was a strange dignity about the lined and wrinkled countenance, an aura of power and keen intelligence now long gone. The steady breakdown in the life processes was rapidly wiping all expression and character from the face, but enough remained for Lockhart to know that he would have liked this man. He had a feeling which affected him in cases of this kind—an overwhelming respect, and pity, and love of the aged. Maybe he should have specialized in geriatrics. But he felt that any indignity to which he might subject this old man would be nothing less than a moral offense, like disordering the bones of a dead saint.

*"Hurry!"* Hedley whispered fiercely.

The agent had his bag open. He was lifting out what a lay observer might have mistaken for a sphygmomanometer—though the same observer would have referred to it out of self-defense as "the thing doctors used to take blood pressure." Actually it was a heavily disguised tape-recorder. Hedley set it going and moved it closer to the old man, then left to intercept the café proprietor who was bearing down on them.

Callously, efficiently, Lockhart's hands went to work. The emotional and untrustworthy sector of his brain was cut off, isolated—especially from control of his hands.

He forced the mouth open, wide. He tested the teeth; they were all good—which surprised him—and they rang solid. Carefully he scrutinized the inside of the mouth; empty. He examined the gums again, and raised the tongue; still nothing. Where was the thing?

A gendarme had now joined Hedley and the café proprietor. In faultless French, the agent was gravely taking them into his confidence about the distressing condition of the old gentleman whose life his colleague was striving so gallantly to save. With the proper amount of respect due to

## THE SECRET VISITORS

one authority from another in a different though doubtless equally important field, Hedley appealed for the gendarme's aid in the struggle. He was most eloquent. The gendarme, obviously feeling about seven feet tall and broad in proportion, moved importantly onto the pavement to disperse the crowd which was beginning to gather.

Lockhart badly needed advice on other possible methods of concealing poison, but the café proprietor was keeping Hedley busy with morbid questions regarding things medical. He gritted his teeth. Time was running out. The old man's life expectancy could be measured now in minutes, perhaps seconds. Prising open the unresisting jaw, Lockhart had another look. Suddenly he saw it.

It had been a flat, lozenge-shaped capsule of some gelatinous substance moulded around a few drops of grayish liquid. Body heat and saliva had dissolved the capsule to wafer thinness, except where the liquid made a tiny bulge in its center. Lockhart had mistaken it at first for a small mouth ulcer. Now he knew it for what it was, but he still had to get it out. While it remained, the slightest pressure of the old man's tongue would burst it, and Hedley would be looking elsewhere for his information.

The partly melted capsule was fragile, slippery, and it adhered far back on the roof of the mouth. Carefully, so as not to nip through it and allow the highly lethal contents to trickle down the old man's throat, Lockhart began to slide it forward. Sweat broke on him as his probing instrument pressed briefly behind the tongue, causing involuntary, retching contractions of the throat, and he nearly lost it. But finally he had it between his fingers, then out.

Without giving his mind time to dwell on how close a thing it had been, he set about the second half of the job.

The shots were already prepared. He injected heart stimulants, then broke the seal of a small tube of compressed ox-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

ygen and let the gas play briefly over the open-mouth and nostrils. When he came to the point where the pentothal-derivative was being administered, the old man was conscious enough to wince. Lockhart listened intently to the sucking, creaking and rumbling noises of that worn-out heart being forced into renewed activity. Like a faulty engine with cracked cylinders and no lubrication, he thought sadly; it could be made to work, but not for long.

"Hedley!" he called sharply. When the agent joined him, he whispered, "Be quick. You've got about ten minutes."

"What is your name?" Hedley said, softly but distinctly into the old man's ear. "Where do you come from?"

Hedley's face, for the benefit of onlookers, showed the proper mixture of gravity and clinical detachment, but his knuckles where they gripped the chair shone white. He repeated the question, in French and German and Russian.

The old man's head rolled from side to side, as if he was trying to avoid something. He looked puzzled and vaguely frightened. Suddenly he said, "Hargon," followed by something which sounded like "Vitlim."

Hedley tried again: "Why are you here?"

The answer was mumbled gibberish.

"Delirium," Lockhart diagnosed. "Probably caused by interruption of blood-flow to the brain, or simply advanced senility."

"Then why can't he rave in English so's we would have some idea—"

For an instant the hard-held mask of Hedley's face slipped, and his jaw dropped open. The old man was no longer raving.

"I mus' speak English," he mumbled slowly, "and think in English. Even among the . . . the . . ." His voice wavered, and his head seemed all at once too heavy for him to hold up. Quickly, Lockhart measured out another dose, then

## THE SECRET VISITORS

slowly replaced the syringe without using it. He tapped Hedley's arm.

"No more questions, I'm afraid," he said gently.

Hedley sighed and straightened up. "He didn't tell us much," he said bitterly. "Unless—" He tapped the recorder lightly, "—we can unravel the gibberish in here."

Lockhart's mind was suddenly seething with questions, for the agent had told him practically nothing.

"Why," he burst out, "was he *sucking* that capsule? Could he have known we were watching him, or did he mean to commit suicide anyway, not realizing that he was dying?"

Hedley looked up and down the cool, tree-lined avenue, at the crowds, and at the conflagration raging across the western sky. Everything—even to an orange peel lying in the gutter—held a sharp intensity of coloring that made the scene resemble an over-vivid painting rather than mundane reality. When he spoke he seemed almost to be talking to himself.

"He picked a good time for it," the agent said softly. "This is nice. Much better than dying in bed . . ." He trailed off into silence, then turned abruptly and waved to the waiting car.

As Hedley and the gendarme helped him lift the old man into the car, Lockhart thought of his manner of dying. His waiting, as Hedley had so uncharacteristically put it, until the nicest time of the day to do it. The thought made him uncomfortable, as if he were missing something.

What sort of enemy agent would do a thing like that?

## II

HEDLEY PACED slowly up and down the hotel room which served as his team's headquarters in Paris, from the cream-painted door to the window overlooking the brightly-lit Rue de Londres. The agent was a big man with large, mobile features held together by loosely-connected slabs and ridges of muscle. His face could register any emotion to order, but at the moment it showed nothing and was working very hard to do it. Hedley was very, very angry.

"Both the Surete and French Military Intelligence asked our help in this," he said, halting. "And now that we've given them a 'grandfather' who has died naturally they won't even let us near the hospital where the autopsy is being performed, nor allow you, Doctor, to assist with it. I don't like this, not one bit.

"I hope Gates is all right," he added worriedly.

Gates, Lockhart knew, was one of Hedley's men who had been at St. Armande's Military Hospital since the previous day. Presumably he was still there. His report, when it arrived, might clear everything up.

Lockhart could understand Hedley's anger, but he felt no sorrow at missing that autopsy. The things Hedley had told him about the old man they had questioned—and the many others like him—had made Lockhart's skin crawl.

Following a brief period of amity between the nations of the world, tensions had begun to build toward a threat of war, and Secret Service departments were being kept busy investigating various problems which could lead to the final atomic blow-up. Of these, the most bewildering was that of the "dying grandfathers."

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Scores of elderly men in the city of Paris had committed suicide rather than answer the simplest questions about themselves or their origin, their behavior during the questioning making it certain that this was due to a conditioning process of some kind. Some of the questioning had been subtle—the Surete was noted for its subtlety—but the results were always the same, a dead “grandfather” within seconds. They were conditioned to kill themselves rather than answer questions, and with the exception of the one Hedley and Lockhart had encountered today, they had done just that.

But it was the effects of the poison used which had the authorities in fear and trembling. Besides killing instantaneously, it greatly accelerated the processes of decomposition. This was the item that gave birth to the theory with which the authorities were currently scaring themselves into fits. Briefly, it was thought that the suicidal old men were nothing less than walking bacteriological bombs already primed to spread a virulent disease at or shortly after the time of their deaths, and that the poison acted as the “fuse” to these living bombs.

The “grandfathers” had all been cremated with indecent haste, but attempts continued to capture, dead or alive, one who had not taken poison.

Things could be learned from an unfused bomb.

But at St. Armande’s they had been curtly informed that the investigation was officially closed, that the old men had simply belonged to a religious sect with peculiar ideas of personal liberty and an intense dislike toward any form of coercion. Hedley’s department had already been informed of this and his orders to return home were no doubt on the way.

And Gates, who should have phoned in his report two hours ago, was in St. Armande’s.

Lockhart tried to stop Hedley’s monotonous pacing



## THE SECRET VISITORS

with a question. He said, "This etymologist you're expecting, is he a local man?"

"No. Belongs to the decoding section of the department." The slow march continued.

Lockhart tried again. "That old man in the Boulevard St. Michel looked harmless enough. A nice old boy, in fact. Are you sure . . ."

"They are not ordinary agents or subversives," Hedley said irritably. "They have been under close surveillance and have posted no letters, made no suspicious contacts, and from the few words they've addressed to hotel people and such, their politics are pure beyond belief. They appear neither to seek nor avoid meetings with each other and do nothing but sit around in parks, or go to shows or concerts, or maybe for a ride on the riverboats. Harmless. But ask one his name and he's dead, just like that."

The phone rang. Hedley pounced on it, the receiver dwarfed in his ham-like fist. He said, "Gates? What's going on over there, man?"

There was a tinny, agitated squeaking which Lockhart could hear eight feet away. Hedley turned suddenly and was handing him the phone. "Gates," he said shortly. "Wants to talk to a doctor first and me second. Says it's important. But hold the receiver out a bit so's I can hear, too."

Speaking rapidly, Gates told them that the situation at the hospital was still confused. Higher authority had ordered the investigation of the "dying grandfathers" stopped, but some of the resident medical staff were convinced that it should be carried on. One of these, a Dr. Gerarde, had performed an autopsy on the body of the old man. Subsequently he had reported his findings to Gates, urging him at the same time to get away from the hospital and pass the data to another doctor—any doctor—as quickly as possible.

"They are definitely not germ carriers, Gerarde says, so that is one of our worries gone. But he found traces of a

## THE SECRET VISITORS

substance which inhibits the formation of cholesterol, among other things, in the body, and there were physiological peculiarities . . .”

The stuff which followed meant nothing to Gates, as was obvious from his frequent mispronunciations while reading the notes Dr. Gerarde had given him. Lockhart felt his throat tighten and he had an urgent desire to sit down before his legs gave way on him. But nothing on earth could have dragged him away from that telephone just then.

“ . . . Shortly after Gerarde left me to make a further study of the corpse, the mortuary building blew up and burnt itself out with him in it. I’m in a phone booth about half a mile from the hospital. But I’ve the feeling I’ve been followed, though there’s nobody in sight—”

The voice broke off sharply with a quick intake of breath. “What?” began Hedley, but Gates was talking again.

“There’s a guy outside, close,” he said jerkily. “Didn’t see him coming. He . . . dammit, my eyes are playing tricks. His face is sort of wobbling, the way stones do under running water. Horrible. He’s carrying a sort of reading glass in one hand and a gun in the other—but the gun barrel is solid, no aperture. God, he’s close. There’s a pane missing and he’s pointing the gun at me through it. The gun barrel *isn’t* solid, there’s a pin-hole in the end of it . . .”

Something went *phhtt*, followed by noises which could have been made by a body slumping to the floor. Immediately afterwards the receiver was replaced firmly at the other end and they were cut off.

Hedley’s expressionless mask slipped for perhaps two seconds, then it fell into place again. He said softly, “That stuff Gates was telling you, what did it mean?”

Lockhart told him exactly what it meant, and as he

## THE SECRET VISITORS

talked he grew certain that Gates had been killed to suppress this information. It was that kind of information.

"But if the old man had been taking treatments which kept him, or could have kept him, young indefinitely, why was he so *old*?"

"Because the treatments were stopped," Lockhart replied, "and the artificial balance maintained in his endocrine system broke down. Aging would take place very quickly after that; he would simply go to pieces. But the treatment itself interests me. Who gave it, and why was it stopped?"

Things were happening too fast, Lockhart thought. He was talking about virtual immortality and a man had just been killed. The implications had yet to sink in. When he realized that he possessed information which had caused the deaths of Gates and Gerarde. . . .

"I wonder," said Hedley suddenly, "if the old man had fallen from grace somehow. If the treatment is a reward for doing something . . . But it doesn't add up. There's a piece missing somewhere." He fell silent.

There was a double knock on the door. Draper, the agent who'd been detailed to follow the couple that had spoken to the old man, entered. Lockhart had almost forgotten about that incident. Draper eased his 180-pound frame onto Hedley's bed, linked fingers over one knee and spoke in the general direction of Hedley's belt-buckle.

"Their name is Kelly," he said. "Brother and sister, Irish, from Belfast on a Cook's tour. They flew home an hour ago."

Draper was a dark-jowled individual who resembled his chief in many ways. Lockhart guessed him to be next in seniority. He treated words like gold dust.

"I hung around their hotel lounge and had dinner there," he went on. "Mostly they spoke English, sometimes something else which I couldn't identify. Neither of them had Irish accents, though the man's seemed to be vaguely English

## THE SECRET VISITORS

despite the fact that I could only understand one word in ten.

"They don't look Irish and they don't look to be brother and sister. Also, it seems they go out of their way to make friends with the oldest residents in their hotel." Draper smiled dourly. "The receptionist gave me most of this. I have a way with hotel receptionists."

Before Hedley could reply there was another knock and three men trooped in. They were Simpson and Fox, two of Hedley's men, and a tall, thin individual with a bald head and a sad, hungry expression. When Hedley introduced him as Professor Brian, the etymologist, Lockhart discovered that he had a grip like iron.

The other two found places for themselves on Hedley's counterpane. Simpson, who was the most colorless person Lockhart had ever met, seemed not to be there, while Fox, a small, nervous man and a careful dresser, kept running a finger and thumb along the creases in his pants. The professor took the only vacant chair.

Hedley quickly brought them up-to-date on the latest events while setting up the tape-recorder. He said, "Right, then, let's get on with it." There was a click.

On the playback Lockhart heard his own heavy breathing again as he traced and extracted the capsule from the old man's mouth, and his urgent call to Hedley to make it fast. Then came the agent's voice:

"What is your name? Where are you from?"

The answers still sounded like "Hargon" and Vitlim."

"Why are you here?"

Answer: gibberish.

Lockhart mentioned delirium and Hedley wondered aloud why the old man couldn't rave in English. Then:

"I mus' speak English," the old man's wavering voice returned, "and think in English. Even among the . . . the . . ." It faded into silence.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"That's all," Hedley said. He looked at the professor. "Do you want it again?"

Professor Brian nodded. It was played over again. And again. After the seventh time the professor signaled that he had heard enough. Carefully avoiding Hedley's questioning stare, he turned to Lockhart.

"Doctor," the etymologist asked quietly, "from your knowledge of the old man—both yours and that furnished second-hand by Dr. Gerarde—would you say that his physiology was sufficiently normal for the truth drug to have its usual effect?"

"I would," said Lockhart. "With no hesitation."

"Oh," said the professor, his face becoming sadder and even hungrier in its expression. "Oh," he repeated.

"But where does he *come* from?" Impatience was making Hedley's tone downright rude.

"Before I answer," Professor Brian said, "you must understand that I've assumed—justifiably, I think—one very important fact, namely, that the truth drug administered to this man worked. Assuming this, his replies of 'Hargon' and 'Vitlim' were, so far as he was concerned, true answers to your questions, and the gibberish that followed the more complicated question, 'Why are you here?' was the same.

"The fact that he did not start speaking English until your remark to Dr. Lockhart—which went, I believe, 'Why can't he rave in English?'—makes my assumption that he was answering in his own language practically a certainty."

"But what language is it?"

"I am familiar with the languages of all the technologically advanced nations, either friendly or potentially dangerous to us, and many more," he said evasively. "It could be a new artificial language, such as *Io* or *Esperanto*. But against that is the fact that a person in the truth-drugged state invariably speaks his native tongue unless ordered to do otherwise by his questioner.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"Now this language," the professor said, and made stabbing motions at the recorder with a bony index finger, "has not the *feel* of an artificial language. In my opinion it did not originate on this planet." He glared at Hedley as if daring him to laugh.

"I'd thought of that, too," Hedley said evenly. He was not laughing.

Springs creaked and twanged as the agents slouched across the bed sat bolt upright. Fox stared at Hedley, mouth opening and closing wordlessly, his expression reminding Lockhart of a stunned goldfish. From a dry and rather pedantic discussion on language to *this!* Involuntarily, Lockhart laughed.

"This is serious," said Hedley, and Lockhart realized suddenly that it was. Deadly serious.

"If these old men are extra-terrestrials," said Hedley after a thoughtful silence, "that would explain the longevity treatments, which indicate advanced medical science, though it surprises me that they resemble us so closely. It also explains the action of the authorities here, if we postulate the existence of a high governmental clique that has been promised longevity as a reward for secret cooperation with the aliens. This group disregarded the 'grandfather' investigation because the aliens had assured them that nothing could be found out from that source, the poison capsules destroying all traces of this advanced medical science within their systems."

Hedley shot Lockhart a brief, questioning look, received a nod of corroboration and continued:

"But when we began to find out things, they panicked. A hospital building burned down, one of my men was killed; their actions had about the subtlety of a steamroller going over a pup. Then to top it all off they explained everything with a story a child could see through." He snorted. "A religious sect!"

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Hedley's eyes frightened Lockhart; they had a look that the doctor had seen too often in D.P. camps in people who had had the props of country, friends and ideals yanked from beneath them. The agent went on:

"Their story is too transparent, they're being too careless. Either they don't have to maintain secrecy much longer—the war blowing up will shift interest elsewhere—or . . ." Hedley's voice dropped so that Lockhart almost missed the final words, ". . . other governments are similarly riddled by this alien fifth column and a few individuals like ourselves can do nothing."

Traffic noises, punctuated by the authoritative whistling of a gendarme drifted up from the street, gradually diluting the silence in the room. From the bed Draper said, "These extra-terrestrials will be responsible for the war, then?"

"They must be," Hedley replied. "But *why?* There must be other planets, uninhabited, that they could use."

Brief and to the point as always, Draper said, "What can we do?"

Hedley seemed to gather himself together suddenly. He said, "We can do nothing here, we'd be blocked in every move. But what I want you, Draper, to do, is return to the department. Find out if there is any pressure being brought to bear to have the investigation called off there. If there isn't, and only if there isn't, report to me in Belfast. The rest of us are going to Ireland direct."

On the way to the airport Hedley apologized for having dragged Lockhart into this suddenly dangerous business, and added that Lockhart would be a lot safer out of Paris. Lockhart, who was already beginning to suffer waking nightmares about jelly-faced beings with guns that went *phtt*, waved the apologies aside; he felt more protected in com-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

pany. Besides, if he stuck with Hedley they might encounter some more old men.

And the secret of longevity.

### III

THEY TOOK an Aer Lingus "Viscount" to Dublin, then went on to Belfast by train. It was while outside the Great Northern station, waiting for the others to finish with the Customs, that Lockhart asked the professor a question which had been bothering him for some time.

"Suppose there *are* more of the old men here. What can we do? We know nothing about them; nothing, that is, to stop them from dying on us like the others."

The professor shrugged. "I don't know," he said, momentarily raising his voice above the sound of a passing bus. "But you're not quite accurate in saying we know *nothing* about them. Apart from the knowledge of their inexplicable behavior toward us, we have three small and probably useless pieces of information: two words in their language and one fact. The words are 'Hargon' and 'Vitlim,' and while their exact meaning is obscure we know that the first was a person who apparently came from the second, a place."

"And the fact?"

"Oh, that this 'Hargon' of 'Vitlim' is dead."

Lockhart held back a sarcastic retort with an effort. But then he began to wonder. The aliens probably knew Hargon was dead. But if they did not, and he was someone special . . .

The idea taking form in the back of Lockhart's mind



## THE SECRET VISITORS

dissolved with the arrival of the others and the trip to their hotel.

Next morning Hedley and Lockhart called at the local branch of Cook's. Lockhart accompanied the agent solely because their sudden departure from Paris had left him short and he needed to change some francs. The professor had wanted to come, too, but Hedley had stated firmly that three was a crowd and that he could transact his business later.

The clerk at the Continental Travel counter was tall, red-haired and inclined to be talkative, and mention of Miss Kelly brought an immediate and enthusiastic response.

"I know her, of course," he said smiling. "The Kellys are very good clients." He indicated a technicolored travel brochure about thirty pages thick. "Paris, Rome, the Tyrol, the French Alps; they seem to be working their way through that thing."

Hedley said, "Different spot every year, eh?"

"No," said the clerk in tones of one not expecting to be believed. "They did those places all within the last ten weeks. It's most unusual . . ." He broke off, laughed, then said, "And you know, she and Mr. Kelly come here a lot, but not always on business. They just stand watching clients, sometimes asking where they're going, then on the spur of the moment going there too. Their Paris trip happened that way,"

*Unusual*, Lockhart thought, *but not criminal*. For some strange reason he found himself wishing that the girl were not mixed up in this horrible business. He didn't know why.

There was barely repressed excitement in Hedley's voice as he said carefully, "Have you her address? And if her passport is here I would like a look at that."

"It . . . it is here," the clerk began in sudden confusion, "being fixed up for her next trip. She'll be in any time . . ."

## THE SECRET VISITORS

He stiffened suddenly. "But we are not allowed to divulge personal inform—"

"Let me talk to Mr. Griffin," Hedley cut in. The clerk dithered for a moment, then disappeared. To Lockhart he said, "Griffin is the manager of this branch. His name was in the phone book. I need that address but don't want to identify myself to our friend here; he talks too much." As the clerk returned, trailed by a small, gray-haired man, Hedley ended hastily, "Get your money changed, then wait for me outside."

Five minutes at the Bureau de Change counter finished his business, and zipping up his wallet Lockhart was about to leave. Suddenly he froze and began looking wildly around for Hedley.

Miss Kelly had just come in.

He had to do something, he knew, and quickly. But what? If that clerk should look up and see her, and mention the men who had been asking about her . . . Lockhart swallowed and took a step forward.

What would Hedley do in a case like this?

Talk to her, the answer came. Get her outside on some pretext and away from that clerk, then keep her there until help arrived—except that Hedley would not need help. Only amateurs like himself needed help with jobs like this. His hands were suddenly moist and the stretch of terrazzo flooring between them seemed endless.

She still looked to be an ordinary girl of twenty or thereabouts, Lockhart thought as he approached; though it was difficult to be sure of her age because of the almost child-like expression in her face. Obviously an emotionally immature type, Lockhart thought. But then he knew that already from seeing her behavior at that concert.

He had gone to the concert only seven days ago, though it seemed now to be far away in time as well as space. His

## THE SECRET VISITORS

only problems then had been a not very pressing one of choosing between two jobs that had been offered him, and the immediate one of obtaining a good seat. He did get one of the best—and cheapest—seats in the hall, one of the few benches perched above and behind the orchestra. Lockhart was practically looking over the shoulder of every musician, observing each gesture and expression on the conductor's face and clearly seeing, when his eyes were occasionally directed away from the sweating, dedicated face of the conductor, the reactions to the music of the patrons in the plush luxury of the orchestra.

It was at the conclusion of the first piece that he first noticed the girl later to be identified as Miss Kelly. He couldn't help noticing her. She had stood up and cheered and clapped so wildly that the applause of a highly demonstrative French audience had seemed almost tepid by comparison. After the second work—Hardy's arrangement of the "Londonderry Air," strangely enough—she had not cheered, but sat huddled and forlorn with big tears rolling down her cheeks. Lockhart had been unable to take his eyes off her for long after that.

The major work of the evening had been Beethoven's "Fifth." During it Lockhart had felt that he was watching the girl bare her very soul. As movement followed movement she wept, beat her fists against the arms of her seat, covered her face with her hands and writhed in a very ecstasy of emotion. Lockhart had been in turn fascinated, sympathetic, then almost angry with the knowledge that he could never experience such intensity of feeling. After the final, crashing chords, when the conductor was waving the orchestra to its feet, Miss Kelly had been a flaccid, emotionally spent bundle on her seat, too overcome even to clap.

And this was the girl suspected of being mixed up with the aliens.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

The thought came crawling into his mind that some of the old men had been music lovers. But he was six paces from her now and he still didn't know what he was going to say or do.

Feverishly, Lockhart wracked his brains for an opening that would hold her interest and yet not frighten her off; in vain. His bedside manner had never been good, he had not Hedley's easy charm and even at the age of thirty he still felt awkward before strangers. What was he going to say?

Suddenly he thought of a remark the professor had made on their arrival the previous night. It was a mad, an insane, risk if the girl were an alien. Hedley would undoubtedly blow up if he bungled it.

Lockhart stopped two feet from her. Looking into her slightly upturned face he said quietly, "Hargon is dead."

The reaction was startling. Her eyes reflected a fear that was close to panic and she burst into a low, impassioned tirade. He was being accused of something, Lockhart knew instinctively, but of what he had no idea, because the accusation was being delivered in the same alien gabble he had heard for the first time in Paris, the language which was not of Earth.

It was a case of mistaken identity, all right, Lockhart thought as a cold, crawling sensation tightened his scalp. But who had he been mistaken for? Judging by the reaction, it must be someone in authority.

"Speak English, you fool!" he said in an angry whisper. By sheer luck he had the jump on the girl. She was obviously afraid of him, and he meant to keep the initiative.

Hedley, he thought, would have approved of this. But deep inside him Lockhart felt the stirrings of shame and self-disgust. The bold approach was easy when the opponent was a frightened young girl.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"Why should we speak English?" she said quietly, but with a bitter, despairing edge in her voice. "You no longer try to hide your actions, judging by the Paris incident. Tell me, is the war so near that you can afford to be careless? And Hargon," she went on scornfully, "you killed even the great Hargon of Vetliman!"

Lockhart's head was spinning. Apparently the girl did not approve of the things that had happened in Paris. Was the alien camp split into two opposing factions for some reason? But why was she afraid of him without actually knowing him? Did she think he was the stern impersonal type of authority, the alien equivalent of a policeman, perhaps? There was one way of finding out.

Lockhart gestured towards the door. "Come outside," he said harshly.

She didn't speak. Her face had gone white and if Lockhart had not grabbed her arm she would have fallen. With a shock he realized that she was horribly and desperately afraid, afraid for her life. Nobody had ever looked that way at him before, and suddenly he could no longer stomach it. He would stop this senseless bluffing and tell the truth.

The girl was an alien, but her strong feelings about the war and the death of "Hargon" indicated a possible sympathy for the Human side. Softening his tone to what he hoped was one of reassurance, Lockhart began, "I won't hurt you. In fact, I'd like to help you if possible. I do not approve of the war, either, and I want to talk to you. Could we go somewhere less public?"

"You are . . . alone?"

The girl's expression was less frightened, but a wariness, and a look almost of hope had come into her eyes. Suddenly, shockingly, she laughed.

"Alone," she repeated scornfully. "Alone, and without a Cloak. But he still wants to make a killing and gain promotion by an unarmed capture." She laughed again. "So he

## THE SECRET VISITORS

pretends to be on my side, pretends that he is opposed to the war, and that this, out of all the planets in the Galaxy, is the one world which must not be harmed. And he will expect me to believe him.

"The people, yes," she added vehemently. "But not the world. That is too valuable."

"You don't understand," Lockhart began. "I am not—"

He broke off as her arm—which he was still gripping—tensed and she looked aside quickly. He caught the covert glance and half turned toward the door.

Her brother had arrived.

Lockhart could not believe that his appearance could mean danger. The get-up was too fantastic. Fawn sports coat, plum-colored trousers, a green and gold cravat with a jeweled stick-pin and, carried negligently in the left hand, a silver-topped cane. As he stood in the entrance, dabbing daintily with a lace handkerchief at some imaginary perspiration on his pallid brow, a second complication occurred.

Professor Brian also arrived.

Kelly saw his sister in the same instant that the Professor saw Lockhart, but Kelly moved first. He came toward them at a dead run, and there was nothing at all effeminate about the look on his face.

Instinctively, Lockhart tightened his grip on the girl's arm. He felt her try to pull free, then heard her direct a few low, urgent syllables toward her rapidly approaching brother. He found his tongue again.

"Wait!" Lockhart said hastily. "I've got to talk to you. I'm a . . . a *native*—"

"Doctor!" Brian called suddenly, "*Look out!*"

When Kelly had shown no sign of going for a weapon alien or otherwise, Lockhart had returned his attention to the girl. Her brother was small and slight, and no match for

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Lockhart physically. But he brought it back in time to see the innocent, silver-topped cane come apart to reveal a two-foot sliver of steel attached to the ornamental handle. The cane which had acted as a scabbard for the swordstick cracked viciously against Lockhart's wrist. Simultaneously, the blade flicked upwards and drove toward his throat.

Two things saved his life; his frantic attempt to twist aside and fend off the blade with his arm, and the two quickly spoken syllables from the girl which caused her brother to hesitate in mid-lunge. Lockhart's upflung arm deflected the blade from his throat, but there was a tearing, burning sensation in his right shoulder before he saw it withdrawn for a second—and lethal—attempt.

Evasive action was impossible to him; he could not take his eyes off that thin, wicked blade with the red streaks on its tip. Shock kept the pain from registering fully, and his only thought was a bemused observation that aliens were supposed to have ray-guns and not swordsticks. He was still gazing hypnotically at the point of the weapon when it dawned on him that it was not coming any nearer. Two big, bony hands were restraining the arm which held it, and Lockhart recognized the professor's hands even before the other's strained and sweating face swam into his field of vision.

The struggle was brief, bitter and noisy. Kelly was doing a lot of swearing. Lockhart knew because some of it was in a peculiar type of English. Still with a strangely detached feeling about the whole thing, Lockhart saw the swordstick fall to the floor, and the girl close in on the struggling pair. He saw her fists thud into the professor's back in a double kidney punch, then Brian was hunched forward and gasping painfully, and Kelly and his sister were gone.

Hedley appeared a few seconds later and hustled them outside, loudly proclaiming, for the benefit of the crowd, that they were going in search of a policeman. Back at the

## THE SECRET VISITORS

hotel, Lockhart dressed the punctured shoulder. It was not a serious wound, and he hurried back to Hedley's room as quickly as possible to make his report.

". . . But didn't you try to follow them?" the agent was saying as Lockhart entered. His voice was scathing.

"She punched me in the kidneys," the professor replied hotly. He added, "That's dangerous in a man of my age."

"Oh, skip it," Hedley said, noticing Lockhart. Before listening to his account of the conversation with the girl he asked curtly about the wound, and when Lockhart had finished the agent said shortly, "You did very well, Doctor."

He was quiet then, for a long time.

"Are you sure of your facts?" he finally said, addressing the professor. "You positively identified the language spoken by the man?"

"He only spoke that particular form of English when he was—er—excited," Professor Brian answered. "The rest was unintelligible, but I heard enough to be sure. The swordstick, his dress, and his seeming effeminacy make it conclusive."

Turning to Lockhart, Hedley said drily, "You'll be glad to know that the professor has tracked down our Mr. Kelly." His mouth quirked downwards as if fighting the urge to burst into laughter, or maybe profanity. "He is, or was, a native of England during the middle 1700's. What is more, he resided there *recently*, because the professor assures me that his language shows no dilution by the colloquialisms of later periods, as would be the case if he had lived through those years."

Abruptly Hedley pushed himself from his chair and began pacing the room. He halted suddenly, and clenched his big fist over a brass knob on his bedstead. "What can we do? Where can we start?" he said dully. "Space travel was bad, but now we have time-travel to deal with as well.

"Did those old men come from the stars, or from our own future, or both? And what part do they play in this? We



## THE SECRET VISITORS

now have proof that there are extra-terrestrial beings at present on Earth, but now we have to discover when as well as where they've come from."

The brass knob came away suddenly in his hand. Hedley gazed at it curiously for a moment. Absent-mindedly he added, "And, of course, why they're here."

### IV

THERE SEEMED to be three distinct groups of aliens now. First came the old men, harmless and fanatically uncommunicative, whose behavior had first aroused the department's suspicions. There was the group that had been responsible for the St. Armande fire, a group which almost certainly contained a large number of Earthmen. A third group, possibly of only a few individuals, were opposed to the war-breeding activities of the second group, and they disapproved of their treatment of the old men, who were group one. And, just to tangle the skein further, there was a time-traveling Earthman from two hundred years in the past.

The problem was giving Lockhart a splitting headache to add to the trouble his shoulder was giving him. The wound was superficial, a small, neat puncture that had gone through the deltoid muscle without touching the bone, made by an instrument of razor sharpness and aseptic cleanliness. Penicillin dressings and a firm bandage would have it as good as new in a week, but the constant jogging and swaying motion of their speeding car was not helping toward a pain-free recovery. The eye which Lockhart turned on the scenic grandeur all around him was, as a result of this, decidedly jaundiced.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Hugging the restless edge of the sea, the Antrim Coast Road wound beneath soaring limestone cliffs and around gray, foam-flecked headlands, and tiny bays where the sea was like blue grass. Their objective was Portballintrae.

Hedley had intended going to Portballintrae since the moment he found out Miss Kelly lived there. But when Draper's report arrived the visit became a five-star crash priority.

Draper had reported the department free of alien influences; its organizational tree was such an impenetrable tangle that it was impossible for any small group to gain effective control of it. He had added that the department approved of Hedley's recent actions, and some new information, in the form of a photograph, a dossier, and a copy of an FBI field office report, had been enclosed for his attention.

The copy report, stamped MOST SECRET, concerned three old men who had killed themselves while with a party touring Yellowstone National Park. The circumstances, not to mention the poison used, had been of a very disquieting nature, though the old men themselves had seemed harmless. By backtracking their movements prior to the triple suicide the FBI had traced them to a hotel in a small Irish coastal town, where the trail had come to a dead end. An agent who had been vacationing in Ireland was at present in residence at this hotel. The FBI man was called Keeler. He was staying in a place called The Bay Hotel, Portballintrae.

"Navigator to pilot," Fox sing-songed to Hedley behind the wheel. "We're here."

The Bay Hotel was a sprawling, three-story building set on the main road overlooking the small harbor of Portballintrae, and it boasted a large private lawn and an enclosed car-park. It looked prosperous, in a quiet sort of

## THE SECRET VISITORS

way, and completely ordinary. But, Lockhart reminded himself, Miss Kelly lived somewhere nearby, and this hotel had apparently given birth to three old men whose deaths had the United States Federal authorities in a condition of extreme anxiety. Appearances were deceptive.

Lockhart, his mind only on the thought of supper—or whatever meal the hotel could provide at eight-thirty in the evening—was leaving his room when the purpose of their coming here was abruptly brought back to him.

He saw the time-traveler.

It was only a glimpse through an opening door some ten yards along the corridor, but identification was positive. And the speed with which the door closed again told Lockhart that the other had seen him. Lockhart flung open the door of the room belonging to Hedley and the professor, yelled, "Come on!" and broke into a run down the corridor.

He burst through the door as the time-traveler was trying to lock it, sending the slight figure stumbling back into the room. Lockhart followed him up, swinging a vicious right. It connected high on the other's cheek, spinning him half around and throwing him against a wardrobe. He moaned faintly and slid to his knees, his hand groping toward the breast pocket of his jacket. Lockhart grabbed at the wrist, put his knee behind the elbow joint and pulled the arm back until a shiny metallic object thudded onto the carpet.

It resembled a revolver, but more streamlined, and the barrel was solid except for a tiny pin-hole at the business end. Probably it was a twin to the weapon which had shot Gates in Paris. Lockhart hit him again.

"Doctor," Hedley said mildly from the doorway, "we want him to be able to talk. Don't make work for yourself."

Lockhart straightened up. He had been mad for the last few minutes, homicidally insane. He wasn't the type who charged blindly into bedrooms and beat their occupants into insensibility, especially when he could very easily have

## THE SECRET VISITORS

been killed doing it. He looked at the weapon on the floor and shuddered. But he had wanted to get his hands on this murderous little so-and-so since that morning in Cook's. The shameful memory of how he had let himself be wounded and then just stood watching while the professor kept him from being killed had not helped his anger. Lockhart had been a tightly-wound spring, and at sight of the time-traveling Kelly he had gone *snap!*

But he was not proud of himself for it.

"I hope you haven't broken his jaw," Hedley said worriedly.

Lockhart ran exploring fingers along the lower jaw, glanced inside the mouth at the even rows of teeth and said shortly, "He's all right. He'll come round in a few minutes." They lifted the unconscious figure onto the bed.

Everybody was in the room now, gazing curiously at the man on the bed. Hedley gave curt, low-voiced orders, and Simpson left to keep watch in the corridor while Fox went to seek out the FBI man, Keeler. The agent gave Lockhart a peculiar look and said, "Perhaps you'd better go to the other side of the bed, Doctor. There's a possibility that he may side with us, but if he wakes up and sees you . . ." He left the sentence hanging. Both he and the professor moved nearer to the bed.

It was a most unusual interrogation, conducted with such extreme and flowery courtesy that the initial introductions and exchanges of compliments took all of fifteen minutes. Kelly was really the Honorable Cedric—plus six or seven other names—Bowen-Walmsley, and he was obviously pleased that the professor was able to converse with him in his own brand of English. Some of the conversation made Lockhart smile, especially when Cedric referred to Hedley as a Bow Street Runner. But when he began to describe the work of

## THE SECRET VISITORS

something called the "Agency" on Earth, there was nothing funny about it at all.

Apparently the Earth-human employees of this Agency were ignorant of its true plans. There were several hundred of them occupying positions of importance in most of the world's governments, but they worked only for the promise of continual rejuvenation and the power and riches which longevity would bring. Usually it was very dirty work indeed. The coming war was a sample.

"But *why*?" Lockhart burst out suddenly. "Why are they doing it to us?"

Cedric, who had raised himself to a sitting position on the bed by this time, twisted around in surprise. He had not been aware of a fourth party in the room. When he saw Lockhart his teeth came together with a click. A slender white hand went up to the raw patch on his cheek and his features stiffened with the tension of anger. He got slowly to his feet, turned to face Lockhart, then made a sweeping and graceful bow from the waist. He smiled then, but only with his mouth.

Suddenly the professor, his face white and actually beaded with sweat, was between them.

"You would have to shoot off your big mouth!" he whispered fiercely. "Dammit, why couldn't you . . ." He broke off, grimaced and said softly, but with great emphasis, "Be careful what you say now. *Very* careful. Unless you've been holding out on us and are an expert swordsman."

It was the professor, talking with speed and great eloquence, who got him out of it.

The way Brian put it, it had all been a most deplorable misunderstanding. In ignorance, they had acted toward each other as enemies, but now they were allies. They should also be friends. Blood had, after all, been spilled on both

## THE SECRET VISITORS

sides, and the professor was sure that no further satisfaction would be required from either gentleman.

Lockhart, thinking of his throbbing shoulder and measuring it against the quarter-inch nick which his signet ring had made in Cedric's cheek, decided that he had the bigger grievance, but he didn't bring up the point. Instead he gave an awkward imitation of Cedric's grandiloquent bow and flourish and forced his mouth into what he hoped was a smile.

Cedric returned the bow, his smile also a trifle forced. Technically, they were friends, but the atmosphere was still rather strained in the room. Then Lockhart saw Hedley motioning him to the door.

"Doctor," Hedley said when they were outside. "I'm inclined to believe our 'Honorable' friend's story. So far it fits the facts as we know them. However, I make a point of not trusting anyone's feelings in cases like this, not even my own. That is why I want you to question the Kelly girl right away. We'll be able to check his story that way."

"But . . ." Lockhart began. Things were happening too fast for him. And the last time he had met the girl . . .

"Fox will go with you, just in case there's another body-guard," the agent went on. "But you had better handle the questioning. Don't worry, you'll make out all right." He turned and asked Simpson, who was a few yards further down the corridor, "Has Fox come back yet?"

Simpson grinned broadly, as if at some secret joke. "He's just gone into his room."

Fox was standing in the middle of the room. There was a wide, dark stain on the breast of his well-fitting fawn suit and he was dabbing at his right ear with a towel. He looked annoyed.

Hedley indicated the stain. "How—" he began.

"Routine, just routine," Fox mimicked savagely. "I got

## THE SECRET VISITORS

shot with a ray-gun. Dammit, why didn't they tell us the whole family was here?"

"What family?" Hedley said impatiently.

"Keeler's. His wife and kid are with him," Fox answered, glowering. "That kid! If you can imagine a little brat who stands in front of a radio, yelling the answers before the panel can deal with them—he's an ex-quiz-kid, apparently—while watering everybody in sight with that two-hundred-shot space-blaster of his . . ."

"They did say he was on vacation. But that's unimportant. Does he know anything that we don't?"

Fox shook his head. He reported that the FBI man had good descriptions of the three Yellowstone suicides. Cautious questioning of one of the maids had elicited the fact that the old men had arrived at the Bay Hotel suddenly about ten months ago, but she had insisted that they could not be as old as Keeler described them. Keeler had then shown her the photographs his chief had sent, head and shoulder shots of the men taken after their death, and touched up a bit. She was still sure that they were the same men, she had told him, but the photographs made them look very much older.

The reception clerk and manager of the hotel could not tell him where the three had come from previous to their arrival there. Since asking those questions, certain small but irritating accidents had befallen Keeler which, had he been an ordinary guest, would have caused him to leave the hotel.

". . . And just one other thing," Fox concluded. "Keeler says that there is a peculiar character who seems to work here, who answers the description of our Mr. Kelly, and he sometimes meets a girl in the village who could be the Miss Kelly that we're looking for. That's all."

Lockhart only half heard Fox's closing sentences. He was

## THE SECRET VISITORS

wondering about the sudden aging of those three men. What did it mean? Longevity; accelerated aging. He gave up.

Hedley's mind must have been working along the same lines. He said suddenly, "Doctor. Go see Miss Kelly; you know the address. Tell Fox what's been happening on the way." To Fox he said, "I'll see Keeler later. Go with the doc. Move!"

He turned quickly and re-entered Cedric's bedroom.

On the way out they took a wrong turn and found themselves in a big, heavily-carpeted lounge. There was a plentiful scattering of easy chairs, most of which were occupied. As his eyes traveled round the room Lockhart was reminded outrageously of a cartoon he had seen where a member of a select London club had passed away behind his copy of *The Times*, without anyone noticing the fact for weeks.

The occupants were all old men. Some were reading papers, but mainly they just sat staring, heavy-eyed with the fatigue of extreme old age, at the sunset which poured a flood of amber light through the big French windows. Suddenly Lockhart remembered that other sunset in Paris, and the old, old man who had died watching it. Involuntarily he shivered as he turned about.

They noticed a little plaque marked "Adult's Lounge" on the door as they left. Fox, in an awed whisper, said, "Just how adult can you get?"

The girl was living in a place called Daly's Guest House, a small hotel set on the sea-front. Its landlady told Lockhart that she thought Miss Kelly was in and would be mind waiting in the lounge. Lockhart did not mind at all; he hadn't any idea of how to conduct the coming interview and the prospect was making him feel shaky about the knees. A chance to sit down was just what he needed.

This lounge also looked out across the bay. The sunset was



## THE SECRET VISITORS

dying a glorious death, and far out to sea the smoke of a coal barge scrawled a black crayon line across the horizon, accentuating rather than spoiling its beauty. Just across the road a shadowy figure was leaning against the seawall, smoking. Fox was on station. But Lockhart knew somehow that he would not be needing help this time.

It was growing dark in the room. Lockhart had just switched on a table-lamp when the girl arrived.

Looking at her Lockhart now wondered if she really was a girl in her late twenties or, distasteful as the thought was, did she possess a rejuvenated body which had lived through several normal lifetimes. He could not decide. She seemed surprised to see him, but not afraid, and he saw her eyes go to the small tear in the shoulder of his jacket. She spoke first.

"I'm glad Cedric did not kill you this morning," she began, and stopped. There was a brief pause, then she went on hurriedly, "The fact that there are Earth-humans with knowledge of the Agency's crimes on this planet means that evidence of inhuman practice can be brought against them, and makes possible a plan I have which will destroy them. It should also stop the coming war, providing we can act quickly."

"Just a minute," Lockhart said sharply. "Before we talk about plans, or anything else likely to add to the general confusion, there are some questions I want answered. And," he added suspiciously, "it seems to me that if you had a plan to stop this war, you would have told us before now."

"You wouldn't have believed me. Admit it. You had to find out a little about the conspiracy first."

That was probably true, Lockhart thought to himself. But he was not going to be sidetracked. He said, "Who are you, and why are you here?"

"I am an agent of the Galactic Federation," she replied,

## THE SECRET VISITORS

her back stiffening perceptibly, "with instructions from Harlnida to obtain evidence that the Agency is guilty of illegal contact, exploitation and inhuman practices."

Lockhart was thinking of the girl at the concert in Paris who had shown the emotional reactions of a hypersensitive adolescent. She probably swooned in front of crooners, too. His thoughts must have shown on his face, because an angry edge came into her voice.

". . . Widespread inhuman practices," she went on, "because Galactic citizens as well as Earth-humans are being affected."

"You'll have to explain," Lockhart said firmly.

She did explain.

Her story seemed incredible to the Doctor, concerning, as it did, a vast Galactic civilization which flourished unknown to Earthmen. This civilization included over two hundred worlds in the Galaxy. But, though highly advanced technologically, this mighty civilization suffered from an incurable disease—boredom.

Oddly enough, according to Miss Kelly, Earth was the only planet that changed its seasons, that had an infinitely lush variety in its flora and fauna, that was capable of producing such rich music, such gorgeous scenery. No other inhabited planet had an axial tilt; this meant that the other worlds had no change of seasons, that their plants and animals had never had to adapt to changing circumstances, thereby producing variety. Consequently, their inhabitants found the other worlds unbearably dreary and monotonous, while Earth would have been a veritable tourists' paradise.

But not all the Galactic citizens knew about Earth. The interstellar tourist agency that had found it discovered that it was more profitable to keep Earth a secret. This way it had developed a lucrative black market which transported wealthy Galactic citizens to Earth. These wealthy citizens were the "dying grandfathers." The unscrupulous agency, to

## THE SECRET VISITORS

insure secrecy, had made this tour of Earth into a one-way trip. The "grandfathers" had been carefully indoctrinated to commit suicide as death approached rather than reveal their identity.

The Federation ruling the inhabited worlds had perfected a longevity treatment for Galactic citizens, which required an injection every few years or so. Though they were not told at the time of making the trip, this elixir was denied the "grandfathers."

In addition, to eliminate the bulk of Earth's population which, apart from becoming dangerously civilized of late, was simply a nuisance standing in the way of the full exploitation of the planet, the Interstellar Tourist Agency was deliberately fomenting a final, catastrophic war. It was being aided by Earthmen in important governmental positions who were promised longevity as a reward. At the same time the Agency was undermining the power of the Galactic Federation by luring its finest minds to Earth and oblivion, with the intention of taking control of the Galaxy.

"Luring them, how?" Lockhart broke in.

With music and pictures, the girl explained. Music that ripped and bludgeoned the emotions until the hearer often approached death through sheer ecstasy, and pictures which were nothing less than a glimpse of Heaven. The location of Earth was a closely-guarded secret, the trip strictly one-way, but nobody in his right mind refused a one-way trip to Heaven.

And it was the men of sensitivity and imagination, the great men in the Galactic Administration, who were most susceptible to the attractions of Earth. So what had once been a simple if unscrupulous business concern had become the power-hungry, rapacious Agency, the greatest threat to peace ever known.

Galactic peace, the girl added, not just the planetary peace of Earth.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Lockhart said, "There's one more question," and wet his lips nervously. It wasn't that he disbelieved her, his trouble was that his mind balked at accepting such a load of data all at once. "Time-travel," he jerked out. "What about Cedric?"

The girl looked faintly impatient. "Your Earth mathematicians know of the time-contraction effects encountered in a body traveling at light-speed," she replied. "Cedric was thrown from his horse when it was frightened by the landing of a *Grosni* ship. The *Grosni* brought him aboard while he was unconscious, but unaware of the extent of his injuries and feeling responsible for them, they took him to the nearest Human-inhabited planet to receive treatment. Cedric regained complete consciousness only after a few weeks had passed, and had to be given extensive hypno-therapy to make his surroundings livable for him. It was this prior conditioning which allowed him to shake off the later Agency processing given when they put him in joint charge of the base here in Portballintrae.

"The *Grosni*, whose physiology does not allow them to travel in hyperspace, had handed him over to the Agency for transportation back to Earth. But the distance from Earth to the planet where Cedric was landed was great, and though only a few months subjective time had elapsed for him, many years had gone by on Earth. When they returned him he was confused and frightened by the time-jump. They offered him what would have been a harmless job, if the *Grosni* conditioning had not counteracted their own, which was meant, of course, to make his work for the Agency appear harmless even to himself."

So the time-travel question worrying everybody had turned out to be simply a by-product of inefficient space-travel. That was a relief, anyway. But something else was bothering Lockhart now. The girl had spoken of the Agency trying to keep the Earth people at war among themselves. He said:

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"Then the Agency is responsible for all our wars?"

"Certainly not," the girl replied scornfully. "You are not as civilized as all that. World War Two, yes; you know of national leaders, no doubt, who had delusions of being God, of living forever? But the first World War was all your own, though I think," her tone softened a little, "that it would have been the last if you had been left alone."

All at once Lockhart felt very small and ashamed of himself. To this girl, citizen of a civilization that stretched back for countless thousands of years, he must appear little more than a savage. She looked young, but with the advanced medical science which must be part of her culture, she could very well be hundreds of years old.

And Lockhart had almost laughed when she told him that she was a Galactic Agent.

"This plan I spoke of . . ." began Miss Kelly.

### V

HEDLEY WAS sitting on a linen chest with Keeler's portable typewriter balanced on his knees, transposing the notes he had taken earlier. It was shortly after midday, and the agent had spent the greater part of the morning listening to Miss Kelly's plan for saving the world. Now he was waiting for Fox, who had taken the car to meet the Portrush train, to return with Draper. When everyone was present, Hedley would assign duties.

Lockhart, who had heard the plan from Miss Kelly the previous night, did not feel very enthusiastic about it. A group of repertory actors, with their ability to memorize lines quickly, would be better qualified to carry it out than Hedley's group, he thought. Suddenly the agent looked across at him, and spoke.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"Out of deference to the FBI," he said drily, "I think I'll include the *Bill of Rights* and the *Gettysburg Address*." His fingers tapped busily for a few seconds, then stopped as a double knock sounded on the door.

Hedley put the machine aside as Fox and Draper came in. Quickly he introduced Draper to the FBI man. Keeler was a big, lanky individual, deeply tanned, with wide-set eyes and a facial bone formation that suggested Indian blood. The FBI man had time only for a brief handshake before Hedley was calling for quiet and attention. The briefing was about to begin.

"Fox has brought Draper up-to-date on the way here," Hedley began briskly, "so we'll get on with it.

"You must understand that the best way to stop the coming war quickly is by acting directly against the Agency. It is the *only* way, in fact. We can do this, Miss Kelly assures me, by furnishing proof of the Agency's dirty work to the Galactic Court. She also suggests that we show evidence to prove that the Earth is a civilized planet which is worth saving. That is why I want to include excerpts from the works of philosophers, musicians, statesmen and so on.

"But this evidence," he went on, "must be read aloud before a device which both records the words and certifies that the man speaking them is telling the truth. You see, documentary evidence can be forged, so the Court doesn't accept it. The proof we place before it must, Miss Kelly states, be 'keyed' to a living person."

As Hedley paused, Lockhart saw the attentive expressions around the room change slowly to dazed incredulity. They had been expecting something drastic, but *this* . . .

"We haven't much time," the agent continued quickly, "so I suggest we start at once. The library in Portrush will supply the data we need. Draper and myself will work on past and present crimes of the Agency, Simpson and Fox will begin memorizing."

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"Wait a minute," Fox said, his voice squeaking in disbelief. "Does this mean that all we have to do is read history and stuff into this gadget?"

"This 'gadget,'" Hedley replied quietly, "is built into the Agency ship which will arrive two days from now. The plan calls for our boarding it to say our piece, so the job won't be all that easy."

"Oh," said Fox. Around the room there was a sudden perking up of interest.

"To further complicate matters, the ship will be totally invisible to normal vision. So will the 'tourists' landing from it. But this is to our advantage rather than otherwise, as I'll explain later. Right now we have some hard studying to do. You'll work a lot harder than you ever did in school, believe me.

"The professor and Keeler here will not have to memorize anything, as they will not be in the boarding party. But they can help in laying out assignments." Hedley paused, smiling faintly. The 'Why not's?' of the two men came as a perfect duet.

"Because," he went on, "Keeler has a family and the professor is too old. That," he said hastily as the etymologist showed signs of imminent eruption, "is Miss Kelly's decision, not mine. Myself, I'd say it was very thoughtful of her."

The professor subsided into his chair, only slightly mollified. "She will be supervising our—er—studies, of course?" His face wore a 'just you wait' expression. Too old, indeed!

"Well, no," Hedley replied uncomfortably. "She will be out sightseeing.

"With the Doctor," he added quickly.

This was the part Lockhart had been dreading all morning. Maybe it was a guilty conscience bothering him—the others would be sweating it out night and day until the ship arrived, while he had nothing to do but show off the

## THE SECRET VISITORS

countryside to a girl—but he felt the need to defend himself, and her. He said:

"You've all been told of the effect this planet has on Galactic citizens. To them Earth is Heaven. Giving her a last look around is the least we can do. Knowing the Agency, the risks she will run in taking our evidence to the Galactic Court will be great."

"She says," said Fox, *sotto voce*.

Lockhart felt suddenly, unreasonably angry. His face and neck began to burn and hot words rushed to his lips. But Hedley, speaking quickly, poured on the oil.

"I admit the possibility that Miss Kelly is making fools out of us," the agent said gravely, "but I am, myself, of the opinion that she is what she says she is, namely, a Federation agent whose duty it is to correct the situation here. I'm afraid we must operate on this assumption, do exactly as she says, and hope.

"She and Cedric will take the evidence to the Galactic Court on Harla," he went on, "a dangerous job as Lockhart has pointed out. Our job, she has told us, is simply to furnish this evidence and leave everything else to her.

"Doctor," he said, with an abrupt change of subject, "you're supposed to pick her up in fifteen minutes . . ." Delicately, he left the sentence hanging.

Lockhart nodded and rose. Fox tossed him the keys of the car and he turned to leave.

"I did want to see that spaceship," said Keeler. He sounded like the victim of a great injustice.

"That *invisible* spaceship?" Draper asked drily.

The rest of the conversation was cut off as Lockhart closed the door behind him.

What was wrong with him these days, Lockhart asked himself as he maneuvered the car out of the park. He was jumpy, he lost his temper over nothing at all, and only yesterday he had wanted to murder Cedric, literally beat



## THE SECRET VISITORS

him to death. Lockhart had always considered himself to be a sane, well-integrated person with proper control of his emotions. Yet here he was, just itching to pick a fight with someone.

Half an hour later Lockhart's black mood had dissolved in spite of himself. The Law of Sympathetic Magic, he thought wryly; the day was warm and cloudless, the kind that picnickers pray for, and there was a fresh, clean breeze from the sea. And the face of the girl riding in the seat beside him was a reflection of the weather. Bright, warm and expectant. Seeing her like that made it difficult for him to remain suspicious. Conversely, it was hard to feel reassurance either. If this wide-eyed girl was to be their champion against the Agency . . .

Unless, the thought came writhing into Lockhart's mind, she had had the time to acquire sufficient experience to take care of herself and the interests of Earth both. There was, after all, the longevity treatment.

"I wonder," began Lockhart, "if you'd mind telling me something."

What he wanted to know was how she meant to reach Harla, with evidence that would certainly put the Agency out of business, and by using only Agency transport to get there.

"Bribery," she said simply, then added, "I'd better explain what, I hope, will be my procedure."

"To understand, you must realize that the Agency is not completely bad," she went on. "Only a few of the highest officers know what is going on here. The other employees would be horrified if they knew of it, and these will, for a price, help me. The most dangerous part of the journey will be its beginning. The shuttle which is to land late tomorrow night will contain Agency men, but they will have undergone a conditioning process that keeps them from deserting or becoming too curious about their duties. This conditioning

## THE SECRET VISITORS

dulls the mental efficiency, so that I should be able to convince them that—"

"Wait," Lockhart broke in. "You said bribery. What can you bribe them with?"

"This," she said, and held out a square, brightly colored envelope so that he could see it without taking his attention from the road. It was a set of stereoscopic color photographs of the Swiss Alps. "There is nothing to match that scenery anywhere in the Galaxy," she went on, a queer tightness in her voice. "One of these can be sold for a large fortune on any planet of the Federation. But their exchange value depends on how much profit the bursar of the ship carrying me will want, and other ship's officers will have to be bribed also. Probably it will require seven or eight of these to take me where I have to go."

There was a bitter edge to her voice. Apparently a civilization spread over hundreds of star systems had its equivalent of an Earthly black market.

"I have several others at my hotel," the girl continued, "but I need more. We can get them in Londonderry this evening."

It was hard to believe that a trip halfway across the Galaxy was to be paid for in picture postcards, or their modern successors, rather. Lockhart had been told that Earth was unique, but only now was he beginning to realize just how extraordinary a place it must be.

Miss Kelly was quiet for most of the journey, but he did find out that Hargon, the old man in Paris, had been the chief administrator on Vitlimen before their superior, Harlnida, had asked him to find out why so many of his best men were dropping out of sight. Hargon had discovered the reason—Earth. The Agency had seen to it that anyone making his way to Earth never left it, and the once young and vital chief administrator of an entire planet had died,

## THE SECRET VISITORS

desperately fighting both the accelerated aging of his body and the conditioning that demanded he kill himself at the slightest danger of his identity or origin being discovered.

Lockhart thought of the capsule that had been in the old man's mouth, almost dissolved but not swallowed. Hargon had known he was being watched then, and had tried to help.

In Derry Lockhart found a photography shop and pulled up outside. The shop kept a stock of the prints that Miss Kelly wanted, and she began to sort through them. It was not long before Lockhart began to feel uncomfortable.

"You've got over two hundred sets and fourteen viewers there," Lockhart whispered fiercely. "Enough, at your own valuation, to move half the population of Derry to the other side of the Galaxy. I haven't enough money to pay for them."

The girl gave him a startled, uneasy look, then quickly composed her features again. "I have money," she said, and drew out a half-inch-thick bundle of clean, crisp notes. "Will you pay for them and ask that everything be packed very securely, please."

It was in a restaurant an hour later that Lockhart again remembered the wad of notes. He said, "Where did you get all that money?"

"Cedric gave it to me," Miss Kelly replied easily. She was holding a postcard with a picture of Mount Errigal on it. "The Agency makes it," she added.

Lockhart choked on his coffee. When he got his breath back he began angrily to explain about counterfeiters, the law regarding them, and the unfairness of passing such money to the innocent shopkeeper. He took a long time to run down.

"Those were very good copies," the girl said quietly when he had finished. "The shopkeeper will lose nothing. And what

## THE SECRET VISITORS

difference will real or counterfeit money make to him if an H-bomb drops within five miles of his shop?"

Deflated, Lockhart said nothing. If anyone was above the law it was she.

"I would like to go there," Miss Kelly said suddenly. She dropped the postcard she had been holding beside Lockhart's plate and tapped it with a slim finger.

"Errigal?" said Lockhart. "But it's too far. We might not get back in time to meet the ship."

"I want to go there," she repeated firmly.

Lockhart looked at her. As a doctor he had come to know people, the methods they used to fool others and the even more complicated ways they tried to fool themselves. Take the Kelly girl here, for instance.

She might not admit it to herself, Lockhart knew; probably the very idea of it was unthinkable to her, but he was convinced that Miss Kelly wanted desperately *not* to catch that ship.

## VI

THEY CLUNG to the Land Survey marker that was conveniently placed near the summit of Mt. Errigal, trying to keep the gale which tore at their clothing from blowing them off the mountain. Sharp and clear where it was not obscured by low-flying clouds, the wild, cruel beauty of north Donegal lay around them. Like a loaf left too long in an oven and burnt, Mt. Muchish raised its brown, rounded summit five miles to the northeast. The clear, cold air made it seem close enough to reach out and touch. Everything was

## THE SECRET VISITORS

gray and purple and brown; tumbled, jagged rock, heather, and the dark, wet brown of freshly-dug peat. Directly below them the road was a twisted yellow thread, and the tiny black knot in it was their car. The view was achingly, indescribably beautiful.

And it was *cold*.

Judging by her pinched face and blue lips, the girl was suffering from the cold, too. Her eyes and cheeks were wet, which could, Lockhart thought, be due to the strong wind. But several times already today she had burst into tears, and at scenery that fell far short of the breathtaking panorama now spread before them.

Lockhart glanced at his watch, then scrambled stiffly to his feet. They had been up here for over an hour.

Urgently he shouted, "We'll have to leave, or you'll miss that ship." He half-dragged the girl to her feet and began propelling her down the path.

The path was steep and narrow, following the edge of a razor-backed ridge, and it was the only means of reaching the summit without the use of climbing tackle. It was safe enough, of course, provided one did not allow one's eyes to wander from it to the depths on either side. The sweat broke out on Lockhart when Miss Kelly, who was a short distance ahead of him, stopped suddenly. He bumped into her, nearly overbalancing both of them.

"Wait!" she said, and pointed.

It was a cloud, one of the low, cottony rainclouds that were blowing in from the sea. This one was headed straight for them. Lockhart could look down on it as it approached, until the up-draft caught it and sent it boiling up the slope toward them. Like a horde of maddened ghosts it rushed silently over and past them to stream out over the valley on the other side.

The girl laughed exultantly and resumed the descent.

Later, when the car was traveling as fast as road con-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

ditions would permit, and sometimes a little faster, Lockhart asked worriedly, "When exactly will that ship land, Miss Kelly? We've wasted a lot of time here."

"Wasted?"

Lockhart kept his eyes on the road, but he knew immediately that he had made her angry. She took a deep breath.

"As accurately as the transposed time-measuring systems will allow, I expect the ship to arrive between eleven-thirty tonight and two-fifteen tomorrow morning. And, Dr. Lockhart," she went on coldly, "my name, or the abbreviation of it allowed to a person who has spent several hours alone with me, is 'Kelly.' That is the pronunciation; the spelling varies with the language used. I have mentioned this before.

"The word-sound, 'Miss,'" she added, a hint of apology creeping into her voice, "has very unpleasant connotations in the language of my home planet. You had no knowledge of this, I know, but the constant repetition of the word is irritating when linked with my name, especially when it is unnecessary."

Lockhart sneaked a quick, sideways glance at her face. She was angry all right, but was it really because of him? He had the impression that she was fighting a war with herself, and he was merely an innocent bystander. Again he wondered, was she deliberately trying to miss that ship, or at least, *hoping* she would miss it? She must have gone through a lot to reach Earth and Cedric, the ready-made fifth column inside the Agency. Lockhart remembered suddenly what the professor had called her. Joan of Arc, he thought, was beginning to show signs of battle fatigue.

Not that Lockhart blamed her. The forthcoming trip, to him, seemed to be dependent on luck rather than planning. Or maybe there was planning, but semi-barbaric Earthmen like Hedley and himself were incapable of understanding it.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"I'm very sorry, Kelly," Lockhart said carefully. A few seconds elapsed, and he added, "My abbreviation is 'John.'"

"John is a pleasant name," she said, all trace of anger gone from her voice. "Its sound is innocuous both in Galactic and the other planetary languages with which I am familiar. But this," she went on, her voice deadly serious, "is not the case with many of the often-used word-sounds in your language.

"If you were a passenger on an Agency tourist ship you would have to be very careful about such things. Even an unthinking gesture or change of facial expression could cause serious trouble, and possibly death. That is the reason why the passengers adopt an attitude of. . . ." In considerable detail she explained the code of behavior forced on interstellar travelers for their protection, a code that was supposed to make it impossible for one human unknowingly to insult another from a different cultural background. It was complicated.

"A pleasure cruise on a ship like that wouldn't be very nice," Lockhart said. He laughed to ease the earlier tension. "I'm glad it's you and not me."

The girl turned abruptly and began staring through the far-side window at something.

It was nearly eight o'clock when they reached Derry. Lockhart left the car for exactly three minutes, and when he returned he dumped a warm and aromatic parcel in Kelly's lap and got behind the wheel again.

"Fish and chips," he said. "It's all we've time for."

They were on the outskirts of Portrush when the girl said, "There's a building I want to visit here."

"Look, we haven't time," Lockhart snapped. Angrily, he pointed out that it was almost dusk, that the ship might arrive early, and that Hedley and the others must be worried stiff about them by now.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"Please. It won't take long," she pleaded. Then, "The next turn left."

Lockhart swore under his breath, and nosed the car into a narrow street leading toward the sea front.

It was a big white building that she pointed out to him, ablaze with neon lighting and with music drifting out through the brightly lit entrance. Lockhart gave it an incredulous stare, shook his head and said, "You can dance?"

"No," she replied. "But I come often with Cedric, for the music."

*Alfie McConnel and his Orchestra* were featured nightly, the display poster outside had stated. It was a small outfit, Lockhart saw, but it most decidedly cooked with gas. McConnel himself sang, played trumpet and waved his arms in front of his band, frequently doing all three during the course of a single number. Lockhart grew aware that his right foot, which had been tapping impatiently against the floor, was now beating time to the music and that he had no inclination whatever to stop it.

The number ended and the band went into another. This time it was a waltz.

"Please," Kelly said suddenly, "I would like to try it."

The floor was crowded with couples shuffling around cheek-to-cheek and locked tightly together. Lockhart, who had taken dancing seriously in his student days, deplored the modern habit of "creeping," but at least there was no skill required for it. He said, "Just one, remember," and glanced anxiously at his watch. They moved off.

Lockhart had expected her to trip all over his feet, but he received a pleasant shock. He found himself forgetting that she had feet at all. Kelly seemed to possess a natural sense of rhythm, and the music moved her as though each separate chord were the controlling wire of a puppet-master. But it was only her feet that he was able to forget, because she had automatically adopted the cheek-to-cheek strangle-



## THE SECRET VISITORS

hold of the "creepers" around them. It began to bother Lockhart, but pleasantly.

"I remember this work," the girl said dreamily, her words muffled against his chest. "It was used in a film I saw about an artist whose short legs led to an advanced state of neuroticism, making it impossible for him to achieve complete adjustment to his environment and causing him much unhappiness." She sighed as the number came to an end, but showed no signs of leaving the floor. Lockhart listened helplessly to a Galactic judgement of Toulouse-Lautrec in the middle of a suddenly empty floor.

"We'll have to go now," Lockhart said firmly when she had finished. "I'm sorry."

The band began another waltz.

"No," Kelly said, "no." She turned quickly and hurried in the direction of a small group of unattached males over by the wall. Lockhart saw her go up to one of them, a sallow-faced character whose tie was a jangling discord against the screaming pattern of his shirt, and ask him to dance. Then Lockhart was at her elbow, urging her fiercely to leave.

"Is Grandpa here annoying you?" the youth said, speaking out of the corner of his mouth.

Lockhart had visions of the girl losing herself in the crowd of dancers, disappearing. What could he tell Hedley if that happened? Anger surged up in him again, the same blind, murderous rage that had sent him after Cedric that evening in the hotel. It must have shown in his face, because the youth looked frightened suddenly and began to back away from him. Lockhart gripped Kelly tightly and guided her onto the floor again.

Why, he asked himself, should she not have another dance? Why not several? His anger faded as he thought of the thing this girl was trying to do for him, and everybody else, too. If only he could help her in some concrete fashion,

## THE SECRET VISITORS

instead of merely trying to make her last few hours on Earth as pleasant as possible. Hedley, he decided fiercely, could wait. Lockhart had a sudden urge to protect her, to shield her from harm. Unconsciously, his hold on her grew even tighter.

Without actually doing anything, Kelly, in some subtle fashion, responded. Then Lockhart forgot Hedley, the Agency and everything but the girl. His mouth was dry, he was sweating and his head seemed to be whirling though he did not feel the slightest bit dizzy. He thought helplessly, *Oh, blast. Soft lights and sweet music . . .*

They were drawing abreast of a big French window that opened out onto a veranda, and the beach. He pushed her roughly toward it.

"John!" Kelly said, startled.

The breeze from the sea struck cold against his moist face. The cane chairs on the veranda were all filled, two shadowy forms to each chair. There were more couples lying on the moonlit sand below. He half-dragged, half-carried her across the veranda and down the steps to the beach.

"John," she said again, sounding a little frightened.

Across the soft, silvery beach, past the murmuring, prostrate twosomes, then up more steps. Lockhart carried her bodily up most of them. A few seconds later he was behind the wheel again, and Kelly was safely in the back seat. Lockhart was sweating profusely, and not only from his exertions.

Another few minutes in that place, he thought, and Hedley would have seen neither of us tonight. Silently, viciously, Lockhart cursed himself for a fool. The girl was not simply leaving his town, or even his country. She was going several million light-years away, and in only a few hours time from now.

Why, he asked himself in bitter self-disgust, did he have to start falling in love with her?

## THE SECRET VISITORS

It was five minutes to eleven when they drew up before Daly's Guest House in Portballintrae. A blocky figure detached itself from the group waiting tensely beside the sea-wall. It was Hedley.

"Where in blazes have you been," he said with a cold, deadly ferocity. "We thought you'd eloped."

### VII

THEY LAY HIDDEN in the sand dunes overlooking the White Rock, a tall pinnacle of limestone rising dramatically above the level beach. Though it was not at all convenient to the Bay Hotel, it was an unmistakable landmark for the ship whose invisibility rendered it partially blind, and the hotel's station wagon would be on hand to take care of the new arrivals.

But two hundred yards of sand, long grass and prickly bushes lay between the Rock and the roadway where the station wagon would be parked, and while Cedric and the conditioned extra-terrestrial from the hotel were guiding the new arrivals over it, Kelly and Hedley's men would board the ship.

At least one of the Agency ship's men would have to accompany Cedric so as to recover the Cloaks which they would all be using until they reached the car.

In the hollow sheltering them from the wind, Hedley moved restively, his eyes constantly searching the sky, the beach and the path leading back to the road. Suddenly he swore, and pointed.

"Who's *that!*" he whispered angrily. "What are they doing there this time of night?"

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Lockhart could just make out three tiny figures far along the beach. They seemed to be approaching slowly. Disgustedly, he thought that it would be just like somebody to blunder into them and spoil everything.

Draper, who was crouched beside Hedley, pushed himself onto his knees and focused his binoculars on them.

"Well?" said Hedley impatiently.

"They are," said Draper in a carefully neutral voice, "Keeler, his wife, and Junior."

"But I told Keeler . . ." Hedley began angrily, then stopped as he realized that Kelly might hear him at the other side of the hollow. There was no telling how she might react to this.

"I expected this to happen," the professor put in quietly. "I heard him telling his wife that nobody could stop him from taking a midnight walk on the beach if he wanted one, and here he is. Mrs. Keeler knows most of what is going on, I expect, and went along to keep an eye on him. Junior, of course, goes where he likes. He probably trailed them from the hotel.

"Anyway," he went on reasonably, "Keeler will have sense enough not to come too close. If he hasn't, his wife will."

Hedley said, "I hope so."

In the silence that ensued, Lockhart's attention returned to the girl again. She was sitting apart from the others and staring fixedly out to sea. *She's afraid*, he thought. He wished he could do something.

Hedley and the others had been polite, and very respectful toward her. Their appreciation for the thing she was trying to do for them was unmistakable; the professor, in his less restrained moments, had several times likened her to Joan of Arc. But not once had Lockhart heard one of them express concern for her personally. They were too busy worrying about the "Big Picture," he supposed, the state of the world at large.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Didn't they think Kelly was human? Or were extra-terrestrials supposed to be above feelings? On a sudden impulse, Lockhart went across to her.

"You'll do it, all right," he said reassuringly, and put his hand on her shoulder. "I know you will."

Lockhart felt her stiffen. She glanced at him, then turned her head away. He drew his hand away and said awkwardly, "If I can do anything to help, tell me. I . . . we . . . appreciate what you're doing and, well . . ." He ended with a rush. "If I could help by going along, I'd do it."

And he meant what he said, Lockhart realized suddenly. Kelly had grown on him the past few days. But there was no chance of her taking him up on the offer. How could he help her; it would be like an aborigine trying to assist a private detective.

Kelly looked at him with a start. The corners of her mouth twitched before she turned her head away again. In a strained voice, she said, "Thank you, John."

But suddenly there was no distance at all between them. Her arms were around his neck and she was making muffled, weeping noises against the shoulder of his jacket. Lockhart was too surprised to move. Dazed, he heard her tell him that she was sorry for something, but the blare of a car's horn sounded from the road before she told him what she was sorry for, and Hedley was beside them.

"Is she all right?" the agent said urgently. "That's Cedric and the station wagon. The ship must be on the way down."

Lockhart nodded. "Just nerves, I think."

"Yes," said Hedley, "That's probably it. But—"

He broke off as Kelly pushed herself away from Lockhart and grabbed for her bag. She produced a gadget rather like a large reading glass, held it in front of her face and began sweeping an ever-widening area of sky with it. Suddenly she said, "There it is!"

A faint blob of greenish light showed on the inner face

## THE SECRET VISITORS

of the lens, wobbling and growing larger as she kept it inside the instrument's field of view. It grew until the blob became a stubby torpedo-shape that almost filled the tiny screen. To the naked eye the sky was clear. It was hard to believe that two hundred feet of ship was landing practically on top of them. Kelly brought the instrument smoothly downward until her eye and it were in line with a point far up the beach, then she held it steady and nodded for Lockhart and Hedley to have a closer look.

The screen showed a small section of beach, with the ship resting on broad triangular fins close to the water's edge. The picture was in pale green and black monochrome, and lacking in fine detail—rather like a radar picture he had once seen, Lockhart thought. But it was this defect which would make their entry of the ship possible.

According to Kelly, a person who hid inside a field of total refraction—who became invisible, that is—automatically blinded himself to everything outside it unless he used an instrument similar to the one she was holding. With such an instrument, it was possible to see through a refraction field to a certain extent. Obstacles and people could be seen, but not clearly enough for purposes of identification. Therefore, when the passengers and crewman whose job it was to collect their refraction field generators, or Cloaks, left their invisible and partially blind ship to follow Cedric and the Agency man to the station wagon . . .

Lockhart's mind was running over the plan for boarding the ship when Kelly's voice brought him back with a start.

"It's too far. We'll have to move closer."

"Yes," Hedley agreed. "And before that goon from the hotel arrives with Cedric." He gave low-voiced instructions to the men crouched around him and they went half-crawling, half-running through the dunes in the direction of the ship. They stopped behind a rocky outcropping which Kelly said was as close to the ship as they dared go—about

## THE SECRET VISITORS

twenty yards. They had to take her word for that, of course; the beach looked deserted.

But not completely deserted. Lockhart had forgotten the Keelers. They were less than a hundred yards away now, he saw, and walking slowly closer. Their son was a few yards ahead of them, moodily throwing stones into the sea. Occasionally he let fly at some imaginary target on the beach or among the dunes. Lockhart heard someone cursing softly.

"Here's Cedric," Draper whispered anxiously.

Two figures were approaching from the direction of the White Rock. One of them held something up to his face every few minutes—a detector similar to Kelly's, Lockhart guessed. He crawled over to the girl and squinted over her shoulder. There should be something going on around the Agency ship by now, he told himself. There was.

The detector revealed nine tiny figures grouped around the base of the ship, and as he watched, eight of them moved away to join the pair approaching them. They were slow and awkward in their movements, and all of them held detectors before them, like a group of caricature detectives.

The man from the hotel must have said something to them, for they followed him in single file back along the beach, with Cedric bringing up the rear. To the unaided eye Cedric was following the other man at a distance of twenty or thirty yards. It took very sharp vision to see the little scuffings made by invisible feet in the sand between them.

Cedric would pretend to get a stone in his shoe, fall behind, then join Hedley's party as soon as possible. But nobody had expected a crewman to stand taking the air outside the ship. And the proximity of the Keelers was a further complication. Lockhart began to feel the first stirrings of panic. Something was going to go wrong here, horribly wrong.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Just then Keeler stopped. He pointed at the dunes and said something to his wife, probably about the advisability of hiding before they got too near the White Rock where he expected the ship to land. Both of them turned sharply inland, the FBI man calling for his son to follow. Lockhart relaxed, and beside him he heard Hedley's sigh of relief.

But young Keeler had other ideas. He wanted to go on throwing rocks. He made one last, bad-tempered throw before turning to follow his parents.

The pebble hit the ship with a clang that must have been audible in Portrush.

Things happened quickly after that. Lockhart saw Keeler break into a sprint toward his son, and his son start running in the direction from which that intriguing noise had come. Knowing that the ship would be invisible when it came, the FBI man must have guessed what had happened. Simultaneously, the girl saw the Keelers for the first time. Horror-stricken, she cried, "What are they doing here?"

Lockhart snatched the detector from her suddenly trembling hands and lined it up on the base of the ship. The important part now was how the crewman reacted to all this.

The tiny, ghostly image had moved away from the ship, and it was clear enough for Lockhart to see that the man was fiddling with something at his waist. That meant only one thing. He was about to switch off the generator of his Cloak so as to clearly see the figures who were apparently charging toward him. Lockhart saw him exchange the detector he had been using for another instrument. It looked like one of the needle-guns.

Lockhart whispered a hasty account of what was going on to Hedley, then returned the detector to Kelly. For what was about to happen, he would not need it.

The Keeler boy screamed suddenly, "Pop!"

Though Lockhart knew the explanation for the effect now, the sight of the quivering, rippling head and shoulders of the



## THE SECRET VISITORS

Agency man, caused by residual radiation from his Cloak, sent a shiver of horror along his spine. The last time this had happened had been in Paris when Gates had died. If something wasn't done quickly now, he knew that there would be a similar killing here.

The Agency man was aiming at the cowering and terrified figure of young Keeler, obviously bent on dealing with the stationary target before finishing off the charging FBI man. Then Keeler's wife, seeing the twisting, undulating features of the crewman for the first time, screamed.

A hydrogen bomb seemed to go off a few inches from Lockhart's ear as Draper fired his .45. The bullet *spanged* against the metal of the ship and whined off into the night. The Agency man whirled to face this new threat. Then a second bomb went off in his other ear as Hedley fired. The crewman spun half around and pitched sideways onto the sand.

Hedley said, "Come on!"

Lockhart clutched his bag and charged with the others toward the apparently empty section of beach containing the ship. He saw Keeler land on the squirming Agency man and tear the weapon away from him. Mrs. Keeler was hugging her son and crying and, far up the beach, the figure of Cedric was racing toward them, hotly pursued at a distance of about fifty yards by two other men whose outlines wavered with the after-radiation of their refraction fields. Lockhart stumbled into Hedley as the agent stopped and raised his gun again.

"Don't kill them!" Kelly called urgently. "They have to work the ship!"

Hedley grunted. His three shots kicked up sand ahead of their running feet. Cedric's pursuers halted so suddenly that one of them fell onto his knees.

Suddenly the ship was towering into the night only a few yards away. Simultaneously with the appearance of the

## THE SECRET VISITORS

ship the beach vanished, being replaced by a cylindrical wall of silvery mist that encircled it to within a few yards. Lockhart heard Kelly directing that the wounded crewman be brought to the ship, and suddenly the misty cylinder around them was filled with people milling around the ship's entry port. The Keelers came stumbling through the invisibility screen, Kelly having decided that it was too dangerous for them outside. They were followed closely by Cedric who came through it at a dead run. Kelly and Cedric entered the ship, followed quickly by Draper, Fox and Lockhart carrying the wounded Agency man, and Simpson bringing up the rear with Lockhart's bag. The professor had long since been detailed to stand by the car and keep the engine running.

There was a vague impression of spiral stairways and masses of surrealistic plumbing, but Lockhart was too rushed to notice details. They stopped in a small compartment filled with soft-looking chairs. Passenger lounge, Lockhart guessed. Kelly pointed to a shiny mechanism built into one of the walls, then left with Cedric for the control room, saying that she had to arrange her trip. Shortly afterwards, two pairs of footfalls went past the lounge, going upwards; no doubt it was the two members of the crew who had escorted the new arrivals.

The wounded man was groaning softly on the floor. While Hedley and the others gathered around the machine on the wall and began reading into it, Lockhart made a quick examination of the injury, then cleaned and dressed it. Carefully chosen excerpts from Earth's history, philosophy and politics droned about his ears, together with the other data which proved the extent of the Agency's crimes. It was not a very serious wound; the bullet had gone through a fleshy part of his thigh, but Lockhart took particular pains to make it a neat job. The doctor who saw it next would be an alien, and far advanced in medical science. Lockhart

## THE SECRET VISITORS

wanted him to think that he had been at least a good workman.

He had a brief attack of dizziness at one point. He ignored it and was just finishing off with a sedative shot when Cedric re-entered the room.

With his characteristic mincing walk Cedric went over to the mechanism on the wall. He smiled apologetically at those grouped around it, then pressed one of the buttons set on its side. A panel slid open revealing a pear-shaped plastic container which held a clear, colorless fluid like water.

It was not until Cedric walked to the opposite wall, sipping daintily at the fluid on the way, and moved aside another panel that Lockhart realized what had been done to them.

The Earth, from eighty miles up, was beautiful.

## VIII

THE SURFACE was receding visibly. Their acceleration must be colossal. Yet apart from that momentary dizziness—which must have been due to the take-off, Lockhart guessed—there was no sensation at all. That meant gravity control, he thought, as more and more of the European land mass crawled into sight around the edge of the view-port. The dun-colored surface was streaked and spotted with vivid orange, yellow and pink, high-flying cirrus clouds lit by the sunrise which had not yet reached the ground. It was a breathtakingly beautiful sight, but it was being spoiled by a gathering red haze.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Lockhart burst out of the lounge, a scant two-yards ahead of the suddenly white-lipped Hedley, in the grip of a rage which he could not even hope to control. His hands were so tightly clenched that they hurt. Never in all his life had Lockhart been made such a fool. He had *trusted* Kelly.

She would be in the control room, Lockhart told himself as he viciously pulled himself up ladders which had replaced the spiral stairways of the passenger section. What she would be doing there, now that he knew her for the cheat and liar she was, he did not know. But if he could only get his hands on her, he would . . .

The sound of Hedley close on his heels did not register fully until a large, strong hand closed around his ankle.

"Where d'you think you're going?" Hedley asked, gasping.

Lockhart told him where and why. He kicked out angrily, trying to free his foot from the agent's grip, but succeeded only in losing his balance so that he dropped a rung and almost fell from the ladder.

"So she made fools of us," Hedley said, head thrown back and glaring up in Lockhart's face. "Does that mean you have to barge in when she's in the middle of a tricky situation. You don't know what exactly is going on up there, and one mistake on your part will mean curtains for everybody; and in your present frame of mind, you'll make mistakes."

"But she's on their side."

"Don't be a fool!" Hedley was impatient as well as angry. "She's on our side, make no mistake about that. Dammit, I thought you, especially, would have been expecting this, spending as much time with her as you did. The rest of us were."

Lockhart gaped at him.

Hedley said, "There was her refusal to allow Keeler and the professor aboard the ship, though both would have

## THE SECRET VISITORS

been in little danger on a purely temporary visit to the ship. And her story about *recording* through a lie-detector! A recording could be faked just the same as documents and would be useless as evidence.

"We were meant to go to Harla from the very first time she realized that you and the professor were not Agency men, but Earth-humans who knew, or suspected, enough to believe her when she told you who she was and what was going on."

"But why didn't she *tell* us?"

Hedley grimaced. "If she'd told us, I would have had to tell the department, and you can imagine the complications that would have caused. We could not have gone until a full investigation had been made, and by that time it would have been too late. I think she knew this, and decided to keep the whole truth from us until we were clear of Earth."

Lockhart's mind seemed to be doing somersaults inside his head. So Hedley knew of, and condoned, the kidnapping of eight humans from Earth! Well, not exactly eight; the Keelers being on the ship was accidental. The realization shocked him. It also caused the blind fury which had driven him toward the control room to subside. Lockhart was angry now only because he, alone, had been made to look foolish. Everyone else had expected this, and now that he thought of it, the girl had tried to tell him, or at least hint at it, on one or two occasions. Lockhart's protest was instinctive.

"But supposing we didn't want to come?"

"I hope," said Hedley quietly, "that that is a purely rhetorical question."

Looking into Hedley's level brown eyes, Lockhart made a surprising and very disquieting discovery. The agent was a fanatic, one of those hopeless, disillusioned idealists, so common after the war, who could not find anything to be idealistic about. Patriotism was these days referred to cyn-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

ically as applied propaganda. But Hedley, he saw, had become a patriot again, and in the widest sense; his patriotism embraced a world and a species now, instead of merely a country and a race. Hedley had found an ideal again, one that in his quiet and matter-of-fact way the agent would not mind dying for.

Lockhart felt very proud of knowing Hedley at that moment, proud, and very much ashamed of himself.

"Doc, this is crazy," the agent said, grinning widely. "Come down where we can talk comfortably, for Pete's sake."

Hedley and Lockhart were spread vertically along about twenty feet of ladder, with the agent hanging grimly onto his right ankle. Lockhart smiled in spite of himself and began to descend. He had just reached deck level when there was a faint scraping sound from the deck above.

There was somebody up there. Lockhart could see an outline through the open grill-work of the deck. And whoever it was had been there for some time, otherwise he would have heard an approach, which also meant that the conversation between Hedley and himself had been overheard.

The scraping sound of shoes against metal was repeated, and a pair of legs clad in dark blue slacks began to descend the ladder. Kelly.

It was obvious from her face that she had heard everything. Lockhart deliberately looked away as she started to speak to him. He still felt angry, and an utter fool. He wanted to get his feelings under control before he risked talking to her again.

"I'm sorry I had to mislead you," Kelly began.

"We understand," Hedley said quickly, cutting short the apology. "But what about the Keelers? I told them to follow the main group to the lounge as a safety precaution; they would have been killed on the beach for sure. Can you have them landed again?"

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Kelly shook her head. "We rendezvous with the parent ship in seventeen hours, shortly before it resumes its journey. There is no time . . ."

She stopped suddenly and changed the subject without warning. She looked frightened.

"You are Agency recruits," she said quickly. "All of you with the exception of Cedric and myself, so act accordingly. The pretense will be necessary until we transfer to the parent ship, and afterwards unless I can find a trustworthy Agency official."

She darted a glance upwards, and for the first time Lockhart heard the approaching footsteps. Kelly rushed on:

"The officers of this ship know that Cedric is an Agency man, but not that he has changed sides, and he has convinced them that I am a high Agency official. Together we have made the Chief Officer believe that your group are Earthmen who have stumbled onto the Agency by accident, that you will do anything for the secret of longevity, and that your attempt to seize their ship was in the mistaken belief that the apparatus for administering the treatment was aboard. The error has now been pointed out to you by Cedric and me, and our job is to smuggle you aboard the parent ship without the other passengers knowing about it. The Agency welcomes Earth-human recruits. They are the only ones who can do efficient work on the planet. The Galactics, unless they have been conditioned into near uselessness, are softened by contact with it."

She opened her mouth to say something else, then changed her mind. The ship's officer was almost beside them.

The man looked disappointingly ordinary. He had the same dark, vaguely Spanish features as Kelly, but that was due to his world's being populated by a single, homogenous race. Only Earth, Lockhart had discovered, was blessed

## THE SECRET VISITORS

—or cursed—with racial differences of color and physique. He wore shorts and a loose blouse, with a row of badges vertically bisecting his chest. A heavy, cloak-like garment was thrown back from his shoulders, revealing the generator of his refraction field strapped to his waist. This had been one of the escorts for the new arrivals, until the shooting had brought him hurrying back to the ship.

The officer looked with sharp curiosity at Lockhart and Hedley, then his face became expressionless. Folding his arms stiffly across his chest, he bowed his head slightly to each of them in turn. He wheeled and began to remount the ladder, talking rapidly to Kelly as he climbed.

"You are to go to the control room for language impression," Kelly translated, motioning them nervously upwards. "They have two Educators there and you are to be given Galactic. He says it will save time and annoyance if you can understand what is being said to you during the transfer. And . . . and . . ."

Her eyes were boring into Hedley, pleading, pitying and despairing all at once. Her face was white. "Oh, be *careful*," she sobbed, and turned quickly toward the ladder leading down to the passenger lounge.

Lockhart followed a pair of feet and legs, clad incongruously in calf-length boots of completely transparent plastic, past two deck levels and along a catwalk to the control room. Too much was happening too quickly, he told himself helplessly. His brain could not accept the knowledge that he was no longer on Earth. Refusal to face reality was a mentally unhealthy reaction, he knew, the first step toward catatonia. But he did not want to fight against anything that these aliens might do to him. Let Hedley and the others do the thinking and worrying, this was too big and complicated for him now.

Desperately, he wished that he could just wake up.

They were led to a couple of chairs set in the middle of



## THE SECRET VISITORS

the small control room, a few feet behind the control chairs that were spaced evenly before the semi-circular instrument board. There were large vision screens facing each chair, but the only one in operation was blocked by the head and shoulders of the officer using it. Abruptly the view was further curtailed by the other occupants of the control room standing over him. One held a heavy metal helmet with straps and wires hanging from it.

Hedley watched him anxiously as they fitted the helmet tightly over his head, the agent would be next. An intolerable itching sensation began inside his skull, and Lockhart instinctively made to scratch it. But before his hand was raised six inches, everything—light, sound and feeling—switched off.

Lockhart awoke as suddenly as he had been knocked out, and because his hands were still lying in his lap he saw his watch. Two hours had passed. With an incredulous glance at the officer standing over him, he looked across at the still-unconscious Hedley. The agent's hair was awry. Lockhart guessed that he had offered some resistance to the helmet's being fitted after seeing what it had done to himself.

"Attend, please!" the alien said briskly. "Go to the passenger compartment and send two more Earth-humans here for language instruction. Also—"

"But you're speaking *English!*" Lockhart burst out.

The officer looked impatient. "Speak Galactic," he said. "That gibberish means nothing to me."

It was only then that Lockhart realized he was thinking in two languages instead of one. *Some Educator*, he thought admiringly. Aloud, he said, "Sorry."

The Galactic word for it felt awkward on his tongue, but he knew that he had pronounced it intelligibly.

"Very well."

From his general air of authority, as well as the abundance

## THE SECRET VISITORS

of badges running down his blouse, Lockhart decided that this was the ship's Captain. The officer went on:

"You will also see that these men carry the body of sub-Captain Kernetsin to me here, and that the Earthman responsible for his death accompanies them."

There were only two Educator helmets in the control room, Lockhart knew. Then what fate awaited the third man, the man who had shot this Kernetsin?

With a tremendous effort, Lockhart kept himself from looking at Hedley. This explained Kelly's panicky warning to the agent as they were coming to the control room. But why had she not been more specific, or used her influence to protect him? He could not answer, and speculation was useless at the moment. He had to head the Captain off somehow, and quickly. Lockhart was frightened by the other's expression. One wrong word and he might witness the summary execution of Hedley by the Captain.

"But he wasn't killed—" Lockhart began quickly. He was interrupted.

"So I have been told," the Captain said harshly. "But I trust he is dead now. Despite the fact that the projectile fired into his body contained no lethal and painless poisons, its large size must have caused widespread damage and bleeding which is impossible to repair or control. The suffering which this crude and barbarous weapon has caused him is inexcusable."

His lips tightened, and he looked slightly sick.

"But he's all right," Lockhart repeated, and began describing the wounded officer's condition. "Why not go and see for yourself?"

The Captain hesitated, then gestured for Lockhart to precede him from the control room.

When they reached the passenger lounge, Lockhart saw that the occupants were grouped around Kelly, all talking loudly. Cedric stood beside the girl, as if expecting violence.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Mrs. Keeler was still crying, despite the awkward attempts at reassurance by her husband. The only one enjoying himself was the boy, who was having a noisy game of Space Pirates at the observation port. Silence fell as the Captain appeared behind Lockhart and strode quickly to the prostrate Kernetsin.

Kelly went pale when she saw that Hedley was not with them. Her face told Lockhart two things; she had been expecting trouble, and the penalty for shooting an Agency officer was severe. She thought that Hedley was already dead. Anger began to boil up inside him, but Lockhart fought it down. He had to, for Hedley's sake.

The Captain's eyes flicked about, missing nothing; the resilient plastic cushions stripped from nearby chairs on which the wounded man lay, Kernetsin's pale but relaxed face, his slow, even breathing, and finally the neatly bandaged thigh. He gestured angrily for the dressings to be removed.

As he gently uncovered the wound, Lockhart's mind began to work rapidly and on two levels. While describing the sleeping officer's injury and its treatment to the Captain, he was arriving at an unpleasant and rather terrifying conclusion regarding Kelly. They had been depending on the girl too much. She was honestly trying to help them, he knew, and risking her life to do it, but she was no superwoman. Kelly was trusting to luck more than anything else. She had a wider knowledge of Galactic affairs than the Earth party, but her control of the present situation was nil; otherwise she would have done something to save Hedley. She had tried, probably, but without success.

To Lockhart, it was painfully evident that if they were to save either their world or themselves, they, the Earth-humans, would have to do it. With Kelly's assistance.

The Captain signaled for the dressing to be replaced.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Straightening up, he gave Lockhart a peculiar, baffled look.

"Are you a Doctor?"

The word, in Galactic, was not quite "doctor," or "surgeon" either, but something like "medical technician." Lockhart swallowed nervously and nodded.

"The damage seems to have been repaired," the Captain went on. For a moment his features worked uncontrollably, and Lockhart realized with a shock that the Captain was regarding him with awe. "I have heard of such work being done on the Central Worlds, and that the injured often survive, but out here . . ."

Surely, Lockhart's mind protested wildly, the Captain's words did not mean what they seemed to mean. These people possessed a fantastically advanced medical science; longevity, even immortality, perhaps. What was so awesome in a couple of neat sutures and a bandage?

"If you wish," the Captain said, the harsh, tight lines of his face relaxing into a smile, "you may view the landing on your satellite from the control room."

He wheeled and left the room, passing Hedley, who had just returned from the control room, at the doorway. He made no further mention of punishing the man guilty of wounding sub-Captain Kernetsin. Apparently, he had forgotten all about it.

## IX

LOCKHART sat in the ridiculously tiny sick-bay of the mighty *Shekkaldor*, pride of the Agency's passenger fleet, using the few minutes left to him before the arrival of the ship's

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Medical Officer to try catching his mental breath. Of course, the words "sick-bay" and "medical officer" were approximations only. Nobody took sick on this ship apparently, and judging by the equipment that was in sight, the man in charge of it seemed to be more librarian than doctor.

A sigh from the figure in the room's single bed broke into his thoughts. Though Kernetsin was semi-conscious, resting comfortably and in no danger at all, Lockhart had a look at him.

He had a very warm feeling for the sub-Captain.

Twenty-four hours ago in the ferry-ship the future had looked hopeless. Kelly had convinced its officers that Hedley's party were recruits, but the driving force that kept the group together, Hedley himself, had been in deadly danger over the shooting of Kernetsin. Away from the civilized center of the Federation, an eye for an eye seemed to be the rule. Lockhart had not known why his treatment of the wounded officer produced such a marked thaw in the ferry-Captain's feelings until after the transfer to the parent ship. It was then that he found out that Kernetsin was sub-Captain, not of the ferry, but of the *Shekkaldor*, and that he was related to Kerron.

Kerron was Captain of this ship, and as such was only a couple of steps below God. And this near-deity approved of Lockhart, apparently.

But their good fortune did not end there. It had been explained to Lockhart that hyperspatial travel was instantaneous, that time was consumed only during take-offs, stopovers and landings, and that the *Shekkaldor*, with just three brief stops on the way, was bound for Harla.

Kelly had wanted to tell everything to Captain Kerron. He had struck Lockhart as the stern, just and highly moral type, who on Earth would have fitted well behind a High Court bench. Kelly believed that he could be trusted, and

## THE SECRET VISITORS

he was the ideal person to help them on the ship, but the cautious Hedley had urged her to wait.

Smiling inwardly, Lockhart looked closely at the face of his patient. The features were almost identical, the chief difference being that Kerron's hair was iron gray while Kernetsin's was jet black. But the Captain's gray locks were simply affectation, according to Kelly; the higher officers dyed their hair in an effort to look old and distinguished. The younger-looking Kernetsin was really Kerron's grandfather, Lockhart had learned. It did not seem so improbable when the twin factors of wholesale rejuvenation and authority based on ability rather than age were taken into account.

The soft noise of a sliding panel made Lockhart look up. A man stood in the doorway dressed in shorts and a blouse of what looked like liquid silver. He wore a red, sash-like affair across his chest, and his features were from the same mold that had convinced Lockhart that *all* aliens were related. He stepped into the room, folded his arms, dipped his head by not more than half an inch and announced, "I am Naydrad."

"I'm Lockhart." Naydrad was the ship's M.O., and courtesy toward a colleague was automatic with Lockhart. He stuck out his hand.

Naydrad gave a startled look at the proffered hand, dipped his head again hastily, and bent over the patient. His ears were burning.

Lockhart cursed his own stupidity under his breath. He had just dropped a large brick. And after Kelly's repeated warnings about making sudden and unthinking gestures to these people. God alone knew what an offer to shake hands meant on Naydrad's home planet.

But it could not have been too insulting, because Naydrad quickly began asking questions. His questions were more detailed and searching than those of the ferry-ship's Cap-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

tain, but they were also more revealing. The *Shakkaldor's* MO was woefully, and inexplicably, ignorant about the simplest things.

Lockhart had resigned himself to the role of a child sitting at the other's feet, eagerly absorbing the simpler concepts—everything else being beyond his mental grasp, of course—of a true Master. That was what he had expected. But now Naydrad was hanging on *his* every word.

This, Lockhart reminded himself angrily, was a representative of a culture that spanned the Galaxy, a culture that had possessed the secret of longevity for centuries. Lockhart could contain his curiosity no longer.

"You have, I believe, the means to extend life," he interposed hastily between the other's questions, "and are therefore far beyond Earth with your medical science. Why is it that such crude methods of surgery interest you?"

"Longevity," Naydrad answered, "is not a surgical treatment." He hesitated, then asked another question. "You and your companions risked much to join the Agency, and merely because of the longevity treatment. Why?"

Feeling that it was a stupid question, Lockhart told him some of the reasons why a person might want to increase his life-span. He ended by saying, "Everybody wants to live longer. There is so much to do, to enjoy."

"No," said Naydrad, and there was a great sadness in his eyes, "you are wrong. Galactic citizens undergo the treatment because it is the accepted thing to do. Long life is no longer striven for, unless one happens to be an exceptionally gifted person such as an Administrator or," he smiled wryly, "a high executive of the Interstellar Travel Agency. There is nothing to do or to enjoy which retains its appeal after one normal lifetime. If one is rich enough, boredom can be held off for a time by travel, but even then . . ."

"But the science behind this longevity," Lockhart interrupted gently but insistently. Kelly had told him some-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

thing of the cultural desert that was the Federation, but he could wait for further knowledge on that subject. Nodding toward the patient, he went on, "I had the impression that the Ferry-Captain intended killing this man, in the same way as we are sometimes forced to shoot an injured horse, until he saw what I had done to the wound. Surely you can cure such a simple injury?"

"The medical science of the Federation is, and has been for many hundreds of years, preventive rather than curative," Naydrad explained. "In the early days life was still precious. Longevity and interstellar travel had come simultaneously, and every star system was a promise of escape from the monotony of home. Because of this, every machine, city and individual became weighed down with safety devices to insure that no precious lives would be accidentally lost. Accidents causing gross physical injury became so rare that the ability to deal with them was lost. But the promise was an empty one. There was nothing new under any sun, everywhere was the same.

"Pain and sickness, thanks to preventive medicine and the efficiency of our safety devices, is virtually unknown, and pain is the only thing which frightens us. That is why our weapons are invariably lethal, and painless."

As he talked, Naydrad drew a small, intricate mechanism from a recess in the wall and brought it toward Lockhart.

"You are still obsessed with the thought of longevity," he said, smiling. "Permit me to make a demonstration."

The machine looked like nothing Lockhart had ever seen before; probably, he decided, because it was meant to do something he had never heard about. Attached to it by a length of thin silvery tubing was something that resembled one half of a pair of thick handcuffs. Naydrad slid the manacle onto Lockhart's wrist. As soon as it was in position, Lockhart felt a sharp tingling sensation over the veins in his wrist, as if several needles were pricking the area.



## THE SECRET VISITORS

"They are," said Naydrad when he mentioned it aloud. A few seconds later he released the manacle and replaced the gadget in its recess, returning with a ring in which was set a smooth red stone. "Wear this," he said casually. "When it turns black you will require a further longevity shot. I estimate that as being twenty-five to thirty of your years hence."

When the meaning of the other's words penetrated, elation that was almost a pain surged through Lockhart. This was what he had wanted since that autopsy in Paris. But he had not been given details of the shot's composition. Where then was the altruism, the noble selflessness that had driven him to seek knowledge for the sake of his profession and his race? Did he, he asked himself in sudden self-loathing, want this only for himself? Surely there was more of the stuff around. If he could steal some and analyze it somehow . . . He opened his mouth to speak.

But Naydrad was speaking again.

"You can now see that the treatment means nothing to us," he said dryly. "Only Earth-humans consider it valuable, apparently." Naydrad held out a small sphere of transparent material containing a yellowish solution. "This contains enough for thirty shots, the equivalent of four hundred years of youthful, disease-free life. For various reasons, the treatment has to be given at shorter intervals toward the end.

"But pardon me, you were about to speak."

Lockhart, with his hand closed firmly around that tiny, infinitely precious globe thought, *Sample for analysis!* He swallowed and said, "If that is all there is to it, can I bring my friends here and—"

"No!" said Naydrad sharply. "I dare not do what you ask. The Agency Headquarters on Harla gives Earth recruits special training. Most of it is psychological, and I

## THE SECRET VISITORS

understand that the promise of longevity serves as an anchor to deep, post-hypnotic instructions and conditioning."

"Oh," said Lockhart. Then curiously, "What is this training for? What are they supposed to do?"

As if *I didn't know*, he added bitterly to himself.

"I know very little about it," Naydrad replied easily. "The Agency discovered Earth a long time ago and ever since has been charging astronomical prices for taking tourists to it, *and* just leaving them there. The tourists don't mind because it's supposed to be an unusually beautiful planet, and the Earth natives are not harmed in any way. From what I hear it is simply a piece of innocent exploitation on the Agency's part. But if the Federation heard about it they might make trouble.

"The Agency isn't popular with the Federation; it has become too big and powerful for just a business concern." Naydrad looked cautious. "That is why I am not very curious about Earth. There are people on this ship who were curious. They had a lot of memories erased, not to mention some other things the Agency psychologists did to their minds. They weren't hurt, of course, but I wouldn't like it done to me."

Lockhart felt anger rising in him again. It was a tightness in his chest and across his shoulders that demanded he take a swing at something to relieve it. Trying to keep a sarcastic edge out of his voice, he said, "Why did you risk giving me the shot? Professional courtesy or something?"

Naydrad looked at the figure of Kernetsin in the bed. "Yes," he said. "Something like that."

"I suppose," said Lockhart bitingly, "it would be considered proper to make a return gift under the circumstances?"

Naydrad looked confused and hurt. He nodded.

Lockhart's fingers found the packet in his breast pocket, then withdrew it. It was a stereoscopic transparency set

## THE SECRET VISITORS

showing views of Switzerland, which he had absently put there on finding that Kelly already had that set. The girl had been right in one thing at least, he thought savagely; not all the Agency men knew, or approved of, what was happening on Earth. Naydrad especially, who paled at the bare mention of physical suffering, would certainly not approve of it.

With the exception of Kelly, Naydrad was the only alien Lockhart felt comfortable with. He might even grow to like the other in time. Also, Lockhart knew that Kelly and Hedley planned to take similar risks with other ship's officers. That knowledge consoled him, but only slightly.

"Look at that!" he said, and slapped the brightly colored envelope into Naydrad's hand.

He watched while Naydrad fumbled with the envelope and peered at the transparencies. He produced a lens from somewhere and examined them more closely. When he spoke his voice was an awed whisper.

"Do you know how valuable this is?"

Lockhart nodded.

"I've heard about such pictures, but this is the first time I've seen any." Naydrad gave a long, shuddering sigh. "I can't believe that such . . . such . . . Oh, it is a beautiful planet!"

"Yes," Lockhart said harshly, "Yes. And do you know what your harmless and innocent Agency is doing on that planet now, at this minute? Well, I'll tell you."

Lockhart told him. He did not spare any of the grisly details—the pain, waste, disease and mutilation that was war. When he had finished, Lockhart saw that Naydrad looked considerably less healthy than their patient.

"No," Naydrad protested. "No. You must be mistaken."

"Attention!" commanded a voice quietly from the loud-speaker in the room. "Chief Medical Technican Naydrad and the Earth-human Lockhart to Kerron in Control at once."

## THE SECRET VISITORS

So, Lockhart thought bitterly, *Big Brother was watching you*. Or listening, at least.

He could offer no resistance as Naydrad hustled him out into the corridor. The ease with which his first attempt to subvert an Agency officer had been uncovered was a paralyzing blow.

Naydrad seemed to be excited rather than worried by the summons to the Control room; it was an unprecedented occurrence. Lockhart could not understand his attitude at all.

He was beginning to wonder if their conversation in sick-bay had been overheard, or whether the summons was for an entirely different reason, when Naydrad stopped abruptly and pressed a button on the corridor wall. A panel slid aside revealing a direct vision port.

"We've landed on Retlone," he said. "It's a famous beauty spot. But why aren't we disembarking passengers?" Naydrad hurried on.

Buzzers made hoarse, intermittent noises in the corridors they passed through, which were replaced, when they entered the passenger section, by loudspeakers requesting all passengers to stay in their cabins. Naydrad was beginning to look frightened. They covered the remaining distance to the Control room at a near run.

Kelly was beside the Captain as they entered, staring at a vision screen which covered the whole of one wall. After one look, Lockhart knew that he had not been called to answer for his attempted subversion of Naydrad.

"The position is this," Kerron said, motioning them closer. "We have been ordered by the port authorities here to vacate our ship so that it can be used to evacuate some of these people." He jabbed a finger at the screen, which showed a mob of shouting, fist-waving humanity surging on to the *Shekkaldor's* landing area. "If we refuse to do this, or try to take off instead—" his finger touched a stud on his desk, and the screen showed something that vaguely re-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

sembled a radar installation on the distant perimeter, "—then they will destroy the ship before we can leave this atmosphere.

"The reason for this panic," Kerron went on, and strangely, he seemed to be talking only to Lockhart, "is this."

The screen now showed a small, squat ship about half a mile distant. Black where it was not streaked with corrosion, it looked not much bigger than the *Shekkaldor's* ferry.

"A *Grosni*!" Naydrad burst out. His face had gone white. "But can't their Medics help them? Nobody would want to live—"

"Several thousand have already killed themselves," Kerron said harshly, "which includes most of their Medical technicians, possibly because they are a little more imaginative than most, and can foresee more clearly what is to come." His thin, ascetic face with its high, intellectual forehead registered an expression of shame, and a sick, incredulous disgust. "But it seems that among some perverted beings life becomes more valuable in proportion to the threat against it."

Lockhart would not have called that perversion exactly, but he was suddenly aware that the Captain was speaking directly to him.

"As Naydrad has already guessed, that ship contains the normal-space segment of a *Grosni*. It is dying. I do not believe that anything can be done to halt the process, but I have been assured that you can deal with it." He nodded toward the girl. "Kelly has important verbal information which must reach Harla without delay. She would like you to hurry."

There was a peculiar stress laid on the final sentences. Kelly, he realized, had told Kerron all.

"What do you want me to do?" Lockhart asked witheringly in English. "Just walk over, take its pulse and write a prescription?" He looked into the frightened, appealing

## THE SECRET VISITORS

eyes of Kelly. Switching back to Galactic, he protested, "I don't know anything about its metabolism or physiology. I need data, detailed information. Charts, too, if possible."

It was Naydrad who told him all that was known about the *Grosni*. When he had finished, Lockhart placed his hands flat on the Captain's control desk, purely as a precaution against falling to the floor. His head was spinning.

*Write a prescription*, a voice gibbered inside his brain. *Write a prescription*, it cackled. *Maybe a shot of penicillin will do the trick. Go on! Write fifty thousand tons of penicillin.*

Or would it be five hundred thousand tons? It was so easy to drop a zero sometimes.

### X

FROM A DISTANCE the *Grosni* ship had not been an esthetically pleasing object; but close up it was ugly to the point of obscenity. Leprous patches of rust grew on its hull, which was scarred and pitted so deeply that in places it looked like the bark of a tree rather than metal plating. A row of dark, slot-like openings encircled the hull about eighty feet from the ground, from which sprouted a fringe of thin, ropy tentacles like limp spaghetti. Most of these lay motionless across the supply containers spilled around the ship's base, but some of them twitched spasmodically.

"I cannot understand its landing to die," Naydrad said. "They are usually more considerate."

Cedric said, "Please hurry."

The tone, Lockhart noted curiously, was exactly that

## THE SECRET VISITORS

used to the doctor when a close relative is very ill; worried, and almost pleading. As he followed Cedric up the telescopic ladder—used once and abandoned in haste by a Retlonian port official—Lockhart wondered again what that previous contact with the *Grosni* had done to Cedric's mind to make him feel like that about them. The thought of something similar being done to his own mind made him shudder.

Hedley had said, "Think of it as an ordinary patient, Doctor. It's big, but it seems to be made up pretty much like a Human, and it uses ordinary air and water. Do your best to patch it up enough for it to take off. Kerron won't be able to stall the people here for more than a couple of hours, so be as fast as you can, Doc. There's an awful lot depending on you."

He did not need reminding of his responsibilities, Lockhart thought angrily as he pulled himself up the ladder. If he failed to do the well-nigh impossible, the *Shekkaldor* would not reach Harla, the Earth party would not appear before the Galactic Court, and on Earth the Agency would have everything its own way. If anything was lacking in this, Lockhart thought bitterly, it certainly was not incentive.

Cedric was several rungs above him on the ladder and Naydrad was following, but Lockhart did not look down. He had no head for heights. Instead he examined the slots from which the tentacles hung as he came level with them. They were deeply recessed and the yellow, flaccid ropes went far into them and disappeared in darkness. From the bottom of one of the slots a thick liquid, like oily green porridge, oozed out and dripped slowly to the ground. There was a sharp, unpleasant smell; he turned his head away.

From up here he had a good view of the three great, needle-peaked mountains, overhanging the capital of Retlone, which gave it the reputation of being one of the most beautiful places in the Galaxy. The mountains looked volcanic,

## THE SECRET VISITORS

but their bare slopes were streaked and dappled with vivid patches of brilliant color. They were beautiful, Lockhart admitted, in a garish sort of way.

Naydrad had told him that the effect was due to oxides in the rock, adding cynically that the natives were always improving on nature with the help of paint-sprayers. The tourist trade, it seemed, was the same everywhere.

Lockhart went through a small lock into darkness, but Cedric was making the quick, sure noises of a person in unlit but familiar surroundings. Standing there Lockhart felt dull, unlocalized pains start suddenly in his head, chest and throat. They grew steadily more severe. Lockhart's anxiety became outright fear as the pains mounted in intensity. He was on the verge of panic when they stopped suddenly.

He was about to ask Cedric about the experience when the lights came on and he saw the interior of the compartment which they occupied. The sight drove the question out of his mind.

"But this is for *men*," he burst out. "Look at the chairs, the controls!"

Naydrad came through the lock at that moment. He said, "The Human servicing engineers operate from here." He waved at the storage cabinets ranged around the room, the control panels with chairs facing them, and at the harsh brilliance of the lighting. There were patches of corrosion here, too, but the dirt which covered everything was from age rather than misuse. He explained, "They repair the purely mechanical and accessible parts of the ship, on request. They aren't asked often as you can see."

Lockhart digested that. He said, "Have the people here determined that the *Grosni* isn't planet-bound for mechanical reasons?"

Naydrad shook his head. "The port official said that it was dying. Nobody approached the ship after that. Besides,



## THE SECRET VISITORS

it is only on the Central Worlds that such repairs are possible."

"But suppose the trouble is partly mechanical," Lockhart protested. "I'm not an engineer."

From the look on Naydrad's face Lockhart knew that it was no good trying to shift, or at least divide, the responsibility of getting this ship off Retlone; the guilt or the glory would be all his own. Angrily, he said, "Oh, let's get on with it."

Lockhart examined the chart that Naydrad unrolled. It was large, and certain sections of it were enlarged and finely detailed in red—those parts of the *Grosni* actually inside its ship. But the rest of it made Lockhart think of a map rather than a physiology chart. That was understandable; the scale, for one thing, was approximately three miles to the inch.

The *Grosni* were amoeba-like life-forms which continued to eat and grow indefinitely instead of fissioning when a certain size was reached. As they were extremely long-lived, the true size of their bodies often approached planetary mass. Because of this uncontrollable hunger and growth interstellar travel became necessary for their continued survival, and this in its turn led them to a method of slowing down their fantastic rate of food consumption and growth.

Instead of using the hyperdrive method of propulsion for their ships they used it to transpose their gigantic and cumbersome bodies—with the exception of the brain, one respiratory opening and one feeding mouth with its connected manipulatory organs—into the hyperdimension where the time-rate, and therefore their metabolism, was slowed almost to a stop. As their brains were not affected by this slow-down, this enabled them to travel in small ships instead of the enormous shells which they had been forced to use previously, and their food intake dropped in proportion.

It was a highly artificial and biologically dangerous adapta-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

tion, because the greater part of their bodies existed in the gravity-free hyperdimension, thus making atrophication inescapable. And they could not use the hyperdrive method of space-travel. That would have meant bringing their whole body together into one continuum, a body thousands, maybe millions of times too big for the ship carrying it. But the use of slow, reaction-driven ships did not worry such a very long-lived race.

Occasionally, Lockhart had been told, a *Grosni* did die. When death occurred the organic and mechanical combination of controls, which held its Gargantuan body in the hyperdimension, broke down, precipitating it into normal space around the dead brain.

That was the explanation for the panic-stricken mob besieging Kerron's ship. The dying *Grosni* was said to be young and relatively small, but the Retlonians wanted to flee the planet before a carcass one hundred miles or more in diameter burst into existence on top of them. Though help in the form of Federation transports was undoubtedly on the way, it might take hours or even days for enough of it to arrive. This might happen in minutes.

Though the disaster would not kill everyone outright, the planet would be rendered uninhabitable forever by that awful mountain of corruption poisoning its atmosphere. Lockhart tried not to think of being buried under such a mountain and concentrated on the chart spread before him.

He said, "These small areas marked in red are the organs which come out into the ship. But where exactly are these segments placed in the ship, particularly the *Grosni* brain?" Looking at Cedric, he went on, "You said that you could communicate with the being. If I could find out what it thinks is wrong with it, that would help a lot. I presume there is none of the *Grosni* in this compartment?"

"That is correct," Cedric said. "But you must understand that there is no difficulty in conversing with it." He

## THE SECRET VISITORS

began a stammering, confused explanation of why that was so which Lockhart cut off short. Cedric, while speaking Galactic, was understandable as long as he kept off technical or involved subjects. Otherwise, he might as well have spoken his own archaic English, which Lockhart could not understand at all.

"If you can talk to each other that's all that matters," Lockhart said quickly.

Cedric gave an angry shrug, muttered to himself, then moved to the center of the compartment. He began unscrewing the fastenings of what looked like a manhole cover set flush with the floor. Naydrad and Lockhart went over to lend a hand.

Suddenly there was the rushing whistle of air under pressure and the manhole cover sprang open. Lockhart gagged. It was the same sharp, unpleasant odor which had assailed him outside, but here it could have been cut with a knife. Lockhart bent forward to look down.

It was like gazing into a deep, smooth-walled well, but instead of there being water at the bottom of it, a green, oily porridge bubbled softly to itself. A ladder led downwards, and Lockhart could see rung after rung being covered by the green stuff. Air pressure had kept it down, but now that the cover had been removed it was pushing sluggishly upwards. At its present rate of climb it would be oozing into the compartment within twenty minutes.

"What is it?" Lockhart asked.

Cedric shook his head helplessly.

The smell of the stuff suggested something to Lockhart, but he could not remember what it was. He said, "We can't go through *that*. Is there another way?"

"No," Cedric said.

Lockhart took a deep breath, then let it out slowly through his nose. He had seen the green stuff leaking from one of the tentacle slots near the base of the ship. That

## THE SECRET VISITORS

probably meant that the whole lower part of the vessel was filled with it. He said impatiently, "If I can't get nearer to my patient than this, I can do nothing. Is there no means of draining the ship?"

"Yes," said Cedric suddenly. "There is an opening that discharges the ashes from the vessel's motor." He probably meant radioactive waste from the power pile, Lockhart thought. "But it can only be opened from inside the ship."

There was no need for him to add that the controls for it were submerged in green porridge.

Naydrad cleared his throat. "The repair engineers keep vacuum-suits here," he said. "If you were to use one to go down through this green substance . . ."

"Of course," Lockhart burst out. "But I don't know the position of the controls." He looked at Cedric. Lockhart was not at all anxious for the job himself; he just thought it a good idea.

"Cedric is too small for the regulation vacuum-suit," Naydrad demurred. "But he could guide you to them through the suit's radio. I," he added, a little too hastily, "will have to stay in touch with the *Shekkaldor*." He patted the communicator which was strapped to his chest.

Lockhart was expected to do his own dirty work.

Ten minutes later he was lowering himself into the green stuff, the cable of his RT set unwinding behind him. When the slime closed over his head he gripped the ladder in sudden panic; he had not realized it would be so *dark*. But he forced his hands to release their hold and felt himself sinking. Lockhart had to drop to the bottom of this well, Cedric had told him, then enter another pipe, three feet in diameter, which led off it at right angles. The air bubbles which gave the impression that the stuff was boiling pushed upwards along his suit. He began to wonder what the pressure would be like when he reached bottom.

To keep his mind off these unpleasant thoughts he

## THE SECRET VISITORS

said to Cedric, "Is it possible for you to talk to the *Grosni* from where you are? If you could contact it and—"

"You don't understand," Cedric's voice came impatiently through his phones. "There is no difficulty about speaking to it. I have been communicating with it constantly since entering the ship. I tried to explain . . ." He hesitated, then went on worriedly, "But the *Grosni* does not answer. I thought it was about to contact us upon our entry, but it withdrew."

"What the blazes are you talking about?" Lockhart said, then suddenly he got it. *Telepathy!*

Why hadn't Naydrad told him that, Lockhart asked himself angrily. Then he remembered their hasty trip from the *Shekkaldor*, and his own constant stream of questions. Naydrad had been too busy answering him to volunteer information, and probably the Medic had thought that Lockhart understood what Cedric had tried to tell him about it.

He said urgently, "Can I talk to it? And will it talk to me?"

"This is a dying *Grosni*," Naydrad's voice came warningly. "The Retlonian who visited the ship—"

"You *are* talking to it," Cedric cut in. "But do you want it to talk to you?"

"Of course I want it to talk, dammit," Lockhart began irritably. Suddenly he almost cried out in agony.

A white-hot lance of pain stabbed at his brain; his head was bursting with a terrible pressure, and his lungs were on fire. Lockhart could feel himself breathing rapidly, but still he was choking. With part of his mind he knew that there was nothing wrong with him, and he remembered his peculiarly painful experience just after entering the ship. But his lungs were bursting and he was choking and the pain in his head was getting worse and worse.

The *Grosni*, Lockhart realized, was talking to him.

## XI

STOP IT!

Maybe he screamed the words, or perhaps he only thought he did, but the result was the same. Lockhart's suffering ended abruptly.

So that, he thought shakily, was telepathy as practiced by the *Grosni*. His feet touched bottom just then and he groped for the lead-off conduit. Entering it he soon found that traveling horizontally through the stuff was a lot harder than simply sinking into it; he felt as though he were swimming through an endless river of molasses. The temperature inside the suit grew hotter and hotter; it had been designed for use in a vacuum where surplus heat could radiate away, not for diving operations like this. The sweat poured from him, soaking his clothing and trickling into his eyes. His arms were leaden weights on his shoulders. Lockhart wondered if he were making any progress at all.

He became aware of an obstruction. It felt like a tangle of thick rope. With a feeling of revulsion he remembered the tentacles trailing from the outside of the ship. He pushed his way through.

A projection on his suit caught against something in passing. For an instant the pains returned. Lockhart thought, *I'm sorry*. The being was telepathic.

It seemed like hours before he found the hatch control Cedric had described. Lockhart tugged at it. It moved slightly, then suddenly he was hanging onto it for dear life.

The thick, viscous liquid was in motion along the conduit and trying to pull him along with it. There were sucking,

## THE SECRET VISITORS

bubbling noises from somewhere, and all at once it was no longer black outside his helmet, but black streaked with green.

"What's happening?" Lockhart called urgently.

Cedric began stammering something about this ship being different from the one he had known.

"You have made a mistake," Naydrad cut in, "but a fortunate one. The control you activated has caused all cargo and inspection ports to open. The ship is draining rapidly. But I'll have to tell the *Shekkaldor* what's happening. From over there it won't be a reassuring sight."

"Right," Lockhart said, relieved. "But come down and get me out of this blasted oven as soon as you can."

The flow through the conduit slackened and stopped. Lockhart released his grip on the control lever and wiped at the outside of his visor. He was lying inside a pipe about five feet in diameter which curved away on both sides so that he could not see either end. A single tubular light ran along the ceiling, its harsh brilliance softened slightly by the green scum that coated it and everything else in sight. While waiting for the others to reach him Lockhart tried to sort out his impressions of the being that was supposed to be his patient.

The *Grosni* was telepathic; it could receive and understand his thoughts. He had simply thought, *Stop it*, and all sensations of pain had stopped, just like that. Telepathy, then, should be the answer to his communications problem at least, but it was not. When the *Grosni* tried to communicate with *him* . . . Lockhart cringed at the memory of it.

It didn't seem right that telepathy was only one way. A telepath should be able to broadcast the contents of his mind, not just a radiation that caused severe pain in the receiving person. Cedric's experience with the *Grosni* had been mentally pain-free, and judging from what he had told Lockhart, his conditioning had been aimed only at

## THE SECRET VISITORS

making his physical surroundings bearable. But the *Grosni* in that instance had not been dying.

Lockhart had the frustrating feeling that the explanation was staring him in the face but that he was too stupid to see it. The green substance that had lately filled the ship was, he felt sure, an important clue.

Cedric and Naydrad arrived then, interrupting a train of thought which didn't seem to be leading anywhere. When they had peeled off his vacuum suit, he said, "Take me to the brain segment." He had an idea that the *Grosni* telepathy would function more efficiently if he were close to the transmitting mind.

But he was wrong. When he tentatively asked the being to make contact again it was the same as before. He thought, *Stop!* and the pains ceased immediately. Then he began to wonder whether they had been exactly the same. The strangling, burning sensation in his throat and lungs seemed to have eased a little, but that might have been his imagination.

The brain-casing was an upright metal ovoid ten feet high, housed in a thick-walled compartment in the very heart of the ship, and was constructed of small sliding plates which allowed for growth in the brain. The whole thing looked like an oversized metallic pineapple. Cedric moved one of the six inspection panels aside to reveal a second, transparent panel. Lockhart saw an expanse of grayish-pink convolutions with purple veining, surprisingly similar to the view of a human brain during a craniotomy. Lockhart could see nothing wrong with it, but then he did not know how it *should* look.

As he turned away, the pains which meant that the *Grosni* was trying to contact him washed briefly through his body. They were mild, but Lockhart had the idea that they were meant as a gentle reproof, as though the great



being was impatient at his failure to see something which should be obvious.

"Take me to the breathing orifice," he said to Cedric. His voice was harsh with frustration.

Several seconds before they reached the compartment containing the *Grosni's* respiratory opening, Lockhart felt a decided tail-wind. Inside he saw that a ten-foot cube of metal occupied most of the space, one of its faces being a fine mesh grill through which Lockhart could see into a narrow funnel of leathery, wrinkled flesh. Somewhere inside, the breathing mouth of the *Grosni* took a dive into the hyperdimension. A thick pipe left the cube and disappeared into the floor. Through it, Lockhart's chart told him, went the being's exhaled air for purification and re-use. With its slowed-down metabolism the drawing of a single breath could take days or even weeks.

"How does it carry enough air?" Lockhart asked suddenly. There was a small gale blowing into the compartment. "And what happens if dust or water gets in here?"

"It was not like this on the other ship," Cedric said with a baffled expression. "There, its breathing was scarcely noticeable."

"This air is coming from outside," Naydrad broke in. "Through the open cargo ports. Why it's using so much of it I can't say. With regard to your second question, if there is danger of a liquid or other foreign substance being introduced into the breathing compartment, the door through which we entered closes automatically. Dust and bacteria are caught by organic filters within the organism."

Lockhart said, "It's dry in here. That means that the door must have been sealed while that green stuff was flooding the ship. How did it breathe then?"

"It didn't."

*It didn't breathe*, Lockhart repeated to himself as he turned away. But for how long had the being been unable

## THE SECRET VISITORS

to breathe? Or rather, how long had the green stuff been flooding the ship? Suddenly Lockhart decided that he knew, in broad outline, what had happened to the *Grosni*, and he knew what he would see two levels below at the being's ingestive system.

The *Grosni* breathed air, used water and its food could be eaten by a human being provided he was desperate enough. Scarcely surprising then that its metabolism—though greatly slowed down—also paralleled that of the human body. Only the air in the ship was re-used, the water and food wastes being evacuated from the main body in the hyper-dimension and not through the ship. The ship was packed with food and water stores normally, Lockhart knew, so there was only one place that greenish, semi-solid substance could have come from.

On the way down they had to pass the tentacle which Lockhart had struggled through to reach the hatch control. It had a roughened, fibrous tip, probably for gripping purposes, and further back two shorter, finer tentacles branched from it. These had soft bulbous tips with the watery look of eyes, and one was torn open and partially collapsed. Lockhart remembered catching his vacuum-suit against something here. He thought, *I'm sorry*, a second time.

"This should not be here," Cedric said, pointing to the tangle on the floor and to the opening from which the tentacle emerged. It was a feeding appendage only, he explained, and had no purpose in a part of the ship used only by Human repairmen.

"It was trying to do for itself what we have done for it," Lockhart said. "You can see that its tip is only a few yards short of the hatch control I activated."

But what had caused it to stop short?

The compartment below was such a bewildering tangle that Lockhart had only a vague idea of its size. The feeding mouth was housed in another of the ten-foot cubes, with

## THE SECRET VISITORS

three distinct types of appendage sprouting upwards from what on a Human would be its lips. They spread out and most of them disappeared through slots in the walls. Cedric explained that the thick, heavy type protruded through seals in the hull above the cargo holds and were used for loading. The thinner type with multiple eye-clusters near their tips were for manipulating the various controls of the ship, and the third type carried food to the *Grosni* mouth. Before the species had become technically advanced they had all been feeding appendages, but now they were of three specialized types.

The *Grosni* did everything except breathe and think with its mouth.

But Lockhart could not see into it, because a slow flood of the green substance oozed out between the roots of the tentacles encircling it and onto the floor. It looked remarkably like certain types of Human vomit, Lockhart thought; certainly it smelled like it.

It was nice to have one's deductions borne out like this, Lockhart thought, and there was a further test he could make. He said silently, *Come in again, please*, then added hastily, *But not too hard!* The *Grosni* came in.

As he had expected, the choking, strangled feeling in his throat and lungs was almost gone. But the ache in his head was still present. Lockhart remembered his earlier anxiety over being unable to diagnose the being's trouble, and smiled wryly to himself. That had never been a problem, because every time the *Grosni* touched his mind its symptoms were impressed on it so that he had felt exactly what the *Grosni* was feeling—or the nearest Human equivalent, that is.

But the one drawback was that it could not contact Lockhart fully enough to transmit a coherent message to him, because that would have meant concentrating all of its mind on his, making him feel all the pain that it felt,

## THE SECRET VISITORS

and very likely killing him in the process. Lockhart shook his head. Maybe he could manage without full contact.

Maybe he had effected a cure already.

The way Lockhart saw it, the *Grosni* had suffered an acute digestive upset which had caused violent regurgitation of large quantities of partially digested food. This had filled the ship and, among other things, had cut off its air supply. The *Grosni* had landed the ship, tried to open it up to relieve the rapid strangulation, and had failed. Possibly, Lockhart thought, because the understandably rough landing had damaged something. Supplies had been sent out to it, then a Retlonian official had gone to see why its loading tentacles were not taking them aboard.

Though he had not been aware of it at the time, Lockhart, by opening up the ship had enabled it to breathe again. The rate at which air was pouring into its lungs showed that the *Grosni* metabolism could be speeded up despite the different time-rate of the hyperdimension. Probably an equivalent of adrenalin was released into its system in an emergency like this. All that now remained was to wait until the *Grosni* had enough air, then it would recover and begin helping itself. It should be moving a little already.

But it did not move. Even the appendages which had given an occasional twitch were motionless now. Lockhart had the panicky feeling that it was dead and that its monstrous corpse was about to explode over them. Sweating, he unrolled the chart and began to study it again.

From the mouth, the *Grosni* esophagus ran to a sort of muscular pump which forced the food into a number of smaller and narrower channels to its stomachs. Each of these channels was, according to the chart, fitted with an organic valve which was supposed to insure the food's going one way only; down. The pump and subsidiary valves would be controlled by involuntary muscles, he thought, not by

## THE SECRET VISITORS

conscious direction from the brain. What could make them not only relax, but reverse their normal operation?

A disease peculiar to the being might cause such malfunctioning of the organs concerned, and if that were the case Lockhart could do precisely nothing for it. But such a disease would hardly explain the tentacular paralysis. Something of a more general and widespread nature had occurred, and its onset had been sudden.

"Take me to the brain again," Lockhart said suddenly.

It was still the same ten-foot metallic pineapple. At Lockhart's direction Cedric and Naydrad removed the covers of all six transparent inspection windows and the Doctor began a close visual examination of the brain area exposed. He went around the brain-casing twice before he noticed the trace of yellowish matter overlying the grayish-pink convolutions of the organ. Lockhart had mistaken it for grease on one corner of the window. He noticed too that the sliding plates which allowed for the limited growth of the brain were warped slightly in that area, as if from internal pressure.

Lockhart indicated the area with his finger. "I want the brain-casing removed here," he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. "And bring my bag from the airlock."

Underneath the plating was a thick, transparent membrane, the brain's organic sheath, and beneath that lay plainly revealed a tumor which was not quite as big as a football. It had ruptured, but only a small amount of the yellowish pus had been discharged onto the surrounding brain surface, indicating that the growth had a more or less solid core, and it depressed that surface for a radius of two feet all around it. Here the blood-vessels were swollen dangerously.

Tumor, probably malignant, with developing angioma.

Working through a triangular flap cut in the sheath's membrane he first opened the tumor, then began cutting

## THE SECRET VISITORS

out its contents. He could not risk removing it completely because of his ignorance regarding the placing or importance of blood-vessels or nerve connections in the area. All he could do was trim and pare away at it to relieve the compression on the brain, even though he knew that doing so meant that the growth must eventually return. He syphoned off the yellow discharge, withdrew and neatly sutured the membrane.

He was surprised to find that he was trembling all over. A human operation didn't affect him that way.

"As I see it," Lockhart explained as the casing was being replaced, "the *Grosni* has had this growth for a long time. Pressing down on its brain, it caused gradually increasing mental confusion and loss of coordination. But the shock of its latest landing must have caused the growth to shift slightly, onto the part of its brain regulating the involuntary muscles of swallowing, and also paralysing the tentacles which surround its mouth. The result was a regurgitative spasm of incredible violence. The ship was quickly flooded with the stuff and it was strangling, unable to breathe, as well as being paralysed."

"Is it cured?" Naydrad asked as they left the compartment. His tone was just short of being worshipful.

"We won't know until it begins moving," Lockhart said uncomfortably. He wasn't used to being worshipped. "The distance from the *Grosni* brain to its feeding mouth and connected tentacles is short in the hyperdimension. The nerve impulses should not take long to reach it. But it is not *cured*. I have only tried to remove the cause of its paralysis. It may be able to take off again, if it wants to."

"It will," Cedric stated. "No *Grosni* would knowingly cause death and destruction on this scale."

They were back at their original point of entry when a shudder went through the ship. Crowding into the lock they saw the *Grosni's* loading tentacles lashing about the

## THE SECRET VISITORS

base of the ship. Suddenly the uncontrolled threshing ceased. One of the tentacles curled upwards, then another. Naydrad gave a yell as one wrapped itself around his waist and pulled him out, but Cedric submitted silently. Lockhart backed hurriedly as yet another came for him.

And the *Grosni* was talking again . . .

This time it was different. The pain was still there, but now it was controlled, screened off from Lockhart's mind. Instead of a mind filled with pain and confusion he found coherence, and in the instant before the *Grosni* narrowed its transmission down to simple speech, Lockhart glimpsed an awful lot.

Mixed with the awareness and impressions of a completely alien mind was the knowledge that the being had retained enough control during its suffering to contact him only when contact was requested, and then, out of a thoughtfulness that was intensely humane if not Human, making the contact a diffuse one. Looking into that mind, and remembering the hurried and unsatisfactory work he had done on its brain, Lockhart felt like a louse.

With the tentacle curled tightly around his waist Lockhart was lowered gently to the ground beside the others. Then, as it wrapped itself around a supply container and hoisted it effortlessly aloft, he received his last message from the *Grosni*. It was narrowed down to just three words which sounded silently within his brain.

*"Thank you, Doctor."*

## XII

CAPTAIN KERRON was a man who rarely showed approval of anything, Lockhart thought, and when he did a little went

## THE SECRET VISITORS

an awfully long way. Lockhart felt his chest swell at the brief smile of approbation he received from the Captain at the conclusion of Naydrad's report.

Behind Kerron the big view-screen showed the distant *Grosni* ship. The loading tentacles had been withdrawn and all openings sealed. Take-off must be imminent.

The Captain's face grew suddenly stern again. His eyes practically bored holes in Lockhart and he said harshly, "Some of your party have been attempting to undermine loyalty to the Agency in a number of my officers. This must stop at once."

Abruptly, Lockhart suffered a horrible sinking feeling. Beside him Naydrad moved restively. Cedric remained silent.

Kerron's eyes noted the movement. He went on, "The girl Kelly has told me everything, and while I knew that certain of the wealthier members of the Tourist Class were being landed on Earth, I assure you I was unaware of the inhuman conditioning which was forced upon them, or of the political disruption being caused on your world. In the circumstances my duty is plain. We will proceed to Harla as quickly as possible, making just one call on the way. On arrival you will not be required to go to Agency Headquarters, but will be free to arrange a hearing.

"This will undoubtedly cause trouble for me with my superiors, but, apart from the thanks due you from this planet's inhabitants, I am grateful to you for saving my ship. You have therefore achieved your purpose of gaining protection in this ship for your party—*my* protection. Further subversion of my officers is unnecessary. It is bad for discipline, and there is the danger," his voice lowered perceptibly, "that some of my men may be aware of this criminal core within the Agency, and be in sympathy with it, or even part of it. If these men discovered your true purpose, you would be lucky to reach Harla alive."



## THE SECRET VISITORS

Lockhart breathed a deep sigh of relief. Kerron had had him worried for a moment, but the Captain seemed to be on their side all right. It was just that he ran a tight ship and wanted it to continue that way, and that his faith and loyalty in the Interstellar Travel Agency which employed him had been rudely shattered. The things probably caused the repressed anger in his voice.

"For this reason," Kerron went on, "the Earth party has been moved out of Crew Quarters and given the freedom of the ship. You will find mixing with other races interesting, I expect. Just remember to keep silent regarding the Agency; it is for your own good."

An hour later, in an outfit loaned him by Naydrad, Lockhart went looking for Hedley. Despite what Kerron had told him he expected to see the Earthmen together; they all had too much on their minds to go sightseeing around the ship. He found them in a small passenger lounge, and his entrance went unnoticed because they were crowded against the view-port watching the *Grosni* ship. It was taking off.

Boiling clouds of dust and smoke obscured its outlines and softened the incandescent glare around its stern. Even through the hull of their ship its reaction motors screamed and thundered with a sound that could be felt rather than heard. Slowly it began to rise; veering, overcompensating, then veering again, it staggered drunkenly upwards trailing a long blue spear of light after it. Lockhart bit down on his lip, swaying tensely in sympathy with that gyrating ship, thinking desperately that he should have advised the *Grosni* to wait a while before moving. A Human patient would have been on his back for days.

By some miracle the ship remained vertical. With steadily mounting velocity it screamed upwards to become a shrinking blue star in the sky, then nothing. Lockhart released his bruised lip and forced his fists to unclench.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"Well, well," came Fox's voice, followed by an admiring whistle. "You look real cute, Doctor."

Lockhart tried not to show embarrassment as all eyes turned toward him. He was wearing the silver blouse and diagonal red sash of a Chief Medical Technician, shorts and calf-length boots. Lockhart had shied at wearing the outfit, but Naydrad had insisted that he was more than qualified to wear it. But Lockhart felt uncomfortably conscious of his bare knees.

"So you saved our bacon again, Doc," Hedley said, waving toward two chairs beside him. "Come and sit down. There have been developments since you've seen us last. I want to talk to you."

Lockhart was suddenly glad to sit down. All their problems were solved. He could relax.

"If you mean about Kerron taking us to Harla," he said, "and giving us the freedom of the ship, I've heard it, from him."

"Oh," said Hedley. He gave a half-angry toss of his head, then went on. "Doctor, I'm uneasy about all this. We've been too lucky. This trip to Harla should have been the trickiest part of the job, but we're having no trouble at all."

"Speak for yourself," Lockhart said tartly.

Hedley grinned. "Yes, of course. You've been having all the trouble so far, and are directly responsible for this good luck I've been worrying about." His brows drew together and he fell silent, still worrying.

Lockhart ignored him, his eyes traveling idly about the room. Kelly was missing, he saw, and he had left Cedric singing madrigals—he supposed they were madrigals—in his bath, but everyone else was there. Draper, Simpson and Fox were talking quietly together at the view-port. The Keelers were in a corner by themselves. Mrs. Keeler was chiding Junior in a tired, despairing voice, knowing that

## THE SECRET VISITORS

she was wasting her breath. Her husband was staring moodily at the floor. Deep lines had been cut into his forehead and around his mouth. Plainly he blamed himself for landing his family in their present fix.

The Keelers puzzled Lockhart. The FBI man seemed very fond of his wife, and though he gave the impression of being easy-going, his job proved that he was not the type to stand any nonsense, especially from an eight-year-old son. Young Keeler was an ex-quiz kid, of course, a species prone to spoiling by too much fame at a tender age, but Keeler seemed strangely awkward with the youngster.

He was basing a lot on just a few impressions, he knew, but Lockhart suspected that Keeler had acquired his family ready-made. Mrs. Keeler had perhaps been a war-widow with a grown son when Keeler married her. Perhaps the marriage had been recent, and the holiday in Ireland had been their honeymoon.

A fine honeymoon it had turned out to be.

"You know," said Hedley, breaking suddenly into Lockhart's thoughts, "Kerron gave us the freedom of his ship just a few minutes after you'd left. Kelly must have convinced him that you were quite a Doctor. And while you were over there, the ferry-ship took off. Peculiar."

Lockhart was silent; not in thought, but because he suddenly felt too tired to think. Across the room Junior was prowling about with his space-blaster cocked. It was the same gun he had soaked Fox with in Portballintrae, but it was empty now and he had not yet found a way to refill it from the water dispensers in the ship. He looked slyly around, then darted out into the corridor. Lockhart moved instinctively to stop him, but relaxed. There should be no danger out there now.

But Hedley was looking at him as though expecting some

## THE SECRET VISITORS

comment. Lockhart said, "Er, I'm surprised the Retlonians let the ferry-ship take off."

"Kerron was anxious to report the situation to his superiors, he said, and he agreed to filling the ferry-ship with natives provided one of his officers could take his message along. That's why the ferry wasn't blown out of the sky. And another thing. When you were busy with our large friend another ship landed and started embarking refugees. It was a Government ship, belonging to what I suppose we'd call the Federation Navy, sent here by one of the first Retlonian craft to flee. I was with Kelly and Kerron and saw it arrive."

Hedley paused. He looked down at his large brown hands and went on. "I suggested that Kelly, being a Federation Agent, should contact the ship and arrange a transfer for us. I would have felt a lot easier on a Government ship. From Kerron's face I couldn't tell what he thought of the suggestion, but Kelly didn't like it at all; she thought we'd be better off where we are."

Lockhart felt himself tightening up again. He had thought they were all safe, that it would be just plain sailing from here on in. Maybe they were safe. Maybe they just didn't know enough of the background to realize that Kelly's suspicious behavior was correct in the circumstances. Sardonically he remembered that only a short time ago Hedley had manfully defended the girl against his suspicious mind.

"So you suspect her of something," Lockhart said. "What?"

"I don't know, I just don't know," Hedley said irritably.

"She knows the ropes here better than we do," Lockhart said reassuringly. "I wouldn't worry about it too much if I were you. Where is she?"

"With Kerron, probably," Hedley said shortly.

"Now that we're on our way to Harla," Lockhart said, "it's time she gave us an idea of what to expect there. How are we supposed to act in this Galactic Court, for instance?"

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Lockhart broke off as an officer entered the lounge and approached Hedley. He folded his arms, bowed and politely requested that the Earth party move to the main passenger lounge as this one would shortly become untenable. It appeared that the wiring under the floor required attention.

Whether they liked it or not they were going to meet the other passengers.

The *Shekkaldor* left Retlone and put the necessary distance between it and the system's gravitational field for its Hyperdrive to function accurately. Then it executed the shift through nowhere which brought it out somewhere else. That, despite Naydrad's explanation of the process, was how Lockhart thought of it, and in this case "somewhere else" was the system of Karlning. They landed and disembarked the passengers who were natives of the planet, which took about half an hour. In another hour the routine of the port had been completed and the ship was ready to leave.

But six hours later they were still there.

Hedley said, "What's Kerron hanging around for? He said he was going to take us to Harla as fast as he could."

The same question was beginning to worry Lockhart. He continued his slow pacing along the corridor without saying anything. Kelly might know the answer, but the girl just wasn't available these days. He hadn't seen her since the landing on Retlone. And he was becoming as jumpy as Hedley.

Sometimes he shared the agent's doubts about the girl, but then he would remember how she had looked at the concert in Paris, and on Mount Errigal. Mostly he thought of the way she had clung to him during that dance in Portrush. Kelly was probably not avoiding the Earth party so much as Lockhart himself. She was a Galactic Citizen who had allowed herself to relax before a barbarian named

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Lockhart. She was probably keeping away from him in case he got the idea that it had been more than that.

Kelly's lack of contact with the Earth party had been a source of anxiety at first. Remembering her warnings about the shipboard code of behavior and manners, designed to avoid friction between individuals of widely differing cultural backgrounds, they had been worried about meeting passengers without a detailed knowledge of it. But to the *Shekkaldor's* passengers the Earth party could do no wrong. Any lapses were either laughed off or ignored. The *Grosni* incident was responsible for that. And Fox.

Fox could blow a mean mouth-organ. A passenger had heard him playing dolefully to himself in a corner of the main lounge, and now . . . well, Sinatra never had a more enthusiastic and near-hysterical following. The craziness of it all made Lockhart wonder if Galactic citizens were so very superior to people like himself after all.

His thoughts were rudely interrupted by Hedley gripping his arm.

"Look!" the agent said, pointing through the view-port which they were passing. "The ferry-ship!"

It was the ship that had landed on Earth, transferred them to the *Shekkaldor* and later taken a load of Retlonian refugees and Kerron's report to Harla. Now it was returning, gliding silently downwards with its broad fins catching the sunlight.

"Maybe that's what Kerron has been waiting for," Hedley began thoughtfully, when the sound of running feet behind them made him stop. They turned quickly.

Junior was moving so fast that he ran full tilt into Lockhart's legs. Grabbing two small fistsful of Lockhart's shirt he gasped out, "Come quick!"

"What's wrong?" Hedley asked sharply.

Junior's eyes turned to Hedley. They were big and wide.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

He fought for breath for several seconds, then panted, "It's Mr. Simpson and Mr. Draper. Pop says they're dead."

From somewhere inside the ship there was the unmistakable sound of a revolver shot. It was repeated twice.

### XIII

THEY REACHED the main lounge in seconds, then stopped abruptly just inside the entrance.

Fox stood half-crouching in the center of the floor, a harmonica in his left hand and a heavy automatic pistol in his right, but there was nothing ludicrous about the look on his face. His gun pointed steadily at the figure in an Astrogation section uniform who was half-sitting and half-lying against the wall. The officer was bleeding from the nose, there was a hole in the sleeve of his pale blue tunic and a little blood was trickling down past his wrist. The shattered remains of a needle gun lay near the hand.

Keeler stood a few feet from Fox. The FBI man's gun covered the twenty-odd passengers currently inhabiting the lounge. His stance was more relaxed, but his freckles showed prominently. On the floor between them Simpson and Draper lay in abandoned attitudes, like unstrung puppets.

Lockhart went across to them, but he knew that he could do nothing. The needle gun was a very civilized weapon, he thought bitterly; it was painless, but one of those poisoned needles anywhere on the body meant death in seconds. Hedley spoke from behind him.

"What happened here?"

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Fox was muttering steadily to himself, his eyes boring into the face of the officer on the floor. Hedley repeated himself, sharply.

"I . . . I didn't see it all," Fox said, his eyes shifting briefly towards Keeler.

"I saw it," Keeler said thickly.

"Well?"

"My son was hiding behind that," Keeler said, pointing to a large, heavily upholstered chair. His voice was without inflection and his eyes would not meet Hedley's. "An officer came in and my son jumped out on him from behind it. He yelled for the officer to 'stick 'em up' and he pointed his gun at him."

Lockhart could see the bright plastic toy lying on the floor. It had been stepped on several times and showed it.

"This officer," Keeler went on, indicating the man lying against the wall, "drew a needle gun and stepped back, aiming it at the boy. Fox, Draper and Simpson were sitting close by. They jumped up. Simpson shouted that it was only a toy and grabbed the officer's arm. The needle gun went off. Simpson was still falling to the floor when the officer took aim and fired at Draper, who had made no movement other than rising from his chair. Draper fell. Fox closed with the officer and landed a couple on his face, knocking him where you see him. Then Fox drew his gun and held it on the officer and I thought he was going to kill him.

"I didn't know what repercussions that might have," Keeler said, wetting his lips nervously. "So I sent Junior to get you. Shortly afterwards the officer tried to grab his needle gun, which was lying near him. Fox shot him in the arm, then fired twice at the weapon."

Keeler met Hedley's eyes then for the first time. His freckles still looked like brown paint splattered on parch-



## THE SECRET VISITORS

ment, and his eyes were dark with pain. "I'm awfully sorry," he said.

But he had nothing to apologize for, except Junior.

Curtly, Hedley waved the apology aside. He said, "Doctor, Simpson and Draper were armed. Shoulder holsters. Give me their guns." He snapped his fingers. "Quick!"

Simpson had a .38. Draper had favored a Webley .45, a veritable cannon of a weapon. As Lockhart passed the guns to Hedley he wished suddenly that he had known the two men better. He felt he should feel sorrier that they were dead, and he was ashamed that he did not. But Simpson had been nondescript and unobtrusive to the point of self-effacement, which probably explained why Hedley considered him one of the best men in the department. It was difficult to grieve for a man like that, however. And Draper, big, slow-moving, taciturn Draper had not exchanged a dozen words with Lockhart since their first meeting.

Hedley had been very fond of Draper, Lockhart remembered. He felt suddenly anxious. Why had Hedley asked for the guns? What was he going to do with them?

Lockhart could not guess how this incident was going to affect their relations with Captain Kerron. Some very clear thinking was needed here, and quickly. But looking at Hedley's pale, immobile face, and at his burning eyes, Lockhart knew that the agent was not thinking at all.

Abruptly Hedley was not looking at him, but staring at something over his shoulder. Lockhart twisted around to see what it was.

"Drop those weapons onto the floor. At once!"

It was Kerron, Lockhart saw. The Captain was standing inside the other entrance to the lounge.

"Quickly!" Kerron repeated harshly. "I could have had all of you killed without warning had I so desired. *Drop them!*"

The Captain was not armed, but the six officers ranged

## THE SECRET VISITORS

on each side of him were, and their hands were very steady. Lockhart whirled around to find that the entrance Hedley and he had used was also filled with officers holding needle guns. One of them was also holding a red-faced and silently struggling Junior. The Keeler boy had been unable to give warning of what was happening, but Lockhart could see teeth-marks on the restraining officer's thumb. He almost liked Junior at that moment.

The guns of Hedley, Fox and Keeler thudded against the floor. Lockhart straightened up.

"The right to carry weapons is the prerogative of every Federation Citizen," the Captain began angrily, "and I allowed you to retain yours in the belief that you were sane, responsible beings. I was mistaken, you are nothing but—"

"He killed two of my men," Hedley snapped, "and for no reason at all."

"Simpson might have been an accident," Keeler put in loudly. "But he deliberately aimed at Draper. I saw it."

Several of the passengers began protesting to the Captain as well. Lockhart realized that Fox must have made an awful lot of friends among them.

"Quiet!" Kerron shouted. He pointed to one of the passengers. "You—what happened?"

The recital was practically a verbatim repetition of Keeler's. The Captain cut it off as the passenger was about to add opinions to the facts, and turned to Hedley again.

"My Astrogation officer was threatened by a weapon."

"But it was a toy," Hedley said angrily. "A child's plaything which emits a harmless jet of water."

"The officer did not know that it was harmless," Kerron said harshly. "The shock of having it pointed at him, and of two of your men jumping up seemingly to attack him from the flank, could cause a panic reaction during which he would think it necessary to kill your men in self-defense. I am unable to blame him for his action."

## THE SECRET VISITORS

A deprecating cough made Kerron break off and glance aside. One of the passengers had something to say.

"Before midday I was visiting my cabin," the man began nervously. "It's close to those occupied by the ship's officers. I saw the Earth boy and the officer in question together in the corridor. The boy had his weapon and the officer was playing with him in such a way that he must have known with certainty that it was a toy. He could not, therefore, have been afraid of it when the boy later surprised him."

The Captain's eyes bored into those of the passenger while he spoke, but it was Kerron who lowered his gaze first. "This alters things," he said to Hedley, then he swung toward the recumbent Astrogation officer. "You! Get onto your feet. All of you, follow me. And put those things away," he said impatiently to the armed officers surrounding him. He turned and began leading the way to the control room.

Lockhart had never in all his life experienced such a tongue-lashing. Even Hedley's ears had been red. It was not that Kerron had accused them of anything specific. He simply ripped the whole Earth culture to shreds. Speaking very softly he had begun by dissecting a civilization which allowed its children to amuse themselves with "toys" which were simply training models for the full-sized and lethal weapons which, he had no doubt, they would use just as frequently when they reached maturity.

Kerron admitted that the culture held much of value—its music in particular displayed an emotional depth and a sensitivity that was unique in the Galaxy—but this barbarous aspect of Earth's civilization he found repellent.

Lockhart, though his face was burning with the rest of them, thought that Kerron was building an awful lot from a toy gun. And there was something about it all that did

## THE SECRET VISITORS

not quite ring true. When all Galactic citizens were allowed arms, why was he talking like this? But Lockhart didn't say anything. Kerron was not the sort of man one could interrupt.

With a sudden change of tone, the Captain went on. "From now until we reach Harla the Earth people will stay in their quarters. They will have no contact with passengers and as little as possible with ship's personnel. This is for your protection.

"However," he added, reaching into a pigeon-hole behind his desk, "it is apparent that my Astrogation officer, for reasons which he is hardly likely to talk about, deliberately killed two of your men." He straightened with a needle gun in his hand and slid it across to Hedley. "It is your right to perform the execution."

Lockhart gaped at him. The Captain had been ranting at them about the savagery of Earth with one breath, then with the next he cold-bloodedly sentenced one of his officers to death, and at the hands of Hedley. With an effort Lockhart brought his disordered thoughts under control. Kerron's action was not in character with his previous behavior. Something was going on.

The eyes of Keeler and Fox were glued to the needle gun as Hedley picked it up. The Astrogator stood with drooping shoulders, a dazed rather than a frightened expression on his face. Hedley's face was pale and strained as he took aim at the man who had killed two of his friends. With awful certainty Lockhart knew that he was not thinking of their safety, of their purpose in reaching Harla, or anything but the tumbled bodies of Draper and Simpson in the main lounge, and vengeance.

"Stop!" Lockhart said urgently. "Are you mad?"

Hedley ignored him.

Lockhart's action then was instinctive, and stupid; he realized that when he had time to think about it after-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

wards. With his hand he covered the gun's tiny aperture and said quickly, in English, "Use your head, man. This might be a test."

Hedley gazed hypnotically at the hand blocking his line of fire, then he shuddered violently, and swore. He dropped the weapon onto Kerron's desk as though it were red-hot.

"Of all the damn-fool things to do, Doc," he said. His face was still white, but something like sanity had returned to his eyes. "I might have killed you."

But if it had been a test, Kerron gave no indication whether or not they had passed or failed it. He signaled for the Astrogator to be taken out, then he said, "We will arrive on Harla tomorrow. Be prepared to disembark. And Doctor," he turned to Lockhart, "I would advise you to remove that uniform. Your own clothing has been cleaned and will be returned to you shortly. It would cause comment, you understand, for an Earthman who was bringing charges against the Agency to appear in the uniform of one of its officers." He smiled faintly. "That is all. You may go now."

Suddenly Lockhart remembered a question he wanted to ask, and Kerron, if anybody, could give him the answer.

"Where is Kelly?" he said. "Why haven't we seen her these past few days? She was supposed to stay close to us."

Kerron nodded. "She was to have kept her eye on you, kept you out of trouble, and until the incident of a few minutes ago we didn't think you needed her. Your work with the *Grosni* insured your popularity with the passengers, and I thought that my authority would be sufficient protection against others. I was wrong, and I blame myself entirely for this tragedy.

"But to answer your question, she is still doing the word of a Federation agent among certain of my officers. And though her efforts are unnecessary—I intend helping you

## THE SECRET VISITORS

in every way possible—I don't want to stop her." The stern, coldly composed mask of Kerron's face slipped for an instant, revealing a being tortured by fear, insecurity and a warring complexity of other emotions which were unreadable. "I will need friends in the Administration when this is all over."

Three hours later they were gathered in the storage compartment adjoining their cabins into which Kerron had put an adequate number of chairs, when Fox broke a long silence by saying, "That Kerron is a peculiar character."

"Kerron is afraid for his job," Hedley answered. "You can see that. And he's trying to protect himself. He's human after all, and I'm sorry for the hole we've put him in."

A sharp report, muffled by the intervening bulkheads, put a dramatic period to Hedley's concluding sentence. Lockhart jumped to his feet, the others stared wildly at each other. It was Hedley who relaxed first.

"We're all here," he said, then disgustedly, "Somebody is probably playing around with one of our guns. I hope he hasn't blown somebody's head off with it."

But, though he did not know it at the time, somebody had.

## XIV

THE EARTH party left the *Shekkaldor* through a cargo port while general interest was centered on the passenger gangways. Kelly still had not contacted them beyond sending written instructions for leaving the ship. A ground car driven

## THE SECRET VISITORS

by a brisk, competent young man in black blouse and shorts of severe cut whisked them toward the perimeter. They had a hurried look at Harla, capital city of the planet of the same name, before the car dipped into an underground tunnel.

Everything, Lockhart was thinking angrily, had been done in a hurry in this affair. Something happened, an imperfect explanation was given for it, then something else occurred before it could be properly understood. There had been no time to think things out, to catch their mental breath. Lockhart didn't like that; he had a methodical mind. At the moment it seethed with questions.

Harla was the center of Galactic administration. The two planets, Harla and Vitlimen in a nearby system, made up the double heart of Galactic civilization. It was on these, the Central Worlds, that they practiced rudimentary surgery, repaired *Grosni* ships and did various other things which commanded the awed respect of the Galactic citizenry. And here, Lockhart thought, should be the answer to questions which had nagged at his mind since boarding the *Shekkaldor*.

He caught a glimpse of some native Harlans when the ground-car stopped and they were transferred into what their driver told them was a pneumo-coach. The females wore blouses and long, tight trousers, and the males wore loose ones; other than that they looked very ordinary. Two of them were laughing at something. They did not, as various people had led Lockhart to expect, look like citizens of a civilization driven psychotic by boredom. They looked healthy and very sane.

The present vehicle being automatic, their driver sat with them. Lockhart decided that now was as good a time as any to start satisfying his curiosity. Especially about Kelly.

Hesitantly, he said, "I wonder if you'd mind telling me

## THE SECRET VISITORS

something about your culture. There are some points on which I am not clear."

The Harlan looked up. For the first time Lockhart noticed the old, experienced eyes in that youthful and probably many times rejuvenated face. He smiled and said, "Doctor Lockhart, isn't it? No, I don't mind. On this assignment answering your questions is part of my job."

That was all Lockhart wanted.

The first question was a complicated one, and the Harlan frowned thoughtfully for several seconds before answering. Then he said, "The information given to you about our civilization is correct, but it has been highly colored by its source. That is understandable. It came from members of what we call the 'tourist class,' individuals who, although gifted in many ways, think that the galaxy has been created solely for their amusement. The need to experience new sensations is a neurosis with them, and you can understand, I think, how their defeatist slant on our civilization stems from the fact that they could help it, but won't—a simple guilt complex.

"Generally speaking," the Harlan went on, "the drab similarity of environment throughout the Galaxy causes cultural apathy rather than intense boredom. Boredom presupposes a certain amount of dissatisfaction, and a being cannot feel dissatisfied if he has no knowledge of anything better than his present state. The citizens of these worlds may be apathetic, unimaginative, lethargic, but they are rarely bored.

"Someday," he continued, "we will succeed in shaking them out of this cultural apathy. We are having a little success even now on some worlds. But it will require hard work and a lot of time. That is why it angers us to see gifted people wasting their time when they could be doing useful work, and business concerns growing rich and powerful—much too powerful, sometimes—catering to them."



## THE SECRET VISITORS

The Harlan laughed. "You will understand, naturally, that *my* slant is biased in favor of the Administration."

Lockhart smiled faintly in return; he had not quite finished yet. He still remembered the time on Retlone when Kelly had turned down their suggestion for transferring to a Federation ship. That incident had bothered him a lot.

He said, "If Kelly is a Federation agent, why did her account differ from yours?"

"Because," the Harlan replied, "she isn't an agent."

Up till then, nobody had been paying much attention to the conversation, but suddenly the Harlan was the focus of all eyes.

"Oh! She didn't tell you, then," he said, looking faintly uncomfortable at his accidental breach of confidence. "No. She was one of the passengers on the Agency ship which Hargon was investigating. He decided to trust her with the information he had obtained because he knew he would soon be killed or conditioned, and he hoped she would bring it here. But a chance of gaining more information presented itself and she decided to carry on where Hargon had left off.

"Because of her youth she has not yet undergone the rejuvenation treatment and has unrealistic and romantic ideas about an Agent's work," the Harlan went on, "but she did that work exceedingly well. She reached Earth and was lucky in contacting Cedric who gave her the Earth language spool. Eventually your group came along. Kelly is a most unusual girl to be of the Tourist class. She can be a real agent if she wants that, unless she's decided by now that it would be more romantic to be something else." He gave Lockhart a peculiar look, adding dryly, "Something in the medical field, perhaps."

Before Lockhart could reply a surge of deceleration bent them forward in their seats. The vehicle stopped and the Harlan led them across a small landing platform to an

## THE SECRET VISITORS

elevator. They shot upwards for what seemed a very long way.

Almost talking to himself, Fox murmured, "She certainly is an unusual girl, doing what she did for us."

"Yeah," Keeler said softly. "And her a civilian, too."

The others were silent. It was a respectful silence.

The Harlan had told them that she was waiting for them in their quarters, but Lockhart found himself wanting to avoid her. It was his inferiority complex again, he thought angrily. But he kept remembering Portrush, and that dance hall, and how he had almost stayed there until too late. The professor had called her "Joan of Arc."

She was unattainable, except, perhaps, by someone who was her intellectual and cultural equal.

Their quarters consisted of a large central room with others leading off it, but nobody was paying attention to layout or appointments just then. One wall of the central room was a sheet of transparent plastic, and through it they could see Harla.

The city spread out before them to the horizon, the surface and air above it thronged with traffic. The buildings were all cube-shaped; functional and efficient, but not beautiful. All except one.

Less than a mile away a slender white tower rose tapering into the glaring blue of the sky, dominating the city. It was flawless, breathtaking, a poem in metal and plastic.

"That is the Court," the Harlan said, breaking the awed silence. There was more than just a trace of pride in his voice. He began quoting statistics.

The Galactic Court was the most intricate and extensive union of electronic brains in existence, containing more than two cubic miles of electronic equipment. It was capable of solving hundreds of problems—or more precisely, passing hundreds of judgements—per minute with the impartiality

## THE SECRET VISITORS

possible only to a machine. Normally a "judgement" was all that was necessary for most cases, but when something really serious came up, something requiring punishment, for instance, human judges were needed. A machine could judge fairly, but it could not pass sentence.

In this case six judges would be present. Harlnida, the planet's Chief Administrator, would be one of them; the other five, two of whom had Agency leanings, were off-planet dignitaries of various types.

"The reason for both friendly and hostile judges during a hearing," the Harlan explained, "is to avoid the danger of an overly harsh sentence being passed on the guilty party. The judges possess the power of summary execution, provided they are all agreed on it, but that has not occurred for centuries.

"You all know of the lie-detector system used by the Court," he went on. "Present your evidence clearly and truthfully and you have nothing to worry about. The hearing is set for tomorrow. All that remains is for me to warn you to have no contact with strangers until then." He turned to go. "I will leave someone on guard at the elevator shaft in case—"

"Just *one* man?" Hedley asked.

"Some security system they've got here," Fox said in a scathing undertone to Keeler. The Harlan looked at him sharply.

"We have sources of information within the Agency," the Harlan said with a touch of impatience, "and while their exact plans are unknown, we know with certainty that there will be no attempt by them on your lives. Widespread reorganization is taking place within the Agency at the moment. The war planned for Earth has been called off. The adverse decision of the Court will, of course, force them to reveal the coordinates of your planet so that a full investigation can be made. Our chief concern is not for the

## THE SECRET VISITORS

hearing, but what we are going to do with you afterwards."

His tone became almost apologetic.

"You are an able race of Humans," he went on, "and will be capable of great things in the not-too-distant future. But knowledge of the Interstellar Drive or the Longevity treatment, which you are very close to discovering for yourselves, anyway, must come naturally for your healthy development. That is why, should you elect to return to Earth, all memories since your entry into the Agency ferry-ship must be erased.

"However, you are welcome to stay here. There are many ways for you to assist us. And Doctor Lockhart especially . . ."

"Excuse me," Hedley broke in, "but it seems to me that the findings of the Court are being taken for granted. We were expecting more trouble than this."

The Harlan held up his hand. "If your evidence is accepted by the Court as truthful, its findings are a certainty. So is the sentence."

"So it's all over but the shouting," Hedley said with a long sigh. The lines around his eyes and mouth were smoothing themselves away. "We've done it."

"Yes," said the Harlan, smiling. He bowed slightly, then moved to the door. Before leaving he called something which sounded like "Good-bye" in the direction of one of the side rooms. It was answered by Kelly's voice. Shortly afterwards she came into the main room.

A shrill wolf-whistle from Fox was cut short by a disapproving glare from Hedley. Lockhart saw that she had changed to the Harlan mode of dress, and while he couldn't say exactly what difference it made in her, he very definitely approved. But her face was pale and tense. She looked frightened.

Lockhart said, "Hi, Secret Agent." He smiled. "I suppose they *do* call you Kelly? You've fooled us so much . . ."

## THE SECRET VISITORS

He broke off. Kelly had clapped her hand to her face, whirled, and ran back the way she had come. The sound of muffled sobs came faintly through the open doorway. Lockhart, with a helpless look at Hedley, followed her inside.

"We understand," Lockhart said, putting his arm around her shoulder reassuringly. "Please don't do that. Nobody's angry with you. On the contrary . . ."

"I meant to tell you everything," she said, sniffing, "before we left Earth. I was afraid. I wanted to tell you that day in the car but you changed the subject. It was too late afterwards."

"You can tell me now," Lockhart said placatingly. "The Harlan didn't say much about it." He gave her his handkerchief.

She told him of the adventure, in detail, then of her background. Somehow, before Lockhart knew it, they were exchanging life stories. From the adjoining room came the sound of Fox playing "Frankie and Johnny" with Keeler and Hedley supplying the vocal until Junior threw a tantrum because he wanted to play the mouth-organ. Hedley said several times that it was a pity old straight-laced Kerron wasn't there to be properly thanked for what he had done for them, especially as he was almost certainly in trouble over it.

The evening wore on and dusk fell. The stars came out.

Lockhart knew then why this was called one of the Central Worlds. Here, in the center of the galactic lens, the stars burned so thickly and so close that the sight of them caught at Lockhart's throat. It made him want to cry, or cheer, or something.

A pounding on the outer door startled him. Lockhart gently but hurriedly eased Kelly's head away from his shoulder and got to his feet. The pounding was repeated, accompanied by a muffled voice, then the hiss of the sliding door. Lockhart, closely followed by Kelly, went quickly into

## THE SECRET VISITORS

the main room. When he saw who it was he almost laughed out loud.

The hair was no longer dyed gray, the face wore a wide, loose grin instead of its customary severity, and the tall, commanding figure was slouched forward and swaying gently, but it was Kerron all right.

"For Pete's sake," Fox said incredulously, "Just smell the man! *Whisky!*"

### XV

DESPITE HIS keen interest in their surroundings and in the processes of Galactic Law to be unfolded before him, Lockhart strongest emotion was shame. It was not that Kerron—intent, as he had put it, on drowning his sorrow at being kicked out of his Senior Captaincy and celebrating the Earth party's success at the same time—had been the cause of his getting more than slightly drunk. The others had been pretty high, too, and after the tension of the past few days he couldn't blame them. It was simply that he had taken too much of Kerron's Earth whisky, and while under its influence had proposed several times to Kelly. He was ashamed of that.

If Kerron's arrival had not interrupted them he would have proposed to her anyway, but sober instead of drunk.

The only good thing about the affair was the absence of a hangover. Maybe it was as ex-Captain Kerron had stated, that the constant ducking in and out of hyperspace had that effect on his smuggled Earth liquor, or maybe he had been making a joke. It was hard to think of Kerron

## THE SECRET VISITORS

making a joke, but then it was hard to think of him drunk.

Beside him Kelly moved restively. "The judges are coming in," she said. "It won't be long now."

The great domed hall set atop the Court building could hold two thousand comfortably and had never been filled before; now it held almost double that and they did not seem to mind the discomfort. In the center of the vast room was a white dais with two dull metal cabinets on it, with a chair between them. The cabinets were the visible part of the Lie-detector, and of the associated mechanism designed to tell if the witness was using trickery to beat the Detector. Their findings were communicated by indicator lights set above each. The judges' positions were about twenty yards from the Detector, and in between were the defense counsels. Also in this area, but nearer to the public section, sat Hedley, Keeler and Fox, plus a few Court technicians. Lockhart, who was in the first row of the public enclosure, could see that Hedley was beginning to fidget.

As the six judges took up their positions, Kelly pointed out Harlnida, the Chief Administrator. He had a young, strong face that was compelling solely because of the eyes. The eyes were old, hundreds of years old, and very, very wise. With no formalities at all the signal was given to commence.

Lockhart set his pile of notes on the chair beside him. He checked his two-way radio, making sure the button speaker would not slip from his ear, and settled back to wait his turn.

Hedley had wanted a prompter in case some of them forgot parts of their evidence, and Kelly had procured the two sets. Nobody had objected to their use. Without them he would have had to shout across thirty or forty feet to the agent.

The Agency's counselor opened by admitting that the

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Interstellar Travel Agency had been guilty of secretly taking small numbers of tourists to Earth, that very large sums of money were charged for the trip, and considerable profit was made from the undercover sale of pictures and music tapes taken on the planet. All this was admitted. But he stressed the fact that avarice was only part of their reason for doing this. It was done mainly for the protection of the Galactic Federation.

The Earth, he said, was dangerous, its people and their products a threat to the mental stability of Galactic Citizens unless a filter was interposed which allowed only the relatively harmless portion through. The Agency had been this filter, conducting an altruistic censorship which could better be appreciated by Human judges than a machine.

One of the judges, wearing the blue sash of the off-planet resident, interrupted at that point. He said, "The Court, through a machine, can evaluate the property which we call altruism if proof of altruism exists. Does it?"

The Agency counselor was silent for a moment, then he said carefully, "Agency personnel are given protective hypnotic conditioning before landing on the planet, and none of them are immediately available."

"Conditioning! That is forbidden, being both a violation of privacy and in its grosser forms actual enslavement."

"The process is both harmless and temporary," the counselor said quickly. "Not, as these three members of the Earth party will later suggest to you, a widespread and inhuman method of ridding ourselves of the tourists we take to the planet." He paused and went on more slowly. "We admit that these tourists rarely if ever return, but that is because they choose to stay. They are not interfered with either mentally or physically, with the exception of Educator treatment in Earth language and customs. Protective devices and money are supplied them,



## THE SECRET VISITORS

and they may continue with Longevity treatments as long as they please.

"These charges against the Agency," he continued in a voice throbbing with righteous anger, "are lies brought by a group of scheming, vicious Earth-humans whose abberated intelligence is shown by the way in which they forced entrance onto an Agency ship, there making heroes of themselves to its passengers by the action of one of their number in curing a *Grosni* which was said to be dying. Oh yes, they made friends on the *Shekkaldor*, all right; rich, powerful friends. And I would suggest that it is these 'friends' with their resources and knowledge of current conditions in the Federation who are responsible for these charges against us. If the Agency could be discredited, ruined, then certain business organizations that have been resenting the Agency's monopoly of interstellar commercial transport would stand to profit. Not to mention," he added, with an oblique glance at Harlnida, "the relief it would give the Administration, which has been accusing it of sedition for the past century or so."

Beside Lockhart, Kelly said worriedly, "Why is he conducting it like this? He should be blaming the crimes on a secret faction within the Agency, offering cooperation to bring them to justice, and trying to salvage what remains of the business. Instead you would think he was trying to *win* the case."

"But I am convinced that this vicious conspiracy must fail," the Agency counsel was saying. "No matter what ingenious scheme they have thought up to fool the Court—and again I would stress that they are an able, intelligent and extremely dangerous race—the attempt must fail. If it does not, and these . . . these savages gain a favorable decision . . ." His shoulders drooped, and in a voice thick with suppressed emotion he said, "If permitted

## THE SECRET VISITORS

I will show two vision recordings which give some idea how an Earth-human can behave."

Just then Harlnida interrupted to ask if there were witnesses present who could state to the Lie-detector that these records were complete, accurate and true.

"No," Agency counsel replied. "One is a fragment only, taken by a passenger during a quarrel between the *Shekkaldor's* Astrogation Officer and this man." He pointed to Fox. "The other was taken simply because the same officer had to leave his desk and left a sound and vision recorder trained on it in case a message arrived for him in his absence. The passenger left this morning on the *Shekkaldor*, as did the member of the crew who first saw the body."

*Body!* What body? The bodies of Simpson and Draper had been buried in space shortly after their deaths. Kerron had insisted on that, because of the accelerated decomposition which the poisoned needles caused. Lockhart felt a sudden premonition of disaster. What body was this?

Harlnida said, "Permission is granted, though personally, I fail to see why these recordings are being presented when the Earth-humans will ultimately undergo Detector questioning."

The Agency man asked that the windows be polarized. Lockhart watched a large white screen being lowered from the domed ceiling. He could view it comfortably by lying back in his seat. Lockhart indicated the counselor and said, "Why don't they put him under this super lie-detector of yours? He's not only twisting the facts, he's tying them into knots."

Kelly shook her head impatiently. "He is acting on instructions, and believes that he has been told the true facts. Can't you see that?" She bit her lip. "This is insane. His evidence is not verifiable by the Detector; yours is. He's throwing the case away."

The light dimmed. A picture, in color but without sound,

## THE SECRET VISITORS

appeared on the screen. It showed the *Shekkaldor's* Astrogator staggering backwards against a wall and slumping to the floor. It showed the blood pouring from his nose, then the picture slewed crazily and Fox filled the screen. The bodies of Simpson and Draper were not in view, neither was Keeler; just Fox. And Fox was holding a revolver, his face distorted by rage and grief. Fox mouthed something and smoke spurted from the gun. The picture swung to the Astrogator again. It showed him gripping his arm tightly, his face contorted in pain and blood from his wound beginning to ooze through his fingers. It did not show the needle gun he had been trying to snatch from the floor. Then it blanked out.

Shocked, incredulous gasps arose from the public section. Hedley began protesting loudly that there was more to the picture than had been shown, but the stern voice of a judge ordered him to be silent.

There was more, and worse, to come.

This time the Astrogator's back was shown, sitting stiffly in a chair before his control desk. A second figure moved into view, also with his back to the camera pick-up. It was dressed in Earth-style clothing and held a revolver which was pointed at the Astrogator's head. The figure looked oddly familiar to Lockhart, until with a mind-wrenching shock he realized that it was himself.

Or rather, it was wearing Lockhart's clothing.

This visual record included sound, and the report of the gun was thunderous. The officer was flung forward by the force of the bullet, a round, dark hole appearing in the back of his neck like magic. Then his swivel seat turned slightly, and he slipped off to lie face upwards on the floor.

"That wasn't me," Lockhart burst out. "I didn't see that officer after we left him in the control room with Kerron."

He broke off as light returned. Kelly was looking at him.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

So were the six judges and all of the crowd. Their faces were sickly pale. Lockhart knew that the *Grosni* incident on Retlone had made him a hero, a legendary figure whose offenses against custom were laughed off. That, he knew without false modesty, was the chief reason their trip here had been relatively trouble-free. But looking at the white, angry faces glaring at him now . . .

"I know it wasn't you," Kelly said. "But . . . but I'm frightened."

"He's trying to get the crowd to lynch us before we get a chance to testify," Lockhart said wildly. A few minutes ago he would have laughed at such a melodramatic suggestion, but now there was nothing in it to laugh at.

"They would not commit violence like that," Kelly said, reproof in her tone. "They are civilized people."

It was several minutes before the judges restored silence and order. During that time Lockhart saw Hedley being led to the seat on the Detector dais. A device comprising a large number of tiny, revolving mirrors was hung before the agent's eyes, metallic disks were attached to his head, neck and arms from which wires trailed, and a number of blood samples were taken. These tests, Lockhart knew, were exhaustive, and would uncover any attempt by a witness to fool the Detector. A light metal helmet was placed on his head and connected to the Detector cabinet, after which the testing instruments were removed. Hedley was told to begin before the test data had been fully analyzed by the first cabinet and the agent began to speak.

Quietly and without dramatics, Hedley began with a resumé of the Agency's machinations on Earth, including its cold-blooded treatment of the tourists. As he talked the indicator lights flickered and went on, first above the analyzer, then the Detector—both of them pale green. There seemed to be no thaw in the feelings of the crowd, Lockhart noticed, which was surprising. If anything it had

## THE SECRET VISITORS

grown more hostile. Lockhart switched his attention to the judges.

All the faces registered open hostility, mixed, in Harlnida's case, with a look of bitter disappointment.

It was Harlnida who spoke. Pointing to the indicator lights he said harshly, "The Detector refuses your evidence. The tests show that you have recently introduced the drug *Crylthis* into your system. Your evidence is therefore worthless."

### XVI

HEDLEY LOOKED thunderstruck. Lockhart felt the way Hedley looked. The first shock wore off, then his mind became a churning mass of wild questions.

One of the questions was asked by Hedley.

"What's *Crylthis*?" he said angrily. "We've never even heard of the stuff."

Harlnida said impatiently, "It is a combination of rare and extremely expensive drugs, the use of which makes it impossible for the Court to decide whether a witness is lying or not. It was developed in secret and its existence has become known only recently. You are full of the stuff."

"There's some mistake," Hedley protested. "I've taken no drugs, none of us have. The machine must be at fault."

"The testing devices are not at fault."

Hedley looked wildly about him. "Wait! There's two more witnesses," he said desperately. "Keeler and Fox. Let them give evidence."

Gripping his knees tightly and breaking off every few

## THE SECRET VISITORS

seconds to lick his lips, Keeler talked until the machine behind him had finished its analysis of his test samples, then he stopped. The indicator lights were burning pale green.

Hedley said, "Fox." He sounded sick.

But with Fox it was the same. Pale green light; evidence refused by the Court.

Beside Lockhart Kelly sat frozen, her face buried in her hands. He could get no response from her. And Hedley's set must have been switched off because he could not raise the agent either, short of shouting across to him. But what did it matter, he suddenly asked himself. Their plans and hopes had been blasted at the last moment, there was nothing left. They had been stupid even to think that they could get away with it—a handful of Earthmen against an interstellar business empire, and fighting on the enemy's own ground, too. They didn't know enough. Galactic civilization was too complex. Why fight it any longer?

The sound of his name being called brought Lockhart momentarily out of his despair.

"This is a waste of time," the Agency counselor broke in. "They are obviously guilty of perjury and—"

"Shut up, you," Hedley said viciously; then, "Lockhart! Come over here, quickly!"

Lockhart's obedience as he began moving toward the Detector dais was purely involuntary. No slightest flicker of hope lit the blackness of his despair. Not, that was, until he heard what Hedley was saying . . .

". . . Somehow this drug has been given to us without our knowledge. But the party responsible must have missed the Doctor. He was separated from us, a mere observer. How else could it have happened? It was given, possibly in our food, and we didn't know that it had been done."

"This ignorance," Agency counsel cut in sarcastically, "this *pretended* ignorance, is deplorable. You could not help

## THE SECRET VISITORS

but know that the drug *Crylthis* had been administered. Immediately upon being introduced into the system it produces a marked state of euphoria which lasts up to three hours, after which there are no sensations whatever. But," he ended impatiently, "You know all this already."

Lockhart was only a few yards from the Detector when the Agency man's words registered. He stopped dead. A great light dawned and he cursed himself bitterly for a blind, stupid, over-trusting fool. Hedley was urging him forward, but he shook his head. The machine would react to him exactly as it had done with the others. Lockhart turned and spoke rapidly to Hedley.

Hedley listened, swore, then swung round to face the judges again.

"The drug was administered last night," he said. With desperate urgency he went on to describe how it had been done. He ended, "Our 'guard' must have been bribed by the Agency."

It had been Kerron, of course. Kerron the stern, righteous Captain who, because of his help to the Earth party, had been dismissed from his high position in the Agency. Kerron had been a pitiable sight, yet one that drew admiration more than pity because, though he had been drunk and very, very sorry for himself, Kerron had never actually *asked* the Earth party to use its influence on his behalf. He had retained that much pride, at least.

And now Lockhart realized that it had all been an act. They had not been drunk on Kerron's smuggled Earth whisky last night; they had gone into a state of euphoria produced by the *Crylthis* in their systems. They had trusted Kerron because of his actions on the ship; in a stiff-necked, disapproving sort of way he had been their friend, they thought. But Lockhart now knew that Kerron had been acting from the very first.

Kelly had told him the truth about the Earth party

## THE SECRET VISITORS

just before the landing on Retlone. He had pretended to be on their side, but while Lockhart had been busy with the *Grosni* Kerron had sent the ferry-ship to Harla with a report of the Earth party's bid to reach the Galactic Court. And if *Shekkaldor* escaped from Retlone Kerron had asked that the ferry-ship rendezvous with him on Karlning with instructions from his superiors. That was the reason they had delayed in taking off from the Karlning system.

Lockhart saw it all clearly now. After the *Grosni* incident the fantastic popularity of the Earth-humans had frightened Kerron, and on his own initiative he had decided to do something about it. The Astrogation officer who pretended to be frightened by Junior's toy gun so that he could kill Draper and Simpson had been acting on Kerron's orders. The fact that he had only killed two of the Earth party was probably the reason for his later being shot by an Agency man wearing Lockhart's clothes; he should have bagged more. They had all heard that shot, but had dismissed it as an accidental discharge of one of their confiscated weapons. Shortly afterwards Lockhart's clothing had been returned to him.

But that killing, and Kerron's decision to segregate the Earth party again, had occurred *after* the arrival of the ferry-ship with instructions from Headquarters. Those instructions must have stated that the Earth people were to be discredited rather than harmed, and the murder of the Astrogator had been toward that end. They had also ordered that Kerron, who had acted sympathetically toward them up until then, continue to do so until he had their trust. Then he would be in a position to really discredit them.

Lockhart became aware that the Agency man had risen to reply to Hedley. His tone was scornful.

"The Captain Kerron you mention left on the *Shekkaldor*



## THE SECRET VISITORS

this morning. He is an exceptionally able officer and has never yet been disciplined in any way."

Lockhart had been expecting something like that.

"So Kerron isn't here either. Nor are the men responsible for taking those pictures you've shown us." Hedley turned to the judges. "Don't you think," he said with biting sarcasm, "that is just a little bit suspicious?"

"No," one of the off-planet judges replied coldly. "The Tourist Class is not encouraged on Harla. There is no time for them here, so it is natural for them to leave after a very short stay. And let me remind you that you have used drugs which inhibit the body functions that indicate to the Detector whether the truth or a lie has been told. Your accusations and suspicions, like your evidence, are worthless."

Hedley began to argue, but Lockhart knew that it was no good. The Detector had the last word here, and anyone caught trying to influence it in any way was considered guilty on the spot. There was no chance of bringing back anyone who might help—the Agency would make sure of that. And the *Crylthis* took a long time to disappear from the system. The decision, the sentence, would be given here and not very many minutes from now.

The Agency, Lockhart knew, was only slightly less powerful than the Administration. If it succeeded here it would emerge stronger, and the Earth case would never again be opened. Lockhart shivered involuntarily.

The Court, that emotionless and impartial machine, had been effectively disposed of by the *Crylthis* being in their systems, which left the six human judges. But these were hostile, even though most of them knew that the Agency was not completely innocent. They, long-lived, highly civilized and, because of this, having a veritable phobia about physical suffering, were so outraged at what appeared to be a cold-blooded murder by Lockhart that even Harlnida seemed to be against them.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

But in the Galactic Federation they were civilized. They did not throw you in jail, use the cat or anything else likely to cause physical or mental pain—such as awaiting one's execution. Lockhart remembered how, on the *Shekkaldor*, Kerron had given Hedley a needle gun and told him that it was his right to perform the execution of the Astrogator.

The Earth party was in danger of quick, painless and imminent death.

"But someone must have seen Kerron on his way to our apartments last night," Hedley protested. "And seen how drunk he acted. That would prove part of our evidence."

"They may have seen a person resembling Kerron," another judge cut in. "It proves only your foresight in providing yourselves with this story on the chance that your attempt to trick the Court would fail. The attempt has failed, and this second line of defense convinces no one." He turned to glance along the five stern faces of his colleagues. "I think we have wasted enough time. Let us agree on the sentence."

"Wait!"

Lockhart had not known that he shouted until he saw the judges turn to look at him. It was an involuntary protest against the cruel injustice of what was happening. It wasn't fair after all they had come through, and done. Desperately, he tried to think of some way out, but his mind was an incoherent, seething whirlpool that circled madly around his personal fear of dying. The eyes of the judges were boring into him, but he could not think of a single thing that could help them. *Oh please*, he thought desperately, and he did not know whether it was a prayer or a curse, *please don't let this happen*.

Suddenly there seemed to be a pressure on his mind. It was a peculiar sensation. His mind was perfectly calm, but Lockhart knew that he was not responsible for this strange feeling of detachment. Their problem was still of great im-

## THE SECRET VISITORS

portance, but now it had become separated from the confusing side-issues of personal fear for himself and for his friends and race. It was simply a problem, and not a very difficult one. As Lockhart solved it he knew that it was he who had found the answer, but the vast, awesome calm which had descended on his mind, allowing him to find it, that had not been him. He had experienced a similar feeling before, however.

*Thank you*, Lockhart thought. *And thank you for letting me do it myself.* He wondered if it was the same *Grosni*. Then he swung round to Hedley.

"There's a way out of this, but you've got to stall these people until I get back." Seeing Hedley's mouth opening, he added quickly, "I can't tell you about it in case there are Agency men outside who could get there first. And keep the mike of your set switched on. I want to know what's going on in here."

Only four people made a determined effort to stop him as he sprinted towards the exits. The first he laid on his back with a perfectly clean charge, but the other three ganged up on him, their concerted action making him positive that they were Agency men placed especially among the public. Lockhart was not trained in dirty fighting, but as a doctor he knew all the vital spots. He left them writhing on the aisle behind him and ran on.

Outside, in the corridor leading to the observation gallery, the confusion of the chamber he had left came through the tiny speaker in his ear. Gradually order was being restored, one of the judges was reassuring the Agency counselor that the murderer Lockhart could not escape the building, who in turn was calling for an immediate sentence. Lockhart stopped as a thought occurred to him. He said, "Hedley, can you hear me?" and spoke rapidly for several seconds, then continued along the corridor.

He heard Hedley asking the Agency man if there had

## THE SECRET VISITORS

been any wars recently on Earth, and if so would *he* mind describing them as the testimony of the Earth-humans was not acceptable. Just, the agent added, to satisfy the curiosity of the judges and public.

*Oh, good man!* Lockhart thought.

Agency counsel seemed to be reading from something as he replied. He said, "There have been no wars of the kind you described in the time which the Agency has been on Earth, some forty of your years. There have been petty squabbles, small, inter-tribal wars, which the Agency acting undercover has been able to curb before more than a few fatalities were suffered. Anything of such an inhuman and catastrophic nature as you have described would be immediately reported to the Administration."

There was more of it, but Lockhart knew that the Agency man had said more than enough. If the Agency could be caught out in that lie, then they would be discredited, too. And knowing the horror most Galactic citizens felt for deliberately inflicted pain of any kind, that discredit would be great indeed.

Viciously Lockhart curbed his mounting exultation. He was being a little premature.

When he reached the observation gallery, Lockhart turned right and began running again.

In his speaker he heard Hedley appealing for the chance to present a further piece of evidence. This evidence did not have to be tested by the Detector, he stated, because it was evidence of ability, and of the emotional depth and richness of a small section of their race.

Fox began playing *Malaguena*.

Lockhart would have laughed if he'd had enough breath to do it. But three minutes later Fox was still playing, and the protests of the Agency counselor had been curtly silenced.

Suddenly Lockhart came into sight of them. They were

## THE SECRET VISITORS

looking out over the city with their backs to him. Breathlessly, Lockhart shouted, "Mrs. Keeler!"

Hedley said, "Keeler, you'd better handle this."

The FBI man moved across to the Detector cabinets and glanced up. Both indicator lights burned a clear amber, signifying that the witness was free of drugs or psychological conditioning, and hence a fit subject for the infallible Detector.

Naturally he was free of drugs, Lockhart thought; whisky was not, as a rule, given to eight-year-old boys.

Keeler said, "Son, this is a sort of quiz. It's the most important quiz you were ever in. But if you don't know any of the answers, don't guess at them; that's lying, and it will disqualify you. Now," he went on, taking a deep breath, "How many World Wars have there been on Earth in the past forty years, how long did each of them last, and what sort of weapons were used in them?"

Junior giggled. "That's an easy one," he said smugly, and began his answer. While he spoke the indicator lights above him burned a steady amber. Detailed and blood-curdling descriptions of air-raids, submarine warfare, V-2's and flame-throwers—seen on newsreels for the most part, but acceptable as evidence because he knew that they were records of true events—made up the biggest part of the answer.

The silence in the great room could be felt. In the public section the faces of the crowd had gone a sickly gray. So had those of the judges, and even the Agency counselor. Harlnida's face was a shocked, horrified mask, but a gleam of triumph had come into his eyes.

Keeler said, "Now this is a harder one . . ."

When Junior gave the casualty figures of both the World Wars, adding self-importantly that these did not include Korea, the trial was as good as over.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

As they were about to leave the Court building two hours later, Harla was attacked from space.

### XVII

SEVENTEEN Harlan cities were annihilated during the first ten minutes of the attack—it took that long for the realization of what was happening to sink in—before a blue sky changed to the silvery mist of a total refraction screen which went up around the planet. But there was no respite; pattern-bombing sought out the now invisible ground targets and the roll of obliterated cities continued slowly to grow. The demands for the Administration's surrender were also continuous, and these made the reason for the attack all too plain.

Defeated in its bid to take peaceful control of the Federation by the success of the Earth party in Court, the Agency had been forced prematurely into open war. And the Earth-humans, who were indirectly responsible for bringing this devastation to a civilization which had not known war for thousands of years, were now cordially hated by both sides.

It was a time for treading carefully, Lockhart thought, for staying out of sight and above all for keeping quiet. But Hedley was doing none of these things. Instead he leaned over Harlnida's desk and each word he used was a metal-tipped lash.

"Have you no guts?" Hedley was shouting. "No backbone? Are you all yellow?"

In a corner the Keelers, Fox and Kelly huddled together,

## THE SECRET VISITORS

white-faced. The black-garbed Administrative officers were also pale, but with fury. Kencorril, who was Harlnida's deputy, cut him off.

"You barbarian!" he said thickly. "How dare you address thus the First Citizen of the Galactic Federation—"

Harlnida raised a hand tiredly for silence. The Chief Administrator's hair was still sleek and black, his face glowing with youth, but nevertheless he had suddenly become an old, old man. "You have called us cowardly," he said, nodding toward Kencorril and the others in his chamber. "Perhaps you were not aware that all these men favor the same course of action that you do. But unlike you they have tried to weigh in the balance the suffering of our people which would result if we continue resistance. It is suffering and pain which frightens us, not loss of life.

"But resistance is useless," he continued heavily. "True, we have the refraction screen, installed shortly after the first *Grosni* contact before we learned fully of their nature and intentions. And our Navy has nearly four times the offensive strength of the fleet attacking us, but its units are spread thinly over two hundred solar systems engaged on administrative duties, communications, survey and colonial work. I have already explained how the Agency force will have this planet and system sealed off, so there is no chance of a message requesting aid reaching our forces."

"The point I'm trying to make," interrupted Hedley, "is that the Agency could not have been quite ready for this step. There's bound to be some disorganization, some chink in their armor."

"I want to end the suffering of my people! Surrender seems to be the only way."

"So you surrender and what happens? The Agency fleet moves to Vitlimen. They'll probably surrender, too, being spineless like yourselves. But other planets will *fight*! Have you considered that by fighting on and weakening the

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Agency force by even a small amount it could make all the difference later when these less powerful people are fighting?"

"I am considering those things," Harlnida said, rising suddenly. A spark of anger lit the dark tragedy of his eyes and his face came to within inches of Hedley's. "What is it you desire? A chance to fight the Agency? Very well. Most operating procedures in our ships require only knowledge without skill, and the proper Educator tapes will provide that. There are seven major units of the Federation Navy on Harla. Do what you like with them. Now leave me!"

Hedley was taken aback. He said hesitantly, "On Earth, I regret to say, we have considerable knowledge of war and strategy. Possibly we might accomplish something."

But Harlnida was pointedly ignoring him. Hedley swung round and headed for the door, calling for Fox and Keeler to follow him, and the Harlans tacked themselves on behind. Lockhart hung back and tried to tell a silent Harlnida that Hedley had not meant the things he had said, that they all respected the pacific ideal of the Federation, but that the agent had been trying to shock him into action of some kind. It was a surprise when Harlnida looked up suddenly and said, "I knew that. But perhaps I, too, secretly want to indulge in these stupid and selfish heroics which serve only to prolong the death agonies of my people."

It was at that point that Lockhart's communicator, which he was still wearing, made beeping noises at him. It was Hedley.

"Doc," the voice came, high-pitched with exasperation. "I've run into trouble, *crazy* trouble! I've got volunteers, but they won't fight unless allowed to booby-trap their ships so that they blow up if more than a few of them are wounded. They aren't scared of dying—just the thought of their shipmates suffering frightens them. They all *prefer* to die instantaneously rather than have some of them suffer!



## THE SECRET VISITORS

You've got to admire 'em, but dammit you can't fight a war that way. It would be like an exchange of pawns in a chess game, when I was hoping to make some of our pawns rooks and bishops. Can you ask the Big Boss?"

But Harlnida was not in sympathy with Hedley's idea of fighting a ship to the last man.

"Isn't there anyone here who *isn't* afraid of pain?" Lockhart burst out.

Harlnida looked guilty for an instant, then hastily changed the subject. But Lockhart scented something and stuck tenaciously to the original question. Finally, with the degree of reluctance found only in getting people to talk about relatives insane or in jail, Lockhart pried the information from him.

"*Perverts!*" said Hedley.

"Yes," Lockhart replied. "People seeking new sensations, inflicting small cuts and bruises on themselves. They don't seem to be a very strong-minded bunch, and self-respecting Harlans have nothing to do with them, but if they'll volunteer—"

"I'll try anything," said Hedley fervently. "But you'd better join me, I'll need help with that bunch. Pain-addicts, yet!" The communicator clicked off.

Two hours later they were able to man one of the smaller fleet units with these so-called perverts. Lockhart could not see much wrong with the men apart from the fact that they seemed very impressionable and easily led; but that only made getting them to volunteer easier for Hedley. Staffing the ship with the necessary officers, those whose skills could not be transferred by Educator tape, was harder, but finally the Federation cruiser *Tranilde*, with Hedley and Kencorril aboard, lifted and slid upwards through Harla's total refraction screen. Hedley had told Lockhart that he had a plan which might or might not come off. The

## THE SECRET VISITORS

rest of the Earth party stayed on the ground and sweated it out.

Falls of wreckage were reported five times during the next hour, each in its turn suspected of being the remains of *Tranilde*. But *Tranilde* came down to a bone-jarring landing a few minutes later, torn, battered and holed in several places. Harlnida and several of his aides were watching, Lockhart saw, as the crew collected under its ruined stern and then, heads up and shoulders thrown proudly back, marched straight toward the nearest empty ship.

Hedley and Kencorril arrived then. Jubilantly, the agent began, "Nine! We got nine of them!" He shook his head as though he could not quite believe it. "They kept expecting us to blow ourselves up. We didn't, and they did."

Harlnida looked at Kencorril. "Casualties?"

"Nineteen, all dead," the other replied. "Mostly from decompression. They were buried in space for reasons of morale." Hedley and he exchanged looks and Kencorril's mouth whitened around the edges. His eyes said that they had seen things which he desperately wanted to forget.

"Anyway," said Hedley, "we'll have shamed some more people into taking off in ships that will not blow themselves up the first time they're more than sneezed at. Isn't that so?"

Harlnida stared piercingly at the agent's face. Abruptly, he said, "Yes, you will have infected sufficient naval personnel with your particular form of insanity to man the remaining seven ships." After a few seconds, he added, "But you can't win. I've tried to explain why. You just can't win."

But Hedley and Kencorril had already left.

The next two hours were a confused blur to Lockhart. First he had to beat it into Kelly's beautiful skull that she could not come with him. Then followed a session with the Educator. Hedley told him that Kencorril would have

## THE SECRET VISITORS

*Tregaltor*, one of the largest ships in service. It mounted forty-eight of the vibratory weapons whose purpose hitherto had been the clearing and processing of large tracts of land on planets chosen for development by the Colonial Service. A clear case of turning ploughshares into swords, Lockhart thought sardonically. *Trevegan* was its sister ship, which Hedley would command, and would Lockhart mind joining him on it in the capacity of M.O.? Keeler would have *Screnn* and *Fox*, Hedley thought, would operate as a flotilla in command of the four ten-turret light cruisers, *Jadar*, *Jekari*, *Jerringa* and *Sulyan*. According to Hedley, they were seven bishops masquarading as pawns, and a couple of them might even turn out to be queens. But Lockhart could not help remembering that the Agency had an awful lot of pawns to spare.

Nearly a thousand of them.

They took off in tight formation and drove through the refraction screen. Harla was suddenly a dark globe far below them, surrounded by its bright blue atmosphere. Two hundred miles up they split into an extended line formation and began a sweep around the planet. Almost immediately their detectors showed target traces at extreme range but closing rapidly, and Lockhart noticed with strangely objective interest a psychological phenomenon which he had heard about but which he had not yet experienced himself; the major incidents of his life were passing before his eyes.

He did not feel scared; Hedley's pep-talk, he thought drily, must have buoyed him up with the same martial fervor that was affecting the Harlan crew. But neither was he confident of winning; he agreed with Harlnida that they could not possibly win. Instead there was a slow, burning anger within him at the realization that all their striving had been in vain. Their appeal to the sprawling, benevolent and highly ethical Galactic Federation had resulted only in hastening its fall before the rapacious and power-hungry

## THE SECRET VISITORS

Agency. Even the mental assistance of a *Grosni* which had helped him defeat the Agency representative in Court had done no good in the end. He began to wonder dully whether he should have enjoyed a few short hours with Kelly on Harla; he was not the death-and-glory type at all.

There was sudden excitement around him in the control room. Detectors and their connected view-screen showed enemy ships within range—five, six, no, nine of them. Hedley was talking rapidly into a chest pick-up, assigning targets to his Ordnance Officers, when the deck beneath them trembled as *Trevegan* sustained her first hit.

Hedley looked across at Lockhart briefly. He quoted the half-prayer-half-blasphemy with which men in the days of sail and cannon and stately ships-of-the-line had greeted an imminent broadside:

“For what we are about to receive . . .”

### XVIII

THEIR armament was a modification of the gravity drive which powered the ship. Instead of creating a field of repulsion from the stern which could accelerate the ship up to twenty gravities, the projectors were double-mounted weapons which pulled as well as pushed. Properly directed they could be fantastically deadly. The few square yards of enemy hull on which they were focused was subjected in rapid, split-second succession first to a pull, then a push, of thirty to forty gravities. Even the strongest hull plating could not take vibrations of that order; seams opened, plates shook themselves loose and large amounts of heat were

## THE SECRET VISITORS

generated. The push-pull synchronization of the field was altered then to give slightly more pull than push so that loose wreckage was whisked away, after which the hellish vibrations probed deeper into the target ship.

And the Harlans had used them for cultivating land from the air . . .

The control room was a bedlam. Though deep inside the ship and relatively safe, the tearing, screaming vibrations of each hit were transmitted through the metal fabric of the vessel. Air-tight doors slammed shut, men screamed in disciplined babel in attempts to out-shout the din around them, and Lockhart had a shaky feeling that if that horrible racket continued for one more minute he would go mad. He had to force himself to uncover his ears when he saw Hedley gesturing at him.

"A rook among the pawns, Doc!" he shouted excitedly. "Or a vulture among chickens." As he spoke the main view-screen lit twice as two more Agency ships blew themselves to pieces. Lockhart had noted that phenomenon seven times already. As he was considering with a certain amount of awe the fact that they were responsible for the destruction of nine enemy ships, a sudden glare on the screen marked up number ten.

But there was a point which Hedley was, perhaps deliberately, forgetting. The fact that the Harlan force would not destroy itself when a certain amount of damage was suffered did not make it automatically impregnable. There were an awful lot of Agency ships, and with each inflicting its share of damage it would be only a matter of time before the Harlan units, no matter how bravely they fought, were just so much wreckage.

"Fox is in trouble!" Hedley shouted suddenly. He pointed to the master screen where Fox's flotilla was in the process of being englobed by the enemy. One of the units—*Jekari*—exploded into a ball of orange fire as he watched. It was

## THE SECRET VISITORS

not the glare of the self-destroying explosions of the Agency ships, but a dimmer type which told of vibrator fields churning at the interior of its power pile. Then suddenly *Tregaltor* came looming onto the screen, and Kencoril's voice joined the circuit.

"Is this situation strategically valuable to you," he said in dry, pedantic tones, "or do you require assistance?"

Fox put a whole universe of feeling into the single word of his reply. He said, "Help!"

Then suddenly it was all over and they were staring unbelievably at diminishing blobs of light on the detector screen. The enemy was running!

A message arrived from Harlnida a few minutes later. Hedley repeated the gist of it to Lockhart in a voice that sounded unnaturally loud in the post-battle silence of the control room. He said, "Apparently we've stampeded the Agency force around Harla, and they're fleeing to rejoin their main fleet beyond the no-jump limit. He says what we've done is glorious, that words fail him, but that it has been essentially useless, that the losses inflicted on units attacking Harla will in no way impair the efficiency nor the strategically impregnable position of their blockading force, a fleet comprising nearly one thousand heavy units." Hedley's mouth twisted into a lopsided grimace. "He advises us to return and try to enjoy the stay of execution which we have won for Harla and ourselves."

"It's very good advice," said Lockhart carefully.

"I know that!" Hedley exploded suddenly; then, "We have them temporarily on the run, and that advantage must be exploited to the full. I'm convinced, remember, that the Agency was so rushed into this action that its organization of the operation cannot be fool-proof. Also, that it would normally expect a break-through only after much ducking and dodging about, and then in two or three places at once.

## THE SECRET VISITORS

"What I plan to do is this: Keep harrying the ships up ahead instead of allowing them to decelerate to rejoin their friends. They'll run right through the blockading fleet and we'll be on their tails while they're doing it. We'll punch a hole right through them. In the resulting confusion some of us will get far enough from Harla's sun to jump. After that," Hedley's eyes shone with the somewhat premature, light of victory, "we jump from system to system dropping message repeaters. Given two days there'll be more Federation warships jumping in here than could lick three Agencies."

"You heard Harlnida explain about that blockade fleet," Lockhart said gently. "You are punching a brick wall, and the fact that it was built in a hurry will make little difference to its effect on your fist."

"Doctor," said Hedley in a tone suddenly harsh, "just whose side are you on?" He turned angrily away.

The Agency had all the advantages, Lockhart knew, because, simply, the situation hinged on the fact that a ship's hyperdrive could not function within a certain distance—roughly one thousand million miles—of a sun. Ships within this limit were forced to use the normal repulsion drive until it was passed, but vessels beyond the no-jump region could jump—use their hyperdrive—and cover large or small spatial distances instantaneously.

The Agency's main fleet was in the latter position. From the fringe of the Harlan system it could watch the Federation ships as they attempted to escape from this zone of relatively snail-like speeds, and jump *en masse* to meet them at any point where they tried to break through. Even if the Harlan force split up, the Agency could materialize a hundred or more units in the path of an escaping ship minutes before it gained the point where it could jump.

Lockhart was suddenly aware that a voice was breaking

## THE SECRET VISITORS

gently into his mood of black despair. "Pardon this intrusion," it began, "but your previous contacts with us have made it easier to communicate with you at this range. Please inform the being Hedley of the following facts, and my suggestions."

At that moment Lockhart realized that nobody was near him, that the voice was soundless and only in his mind. He exclaimed, "A *Grosni*!"

"What?" said Hedley, swinging around.

Lockhart listened attentively to the mighty, silent voice speaking in his brain until it withdrew. He swallowed then and said, "There's a *Grosni* ship out there; you can detect it now that you know where to look. The *Grosni* suggests you head toward it and check velocity so that it can reach the point where the Agency fleet will block us a short time before we do. It says it will be able to create a diversion which will aid our escape."

"A *Grosni*," said Hedley sourly. "Why couldn't it have been somebody in a hyperdrive ship who could have gone for help?"

"Will you do as it suggests?" Lockhart said sharply.

The Harlans in the control room were listening tensely. The master screen showed the ships they were pursuing drawing together as they converged on their distant main fleet. There were upwards of fifty of them, and Lockhart had the feeling that at any moment their senior officer might realize that he had an organized force around him once more, and stung by his earlier defeat, stop and make a fight of it. Hedley must have felt the same because he barked suddenly, "Yes, I am!" and began issuing orders for course and velocity alterations.

He had to conserve the Harlan strength, such as it was, for that one vital punch through the blockading fleet.

"What is it going to do?" he asked.

"It didn't say," said Lockhart.



## THE SECRET VISITORS

Two hours later the glowing spot of light which was the *Grosni* ship disappeared behind a giant star cluster which flicked into being on the detection screen—the Agency's main fleet. It was like switching on lights on a Christmas tree. But they were countless, and they were centered just beyond the no-jump region midway between the Harlan force and the approaching *Grosni*. There was sudden agitation around the battle screen, then a Harlan officer was worriedly reporting to Hedley that a section of the opposing fleet was being detached and sent into the no-jump area to meet them. Guessing what Hedley intended to do, the Agency commander was taking no chances, and had instituted a defense in depth. Hedley swore luridly. "There goes our hopes of a nice, clean break-through," he said grimly.

Lockhart had thought it bad the first time . . .

The whole ship shivered and shrieked in metal anguish as the massed vibratory weapons of the enemy shook large sections of its hull-plating loose, tore them away and clawed inwards at its vitals. The noise was a needle-sharp spike that lacerated the brain and turned the bones to water. Hands pressed unavailingly against his ears, Lockhart saw the indicator lights on the *Trevegan's* ordnance panel, singly and in groups, flicker and go out. Projector turrets were being cut off from communication with Control, many were simply torn off the ship. But *Trevegan* was the lucky one.

Keeler in *Screnn* was englobed by enemy warships. That ship had been battered after the first skirmish, now it was a tangled, twisted skeleton of a ship which refused to lie down and die. Keeler's voice came then, more angry than frightened:

"Hell! Am I riding a ship or a broomstick! They're pulling us apart. But there's an Agency tub very close, so I think I'll ram . . . What the blazes—"

The voice cut off; Lockhart saw the *Screnn* break in two

## THE SECRET VISITORS

and the stern section, still under power, go snaking crazily off the screen.

They did not hear from Fox. His three lighter ships were englobed and literally torn apart during the first minutes of the engagement. The large, inchoate masses of wreckage were then further shredded as if hungry dogs were fighting over the tattered remains of a rabbit. A large number of Agency ships had obliterated themselves before the end, however, but they would not be hearing from Fox anymore.

*Tregaltor* was a near-wreck, but like themselves it retained some power to move and to hit out. Lockhart was wondering how long they could do so when control panels and view-screens went suddenly black. There was a grinding screech of metal above and Lockhart glimpsed the ceiling springing open along its seams, then Hedley was yelling, "Suits, everybody! Shift Control aft!"

The nightmare trip to the stern control position was viewed on Lockhart's part with a strange objectivity; he seemed to be in two places at once, and the reason was that the *Grosni* was talking to him again.

"It is almost time," the voice said. "All attention is focused on you, and I have remained undetected as yet. Prepare for radical alteration in course, and at my signal, maximum speed allowable in your ship's condition must be used in the maneuver."

The din inside the ship was hideous, mind-wrecking. Lockhart bawled the message through his radio to Hedley. But the *Grosni* voice had not come to him through his ears, so it remained clear and undistorted. Moreover, he was able to catch more than the great being's words; there were fringe thoughts which showed that it was terribly afraid.

"This thing you're going to do will put you in great danger!" Lockhart said. He could order his thoughts better

## THE SECRET VISITORS

if he spoke aloud. "But there is something in your mind which you're hiding from me, and I suspect what it is. Well, you don't owe me, or any of us, a thing. That bit of work on Retlone was lousy; I was scared and in a hurry and it wasn't even good butchery."

"Retlone is many of your light-years away, so you will understand that I am not the being on which you practiced this inferior—but to the rest of us awe-inspiring—butchery. As to whether my race or myself owe you anything, that is a purely ethical problem which we are in a better position than you are to solve."

Their headlong scramble to the stern control point had led them along a corridor close to the outer hull of the ship. Lockhart saw a wall suddenly quiver and buckle and pull apart, the vibration jarring upwards through his heels. The shambles of a projector turret showed through the wreckage. At the touch of the vibrator field he saw the turret's main generator explode into greasy smoke and hurl its component parts outwards like a giant bomb. Figures in ruptured suits kicked briefly until decompression stilled them. A random movement of the beam touched the Harlan who was ahead of Lockhart. Without moving the man more than two inches either way, the field of vibration batted him backwards and forwards with a force of 50 gravities. In two seconds his body was a thick jam oozing from breaks in his shattered spacesuit.

The screens in the after-control position were in operation and already partly staffed. Ahead showed the Agency fleet like a great star cluster that was visibly drawing itself tighter together in their path. So numerous and so tightly packed were they that it seemed that the *Tregaltor* and *Trevegan* must dash themselves to destruction against them even if the enemy did not fire a shot. But firing instructions were going out from white-faced Harlans to the pitifully few turrets left in operable condition, and it

## THE SECRET VISITORS

was obvious that they would continue to go out until there were no more Harlans left to give them.

"And I called these people yellow," Hedley said softly. The situation was hopeless; two virtual wrecks against a fleet close on one thousand.

"You must be hoping that your mere presence will cause sufficient confusion and disorganization in the Agency fleet for us to slip through," Lockhart said, thinking at the *Grosni* again. "But our ships are about finished. It's too late. Go back—"

"My strategy," interrupted the *Grosni* thought, "is more simple and direct than that." Besides the fear it was making such efforts to hide in its mind there was a hint of very Human irony tingeing its thought. There was a short pause, then it sent urgently, "*Now!*"

It was not just a word of command; part of the wave of fear and terror which the *Grosni* itself felt washed over the mind of each and every occupant of the two Harlan ships, and galvanized them into action. Now they *knew!*

"Reversel Reversel" screamed Hedley, his face gone the color of putty. On the screen Kencorril's *Tregaltor* was already ponderously swapping ends. "Cease firing! Short out the attractor fields of your projectors and train the repulsion field generators aft to assist the Drive. *Get us out of here!*"

Some of the Agency ships followed them, but most of them had had enough. Lockhart watched them hurrying back to the main fleet, the doomed main fleet.

What happened then was essentially indescribable. One second there was a mighty array of warships drawn up in tight formation—solid, awesome, seemingly invincible. The next it was engulfed by an alien something which sprawled and twitched hideously across thousands of miles and an unguessable volume of space. The *Grosni* had created its diversion, all right, by precipitating its monstrous body out

## THE SECRET VISITORS

of the hyperdimension into normal space. It lived for a few interminable minutes, then the Gargantuan writhings and twitchings mercifully ceased. A haze grew around it as the body fluids began to boil off with the effects of decompression, and a thickening mist gradually hid the remains of the Agency fleet.

Some of the surviving Agency ships fled into hyperspace. Not all. Hysterical messages of surrender came flooding in even before the Harlans had recovered from the shock.

It was while they were returning to Harla that Lockhart realized what his life's work was to be. There was a *Grosni* corpse in orbit on the fringe of the Harlan system, and he was determined to make Harlnida give him permission and the resources to investigate it fully. Only in that way could he help the other members of its species who were helpless and threatened with extinction because of the highly artificial adaptation which had been forced on them. Something must be done for them even if it took several of his now-renewable lifetimes. He owed them that much, at least.

On landing they were greeted with the news that Keeler had been fished out of the wreckage of his ship in a battered but still serviceable condition. Mrs. Keeler would be glad to hear that, Lockhart thought, then suddenly, for the first time since he had left on the *Trevegan* he found himself smiling.

He was thinking about Kelly, and wondering what the marriage ceremony was like on Harla.

*If you've enjoyed this book, you will not want to miss these*

## **ACE SCIENCE-FICTION NOVELS**

- D-233    FIRST ON MARS** by Rex Gordon  
The "Robinson Crusoe" of the Red Planet. An unusual and realistic novel of alien life on an alien world.
- D-227    GUNNER CADE** by Cyril Judd  
Rebellion of a human automaton!  
*and* **CRISIS IN 2140** by Piper & McGuire  
Black market in forbidden knowledge.
- D-223    THE 13TH IMMORTAL** by Robert Silverberg  
Was he a fugitive from Utopia?  
*and* **THIS FORTRESS WORLD** by James E. Gunn  
He brought the skies down upon him.
- D-215    THREE TO CONQUER** by Eric Frank Russell  
Only one man knew the Earth was invaded!  
*and* **DOOMSDAY EVE** by Robert Moore Williams  
Were the strangers impervious to A-Bombs?

- D-211 EYE IN THE SKY** by Philip K. Dick  
Something had changed the laws of nature—and  
made them subject to the whims of abnormality!
- D-205 THE EARTH IN PERIL**  
Edited by Donald A. Wollheim  
Exciting stories of invaders from space.  
and **WHO SPEAKS OF CONQUEST?**  
by Lan Wright  
The galaxy said, "Earthmen, go home!"
- D-199 STAR GUARD** by Andre Norton  
"Fast-paced and good reading."—*Saturday Review*  
and **THE PLANET OF NO RETURN**  
by Poul Anderson  
The first—or the last—on that new world?
- D-193 THE MAN WHO JAPED** by Philip K. Dick  
In the days of the robot peeping toms!  
and **THE SPACE-BORN** by E. C. Tubb  
Their world was entirely man-made!

**35¢**

If not available at your newsdealer, any of these books may be bought by sending 35¢ (plus 5¢ handling fee) for each number to Ace Books (Sales Dept.), 23 W. 47th St., New York 36, N. Y.

*Order by book number*