

ACE

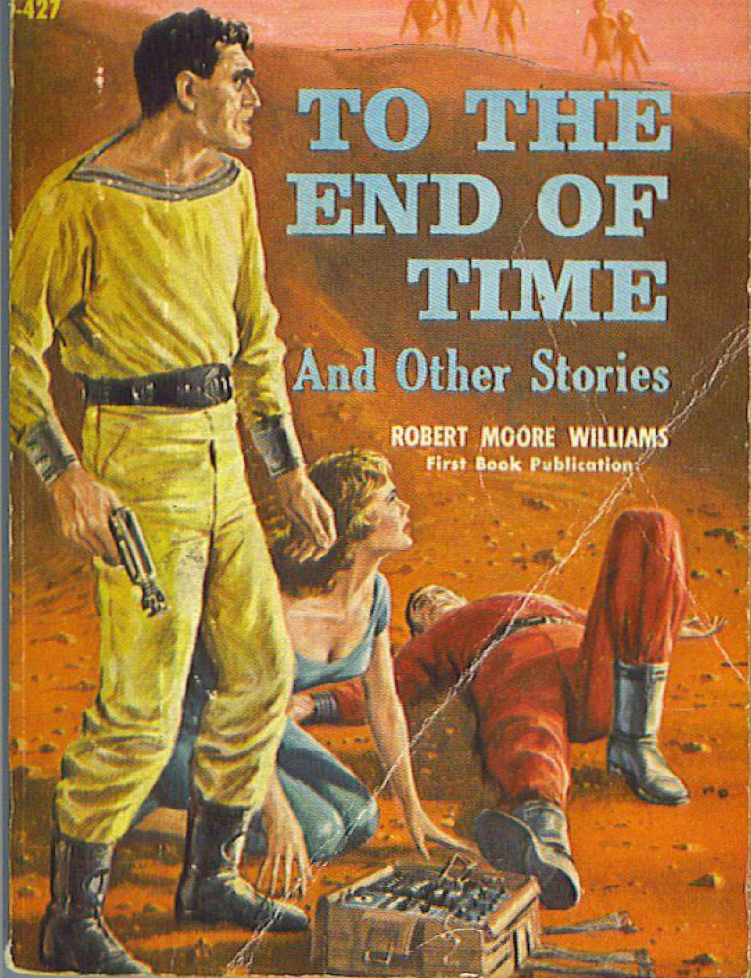
DOUBLE NOVEL BOOKS 35c

427

TO THE END OF TIME

And Other Stories

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS
First Book Publication



BEYOND THE FRONTIERS OF SPACE AND TIME

There are no barriers to the imaginative vision of a top-notch science-fiction writer as Robert Moore Williams demonstrates in this new collection of his stories. The wonders of the universe, big and little, probed by his pen are many.

The mystery of Mars?

See WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

The enigma of time?

Read TO THE END OF TIME

Flying saucers?

Think about LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

The search for Utopia?

Turn to WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

Each story is a thrilling adventure in super-science.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS has been a prolific and high-rated author of science-fiction stories for several decades. His tales have appeared in virtually all the magazines in the field and have been reprinted in a great many distinguished anthologies. He accounts for his talents this way:

"Writing seems to be in my blood; it's the only occupation I enjoy. I've been at it ever since I was a kid. If I may parody Mark Twain, who apologized because there was a certain amount of information in *The Innocents Abroad*, and said he was sorry but that "information appeared to stew out of him like the precious ottar of roses out of the ottar," words appear to stew out of me. There is really nothing I can do about this except direct them at a typewriter and hope they will emerge in the form of stories or books."

Other novels by Robert Moore Williams that have appeared in Ace Books editions include: THE CHAOS FIGHTERS (S-90) CONQUEST OF THE SPACE SEA (D-99), DOOMSDAY EVE (D-215), and THE BLUE ATOM (D-322).

TO THE END OF TIME
and other stories

by

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

TO THE END OF TIME AND OTHER STORIES

Copyright ©, 1960, by Ace Books, Inc.

All Rights Reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TO THE END OF TIME	5
Copyright, 1950, by <i>Super Science Stories</i> .	
WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM	35
Copyright, 1952, by <i>Fantastic Adventures</i> .	
HOMEWARD BOUND	51
Copyright, 1950, by <i>Startling Stories</i> .	
WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME	59
Copyright, 1952, by <i>Planet Stories</i> .	
LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING	90
Copyright, 1947, by <i>Amazing Stories</i> .	

WORLD OF THE MASTERMINDS

Copyright ©, 1960, by Ace Books, Inc.

Printed in U. S. A.

**TO THE END OF TIME
AND OTHER STORIES**

-



1

TO THE END OF TIME

THE NATIVE Venusian guides, tense and sullen with fear of something they could not or would not name, had come into this region with reluctance. Thorndyke, who had no respect for superstition, was intelligent enough not to browbeat them. He had cajoled them instead with much talk about all the *atjol*, the fiery native drink, they could buy with their wages, and they had gone forward again, moving toward the precipitous mountain region of the hotlands jungle. Then, when it became apparent that their destination was actually the plateau that they called Kith-kal-sar, the singing mountain, they had taken council together and had decided on a course of action, without telling their employer. The first Thorndyke knew of it was when he awakened in the morning and discovered that the whole safari crew, porters, guides, cooks, and the rest, had vanished in the night.

Thorndyke was short and stubby, gnarled like an oak tree, and although he was actually one of Earth's foremost psychologists, nobody seeing him for the first time ever believed he was anything but a pirate. Timid women had been known to faint at the sight of him. Stronger specimens, on meeting him, invariably reached mentally for a baseball bat or some other weapon, to have handy just in case. He had long since accepted the fact that he was not pretty, and as for the opinion of the female members of the order mammalia, he cared not two hoots what they thought of him. Or what anybody else thought. He was a little universe all in himself,

TO THE END OF TIME

complete with his own natural laws, which he made up as he went along.

Most men, deserted by their guides and helpers in the hotlands, would have started hot-footing it out of there. Thorndyke, operating according to his own peculiar laws, spent five minutes in outraged profanity, then selected a light rifle that threw a bursting charge capable of stopping a garo or a cat lizard, added a kit of medicines and food, and headed straight toward Kith-kal-sar.

To his mind, the goal he was seeking was sufficiently important to justify the risk. The goal was neither wealth nor fame. It was a song.

Back on Earth, where the song was being played, it was called *Journey to the End of Time*. Though no one on Earth knew how, it was certain that the music had come from Venus, as a recording of a native song. On Earth, it had been brought to the attention of a famous band leader, who had sensed at least part of the possibilities of the piece. The band leader had translated the weird half and quarter tones into notes capable of being produced by human musical instruments. Unquestionably the music had lost much in translation. Unfortunately it still had too much left, all of it bad.

The first effect was sadness. The second was a deep melancholy. The third was—disorientation. It might take the form of murder, insanity, suicide . . . The first, and last time, the number had been played on the air, over a hundred people died violently. Apparently, any dangerous tendencies already present in the human mind were accentuated by the music.

After one playing, the Department of Health had hastily ordered the number withdrawn from the air. But wire recordings existed and these were being played in clandestine hideouts, in fierce little night clubs, at secret orgies.

The music exploded something in the psyche; it caused a

TO THE END OF TIME

disease of the mind. Remembering the new diseases that had been brought back from the planets with the first interplanetary vessels, and the rigorous measures that had been necessary then, the U.N. had acted as they would have done if a new extraterrestrial had appeared on Earth, by sending a crew of germ fighters to the origin of the disease to isolate the germ and combat it.

If, lamed in translation, crippled by musical instruments of another world, it still possessed so much power, what might be the effect of the music in the original, as it was played on Venus? This question worried them. There were other fringe questions, though, that worried them even more.

Thorndyke was a member of the team trying to locate the origin of the music. The investigation had been difficult. The Venusian tribes living around the spaceports either did not recognize the music, as played back for them from Earth recordings of Earth instruments, or they were unwilling to admit their knowledge. Rumors and tips had indicated that perhaps here in the hotlands, at the place called Kith-kal-sar, the singing mountain, the source of the music might be found.

As he was crossing the side of a precipitous hill, with pools of swamp water and mud below him, Thorndyke's foot slipped. He tried to catch himself, failed, and went headlong down the hill. With a mighty splash he landed in one of the pools. When he came to the surface, he caught a log that was anchored to the bottom, and seeing what he had aroused on the sandbar across from him, he held onto the log, let himself float, and did not move a muscle. He knew enough about garos, the swamp alligators, to keep still.

His fall into the pool had awakened the garo. If he moved, the vibrations of that movement would be transmitted through the water, the garo would pick them up and come to investigate the juicy tidbit that had fallen into its private cafeteria.

TO THE END OF TIME

Lifting its head, the garo tried to locate the source of the splash that had aroused it.

Creatures that fell into this pool always splashed as they tried to get out.

Thorndyke did no splashing. Maybe the garo would go back to sleep. Then the human could wiggle, an inch at a time along the log, and float to shore.

And maybe he couldn't.

Alligator bait! he thought bitterly.

The garo knew something strange was in the pool. Under the circumstances, the monster had no intention of going back to sleep. Thorndyke could see the creature raise itself up and look around, trying to see from weak eyes if anything edible was in sight. The garo couldn't see very far or very well. It grunted, inquiringly. Thorndyke didn't grunt back.

The hot afternoon was still. Sunlight glinted through an opening in the clouds. Somewhere in the jungle a rain bird shrilled. A dragonfly with iridescent wings a foot long flew across the pool. Thorndyke was aware of sound—somewhere. It came from somewhere on the slope and grew stronger—a swelling chorus of song. Deep bass voices roared a chant until the whole jungle seemed to echo with it.

Listening, Thorndyke felt a sudden, irrational anger surge within him. The lust for battle, the clash of swords on shields, the cry of the victor, the sob of the stricken, all were in this music. Thorndyke felt hate rise in him, hate for the enemy. His heartbeat quickened.

He was dimly aware that he was listening to a song like *Journey to the End of Time*. It was a different song, written for a different purpose, but it sprang from the same source. The first effect of this wild music was anger. The second effect was—hallucination. As if his mind were a movie screen

TO THE END OF TIME

and a new film had been spliced into the middle of an old picture, the hallucination hit him.

The pool of swamp water, with the restless garo on the bank, faded instantly. His eyes seemed to disconnect themselves. His mind looked at a new scene. He found himself in a place that he knew did not exist except in his imagination.

He was sitting in a beautiful living room with a picture window across the corner. Through the window he saw a breath-taking vista of snow-capped mountains sweeping away into the distance. He recognized them somehow as the Colorado Rockies. They were so real he could have been willing to swear he was actually looking at them. In his hand was a drink so real he could savor the smokiness of the Scotch, and sitting beside him was a woman. He could not visualize her features clearly but he knew she was very near and very dear to him.

A woman! By this one fact, Thorndyke knew he was dreaming.

While the music swelled in a growing flood, the illusion held. When it died, the illusion vanished. Thorndyke, gulping, saw that he was still holding onto the log. The garo was leaving the sandbar to search the pool for him, but the human was not aware of this fact. His attention was held by what was happening on the hillside.

The music makers were there. They were a group of barrel-chested little men about three feet tall. They looked a lot like pygmies, like the vanished Bushmen of the South African *veld*, almost naked little men with barrel chests. Thorndyke caught glimpses of them scurrying through the trees on the steep slope, their bass voices emitting agonized bellows. He saw why they were running, why they were alarmed.

A human woman was after them. She had in her right

TO THE END OF TIME

hand a slim, supple tree branch, and she was laying about her with all the strength in her arm.

For a second Thorndyke gaped at this astonishing sight, then he became aware again of his own situation and lifted his voice in a yell.

At the sound, the woman dropped the switch and stared around her. She located Thorndyke in the pool.

"Hey, look out, there's a garo in that water!" she shouted.

"Hell, I know it," Thorndyke answered. "If I move, he'll locate me."

"Don't move," the woman shouted. She came down the slope in a surefooted run. Like a monkey, she shinnied up a slender tree growing at the edge of the water. The tree bent under her weight. Splashing her feet in the water, she began shouting to Thorndyke.

"Swim, you idiot, while I draw the garo over here."

The swamp alligator, certain that it had now located the juicy tidbit that had fallen into its pool, headed straight toward her. She jerked her feet out of the water before the ugly snout emerged.

Thorndyke had never had any swimming lessons, but he didn't need any now. Dripping water and mud, he scrambled up the bank. The girl slid down the tree and came toward him.

The expression on her face said that now she had seen him, she regretted cheating a perfectly innocent alligator out of its dinner.

Thorndyke didn't mind her reaction. He was used to it. She had freckles, and brown hair and eyes the color of the skies of Earth. He liked her, instantly. "I can't help how I look," he said. "You can blame it on poor heredity. I'm a throwback to the ape-man." He grinned at her.

Astonishingly, she grinned back.

TO THE END OF TIME

"Where'd you come from? What are you doing here? Who are you? What were you doing in that pool—fishing?"

"One question at a time," Thorndyke said. He took off his pack, upended it, poured out the water. "I'm Jim Thorndyke."

"I'm Neva August," the girl answered. "My father is a missionary here."

"A what?" Thorndyke said. He never ceased being astonished at the places the missionaries penetrated, but of all the places he expected to find one, the hotlands of Venus came last. He told the girl what he was doing here.

Surprise showed on her face as she listened, then it was replaced by fear.

"The Noro music has reached Earth?" she said. "Then Haswell escaped after all."

"Who is Haswell?"

"He is a prospector, or said he was. He was here with us for a while. He made a recording of some of the Noro music, then disappeared. I didn't know what happened to him but I thought the Noros—" She paused. "They objected to having a recording made of their music and I thought—"

"They had dropped Haswell into the swamp?" Thorndyke asked.

"Well, something like that."

"Who are the Noros?"

"I forgot you do not know them." She looked away, searching the trees on the hillside. Her voice rang out in a series of deep tones.

In response there began to appear around them, hesitant, sullen, staring at Thorndyke with no friendliness whatever, the three-foot pygmies of the hotlands swamp. These were the music makers of Venus.

"They're angry with me," Neva said. "I stopped a war

TO THE END OF TIME

between them. They're both angry and grateful because of that."

"You stopped a war?" Thorndyke asked puzzled. "How?"

"With a switch," she answered. "I know you must be thinking that a war that could be stopped with a switch was not very important, but it was important, to the Noros."

"They don't even have any weapons," Thorndyke said.

"They had the War Song," the girl said. "That was weapon enough."

"Eh?"

She looked thoughtfully at him as if she were trying to estimate how much she could tell him. "Go on," he said. "I'm ready to believe anything. How can a song be a weapon?"

"I don't know, but it is. There were two bands of Noros and they were going to fight each other with that song and nothing else. When they finished one band or the other would have been dead. I've seen it happen."

"But the song had no effect on you," he said.

"I have learned how to keep from hearing it," Neva explained.

"And you dared to use a switch on them?"

"Yes. When they started the War Song, I became very angry. I didn't stop to think what I was doing, I just grabbed a switch and lit in on them, as if they were bad children."

"And they didn't try to fight you?"

"No, they were just angry with me. They know that the War Song is bad and they know I am doing right in stopping it. So they let me."

"If they know it's bad, why do they ever start it?"

"Why do humans start wars?"

It was a question that Thorndyke could not answer.

"This is no time to talk philosophy," Neva spoke. "You're soaking wet and lost. You come home with me and meet my

TO THE END OF TIME

father. There you will also have a chance to study the Noros."

Thorndyke recovered his rifle from the slope where he had dropped it. The Noros clustered around him and it was in his mind to give them a demonstration of the weapon. On the other side of the pool, the garo had crawled out on the sand-bank again. Thorndyke took careful aim at the head of the monster. The rifle cracked sharply; the garo's head vanished in the explosion.

The Noros seemed totally unimpressed. One Noro spoke to Neva.

"This is Tom. He says the gun is no good, it makes too much noise," the girl translated.

"But look what it did to the garo," Thorndyke said.

"He says he can do more than that to the garo, with his music," Neva answered.

"Eh?" Thorndyke said.

It was a worried psychologist who followed the girl through the jungle. Moving along with them as silently as shadows were the Noros. Thorndyke was very much aware of the puzzling mystery presented by these barrel-chested little men.

"Here is where we live," Neva said. They had come to a large open glade on the side of a mountain. Below them were the swamps and the rain forest. Above them a steep slope led upward to a high plateau. Directly in front of them, in the face of a limestone cliff, was the large opening of a natural cave. In the opening a tall man was standing. He waved at Neva, then, at the sight of the man with her, he came striding forward, astonished at the sight of another human being.

"Daddy, this is Jim Thorndyke. This is my father, Lawrence August."

"It is a pleasure to meet another human," August said, extending his hand. His grip was firm, his manners were courtly

TO THE END OF TIME

and pleasant. He came of a generation that put great emphasis on manners. "I'm glad to meet you. You are not, by any chance, the James Thorndyke who wrote the book on the psi function of the human mind?"

It was Thorndyke's turn to be surprised. "I am," he answered.

"Then there is no one from Earth I would rather make welcome here," August said. "Unless I miss my guess, we have here an example of the psi function, of the effect of mind on matter, unlike anything science has ever known before." He nodded toward the Noros, filing past them into the cave.

Thorndyke caught a throb of sound. As the Noros moved past them, they were singing.

"It is the gathering song," Neva spoke. "No, you must not listen, or you will try to follow them. Turn it out of your mind. Don't let yourself hear it."

"The gathering song?" the psychologist said. He felt an impulse rise in him to follow the little men.

"It is the song they sing when they are gathering for the night," the girl said. "It calls them together. Put your hands over your ears."

Thorndyke obeyed. The song dropped several notches in volume. The impulse that had been rising in him dropped to a whisper which remained, inside his mind, like an echo of siren music. *The Gathering Song! The War Song! The song that was called Journey to the End of Time!* Each piece of weird music seemed to have a special job. What other songs did they have? Above everything else, what vast mystery was hidden behind the music?

The Noros filed out of sight inside the cave and the echoes of the music died away. Thorndyke followed August into the cavern. Near the entrance, where the sunlight still fell, a

TO THE END OF TIME

complete camp had been set up. It was a comfortable place, but it was very near the entrance to the cave. Thorndyke wondered about the cat lizards coming in here at night, then the question passed from his mind and was forgotten.

"Where do the Noros live?" he asked.

"We do not know," August answered. "Somewhere here in the cave, but we do not know where."

"Haven't you ever tried to find out?"

A look passed between August and his daughter. "Yes," Neva answered hesitantly. "But somehow or other, they have always slipped away from us."

"Neva believes they hypnotize us each time we try to follow them," the missionary slowly added. He saw Thorndyke shake his head and continued: "I know what you are thinking—hypnosis without the full consent and cooperation of the subject, is not possible, but I am not certain that the Noros do not know more about hypnosis than we do. Certainly they know many things that—" He stopped abruptly. "Come, sit down, my friend, and tell me about Earth."

"Later," Thorndyke said. "Right now I want to talk about the Noros. Tell me what you know about them."

"It won't be much, I'm afraid," August answered. "The proven facts are very few. Everything else is guesswork. For instance, I don't know whether the Noros are a primitive people just beginning the climb to civilization, or whether they are the most advanced race in the solar system . . ."

That night a storm whipped the jungle. Lying on the folding cot that August had given him, Thorndyke could hear the storm roaring outside the cave. Once something else roared out there too, a cat lizard or some other creature of the Venusian swamp. Thorndyke clutched his rifle. He could hear the creature in the glade outside the entrance to the cave.

TO THE END OF TIME

Coming from nowhere and from everywhere, a burst of music sounded. It was *Journey to the End of Time*.

Out in the night something screamed. The music died.

Holding the rifle, Thorndyke moved to the entrance of the cave. A flash of lightning revealed that the glade was deserted. The creature that had been there was—gone.

What had happened to it? Thorndyke did not know. But he had the eerie notion that unseen eyes watched the entrance to this cavern and that unseen forces guarded it.

Neither Neva nor her father appeared. They seemed to accept the matter as commonplace, if they had heard anything.

It was an uneasy psychologist who returned to his cot that night.

The next morning, there was a roar in the sky and a stubby-winged spaceship barge flashed through the mists. Hurrying outside the cave, they heard the thrum of jets as the barge was eased to a landing on the plateau above them. A few minutes later a group of men were glimpsed coming down the steep slope. Neva stared toward them.

"Haswell!" she said.

Haswell, a machine pistol holstered at his hip, came arrogantly down the slope. He was a tall man, with a narrow face and sharp, alert eyes. Following him were two men whom Thorndyke did not know, although he recognized the type. Men like these two might be seen roistering in the space-port of Luna, drunk and rolling down the main street of Venusport, hanging around the employment offices of the spaceship lines on Earth, trying to ship out to one of the planets, to any planet, it didn't matter which, just so they got away from Earth as fast as possible. They were space bums, willing to cut any man's throat for a dollar.

TO THE END OF TIME

Haswell reached the glade and came toward them. "Hello, Neva. How are you, August?" His manner was friendly; there was a grin on his face. He looked at Thorndyke. The grin went away. "Who's this?"

Neva introduced them. Haswell said he was pleased to meet Mr. Thorndyke. His eyes said he wasn't.

"Why did you come back here?" Neva said.

"Maybe to see you," Haswell answered. "Boys, get busy."

The two men nodded. Moving to the entrance of the cave, they began to drive metal stakes into the ground. The hammers rang sharply in the quiet morning air.

"What are they doing?" August asked.

"Staking a mining claim," Haswell told him.

"A mining claim?" the missionary was startled. "But there are no minerals here."

"That's what you say but that isn't what the counter says. I checked this mountain carefully. I couldn't locate the bed of ore but the counter says there's radioactive rock under the plateau, in tremendous quantities. With the price of fissionable material as high as it is today, this place is worth more millions than you can count." Haswell's adam's apple moved up and down as he spoke. Apparently the thought of millions made him want to swallow.

The sharp clang of the hammers was the only sound in the still air. Once the notices were posted, Haswell had exclusive rights to this area for twenty-five years. Slowly, Neva spoke. "That means mines will be developed here?"

"It certainly does," Haswell answered.

"But what will happen to the Noros?"

Haswell shrugged. "Out."

"But this is their home," the girl protested. "Suppose they don't want to move? What happens then?"

TO THE END OF TIME

"In that case—" Haswell shrugged again. He broke off, to stare toward the cave entrance.

Five Noros, led by Tom, were coming out of the cave. Moving with a sureness that was full of meaning, they advanced straight toward the humans. Haswell's hand moved toward the machine pistol at his hip, then came away.

The five stopped in front of him, and Tom spoke in deep, guttural English.

"Go away," the Noro said.

"Go away?" Haswell was astonished, then angry. He laughed. "Well, if this don't beat hell—"

Tom spoke to Neva, in the Noro tongue, the bass tones ringing clearly as he expressed a concept he could not put into English. Finishing, he did not wait for an answer, but turned and walked away. The other Noros followed him.

"What did he say?" Haswell asked.

"He said he had warned you and that whatever happens now, will be your own fault."

For a second, Haswell seemed shaken, then he grinned. "I thought those little devils would try to make trouble. Well, I came prepared for them."

"What are you going to do?" August asked.

Haswell did not answer. Motioning to the two men to follow him, he moved up the slope. They came back later, with three more men. All were heavily armed. All carried heavy metal cylinders and gas masks.

"Keep back," Haswell grimly warned August.

Putting on their masks, the men set up the metal cylinders at the entrance to the cave. They opened the valves; a heavy yellowish smoke spewed out into the caves.

Haswell came over to August. "Gas," he said grimly. "That'll fix 'em."

From nowhere and from everywhere, from the thin layer

TO THE END OF TIME

of soil lying over the solid rock below them, seemingly from the very atoms of the air or perhaps from the structure of space itself, came a burst of music. A wild flood of roaring notes, it was—*Journey to the End of Time*.

Yellow heat lightning seemed to flicker in the air.

Standing near the mouth of the cave, one of the men snatched the mask from his face, screamed, and disappeared.

"What happened?" Haswell shouted. He moved toward the group of men there, then backed away. The yellow lightning flickered again. The second man was gone.

"The Noros are doing that," Haswell said harshly. His gaze fixed on Neva. "Stop them!"

"Stop them?" the girl faltered. "How can I?"

"You can stop the war song, you can stop this too. Take a mask and go into the cave—"

"She will do no such thing," August spoke.

Haswell snatched the machine pistol from the hoster at his hip. He pointed it at August but when he spoke, the words were directed at Neva.

"Either go into the cave and stop them or I'll shoot," he said.

Thorndyke took a step forward. The gun muzzle swung toward him and slugs blasted past his head. Near the cave entrance, the third man screamed.

Haswell turned his head to look toward the sound. Neva grabbed his gun hand.

For a second, the two wrestled. As Thorndyke and August moved forward, something like a shimmering wall of light moved between them. The yellow lightning flashed. Neva screamed.

The spot where she and Haswell had stood was empty.

That much Thorndyke saw. Then the electric shock that

TO THE END OF TIME

went with the lightning hit him. He felt himself falling; then he didn't feel anything.

Thorndyke recovered consciousness slowly. As the fringes of his senses came back, he was aware of vague sounds: the screeching of a bird in the swamp below, the far-off bellow of a bull garo. He groped through his mind for understanding. Something had happened, he didn't know what. Then he remembered. The jolt shocked him back to consciousness. He sat up.

Beside him, August lay stretched on the ground. The old man moaned softly. Thorndyke's memory still had blank spots. His gaze roved, seeking what ought to be before his eyes, Haswell and Haswell's crew, the gas cylinders in the cave entrance, the yellowish gas, and Haswell's men, were gone. Haswell was gone. Neva was gone. Thorndyke struggled to his feet. Looking at the sun, he estimated that he had been unconscious for less than an hour. He bent over August. The missionary was breathing and, given time, would apparently be all right. The problem was—where was Neva?

When someone was lost, you shouted for him. Thorndyke's voice lifted in a shout. There was no answer. He had the feeling there would never be an answer. Panic rose in him.

Movement at the mouth of the cave caught his eye. Tom appeared there. With him were four other Noros.

The little men seemed frightened. They stared around. Their deep voices rang with questions. Thorndyke moved toward them. Tom pursed his lips, trying to form unfamiliar words. His first effort came out, "Whar—" The second time he got "Whery—" Then he got a recognizable, "Where—Nevy?"

"That's what I want to know," Thorndyke said. He reached out, seized the Noro by the shoulder, shook him as

TO THE END OF TIME

one shakes a recalcitrant child. The Noro's head rocked on his shoulders. Anger appeared in his eyes at this indignity, but he endured it. "Neva is gone," Thorndyke shouted.

"Gone?" Tom echoed. The anger went swiftly from his eyes.

"Yes, you damned idiot, she's gone. I want to know where. I want her brought back. I want it done right now. Do you understand me?"

The Noro was badly frightened now. Thorndyke released him. Tom's bass voice spoke in a whisper to the other two, telling what had happened.

"Where is she?" Thorndyke demanded. The Noros looked at him. They did not answer. Despair showed on their faces. "Gone-gone—" Tom whispered the word. "Journey—How you say?—to end of—time. Like with cat lizards, with bad man. She was near bad man when we send song. We not see her, not know—" The broken voice went into silence.

"Trip into time?" Thorndyke whispered.

"Into future, we send her," Tom answered. "I—cannot explain."

"You don't have to explain," Thorndyke said. "All you have to do is bring her back."

The Noro shook his head. "We cannot. It not possible. Most likely, it not possible. Sorry."

Again Thorndyke grabbed Tom's shoulder, again he shook, harder this time. "Damn you, you've got to bring her back!"

"But—most likely cannot."

"Why not?"

"Can send into time, cannot bring back, unless—"

The third Noro spoke abruptly. Thorndyke could not understand a word that was said but the Noros became excited. They looked at the psychologist.

"Thersill says, can try," Tom said.

TO THE END OF TIME

"Can try what?"

"Can try bring her back."

"Then do it!"

"But there is catch."

"What catch?"

"Somebody have to go after her."

"I'll do it," Thorndyke said promptly.

"I catch to that too," Tom said.

"Eh? What catch?"

"You may not come back."

"Well—" Thorndyke's hesitation lasted only a moment. His mouth closed with a snap. "I'll take the chance."

"Come then. Must hurry." Tom turned to the cave. Thorndyke followed the Noros.

Neva had said that she had tried to follow the Noros into the hidden depths of the cave, but that they had always eluded her. Going with them, Thorndyke could easily understand that. They followed in darkness a twisting, winding trail visible only to the Noros. They stopped, and a door swung open. Thorndyke gasped.

Ahead of them was a great blue gulf of light, stretching away into the far distance. He saw that here, inside his high plateau, was a tremendous cavern. The floor of the cavern lay far below him, a vast panorama of miniature cities, of fields and forests, all in the same small scale as the Noros, and all bathed in the bright blue light that blazed in the center of the roof.

In the middle of the cavern was a building. It was large even to a human; to the Noros it must have been gigantic—the crowning effort of a race.

"Fathers come here long ago from dying land," Tom explained.

TO THE END OF TIME

A long flight of twisting steps led down to the floor of the cavern. They were spotted as soon as they appeared in the doorway; faces turned toward them, and little men could be seen running toward the bottom of the steps. When Thorndyke reached the bottom, voices rang out, questioning, demanding. Tom had to do a lot of explaining fast. To Thorndyke, it was obvious that Tom had broken a tribal law in bringing him here. Tom's explanation was finally accepted, though with reluctance.

"Come to big building," Tom said.

The entrance to the building was large enough for him to walk through without bending his back. Inside, he caught a glimpse of a single immense room, but he was taken to a small enclosure that was apparently a workshop. Noro technicians were here. Tom explained to them what was needed. They looked at Thorndyke doubtfully, shook their heads, then got busy. First they got his exact weight, then they fitted a strange kind of metal cap over his head and ran a series of tests. Perhaps they were measuring minute brain currents. Why, he didn't know, and didn't ask. Other technicians were busy building a kind of metal pack designed to be strapped around his chest. He saw they were building two of the packs. Finishing this, they strapped the first pack around him, gave him the second to carry.

"Come," Tom said. Thorndyke followed the Noro into the big room.

Noros jammed it. They sat in orderly rows in a complete circle around the machine in the center. Tom led him down a narrow aisle directly to it.

It was like no machine Thorndyke had ever seen before. There were dozens of meters, their scales calibrated in colors, each monitored by a Noro in a control chair. In the heart of the machine was a master control board, at which a single

TO THE END OF TIME

wizened Noro sat, like an old spider in the midst of many webs. The old spider looked at Thorndyke. There was compassion in his eyes.

"From machine lines of—push—flow," Tom said. "Bad man had instruments which find lines of push from here. But he made mistake. He thought instruments said uranium was here."

Thorndyke grunted. He remembered Neva had said that Haswell had tried to get the Noros to guide him into the depths of the cave but that they had refused. They were concealing from the prospector the existence of this machine.

"Ready," Tom said.

"Ready," Thorndyke answered.

"Use this pack for Neva," Tom explained. "It bring her back, if we lucky. Without pack, she cannot return. We send you to take pack to her."

"I'm ready," Thorndyke said. Tom nodded at the ancient, gray-haired Noro at the master control. He pushed a switch. A gong chimed. The music began. It came from the massed Noros. Beginning softly, it started to rise in volume, a gigantic chorus of bass notes, singing *Journey to the End of Time*.

In this split second, Thorndyke realized at least a part of the function of the music. It had originated as a musical expression of something else—a psychological process. It served to focus their minds, perhaps, or to induce the necessary mood. In itself, it was probably of little importance. The important part was within the mind. It was the mind that could look forward into the future—that could attract or kill. The mind could do a thousand and one other things, many of which it could not understand itself.

He saw, also, the part the machine played in this strange rite taking place in the cavern of the blue light. Roughly translated into human terms, the machine was a power am-

TO THE END OF TIME

plifier. It received the thought pressures within the massed Noro minds and amplified them to any desired strength, concentrated them, focused them. Through the machine, the thought pressures could be focused at any desired spot inside the cavern or out of it. They could be focused on the ledge outside the entrance to the cave, in the jungle swamplands, perhaps anywhere on Venus.

In front of each meter, a Noro watched intently. The wizened Noro at the control board, watching Thorndyke, shoved home a final switch.

Thorndyke screamed as a million microscopic needles jabbed him. He felt a supercharged jolt of electric tension spring into existence in the air around him. Yellow lightning licked across his vision. He saw the Noros, the vast hall itself, waver and fade like a vision seen through distorting glass.

Cold struck him, he did not know how many degrees of it, but he knew if it lasted long, he would be frozen stiff. He had the impression of flickering movement far too fast for the eye to follow.

The cold faded. He fell, stumbled, fell again, got to his feet.

Weak sunlight hit him. The cloud-bank was gone. The jungle was gone. The sun shone down on a dying planet.

He was on a slope. Below him in a valley a line of dead trees marked where there was a dry river-bed. Dust blew past him on a languid wind.

This—this was the future of Venus, how many million years away he could not tell. This was the Veiled Planet when it was no longer veiled. He was not at the end of time, but he was near it, for this planet.

He was aware that his mind was showing symptoms of refusing to obey him. His will forced it back into its proper groove. Below him, on the slope, a creature lay—a cat lizard. Dead. He could not see the cause of death. Nearer still there

TO THE END OF TIME

was a man, one of the men who had been with Haswell. The man was dead.

Where was Neva? He lifted his voice again, calling her name. The effort made his lungs hurt. In the thin air, his shout was not much louder than a whisper. He felt his heart begin to pound as it struggled to supply sufficient oxygen to his tissues. In this air, the life-giving gas was scarce.

The pack circling his chest hummed softly. He felt the surge of electric currents in it, reminding him that back in another time the Noros still maintained contact with him, through this pack.

"Neva!"

A halting voice answered him. She stood up slowly.

He saw her. He ran toward her.

She stared at him as if she could not believe her eyes. It was the first time in his life that a woman had ever seemed pleased to see him. Her clothes and her face were dust covered. He thrust the pack toward her. "Here. Put this on, I came for you. This will take you back." The effort made him pant.

"You—came for me?" She seemed dazed, unable to comprehend. Reaching out, she touched him. "You're real," she whispered.

He tried to grin. "The Noros sent me. This pack will take us back. There isn't time to explain. Just put it on—"

She took the pack from him, stared at it as if she did not understand. To one side a footstep squeaked. A voice rasped: "Where's *my* pack?"

Haswell stood there. He had been sitting down and had remained unseen until he stood up.

Aghast, Thorndyke stared at the prospector. Until this moment, he had forgotten that Haswell existed.

TO THE END OF TIME

"So you didn't bring a pack for me?" Haswell said.

"I—I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't let it bother you," Haswell said. "I'll just take yours." He lifted the machine pistol.

"Like hell—" Thorndyke said. Haswell squeezed the trigger. A stream of lead squirted past Thorndyke's head. He ducked.

"If that pack will get me back, I want it," Haswell said. "I'd just as soon take it off a dead body."

"All right," Thorndyke choked. The pack was a circling band of metal eighteen inches wide and over two inches thick. He had seen the Noros fit a series of compact tiny instruments into that space. Tiny batteries furnished a limited supply of power. Slowly, Thorndyke released the catches. He slipped it from his body, handed it to Haswell. The prospector reached for it. Thorndyke's fingers seemed to lose their grip. The pack fell to the ground. Haswell bent to pick it up.

Thorndyke stepped forward. With all the strength in his body, he hit the prospector behind the ear.

Haswell went over. Thorndyke jumped at him. Both went to the ground with Thorndyke on top. Haswell, gripping the pistol, tried to bring the muzzle up against the body of his antagonist. Thorndyke caught the wrist of the hand that held the gun. He heard Haswell swear.

The prospector was as agile as a cat lizard. Somehow he got a knee up into Thorndyke's groin. Stars splashed before Thorndyke's eyes. Strength went out of him. But he held on to the gun hand. He waited for his strength to come back.

It didn't.

Aware that his lungs were laboring for air, he guessed the fatal truth. His strength was not coming back. Strength depended on oxygen and there was too little oxygen in this air to support activity. A fight here was impossible. Violent ex-

TO THE END OF TIME

ertion would result in the collapse of oxygen-starved tissues. The cat lizard and the man on the slope had died for this reason.

Panting for breath, Thorndyke let Haswell try to throw him off. His sole activity was to hold on to the gun hand.

Haswell dropped the gun. After that, Thorndyke made no effort to resist.

He felt Haswell heave violently at him. A quiver ran through the prospector's body.

"Damn you—" Haswell shuddered. And was still.

The man was dead. His overburdened heart, pounding furiously in an effort to supply oxygen to meet the needs of tissues that had evolved on Earth, had simply collapsed from the effort. Death here was simple and quick.

Thorndyke knew that he too, was very close to death. He did not move a muscle. He was aware that Neva was trying to help him. He whispered to her to stay away.

He was fighting another battle, harder perhaps than the fight against Haswell, a fight for enough oxygen to stay alive. The only way he could win was to keep absolutely quiet. Even then, he was not certain he could win. It might be that his efforts to breathe, even the beating of his heart itself, used up more oxygen than he was taking in.

He thought, *Here, near the end of time, when the solar system is running down, when man and all of man's achievements are gone . . .*

Every muscle in his body screamed for more oxygen. Every instinct in him yelled for him to breathe faster. But, if he breathed faster, the very act of breathing itself might be using up more oxygen than this air contained. He forced his laboring lungs to breathe slower and slower.

Eventually, nerve cell by nerve cell it seemed to him, the

TO THE END OF TIME

clamor in his body died down. He knew then that he had won this fight. He sat up.

He told Neva what had happened. "Put the pack on, Neva. I'll put mine back on. We'll get out of here."

Back to a day when oxygen was plentiful, back to a time when the solar system was not near death. He picked up the pack, started to slip it into place, stopped, stared at it. For a moment he thought his heart was going to stop.

Either he or Haswell had kicked the pack. Part of the metal cover had been knocked off. Inside, in a jangle of broken wiring, all loose ends and smashed connections, hung the broken coils and tubes.

"Can you fix it?" Neva whispered.

"I can try," he answered.

Half an hour later, he knew it was a hopeless task. Special tools were needed, special knowledge, special skills, tools and knowledge and skills that only the Noros possessed.

"You—you can't go back?" Neva asked him.

Thorndyke shook his head. He was marooned here, forever.

"Then I won't go either," Neva said. "If you have to stay here, I will stay too, with you."

In another world and in another time they had had a word for what she was saying. It was a word that Thorndyke had never fully understood until now. Now he knew what it meant, knew also that it was too late to realize that meaning. He choked.

They sat side by side, leaning against a stone ledge, and watched the dull red ball of the sun go down. It went down very slowly.

"Listen—" Neva whispered. Thorndyke at first thought his ears were deceiving him. In the thin air of this planet,

TO THE END OF TIME

coming from nowhere and from everywhere, was a trace of music. He listened to it, caught his breath.

It was the madness melody: *Journey to the End of Time*.

It swelled in a mighty chorus, burst into a flood of sound, then died in quick silence.

On the slope above them bass voices called.

"Thorny! Nevy!"

They leaped to their feet.

"Herel" Thorndyke called, huskily.

....On the slope above them were—Noros! They saw the face of Tom. It was a worried face, then at the sight of them, it broke into a grin. Tom came bounding down the slope to them. He too, wore a time pack. The thin air did not seem to bother him. His barrel chest hardly heaved.

"Was worried—oh, I see. Get plenty busy here plenty quick."

He saw the damaged pack, guessed what had happened. He and the other Noros with him got busy. Noro tools they had, Noro knowledge, Noro skill. Thorndyke's voice lifted in a shout of exultation.

"Pack fixed," Tom said. "Now we go back again." He looked up at Thorndyke, tried to find words for something he wanted to say, spoke rapidly to Neva in his own language.

Neva translated. "He says to tell you that the Noros came from this time, long ago, that they escaped from the oxygen death of this world back into time, fleeing the death that is here."

"What?" Thorndyke gasped. Yet he knew the Noros had come from some other land. Why not from this land? Their barrel chests could only have evolved in air where oxygen was scarce. Most of all, their tremendous sciences could only have been the result of millenniums of development.

"He says to tell you that they are the descendents of both

TO THE END OF TIME

humans and Venusians, that the two races intermingled and became one race, becoming smaller at the same time. He says that in one sense, the Noros are your far-removed grandsons."

"Grandsons!" The thought shocked him.

Yet he saw that, in one sense, at least, it was true. To them, he was Cro-Magnon man, the shaggy man beast of the dawn world.

"Hi, pop," Tom said, grinning.

"Hi, son," Thorndyke answered.

They fitted the packs into place. Thorndyke and Neva went together, through the biting instant of cold. The vast cavern appeared and again in their ears was the enigmatic music—*Journey to the End of Time*.

The great hall rang with the sound of it. To Thorndyke, it was the happiest sound he had ever heard.

Later, Thorndyke returned to Earth with Neva. Still later, he built himself a house in the heart of the Rockies, a house with a picture window looking out over a breathtaking panorama of mighty peaks stretching away into the far distance.

In his hand is a pleasant drink; the room is cool; the touch of spring is in the air. The cushions are soft and Neva is sitting beside him, snuggled close, her head resting on his arm, her dark hair flowing downward.

With a shock, he realizes that this is the hallucination that came to him in the swamp.

The future that he saw on far-off Venus has come true.

Or has it? He may still be in the pool of water, with the garo searching for him. The Noros on the bank may be projecting into his mind the colors of the Rocky Mountain sunset, the picture window, even Neva herself.

Which is the reality, and which is hallucination?

He realizes he will never know. He doesn't care. It is

TO THE END OF TIME

enough just to dream that she is here with him and that the sunset colors are gilding the distant peaks with gold.

There is a trace of soft music somewhere in the background. He listens. Is he remembering something or is he really hearing this music? It is the soft muted strains of *Journey to the End of Time*.

WHERE TALL TOWERS CLEAM

LIKE A CHILD taking holiday, the wind ran whooping down the hillside. Having gained speed in this mad slide, it ran hilariously through the willow trees, crossed the brook, and raced still whooping up the hill where the red clover grew. From the top of that hill—as if the purpose of this whole maneuver had been to gain all possible speed for this one effort—it leaped madly into the sky as if striving to reach there some haven of the winds.

In his chair under the willow trees, Grandfather Rucker saw that the two children were growing tired of listening to him. "Run along and play," he said, his voice gruff to hide the twinge of hurt within him. "Run along. I am tired of talking."

They went, skippity-hoppity, down to the spring. He leaned back in his chair under the willow trees. For a while he watched the antics of the wind in the field of red clover, then he watched the sky . . .

Dick was leaning over the spring, looking for the single solitary old crawfish that lived on the bottom of that crystal pool. He did not see the man come down the long road where the summer's dust was deep. He did not know a stranger was near until he heard Kathie say:

"Why, there's a man. Hello, man."

Dick looked up. The man standing there in the dusty road was not such a man as can be seen any day in summer. His clothing was a soft golden color and he did not wear a suit but a loose robe which came almost to his ankles. The robe was pulled down over his shoulders and his hands were

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

folded out of sight in it, so Dick could not see them. But Dick could see his face. It was a beautiful brown, like the face of a young man who has been much in the sun, but somehow this man did not seem to be young. His eyes were old; they were not like the eyes of any man Dick had ever seen except, possibly, those of Grandfather Rucker when Grandfather Rucker was watching the passing of the wind.

The man did not speak. So Kathie, who at five did not know there was anything but love in the world, said:

"Hello, man. Why don't you talk to us, man?"

Something that looked like the shadow of a smile went across the man's face. But he did not speak.

"Would you like a drink?" Kathie said. She took the tin cup from its resting place between the moss-covered stones and filled it with water. Splashing silver drops at every step, she trotted with it to the man in the dusty road. In Kathie's experience every man who stopped here wanted a drink.

And this man too. He smiled and took the cup from her hand. "Thank you, little miss."

Dick clearly heard the words. But he was watching closely and the thing he saw astonished him so much he jumped up and ran and stood beside Kathie and looked up at the man to make sure. The man drank the water slowly, as though he relished every drop of it. He smiled and looked down and said:

"Spring water. Yes. I have needed a drink of spring water for a very long time, I think. Thank you, little miss."

Dick saw the same thing happen again. In his surprise, he blurted out the words: "You talk like Edgar Bergen."

The man had not opened his mouth when he spoke. He had not moved his lips. Dick, at seven, had very keen eyes and he had seen this thing happen.

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

Kathie had seen it too. She jumped up and down in great excitement.

"Do it again, man. Do it lots."

"Eh? Do what lots?"

"Talk like Edgar Bergen!" Dick and Kathie said together.

"And who is—ah—Edgar Bergen?" Now the man opened his mouth when he spoke but he did not do it very well for some of the words came out when his mouth was closed. Dick saw this and was a little disappointed but Kathie was not critical.

"You know about Edgar Bergen and—and Charlie McCarthy," Kathie said, as if she had explained all that any man needed to know.

And she had explained all that was necessary, it seemed. The man looked at her very thoughtfully. "Yes. Ah. Yes. I see."

So he talked like Edgar Bergen and now his lips did not move at all. Dick nodded approvingly at this performance and Kathie squealed in glee and danced in circles around the man. The daisies growing on the slope beside the spring suddenly found voices and told them in soft flowerish tones how nice it was to be a daisy nodding in the wind. A bumblebee that came buzzing by stopped and talked to them. He told them he was gathering honey to take back to his nest in the clover field, and Kathie, who was usually a little reserved with bumblebees, was not afraid of this one at all. For he was a nice bee. A blackbird that came down to drink from the spring gave them a pleasant, "Good morning." It was fun.

But Dick thought it was the most fun when the old crawfish came out of his hole in the bottom of the spring and floated to the top of the water and spoke to them in a thin, reedy voice. Usually the crawfish stayed in his hole. Most of

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

the time, like Grandfather Rucker, he seemed to be watching and waiting, though for what, no one knew.

"I'll bet grandfather would like to see this!" Dick said. He started to lift his voice, to call his grandfather, but the man said, "Wait. Where is your grandfather?"

"There under the willow trees."

The man looked. "But he's asleep," he said. Sure enough, Grandfather Rucker was dozing there in his chair. "We wouldn't want to wake him, would we?" the man said.

"I guess not," Dick said.

Kathie was still laughing at the crawfish. "Isn't he funny? You must stay with us always, man, and make things talk."

It was suddenly very quiet by the spring. The only sound was the whisper of the wind in the willow trees and the gurgle of the water in the brook. The crawfish was silent. But the crawfish stayed on top of the water and looked up.

The man said, slowly: "Do you really want me to stay with you?"

"I sure do." She walked to his side and looked up, for Kathie was the friend of the whole wide world and everything that lived in it except, sometimes, bumblebees, and everything in the whole wide world was her friend too. "We want you to stay with us always and always, don't we, Dick?"

"You bet we do," Dick said.

"I—" the man said. "I—Wouldn't you rather come home with me instead?"

Kathie's face said she did not know about this. It would be nice, but— She appealed to Dick for decision. Dick did not know either. "Where is your home?" Dick said. He had been wondering about this. Perhaps the man had come from a circus?

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

"No, not a circus," the man said. He looked toward the clover field beyond the brook. "I came from a far country."

"Africa?"

"No."

"But Africa is a far country?"

The man's eyes were on Dick. "My country is far in a different way."

"Is it a nice country?" Kathie said.

The man smiled. "Yes, but it would be nicer, I think, if you were there."

"Well," Kathie said. "If it is a nice country, we could go with you but I could not stay very long."

"Why not, child?"

"My mother would miss me."

"Your mother? Ah, yes, your mother." He said nothing more but seemed to be thinking. Dick watched his face. It seemed to Dick that the man was sad about something. Dick thought about far countries and what they were like and the man thought too, about something else. A rebellious expression appeared on his face. "I'm going to do it," he said. "I am, I am!" He put his hand inside his robe. When it came out, it held a bright glass ball. He handed the ball to Kathie.

"Here, little miss, this is for you and Dick."

It was a beautiful thing and Kathie said, "Ooh," in delight, but Dick was a little disappointed. There had been talk about a far country. Was this more grown-up talk, a promise never kept? "Aren't you going to take us?"

"Yes," the man answered. "That is—you see—I can't exactly take you with me. You have to go yourself. But this ball will show you the way."

"Like a map?" Dick asked.

"Yes. Like a map. Look at it."

Kathie was already looking at it. Dick looked too. In color

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

it was a creamy white but in the center was a light blue haze, like the color of the sky seen from afar. Little points of light danced in the blue of that far-off sky. It was pretty, but Dick could not see how it could be a map. He looked up to ask.

The man was gone.

Dick ran to the road. He looked to the south, down the long road, but he did not see the man in that direction. He looked to the north. The man was not in sight this way either. Dick looked in the dust, to see which way the man had gone. The dust was heavy and thick—and without footprints.

While Dick was trying to understand how the man could walk in the dust without leaving footprints, Kathie called. Running to her, he almost stepped on the crawfish, which had come out of the spring and was walking on the ground. Feelers waving, eyes extended, the crawfish seemed to be trying to find something. Dick stopped, astonished.

"What do you want, old crawfish?"

"Which way did he go?" the waving feelers seemed to say.

"Look!" Kathie squealed. "Look through it this way, Dick."

She held the ball level with her face and closed one eye and looked through it out across the brook and over the clover field where the wind was whooping up the hill. Dick took it and looked too. Kathie danced up and down.

At first Dick could see nothing, except the blue of that far-away sky. Then he saw something moving in that sky and as he stared, keeping one eye closed all the time, the something that had moved in the sky swam closer and closer. He saw what it was. It reminded him of a picture in a fairy book of a castle on a hill. Only this was not a castle. It was a—city. Made of glass and bright metal, it gleamed in the sun under that far-off sky.

He jerked the glass away from his eye. Beyond the clover

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

field, beyond the top of the hill where the wind vaulted into the sky, the city glistened in the sun. He did not need the glass to see it now. It was there, just beyond the top of the hill.

"That's where the man went," Dick said. "I—Let's—Come on, Kathie."

Kathie was so excited she didn't say a word. She took Dick's hand and they crossed the brook. Somehow they didn't seem to use the stepping stones and they didn't get their feet wet. Was there water in the brook? Dick did not notice. It was not wet water anyhow.

They didn't have any trouble climbing the woven-wire fence around the clover field, either. Climbing that fence had always been hard, even for Dick, because of the two strands of sharp barbed-wire at the top. But it was not hard to climb now. They seemed to climb it without noticing they were doing it. He did not wonder much about the fence. He was looking at the city.

It seemed very near. But it must have been farther than he thought for they walked a long time without getting closer. Kathie began to get tired. Her legs were short and she couldn't walk as fast as Dick but she tried hard to keep up. Once she looked back to see how far they had come.

"Oh."

Dick looked back. He couldn't see Kathie's house or his house either. He had been in the clover field before and he knew both houses could be seen from here. But now he couldn't see them. There was a blue haze that made him think of late afternoon when the sun was setting and the shadows were growing long.

Kathie was afraid. "Dick, it's awful far."

"Do you want to go back?"

"Well—" She hung her head.

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

It *was* awful far, Dick could see. He was a little afraid too, but he was seven. He couldn't let Kathie see he was afraid. So he reminded her that the man who talked like Edgar Bergen was in the city and maybe he would have Charlie with him now? Didn't she want to see Charlie? Yes, she did.

Hand in hand, they went on to the city. It was closer now. They saw it had a high wall around it, with gates in the wall. They went to the closest gate and knocked and the gate opened.

A little bald-headed man looked out. He was wearing the same kind of golden robe as the man who had talked to them by the spring but he was not quite as tall as that man.

"Well," he said. "Well. What do we have here?" He seemed surprised to see them and not pleased. Or rather he seemed both pleased and not pleased.

"The man said we could come," Dick said.

"Eh? What's that? He did, did he?" Gruffness crept into his voice. "Hmmm. That would be Orman, naturally. He was back to the world today. I should have been expecting something like this, naturally. Well."

He rubbed his chin and looked at them. "Well. But you may as well come in, since you are here, but what we will do with you, I do not for the life of me see. Well. Come in. I shall have to see Orman about *this*."

He held the gate open for them.

They went in. Kathie's eyes got big when she looked at what was to be seen. There were tall gleaming buildings rising up to the very sky. There were parks, with green grass and flowers growing and fountains spurting water that turned into rainbows while she looked. There were birds of many colors.

But she could not smell the fragrance of the flowers and

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

the fountains made no sound and the birds did not sing. There was silence over the city.

"Orman," the little man said. "Come to gate thirty-seven at once. Do you understand?"

He did not raise his voice and he did not open his mouth when he spoke but the children heard him clearly. He waited for an answer. It did not come.

"Orman!"

No answer.

"Orman, you hear me and there is no use in pretending you don't. You just don't want to come and help me clear up the mess you have caused, naturally. Orman, my patience is about exhausted. You come here immediately."

"Oh, all right." The answer came from afar but Orman came quickly. Strangely, the children did not see him coming until he was right there. Sure enough, he was the man who had talked to them by the spring.

He smiled at them. "Hello, Kathie, hello, Dick."

"You got here mighty fast," Dick said. "Did you come the same way we did?"

"No," Orman answered. "Not exactly."

"Then how did you come. We came as fast as we could but you beat us. Did you come in an airplane?"

"No," Orman said. He squatted down on his heels and started to tell them how he had come. The little man said, "Orman." Orman acted as if he hadn't heard. The little man said, "Orman!" in a much sharper tone of voice.

"Aw, Rudolf," Orman said. "Why don't you get lost?"

Rudolf's face got white first, then it got purple. His eyes bulged and Dick was afraid he was going to explode. Rudolph talked for at least five minutes without stopping once. Orman rose to his feet and patiently waited for Rudolph to finish.

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

"Why did you do it, Orman?" Rudolf ended. "Just tell me why you did it?"

"Aw," Orman said. He looked down at the ground and scuffed a piece of gravel aside with the toe of his sandal. "Well—"

"I am waiting to hear what you say," Rudolf said. His voice had lost the point of its sharpness.

"Well—" said Orman. He swept his arm in a gesture that included all of the gleaming city. "We don't have any of them here. And I thought it would be kind of nice—"

"Oh," Rudolf said. "I see." All the sharpness was gone from his voice. He was silent.

In all that gleaming city there was silence. There was not even the friendly sound of the rushing wind. The birds flying through the air did not cry out and there was no sound from the splashing fountains. The silence was the kind that goes through lonely dreams.

Kathie clung to Dick's hand and stood very close to him, her eyes open very wide. "Oh . . ." she said. The little cry was the only sound in all that vast silence.

"You hear?" said Orman.

"I hear," said Rudolf. He hesitated, then spoke quickly, his voice tight with sudden, inexplicable fright. "But we can't keep them. You know we can't. You know it."

"Aw," said Orman. He scuffed the toe of one sandal against the toe of the other. "Why not? They are of the chosen—"

"Of course they are of the chosen," Rudolf answered quickly. "Otherwise they would not have been able to come here even with your help. But that is the more reason why we cannot keep them."

Orman shook his head. "I don't see it."

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

"They have things to do," Rudolf answered. "The boy, especially."

"I know," Orman answered and there was rebellion in his voice. "But must they climb *all* the mountains and fly *all* the oceans and build dams to turn every river from its course? Can't one mountain go unclimbed?"

"Not one," Rudolf answered.

"Must all of them spend their lives in stuffy laboratories where the smell of chemicals fouls the air and the flash of the lightning they are trying to chain threatens their lives? Can't some of them come to us as little children, so that the sounds of their voices may make us glad and the sight of their faces make us a little less lonely here in our dreams?"

Rudolf was really frightened now.

"Orman. They must do every one of these things. Every pound of concrete must go into every dam and every ocean must be crossed and every mountain climbed. That is how they build this city, Orman. And they must work, all of them, even as we worked, for a long time yet, before it is built. If we bring two of them here as children the work they are supposed to do will remain undone and the building of this city will be by that much delayed."

Rudolf's voice shook. The city was quiet. There was the stir of no single sound in all that vast lonely silence.

"Then let it be delayed," Orman said. "I do not care. It is lonely here." His voice trailed off.

Rudolf's face was lined with sudden pain. "Orman, you are betraying us. You are betraying yourself. You are betraying *this!*" His arm swept in a circle that included all the gleaming silent city. "Finally, you are betraying *them.*"

If it was a bad thing that Rudolf said, Orman seemed not to hear. He took Kathie's hand and she gave it to him trustingly. He reached out for Dick's hand but Dick drew back.

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

Dick had listened to all that had been said. He had not understood it, except dimly, but part of it had thrilled him as he had never been thrilled before.

Orman smiled. "Do not be afraid."

"I'm not afraid."

Orman changed his tactics. "I am going to show you the city. Don't you want to look at it?"

This worked very nicely. Dick was conscious of a vague yearning somewhere inside of him, a yearning that was stronger than his fears. He went with Orman, to see the city, but he did not take the man's hand.

They walked down the broad silent street. A man sitting in one of the parks saw them and looked astonished. He came quickly but at a sign from Orman he walked silently behind them.

Bright birds flew through the air.

"Why don't the birds sing?" Kathie asked.

Orman smiled. "They will sing," he said. They did. The air was suddenly alive with the sound of their song. The robin and the thrush, the shy catbird and the brazen blue jay, all sang. The fountains splashed merrily and the flowers talked.

Kathie cried out in glee and even Dick laughed a little. Orman looked happy. The oldness went out of his eyes as he watched them. They walked and walked. Orman seemed to grow happier with every step he took.

Then Kathie said, "I'm hungry."

Orman said, "Oh." The happiness went out of his face. The birds stopped singing and the fountains were still.

"May we have something to eat?" Kathie said.

Orman said, "Oh."

Dick was hungry too but he hadn't said anything about it.

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

He watched Orman. Again Orman's eyes were like the eyes of Grandfather Rucker when Grandfather Rucker was watching the blowing of the wind.

"Kathie is hungry," Dick said. "We must get her something to eat."

"I know," Orman said. He sighed.

"But we must get her something to eat," Dick said. "Don't you have anything to eat here?"

"N-o," Orman answered. "I did not think of that until now, but we do not have anything to eat here. No, Rudolf was right in more ways than one but I was blinded by my loneliness, and I hoped—But no matter."

He sighed. "Now we must go back."

They turned. Dick was surprised. There in the street behind them, following them in complete silence, were many people. Hundreds of people, maybe thousands. Men and sweet-faced women, watching. They made a lane for the children and smiled as they went past but under the smiles was loneliness.

"Come again, children," voices murmured from the watchers.

"We will," Dick said. "Later."

Rudolf still waited by the gate. When he saw them coming he ran to meet them. He put his hand on Orman's shoulder. His voice was choked.

"Old friend, old friend, it would be good to hear the voices of children in this lonely silence where we wait near the end of time. Someday we will hear them—but not yet. Now you must take back these two, that they may do their part toward making reality out of this thing that we have dreamed, that the building of this city may not be unnecessarily delayed. I will remain here at the gate and when you return we

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

will play chess together, to shorten a little the time of our waiting."

He opened the gate and they went out. Dick looked at the city. Gleaming tier on gleaming tier, it rose above them into the blue of that far-off sky.

"Mister," he said. "Mister Orman."

"Yes, Dick, someday you will return to this city. But in the meantime—"

He seemed to listen. "I hear Kathie's mother calling to her, so you must hurry."

Orman was gone. Dick looked for him. The city was gone—fled, faster than smoke vanishing in the driving wind. They were in the clover field. The wind was whooping up the slope gaining speed for its mad-leap into the sky.

Kathie's mother had come down to the spring looking for them. Grandfather Rucker had awakened and was leaning on his cane looking for them. They could hear Kathie's mother calling.

"Here we are, mother," Kathie called. "Here we are in the clover field."

They had trouble with the high fence and Kathie slipped on one of the stepping stones in the brook and got her foot wet.

"I was worried," Kathie's mother said. "I called and you did not answer. Where have you been?"

"A man came and showed us the most bee-yut-i-ful city over there in the clover field and he gave us a glass to show us how to go to this bee-yut-i-ful city and we went to it and a little man met us by the gate and he didn't want us to stay but the big man came and made him let us stay a little while and the birds didn't sing and they didn't have anything to eat, not a thing—" Kathie ran out of breath.

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

"Oh," Kathie's mother said. "You have been playing the game of make-believe."

"No," Dick said quickly. "We really went to the city. It was right over there in the clover field."

"Ah. But where is it now?"

"I don't know," Dick answered. "It's gone."

Kathie's mother smiled and went up the slope to her house. Dick could see that she had not believed him.

"What is this about a city?" Grandfather Rucker spoke.

"There is a city in the clover field."

"What? Where?"

"There." Dick pointed. "And I can prove it." He reached into his pocket for the glass that Orman had given him, the wonderful glass that was actually a map showing the way to the city.

The glass was gone. While Grandfather Rucker waited, Dick looked in all his pockets. "I—I must have lost it," he said. He felt weak inside. He wanted somebody to believe in the city he had seen and visited but now the glass was gone and nobody—

"Tell me about this city," Grandfather Rucker said.

Dick told him the whole story, of how Orman had talked and how the crawfish had looked and how they had gone to the city and what had happened there.

"Ah," Grandfather Rucker said.

Dick started to cry.

"I don't need a glass, or anything else, to see *that* city," Grandfather Rucker said.

"You mean you can see it with your own eyes?" Dick gasped.

"Of course," Grandfather Rucker said. "Every year that has passed, I have watched them building it."

He was going to say more but just then Kathie's mother

WHERE TALL TOWERS GLEAM

called from her house that lunch was ready and from Dick's house across the road the dinner bell began to ring. Kathie went scrambling up the slope and Dick went too. Both had been to a far country and both were hungry. But Dick stopped and looked back.

There was wind in the sky and wind in the willows. Across the brook there was wind in the clover field. Grandfather Rucker had not come with them. He had crossed the brook and was walking across that windswept hill where now the clover grew. He had thrown his cane away and he was walking with his head held high and his back held straight, walking toward that city in the far-off sky, walking as if he knew exactly where he was going, walking as if from the summit of that hill—like the wind—he expected to pass directly to some haven in the sky.

As Dick watched, the tall figure passed over the hill—and out of sight. He had gone beyond the top of the hill? Or had he—

For a moment, glimpsed there in that far distance of the sky, tall towers gleamed, and were gone.

Then there was only the wind.

HOMeward BOUND

MARCUS AURELIUS MCGHEE was one of the rare souls of this earth. One of the rarest and most refreshing facets of his many-sided character was his delightful capacity for naive belief. He believed, for instance, actually believed that men from Mars had visited Earth many times and that these visitors had often been seen here on this planet but that nobody had ever recognized them for what they really were.

This belief, among others, was the source of long and acrimoniously friendly argument between McGhee and his friend, Henry Smith, who often said he believed no such nonsense.

Smith was a copyreader on a metropolitan newspaper and professedly an advocate of strict truth. He was also a realist. "Get the facts," was his motto. "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," was his code. While he held McGhee in high affection, he regarded Marcus as an unprincipled romantic, as a dreamer with no regard for truth.

"Get the dream," McGhee would retort. "The facts follow the dream. You're an idiot, Henry."

Henry Smith would shake his head and mutter what more could you expect from a librarian! To McGhee, this was a cutting retort, for he actually was a librarian. He was in charge of the science reference room of the public library and he spent his days issuing reference books to curious people in search of hard facts. Between calls for books, he

HOMeward BOUND

read the literature himself, not, however, for the factual content but for the dream behind the fact. Always, behind every fact, there was somewhere a dreamer.

Or so Marcus McGhee believed. And Henry Smith disputed. The two old men met almost every night, either in the room Marcus occupied in the downtown Y or in the private rooming house where Henry lived, and argued about many things, including the man from Mars. Neither had ever married and neither had a family. In consequence both had plenty of time for argument.

"You're nuts," Henry Smith said. "How would the man from Mars get to earth?"

"In a space ship, you idiot! Do you think he has wings of his own?"

"But a space ship would be seen."

"It has been seen. How often on that copy desk where you work have you read stories of big meteors seen in the sky? One in a thousand of those meteors is actually the jets of a space ship. And you know it is. That's why you blue pencil most of those stories out of the news." McGhee became quite vehement. He pounded on the table. "You and your passion for fact. You're actually keeping facts from being known, that's what you're doing."

Henry Smith squirmed uncomfortably. "But a meteor isn't a space ship," he protested. "And there is no use in trying to pretend that it is. Meteorites have been found. Chunks of rock, that's what they are."

"That's what most of them are!" Bang, went McGhee's fist on the table.

The argument grew hotter and hotter until finally McGhee shouted, "I'll tell you what! The next time one of those stories

HOMeward BOUND

comes to your desk, you note where the meteorite falls, and I'll take you to the spot, and I'll show you—"

"Phooey!" Smith said. "You talk like you're from Mars, yourself."

"And you talk like you're a stubborn old fool," McGhee shouted.

"But what does the man from Mars look like?"

"Like anybody. He could be made to look like anybody on earth. If he was going to live in China, he would look like a Chinese. If he was going to live in the United States, he could look like almost anybody, a Chinese, a Hindu, a Negro, a Swede—Of course, he would have to keep away from X-rays and doctors and women, but if he did that, nobody would ever know him.

"I still say Phooey. What's he doing here?"

"Keeping an eye on us. Trying to determine how soon we will have space travel, finding out if we're likely to start dropping atom bombs on his home planet. There are a million things he could be doing here."

"Oh come, Marcus. The trouble with you is you read too many books when you're supposed to be working. You're going to get fired one of these days, for loafing on the job."

At this thrust, McGhee retired into hurt silence, for Smith's charge was true. But if you worked in a place where all the books on earth were stored and liked to read and didn't have much to do, why shouldn't you spend your spare time reading? You could learn a lot by reading.

Henry Smith smiled and said gently, to show there was no hard feelings, "I'll buy the beer tonight."

They walked down to the corner and contentedly had a small beer. The next day Henry Smith was back on the copy-desk editing the news of the world and correcting the spelling of the reporters; and Marcus McGhee was back in the

HOMeward BOUND

library reading the facts and the figures the scientists used in reporting their dreams as to the way the world was put together.

The next night and the next they met again to argue about something, what it was didn't much matter.

But Henry Smith remembered the challenge about the meteor. There came the night when he tossed a piece of rumpled copy paper to McGhee. "There you are, Marcus. Read that."

McGhee read it. The story was the account of a big meteor that had been in the air the night before, near the town of Farmington.

"You asked for it," Henry said. "Well, here it is. Farmington is exactly sixty-one miles from here. I looked it up in the atlas. A bus leaves at nine o'clock in the morning."

McGhee read the story again. "Well," he said.

"Put up or shut up," Henry Smith answered.

"But darn it, you know the chances are actually a thousand to one that this is really a meteor and nothing else."

"Of course," Henry said mockingly.

The mockery so enraged McGhee that nothing on earth could have kept him from hunting for this meteor. "I'll meet you at the bus station at nine o'clock!" he shouted. "I'll show you a thing or two."

Henry Smith reached the station almost too late to catch the bus the next morning. He arrived, puffing and panting, a short, round-bodied little man, wiping sweat from a red face and a bald head.

"I told 'em at the office I was sick," he said, cunningly.

"So did I," McGhee said. "You're late."

"Had to put my things in storage," Henry explained. "I've decided I can't stand my landlady a minute longer. When we come back, I'm going to look for another room."

HOMeward BOUND

"What?" McGhee said. "Well. So am I. You get sick of the same room." He paused, his forehead wrinkling with thought. "Think we ought to move in together, Henry, when we get back?"

Henry Smith was evasive on this point. "I'll think about it."

Before noon, they reached Farmington and inquired about the meteor, pretending they were scientists interested in such phenomena. "It fell out in the hills," they were told. But nobody knew exactly where and nobody seemed to care much, one way or the other. Farmington was a sleepy little town that could take its meteors or leave them alone. Finally they found a twelve-year old boy who had seen it fall, "Slow like a balloon on fire." The boy pointed out the direction in which it had fallen.

They spent all afternoon following the exact line he had pointed to them, knowing the meteorite must be somewhere in these blasted broken hills, but night fell without their finding it.

"It looks like we're not going to find it," Henry Smith said, maliciously.

"You're an atheist," McGhee answered. "You wait. I'll show you." He trudged on into the growing darkness and Henry followed. They were in hill country, a land of scrawny post oak brush, where occasional pines grew on rocky slopes. They scrambled up these slopes until they were tired, Henry Smith chuckling softly to himself, Marcus McGhee muttering in growing dismay.

They stopped at the bottom of a hill, in a little glade where no timber grew. A hundred yards away was another hill.

"Well?" Henry Smith said.

"Well, yourself!" McGhee said. There was triumph in his voice. He pointed.

HOMeward BOUND

The space ship rested there on the next hill, its dark bulk so well hidden among the trees that it was hard to see, a tear-shaped, concealed globe, without lights. Seeing it, McGhee started toward it, then stopped abruptly when he realized what he was doing. He turned to his companion thinking in triumph how startled Henry would be, how amazed, how dumfounded.

"Well, Henry," McGhee said. It would be good to enjoy the discomfiture of this human. Marcus prepared himself to enjoy it. He was expecting Henry Smith to be scared half to death at just the sight of the ship and to start running instantly.

Henry Smith was not amazed, dumfounded, or discomfited. He was not scared and he did not start running. Instead, he chuckled, at some secret joke, and started straight toward the ship.

"Hey!" McGhee shouted, in surprise.

The chuckle grew louder. "It was fun," the amazing Henry Smith said. "To talk to you and hear you argue that the man from Mars might be here on earth. You never did guess that you were talking to him all the time, did you, Marcus?" Henry Smith laughed heartily at his own joke.

"Phutt!" McGhee gasped. "You?"

"Of course," Henry Smith said. "Who else?"

"Phutt!" McGhee repeated. He needed time to get his breath before he could speak again. "Phutt! You might have told me. What year did you come?"

"Nineteen," Henry Smith answered. "I came in nineteen. You can't imagine—Say! Sudden surprise sounded in his voice. "How did you know to ask me what year?"

McGhee looked at the stars in the sky. Off there in the heavens was the red ball of Mars, floating serenely in the sky.

HOMeward BOUND

His gaze concentrated on that planet. "Somebody up there has been doing too good a job, a better job than had to be done. It was only necessary for us to be sufficiently well disguised to conceal ourselves from men—not from each other. I came in sixteen, myself."

Henry Smith gasped. "What!" Amazement and confusion sounded in his voice. He acted like a man refusing to believe his own ears. "You?" he kept repeating. "You, too?"

Marcus McGhee chuckled. He was enjoying this. "Me, too," he said. "You thought you'd leave me here, didn't you, Henry, while you went sailing off into the sky? You thought you'd really have the last laugh on one of these humans, didn't you? Hah! Well, I'm scheduled to return home on this ship, and I guess you are, too, or you wouldn't be here."

"I thought no such thing!" Henry Smith shouted. "You're the one who planned this trip. I had nothing to do with it. You planned to leave me here, and go sailing off into the sky laughing at me, knowing what would happen to me if I tried to tell anybody I had known a Martian! You—you—" His voice quivered with indignation at the thought of the trick his friend had tried to play on him. Henry Smith was so angry he could only sputter.

"That's a lie!" Marcus McGhee shouted. "I tried to tell you all along that the man from Mars was actually on earth. I didn't trick you, I didn't deceive you—" He broke off quickly as a bright beam of light flashed out from the ship, revealing them in its brilliant glare.

Each hastily moved hands in complex and identical signs of identification. The light flashed off. Came a voice from the ship speaking in harsh gutturals. They listened.

"The pilot says for us to stop our arguing and get aboard," each tried to say at the same time. "He says we can argue all

HOMeward BOUND

the way back to Mars if we want to but that right now he wants to take off."

Marcus McGhee courteously waved his companion ahead of him. "After you, Henry."

They moved forward. Off in the heavens the red ball of Mars swung serenely in the night sky.

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

I

To **STAY** alive five years on Mars, you have to have a nose for trouble. You have to be able to **smell** it before it happens, to catch the **oderiferous** tang of it in the dry wind blowing across the red deserts, to sense it in the shifting shadows of the sunset. Otherwise you may not stay alive on Mars for five months let alone five years. Or for five days, if you happen to be in the wrong place.

Boyd Larkin had lived seven years on Mars, in the wrongest of all wrong places on the red planet, the city of Sudal. No other earth trader ever even ventured here. In view of the peculiarity of the Martian customs, few traders found it wise to attempt to operate on Mars at all.

The City of Sudal was noted for several reasons. In a way, it was the holy city of Mars. Here also were to be found a few lingering relics of the vast scientific achievement this race had once known and had forgotten in the hard struggle for life across the centuries. Here also was a ruler by the name of Malovar, who, within the framework of Martian law and custom, was an utter despot. The reputation of Malovar alone was sufficient to keep most traders away from Sudal.

This, in itself, was enough to bring Boyd Larkin here.

He stood in the door of this store—it had once been the wing of a temple—just before the hour of sunset. A vague uneasiness was in him, a presentiment of trouble. His eyes went over the city, searching for the stimulus that had aroused the feeling in him. The peaked roofs of the buildings

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

of the city glinted peacefully in the rays of the setting sun. Peaked roofs here on this world of no-rain always struck him as odd but he knew these roofs were relics of the far-gone centuries when rain had fallen plentifully on Mars.

Beyond the city lay the desert with its fretwork of canals and its pathetic patches of green growth, pathetic because where once grain had grown as far as the eye could reach now only a few patches were under cultivation. It was not the failure of the soil or of the water that made the desert bare. This soil would still grow lush vegetation. But the grains, though lush, would be worthless, incapable of supporting life. The minerals has been virtually exhausted from the top soil of Mars.

Without minerals, the grain did not support life.

The breeze that came in from the red deserts was soft and peaceful, with no trace of danger in it, no howl of a devil dog from the desert's brim, no chirrrr of a winged horde of locusts coming to devour the crops.

Where, then, was the source of his feeling of danger.

Had Malovar begun to doubt him? Was the Martian ruler considering what action he might take at the next time of the testing? At the thought, a slight shudder passed over the tall trader as if the desert wind had suddenly become tinged with a trace of bitter chill. No, that could hardly be the source of the trouble he sensed. He was no telepath, he could not read Martian minds, nor they his.

What then was the source of the trouble that he sensed?

From inside the store a soft voice called out, "*Send motan.*"

Larkin went inside. The Martian had entered by the side door. He was tall and slender, with a big chest and a skin the color of old copper. His features were finely moulded, the face of a dreaming esthetic. In one hand he held a jewel, one

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

of the Martian opals, uncut. At a glance Larkin knew that this opal was worth approximately seventy dollars delivered on Earth.

In the other hand the Martian held a list which he was turning in nervous, uncertain fingers.

"Yes, Seekin?" Larkin said.

"The Martian smiled. A little uncertainly he pushed the list across the counter.

"I do not need all of these for me and mine, but the ground is prepared and ready, and if I have these minerals I will be able to grow more than I need. Then there will be something over for someone else to use in the time of scarcity." His voice was as soft as a breeze, there was no hint of a demand in it. But there was a pleading in the eyes that looked at the human.

Larkin took the list. Rapidly translating the Martian script, he saw that Seekin wanted approximately five grams of powdered cobalt, copper, boron, manganese, with traces of iron, zinc, and calcium. Phosphorus also was included and a smattering of trace elements.

The trader went quickly to the bins and filled the order, tossing the correct amount of the powdered elements into the agitator for mixing. He spun the crank of the agitator and the machine hummed softly. The powdered minerals poured from the spout. He bagged the mixture. His practiced eye told him that the cost of these minerals, delivered here on Mars, was approximately two hundred dollars.

The Martian's eyes became fixed longly on the little bag when Larkin laid it on the counter. There was an eagerness in the eyes that was almost as strong as the eagerness for life itself. But there was uncertainty too. He fumbled with the opal.

"This is all we have," he said.

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

Larkin grinned. "It's off, isn't it, how things achieve a balance? Those minerals come to just exactly the price of this jewel."

A glow lit the Martian's face. "Do you mean it?"

"Of course."

"But—"

"Take the minerals, give me the opal. It is fair trade."

On Seekin's face appeared a glow that was like the light of the rising sun. He clutched the bag of minerals to his chest.

"Thank you, my friend. This will be remembered." Turning, he went out the door. On the verbal level his thanks had not been profuse, but the glow on his face had exhibited another kind of thanks, to Larkin a much more important kind.

Larkin felt some of the inner glow within him that had appeared on the Martian's face. The minerals he had practically given away would be spread on some little patch of irrigated land, spread with all the care and saving thought that alert minds and hands educated for centuries in extracting the last trace of food value from unwilling soil could bestow. The grain would be eaten by Seekin and his family. They would feel a new throb of life within them as mineral-hungry tissues took up and utilized the earth elements down to the last molecule. And there would be something left over for somebody else in the time of need. Larkin especially liked that.

A warm glow flooding through him, Larkin went again to the door of his store. He lit his pipe and stood there contentedly smoking, a tall, angular Earthman who had wandered from his native planet for a reason that he considered sufficient. Except for two articles for scientific journals, dealing with the problem of supplying minerals to the top-soil of Mars and the vast need for such mineral fertilizer, he had had no

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

contact with Earth in seven years. Nor did he anticipate that he would ever again see Earth, or anyone from that planet, except possibly a rare, far-wandering trader like himself. There was peace in Boyd Larkin.

But there was trouble in the air.

His ears caught the far-off drum-fire of rockets.

He felt his pulse pick up. A ship was coming.

Instantly he knew the source of his feeling of coming trouble. He had heard the sound of those far-off rockets long before he was aware of it as sub-liminal ranges of sound penetrated to his inner being. That sound had been the stimulus for the feeling of trouble that had arisen in him.

A ship, men, humans, were coming.

Wherever humans were, there was trouble.

II

"THE FOOLS!" he thought. "What do they want here?"

He watched the ship land in a fury of splashing jets, just outside the city, but he did not go to it. He was not in a mood to see his fellowmen. They would come to him in the morning, searching out the lone human in this Martian city. He did not think he would wait for them. In the morning he would take a trip to some outlying settlement where the need of minerals was great. For a few days he would trade there.

He was sitting in his chair outside his store deciding which of the various Martian villages he would visit in the morning when he saw the three humans approaching through the twilight. Astonished, he rose to his feet. They hadn't waited for the morning. They had come to him now, before night.

Three burly spacemen, big enough and obviously willing

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

to cut a throat or rape a woman, were coming toward him. No Martian guided them but they seemed to know where they were going. They came directly toward him. As they approached, he saw they carried *Kell* guns, the vicious little weapons that spurted a stream of explosive bullets like water out of a hose. The sight of the guns startled him. He had forgotten that such weapons existed, or that men used them.

He heard the voices of the men as they approached. Harsh, brutal voices, the language all rough consonants. He had forgotten too, the sound of men. The language spoken by the Martians was all soft vowel sounds, gentle words breathed so easily that they seemed to brush only the surface of the naural mechanism and hardly seemed ever to reach the mind beneath.

"There he is!" The men saw him now, came straight toward him.

He rose to his feet. He would greet them politely, like a gentleman, if it killed him.

"You—Are you Larkin?"

"Yes." He advanced with hand outstretched. "Gentlemen, it is certainly a privilege to see you. Won't you come in?" He gestured toward the temple wing that served as his store.

"Naw!" There was no effort at answering politeness in the harsh voice. "We come to get you. Come on with us."

"Come to get me?"

"Yeah. The boss wants you. Mr. Docker."

"I don't believe I know a Mr. Docker. What does he want?"

"To see you. Come along."

Larkin found himself marching ahead of the three men toward the ship that lay at the edge of the city. No Martian made a move to interfere. No Martians were on the streets, none were visible. He did not doubt that they watched him

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

from the windows of the houses along the streets, but they made no effort to inquire what was happening.

What could they do, even if they had wanted to help him? To the best of his knowledge, the only weapons they had were knives.

What were knives against *Kell* guns? Why should the Martians help him, an alien among them?

Docker was a big man with a red face that perpetually showed the red coloration of hidden anger. He had full, thick lips, the avid lips of a greedy man. Whatever these lips tasted or drank, they wanted more of it, all of it. His eyes confirmed his lips. Here was a man who wanted the world with an iron fence around it. Or better still, the solar system, with a big sign saying—KEEP OUT. THIS IS ALL MINE. He looked up as Larkin entered the cabin, glanced up at the men with him.

"He's clean," one of the men said.

"Okay, you can leave. Set down, Larkin." Docker's eyes went back to the papers on his desk.

Larkin sat down. There seemed nothing else to do. He was very much aware that his situation here was ticklish. Docker finished with the papers. He looked up. His eyes were bold, confident, and arrogant.

"Larkin, we're taking over the distribution of all minerals used for soil enrichment on Mars."

Larkin felt shock rise in him. He held it under control. His hands clenched into fists. "By whose authority?" His voice had acid in it.

"Whose authority?" For an instant, Docker looked astonished. "Why, Roy said—" He caught himself. The astonishment turned into swift anger which showed as a tide of red

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

creeping over his face. "By our own authority!" His fist pounded on the desk, emphasizing the words.

"You do not have the sanction of the Martian government?"

"What government is there on Mars?" Docker demanded. "The whole cursed planet is split into a hundred different tribes that do not even know the meaning of the word government."

"Yes, I know," Larkin said.

Docker spoke the truth, or part of it. There was no central government on the red planet. Yet there was a central authority, of a sort. It centered here in this city of Sudal, in the person of a despot named Malovar. Larkin did not pretend to understand the system but he knew that far-ranging desert tribes followed Malovar's orders, at least to a degree. Malovar's orders and Martian law and custom.

"What about Earth Government?" Larkin questioned.

"Earth Government can go to hell!" Docker answered. "They have no control over Mars. Why do you bring up such questions? I told you we were taking over distribution of mineral fertilizers on this planet. That's enough authority for you or for anybody else." Again the fist banged on the desk.

Larkin looked at the fist and was silent. The fist impressed him not at all but the situation did impress him. There was a question he wanted to ask but he was afraid he knew the answer without asking. He started to ask it, then hastily changed his mind.

"How do you know the Martians will buy from you?"

"They buy from you, don't they? They've been buying from you for seven years. They'll buy from us." He sounded very sure of himself, like a man who has a plan all made, a plan which he knows will work.

"Ah!" Larkin sighed and was silent. True, the Martians had bought from him, but there was a price which he had to

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

pay for doing business here, a price which Docker and his men might not relish paying. Larkin tried to imagine the consequences of their refusal to pay that price. His imagination failed him. These Martians had forgotten a great many things that humans had not yet learned. Larkin thought again of the question he wanted to ask, and again put off asking it.

"What prices do you intend to charge for your minerals?"

A grin that had relish in it showed on Docker's face. "Our prices will be fair. Of course, we expect to show a profit."

"Suppose the Martians can't pay your prices?"

"To hell with that!" Docker snorted. "We're not transporting minerals all the way to Mars just to give them away. They'll pay all right. They'll pay or they won't eat." He smacked his lips with obvious relish. A situation in which people paid his prices or did not eat pleased him.

Larkin was silent. There was still the question he did not want to ask. "You seem to have everything worked out to the last detail," he said.

"We have," Docker nodded agreement. "Roy's a genius along those lines." Again he caught himself as if the name had slipped out unintentionally.

Roy? A thought came into Larkin's mind. He put it out. What he was thinking was impossible. He writhed inwardly. He was going to have to ask the question he had tried to avoid.

"Why have you come to me?"

A smile appeared on Docker's face. "Because you are the only trader who has been able to win the complete confidence of the Martians."

"I see," Larkin said.

"So we have a use for you," Docker continued. "You tell us how you have won the confidence of these Martians and

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

we'll cut you in on the deal. We'll see that you are adequately paid. Any price within reason."

"Ah." Larkin was again silent. "But I thought you indicated that the Martians will have no choice except to deal with you. Under those circumstances why do you need me?"

Docker's smile lost none of its easy sureness. "We prefer to do things the easy way, so nobody gets hurt. Since you are here and know the ground, it'd make sense for you to throw in with us."

"So I am the easy way?" Larkin said.

"Well—"

"You go to hell!" Larkin said. He got to his feet, turned toward the door. Surprisingly, no effort was made to stop him.

"We'll see you in the morning," Docker said.

"It won't do you any good."

Larkin walked out of the ship. No effort was made to stop him. He moved slowly across the desert toward the city.

There was nothing about this situation that he liked. Least of all he liked the fact that Docker seemed to know a lot about him. How could that be? No one on Earth remembered him or knew about him. At the thought, sadness came up in him, replacing the smouldering anger. It would be nice to have someone to stand beside him now, someone fighting shoulder to shoulder with him. The word Roy came into his mind again. He quickly put it aside. Let dead dreams lie. But Docker had used the word twice. What did Docker mean? Larkin shrugged off this line of thinking.

There was almost no question in his mind as to what he was going to do. If he took Docker's offer, and tried to trim the Martians, he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt what old Malovar would do. The temper of the Martian ruler—chieftain, high priest—he had all these titles and more—was certain. Malovar brooked no cheating of his people.

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

But, of course, Malovar did not know about this offer of Docker's. Larkin was glad of that. He did not want Malovar even to guess what was in the minds of the men in the ship.

Entering his store, Larkin started in surprise. Seated in a soft chair at the back was Malovar.

The Martian ruler was old, how old only Malovar and the gods of Mars knew. His skin was wrinkled, his face was a bleak mask that looked as if it had never formed a smile. Except for the curious metal staff that he held across his lap, the Martian ruler wore no insignia of his office. His clothing was a simple tunic like the togas of the ancient Romans. He was smoking a thin reed pipe, the only luxury he ever permitted himself, and the rich flavor of Martian tobacco was heavy in the room. With him was one attendant, an elder of the tribe.

Larkin bowed. "I am honored, sire." It was not too unusual for Malovar to pay him a visit. The ruler went from the greatest mansion to the humblest but at will.

"Come sit, my friend." The Martian's voice was as gentle as the passing of a soft breeze but Larkin knew that this breeze would turn into a tornado in an instant. He sat down. Silently, Malovar extended his tobacco pouch. Silently Larkin took it.

"A ship landed this afternoon, my friend," Malovar said.

"Yes," Larkin agreed.

"You have been to talk to your countrymen."

It was a simple statement. Larkin writhed inwardly but attempted no denial. "How did you know?"

"I have ways of knowing. Tell me, are they scientists, or explorers, or traders? Or some other breed of that curious creature—the human being?"

"They—" Larkin hesitated. How much did he dare re-

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

veal? This Martian had most penetrating and discerning eyes. "They hope to trade."

"Ah." Malovar was quiet for a long time. "My friend, you have been here and I have known you for seven years. During this time I have been pleased to call you friend."

"I have been honored." Larkin spoke. "They have been most enjoyable years." Why was this feeling of sweat suddenly appearing on his body? The room was cool almost to the point of being chilly now that the night had come.

"You have helped many of us. Seekin was in here this afternoon—"

"It was nothing." Larkin said, embarrassed.

"Many times you have done this deed which you call *nothing*." Malovar continued. "I just wanted you to know that I was aware of some of these instances."

"It is good of you to mention them," Larkin said. He did not like this sparring, this talk that seemed to go nowhere.

"I wanted you to know that at the next time of the testing these deeds which you call *nothing* will be taken into consideration," Malovar said.

Sweat broke out all over Boyd Larkin.

"They will be given due weight, but they will *not* sway the scales in your favor against other possible deeds."

Only a strong effort of will kept Larkin from shaking. "Sire—"

Malovar rose. He lingered in the doorway. "I have come to regard you as a friend, the only human I have ever known whom I was willing to call by that name. I should regret very much losing my human friend."

"Sire—"

"But my regret will not stay my hand at the time of the testing!"

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

His lone elder following him, Malovar was gone into the Martian night.

III

MALOVAR LEFT behind him an exceedingly perturbed human. Larkin knew the ruler well enough to know that Malovar meant what he said. His hand would not be stayed at the time of the testing. And that time might be any time when the temple bells sounded a summons to the vast, almost-ruined amphitheater which was used for the tests. Again a chill passed through Larkin. He had been through the testing before, many times, but there had never been any doubt in his mind that he would win through it. Now there was doubt.

He had seen what happened to those who failed. In him the chill grew to a shudder. These Martians had the damndest customs.

Faced with this choice, there could be only one answer.

Docker and his cut-throat crew could really go to hell. Better defy Docker than Malovar. There was no way in which the humans could enforce their demands on him.

Or was there? So far as he knew there were no weapons in this city strong enough to resist the power of the single ship that lay outside. The Martians obeyed Malovar because of custom, and not because the ruler had any way to enforce his orders. Larkin could see no way by which Malovar could force Docker to go through the testing. A single trader could be forced. But a ship full of men armed with *Kell* guns—No!

Larkin spent most of the night going over what he would say to Docker's men when they arrived in the morning.

They came early. Three were the same. Standing in the

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

door of his store, Larkin stared at the fourth man with growing horror in his heart. The sight of that fourth man hit him harder than Malovar's grim warning about the time of the testing.

The fourth man moved ahead of the others, came toward him. In this minute it seemed to Boyd Larkin that he had aged years. Something that he had left back on Earth, left there because he could neither control it nor face it, had come unbidden to him here on Mars. In this moment, he wildly regretted that he had not fled to some outlying village during the hours of darkness.

It was too late to flee now. He had to face the consequences.

He forced himself to move forward, to hold out his hand. Inside of him, operating on an unconscious level, a kind of wild gladness came up. He forced it back down. This was no time for errant emotions.

"Roy!"

This man was his son.

Roy Larkin took his father's hand indifferently. "Hi," he said, and dropped the hand.

With horribly mixed memories flooding through him, Boyd Larkin stared at this man who was his son. He remembered this man in his play-pen, a curly headed tot fiercely demanding his toys. He remembered him in high school, the kid who was going to be the best athlete in school, or else. The hard driving, I-don't-give-a-damn-what-happens-to-you, I'll-get-mine attitude had been obvious in him even then.

It was an attitude which the best specialists in the functioning of the emotions had been unable to control. Roy Larkin seemed to have been born with the grim intention of grabbing everything that was handy, and to hell with everybody else. When his father, knowing the inevitable outcome of

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

such an attitude, had been driven finally to interfere, the explosion had been catastrophic.

Larkin's ears still burned with the memory of what he had been called. "A stupid fool. An incompetent jackass. An idiot without enough sense to come in out of the rain!" There had been other words too. At the end of the argument, the youth had slugged his father. This had happened when he was twenty.

Boyd Larkin had come to Mars then, a grim, bitter, disappointed and frustrated man fleeing from all memories. He had hoped never to hear of his son again.

But his son had come to him here on Mars.

"I'm taking over," Roy Larkin said. "The fact that you're my old man won't get you anything."

"You're taking over? I thought Docker—"

"Docker works for me."

"What?"

"You heard me." The voice was blunt. It stated a fact. "I listened while he talked to you last night. I wanted to get an estimate of the situation. Of course, we'll take care of you. We'll leave you in charge of the station here."

"But—"

"There are no 'buts' about it. I have made a study of the need for agricultural minerals on Mars. If handled properly, the thing is richer than forty mints. I intend to see that it is handled properly. You could have made a fortune here, if you'd a had good sense." An accusatory note crept into the voice as if the failure to make a fortune when one was to be had was an act that Roy Larkin could neither understand nor forgive.

Boyd Larkin felt a burning inside of him, replacing the gladness he had felt when first he saw this man. There had

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

been no change. There was no possibility of change. "You seem to know quite a lot about Mars."

"I do," Roy Larkin grinned. "I've made a study of the subject. A couple of articles you wrote gave me the idea that the right man could clean up here. Of course, I didn't think that *you* were the man—"

"There may be difficulties," the father said.

"We expect them. So what?" Roy Larkin gestured at the men with him, a gesture which also included the *Kell* guns they carried and which included the *Kell* gun held in the elbow of his left arm. "If these don't do the job, we've got bigger things on the ship."

"I see," Boyd Larkin said. He was regaining some of his lost composure but he was acquiring no liking for the situation.

"We're not looking for trouble but we came prepared for it. I thought you would be big enough fool to tell us to go to hell if you had the chance. Well, you've got the chance but you either throw in with us or we throw you out—bodily." His manner said he was prepared to back up his words.

Larkin was silent. They could remove him bodily from this place. He could not resist four men. "But what if the Martians refuse to trade with you when you take over?" he said quietly.

"How can they refuse? They've got to have minerals. Without them, they starve."

"They might choose to starve," Boyd Larkin said.

"What?" the younger man gasped. "But that's silly. That's crazy. You don't know what the hell you're talking about. You're trying to pull a fast one."

"They're a strange people," Boyd Larkin said, ignoring his son's outburst. "Sometimes they seem to do crazy things though I have usually found that back of their craziness is a

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

vein of such hard common sense that it is bewildering to us humans."

Roy Larkin was a little uncertain. "They've been dealing with you. They'll deal with us."

"That does not necessarily follow. What you do not understand is that they have a certain test, and that I have passed it."

"A test? Well, what is it. If you can pass it so can we. You haven't got anything that we haven't got."

An involuntary shudder passed over Larkin. "Perhaps. But this test isn't exactly easy." A sound came to his ears. Over the city of Sudal was flooding the sound of temple bells. The shudder came over him again, grew stronger.

His son's eyes were sharp on him. "What the hell are you shaking about?"

"The temple bells—"

"So what?"

"That's the call to the testing. It's an emergency call. It means us."

He saw unease appear momentarily on the face of his son and the men with him, then he saw it shrugged away. "If we have to pass some kind of a test to do business with these fools, all right. We'll pass it."

"I hope," Boyd Larkin whispered. Already the elders had put in their appearance and were coming toward them. They carried with them the long metal rods like the one Malovar carried and which were the sign of their office.

"They come to take us to the place of the testing," Larkin said. He straightened his shoulders. The Martian elders bowed politely and motioned him to precede them.

Neither his son nor the men with him liked the idea. They did not know what was going to happen. They would have preferred to go elsewhere. But Larkin was going and they

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

could hardly let him out-face them. Besides, they had *Kell* guns. So what danger could they meet that they could not overcome?

IV

THE PLACE of the testing was a huge coliseum that had been centuries old when the human race was still in the barbaric stage of its development. It had been designed to hold tens of thousands of spectators and once unquestionably it had held them but the whole population of Sudal and the surrounding territory would now hardly fill the lower tiers. Looking out at the encroaching desert, where pathetic little patches of greenery tried to stem the tide of encroaching desolation, it was easy to see why this stadium could no longer be filled.

"Already the Martians were beginning to trickle into the lower seats when the humans arrived at the top of the vast bowl.

"What the hell goes on here?" Roy Larkin kept demanding. "I don't like this."

"You've got your *Kell* guns, what are you afraid of?" the trader asked.

"I'm not afraid," the younger man angrily answered. "Except for the metal rods the old gooks are carrying, they're not armed. Hell, we're not afraid of them. It's just that I don't know what the hell is supposed to take place."

"You'll find out," Boyd Larkin answered.

In the center of the vast amphitheater was a raised stone altar. In this dry atmosphere, the red stains on it never weathed away. Directly behind the altar was a chair. Malovar was already taking his place in this chair. Leading up to the

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

altar, a double line of elders was forming. Other elders had already made a large circle of living statues around their ruler.

With only the slightest perceptible hesitancy in his stride, Larkin went down the steps of this coliseum. Very vaguely he wondered how many Martians had traveled this path in the centuries gone. There must have been uncounted millions of them. He, personally, had seen most of the inhabitants of Sudal pass this way at one time or another. He had passed this way himself upon his arrival here. He had not fully understood what could happen then, he had been hurt to the bottom of his soul, and he had not cared much what did happen. He had passed the test, then and later. But now—

Malovar's warning of the night before was still ringing in his ears. "My regret will not stay my hand at the time of the testing."

"Where the hell are we supposed to go?" Roy Larkin questioned, as they reached the bottom of the steps. "This looks like a Roman circus, or something."

"Follow me," the trader answered. His step was firm as he trod between the lines of the elders. He knew them, all of them, he had sold minerals to most of them. Now their faces were as immobile as stone. They seemed never to have seen him. At this moment, he was a stranger among them, an alien they did not seem to know.

He walked up in front of the altar, stood facing Malovar.

Sitting in the big throne chair behind the altar, the face of the Martian ruler was a mask far more bleak than the faces of his elders. Now in this moment he wore the regalia of his office, the carved jeweled crown, the diadem of gems suspended from his throat. Either the crown or the diadem would have been worth a fortune back on Earth. Behind him, Larkin heard the humans catch their breath at the sight of these jewels. He knew what they were thinking: a few quick

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

bursts from the *Kell* guns and this fortune would be theirs.

"Are you prepared for the test?" Malovar's eyes centered on Larkin.

"I am prepared, Sire. But why am I being tested now?"

"Any individual may be tested at any time the welfare of the people in my opinion requires such testing." The Martian words seemed almost to be part of a ritual.

"And on what will your decision be reached?"

"Again, the welfare of my people," Malovar answered.

"I mean—what deeds of mine will be judged here?"

Malovar's face grew bleaker still. "Perhaps nothing you have done but something you may do."

"But you cannot test me now for something I have not yet done, you cannot read the future!" the human protested.

"Perhaps by testing you now I may guide the future," Malovar answered. "But—enough of talk. Kneel!"

Larkin knew he had no further choice. He went down on his knees before the altar. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw one of the elders take Malovar's staff from him, hand him instead the sword. Larkin knew that the blade of that sword was razor sharp. Driven with only moderate force it would cut flesh and bone instantly.

He closed his eyes.

He felt himself grabbed by the shoulder and jerked backward. He faced the raging, frightened eyes of his son. "What the hell's going on here?"

"This is the test," he explained. "You have to go through this test before you can sell minerals to the people of Sudal."

"But what's he going to do?" The younger man gestured toward Malovar who stood erect.

"I do not know. His action is his choice."

"But he is acting and you are acting as if he may chop off your head!"

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

"That is exactly what he may do, if he so chooses."

"But that's crazy!" Roy Larkin exploded.

"To us, yes. To the Martians, no. This is the way they have of testing the loyalty of individuals to the group. At the time of the annual testing all the inhabitants of this city pass one by one before Malovar."

"And he cuts off the heads of the ones he don't like!" Horror sounded in Roy Larkin's voice.

"I do not think his liking or not liking has anything to do with it," the trader explained. "He is working for the good of his whole people, not his personal good. And he cuts off heads if he chooses. I have seen him lop off a dozen heads in a single hour."

Sweat oozed out of Larkin as the memory came back to him.

"But, damn it, we don't have to go through with this test. We're not Martians—"

"We propose to do business with them. This is the way they test our fitness to do business with them. They make the rules here."

A snarl was in his son's voice. "But we don't have to obey them!"

"What is this discussion?" Malovar spoke softly, in Martian.

"I am explaining to my son what is happening here," Larkin said.

"Your son?" Something very close to surprise showed on the wrinkled, bleak face. "Is *this* man *your* son?"

"He is," Larkin answered. There was no apology and no attempt at explanation in his voice. He stated a fact, and if it damned him, then it damned him. The interpretation of that fact he left up to the Martian ruler.

Malovar seemed not to find that interpretation difficult. For

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

an instant, the eyes of the Martian went to the younger Larkin, weighing and testing him. Malovar's face grew bleak indeed as if his eyes saw the surface and what was under the surface and found none of it to his liking. Then his eyes came back to the trader.

"We will continue with the testing," he said.

"I am ready," Larkin answered, moving toward the altar.

"Hey, wait a minute," his son said, seizing his arm.

Larkin shrugged off the grip. "You idiot!" Anger blazed in his voice. "Don't you know what you face here? This test must be accepted, or you will never do business on Mars."

"All right, you old fool!" His son's voice was shrill with anger too, though not the same kind of anger. "Go on and get your stupid head chopped off and see if I care."

"I did not expect you to care," Larkin answered. He laid his head on the altar.

Malovar lifted the long sword.

Over the coliseum the assembled Martians seemed to catch their collective breath and then to stop breathing. The silence became thick, heavy, like a pall of gray mist. In that voiceless instant it seemed to Boyd Larkin that time itself was standing still. What would Malovar do? Larkin did not know, and had never known, the facts on which the ruler based his decision to strike or not to strike.

What did knowing, or not knowing, matter now, in the moment that might see the end of his life?

The hushed silence was broken by a single sharp cry. Larkin opened his eyes. He saw Malovar catch the movement of the sword. He turned his head in the direction from which the cry had come.

Down between the lines of the elders a single Martian was running.

Seekin!

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

Seekin came to a halt before the altar, bowed before Malovar. His gaze did not go to the human rising to his feet. He looked at Malovar.

"I claim the privilege of taking his place, Sire," Seekin said. "According to the ancient law of the testing, I take his place."

Larkin blinked startled eyes. A glow came up in him. He was hardly aware of it. He had never seen this thing happen before, he did not know it could happen, he did not know that Martian minds worked this way. Surprise was in him.

Surprise seemed to be in Malovar too. Over the coliseum the silence seemed to become heavier as if thousands of Martians were each holding his breath in wonder and in awe.

After the first flash of surprise, Malovar's face became bleak again.

"Do you accept the human's fate as your fate, whatever my decision may be?" the Martian ruler questioned.

Under his brown, Seekin showed a creeping tide of white. He knew what was meant, knew it intimately and well. But his nod was resolute and undaunted.

"Yesterday he gave me valuable minerals in exchange for a valueless jewel. Thus he gave life to me and to my family. And he gave me more than was needed, so that something more might be grown—for someone else. Thus he has fulfilled the highest tenet of our law. Sire—" Seekin bowed low. "—whatever it may be, I accept his fate."

The words were simply spoken. The soft slurred sounds hardly disturbed the quiet air. But they carried a wealth of meaning.

Over the vast throng a sigh arose as if the watching Martians were seeing a miracle. For the first time since he had been on Mars, Boyd Larkin saw a real smile appear on the bleak

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

and bitter face of Malovar. The smile was almost a benediction.

The benediction of that moment was shattered by a furious blast of sound.

Brrrrp, brrrrp, brrrrp!

The sound of *Kell* guns in operation.

v

THE ELDER standing beside Malovar clutched his throat and collapsed, blood spurting from a hole in his throat. Larkin jerked startled eyes toward the source of the sound.

On top of the coliseum was a group of men from the ship. Docker led them. They were firing *Kell* guns indiscriminately into the Martian crowd.

The *brrrrp-brrrrp* was an almost continuous blast of sound. Following the throb of the guns was the violence of the explosions of the striking missiles. The whole vast arena throbbed to the fury of the sound.

"No!" Larkin screamed.

This was a slaughter of helpless innocents. The Martians were unprotected, incapable of defending themselves. And they had done nothing wrong.

"Stop!" The voice of Malovar was like thunder rolling through the arena. He spoke in Martian but there was no mistaking his meaning. He dropped the sword, took back his metal rod that was part of the regalia of his office, held it erect. In that moment he was like a tribal god ordering the lightning and the thunder.

The answer, coming from above, was a slug that whistled within inches of Malovar's head and exploded behind him.

"For the last time, stop!"

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

Another slug howled downward.

Then Malovar acted.

Larkin was not quite certain what happened but out from the tip of the metal staff that Malovar held seemed to flash a bolt of blinding radiance. It was not a thunderbolt, it was not electrical, it was probably no force known to Earth scientists.

Looking upward, Larkin expected to see the flashing radiance blast through the group of humans like a smashing thunderbolt, searing and destroying them, leaving in its wake chunks of charred and writhing flesh that had once been men.

No such thing happened. The blinding radiance swirled around the men. It formed a coating around each of them. In a split second each of them was encased in a plastic cocoon that looked like ice, a covering that held them helpless. They still retained their guns but the plastic force covered the guns too. The guns were silent. Either they could not fire into the plastic coat or the men who still grasped them could not move their fingers to press the triggers.

Like statues frozen in motion, the group stood at the top of the coliseum, on the highest row of seats of that vast circling arena.

A cry of rage sounded near Larkin, then was suddenly stilled.

At the sound of the cry near him, Larkin turned, saw that his son and the men with him were likewise encased in plastic envelopes. He saw that his son's eyes were bulging from terror, his throat pulsating from the effort of trying to scream. But no sound was coming forth.

The torture of that moment must have been a terrible thing for Roy Larkin. To be held helpless by a force that stilled all motion, to want to scream but be unable to hear the blessed

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

sound of your own voice, to see the consequences of your own acts coming home upon your head—this was torture.

Malovar and his elders had not been helpless. They had retained in the metal rods some of the vast forgotten science of old Mars, a science that they rarely used, and rarely needed to use.

Malovar, his face still like thunder, was standing erect and was directing what was to happen next.

There were screams in the coliseum, of wounded and dying Martians, and a vast stir as Martian friends ran to help those who had been injured, and a babble of voices rising in anger. The elders were moving. Some of them were attending to the stricken. Others were directing the removal of Docker and the men with him from the top of the coliseum. Docker and his men were being carried down by Martians. They seemed incapable of movement of their own.

The whole group was brought before Malovar.

The face of the Martian was the face of a tribal god, furious with anger. He made a motion with his hand toward Docker. The Martians carrying the man laid him face down on the altar. Malovar handed his metal staff to the nearest elder, took up the sword.

There was no mistaking the intention of the Martian. He lifted the sword, brought it down. Just before it reached its target, the plastic envelope collapsed as the elder holding the staff made a slight shift with it.

Docker had time to start a scream. The scream ended. A head skittered across the stone, blood spurted.

A moan went over the watching throng.

Larkin watched, appalled. He had seen Martian heads roll here before but somehow this scene was different. Here was Martian justice, swift, sure, and final.

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

Malovar made another motion with his hand. The nearest human, one of the men with Docker, was lifted, carried to the altar. Larkin saw the man's muscles writhe against the plastic force envelope that held him, writhe unavailingly.

Sunlight glinted on the red blade of the sword as it came down.

Again a moan went up from the audience.

Malovar pointed with his sword—at Roy Larkin. Elders seized the man, lifted him, carried him to the altar.

The sword came up.

"NO!" A single burst of involuntary sound came from the lips of the trader. He leaped forward. "NO!"

Malovar held the sword, looked at him. The Martian looked a little sad.

"I know he is your son, my friend, but he came here to cheat and to rob. Men under his direction have killed."

"But—"

"The laws of my people are explicit," Malovar continued. "Nor will I stay my hand for the sake of friendship at the time of the testing."

"But—" Larkin still protested. Here was a bond, an obligation, that went beyond friendship.

"I am sorry," Malovar said gently. His tone of voice and the expression on his face said he was really sorry. But they also said he had no intention of holding his hand from striking.

Boyd Larkin moved again. He was not quite sure why he did what he did and he was utterly unsure as to what the result would be, but in the face of the rising sword, he lifted his son from the altar.

"I claim your law," he said. "I take his place." He laid himself on the altar.

Over the watching throng there was silence. He sensed rather than saw Malovar lift the sword.

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

There was a stir of feet near him. A gentle voice spoke. "I also claim the law. I have bought his life once this day. You may not strike him."

Seekin's voice. Soft and gentle but very firm and very sure. Seekin stood before the altar with uplifted hand. He spoke to Malovar but his eyes were on Larkin.

"You are free, my friend. Our laws protect you now and will protect you until the next time of the testing."

Malovar lowered the sword blade. "Our laws hold," he said. "I may not accept you as a substitute sacrifice. Nor may I accept Seekin. Nor may I accept him—" his eyes sought Roy Larkin. His voice became terrible as he spoke a single word. "—now."

He made a gesture with his hand toward the elder who had taken his metal staff. The elder touched the staff in a certain place. Around Roy Larkin the plastic envelope vanished.

Roy Larkin came to his feet, his fingers clutching the *Kell* gun, the wild light of terror in his eyes. Looking at him, Boyd Larkin caught his breath. There was such terror and wild fear in this man as he had never seen before, such terror as might send death spurting from the muzzle of the *Kell* gun in a steady stream.

Larkin saw his son's finger tighten on the trigger, an involuntary movement. Malovar must have seen the movement too, all the Martian elders must have seen it. They must have seen it. They must have known the meaning of it, must have understood that they were facing death. Not a Martian moved a muscle.

Roy Larkin apparently had expected them to cringe, to fawn, to beg. When they did nothing, he seemed confused. Wonderingly he stared at them. His gaze came to the face of his father. On his features the confusion grew. His eyes came down to the *Kell* gun. Something was happening inside of

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

him, what it was no man except he knew or could know. As he seemed to realize he still held the gun, a look of horror appeared on his face. He dropped the weapon. It clattered on the stone floor, the only sound in that vast silence.

Then there was another sound, a sound that resembled the cry of a child gulping a single word—"Daddy." Roy Larkin was saying that single word and he was moving toward his father.

"I've been so terribly wrong," Roy Larkin whispered. "For so many years I've been wrong. I wanted to tell you, but I never could, until now."

Boyd Larkin folded his son into his arms. The hard, bitter driving man that he had known this morning was somehow gone. The man who was in his arms and clutching his shoulders and burying his head against his chest was somehow a little boy who had been lost, bewildered, and alone, and who was no longer lost, who in this moment was growing to the stature of manhood.

Larkin patted the shoulders of this man-boy. His eyes were moist and there was a choke in his throat. Here was something that he had wanted desperately for so many years. Now he had it. His son, his son!

In him somewhere was a feeling not of triumph but of vast achievement. He looked over his son's shoulders at Malovar. The Martian's face was glowing as if he too was tasting this feeling of vast achievement. In this moment Malovar no longer looked like a tribal god demanding vengeance. Malovar looked like a very gentle and kindly old Martian.

"Mine eyes have seen wonders this day," Malovar spoke. "I think at the next time of the testing all of you will be safe from me."

"Do you mean that?" Larkin whispered.

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

"Of course. I never make careless statements." He made a gesture toward the elder who held his metal staff.

Around him Larkin was aware that the other humans were being freed from the force envelopes that held them powerless. There were clattering sounds, the noises of weapons being dropped from hands that no longer chose to use them.

Over the watching throng a sigh was rising, such a sigh as may come from the lips of those who have seen wonders past the understanding.

At the top of the coliseum, where the vast red deserts stretched away under a thin harness of tiny canals, they paused.

Roy Larkin had changed. The fear and the terror were gone. A different enthusiasm was in his voice. "We can still bring minerals here but we will no longer operate as I had planned. We will operate on a cost plus basis, we will deliver them here at a price . . ."

"The buyer can afford," Boyd Larkin said softly.

"Right," his son said.

Behind them stood Malovar and Seekin. Malovar grunted approvingly. "Through such men as you, minerals can come to Mars—and with them new life may come to an old and dying world."

Malovar looked beyond the city to the red deserts. He seemed to be seeing them as vast stretches of greenery, as interlacing canals with lush vegetation covering all the land that now was desert but someday would be something else. His face glowed.

"You also seem to have won a victory here," Boyd Larkin spoke.

"Yes," Malovar answered. "I have blended the laws of my people with the drive of you humans, made each aware

WHEN THE SPOILERS CAME

of the other, made each respect and support the other. The victory will be *there*, in the years that are to come."

He gestured toward the deserts where in his imagination an old world was again coming to life. The glow deepened on his face. He was seeing a lost dream come true.

Boyd Larkin had the fleeting impression that this old Martian ruler had somehow manipulated and conspired the actions that had taken place in the arena down below, that he had moved both his own people—and the humans—like puppets on strings. For an instant the thought startled the trader. Then he looked again at Malovar's face, saw the glow there, and knew that even if Malovar had manipulated them like puppets on strings the purpose of Malovar's manipulations was clear. It was new life on an old planet, new life for two peoples, the Martians and the humans.

With that purpose, Boyd Larkin had complete sympathy.

Quietly the four of them moved down from the top of the coliseum, toward the peaked roofs of the city of Sudal.

Beyond them, the red deserts already seemed to be green-ing with new vegetation, new life.

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

THE YOUTHFUL WARDEN, Ve, was greatly excited. He had made a discovery of such great magnitude that he insisted on reporting personally to Lor, who was head warden in this section of the universe.

His immediate superior told him to make his report through proper channels.

"It will reach Lor in good time," his superior said. "There is no rush about such things. Take everything in its proper time and everything will be well done."

Ve would not listen. Proper channels were all very well for routine reports—rate of radiation from the various suns, passage of comets, explosions of super-novae, and things like that—but this was important, too important for delay. He insisted on the ancient right of all wardens to make immediate personal reports to Lor if they, in watching the worlds of space, observed anything going wrong.

His superior sighed. Ve was young, impetuous. Ve had not yet mastered the ancient wisdom that all things happen in their proper time and that really there was not much that could be done about them. But if Ve chose to invoke the right of the Watchers to make personal reports to Lor, then there was nothing to do except pass him up the line. If Lor threw him out on his ear for bothering him with unimportant trifles, Ve could charge up the experience to the high cost of wisdom.

So his superior signed the proper passes and Ve was passed up through the hierarchy of command, through the equivalent

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

of captains, majors, colonels, and various departmental generals until he was ushered into the presence of Lor himself.

Lor wore no insignia of any kind. Dressed all in brown, he looked much like a worker, perhaps a watcher of no more than a single star, but Ve did not need to see the five-star general at Lor's right hand and the five-star general at Lor's left hand—five-star generals being used to run errands—to know that he was in the presence of the chief of staff himself. For there was an aura of authority about Lor. He looked big, accustomed to command.

Lor was seated at his desk. There was a frown of concentration on his face as he studied the figures spread in front of him. He was so busy he did not notice Ve.

Ve waited. The five-star generals looked at him and through him and did not see him. Ve was suddenly conscious that technicians, second grade, scarcely presumed to exist in the same space as five-star generals. And he had come to see Lor, who used such generals as errand boys.

Ve, beginning to squirm as he waited, suddenly wished he hadn't come. He wished he had taken the advice of his superior and had made his report through regular channels. He squirmed and wondered if he could sneak out before Lor noticed him. He started edging toward the door.

The general at Lor's right hand suddenly became aware of his existence.

"Just stay where you are," the general said.

Ve flushed. "I—I thought—"

"And keep quiet," the general added.

Ve almost swallowed his tongue in his haste to close his mouth.

Lor looked up. He looked straight at Ve.

"What do you want?" he said.

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

Ve saluted quickly. "Sire, I have invoked the ancient right of all watchers—"

"Otherwise you would not be here," Lor said. "What is your information? I'm busy, as you should be able to see."

Ve wished the floor would open up and swallow him.

"Sire, the vermin on Planet Three of Solar System 31,941—"

Lor blinked. It was obvious he was not really thinking about what Ve was saying. "What's that?" he said.

"The vermin on Planet Three of Solar System—"

"Vermin?" Lor questioned.

"They were so classified in the last report, Sire. That report was made by the last regular expedition to visit their planet, which was 4200 years ago. They are scheduled for full-scale inspections once every five thousand years, Sire. Possibly the next inspection report may classify them differently, but for the present they are listed as vermin."

Lor made a little gesture with his hands. It was a gesture of impatience with so trivial a thing. "That doesn't matter. The classification is probably correct. Where did you say they are located?"

"Planet Three of Solar System 31,941."

Lor looked blank again. "And where is this solar system located?" he questioned.

Ve's mouth hung open in astonishment. He had always supposed, nay, he had been specifically told time and time again in his regular indoctrination lectures, that Lor knew everything. It was a great shock to him to realize that Lor did not even know where solar system 31,941 was located, or that there was even such a solar system.

"Well, it's under the Pleiades," he said, fumbling for a way to tell Lor where this sun and its nine planets were located. "It's south of Vega, and—"

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

"Um," said Lor. He turned to the general on his left hand. "Bring me the star map," he said.

The general hastened from the room. He returned with the great map that showed the location of all the suns in this section of the universe. Consulting the cross-reference system, Lor finally managed to locate solar system 31,941.

"I see," he said. "Those aren't fly specks, after all. Well. The third planet out from the sun, you say? Bring me a magnifying glass."

They brought him a magnifying glass. He pored over the map for a long time. "I see the planet now," he said at last. "It has a single moon. Well."

Lor seemed genuinely pleased to have located this solar system. It was, after all, no little thing to be able to locate a single sun and nine attendant planets situated far out in one of the less densely populated sections of the universe. That this sun was mapped at all bespoke excellent organization, which was pleasing to the chief of staff.

"Well," said Lor, looking up at Ve. "And what is there about the creatures of this planet that brings you in such great haste to make a personal report to me?"

Ve took a deep breath. This was the thing that had brought him scurrying across a quarter of the universe.

"Sire," he said. "They have discovered atomic power!"

Even though Ve was only a second grade technician he knew how important this discovery was. Atomic power was the basic energy of the universe. The race that possessed it could eventually go anywhere and do anything. Oh, they couldn't do these things right away, but once the basic discovery was made, everything else came in its turn.

The vermin on Planet Three had atomic power.

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

Surprise showed on the faces of the generals when Ve spoke. Even Lor looked perturbed.

"No," he said. "You must be mistaken."

"But I am not mistaken," Ve insisted. "When I felt the first blast of far-reaching radiation from an atomic explosion, I made a very close investigation. There is no question about it. They have succeeded in releasing nuclear energy and in maintaining a chain reaction in one of the heavier elements."

Ve could see how hard this news hit Lor.

"Atomic energy!" Lor said, repeated the words aloud. "That means they will soon be building space ships."

Ve nodded. "They have a moon, Sire, which they can reach with even clumsy space ships. The moon will lure them into the skies. Once they reach the moon, they will soon be able to fly over the entire solar system. After that, it won't be long before they reach us here."

"Yes," Lor said heavily. "And when they find us—"

Ve could see the question forming in Lor's mind. He shivered a little. For some reason, which he did not quite understand, he rather liked the little creatures who lived on Planet Three. Even if they were classified as vermin, they were grand in a way. Ve hated to report to Lor what he knew about them but he knew he could not avoid the question.

"Are they a peaceful race?" Lor asked.

Ve hesitated. He shook his head. "No," he said at last. "They are not peaceful. On the contrary, they are very war-like. They fight each other almost continuously, going to war for the flimsiest of reasons, or for no reason."

He could see the grim hardness settle over Lor's face at this news. Only the generals looked pleased.

"They will not reach us immediately," Lor said, looking at Ve. "Do you anticipate, from your knowledge of them,

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

that they will have learned the ways of peace by the time they reach us?"

Ve sighed. "I have seen nothing in their history to indicate it," he said.

"Then we can look forward to the time when a new race will come brawling across space and be upon us," Lor said heavily.

The generals grinned.

There was silence in the big office of the chief of staff. Lor was thinking about the problem that had been thrust upon the wardens of space.

Ve thought about this problem too. Lor's words, "A new race will come brawling across space and be upon us," kept repeating themselves in his mind. A little by a little he began to grasp what these words meant. They meant that the vermin from Planet Three would eventually cross space. Because they were a race of warriors, they would come in great battleships, in long-ranging space cruisers. A patrol of fast scouting ships would be flung far ahead of them. There would be war.

There could be nothing but war. The vermin from Planet Three knew nothing else. As well expect the sky to fall down as to expect them to change their heritage of battle. They had fought so long with each other that fighting was second nature with them, something they accepted without thinking.

The wardens of space were peaceful. Although they still maintained a military organization, they had almost forgotten the purpose for which it was originally created. Only the generals remembered things like that. True, the wardens had great powers, tremendous powers, but if the vermin were once permitted to grow to full stature, even the great powers of the wardens might not be enough to withstand them.

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

"What do you suggest?" Lor spoke suddenly, looking at the general on his left.

"Eliminate them," the general promptly answered. "Before they grow strong enough to challenge us, blast their planet from the sky. A small expedition can do the job. I will volunteer to lead it."

"No!" Ve said quickly.

Lor looked at him and ignored him. The chief of staff turned to the general on his right. "What do you suggest?" he asked.

The general grinned. "I suggest we wait a while," he said.

"Why?" Lor questioned.

The general spread his hands in an expansive gesture. "If we wait, they will grow stronger. Destroying them will be more of a test for us. Of course I do not suggest that we wait until they grow *too* strong," he hastily added.

"Just strong enough to provide us with a full-scale military maneuver?" Lor questioned.

"Something like that," the general on his right answered. "I will volunteer to head a special staff to prepare plans for their destruction as soon as they are strong enough to give us a taste of battle."

"Um," Lor said. There was little pleasure on his face. He looked appraisingly at his two generals, then turned to Ve.

"I gather from your remark that you do not approve of destroying these vermin?" he said.

The two generals were looking straight at Ve. They saw him now, no mistake about that. They saw him. The looks on their faces told him what they would do to him if he dared to oppose their plans.

He took a deep breath.

"No, Sire," he said. He did not look at the generals. He looked only at Lor.

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

"Why?" Lor questioned.

It was a question that Ve could not answer. He tried hard to find an answer. He thought of the little creatures on Planet Three. In going about his duties, he had from time to time observed them closely. He had seen them do many fine and brave things. He had seen them come up out of nothing and face a hostile planet of huge beasts, of green tangled wildernesses, of scarred, deadly deserts. He had seen them face the cold of the ice caps, the dark horror of the great seas. He had seen them do these things, knowing that the beasts would kill them, that the jungle would strangle them, that the ice caps would freeze them, that the deserts would burn them. He had seen them face death in a thousand forms without flinching. To Ve, there was something grand about that, something grand about the way they kept on trying, something grand about the way they never gave up.

But that was not the reason he did not want them destroyed, or not the only reason. And he knew the generals would not accept this reason. For unquestionable vermin with atomic power were dangerous vermin. Ve shook his head.

"I do not know the reason, Sire," he said.

"Destroy them now," the general on Lor's left urged.

"Wait a while and then destroy them," the general on the right said.

"I do not know whether we can destroy them," Lor answered.

"Eh?" the surprised generals said in chorus. "We have the power."

"More is involved than power," Lor said. He turned back to Ve.

"Tell me," he questioned, "did they discover atomic power for themselves? Is it their own discovery, a secret they

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

have taken from nature by their own intelligence and their own strength, or did they have help in making it?"

Ve could not see the purpose of this question. The generals could see its purpose for suddenly both of them looked at Ve.

"They had help in making the discovery," the generals said. "That's right, isn't it? They had help."

"No," Ve said. "They had no help. They discovered it for themselves."

Lor looked up at his two generals. "Then that answers your question, gentlemen. If they made the discovery themselves, then we cannot destroy them merely to protect ourselves. There is a law of the universe which says that a race or a species that makes an advance by its own intelligence, by its own strength, is not to be destroyed merely because of the discovery it has made. Otherwise, evolution would stop in the worlds of space."

The generals looked very unhappy. "Surely the law does not hold for vermin," one of them suggested.

"The law holds for life in every form," Lor answered. "Remember, there are wardens who watch over us just as we watch over the creatures under us. If we break their law, we doom ourselves."

Lor shook his head. There was finality in the gesture.

Ve stared in wonder at his chief. Here was high policy that he did not even begin to understand. He knew, of course, that there were higher powers than the wardens in the universe but he had not thought these higher powers were interested in vermin. It seemed they were. It seemed their protection extended all the way down the scale of life, helping even the creatures on Planet Three.

Ve felt better. Immediate destruction was out. That was certain. Lor had said so.

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

"We may not take action against them," Lor continued. "The law protects them. But the law also provides certain protections for us too, sets up certain safeguards. In the centuries that must elapse before the vermin reach us, these safeguards will have ample time to operate."

His fingers drummed on the desk top, beating an impatient, worried, and fretful tattoo. The discovery of atomic power gave him a tremendous problem to solve. He was forbidden to destroy the creatures who had made the discovery but if he did not destroy them, he would eventually have to fight them.

Lor looked at the general standing on his left. "Prepare the probability-scanning equipment for immediate operation," he said. "Have the operators focus on this planet where the vermin are evolving. Although we may not destroy them now, before they have had a chance to develop the discovery they have made, we can at least learn whether or not we will have to destroy them in the future. Time to develop the law allows them. If they do not use that time to advantage, then we may eliminate them on the grounds of unfitness."

"Yes, Sire," the general answered. "At once, Sire."

As the general tip-toed from the room, Lor turned to Ve. "We will examine the various future paths this race may travel," he explained. "We will see if the safeguards operate. As a reward for your diligence in reporting the discovery of atomic power, you may come with us and see what the future holds in store for the vermin on Planet Three."

Ve followed Lor in that section of headquarters where the probability machine was located. He had never seen this machine but he knew the theory on which it operated. Put into simple words, it was a machine that revealed the futures.

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

Not the *future*, but *futures*, the different paths that a planet, a race, or an individual might follow.

As they entered the big room where the futures machine was located, Ve was aware of a vast bustling and scurrying going on around him. This machine was not often used. Now that it had been ordered into action, harried technicians were trying to get it ready for operation. Great banks of calculators were being energized and checked. Delicate electronic balances were being tested. Frantic librarians were assembling the necessary information on Planet Three of Solar System 31,941, information that had to be fed into the great machine before it could calculate and compute the various futures open to the planet and to the race that inhabited it.

"We're ready, Sire," a puffing general reported. "If you will step into the viewing room—"

When they were seated in the viewing room all lights were turned off. The blackness here was utter and complete. All light, all radiation of any kind, was shielded away from this room, including even cosmic rays.

"We have already determined that Planet Three of Solar System 31,941 has three major possible futures," the voice of a technician said in the darkness. "There may be others but we have discovered three major potentialities, three paths the planet may take to the future. Path one will now be explored."

There was a soft click in the darkness and a reedy whirling sound that went rapidly into silence. Ve knew that from the futures machine penetrating currents of etheric force were leaping out across space, moving at many times the speed of light, and were scanning Planet Three. These beams of force were weighing, measuring, the whole solar system and were bringing back data to the machine.

In the front of the room the blackness faded. A picture be-

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

gan to form there, a picture of a sun and nine little attendant planets done in miniature. As projected by the futures machine, the solar system looked like a pretty toy, a plaything that might delight a child, but Ve knew that this was only a picture and that the reality was vastly different. He had seen that toy sun close up. He knew the tremendous radiation flowing from it. Although it looked like a child's plaything here on this screen, Ve knew how tremendously huge it was off there across the untracked depths of space.

"Path one now forming," the voice of the technician droned.

Movement was visible in the little solar system. The movement quickened, speeded up, as the machine began to telescope time in reaching for the probability pattern of this system.

Then the solar system was gone and only one planet was revealed on the screen, Planet Three.

Planet Three floated in space, a round beautiful ball. Enlarging on the screen, the deep blue of its seas became visible, the brown of its deserts, the green of its fertile valleys and plains. The white polar caps sparkled under the rays of that far-off sun.

It was a beautiful sight. Ve stirred restlessly under the pressure of that beauty. Even Lor, sitting so quietly and watching so intently, seemed impressed by the beauty of the scene.

Time on the planet was passing quickly. Years were going by like seconds. Ve watched closely for signs of activity.

It happened too quickly for activity to start.

There was a blinding flash of light.

The screen suddenly blazed in an inferno of white brilliance as Planet Three exploded.

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

A nova flared in the sky.

Ve forgot to breathe.

The screen went blank.

Lor moved in his chair. "That is one possible future," Lor said slowly. "After discovering atomic power, they begin to experiment with the lighter elements. They set off a chain reaction, probably involving the hydrogen atom, that blows up the entire planet."

One possible future of Planet Three was disintegration. Whether or not that future came to pass depended on the way the inhabitants used the new power they had discovered. If they used it one way, they blew themselves and their planet out of the sky almost before they got started.

"The possibility of blowing up their own planet is one of the safeguards I mentioned," Lor continued. "If they follow that path to the future, we need never fear them."

But would they follow that path?

Ve did not know what path they would follow, nor did any of the wardens know, not even Lor himself. This path was only a potential future, something that might happen, could happen. There were other paths.

Again the whirring sound came and again the nine little planets and their sun glittered on the screen like beloved toys in which a child might take delight.

"Probability path two," the voice of the technician droned. Ve watched closely.

Planet Three enlarged on the screen, as beautiful as ever. There was movement in the air over the planet. Ve strained his eyes to see what was happening.

"War!" Lor whispered.

Then Ve saw what the movement was. Hosts of ships were moving through the air. Far-flung sky battles were taking place. He saw tiny midges lock in mortal combat and des-

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

troy each other. He saw cities go out of existence.

He saw the war end.

One by one the little ships left the air.

The cities ceased disintegrating.

Ve waited to see what would happen when the war ended.

He waited and waited.

Nothing happened.

"Move the focus closer," Lor ordered.

On the screen the planet enlarged as the technicians obeyed the order.

Ve saw what had happened.

Planet Three was dead. The ruins of the cities stared tenantless at the empty sky. The highways were deserted. The fields were bare.

The streams ran, the oceans sparkled in the sun, the winds blew, the ice caps glinted, but there was no life visible on the world. No life of any kind.

No animals moved, no vegetation grew in the soil.

"I see what happened," Lor said. "They released a radio-active gas, trying to kill their enemies. The gas was dispersed through the whole atmosphere and it killed every living thing on the planet. One important product of atomic disintegration is radio-activity—"

Ve knew how deadly were radio-active emanations to the people of Planet Three. They had fought a war and had made their entire atmosphere radio-active, thus destroying themselves.

"If they follow the second path, we need never fear them," Lor said quietly. "Our safeguards hold."

The little world spun lifeless in the quiet sky. Eventually, when a thousand centuries had passed, the radio-active gases

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

would die out and life would appear again, to begin the long evolutionary process all over again.

But that would take thousands of years.

"There are other paths," Ve said hopefully.

The eagerness in his voice revealed he was hoping the inhabitants of Planet Three would take another path, would choose another future, and save themselves from destruction.

"The technician said there was at least one other major possible future," Ve said.

In the darkness he was aware that Lor was looking at him. "I believe," Lor said, "I believe you are secretly hoping they will succeed in controlling atomic power and will eventually come against us here."

"No," Ve said hastily. "Nothing like that."

Secretly he hated to see those little creatures, even if they were classified as vermin, destroy themselves and their world. And now he knew why he did not want to see them destroyed. They appealed to him because of their daring!

They dared hold the atom in their hands! Knowing it might destroy them, they still dared to hold it in their hands and seek its secrets. This was a great thing. Such daring and such bravery should not perish from the universe!

"Path three now forming," the technician said in the darkness.

Again the sun and its planets danced in the sky.

Ve held his breath. Here was another path they might take to the future. Would they escape destruction if they took this path? Ve did not know but he was almost afraid to watch.

Again war blazed through the air of the planet, grim, hideous, blasting, totalitarian war.

"Will they never learn?" Ve writhed, speaking the words unconsciously. "Will they never learn to avoid war? Will it

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

always remain a part of their culture pattern? Won't they ever learn that war and atomic power won't mix?"

Along path three lay war.

The focus was brought close in and Ve watched the destruction commence. He saw proud cities flare brightly into destruction, he saw the rain of death from the sky, he saw the great gaping holes torn in the tortured crust of the planet as atomic missiles sought for cities that had been buried underground. He waited, wondering how they would destroy themselves this time.

The atom could be mishandled in so many ways! There were so many things that could go wrong with it!

Lor called the things that could go wrong with the atom safeguards, and from the viewpoint of the wardens, from the viewpoint of the great race that watched space, they *were* safeguards, but from the viewpoint of the little people who inhabited Planet Three, the safeguards were pitfalls leading to sudden death, to swift destruction.

Ve watched, and did not dare to breathe.

The war ended.

The planet was not destroyed.

There was not a city left standing. The population had shrunk to a quarter of what it had been before the fighting started, invaluable natural resources were gone forever.

But the war was done.

And Planet Three was still in the sky, and still inhabited. True, many of the vermin were dead, but enough of them were left alive.

Ve was aware that Lor was very uneasy now.

He was aware that the generals were very alert.

The safeguards of the wardens had failed. The inhabitants

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

of Planet Three had avoided the pitfalls, they had neither blown up their world or destroyed themselves.

Holding the atom in their hands, they had learned how to control it.

Lor was uneasy about that.

Telescoping time ran swiftly on the screen, revealing the future of this race, revealing one possible future.

The race began to build anew.

They built no cities. They lived in small groups, they seemed to control their numbers so that they did not outstrip their food supply. And they got along together!

They didn't fight any more.

They built.

Ve saw them begin to build space ships.

He saw the first wobbly ship take off from the planet.

The technicians, swiftly changing the focus of the futures machine, followed the flight of that space ship.

Ve saw the ship land on the planet's moon.

He knew, then, that the first step had been taken.

He knew why Lor was so very uneasy now, why the generals were so alert.

Path three led to the conquest of space, it led eventually to the dwelling places of the wardens.

Telescoping time revealed landing places built on the moon, regular traffic established, great supplies of new raw materials, ores of all kinds, tapped on the satellite.

Now this race had adequate supplies.

Space ships began to take off from the moon. They began to fly to the planets. They flew in peace through the reaches of space.

"That's enough," Lor said. "Stop the machine."

Lights flared up in the room as he rose to his feet. Ve and

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

the generals followed him out of that section of supreme headquarters where the futures machine was housed, back to his office.

Lor went to the window of his office and looked out.

His window opened out on space, on the vastness of the nothingness that lay between the worlds. Lor stared at this space, saying nothing.

Ve's mind kept returning to a central thought.

Finally he spoke.

"Which path will they take, Sire?" he timidly asked.

There was silence in the big room.

"I do not know," Lor answered. "They must choose the path themselves."

The silence was heavy then.

"But I think," Lor suddenly spoke again, "I think we had better prepare to receive visitors some day."

Ve's heart leaped at the words. "You think, then, that they will take path three?"

"I think they will," Lor answered.

The generals became excited. "Then we must prepare our defenses," they said.

"No," said Lor.

They looked at him in astonishment. "We need no defenses," he said. "The only path that leads to us, is, after an initial period of conflict, a peaceful path. All other paths lead to destruction. The only path that ever leads to us is the path of peace. We need no defenses against people who come in peace."

The generals were silent.

Inside, Ve was suddenly very happy. Those little people who dared hold the atom in their hands, there was hope for them yet.

"We will make preparations to receive them," Lor said.

LIKE ALARM BELLS RINGING

"They will come to us, in peace, when they have mastered both themselves and the skyways of the universe."

There was something of prophecy in the rolling tones of his voice.

"Who knows?" Lor said. "Perhaps in some future time they may take our places here as wardens of this section of the universe while we go on to greater glories. That, I think, is their destiny."

His voice went into silence. Ve was silent. The generals were silent. Far off across vast depths of space the vermin of Planet Three worked on their atomic bomb.