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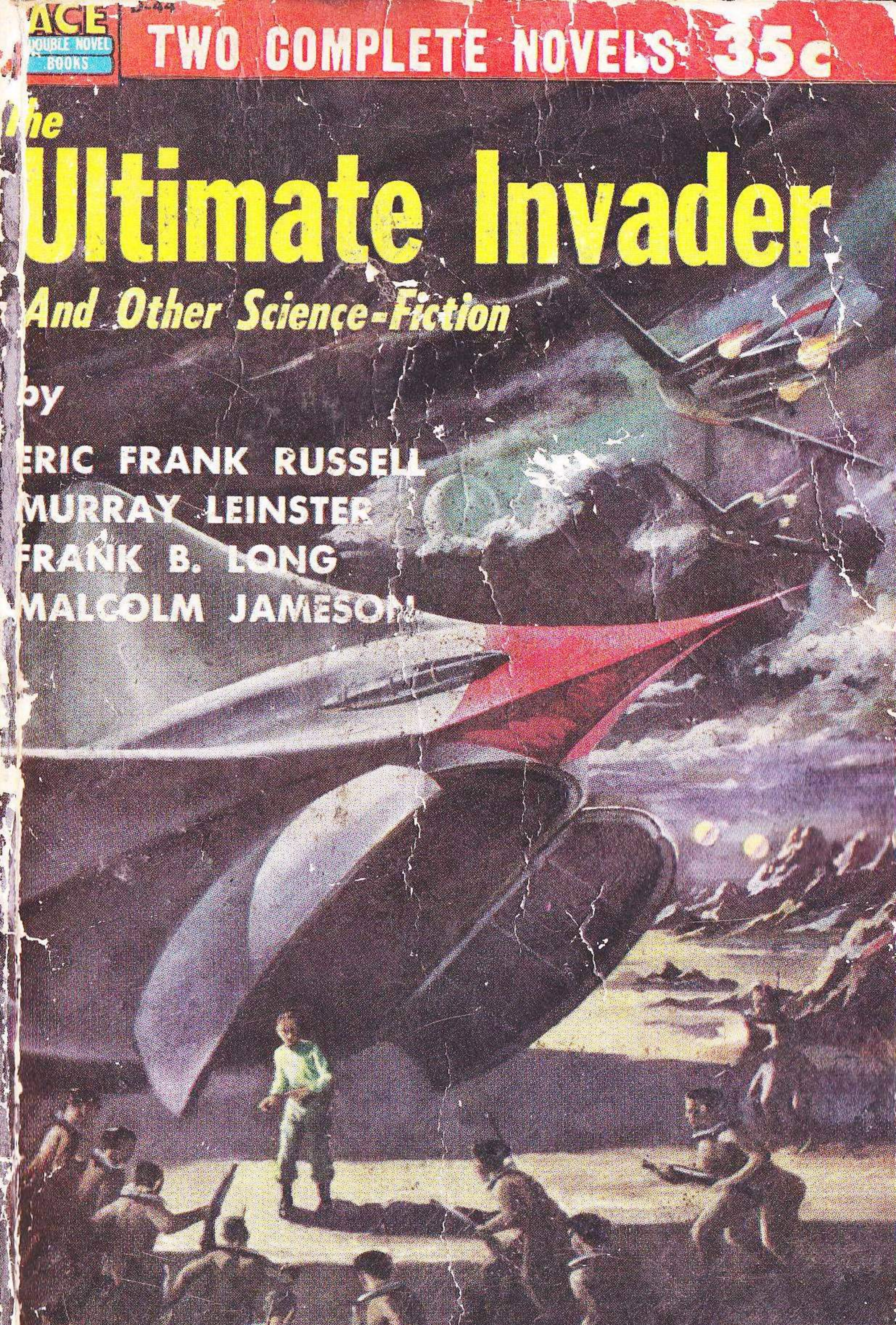

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Edited by

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AND OTHER SCIENCE-FICTION

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SENTINELS FROM SPACE

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THE ULTIMATE INVADER

by Eric Frank Russell

CHAPTER I

THE little ship, scarred and battered, sat on the plain and cooled its tubes and ignored the armed guard that had surrounded it at a safe distance. A large, bluish sun burned overhead, lit the edges of flat, waferlike clouds in brilliant purple. There were two tiny moons shining like pale specters low in the east, and a third was diving into the westward horizon.

To the north lay the great walled city whence the guard had erupted in irate haste. It was a squat, stark conglomeration of buildings in gray granite, devoid of tall towers, sitting foursquare to the earth. An unbeautiful, strictly utilitarian place suitable for masses of the humble living in subservience to the harsh.

At considerable altitude above the granite mass roamed its aerial patrol, a number of tiny, almost invisible dots weaving a tangle of vapor-trails. The dots displayed the irritated restlessness of a swarm of disturbed gnats, for their pilots were uncomfortably aware of the strange invader now sitting on the plain. Indeed, they would have intercepted it had that been possible, which it wasn't. How can one block the path of an unexpected object moving with such stupendous rapidity that its trace registers as a mere flick on a screen some seconds after the source has passed?

Upon the ground the troops kept careful watch and awaited the arrival of someone who was permitted the initiative that they were denied. All of them had either four legs and two arms or four arms and two legs, according to the need of the moment. That is to say: the front pair of underbody limbs could be employed as feet or hands, like those of a baboon. Superior life does not establish itself by benefit of brains alone; manual dexterity is equally essential. The quasi-quadrupeds of this world had a barely adequate supply of the former compensated by more than enough of the latter.

Although it was not for them to decide what action to take against this sorry-looking object from the unknown, they had plenty of curiosity concerning it, and no little apprehension. Much of their noseyness was stimulated by the fact that the vessel was of no identifiable type despite that they could recognize all the seventy patterns common to the entire galaxy. The apprehension was created by the sheer nonchalance of the

visitor's arrival. It had burst like a superswift bullet through the detector-screen that enveloped the entire planet, treated the sub-stratosphere patrols with disdain and sat itself down in clear view of the city.

Something drastic would have to be done about it, on that point one and all were agreed. But the correct tactics would be defined by authority, not by underlings. To make up his own mind one way or the other was a presumptuous task not one of them dared undertake. So they hung around in dips and behind rocks, and scratched and held their guns and hankered for high brass in the city to wake up and come running.

In much the same way that planetary defenses had been brought to nought by bland presentation of an accomplished fact, so were the guards now disturbed by being confronted with an event when none were present who were qualified to cope. Giving distant sluggards no time to make up their minds and spring into action, the ship's lock opened and a thing came out.

As a sample of unfamiliar life he was neither big nor fearsome. A biped with two arms, a pinkish face and close-fitting clothes, he was no taller than any of the onlookers and not more than one-third the weight. A peculiar creature in no way redoubtable. In fact he looked soft. One could jump on him with all four feet and squash him.

Nevertheless one could not hold him entirely in contempt. There were aspects that gave one to pause and think. In the first place, he was carrying no visible weapons and, moreover, doing it with the subtle assurance of one who has reason to view guns as so much useless lumber. In the second place, he was mooching airily around the ship, hands in pockets, inspecting the scarred shell for all the world as if this landing marked a boring call on tiresome relatives. Most of the time he had his back to the ring of troops, magnificently indifferent to whether or not anyone chose to blow him apart.

Apparently satisfied with his survey of the vessel, he suddenly turned and walked straight toward the hidden watchers. The ship's lock remained wide open in a manner suggesting either criminal carelessness or supreme confidence, more probably the latter. Completely at peace with a world in the midst of war, he ambled directly toward a section of guards, bringing the need for initiative nearer and nearer, making them

sweat with anxiety and creating such a panic that they forgot to itch.

Rounding a rock, he came face to face with Yadiz, a common trooper momentarily paralyzed by sheer lack of an order to go forward, go backward, shoot the alien, shoot himself, or do something. He looked casually at Yadiz as if different life-forms in radically different shapes were more common than pebbles. Yadiz became so embarrassed by his own futility that he swapped his gun from hand to hand and back again.

"Surely it's not that heavy," remarked the alien with complete and surprising fluency. He eyed the gun and sniffed.

Yadiz dropped the gun which promptly went off with an ear-splitting crash and a piece of rock flew into shards and something whined shrilly into the sky. The alien turned and followed the whine with his eyes until finally it died out.

Then he said to Yadiz, "Wasn't that rather silly?"

There was no need to answer. It was a conclusion Yadiz already had reached about one second before the bang. He picked up the gun with a foot-hand, transferred it to a real hand, found it upside-down, turned it right way up, got the strap tangled around his fist, had to reverse it to get the limb free, turned it right way up again.

Some sort of answer seemed to be necessary but for the life of him Yadiz could not conceive one that was wholly satisfactory. Struck dumb, he posed there holding his weapon by the muzzle and at arm's length, like one who has recklessly grabbed a mamba and dare not let go. In all his years as a trooper, of which there were more than several, he couldn't recall a time when possession of a firearm had proved such a handicap. He was still searching in vain for a verbal means of salvaging his self-respect when another trooper arrived to break the spell.

A little breathless with haste, the newcomer looked askance at the biped, said to Yadiz, "Who gave you orders to shoot?"

"What business is it of yours?" asked the biped, coldly disapproving. "It's his own gun, isn't it?"

This interjection took the arrival aback. He had not expected another life-form to speak with the fluency of a native, much less treat this matter of wasting ammunition from the angle of personal ownership. The thought that a trooper might have proprietary rights in his weapon had never occurred to him. And now that he had captured the thought he did not know what to do with it. He stared at his own gun as if it had just miraculously appeared in his hand, changed it to

another hand by way of ensuring its realness and solidity.

"Be careful," advised the biped. He nodded toward Yadiz. "That's the way *he* started."

Turning to Yadiz, the alien said in calm, matter-of-fact tones, "Take me to Markhamwit."

Yadiz couldn't be sure whether he actually dropped the gun again or whether it leaped clean out of his hands. Anyway, it did not go off.

CHAPTER II

THEY met the high brass one-third of the way to the city. There was an assorted truckload ranging from two to five-comet rank. Bowling along the road on flexible tracks, the vehicle stopped almost level with them and two dozen faces peered at the alien. A paunchy individual struggled out from his seat beside the driver and confronted the ill-assorted pair. He had a red metal sun and four silver comets shining on his harness.

To Yadiz he snapped, "Who told you to desert the guard-ring and come this way?"

"Me," informed the alien, airily.

The officer jerked as if stuck with a pin, shrewdly eyed him up and down and said, "I did not expect that you could speak our language."

"I'm fully capable of speech," assured the biped. "I can read, too. In fact, without wishing to appear boastful, I'd like to mention that I can also write."

"That may be," agreed the officer, willing to concede a couple of petty aptitudes to the manifestly outlandish. He had another careful look. "Can't say that I'm familiar with your kind of life."

"Which doesn't surprise me," said the alien. "Lots of folk never get the chance to become familiar with us."

The other's color heightened. With a show of annoyance, he informed, "I don't know who you are or what you are, but you're under arrest."

"Sire," put in the aghast Yadiz, "he wishes to—"

"Did any one tell you to speak?" demanded the officer, burning him down with his eyes.

"No, sire. It was just that—"

"Shut up!"

Yadiz swallowed hard, took on the apprehensive expression of one unreasonably denied the right to point out that the barrel is full of powder and someone has lit the fuse.

"Why am I under arrest?" inquired the alien, not in the least disturbed.

"Because I say so," the officer retorted.

"Really? Do you treat all arrivals that way?"

"At present, yes. You may know it or you may not, but right now this system is at war with the system of Nilea. We're taking no chances."

"Neither are we," remarked the biped, enigmatically.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The same as you meant. We're playing safe."

"Ah!" The other licked satisfied lips. "So you are what I suspected from the first, namely, an ally the Nileans have dug up from some very minor system that we've overlooked."

"Your suspicions are ill-founded," the alien told him. "However, I would rather explain myself higher up."

"You will do just that," promised the officer. "And the explanation had better be satisfactory."

He did not care for the slow smile he got in reply. It irresistibly suggested that someone was being dogmatic and someone else knew better. Neither had he any difficulty in identifying the respective someones. The alien's apparently baseless show of quiet confidence unsettled him far more than he cared to reveal, especially with a dopey guard standing nearby and a truckload of brass looking on.

It would have been nice to attribute the two-legger's sang-froid to the usual imbecility of another life-form too dim-witted to know when its scalp was in danger. There were plenty of creatures like that: seemingly brave because unable to realize a predicament even when they were in it up to the neck. Many of the lower ranks of his own forces had that kind of guts. Nevertheless he could not shake off the uneasy feeling that this case was different. The alien looked too alert, too sharp-eyed to make like a cow.

Another and smaller truck came along the road. Waving it to a stop, he picked four two-comet officers to act as escort, shooed them into the new vehicle along with the biped who entered without comment or protest.

Through the side window he said to the officers, "I hold you personally responsible for his safe arrival at the interrogation center. Tell them I've gone on to the ship to see whether there's any more where he came from."

He stood watching on the verge while the truck reversed its direction, saw it roll rapidly toward the city. Then he clambered into his own vehicle which at once departed for the source of all the trouble.

Devoid of instructions to proceed toward town, return to the ship, stand on his head or do anything else, Yadiz leaned on his gun and patiently awaited the passing of somebody qualified to tell him.

The interrogation center viewed the alien's advent as less sensational than the arrival of a Joppelan five-eared munkster at the zoo. Data drawn from a galaxy was at the disposal of its large staff and the said information included descriptions of four hundred separate and distinct life-forms, a few of them so fantastic that the cogent material was more deductive than demonstrative. So far as they were concerned this sample brought the record up to four hundred and one. In another century's time it might be four hundred twenty-one or fifty-one. Listing the lesser lifes was so much routine.

Interviews were equally a matter of established rigmarole. They had created a standard technique involving questions to be answered, forms to be filled, conclusions to be drawn. Their ways of dealing with recalcitrants were, however, a good deal more flexible, demanding various alternative methods and a modicum of imagination. Some life-forms responded with pleasing alacrity to means of persuasion that other life-forms could not so much as sense. The only difficulty they could have with this specimen was that of thinking up an entirely new way of making him see reason.

So they directed him to a desk, giving him a chair with four arm-rests and six inches too high, and a bored official took his place opposite. The latter accepted in advance that the subject could already speak the local tongue or communicate in some other understandable manner. Nobody was sent to this place until educated sufficiently to give the required responses.

Switching his tiny desk-recorder, the interviewer started with, "What is your number, name, code, cipher or other verbal identification?"

"James Lawson."

"Sex, if any?"

"Male."

"Age?"

"None."

"There now," said the interviewer, scenting coming awkwardness. "You must have an age."

"Must I?"

"Everyone has an age."

"Have they?"

"Look," insisted the interviewer, very patient, "nobody can be ageless."

"Can't they?"

He gave it up, murmuring, "It's unimportant anyway. His time-units are meaningless until we get his planetary data." Glancing down at his question sheet, he carried on. "Purpose of visit?" His eyes came up as he waited for the usual boring response such as, "Normal exploration." He repeated, "Purpose of visit?"

"To see Markhamwit," responded James Lawson.

The interviewer yelped, *"What?"*, cut off the recorder and breathed heavily for a while. When he found voice again it was to ask, "You really mean you've come specially to see the Great Lord Markhamwit?"

"Yes."

He asked uncertainly, "By appointment?"

"No."

That did it. Recovering with great swiftness, the interviewer became aggressively officious and growled, "The Great Lord Markhamwit sees nobody without an appointment."

"Then kindly make one for me."

"I'll find out what can be done," promised the other, having no intention of doing anything whatsoever. Turning the recorder on again, he resumed with the next question.

"Rank?"

"None."

"Now look here—"

"I said *none!*" repeated Lawson.

"I heard you. We'll let it pass. It's a minor point that can be brought out later." With that slightly sinister comment he tried the next question. "Location of origin?"

"The Solarian Combine."

Flip went the switch as the unlucky desk instrument again got put out of action. Leaning backward, the interviewer rubbed his forehead. A passing official glanced at him, stopped.

"Having trouble, Dilmur?"

"Trouble?" he echoed bitterly. He mooned at his question sheet. "What a day! One thing after another! Now this!"

"What's the matter?"

He pointed an accusative finger at Lawson. "First he pretends to be ageless. Then he gives the motive behind his arrival as that of seeing the Great Lord without prior arrangement." His sigh was deep and heartfelt. "Finally, to top it all, he claims that he comes from the Solarian Combine."

"H'm! Another theological nut," diagnosed the passer-by. "Don't waste your time on him. Pass him along to the mental therapists." Giving the subject of the conversation a cold look of reproof he continued on his way.

"You heard that?" The interviewer felt for the recorder-switch in readiness to resume operation. "Now do we get on with this job in a reasonable and sensible manner or must we resort to other, less pleasant methods of discovering the truth?"

"The way you put it implies that I am a liar," said Lawson, displaying no resentment.

"Not exactly. Perhaps you are a deliberate but rather stupid liar whose prevarications will gain him nothing. Perhaps you may have no more than a distorted sense of humor. Or you may be completely sincere because completely deluded. We have had visionaries here before. It takes all sorts to make a universe."

"Including Solarians," Lawson remarked.

"The Solarians are a myth," declared the interviewer with all the positiveness of one stating a long-established fact.

"There are no myths. There are only gross distortions of half-remembered truths."

"So you still insist that you are a Solarian?"

"Certainly."

The other shoved the recorder aside, got up from his seat. "Then I can go no further with you." He summoned several attendants, pointed to the victim. "Take him to Kasine."

CHAPTER III

THE individual named Kasine suffered glandular maladjustment that made him grossly obese. He was just one great big bag of fat relieved only by a pair of deep-sunk but brilliantly glittering eyes.

Those optics looked at Lawson in much the same way that a cat stares at a cornered mouse. Completing the inspection, he

operated his recorder, listened to a play-back of what had taken place during the previous interview.

Then a low, reverberating chuckle sounded in his huge belly and he commented, "Ho-ho, a Solarian! And lacking a pair of arms at that! Did you mislay them someplace?" Leaning forward with a manifest effort, he licked thick lips and added, "What a dreadful fix you'll be in if you lose the others also!"

Lawson gave a disdainful snort. "For an alleged mental therapist you're long overdue for treatment yourself."

It did not generate the fury that might well have been aroused in another. Kasine merely wheezed with amusement and looked self-satisfied.

"So you think I'm sadistic, eh?"

"Only at the time you made that remark. Other moments: other motivations."

"Ah!" grinned Kasine. "Whenever you open your mouth you tell me something useful."

"You could do with it," Lawson opined.

"And it seems to me," Kasine went on, refusing to be baited, "that you are not an idiot."

"Should I be?"

"You should! Every Solarian is an imbecile." He ruminated a moment, went on. "The last one we had here was a many-tendriled octoped from Quamis. The authorities on his home planet wanted him for causing an end-of-the-world panic. His illusion of Solarianism was strong enough to make the credulous believe it. But we aren't foolish octopeds here. We cured him in the end."

"How?"

Kasine thought again, informed, "If I remember aright, we fed him a coated pellet of sodium and followed it with a jar of water. Whereupon he surrendered his stupidities with much fuss and shouting. He confessed his purely Quamistic origin shortly before his insides exploded." Kasine wagged his head in patronizing regret. "Unfortunately, he died. Very noisily, too."

"Bet you enjoyed every instant of it," said Lawson.

"I was not there. I dislike a mess."

"It will be worse when it's your turn," observed Lawson, eyeing the enormous body.

"Is that so? Well, let me tell—" He stopped as a little gong sounded in the depths of his desk. Feeling under the rim, he pulled out a small plug at the end of a line, inserted it

in an ear and listened. After a while he put it back, stared at the other. "Two officers tried to enter your ship."

"That was foolish."

Kasine said heavily, "They are now lying on the ground outside, completely paralyzed."

"What did I tell you?" commented Lawson, rubbing it in.

Smacking a fat hand on the desk, Kasine made his voice loud. "What caused it?"

"Like all your kind, they are allergic to formic acid," Lawson informed. "It's a fact I had ascertained in advance." He gave a careless shrug. "A shot of diluted ammonia will cure them and they'll never have rheumatics as long as they live."

"I want no abstruse technicalities," harshed Kasine. "I want to know what caused it."

"Probably Freddy," thought Lawson, little interested. "Or maybe it was Lou. Or possibly Buzwuz."

"Buzwuz?" Kasine's eyes came up a bit from their fatty depths. He wheezed a while before he said, "The message informs that both were stabbed in the back of the neck by something tiny, orange-colored and winged. What was it?"

"A Solarian."

His self-control beginning to slip, Kasine became louder. "If you are a Solarian, which you are not, this other thing cannot be a Solarian too."

"Why not?"

"Because it is totally different. It has not the slightest resemblance to you in any one respect."

"Afraid you're wrong there."

"Why?"

"It is intelligent." Lawson examined the other as though curious about an elephant with a trunk at both ends. "Let me tell you that intelligence has nothing whatever to do with shape, form or size."

"Do you call it intelligent to stab someone in the neck?" asked Kasine, pointedly.

"In the circumstances, yes. Besides, the resulting condition is harmless and easily curable. That's more than you can say for an exploded belly."

"We'll do something about this." Kasine was openly irritated.

"It won't be easy. Take Buzwuz, for instance. Though he's small even for a bumblebee from Callisto, he can lay out six horses in a row before he has to squat down someplace and generate more acid."

"Bumblebee?" Kasine's brows tried to draw together over thick rolls of flesh. "Horses?"

"Forget them," advised Lawson. "You know nothing of either."

"Maybe not, but I do know this: they won't like it when we fill the ship with a lethal gas."

"They'll laugh themselves silly. And it won't pay you to make my vessel uninhabitable."

"No?"

"No! Because those already out of it will have to stay out. Most of the others will get out fast in spite of anything you can do to prevent their escape. After that, they'll have no choice but to settle down and live here. I would not like that if I were you. I wouldn't care for it one little bit."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Not if I were you which, fortunately, I am not. A world soon becomes mighty uncomfortable when you've got to share it with hard-to-catch enemies steadily breeding a thousand to your one."

Kasine jerked and queried with some apprehension, "Mean to say they'll actually remain here and increase that fast?"

"What else would you expect them to do once you've taken away their sanctuary? Go jump in the lake just to please you? They're intelligent, I tell you. They will survive even if they have to paralyze every one of your kind in sight and make it permanent."

The gong clanged again. Inserting the ear-plug, Kasine listened, scowled, shoved it back into its place. For a short time he sat glowering across the desk. When he did speak it was irefully.

"Two more," he said. "Flat out."

Registering a thin smile, Lawson suggested, "Why not leave my ship alone and let me see Markhamwit?"

"Get this into your head," retorted Kasine. "If any and every crackpot who chose to land on this planet could walk straight in to see the Great Lord there would have been trouble long ago. The Great Lord would have been assassinated ten times over."

"He must be popular!"

"You are impertinent. You do not appear to realize the peril of your own position." Leaning forward with a grunt of discomfort, Kasine hushed his tones in sheer awe of himself. "Outside that door are those empowered merely to ask ques-

tions. Here, within this room, it is different. Here, I make decisions."

"Takes you a long time to get to them," said Lawson, unimpressed.

Ignoring it, the other went on, "I can decide whether or not your mouth gives forth facts. If I deem you a liar, I can decide whether or not it is worth turning to less tender means of obtaining the real truth. If I think you too petty to make even your truths worth having, I can decide when, where and how we shall dispose of you." He slowed down by way of extra emphasis. "All this means that I can order your immediate death."

"The right to blunder isn't much to boast about," Lawson told him.

"I do not think your effective removal would be an error," Kasine countered. "Those creatures in your ship are impotent so far as this room is concerned. What is to prevent me from having you destroyed?"

"Nothing."

"Ah!" Slightly surprised by this frank admission, the fat face became gratified. "You agree that you are helpless to save yourself?"

"In one way, yes. In another, no."

"Meaning?"

"You can have me slaughtered if you wish. It will be a little triumph for you if you like that sort of thing." Lawson's eyes came up, looked levelly at the other's. "It would be wisest if you enjoyed the triumph to the full and made the very most of it, for it won't last long."

"Won't it?"

"Pleasure is for today. Regrets are for tomorrow. After the feast, the reckoning."

"Oho? And who will present the bill?"

"The Solarian Combine."

"There you go again!" Kasine rubbed his forehead wearily. "The Solarian Combine. I am sick and tired of it. Forty times have I faced so-called Solarians all of whom proved to be maniacs escaped or expelled from some not too faraway planet. But I'll give you your due for one thing: you're the coolest and most collected of the lot.

"I suspect that it is going to be rather difficult to bring you to your senses. We may have to concoct an entirely new technique to deal with you."

"Too bad," said Lawson, sympathetically.

"Therefore I—" Kasine broke off as the door opened and a five-comet officer entered in a hurry.

"Message from the Great Lord," announced the newcomer. He shot an uneasy glance at Lawson before he went on. "Regardless of any conclusion to which you may have come, you are to preserve this arrival intact, unharmed."

"That's taking things out of my hands," grumbled Kasine. "Am I not supposed to know the reasons?"

Hesitating a moment, the officer said, "I was not told to keep them from you."

"Then what are they?"

"This example of other-life must be kept in fit condition to talk. Reports have now come in from the defense department and elsewhere. We want to know how his ship slipped through the planetary detector-screen, how it got past the aerial patrols. We want to know why the vessel differs from all known types in the galaxy, where it comes from, what gives it such tremendous velocity. In particular, we must find out the capabilities and military potential of those who built the boat."

Kasine blinked at this recital. Each of these questions, he felt, was fully loaded and liable to go bang. The mind behind his ample features worked overtime. For all his gross bulk he was not without mental agility. And one thing he'd always been good at sniffing was the smell of danger.

Words and phrases whirled through his calculating brain: slipped past, origin, type of ship, tremendous velocity, bumblebees, the coolest and most collected. His brilliant and sunken eyes examined Lawson again. In the light of what the officer had brought he could now see more clearly the feature of this strange biped that inwardly had worried him most. It was a somewhat appalling certitude!

He felt impelled to take a gamble. If it did not come off he had nothing serious to lose.

If it did he would get the credit for great perspicacity.

Very slowly, Kasine said, "I think I can answer those questions in part. This creature claims that he is a Solarian. I consider it remotely possible that he may be!"

"May be! A Solarian!" The officer stuttered a bit, backed toward the door. "The Great Lord must know of this. I will tell him your decision at once."

"It is not a decision," warned Kasine, hastily ensuring himself against future wrath. "It is no more than a modest opinion."

He watched the other go out. Already he was beginning

to wonder whether he had adopted the correct tactics or whether there was some other as yet unperceived but safer play.

His gaze turned toward the subject of his thoughts.

Lawson said, very comfortingly, "You've just saved your fat neck."

CHAPTER IV

MARKHAMWIT went through the data for the fourth time, pushed the papers aside, walked restlessly up and down the room.

"I don't like this incident. I view it with the greatest suspicion. We may be victims of a Nilean trick."

"That is possible, my lord," endorsed Minister Ganne.

"Let's suppose they've invented an entirely new type of vessel they've reason to think invincible. The obvious step is to test it as conclusively as can be done. They must try it out before they adopt it in large numbers. If it can penetrate our defenses, land here and get out again, it's a success."

"Quite, my lord." Ganne had built his present status on a firm foundation of consistent agreement.

"But it would be a giveaway if it arrived with a Nilean crew aboard," Markhamwit went on, looking sour. "So they hunt for and obtain a non-Nilean life-form as ally. He comes here hiding himself behind a myth." He smacked one pair of hands together, then the other pair. "All this is well within the limits of probability. Yet, as Kasine thinks, the arrival's story may be true."

Ganne doubted it but refrained from saying so. Now and again the million-to-one chance turned up to the confusion of all who had brashly denied its possibility.

"Get me Zigstrom," decided Markhamwit suddenly. When the connection had been made he fitted the earplug, spoke into the thin tube, "Zigstrom, we have many authorities on the Solarian Myth. I have heard it said there are one or two who believe it to have a real basis. Who is the chief of these?"

He listened a bit, growled, "Don't hedge with me. I want his name. He has nothing to fear." A pause followed by, "Alemph? Find him for me. I must have him here without delay."

The required expert turned up in due course, sweaty with

haste, dishevelled and ill at ease. He came hesitantly into the room, bowing low at every second step.

"My lord, if Zigstrom has given you the impression that I am a leader of one of these foolish cults, I must assure you that—"

"Don't be so jittery," Markhamwit snapped. "I wish to pick your mind, not deprive you of your bowels." Taking a chair, he rested his four arms on its rests, fixed authoritative eyes upon the other. "You believe that the Solarian Myth is something more than a frontier legend. I want to know why."

"The story has repetitive aspects that are too much for mere coincidence," said Alemph. "And there are other and later items I consider significant."

"I have no more than perfunctory knowledge of the tale," Markhamwit informed. "In my position I've neither time nor inclination to study the folklore of our galaxy's outskirts. Be more explicit. You have been brought here to talk, not to suffer."

Alemph plucked up courage. "At one edge of our galaxy are eight populated solar systems fairly close together and arranged in a semi-circle. They have a total of thirty-nine planets. At what would be the center of their circle lies a ninth system with seven inhabitable planets devoid of any life higher than the animals."

"I am aware of that much," commented Markhamwit. "Carry on."

"The eight populated systems have never developed space travel even to the present day. Yet when we first visited them we found they knew many things about each other impossible to learn by astronomical observation. They had a strange story to account for this knowledge. They said that at some unspecified time in the very far past they'd had repeated visits from the ships of the Elmones, a life-form occupying this ninth and now deserted system. All eight believe that the Elmones ultimately intended to master them by ruthless use of superior techniques. They were to be subdued and could do nothing effective to prevent it."

"But they weren't," Markhamwit observed.

"No, my lord. It is at this point that the myth really begins. All eight systems tell the same story. That is an important thing to remember. That is what I call too much for coincidence."

"Get on with it," ordered the Great Lord, showing a touch of impatience.

Continuing hurriedly, Alemph said, "Just at this time a strange vessel emerged from the mighty gulf between our galaxy and the next one, made its landing on the Elmone's system as the most highly developed in that area. It carried a crew of two small bipeds. They claimed the seemingly impossible feat of having crossed the gulf. They called themselves Solarians. There was only one piece of evidence to support their amazing claim: their vessel had so tremendous a turn of speed that while in flight it could neither be seen nor detected."

"And then?"

"The Elmones were by nature incurably brutal and ambitious. They slaughtered the Solarians and pulled the ship to pieces in an effort to discover its secret. They failed absolutely. Many, many years later a second Solarian vessel plunged out of the enormous void. It came in search of the first and it soon suffered the same fate. Again its secret remained inviolable."

"I can credit that much," said Markhamwit. "Alien techniques are elusive when one cannot even imagine the basis from which they've started. Why, the Nileans have been trying—" He changed his mind about going on, snapped, "Continue with your story."

"It would seem from what occurred later that this second ship had borne some means of sending out a warning signal for, many years afterward, a third and far larger vessel appeared but made no landing. It merely circled each Elmone planet, dropped thousands of messages saying that where death is concerned it is better to give than receive. Maybe it also bathed each planet in an unknown ray, or momentarily embedded it in a force-field such as we cannot conceive, or dropped minute bacteria along with the messages. Nobody knows. The vessel disappeared into the dark chasm whence it came and to the present day the cause of what followed has remained a matter for speculation."

"And what did follow?"

"Nothing immediately. The Elmones made a hundred crude jokes about the messages which soon became known to the other eight systems. The Elmones proceeded with preparations to enslave their neighbors. A year later the blow fell, or it would be better to say began to fall. It dawned upon them that their females were bearing no young. Ten years later they were frantic. In fifty years they were numerically weak and utterly desperate. In one hundred years they had disappeared

forever from the scheme of things. The Solarians had killed nobody, injured nobody, shed not a single drop of blood. They had contented themselves with denying existence to the unborn. The Elmones had been eliminated with a ruthlessness equal to their own but without their brutality. They have gone. There are now no Elmones in our galaxy or anywhere in Creation."

"A redoubtable tale ready-made for the numerous charlatans who have tried to exploit it," said Markhamwit. "The credulous are always with us. I am not easily to be taken in by tall tales of long ago. Is this all your evidence?"

"Begging your pardon, my lord," offered Alemph. "There are the seven inhabitable but deserted worlds still in existence. There is precisely the same story told by eight other systems who remained out of touch until we arrived. And, finally, there are these constant rumors."

"What rumors?"

"Of small, biped-operated and quite uncatchable ships occasionally visiting the smallest systems and loneliest planets in our galaxy."

"Bah!" Markhamwit made a gesture of derision. "We receive such a report every hundredth day. Our vessels repeatedly have investigated and found nothing. The lonely and the isolated will concoct any fanciful incident likely to entice company. The Nileans probably invent a few themselves, hoping to draw our ships away from some other locality. Why, we blew apart their battleship *Narsan* when it went to Dhurg to look into a story we'd permitted to reach their stupid ears."

"Perhaps so, my lord." Having gone so far, Alemph was not to be put off. "But permit me to point out that well as we may know our own galaxy, we know nothing of others."

Markhamwit eyed Minister Ganne. "Do you consider it possible for an intergalactic chasm to be crossed?"

"It seems incredible, my lord," said Ganne, more than anxious not to commit himself. "Not being an astronautical expert I am hardly qualified to give an opinion."

"A characteristic ministerial evasion," scoffed Markhamwit. Resorting to his earplug and voice tube again, he asked for Sector Commander Yielm, demanded, "Regardless of the practical aspect, do you think it theoretically possible for anyone to reach us from the next galaxy?" Silence while he listened, then, "Why not?" He listened again, cut off, turned to the others. "That's his reason: nobody lives for ten thousand years."

"How does he know, my lord?" asked Alemph.

Half a dozen guards conducted James Lawson to the august presence. They formed themselves into a stiff, expressionless row outside the door while he went into the room.

His approach from the entrance to the middle of the floor was imperturbable. Nothing in his manner betrayed slightest consciousness that he was very far from home and among a strange kind. Indeed, he mooched in casually as if sent on a minor errand to buy a pound of crackers.

Indicating a chair, Markhamwit spent most of a minute weighing up the visitor, then voiced his scepticism. "So you are a Solarian?"

"I am."

"You come from another galaxy?"

"That is correct."

Markhamwit shot a now-watch-this glance at Minister Ganne before he asked, "Is it not remarkable that you can speak our language?"

"Not when you consider that I was chosen for that very reason," replied Lawson.

"Chosen? By whom?"

"By the Combine, of course."

"For what purpose?" Markhamwit insisted.

"To come here and have a talk with you."

"About what?"

"This war you're having with the Nileans."

"I knew it!" Folding his top arms, Markhamwit looked self-satisfied. "I knew the Nileans would come into this somewhere." His chuckle was harsh. "They are amateurish in their schemings. The least they could have done for you was to think up a protective device better than a mere myth."

"I am little interested in protective devices," said Lawson, carelessly. "Theirs or yours."

Markhamwit frowned. "Why not?"

"I am a Solarian."

"Is that so?" He showed his teeth, thin, white and pointed. "In that case our war with Nilea is none of your business."

"Agreed. We view it with splendid indifference."

"Then why come to talk about it?"

"Because we object to one of its consequences."

"To which one do you refer?" inquired Markhamwit, no more than mildly curious.

"Both sides are roaming the spaceways in armed vessels and looking for trouble."

"What of it?"

Lawson said, "The spaceways are free. They belong to everyone. No matter what rights a planet or a system may claim for its own earthly territory, the void between worlds is common property."

"Who says so?" demanded Markhamwit, scowling.

"We say so."

"Really?" Taken aback by the sheer impudence of it, the Great Lord invited a further display by asking, "And what makes Solarians think they can lay down the law?"

"We have only one reason," Lawson told him. His eyes took on a certain coldness. "We have the power to enforce it."

The other rocked back, glanced at Minister Ganne, found that worthy studiously examining the ceiling.

"The law we have established and intend to maintain," Lawson went on, "is that every space-going vessel shall have the right of unobstructed passage between worlds. What happens after it lands does not concern us unless it happens to be one of our own." He paused a moment, still cold-eyed, added, "Then it does concern us very much."

Markhamwit did not like that. He didn't like it one little bit. It smacked of an open threat and his natural instinct was to react with a counter-threat. But the interview with Alemph was still fresh in his mind and he could not rid his thoughts of certain phrases that kept running around and around like a dire warning.

"Fifty years later they were weak and desperate. In a hundred years they were gone—forever!"

He found himself wondering whether even now the ship in which this biped had arrived was ready to broadcast or radiate an invisible, unshieldable power designed to bring about the same result. It was a horrid thought. As a method of coping with incurably antagonist life-forms it was so perfect because so permanent. It smacked of the appalling technique of Nature herself, who never hesitated to exterminate a biological error.

One tended to think that this biped was talking out of the back of his neck. The tendency was born of hope that it was nothing but a tremendous bluff waiting to be called. One could call it all too easily by removing the bluffer's headpiece and tearing his ship apart.

As the Elmones were said to have done.
What Elmones? There were none!
Suppose that it was not bluff?

CHAPTER V

MUCH as he hated to admit it even to himself, the situation had unexpectedly shaped up into a tough one. If in fact it was a cunning Nilean subterfuge it was becoming good enough to prove mighty awkward.

A ship had been dumped on this world, the governmental center of a powerful system at war. On the strength of an ancient fable and its pilot's glib tongue it claimed the ability to sterilize the entire planet. Therefore it was in effect either a mock-bomb or a real one. The only way in which to ascertain its real nature was to hammer on its detonator and try to make it explode.

Could he dare?

Playing for time, Markhamwit pointed out, "War is a two-sided affair. Our battleships are not the only ones patrolling in space."

"We know it," Lawson informed. "The Nileans are also being dealt with."

"You mean you've another ship there?"

"Yes." Lawson registered a faint grin. "The Nileans are stuck with the same problem, and doubtless are handicapped by the dark suspicion that it's another of your tricks."

The Great Lord perked up. It gave him malicious satisfaction to think of the enemy in a jam and cursing him for it. Then his mind suddenly perceived a way of at least partially checking the truth of the other's statements. He turned to Ganne.

"That neutral world of Vaile still has contact with both sides. Go beam it a call. Ask if the Nileans have a vessel claiming to be of Solarian origin."

Ganne went out. The answer could not be expected before nightfall yet he was back with it in a few moments.

Shaken and nervous, he reported, "The operators say Vaile called a short time ago. A similar question was put to us at the request of the Nileans."

"Hah!" Markhamwit found himself being unwillingly pushed toward Alemph's way of looking at the matter. Folk-

lore, he decided, might possibly be founded on fact. Indeed, it was more likely to have a positive basis than not. Long-term effects had to have faraway causes.

Then just as he was nearing the conclusion that Solarians actually do exist it struck him with awful force that if this were a crafty stunt pulled by the Nileans they could be depended upon to back up their stooge in every foreseeable manner. The call through Vaile could be nothing more than a carefully planned byplay designed to lend verisimilitude to their deception. If so, it meant that he was correct in his first assumption: that the Solarian Myth was rubbish.

These two violently opposed aspects of the matter got him in a quandary. His irritation mounted because one used to making swift and final decisions cannot bear to squat on the horns of a dilemma. And he was so squatting.

Obviously riled, he growled at Lawson, "The right to unobstructed passage covers our vessels as much as anyone else's."

"It covers no warship bearing instructions to intercept, question, search or detain any other spaceship it considers suspicious," declared the other. "Violators of the law are not entitled to claim protection of the law."

"Can you tell me how to conduct a war between systems without sending armed ships through space?" asked Markhamwit, bitterly sarcastic.

Lawson waved an indifferent hand. "We aren't the least bit interested in that problem. It is your own worry."

"It cannot be done," Markhamwit shouted.

"That's most unfortunate," remarked Lawson, full of false sympathy. "It creates an awful state of no-war."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Is peace funny?"

"War is a serious matter," bawled Markhamwit, striving to retain a grip on his temper. "It cannot be ended with a mere flick of the finger."

"The fact should be borne in mind by those who so nonchalantly start them," advised Lawson, quite unmoved by the Great Lord's ire.

"The Nileans started it."

"They say that you did."

"They are incorrigible liars."

"That's their opinion of you, too."

A menacing expression on his face, Markhamwit said, "Do you believe them?"

"We never believe opinions."

"You are evading my question. Somebody has to be a liar. Who do you think it is?"

"We haven't looked into the root-causes of your dispute. It is not our woe. So without any data to go upon we can only hazard a guess."

"Go ahead and do some hazarding then," Markhamwit invited. He licked expectant lips.

"Probably both sides have little regard for the truth," opined Lawson, undeterred by the other's attitude. "It is the usual setup. When war breaks out the unmitigated liar comes into his own. His heyday lasts for the duration. After that, the victorious liars hang the vanquished ones."

Had this viewpoint been one-sided Markhamwit could have taken it up with suitable fury. A two-sided opinion is disconcerting. It's slippery. One cannot get an effective grip on it.

So he changed his angle of attack by asking, "Let's suppose I reject your law and have you shot forthwith. What happens then?"

"You'll be sorry."

"I have only your word for that."

"If you want proof you know how to get it," Lawson pointed out.

It was an impasse over which the Great Lord brooded with the maximum of disgust. He was realizing for the first time that by great daring one creature could defy a world of others. It had pregnant possibilities of which he had never previously thought. Some ingenious use could have been made of it, to the great discomfort of the enemy—assuming that the enemy had not thought of it first and were now using it against him.

There was the real crux of the matter, he decided. Somehow, anyhow, he had to find out whether the Nileans had a hand in this affair. If they had they would make every effort to conceal the fact. If they had not they would be only too willing to show him that his troubles were also theirs.

But then again, how deep was their cunning? Was it more than equal to his own perceptive abilities? Might they not be ready and willing to hide the truth behind a smoke screen of pathetically eager cooperation?

If this new ship actually was a secret Nilean production it followed that those who could build one could equally well build two. Also, the unknown allied world that had provided a biped stooge plus some winged, stinging creatures could provide a second set of pseudo-Solarians.

So even now another fake extra-galactic vessel and crew might be grounded on Nilean territory waiting the inspection of his own or some neutral deputation; everything prepared to convince him that fiction is fact and thereby persuade him to recall all warships from the spaceways. That would leave the foe a clear field for long enough to enable them to grasp victory. He and his kind would know that they had been taken for a ride only when it was too late. About the sole crumb of comfort he could find was the thought that if this were not an impudent hoax, if all this Solarianism were genuine and true, then the Nileans themselves were being tormented by exactly the same processes of reasoning. At this very moment they might be viewing with serious misgivings the very outfit that was causing all his bother, wondering whether or not the ship was supporting evidence born of the Great Lord's limitless foresight.

This picture of the Nileans' predicament served to soothe his liver sufficiently to let him ask, "In what way do you expect me to acknowledge this law of yours?"

Lawson said, "By ordering the immediate return of all armed vessels to their planetary bases."

"They'll be a fat lot of use to us just sitting on their home stations."

"I don't agree. They will still be in fighting trim and ready to oppose any attack. We deny nobody the right to defend themselves."

"That's exactly what we're doing right now," declared Markhamwit. "Defending ourselves."

"The Nileans say the same."

"I have already told you that they are determined and persistent liars."

"I know, I know." Lawson brushed it aside like a subject already worn thin. "So far as we are concerned you can smother every one of your own worlds under an immense load of warships ready to annihilate the first attacker. But if they fight at all it must be in defense of their territory. They must not roam around wherever they please and carry the war someplace else."

"But—"

"Moreover," Lawson went on, "you can have a million ships roaming freely through space if you wish. Their numbers, routes or destinations would be nobody's business, not even ours. We won't object so long as each and every one of them

is a peaceful trader going about its lawful business and in no way interfering with other people's ships."

"You won't object?" echoed Markhamwit, his temper again tried by the other's airy self-confidence. "That is most gracious of you!"

Lawson eyed him coolly. "The strong can afford to be gracious."

"Are you insinuating that we are not strong?"

"Reasonableness is strength. Irrationality is weakness."

Banging a hand on a chair arm, Markhamwit declaimed, "There are many things I may be, but there is on thing I am not: I am not irrational."

"It remains to be seen," said Lawson significantly.

"And it will be seen! I have not become the ruler of a great system by benefit of nothing. My people do not serve under a leader whose sole qualification is imbecility. Given time for thought and the loyal support of those beneath me, I can cope with this situation or any other that may come along."

"I hope so," offered Lawson in pious tones. "For your own sake."

Markhamwit leaned forward, exposed his teeth once more and spoke slowly. "No matter what decision I may come to or what consequences may follow, the skin in danger is not mine. It is yours!" He straightened up, made a motion of dismissal. "I will give my answer in the morning. Until then, do plenty of worrying about yourself."

"A Solarian deeply concerned about his own fate," Lawson informed, his hand on the door, "would be rather like one of your hairs bothered about falling out." Opening the door, he stared hard at the Great Lord and added, "The hair goes and is lost and becomes at one with the dust, but the body remains."

"Meaning—?"

"You're not dealing with me as an individual. You are dealing with my kind."

CHAPTER VI

THE guard alerted and accompanied Lawson to the interrogation center, left him at the precise spot where they had first picked him up. Going through the door, he closed it behind him, thus cutting himself off from their view. In leisurely

manner he ambled past desks where examiners looked up from their eternal piles of forms to watch him uncertainly. He had reached the main exit before anyone saw fit to dispute his progress.

An incoming three-comet officer barred his way and asked, "Where are you going?"

"Back to my ship."

The other showed vague surprise. "You have seen the Great Lord?"

"Of course. I have just left him." Then with a confiding air, "We had a most interesting conversation. He wishes to consult with me again first thing in the morning."

"Does he?" The officer's eyes hugely magnified Lawson's importance. It did not take him a split second to conceive a simple piece of logic: to look after Markhamwit's guest would be to please Markhamwit himself. So with praiseworthy opportunism he said, "I will get a truck and run you back."

"That is very considerate of you," assured Lawson, looking at the three comets as if they were six.

It lent zip to the other's eagerness. The truck was forthcoming in double-quick time, rolled away before Cianne or Kasine or anyone else could intervene to question the propriety of letting the biped run loose. Its speed was high, its driver inclined to be garrulous.

"The Great Lord is a most exceptional person," he offered, hoping it might be repeated in his favor on the morrow. Privately he thought Markhamwit a pompous stinker. "We are most fortunate to have such a leader in these trying times."

"You could have one worse," agreed Lawson, blandly damning Markhamwit with faint praise.

"I remember once—" The other broke off, brought the vehicle to an abrupt stop, scowled toward the side of the road. In a rasping voice he demanded of the new object of his attention, "Who gave you orders to stand there?"

"Nobody," admitted Yadiz, dolefully.

"Then why are you there?"

"He cannot be somewhere else," remarked Lawson.

The officer blinked, studied the windshield in complete silence for a while, then twisted to face his passenger.

"Why can't he?"

"Because wherever he happens to be *is* there. Obviously he cannot be where he isn't." Lawson sought confirmation of Yadiz. "Can you?"

Something snapped, for the other promptly abandoned all further discussion, flung open the truck's door with a resounding crash and snarled at Yadiz, "Get inside, you gaping idiot!"

Yadiz got in, handling his weapon as if it could bite him at both ends. The truck moved forward. For the remainder of the trip its driver hunched over the wheel, chewed steadily at his bottom lip and said not a word. Now and again his eyebrows knotted with the strain of thought as he made vain attempts to sort out the unsortable.

At the guard-ring the paunchy individual who had first consigned the arrival to the interrogation center watched the truck jerk to a stop and the trio get out. He came up frowning.

"So they have let him go?"

"Yes," said the driver, knowing no better.

"Whom did he see?"

"The Great Lord himself."

The other gave a little jump, viewed Lawson with embarrassed respect and took some of the authority out of his tones.

"They didn't say what is to be done about these four casualties we've suffered?"

"Made no mention of them," the driver answered. "Maybe they—"

Lawson chipped in, "I'll tend to them. Where are they?"

"Over there." He indicated a dip to his left. "We couldn't shift them pending instructions."

"It wouldn't have mattered. They'd have recovered by this time tomorrow, anyway."

"It isn't fatal then?"

"Not at all," Lawson assured. "I'll go get them a shot of stuff that will bring them to life in two ticks."

He went toward the ship. The driver climbed moodily into his truck and headed back to town.

The creature perched on the rim of the little controlroom's observation-port was the size of Lawson's fist. Long extinct Terran bees would have thought it a giant among their kind. Modern Callistrian ones might have regarded the Terran variety as backward pygmies had there been any real consciousness of Callistrianism or Terranism or any other form of planetary parochialism.

But at this far advanced stage of development of an entire solar system there had ceased to be an acute awareness of worldly origin, shape or species. A once essential datum in the environment had been discarded and no longer entered into

the computations of anyone. The biped was not mentally biased by his own bipedal form; the insect not obsessed by its insectual condition. They knew themselves for what they were, namely, Solarians and two aspects of one colossal entity that had a thousand other facets elsewhere.

Indeed, the close-knit relationship between life-forms far apart in shape and size but sharing a titanic oneness in psyche had developed to the point where they could and did hold mental intercourse in a manner not truly telepathic. It was "self-thinking," the natural communion between parts of an enormous whole.

So Lawson had no difficulty in conversing with a creature that had no aural sense adequately attuned to the range of his voice, no tongue with which to speak. The communication came easier than any vocal method, was clear and accurate, left no room for linguistic or semantic boobytraps, no need to explain the meaning of meaning.

He flopped into the pilot's seat, gazed meditatively through the port and opined, "I'm not sanguine about them being reasonable."

"It does not matter," commented the other. "The end will be the same."

"True, Buzwuz, but unreasonableness means time and trouble."

"Time is endless; trouble another name for fun," declared Buzwuz, being profound. He employed his hind legs to clean the rear part of his velvet jacket.

Lawson said nothing. His attention shifted to a curiously three-dimensional picture fastened to the side wall. It depicted four bipeds, one of whom was a swart dwarf, also one dog wearing sun-glasses, six huge bees, a hawklike bird, a tusked monster vaguely resembling a prick-eared elephant, something else like a land-crab with long-fingered hands in lieu of claws, three peculiarly shapeless entities whose radiations had fogged part of the sensitive plate, and finally a spider-like creature jauntily adorned with a feathered hat.

This characteristically Solarian bunch was facing the lens in the stiff, formal attitudes favored by a bygone age and so obviously were waiting for the birdie that they were unconsciously comical. He treasured this scene for its element of whimsy, also because there was immense significance in the amusing similarity of pose among creatures so manifestly unconscious of their differences. It was a picture of unity that is

strength; unity born of a handful of planets and a double-handful of satellites circling a common sun.

Another bee-mind as insidious as part of his own came from somewhere outside the ship, saying, "Want us back yet?"

"No hurry."

"We're zooming around far beyond the city," it went on. "We've shown ourselves within reach of a few of them. They swiped at us without hesitation. And they meant it!" A pause, followed by, "They have instinctive fear of the unfamiliar. Reaction-time about one-tenth second. Choice of reaction: that which is swiftest rather than that which is most effective. Grade eight mentalities lacking unity other than that imposed upon them from above."

"I know." Lawson squirmed out of his seat as a heavy hammering sounded on the ship's shell somewhere near the air-lock. "Don't go too far away, though. You may have to come back in a rush."

Going to the lock, he stood in its rim and looked down at a five-comet officer. The caller had an air of irateness tempered by apprehension. His eyes kept surveying the area above his head or straining to see past the biped's legs lest something else spring out to the attack.

"You're not supposed to be here," he informed Lawson.

"Aren't I? Why not?"

"Nobody gave you permission to return."

"I don't need permission," Lawson told him.

"You cannot come back without it," the other contradicted.

Registering an expression of mock-bafflement, Lawson said, "Then how the deuce did I get here?"

"I don't know. Someone blundered. That's his worry and not mine."

"Well, what *are* you worrying about?" Lawson invited.

"I've just had a message from the city ordering me to check on whether you are actually here because, if so, you shouldn't be. You ought to be at the interrogation center."

"Doing what?"

"Awaiting their final decisions."

"But they aren't going to make any," said Lawson, with devastating positiveness. "It is we who will make the final ones."

The other didn't like the sound of that. He scowled, watched the sky, kept a wary eye on what little he could see of the ship's interior.

"I've been instructed to send you to the city at once."

"By whom?"

"Military headquarters."

"Tell them I'm not going before morning."

"You've got to go now," insisted the officer.

"All right. Invite your superiors at headquarters to come and fetch me."

"They can't do that."

"I'll say they can't!" agreed Lawson, with hearty emphasis.

This was even less to the visitor's taste. He said, "If you won't go voluntarily you'll have to be taken by force."

"Try it."

"My troops will receive orders to attack."

"That's all right with me. You go shoo them along. Orders are orders, aren't they?"

"Yes, but—"

"And," Lawson continued firmly, "it's the order-givers and not the order-carry-outers who'll get all the blame, isn't it?"

"The blame for what?" inquired the officer, very leerily.

"You'll find out!"

The other stewed it a bit. What would be found out, he decided, was anyone's guess, but his own estimate was that it could well be something mighty unpleasant. The biped's attitude amounted to a guarantee of that much.

"I think I'll get in touch again, tell them you refuse to leave this vessel and ask for further instructions," he decided rather lamely.

"That's the boy," endorsed Lawson, showing hearty approval. "You look after yourself and yourself will look after you."

CHAPTER VII

THE Great Lord Markhamwit paced up and down the room in the restless manner of one burdened by an unsolvable problem. Every now and again he made a vicious slap at his harness, a sure sign that he was considerably exercised in mind and that his liver was feeling the strain.

"Well," he snapped at Minister Ganne, "have *you* been able to devise a satisfactory way out?"

"No, my lord," admitted Ganne, ruefully.

"Doubtless you retired and enjoyed a good night's sleep without giving it another thought?"

"Indeed, no, I—"

"Never mind the lies. I am well aware that everything is left to me." Going to his desk he employed its plug and tube, asked, "Has the biped started out yet?" Getting a response, he resumed his pacing. "At last he condescends to come and see me. He will be here in half a time-unit."

"He refused to return yesterday," remarked Ganne, treating disobedience as something completely outside all experience. "He viewed all threats with open disdain and practically invited us to attack his ship."

"I know. I know." Markhamwit dismissed it with an irritated wave of the hand. "If he is a bare-faced bluffer it can be said to his credit that he is a perfect one. There is the real source of all the trouble."

"In what way, my lord?"

"Look, we are a powerful life-form, so much so that after we have defeated the Nileans we shall be complete masters of our entire galaxy. Our resources are great, our resourcefulness equally great. We are highly scientific. We have spaceships and formidable weapons of war. To all intents and purposes we have conquered the elements and bent them to our will. That makes us strong, does it not?"

"Yes, my lord, very strong."

"It also makes us weak," growled Markhamwit. "This problem dumped in our laps proves that we are weak in one respect, namely, we have become so conditioned in dealing with concrete things that we don't know how to cope with intangibles. We match rival ships with better ships, enemy guns with bigger guns. But we are stalled immediately a foe abandons all recognized methods of warfare and resorts to what may be no more than a piece of sheer, unparalleled impudence."

"Surely there must be some positive way of checking the truth and—"

"I can think of fifty ways." Markhamwit ceased his trudging and glared at Ganne as if that worthy were personally responsible for the predicament. "And the beauty of them all is that not one is genuinely workable."

"No, my lord?"

"No! We could check on whether Solarians actually do exist in the next galaxy if our ships could get there, which they can't. And neither can any other ship, according to Yielm. We could make direct contact with the Nileans, call off the war and arrange mutual action against Solarian interlopers, but if the whole affair is a Nilean trick they will con-

tinue to deceive us to our ultimate downfall. Or we could seize this biped, strap him to an operating table and cut the truth out of him with a scalpel."

"That ought to be the best way," ventured Ganne, seeing nothing against it.

"Undoubtedly, if his story is a lot of bluff. But what if it is not?"

"Ah!" said Ganne, feeling for an itch and pinching deep into his hide.

"The whole position is fantastic," declared Markhamwit. "This two-armed creature comes here without any weapons identifiable as such. Not a gun, not a bomb, not a ray-projector. So far as we know there isn't so much as a bow and arrow on his boat. His kind have killed nobody, injured nobody, shed not a drop of blood either now or in our past, yet he claims powers of a kind we hesitate to test."

"Do you suppose that we are already sterilized and therefore doomed, like the Elmones?" Ganne asked, plainly uneasy.

"No, certainly not. If he had done such a thing he would have blasted off during the night because there would be no point in dickering with us any longer."

"Yes, that's true." Ganne felt vastly relieved without knowing why.

Markhamwit continued, "Anyway, he's said nothing whatever about such methods of dealing with us. We know of them only fictionally, as part of the Solarian Myth. The sole threats he has made are that if we destroy him we shall then have to cope with those winged creatures who will remain here to outbreed us, and that if by some means we succeed in destroying them also, we shall still have to face whatever the Combine may bring against us later on. I cannot imagine the true nature of that particular menace except that by our standards it will be unorthodox."

"Their methods may represent the normal ways of warfare in their own galaxy," Ganne pointed out. "Perhaps they never got around to inventing guns and high explosives."

"Or perhaps they discarded them a million years ago in favor of techniques less costly and more effective." Markhamwit cast an impatient glance at the time recorder whirring on the wall. "Trickery or not, I have learned a valuable lesson from this incident. I have learned that tactics are more important than instruments, wits are better than warheads. If we had used our brains a bit more we might have persuaded the Nileans to knock themselves out and save us a lot of

bother. All that was needed was a completely original approach."

"Yes, my lord," agreed Ganne, privately praying that he would not be commanded to suggest one or two original approaches.

"What I want to know," Markhamwit went on, bitterly, "and what I must know is whether the Nileans have thought of it first and are egging us on to knock ourselves out. So when this self-professed Solarian arrives I'm going to—"

He ceased as a knock sounded, the door opened and the captain of the guard showed himself, bowing low.

"My lord, the alien is here."

"Show him in."

Plumping heavily into a chair, Markhamwit tapped restless fingers on four arm rests and glowered at the door.

Entering blithely, Lawson took a seat, smiled at the waiting pair and asked, "Well, does civilization come to these parts or not?"

It riled the Great Lord, but he ignored the question, controlled his temper and said heavily, "Yesterday you returned to your vessel contrary to my wishes."

"Today your warships are still messing around in free space contrary to ours." Lawson heaved a sigh of resignation. "If wishes were fishes we'd never want for food."

"You appear to forget," informed Markhamwit, "that in this part of the cosmos it is my desires that are fulfilled and not yours!"

"But you've just complained about yours being ignored," remarked Lawson, pretending surprise.

Markhamwit licked sharp teeth. "It won't happen again. Certain individuals made the mistake of letting you go unopposed, without question. They will pay for that. We have a way with fools."

"So have we!"

"That is something of which I require proof. You are going to provide it." His voice had an authoritative note. "And what is more, you are going to provide it in the way I direct, to my complete satisfaction."

"How?" inquired Lawson.

"By bringing the Nilean high command here to discuss this matter face to face."

"They won't come."

"I guessed you'd say that. It was such a certainty that I

could have said it for you." Markhamwit displayed satisfaction with his own foresight. "They've thought up an impudent bluff. Now they're called upon to support it in person by chancing their precious hides. That is too much. That is taking things too far. So they won't do it." He threw a glance at Minister Ganne. "What did I tell you?"

"I don't see how the Nilcans or anyone else can bolster a non-existent trick," offered Lawson, mildly.

"They could appear before me to argue the problem. That would be convincing so far as I'm concerned."

"Precisely!"

Markhamwit frowned. "What d'you mean, precisely?"

"If it's a stunt of their own contriving why shouldn't they back it to the limit and risk a few lives on it? The war is on and they've got to suffer casualtics anyway. If they can dig up volunteers for one dangerous mission they can find them for another."

"So?"

"But they won't gamble one life on a setup they suspect to be of your making. There's no percentage in it."

"It is not of my making. You know that."

"The Nileans don't," said Lawson.

"You claim to have another ship on their world. What's it there for if not to persuade them?"

"You're getting your ideas mixed."

"Am I?" Markhamwit's grip was tight on the arms of his chair. He'd almost had enough of this biped. "In what way?"

"The vessel is there solely to tell the Nileans to cease cluttering the space lanes—or else! We're not interested in your meetings, discussions or wars. You can kiss and be friends or fight to the death and it makes not the slightest difference to us one way or the other. All that we're concerned about is that space remains free, preferably by negotiation and mutual agreement. If not, by compulsion."

"Compulsion?" snapped Markhamwit. "I would give a great deal to learn exactly how much power your kind really does possess. Perhaps little more than iron nerves and wagging tongues."

"Perhaps," admitted Lawson, irritatingly indifferent.

"I'll tell you something you don't know," Markhamwit leaned forward, staring at him. "Our first, second, third and fourth battle fleets have dispersed. Temporarily I've taken them out of the war. It's a risk, but worth it."

"Doesn't alter the situation if they're still chasing around here, there and everywhere."

"On the contrary it may alter the situation very considerably if we have a fair measure of luck," contradicted Markhamwit, watching him closely. "They have been redirected into a colossal hunt. I now have a total of seventeen thousand vessels scouting all cosmic sectors recently settled or explored by Nileans. Know what they are looking for?"

"I can guess."

"They're seeking a minor, unimportant, previously unnoticed planet populated by pink-skinned bipeds with hard faces and gabby mouths. If they find it"—he swept an arm in a wide, expressive arc—"we'll blow them clean out of existence and the Solarian Myth along with them."

"How nice."

"We shall also deal with you in suitable manner. And we'll settle with the Nileans once and for all."

"Dear me," offered Lawson, meditatively. "Do you really expect us to sit around forever while you play hunt the slipper?"

For the umpteenth time thwarted by the other's appalling nonchalance, Markhamwit lay back without replying. For a wild moment he toyed with the notion that perhaps the Nileans were infinitely more ingenious than he'd first supposed and were taking him for a sucker by manning their ship with remotely controlled robots. That would account for this biped's unnatural impassivity. If he were nothing more than the terminal instrument of some highly complicated array of electronic apparatus operated by Nilean science from afar, it would account for his attitude. A talking-machine has no emotions.

But it just wasn't possible. Months ago, before the war started, a radio-beamed message to the nearest fringe of Nilean's petty empire had to be relayed from planet to planet, system to system, took a long time to get there, an equally long time for a reply to come back. It was completely beyond the power of any science, real or imaginary, so to control an automaton across many light years that it could respond conversationally with no time lag whatsoever.

Lawson, he decided uneasily, was robotic in some ways but definitely not a robot. Rather was he a life-form possessed of real individuality plus a queer something else impossible to describe. A creature to whom an unknown quantity or quality has been added and therefore unlike anything formerly encountered.

Emerging from his meditations, he growled, "You'll sit around because you'll have no choice about the matter. I have ordered that you be detained pending my further decisions."

"That doesn't answer my question," Lawson pointed out.

"Why doesn't it?"

"I asked whether you expect *us* to sit around. What you see fit to do with this portion can have no effect upon the remainder."

"This portion," echoed Markhamwit, his air that of one not sure whether he has heard aright. "I have got *all* of you!" He pressed a stud on his desk.

Lawson stood up as the guards came in, smiled thinly and said, "I can tell you a fable of the future. There was once an idiot who picked a grain of sand from a mountain, cupped it in the palm of his hand and said, 'Look, I am holding a mountain!' "

"Take him away," bawled Markhamwit at the escort. "Keep him behind bars until I want him again."

Watching them file out, and the door close, he fumed a bit. "Creating cockeyed problems for others is a game at which two can play. In this existence one has to use one's wits."

"Undoubtedly, my lord," indorsed Minister Ganne, dutifully admiring him.

CHAPTER VIII

JAMES LAWSON carefully surveyed his cell. Large and fairly comfortable, with a queer-shaped bed, a thick, straw-stuffed mattress, the inevitable four-armed chair, a long, narrow table. A generous basket of fruit stood on the middle of the latter, also some brownish objects resembling wholemeal cakes.

He was as amused by the sight of the food as he had been by the rough courtesy with which the guard had conducted him here. Evidently Markhamwit had been specific in his instructions. Put him in the jug. Don't harm him, don't starve him, but put him in the jug.

Markhamwit wanted it both coming and going. The Great Lord was establishing a claim to kindness as a form of insurance against whatever might befall while, at the same time, keeping the victim just where he wanted him until thoroughly satisfied that nothing dreadful could or would befall.

There was a small barred window twenty feet up, more for ventilation than for light. The only other opening was the big grille across the entrance. A guard sat on a stool the other side of the bars boredly reading a narrow but thick cylindrical scroll which he unwound slowly as his gaze followed the print down.

Tilting back in the chair and resting his heels on the end rim of the bed, Lawson had a look at his ship. This was fully as easy as staring at the blank walls of the cell. All that was necessary was to readjust his mind and look through other eyes elsewhere. It can be done, indeed it becomes second nature when the mind behind the other eyes is to all intents and purposes a part of one's own.

He got a multiple picture because he was looking through multiple lenses, but he was accustomed to that. Meeting and knowing other shapes and forms is as nothing compared with the experience of actually sharing them, even those employing organs stranger than eyes.

The ship was resting exactly as he'd left it. Its lock still stood wide open but nobody was entering or attempting to do so. The guards maintained their ring, watched the vessel in the perfunctory manner of those already sick of the sight of it.

As he studied the scene the swiftly moving eyes swung low, dived toward an officer who loomed enormously with sheer closeness. The officer made a wild swipe at the eyes with a short sword curved two ways like a double sickle. Involuntarily Lawson blinked, for it came like a slash at his own head. His neck went taut as the shining blade whistled through the space occupied by his gullet had he been there in person.

"Someday, Lou," he thought, "I'll do as much for you. I'll give you a horrible nightmare."

The bee-mind came back. "Ever looked through somebody landbound, trying to escape danger on legs and without wings? That *is* a nightmare!" A pause as what could be seen through his optics showed him to be zooming skyward. "Want out yet?"

"No hurry," Lawson answered.

Withdrawing from that individual he re-angled his mind and let it reach outward, tremendously outward. This, too, was relatively easy. The velocity of light is sluggish, creeping when compared with near-instantaneous contact between mental components of a psychic whole. Thought is energy, light is energy, matter is energy, but the greatest of these is thought.

Some day his enormously advanced multikind might prove a thesis long evolved: that energy, light and matter are creations of super-thought. They were getting mightily near to it already: just one or perhaps two more steps to godhood when they'd have finally established the mastery of mind over matter by using the former to create the latter according to their needs.

So there was no time lag in his reaching for the central world of Nilea, nor would there have been one of any handicapping duration had he reached across the galaxy and over the gulf into the next. He merely thought "at" his objective and was there, seeing through eyes exactly like his own at the interior of a ship exactly like his own except in one respect: it harbored no big bees.

This other vessel's crew consisted of one biped named Edward Reeder and four of those fuzzy, shapeless entities who had fogged his souvenir picture. A quartet of Rheans, these, from a moon of the ringed planet. Rheans in name only; Solarians in long-established fact.

Callistrian bees wouldn't be of much avail in coping with Nileans who were likely to hang around inviting hearty stings for the sheer pleasure of resulting intoxication. Their peculiar make-up enabled them to get roaring drunk on any acid other than hydrofluoric, and even that corrosive stuff was viewed as a liquid substitute for scoot berries.

But the Nileans were south-eyed, scanning a band of the spectrum that ran well into the ultra violet. And one has to be decidedly north-eyed to see a Rhean with real clarity. So far as local life-forms were concerned this Solarian vessel was crewed by one impertinent biped and several near-ghosts. Like most creatures suffering optical limitations, the Nileans suspected, disliked—aye, feared—living things never more than half visible.

It might have been the same with other Solarians in their attitude toward peculiar fellows from a moon of the ringed planet but for one thing: that which cannot be examined visually can be appreciated and understood mentally. The collective Rhean mind was as much intimate part of the greater Solarian mass-mentality as was any other part. The bipeds and the bees had phantom brothers.

Reeder was thinking "at" him, "I've just returned from the third successive interview with their War Board, which is bossed by a hairy bully named Glastrom. He's completely ob-

sessed by the notion that your Markhamwit is trying to outsmart him."

"Similar reaction at this end. I've been stuck in clink while Markhamwit waits for destiny to intervene in his favor."

"They've come near trying the same tactic with me," informed Reeder's mind, showing strange disinterest in whether or not the other was being made to suffer during his incarceration. "Chief item that has made them hesitate is the problem of what do about the rest of us." His gaze shifted a moment to the shadowy, shapeless quartet posing nearby. "The boys put over a mild demonstration of what can be done by wraiths with the fidgets. They switched off the city's light and power and so forth while crosseyed guards fired at the minor moon. The Nileans didn't like it."

"Can't say they're overfond of our crowd here, either." Lawson paused thoughtfully, went on, "Chronic distrust on both sides is preventing conformity with our demands and seems likely to go on doing so until the crack of doom. Markhamwit is in a mental jam and his only solution is to play for time."

"Same way with Glastrom and the War Board."

"Limit their time," interjected four laconic but penetrating thought-forms from the shapeless ones.

"Limit their time," simultaneously endorsed several beeminds from a source much nearer.

"Give them one time-unit," confirmed a small and varied number of entities scattered through the galaxy.

"Give them one time-unit," decided an enormous composite mentality far across the gulf.

"Better warn them right away." Reeder's eyes showed him to be making for the open lock. His mind held no thought of personal peril that might arise from this ultimatum. He was as ageless as that of which he was part, and as deathless because, whether whole or destroyed, he was part of that which can never die. Like Lawson, he was man plus men plus other creatures. The first might disappear into eternal nothingness, but the plus-quantities remained for ever and ever and ever.

For the same reasons Lawson followed the same course in much the same way. The intangible thread of his thought-stream snapped back from faraway places and the eyes he now looked through were entirely his own. Taking his heels off the bed, he stood up, yawned, stretched himself, went to the grille.

"I've got to speak to Markhamwit at once."

Putting down the scroll, the guard registered the disillusioned expression of one who hopes everlastingly for peace and invariably hopes in vain.

"The Great Lord will send for you in due course," he informed. "Meanwhile you could rest and have a sleep."

"I do not sleep."

"Everybody sleeps sometimes or other," asserted the guard, unconsciously dogmatic. "They have to."

"Speak for yourself," advised Lawson. "I've never slept in my life and don't intend to start now."

"Even the Great Lord sleeps," mentioned the guard with the air of one producing incontrovertible evidence.

"You're telling me?" Lawson inquired.

The other gaped at him, sniffed around as if seeking the odor of a dimly suspected insult. "My orders are to keep watch upon you until the Great Lord wishes to see you again."

"Well, then, ask him if he so wishes."

"I dare not."

"All right, ask someone who does dare."

"I'll call the captain of the guard," decided the other with sudden alacrity.

He went along the passage, came back in short time with a larger and surlier specimen who glowered at the prisoner and demanded, "Now, what's all this rubbish?"

Eyeing him with exaggerated incredulity, Lawson said, "Do you really dare to define the Great Lord's personal affairs as rubbish?"

The captain's pomposity promptly hissed out of him like gas from a pricked balloon. He appeared to shrink in size and went two shades paler in the face. The guard edged away from him like one fearful of being contaminated by open sedition.

"I did not mean it that way."

"I sincerely hope not," declared Lawson, displaying impressive piety.

Recovering with an effort, the captain asked, "About what do you want to speak to the Great Lord?"

"I'll tell you after you've shown me your certificate."

"Certificate?" The captain was mystified. "Which certificate?"

"The document proving that you have been appointed the censor of the Great Lord's conversations."

The captain said hurriedly, "I will go and consult the garrison commander."

He went away with the pained expression of one who has

put his foot in it and must find somewhere to scrape it off. The guard resumed his seat on the stool, mooned at Lawson, killed a cootie.

"I'll give him a hundred milliparts," Lawson remarked. "If he's not back by then, I'm coming out."

The guard stood up, hand on gun, face showing alarm. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You are locked in."

"Hah!" said Lawson as if enjoying a secret joke.

"Besides, I am here."

"That's unfortunate for you," Lawson sympathized. "Either you'll shoot me or you won't. If you don't, I'll walk away and Markhamwit will be most annoyed. If you do, I'll be dead and he'll be infuriated." He shook his head slowly. "Tsk-tsk! I would not care to be you!"

His alarm mounting to a near-unbearable point, the guard tried to watch the grille and the end of the passage at the same time. His relief was intense when the captain reappeared and ordered him to unlock.

The officer said to Lawson, "The commander passed on your request. You will be permitted to talk over the line to Minister Ganne. The rest is up to him."

Leading the way, with the guard in the rear, he conducted the prisoner to a small office, signed to a plug and tube. Taking them up, Lawson held the plug to his ear, it being too big to fit in the locally accepted manner. At the same time his mind sent out a soundless call shipwards.

"This is as good a time as any."

Then he listened to the plug and heard Ganne saying, "What you want to tell the Great Lord can be told to me."

"Pass him the news that he's got seven-eighths of a time-unit," Lawson suggested. "They've wasted the other eighth at this end."

Out one corner of his eye he noted the listening captain registering surly displeasure. His gaze lifted, observed that the door and two windows were half open. Lou, Buzwuz and the others would have no trouble, no trouble at all.

"He's got seven-eighths of a time-unit?" echoed Ganne, his voice rising a fraction. "To do what?"

"Beam his orders for recall."

"Recall?"

Lawson said with tired patience, "You're only wasting valuable moments repeating the end of each sentence. You know

what I meant. You were there all the time, listening to our talk. You're not hard of hearing, are you?"

Ganne snapped, "I'll stand for no gross impertinence from you. I want to know precisely what you mean by saying that the Great Lord has seven-eighths of a time-unit."

"It's more like thirteen-sixteenths now. He has got to take action by then."

"Has he?" sneered Ganne. "Well, suppose he doesn't?"

"We'll take it."

"That comes well from you. You're in no—" His voice broke off as another one sounded authoritatively in the background. More dimly he could be heard saying, "Yes, my lord. It's the biped, my lord."

Behind him in the little office Lawson could also hear something else: a low drone coming nearer, nearer, through the door, through the window. There were exclamations from the other pair, a few scuffling, jumping noises, two thin yelps, two dull thumps and silence.

Markhamwit came on the line, spoke in harsh tones. "If you hope to precipitate the issue by further bluff, you are very much mistaken." Then with added menace, "Reports from my fleets have now started to come in. Sooner or later I'll get the one for which I am waiting. I shall then deal with you rather drastically."

"You've now got approximately three-quarters of a time-unit," Lawson gave back. "At the end of that period we shall take the initiative, do whatever we consider to be for the best. It won't be drastic because we shed no blood, take no lives. All the same, it will be quite effective."

"Will it?" Markhamwit emitted sardonic chuckles. "In that case I will do part of that which you require of me. In other words, I will institute action at the exact moment you have nominated. But it will be the action I deem best fitted to the circumstances."

"Time's marching on," remarked Lawson. The drone had left the room but could still be heard faintly from somewhere outside. He could see the soles of a pair of recumbent jack-boots lying near his own feet.

"You cannot get to your ship, neither can you communicate with it," Markhamwit went on, highly pleased with the situation. "And in precisely three-quarters of a time-unit there will be no ship to which you can return. The aerial patrol will have blasted it clean out of existence while it sits there, a steady target that cannot be missed."

"Can't it?"

"The sterilizing apparatus, if there is one, will be vaporized with it before it can be brought into action. Any winged things left flying around will be wiped out one by one as and when opportunity occurs. Since you've seen fit to push this matter to a sudden conclusion I am prepared to take a chance on anything the Solarian Combine may do." Finally, with sarcasm, "*If* there is a Solarian Combine and *if* it can do anything worth a moment's worry."

He must have flung down the plug and tube at his end, for his voice went less distinct as he said to Ganne, "Get Yielm for me. I'm going to show those Nileans that hoodwinking is a poor substitute for bombs and bullets."

Dumping his own end of the line, Lawson turned, stepped over two bodies unable to do more than curse him with their eyes. Going outside, he found himself in a large yard.

He crossed this diagonally under the direct gaze of half a dozen guards patrolling the wall top. Curiosity was their only reason for watching him, the interesting spectacle of a life-form not listed among the many with which they were familiar. It was his manifest confidence that fooled them, his unmistakable air of having every right to be going wherever he was going. Nobody thought to question it, not a momentary notion of escape crossed their minds.

Indeed, one of them obliged by operating the lever that opened the end gate, and lived to damn the day when he permitted himself to be misled by appearances. Not to be outdone, another whistled a passing truck which stopped for the fugitive. And the driver, too, found later reason to deplore the pick-up.

Lawson said to the driver, "Can you take me to that ship on the plain?"

"I'm not going that far."

"It's a matter of major importance. I've just been speaking to Minister Ganne about it."

"Oh, what did he say?"

"He put me on to the Great Lord who told me I've got little more than half a time-unit to spare."

"The Great Lord," breathed the other, with becoming reverence. He revved up, sent the truck racing onward. "I'll get you there in plenty of time."

There was no need to burst through the guard-ring; it no longer existed. Troops had been withdrawn to a safe distance, assembled in a solid bunch, and were leaning on their arms

like an audience awaiting a rare spectacle. A couple of officers danced and gestured as the truck swept alongside the ship, but they were far off, well beyond calling distance, and the driver failed to notice them.

"Thanks!" Lawson tumbled out of the cab. "One good turn deserves another, so I'm telling you to get out faster than you came."

The other blinked at him. "Why?"

"Because in about one-fifth of a time-unit a dollop of bombs will land right here. You'll make it with plenty to spare provided you don't sit there gaping."

Though puzzled and incredulous, the driver saw clearly that this was a poor time to probe further into the matter. Taking the offered advice, he got out fast, his vehicle rocking with sheer speed.

Lawson entered the lock, closed it behind him. He did not bother to inquire whether all his crew were aboard. He knew that they were there in the same way that they had known of his impending return and intended take-off.

Dumping himself into the pilot's seat he fingered the controls, eyed the ship's chronometer thoughtfully. He'd got just seventy-two milliparts in which to beat the big bang. So he shifted a tiny lever one notch and went out from under.

The vacuum created by the vessel's departure sucked most of the troops' hats from their heads. High above, the aerial patrol swooped and swirled, held on to its missiles and sought in vain for the target.

CHAPTER IX

THE world was a wanderer, a planet torn loose from its parent sun by some catastrophe far back in the tremendous past. At an equally distant time in the future it would be captured by some other star and either join the new family or be destroyed. Meanwhile it curved aimlessly through space, orphan of a bygone storm.

It wasn't cold, it wasn't dark. Internal fires kept it warm. Eternal stars limned it in pale, ethereal light. It had tiny, pastel-shaded flowers and thin, delicate trees that pushed their feet toward the warmth and kept their faces to the stars. It also held sentient life, though not of its own creation.

There were fourteen ships on this uncharted sphere. Eleven

were Solarian. One was Nilean. Two belonged to the Great Lord Markhamwit. The Solarian vessels were grouped together in a gentle valley in one hemisphere. The remainder were on the opposite side of the planet, the Nileans separated from their foes by a couple of hundred miles, each combatant unaware of the other's existence.

The situation of these last two groups was a curious one. Each of their three ships had detected the gypsy-sphere at times a few days apart and landed upon it in the hope of discovering bipeds or, at least, gaining some clue to their whereabouts. Each crew had promptly suffered an attack of mental aberration verging upon craziness, exploded the armory, wrecked the vessel and thus marooned themselves. Each crew now sat around stupified by their own idiocy and thoroughly convinced that not another spaceship existed within a billion miles.

The secret of this state of affairs reposed with two of the eleven Solarian vessels. These had on board a number of homarachnids, spiderish quasi-humans from a place unknown to the galaxy, a hot, moist world called Venus. It happened that this world circled around an equally unknown sun called Sol. Which meant that the homarachnids were Solarians along with the bipeds and bees and semivisible fuzzies.

From the purely military viewpoint there was nothing redoubtable about homarachnids. They were unsoldierly, knew nothing of weapons and cared nothing either. They were singularly lacking in technical skills, viewed even a screwdriver as a cumbersome, patience-straining device. Outwardly, their most noticeable feature was an incurable penchant for wearing the most incongruous feathered hats that the milliners of Venus could devise. In some respects they were the most childlike of the Solarian medley. In one way they were the most deeply to be feared, for they had refractive minds.

With the absolute ease of those to whom it comes naturally any homarachnid could concentrate the great Solarian mass-mentality, projecting it and focusing it where required. The burning point of an immense magnifying glass was as nothing to the effect caused when a non-Solarian mind became the focal point of an attentive homarachnid's brain. The result was temporary but absolute mental mastery.

It *had* to be temporary. The Solarian ethic denied the right to bring any mind into permanent subjection, for that would amount to slavery of the soul. But for this, any pair of homarachnids could have compelled antagonistic warlords to

"see reason" in a mere couple of milliparts. But mentally imposed agreement is worth nothing if it disappears the moment the cause is removed. The final aim must be to persuade Markhamwit and Glastrom to cooperate from motives of expediency and for keeps. The same ethic insisted that this goal be reached without spilling of life fluids if possible, or else at cost of blood only to the high and mighty.

Nobody knew better than Solarians that wars are not caused, declared or willingly fought by nations, planetary peoples or shape-groups, for these consist in the main of plain, ordinary folk who crave nothing more than to be left alone. The real culprits are power-drunken cliques of near-maniacs who by dint of one means or another have coerced the rest. These were the ones to provide the blood if any was going to be shed at all.

Lawson and Reeder and the rest knew the operations of the Solarian mass-mind as well as they knew their own, for it was composed in part of their own. They were sharers in an intellectual common property. Therefore no issuing of detailed orders was necessary to get them to do whatever might be needed. Decisions reached them in identically the same form as if thought out by their independent selves.

As others had found to their cost and would do so again and again, the Solarians had an immense advantage in being able to give highly organized battle without benefit of complicated signalling and communications systems. So far as Solarians were concerned, lack of such antiquated technical adjuncts was lack of something susceptible to error, something to go wrong. There would be no mistaken charge of a light brigade in their history.

Lawson's ship was one of the assembled eleven. Reeder's was another. Seven more had come in from lonelier parts of the galaxy for the same purpose: to rendezvous with the remaining two and add a few homarachnids to their crews. Had the enemy been of different nature they might have been reinforced by a different shape, perhaps, elephantine cratures from Europa or dark dwarfs from Mars. The physical instruments were chosen to suit the particular task, and the hat-models of Venus would do fine for this one.

Two of them, gray-skinned and bristly-haired of body, six-legged and with compound eyes, scuttled aboard Lawson's vessel, sniffed suspiciously through organs that were not noses, looked at one another.

"I smell bugs," announced the one adorned with a purple toque around which a fiuffy plume was tastefully coiled.

"This can needs delousing," agreed the other who wore a glaring red fez with a long, thin crimson ribbon protruding vertically from its top.

"If you prefer," offered Lawson, "you can go on Reeder's boat."

"What, with that gang of spooks?" He cocked the toque sidewise. "I'd sooner suffer the bugs."

"Me too," agreed Red Fez.

"That is most sociable of you," sneered the mind-form of Buzwuz, chipping in suddenly. He zoomed out of the navigation-room and into the passage, an orange ball on flashing wings. "I think we can manage to—" He broke off as he caught sight of the arrivals, let out a mental screech of agony, whirled round in circles. "Oh, look at them! Just *look!*"

"What's the matter?" aggressively demanded he in the purple toque whose name this year was Nfam. Next year it would be Nfim. And the year after, Nfom.

"The vile headgear," complained Buzwuz, shuddering visibly. "Especially that red thing."

The owner of the fez, whose current name was Jlath, waxed indignant. "I'd have you know this is an original creation by the famous Oroni and—"

Frowning at all and sundry, Lawson interrupted, "When you mutual monstrosities have finished swapping compliments maybe you'll make ready for take-off. The fact that we're inertialess doesn't mean you can clutter up the passage." He slammed the door of the lock, fastened it, went to the pilot's cabin and moved the little lever.

That left ten ships. Reeder's departed soon afterward. Then the others, one by one. And that left nothing but three ruined cylinders and three ruminative crews unable to do anything but mourn their own inexplicable madness.

CHAPTER X

FIRST contact was one of the Great Lord's heavy battle cruisers, a long, black cylinder well-armed with large caliber guns and remotely controlled torpedoes. It was heading at fast pace for Kalambar, a blue-white sun with a small system of planets located on the rim of what the Nileans regarded

as their sphere of interest. Those aboard it had in mind that the Kalambar group was believed to be habitable but little else was known about it; therefore it was a likely hiding-place of Nilean-allies, two-legged or winged.

Lawson knew of this cruiser's existence and intent long before it loomed large enough to obscure a noticeable portion of the starfield and even before sensitive detectors started clicking to mark the presence of something metallic, swift-moving and emitting heat. He knew of it simply because the exotically-hatted pair probed forth as twin channels of a far-away supermind, had no difficulty in picking up the foe's group-thoughts or determining the direction, course and distance of the source. All he had to do was take the ship where they indicated, knowing in precise detail what he'd find when he got there.

Even at the tremendous velocities commonplace only to another galaxy the catching-up took time. But they made it in due course, burst out of the starfield with such suddenness that they were bulleting at equal pace and on parallel course before the other's alarm system had time to give warning.

By the time the bells did set up their clamor it was too late. With remarkable unanimity the crew had conceived several strange notions and were unable to sense the strangeness simply because all were thinking alike. Firstly, the alarm was about to sound and that must be the signal for action. Secondly, it was sheer waste of precious lifetime to mess around in empty space when one could put in some real existence on good, solid earth. Thirdly, there was a suitable haven shining through the dark four points to starboard and much nearer than Kalambar. Fourthly, to place the ship completely out of action on landing would be the most certain way of ensuring a long period of rest and relaxation.

These ideas ran contrary to their military conditioning, were directly opposed to duty and discipline, but they accorded with inward instincts, secret desires, and moreover were imposed with suggestive power too great to resist.

So the alarm system duly operated and the battle cruiser at once turned four points to starboard. With the Solarian boat following unheeded it sped straight for the adjacent system, made its landing on a world owned by backward, neutral and embarrassed Dirkins who were greatly relieved when a loud bang marked the vessel's disabling and its crew proceeded to lounge around like beachcombers. Only thing the Dirkins could not understand was why this party of intended lotus-

eaters suddenly became afflicted with vain regrets coincidentally with the disappearance of that second ship from the sky.

In short order twenty-seven more vessels went the same way, turning off route, dumping themselves on the nearest habitable sphere and sabotaging themselves clean out of the war. Seventeen of these belonged to the Great Lord Markhamwit; ten to the Nileans. Not one resisted. Not one fired a gun, launched a torpedo or so much as took evasive action. The partway products of science are pitifully ineffectual when suddenly confronted with the superb end-product, namely, superiority of the brain over all material things.

Nevertheless, ancient ingenuity did try to strike a telling blow at the ultramodern when Lawson came across ship number twenty-nine. The manner in which this one was discovered told in advance of something abnormal about it. The detectors reported it while Jlath and Nfam were mentally feeling through the dark and getting no evidence of anything so near. The reason: the homarachnids were seeking enemy thought-forms and this ship held no thoughts, not one.

Orbiting around a lesser moon, the mystery vessel's design and markings showed it to be an auxiliary warship or armed freighter of Nilean origin. An old and battered rocket-job long overdue for scrapping, it appeared to have been pressed into further service for the duration of the war. It had a medium gun in its bow, fixed torpedo tubes to port and starboard and could aim its missiles only by laboriously positioning itself with respect to the target. A sorry object fit for nothing but escort duty on short runs in a quiet sector, it seemed hardly worth the bother of putting down to ground.

But Lawson and his crew were curious about it. An old but quite intact spaceship totally devoid of evidence of thinking mentalities was somewhat of a phenomenon. It could mean several unusual things all equally worth discovering. No matter how extremely remote the likelihood of anyone developing a screen that homarachnids could not penetrate in search of mind-forms lurking behind, the theoretical possibility could not be ruled out. Nothing is finally and completely impossible.

Alternately there was the million to one chance that the vessel was crewed by a nonthinking, purely reactive and robotic life-form allied to the Nileans. Or, more plausibly, that one of Markhamwit's warships was employing a new weapon capable of slaughtering crews without so much as scratching their vessels, and this particular vessel was a victim. Or, lastly

and likeliest, that it had been abandoned and left crewless but carefully parked in a balanced orbit for some reason known only to the deserters.

As the Solarian boat swooped toward the point marked by its detectors, Nfam and Jlath strode hurriedly to probe the nearby moon for any minds holding the secret of the silent objective. There wasn't time. They whirled high above the target, automatically recorded its nature, type and markings, and in the next breath had been carried leagues beyond it. The Solarian ship commenced to turn into a wide curve that would bring it back for another once-over. They did not get a second look.

Designed to cope with objects moving considerably slower, the instruments aboard the silent freighter registered the presence of another vessel just a little too late. In less than a millipart, vacuum tubes flashed, relays snapped over and the freighter exploded. It was vivid and violent blast guaranteed to disable and possibly destroy any battleship that came within snooping distance. It failed in its intent solely because the prospective recipient of the thump already was far outpacing the flying fragments, of which there were plenty.

"Booby trap," said Lawson. "We'd have been handed a beautiful wallop if our maximum velocity was down to the crawl that local types regard as conventional."

"Yes," responded a bee-mind from somewhere nearer the tail. "And did those two mad hatters warn you of it? Did you hear them screaming, 'Don't go near! Oh, please don't go near!' and feel them pawing at your arm?"

"It seems to me," remarked Nfam to Jlath, "that I detect the sharp, grating voice of jealousy, the bitter whine of a lesser life-form incapable of and unsuitable for self-adornment."

"We don't need it," retorted the critic back. "We don't have to return to artificial devices as a means of lending false color to pale, insipid personalities. We have—"

"No hands," put in Nfam, with great dexterity.

"And they fight with their rear ends," added Jlath for good measure.

"Now see here, Frog-food, we—"

"Shut up!" roared Lawson with sudden violence.

They went silent. The ship bulleted onward in search of target number thirty.

The next encounter provided an orgy that served to illus-

trate the superiority of mass-mind efficiency as compared with artificial methods of communication and coordination. Far off across the wheel of light that formed the galaxy a Solarian named Ellis pursued a multitude of bellicose thought-forms traced by his homarachnids and discovered two fleets assembling for battle. The news flashed out to all and sundry even as he snatched a super-dreadnaught lumbering toward the scene and planted it where it would stay put.

Lawson immediately altered course, boosted his vessel to detector-defeating velocity. There was a long way to go according to this galaxy's estimates of distances but a relative jaunt from the Solarian viewpoint. Unseen and unsuspected, the vessel scudded over a host of worlds, most of them uninhabitable, sterile, deserted.

At one point Nfam's questioning mind found a convoy of ten ships huddled together and heading for the system of a binary, determined them to be neutral traders hoping to make port without interference by one or the other belligerents. Farther on, nearer the twin suns, a pair of Markhamwit's light destroyers hung in space ready to halt and search the convoy for whatever they saw fit to declare illegal transport of strategic war materials. The Solarian vessel promptly cut its speed, herded these two wolves into a suitable cage, raced onward. The convoy continued to plug along innocent of the obstruction so arbitrarily removed from its path.

By the time Lawson got there the scene of intended conflict already had lost some of its orderliness and was dissolving toward eventual chaos. A Nilean force of many hundreds had disposed itself in a huge hemisphere protecting a close-packed group of seven solar systems that were not worth a hoot. Markhamwit's fleet commanders accordingly reasoned that such strength would be marshaled only to defend a sector vital to the enemy's war economy and that therefore these seven systems must be captured and scoured regardless of cost. Which was what the Nileans wanted them to think, for, being slightly the weaker party, they knew the value of diverting attention from genuinely critical points by offering the foe a glittering but valueless prize elsewhere. So both sides beamed frantic orders to and fro, strove to get ready to rend the heavens for the sake of what neither could use. The trouble was that preparations refused to work out as they should have done according to the book.

Established tactics of space warfare seemed to be becoming disestablished. Orthodox methods of squaring up to the enemy

were not producing orthodox results. The recognized moves of placing light forces here and heavy ones there, a spearhead thus and a defensive screen so, a powerful reserve in that place and a follow-up force in this place, were making a fine mess of the whole issue. Bewilderment among commanders on both sides resembled that of an expert who finds that a certain experiment produces the same results nine hundred ninety-nine times but not the thousandth.

Introduction of a new and yet unidentified factor was the cause of all this. The time lag in their communications beam systems, with coded messages flashed from repeater station to repeater station, was so great that none in this sector knew what had happened to the impudent visitors on their home worlds or that Solarians had turned from argument to action. True, some ships were overdue in this area and presumed lost, but that was inevitable. Losses must be expected in time of war and there was nothing to be gained by investigating the fate of the missing or by trying to ascertain the cause of their disappearance.

So deeply embedded were these notions that for quite a time both sides remained blindly unaware of what was happening right under their noses. And the emotions of opposing commanders remained those of extreme irritation rather than real alarm. Inside their military minds conditioning masqueraded as logic and stated that a fight was trying to get going, that any fight is between two parties with nobody else present except maybe one or two mere lookers-on. Such pseudo-reasoning automatically prevented swift realization of intervention by a third party. Whoever heard of a three-sided battle?

Mutually bedevilled, both belligerents postponed their onslaughts while they continued to try and get ready, meanwhile blundering around like a pair of once-eager boxers temporarily diverted from their original purpose by the sudden appearance of numerous ants in the pants.

And the ants kept them on the hop. Lawson's vessel plummeted unseen and undetected right into the middle of the Nilean hemisphere, picked up three boats thundering along under orders to patrol off a certain planet, put them down on said planet for keeps. So far as the Nilean order-giver was concerned, three of his vessels had commenced to move in obedience to commands, had continuously signalled progress, then cut off without warning as if snatched out of Creation. He sent a light fast scout to discover what had occurred. That one radiated messages until within viewing distance of the ap-

pointed post and went silent. He sent another. Same result. It was like dropping pennies down the drain. He gave up, reported the mystery to battle headquarters, sought under his back-strap for a persistent nibbler that had been pestering him all day.

The causes of all this cussedness would have been identified more quickly and easily had one crew been able to beam a warning that they were about to come under the mental mastery of those in a strange vessel of unknown origin. But none were ever aware of what was about to happen. None were aware that it had happened until the cause had gone elsewhere, the influence had been removed and they found themselves sitting on solid earth and dumbfoundedly contemplating a vessel converted to so much scrap.

It was like stealing lollipops from the inmates of a babies' home except that there always lurked an element of danger due to lining up of fortuitous circumstances that none could anticipate. Ellis and his ship and crew went out of existence in a brilliant flash of light when they dived down upon what appeared to be a Nilean flotilla moving at sedate pace toward the hemisphere's rim and discovered one millipart too late that it consisted of a heavy cruiser shepherding under remote control a group of unmanned booby traps.

Every Solarian in the tremendous area knew of this counter-blow the instant the stroke took place. Everyone sensed it as a sudden cessation of life that has been a small part of one's own. It was like the complete vanishing from one's mind of a long-held and favorite thought. None brooded. None felt a pang of regret. They were not inclined to such sentiment because sorrow can never remove its own cause. A few hairs had fallen from an immense corporate whole, but the body remained.

Half a time-unit afterward James Lawson and his crew exacted sweet revenge, not with that motive, but purely as a tactic. They did it by making opportune use of the enemy's organizational setup which like many sources of great strength was also a source of great weakness. Weld men and materials into a mighty machine and they are thereby converted into something capable of mighty collapse the moment the right nut or bolt is removed.

A formidable Nilean battle squadron of one hundred forty assorted ships was running out of the hemisphere in a great, curving course that eventually would position them slightly

behind the extreme wing of Markhamwit's assembly. This was the strictly orthodox move of trying to place a flanking party strong enough to endanger any main thrust at the center. If Markhamwit's scouts spotted this threat, his array would have to divert a force able to meet and beat it. It was all so easy for those who sat in opposing battle headquarters, planning and counter-planning, directing vessels here and there, operating the great combat machines.

And just because the machines were machines, Lawson had no difficulty in pulling out an essential bolt. He took over the entire squadron lock, stock and barrel. All that was necessary was for Nfam and Jlath to gain mental mastery of those aboard the admiral's vessel commanding the rest. One ship! The others did exactly as this enslaved vessel ordered, moving through space like a flock of sheep.

The big squadron turned into a new course, built up to top velocity because the admiral's boat so ordered. They ignored the now visible Solarian stranger in their midst because the admiral unquestioningly accepted its presence. They pushed for their faraway home world as fast as they could drive because The Boss so commanded.

Lawson stayed with them to the halfway point and long after he'd left they continued on course, made no attempt to return. The Boss was not going to admit to an entire fleet that he was afflicted with mental confusion, could not remember receiving or transmitting an order to head for home. Obviously he must have had such instructions, or why were they here, making for where they were going? Best to keep straight on and hide the fact that he was subject to spasms of dopiness. So on they went, one hundred forty vessels bamboozled right out of the fray.

In short time Reeder's vessel performed a similar service for the Great Lord. A reserve force of eighty-eight ships, mostly heavy cruisers, pushed homeward with closed signal channels in accordance with orders from their own commanding officer. Soon informed of this unauthorized departure, the top brass at battle headquarters foamed at the mouth, switched switches, levered levers and stabbed buttons, filled the ether with contra-commands, threats and bloodthirsty promises while still the reserve continued to blunder through the starfield with all receivers sealed and no mutinous ears burning.

Bombs and bullets are of little avail without intelligence to direct them. Take away the intelligence, if only for a little while, and the entire warmaking appurtenances of a major

power become so much junk. The Solarian attack was irresistibly formidable because it was concentrated on the very root-cause of all action, the very motivating force behind all instruments great or small. Solarian logic argued that gun-plus-mind is a weapon whereas gun-without-mind is a mere article no matter how inherently efficient.

The Nilean booby traps were no exception, neither was any other robotic arm, for in effect they were delayed action weapons from which minds had gone into hiding by removing themselves in space and time. The minds originating each booby trap were difficult to trace, hence the fate suffered by Ellis and his crew. But in the long run they were being dealt with as ship after ship became grounded, squadrons, flotillas and convoys departed for someplace else and chaos threatened to become complete. In proof of which the jumpy Nilean high command twice made serious errors by diverting ships that sprang their own traps and thus added a pleasing note to the general confusion.

By the fiftieth time-unit the Solarians had an imposing array of statistics to consider. Fourteen ships destroyed by accident, including one of their own. Eight hundred fifty-one vessels nailed down to various inhabitable planets and satellites. One thousand two hundred sixty-six shiploads of the mentally deceived hellbent for other places, mostly home. Increasing evidence of demoralization in the battle headquarters of both belligerents. Truly the long term chivvying of weaker neutrals was being paid for, heavily, with compound interest. It might be sufficient to convince stubborn minds that a myth can be a very real thing when dragged out of the past and dumped into the present day.

They conferred among themselves and across a galactic gap while their ships continued to flash to and fro. If the opposing parties' battle headquarters were taken under mental control the entire war parade could be scattered through the heavens at a few imposed words of command. They were reluctant to take matters as far as that. It would come much too near a demonstration of near-godlike dictatorship over all lesser creatures.

The basic Solarian idea was to create respect for an essential law by creating respect for those behind it. To overdo the job by just a little too much would be to establish wholesale fear of themselves throughout the galaxy. Some dread here and there could not be avoided when dealing with less developed minds inclined to superstition, but they were deeply anxious

not to create ineradicable fear as a substitute for enlightened tolerance. Since they were trying to cope with two kinds of alien minds not identically the same, it was a touchy matter judging exactly how far they must go in order to achieve the desired result while avoiding the other. How many times should a candidate for baptism be dunked to give him salvation without pneumonia?

By mutual consent they carried on for another time-unit, at the end of which the movements of vessels still controlled by the top brass showed that Nilean forces were striving to regroup in readiness for withdrawal. Their answer to that was to cease all blows at Nileans and concentrate exclusively on Markhamwit's equally confused but more mulish armada. Though slower to make up their minds, the Great Lord's commanders were swifter to act once they'd reached a decision. In due time they saw without difficulty that this was an inauspicious date for victory and they'd do better to bide next Friday week. Which means that they started to pull out, fast.

"Enough!"

It flashed from mind to mind, and Lawson said with approval, "Good work, boys."

"Our work invariably is first class," assured Nfam. Removing his toque, he blew imaginary dust from it, smoothed its feather, put it on at a rakish angle. "I have earned myself a new bonnet."

"Treat yourself to a new head while you're at it," advised the thought-form of Buzwuz from his haunt nearer the stern.

"Petty spitefulness characteristic of the child-like," commented Jlath, nodding his fez until its crimson ribbon waggled. "I have long been intrigued by a phenomenon that someday must be investigated."

"Such as?" prompted Nfam.

"The nearer they are to Sol, the higher in intelligence. The farther out, the lower."

Buzwuz shrilled back, "Let me tell you, Spider-shape, that outside the Asteroid Belt they're—"

"Shut up!" bellowed Lawson, thus staking a biped claim in this scramble for superiority.

They went quiet, not because they were overawed by him, not because they considered him any better or worse than themselves, but soully because it was notorious that his two-legged kind could argue the tail off an alligator and cast grave doubts upon its parentage while doing so. If the Solarian mass mind had a special compartment reserved for flights of vocal

fancy duly embellished with pointed witticisms it was without doubt located on a dump called Terra.

So they held their peace while he boosted the speed and headed for the gypsy planet on which two ships already were waiting to collect the various homarachnids and take them nearer home. There was no need to consult star maps and seek the highly erratic course of the wandering sphere. He could have chased it across half the galaxy and hit it dead center with his eyes shut. All that was needed was to steer straight along the thought-stream emanating from the pair of Solarian vessels waiting there.

It was as easy as that.

CHAPTER XI

THE follow-up process was delayed. Held back deliberately and of malice aforethought. The sluggish communications systems of warring life-forms had been greatly to the advantage of Solarians, but now time must be allowed for those same systems to deliver data to Markhamwit and Glastrom. No use Lawson and Reeder taking them the news in person. They would not be believed until confirmation arrived in large dollops.

And after the warlords had gained a clear picture of recent events further time must be given for the complete digestion thereof. Since the Nileans were by nature a little more impulsive and a little less stubborn than their opponents it was likely that they would be the first to agree that it is unprofitable to play hob with common property such as the free space between worlds.

Markhamwit would be the last to give in. He would have a soul-searing period of balancing loss of face against the growing pile of awkward facts. He must have time to work out for himself that it is better to drop an autocratic obsession than ultimately drop at the end of a rope. Being what he was—a prominent member of his own kind—he'd have no illusions about the fate of one who insists on leading his people to total defeat.

A couple of days before the Nileans were due to become mentally ripe, Reeder burst through the defense screen of their home world, dropped a packet in Glastrom's palace yard,

whipped back into the eternal starfield before guards or aerial patrols fully realized what had taken place.

Ten time-units later—making carefully estimated allowance for Markhamwit's more reluctant character—Lawson obliged with a similar bundle that crowned the fat Kasine as he waddled across the area outside the interrogation center. The thump on that worthy's dome was not intentional. Nobody could go by at such pace and achieve such perfection of aim. It was wholly accidental, but to the end of his days Kasine would never believe it.

Struggling to his feet, Kasine addressed a few well-chosen words to the sky, took the bundle indoors, gave it to the captain of the guard who gave it to the garrison commander who gave it to the chief of intelligence. That official immediately recalled the fate of a predecessor who hurriedly burst open a parcel from someone who was not a friend. So with the minimum of delay he passed it to Minister Ganne who with equal alacrity handed it to the addressee, the Great Lord Markhamwit, and found an excuse to get out of the room.

Viewing the unwanted gift with much disfavor, Markhamwit found his plug and tube, called the chief of inteligence, ordered him to provide an expendable warrior to come lean out the window and open the thing. The chief of intelligence told the garrison commander who told the captain of the guard who duly pushed along a loyal thickhead of low rank and no importance.

The task performed without dire result, Markhamwit found himself with a thick wad of star maps. Spreading them over his desk he stared at them irefully. All bore liberal markings, with certain worlds and satellites clearly numbered. On the reverse side of each was a list of ships stalled on the appropriate spheres, plus roughly estimated strength of crews thus marooned and a further estimate of how long each group could survive unaided.

The longer he studied this collection the more riled he felt. Approximately one-fifth of his total forces had been put out of action according to this data. One-fifth of his battle-wagons were scrap metal scattered far across the light years. Assuming that it would be asking for further trouble to employ armed vessels, it would require full use of his gunless merchant-fleet to rescue and bring home the crews languishing on a couple of hundred worlds. And if he made no attempt to save them there would be trouble aplenty on this world.

He did not know it, but he had another twenty time-units in which to think things over.

At the end of that period Lawson returned.

The second arrival was exactly like the first. At one moment the plain stood empty, with the city gray and grim in the north, the bluish sun burning above and the smallest of the three moons going down in the east. Next moment the ship was there, a thin streak of dust settling behind its tail as if to show that there had been motion even though unseen.

Overhead the aerial patrol circled and swirled as before. This time there was some risk that they might bomb without waiting for orders. A slick trick creates greater fury when repeated and sometimes becomes too much to bear.

"If a man does thee once it's his fault; if he does thee twice it's thy fault!"

But again the Solarian visitor's behavior was that of one completely unconscious of such dangers or completely indifferent to them. It lay on the plain, a clear target. The patrol dropped nothing but did scream the news to the city's chief communications center.

Consequence was that a couple of truck-loads of troops raced onto the plain even as Lawson emerged from the lock. He came out breathing deeply, enjoying the fresh air, the feel of solid earth underfoot. Several winged shapes buzzed ecstatically out of the lock, zoomed into the sky, chased after each other and put over a bee-version of sailors in port.

Disregarding the oncomers from the city, the bee-minds were swapping thoughts intended mainly for the benefit of the biped. They deplored his lack of wings. They questioned the wisdom of Nature in putting sentient life upon two inadequate feet. Ah, the pity of it all!

So far as Lawson and his crew were concerned the truck-loads making toward them contained an armed company of mental moppets of no particular shape or form. And Markhamwit himself would have been appalled to learn that his own status was that of the muscular bully of grade one.

The trucks pulled up and the troops tumbled out. Though Lawson did not know it, his attitude and expression had been perfectly duplicated in the dawn of history by a gentleman named Casey who wore a cap and badge. The corner cop watching the kids come out of school. The lesson learned was the same now as then, produced the same results: the unruly members of this crowd had had to be taught respect for Casey.

They'd learned it all right; it was evident from what they did next. There was no hostile surrounding of the ship, guns loaded and held ready. Instead they formed up in two ranks, wide apart like a guard of honor. A three-comet officer marched forward, saluted ceremoniously.

"Sire, you have returned to see the Great Lord?"

"I have." Lawson blinked, looked him over. "Why the 'sire'? I do not have any military rank."

"You are the ship's commander," said the other, signing toward the vessel.

"I am its pilot," Lawson corrected. "Nobody commands it."

With a touch of desperation, the officer ended the disconcerting talk by motioning toward a truck. "This way, sire."

Grinning to himself, Lawson climbed into the cab, was driven citywards. He kept silence during the journey. The officer did likewise, inwardly feeling that this was one of those days when one can be tempted to say too much.

The Great Lord Markhamwit was sitting in his chair with his four arms lying negligently on its rests, his features smooth and composed. Many days ago he had been in a choleric frenzy of activity as he strove to organize a war that refused to jell. A few days back he'd been in a blind fury, pacing the room, hammering the table, volleying oaths and threats as a volcano spews lava. A few time-units ago reaction had set in as he contemplated an enormous mass of frustrating data topped by the star maps that had bounced off Kasine. Now he was resigned, fatalistic. It was the calm after the storm. He was nearly ripe for reason.

This was to be expected. Solarian tactics did not accord paramount importance to the question of *what* must be done to achieve a given end. It was of equal and occasionally of greater importance to determine precisely *when* it must be begun, how long it must be maintained and *when* it should be ended. Words like *how* or *what* did not dominate a word like *when* in Solarian thinking.

Circumstances were radically altered when Lawson ambled into the room for his third interview. His manner was the same as before, but now Markhamwit and Ganne studied him with wary curiosity rather than bellicose irritation.

Seating himself, Lawson crossed his legs, smiled at the Great Lord rather as one would at an obstreperous child after a domestic scene.

"Well?"

Markhamwit said slowly and evenly, "I have been in direct touch with Glastrom. We are recalling all ships."

"That's being sensible. More's the pity that it's had to be paid for by many of your crews languishing on lonely worlds."

"We have agreed to cooperate in bringing them home. The Nileans pick up and deliver any of our people they find. We do the same for them."

"Much nicer than cutting each other's throats, isn't it?"

Markhamwit countered, "You told me you didn't care."

"Neither do we. It's when innocent bystanders get pushed around that we see fit to chip in."

Lawson made to get up as if at his stage his task was finished because Solarian aims had been gained. Nothing daunted, the Great Lord spoke hurriedly.

"Before you go I'd like answers to three questions."

"What are they?"

"In honest fact do you come from a galaxy other than this one?"

"Most certainly."

Frowning at a secret thought, Markhamwit went on, "Have you sterilized any world belonging to us or the Nileans?"

"Sterilized?" Lawson registered puzzlement.

"As you are said to have done to the Elmones."

"Oh, that!" He dismissed it in the manner of something never contemplated even for a moment. "You're referring to an incident of long, long ago. We used weapons in those days. We have outgrown them now. We harm nobody."

"I beg to differ." Markhamwit pointed to the star maps piled up on one side. "On your own showing eight of my ships have been destroyed, crews and all."

"Plus five Nilean vessels and one of our own," Lawson said. "All by accidents over which we had no control. For example, two of your cruisers collided head-on. Our presence had nothing to do with it."

Accepting this without dispute, Markhamwit leaned forward, put his last question. "You have established a law that free space shall be completely free to all. We have recognized it. We have given in. I think that entitles us to know why you are so interested in the space ethics of a galaxy not your own."

Standing up, Lawson met him eye for eye. "Behind that query lurks the agreement you have just made with Glastrom, namely, that you drop all your differences in the face of common peril from outside. You have secretly agreed to conform to the common law until such time as you have developed

ships as good as or better than our own. Then, when you feel strong enough, you will join together and shave us down to whatever you regard as proper size."

"That does not answer my question," Markhamwit pointed out, not bothering to confirm or deny this accusation.

"The answer is one you'll fail to see."

"Let me be the judge of that."

"Well, it's like this," Lawson explained. "Solarians are not a shape or form. They're a multikind destined ultimately to lose identity in a combine still greater and wider. They are the beginning of a growth of associated minds designed to conquer universal matter. The free, unhampered use of space is the basic essential of such growth."

"Why?"

"Because the next contributions to a cosmos-wide supermind will come from this galaxy. That's where the laugh is on you."

"On me?" The Great Lord was baffled.

"On your particular life-form. You overlook the question of time. And time is all-important."

"What do you mean?"

"By the time either you or the Nileans have created techniques advanced enough to challenge us even remotely, both you and they will be more than ready for assimilation."

"I don't understand."

Lawson went to the door. "Someday both you and the Nileans will be inseparable parts of each other and, like us, components of a mightier whole. You will come to it rather late but you'll get there just the same. Meanwhile we will not allow those in front to be held back by those behind. Each comes in his own natural turn, delayed by no pernickety neighbors."

He smiled. Then he departed.

"My lord, did you understand what he meant?" Minister Ganne said.

"I have a glimmering." Markhamwit was thoughtful. "He was talking about events not due until five, ten or twenty thousand years after we two are dead."

"How did he get to know our arrangement with Glastrom?"

"He doesn't know since nobody could have told him. He made a shrewd guess, and he was absolutely correct as we are aware." Markhamwit brooded a bit, added, "It makes me wonder how close he'll get with his longer shot."

"Which one, my lord?"

"That by the time we're big enough to dare try beat up

what he calls his multikind it will be too late, for we shall then be part of that multikind."

"I can't imagine it," admitted Ganne.

"I can't imagine people crossing an intergalactic chasm. Neither can Yielm or any of our experts," Markhamwit said. "I can't imagine anyone successfully waging a major war without any weapons whatsoever." His tone became slightly peevish as he finished. "And that supports the very one of his points that I dislike the most: that our brains are not yet adequate. We suffer from limited imaginations."

"Yes, my lord," agreed Ganne.

"Speak for yourself," snapped Markhamwit. "I can stir up mine a bit even if others can't. I'm going to see Glastrom in person. Maybe we can get together and, by persuasion rather than by force, so reorganize the galaxy that it becomes too big and strong and united to be absorbed by any menagerie from elsewhere. It's well worth a try." He stopped, stared at Ganne, demanded, "Why do you look like a bilious skouniss?"

"You have reminded me of something he said," explained Ganne unhappily. "He said, 'Someday both you and the Nileans will be inseparable parts of each other and, like us, components of a mightier whole.' If you go to see Glastrom it means we're heading exactly that way—already!"

Markhamwit flopped back in his chair, gnawed the nails on four hands in turn. He hated to admit it but Ganne was right. The only satisfactory method of trying to catch up on Solarian competition was to toil along the same cooperative path to the same communal end that could not and would not remain compartmented in one galaxy. Not to try was to accept defeat and sink into dark obscurity that ultimately would cover them for all time, making them like the Elmones, a name, a memory, a rumor.

There were only two ways to go: forward or backward. Forward to the inevitable. Or backward to the inevitable. And it had to be forward.

Lawson returned to the ship and he knew that his crew already were aboard and eager to go. Getting out of the truck, he thanked the driver, walked toward the lock, stopped when nearby and carefully examined the sentry posted outside it.

"I think we have met before," he offered pleasantly.

Yadiz refused the bait. He kept tight hold on his gun, ignored the voice, ignored a couple of persistent itches. One

learns by experience he had decided, and when in the presence of a Solarian the safest thing is to play statues.

"Oh, well, if that's the way you feel about it." Lawson shrugged, climbed into the lock, looked down from the rim and advised, "We're taking off. There'll be some suction. If you don't want a sudden rise in the world you'd better take shelter behind that rock."

Thinking it over, Yadiz decided to take the suggestion. He marched toward the indicated point, still saying nothing.

Lawson sat in the pilot's seat, fingered the little lever. Far out at the edge of the galaxy, lost to view in the great spray of stardust, were a pair of life-forms developing a kindred spirit. Near to them was a third form, more numerous, arrogant and ready to fill the power vacuum left by Glastrom and Markham-wit. Far out there among the stars the stage was set for interference. Something must be done about it. A few knuckles must be rapped. He moved the lever.

THE ALIEN ENVOY

by Malcolm Jameson

THE telecom rattled throatily, then cleared. The voice was that of Terry, bimmy fieldman.

"Hey, chief, there's something coming in over the visio you ought to have a squint at. Think it's right down our alley."

Ellwood shoved the file he was examining aside. It was the usual slush about the unrest among the talags of Darnley Valley on Venus and dire prognostications of revolt, as if talag grousing was something new. They *always* belly-ached, and nothing ever came of it. That's the way talags were. Anyhow, it was routine and never should have been sent up to the chief's desk. The ace bimmy—so-called from collapsing the initials of the Bureau of Interplanetary Military Intelligence—preferred not to be bothered with trifles.

"I heard you, Terry," he barked. "Let 'er flicker."

The big screen across the room came to life. For a moment there was nothing but swirling gray chaos, and then the color deepened to a velvety purple-black. The screen gained depth and the coldly burning stars came out one by one. For some seconds that was all, then an object drifted into the field. It was a bulky, teardrop-shaped thing of shimmering silvery green and atop it sat a squat turret out of which peeped the blunt nose of some kind of lethal projector. But the violet aura that usually surrounded the stubby gun was missing.

That was but one detail. Ellwood gasped as he ran his eye over the image of the entire ship as it inched its way into the middle of the field of view. The after half of it glowed and sparkled with incandescent lemon-yellow fire, fading slowly to a dull orange and then a cherry-red as the tortured hull radiated its fierce heat into space. The vessel had been caught in a katatrom beam. That was evident, but it was not all. There was a gaping hole through the stern out of which glowing gases were blowing, only to be instantly dissipated in the vacuum of space.

"An Ursan!" exclaimed Ellwood. "We finally penetrated one! Who did it?"

"Commander Norcross, in the *Penelope*. He slammed a Mark IX torp into it, and it took. But, say, chief, that ain't all the story. The whole battle was as screwy as could be. The Ursan didn't fight back, and you know how tough they usually are. All it did was set up a terrible howl that sounded like

all the static this side of Magellan rolled up in one ball. And take a gander at the coordinates."

Ellwood's gaze dropped to the pale white figures in the lower corner. There were three of them—celestial latitude and longitude and the angle of tilt. The wrecked Ursan was less than a million miles away—beyond the moon a little distance and up about twenty degrees.

"What in thunder was he doing this far in?" asked Ellwood. "They haven't ventured in past Jupiter in forty years."

"Search me. That's why I called you. Norcross says he's done his stuff. He's put the Ursan on the fritz, and there aren't any more around. He wants to know whether he should just call the derelict squad, kick the wreck into an orbit, or haul it in so you can have a look-see."

Ellwood fairly yelled his answers into the telecom.

"Park it in the lot by Lab Q-5, of course, you dope. Isn't this what we've been waiting for all our lives?"

The telecom crackled and died. Ellwood's fingers were racing across a panel of buttons.

"Q-5? Stand by for a triple-priority job . . . cruiser got an Ursan . . . no, I mean *got* it . . . it's hanging dead in space, and it's fairly intact. They're towing it in to you, and it ought to be there by this time tomorrow. Recall Twitcherly, and be sure that Darnhurst is there. I'm leaving here right now by stratoline and I'll bring Gonzales with me. You have everything all set—complete metallurgy, chemistry, and magnetonic examination of the hull . . . the Valois procedure will be the best, I think. And I want a board of outplanet medicos there. We want to find out what an Ursan looks like, what makes him tick, and the rest. That means an autopsy such as never was, right down to the histology of every last cell in the monsters. That is, *if* they're monsters, and there's anything left of them."

"I get you, chief. Everything'll be ready to roll."

Ellwood snapped out a score of other calls. Then he sat back and relaxed.

It had started out to be a dull, dreary day of stifling details. Now that was changed. It was the day of days, the day of opportunity every bimmy chief before him had yearned for and never got. What were Ursans, anyway? Where did they come from, and what did they want? And since they were aliens from an unknown outer world who always fought back with murderous savagery while being at the same time virtually impregnable themselves, what could be done to improve

the technics of warfare against them? It was a grim question that had agitated the Earth races ever since the Ursans had first invaded their system.

Ellwood thought back over recent history. The first intruders had come in a wave of some fifty ships, dropping into the ken of the Space Patrol from the general direction of Ursa Major. On that occasion they visited most of the planets, conducting what was unmistakably a reconnaissance in spite of all the heroic space fighters could do. Dozens of the invaders were caught in the quick blasts of katatrons, but they failed to disintegrate. They merely glowed for a moment in blinding incandescence, and proceeded to carry on. They would answer the kat blast with a bolt of massive pink lightning from their own squat guns, and that would be the end of another terrestrian ship and crew. Until now not one of our vessels had managed to stay in action long enough to launch its slower but more positive torpedoes.

It was strange. The Ursans came, and they went away, leaving behind them the burned out hulks of the flower of the Space Navy. A decade passed, and they did not return. Boasters claimed our defense had taught them a lesson; they would not dare come back. The Pollyannas took the view that it was apparent we had nothing they wanted, therefore they were not to be feared hereafter. But there were others who took a soberer view. The fleet was rebuilt and strengthened. Kat pressures were built up; the speed of torps increased. Other weapons were devised under the spur of necessity.

The Ursans did come back. That time they came in not one wave, but ten, and each wave had more than a thousand ships. That was the year of the great running battle from past Neptune all the way in to Jupiter. The earth forces attacked them at the perimeter of the system and hung on to the bitter end. There were many enemy casualties that time, but the surviving Ursans crowded round them and herded them into what was for them safety—down through the swirling ammonia clouds of Jupiter to a landing where no terrestrian dared follow. The tired remnants of what had been a mighty defensive fleet had no stomach for the killing gravity of Sol's greatest planet. They withdrew to lick their wounds.

For a while terror reigned on the inner planets. The Ursans did not follow up their attack, but they did not go away. It was evident they were making an advance base on Jupiter. For twenty years their ships came and went, but they did not come inside the asteroid belt again. Doggedly the dwindling

Space Navy harried them, but apparently to no avail. In a duel between a Terrestrian and an Ursan, the Ursan always won. It was a dispirited, losing business.

Then came a day when the whole Ursan armada took off in one vast cloud and went back toward the upper Northern sky. Until this lone ship came wandering in, there had not been another visitation.

"I wonder," mused Ellwood, "do these creatures come in successive waves like the Goths and the Mongols and the Huns did, and is this the advance scout for a new invasion? Or what? Why did this Ursan give Norcross time to slip a torpedo into him? Asleep? Sick? Internal difficulty?"

He rose. Well, they had the ship. That was something.

Ellwood leaped from the plane and strode across the field. The bimmy guards saluted and made gangway. A hundred yards from the grounded wreck Ellwood glimpsed three sheeted forms on stretchers.

"Who are they?" he asked.

"Tolliver, Schweitzer, and Wang Chiang. They got theirs trying to get into the forepart—passed out in the lock. It's hot in there, and heavy, and what the Ursans use for air is out of this world. It's all over with those three lads."

Ellwood frowned. He didn't relish losing men. Moreover, men with the qualifications for being good bimmies were as scarce as the proverbial hen's teeth. Yet he was glad they had done their duty. If the forward half of the hostile ship was still intact it was important that it be left that way. The easy way would have been to blast it open, but then they would have had to reconstruct the conditions there. This way they had only to observe them.

"Did anyone come out—alive?"

"Yes. Darnhurst. He says there is at least one living Ursan still in there. He saw it crawling around in the control room, and then he got out quick."

"Did it go for him?"

"Oh, no. He just couldn't bear up against the pressure and the rest. There is some kind of gravity device operating in there and inside you have to work against 3-G's. The temperature is around a thousand, and the atmosphere is a mixture of ammonia, methane, helium, nitrous fumes, and about nine other gases that haven't yet been identified."

Ellwood said nothing. A gang of men were just then loading something onto a heavy truck beside the wreck with the

aid of a crane. They had brought it out through the gaping hole left by the torpedo. Ellwood walked over and looked at it. It was truly a monstrous thing.

The dead Ursan partook of the qualities of an articulated deep sea turtle, crossed with an octopus and recrossed with a giant horned frog. There were seven segments, squat and heavily plated, each supported by one thick, elephantine foot no more than four inches long. Some of the segments were topped with a cluster of bony spikes, each in a different arrangement. Some were triple, some quintuple, one a simple pair. None were of the same length or thickness, and their spacing varied. The non-horned segments were two in number, one near each end. Instead of horns they were crowned with flat, lumpy superstructures from which dangled a score of octupoid antennae. Some hung loose and flabby, others were half-retracted into the parent shell. They were variously tipped at their outer ends. About half ended in handlike arrangements of several fingers and an opposing thumb, others terminated in vacuum-grip cups, still others in horny, tool-like finials —chisels, socket wrenches, and the like. But of organs such as the fauna of the Solar System possessed there was no sign. There was nothing corresponding to eyes, ears or noses, nor yet the semblance of a mouth. The creatures were all plate and horn and tentacle, and incredibly massive.

"How many of these are there?"

"Three. The black gang, I guess they were. They aren't damaged much. It must have been the loss of their atmosphere that killed them."

"Rush them along to the lab, then, and let the boys there at them."

There followed a hectic seventy hours during which no bimmy at that post slept more than a cat nap or ate more than a bolted sandwich. By the time Ellwood's special harness was completed a lot of preliminary work had been cleared away. The easiest part of it was the accessible part of the ship itself.

The hull was of immense strength and built of an alloy that as yet defied analysis. Its tensile strength was of the order of a half a million pounds to the square inch. It was acid proof. It had no attainable melting point. It was a wonder that even a katatron could heat it white, let alone atomize it. Only the direct hit of a Mark IX torp could have punctured it.

The main drive was atomic, not much different from the

terrestrial kind. The guns were simply magnetic versions of the katatron. The bimmies whose specialty was ordnance swarmed over them, delightedly taking notes. Here was something really fearsome in the way of armament. The Ursans had learned the trick of accumulating balls of magnetrons under terrific initial tension and then launching them at near the speed of light. But what was radically different was the system of control. No human, or any group of humans that could be contained in either the turret or the engine room could possibly have manipulated the scattered, queer-shaped controls. None but Briarean-handed creatures could do the job. The setup was strictly Ursan, by Ursans, for Ursans. Significantly there was nowhere a single gauge, meter, label or other visual aid to the operator.

As for the control room where the surviving monster still dwelt, whining unceasingly on forty different short-wave radio frequencies at once, Ellwood left that strictly alone. He was not finished tooling yet for his entry into it. The only precautions he took with it was to see that a reserve supply of the gases needed to replenish what the monster used was at hand if needed. But he made one startling discovery without entering the difficult chamber. One of his bimmy engineers deduced the location of the monster's air-purifying system and tapped it in mid cycle. The waste product was amazing. It was steam! Just steam. He led it into a condenser. The end product was distilled water, a fact grabbed onto with great interest by the medic gang.

They, too, had done their work, but in the end it had to be taken out of their hands. Electronicists and magnetonic sharks took over where they left off. If the beast's body chemistry was topsy-turvy, its nervous system was a thing to drive men mad. It was a mess of tangled wire—metallic wire, loaded with radium—and weird ganglia that might have served as distribution boxes. There were sets of flat, semi-bone, metalloid plates that could only be a variety of condenser. There were other screwy arrangements that were probably transformers, and the horns that adorned the spiked segments proved to be combination triodes and sending and receiving antennae. Bimmy after bimmy looked, and bugged his eyes. A thing like that just couldn't be. It violated—well, just about all the laws of electronics there were. Yet—and they would go back to work. What they dreamed of in their snatches of sleep they did not divulge, but it was wild enough to start the doctors shooting hypnophrene as a regular thing.

"There you are," said Gonzales. "It's screwy, but it is what we found."

He handed Ellwood the rough draft of the preliminary report.

The Ursans neither ate nor drank. They breathed—breathed the outlandish blend of gases found in their ship. There were gills under the after edge of each segment's plate except the end ones, and in each segment was a separate lung. The lungs themselves were fantastic beyond expression, an impossible blending of leathery membrane and flexible quartz tubing. In the tubing coursed the creature's blood—a solution of silicon, radium salts, sulphur, iron, zinc, and a score of other metals in a mixture of acids of which nitric was the dominant member. This blood fed the stumpy, clumsy feet and the agile tentacles. It also fed the ganglia and nourished the other electric gadgetry. There were sinuses filled with the liquid where it seemed to act as an electrolyte.

"If I believe what I see here," said Ellwood tapping the document, "we are going to have to throw a lot of preconceived notions out the window. Here we have monsters with intricate nervous systems, but no brain. Yet they are intelligent even if they do think with their reflexes. They have no organs of sight, touch, or hearing, but they evidently perceive the stars well enough to navigate, and us well enough to make us targets. This requires a radical approach."

"They perceive by means of short-wave radio," Gonzales reminded him. "That set in the corner is tuned in on the steady drone that surviving Ursan in the cruiser is sending out. I think that is what he keeps track of his surroundings by. Here's why. We have activated the nerve circuits to this pair of horns on number three segment. They gave off the identical continuous tone, and they also pick it up on the rebound. The return impulses go down to a certain ganglia and from there are fed to this set of bone plates. Unless somebody talks me down, I'm going to label those bones the retina."

Ellwood chuckled. It was not too absurd a thought. For centuries men had been using short-wave radio for night detection. Here was a living organism that used it all the time.

"Now these other spikes and horns perform similar, but different duties," continued Gonzales, putting his finger at spots on the diagram. "A current fed to this five-pronged arrangement makes an armature do funny things when you make noises in the vicinity. I'd call it an audio converter. The Ursans apparently don't care a hang about listening as such,

but they evidently have found it useful to change what we call sound into something else that has meaning for them."

"Yes," said Ellwood, thoughtfully. "You're on the right trail. I wonder which frequencies in the band the creature uses for communication with his mates. Once we have that I'll have a jumping off point for what I intend to do."

"We'll see if we can pick it out for you, chief. There are three or four waves he uses only intermittently, and that stutteringly. It sounds very much to me as if he had been listening in on the chitchat between our ships and was trying to imitate it. Being electronically minded, the Ursans could hardly fail to have picked up our ethergrams. We have recorded a lot of the jabber already and turned it over to the cryptograph gang, but so far they haven't cracked the code. It may be as you suggest—one of those waves is the Ursan speech wave."

"Maybe, and maybe not," murmured Ellwood, "but it's a thought."

That night he made several important changes in his plans. He burned up the air with urgent messages, and before morning the first of the planes bearing rush equipment began dropping down beside the Ursan prize. By ten Ellwood was ready to test out a theory he had spent the night in evolving. He meant to go into the sealed control room and have a direct interview with the captive monster.

"Better play it safe, chief," spoke up the bimmy in charge of the guard. "That thing may act up. You ought to carry along a blaster."

Ellwood shook his head.

"I think," he said, smiling mildly, "that we got off on the wrong foot with these creatures right from the beginning. I don't mean with this ship or what our gang is doing about it. I mean the whole dismal history of our dealings with the Ursans. I've been thinking it over. Has it ever struck you that there has never been an instance of an Ursan ship firing on one of ours except when ours had first attacked? Could it not be that they are an essentially peaceful race of brutes and not prone to fight except in self-defense? I've come to that conclusion, and I'm staking my next move accordingly. Whatever that fellow in there was up to, coming straight toward Earth the way he was, I refuse to believe it was aggression."

"You're the boss," said the man, shrugging, but the look of uneasiness did not leave his face.

The ponderous chair was ready. It stood on the ground just outside the Ursan entry port, and there was a heavy crane beside it. Ellwood let them dress him in the heavy-duty, high-resistant spacesuit fitted with cooling coils. That would enable him to endure the cruel temperatures so dear to his visitor, and at the same time shield his lungs from the noxious atmosphere. Then he let them hoist him into the chair while they rigged his accessory tools handily about him. The chair itself had been specially built for the occasion. It was massive and mounted on a truck carried by thick dollies, and powered by a small atomic. In it Ellwood could sit in relative ease despite the 3-G pull of the control room deck.

He nodded, and the craneman hoisted him into the open lock door. They closed it. Ellwood was in the anteroom of the visitor from the stars. The rest was up to him.

The lock grew warm, and the foul atmosphere of the ship whistled in and filled it. The pressure built up. Shortly conditions matched those in the interior. The inner lock door slid open with a hiss, and as Ellwood piloted his sturdy vehicle through it, it clicked shut behind him.

To human eyes the visibility was bad. Ellwood saw everything through a thick, milky haze, but attached to his chair were powerful lights, and after a minute or so he could see sufficiently well.

The control room was a hemispherical affair, a roundish room with a domed ceiling. Except for the floor there was hardly any part of it that was not encrusted with fantastic, intricate machinery. It rose in banks along the curving walls; it hung from the overhead. Only creatures with long multi-tentacles could have reached its scattered controls. As a piece of functional design it was doubtless splendid—but from the Ursan point of view. Ellwood swept it with one slow, wondering glance, and then put its intricacies out of his mind. In time the technicians would unravel the mysteries. His job was more comprehensive.

The Ursan lay motionless on the far side of the room. Ellwood could only assume that his entry had been noted. For there was not the slightest sign on the part of the monster of any change in his attitude toward his environment. Ellwood drove his chair part way across the room and stopped it there. He scanned the walls afresh for a relatively flat spot and finally found one—a huge plate that seemed to be the cover for a portion of an elaborate arrangement of magnetic gears. That was well. Ellwood relaxed and devoted his attention to

the little black box in his lap. He seized its tuning knobs and began searching the short-wave band.

The two adversaries remained thus for the space of hours. Ellwood simply sat and twiddled knobs, groping for the meaning of what he heard. The monster could well have been as dead as the dissected ones in the laboratory. It never moved an inch or twitched a tentacle. But it kept on doing interesting things with its steady outpourings of radiation.

It was not long before Ellwood was aware that inside him some exceedingly queer sensations were being born. Pimple-raising thrills would creep up and down his spine; elfin fingers reached inside his eardrums and thumped them; once there were sudden shooting pains in his eyeballs; and there was a very trying period several minutes long when his heart action went crazy. Ellwood accepted it stoically. He was sure of himself and felt no fear. He was being probed, examined, mentally dissected by a diffuse electronic mind that felt its way by reflected radiation. He knew his own immense curiosity as to the nature and purposes of the thing opposite to him. It was not illogical that the feeling was mutual.

At last there was a lull. It was time for overtures, the preliminary sizings up having been completed. Ellwood flipped a switch and began sending. *Dot-dash, dot-dot-dot-dash,* and so on, using the wave he thought most likely the creature communicated ideas on. He sent on for one minute, then grinned grimly as he ended with the standard "Over!"

The monster caught on. There was an answering rattle of meaningless *ta-ta-ta-daa-daas.* It made no sense, but the channel had been found. Later the cryptographers could develop the recording tapes and try their hand at unraveling the meaning. But it would not be simple. Spanish is different from Norse, but closely akin—more so, say, than Chinese. Yet all those languages expressed human thoughts in terms of human visual and aural images. How did an Ursan, a creature who had no eyes, ears, or tongue, *think* of the things his "brain" conceived? That was the crux of the problem.

Ellwood was eager to delve into that aspect. It was for that the extra stuff had been rushed through the stratolanes of the night, and he was prepared. For that reason he persisted with the exchange of gibberish only a little while. Then he reached into his bag of tricks and brought out item Number Two.

It was a small, self-contained, magazine projector. Loaded into it were the excellent films devised by the Outplanet Cultural Society for the education of the Venusian talag, the Mar-

tian phzitz, and the odd life forms that haunted the Jovian satellites. Ellwood focused it on the flat plate he was lucky enough to find. Then he started it to running.

The golden key to successful pedagogy is the association of ideas. That was how the OCS had solved the outland language problem. It was true that Ursans could not see, but neither could phzitzn. It was true that a talag is congenitally deaf, but they learned. With an Ursan it would surely be harder, but Ellwood was hopeful.

Nouns, the names of things, are always the obvious starting point. Ellwood's first showing was that of the sun, taken close up, near Mercury. The impressive parade of raging sunspots was there, and the streaming prominences.

"Sun," he sent, in the interplanetary code, and simultaneously uttered the word out loud. Then he diminished the diameter, showing the sun successively as it appeared on Earth, on Jupiter, and on Uranus. Each time he reiterated the noun, both in dot and dash, and by voice. He repeated the performance from the beginning, then sent "Over!"

"Sun," came back the Ursan's reply. "Over!"

Ellwood beamed beneath his helmet, though hot sweat was trickling over his eyes. The Ursan was smart. He was catching on. Now for another noun, and coupled with it a bit of semantic logic. He started the machine off again, and this time shrank the sun to a mere pinpoint of scintillating white light.

"Star," was his dual message.

"Star," said the Ursan.

Then came the planets, all of them, however different, and each Ellwood called simply planet. After that he went through them again, but that time he put the emphasis on their differences. He called them successively Mercury, Earth, Mars, and on in order. The Ursan followed. Now he was beginning to grasp the human communicative pattern. There were all-embracing words—the generic terms that included a whole class of related things. There were also specific words applying to individual variations.

Ellwood rested. Curiously, the Ursan rested, too. Perhaps he was pondering what he learned, thought Ellwood. At any rate he waited, motionless and with much of his radiation stilled. Ellwood was convinced now that his plan would work. The monster's perceptions were those of another world, yet they did perceive. That was what mattered.

Presently Ellwood repeated the show, hopeful that this time the Ursan would take another step and supply *his* version of

the word displayed. He did not. Evidently there were no corresponding concepts in Ursan thought.

Ellwood let it go. He must be content for the time being with one-way teaching. Later—who knew? He showed next two spaceships. The first was a Terrestrian cruiser, the other a typical Ursan craft. He established one after another the general words "spaceship," "warship," and then proceeded to differentiate into classes. The last lesson of the day was the introduction of adjectives. There were the terms Terrestrian and Ursan to define.

Ellwood was exhausted when he came out, and surprised to find that he had spent but two hours within. It had seemed far longer under the terrible conditions suitable to Ursan life. A group of anxious bimmies hoisted him out of the lock and released him from his harness.

"Phew," he whistled. "Now I understand why a katatron won't work against these babies. They heat up a ship that can't be melted, but what is heat to creatures who start at one thousand as normal? And what is internal pressure increments when 3-G's is standard? I doubt if there is any way to kill these things unless it is to deprive them of the precious stink they breathe."

He rested most of the afternoon, and then went back. In the tedious weeks of instruction that followed Ellwood made great progress. Where the monster's memory resided he could not say, but there was one. For when he finished with the concrete words he held a review. He flashed the series beginning with the sun, though without naming the objects. The Ursan faithfully supplied the appropriate nouns. He had acquired a vocabulary of more than a thousand words.

The verbs were harder, and the abstractions worse. But the course the Society had contrived was cleverly put together. Ellwood followed it religiously. He depicted various human activities, each neatly illustrated to emphasize the principle concerned. In the end he came to the concept of rivalry, and showed how rivalry grew into strife. Combat was shown in various aspects, but all of it was combat. And then Ellwood played his trump. A scene showing a fight ended in one party crawling across the lines, waving a white flag. The two combatants then embraced.

At this point Ellwood got his first reaction from the monster that was more than mere parroting. It was sending agitatedly in English. It was a queer sort of English, tinged as it was with

an Ursan accent, for even in code there is such a thing. The creature got in all the words, but the syntax was his own. Some of the inversions almost defied unscrambling, but Ellwood thought he knew what the Ursan was driving at. He quit sending and listened.

"Peace!" the visitor kept repeating. "Peace. Yes, that is what I came for. We are not enemies, but friends. You are puny yet savage monsters in our eyes, but now that I have seen you at close range I see that you are not wholly bad. You do many things in clumsy ways, but we will pass over that. That is your affair. You are not to blame that your sensory equipment and mentality are as limited as they are, but I now concede that you have done remarkably well in spite of your handicaps."

"Thank you very much," said Ellwood dryly.

Being thanked seemed to disconcert the Ursan for a moment, as it was a concept not hitherto explained. But he took up his harangue again.

"I have been a prisoner in this impossible place for a long time now," sent the Ursan, "and I have listened to your teachings. Very well. Now I know about you and your strange race, and the hideous planets you choose to live on. It's my turn. Let me teach you *our* way. Leave off torturing me with your crude electronic devices and just sit and absorb. I assure you that what you have done to me is quite painful, but in your ignorance you could not help that. I will show you that the Ursan way is better."

Ellwood turned off his set meekly. It had not occurred to him before that mechanically generated radiation might have subtle differences in characteristics from the *organically* generated variety. He found himself praying that now that it was his turn and he was on the receiving end the converse effect would not be equally painful.

It proved not to be, though there were times when Ellwood felt he would go mad from the exquisite ecstasies that sometimes rose to intensities amounting almost to agony. For the Ursan discarded all dots and dashes and went straight to the source of thought. By means of its own uncanny mechanism it managed to tune in on the neural currents of the brain itself.

It was a dreamlike experience, verging occasionally on the nightmarish. Ellwood had a hard time later conveying some stretches of it to the Grand Council. Indeed, he had a hard time even remembering part of what he experienced, so utterly alien to human conception were many of the bizarre scenes he saw and activities witnessed.

First he had the giddy feeling one has when succumbing to a general anesthetic. It was as if his soul was being torn from his body and forced to float in space. There was never a time when he could be sure that he *saw* what he saw, or *heard* what he heard, or *felt* what he felt. Sensed? Divined? Perceived intuitively? Some such verb seemed more appropriate. But shortly Ellwood quit caring. He was in another world, a world so weird, so fantastic, so amazing in its extremes and distortions of ordinarily accepted laws of nature that he knew that up to then human science had no more than scratched the surface of general knowledge. He saw how chemistry, physics, all the sciences underwent profound modifications under the terrific pressures and temperatures he encountered on certain far off planets. Everything was—well, was *different*.

What the Ursan was giving him was a general orientation course. Ellwood was shown scores of planets compared with which Jupiter would be but small fry. He saw races of other monstrous creatures that were as different from the Ursan before him as the Ursan was from him, yet they lived in the same environment. It was analogous to the mutual enjoyment of the earth by such diverse creatures as eagles, elephants, snakes, man, fish and streptococci. Each had its own needs and duties, though each impinged at some points on the others. There was cooperation among them, and also strife. And what strife! Ellwood grew faint when he saw the fighting modes of some species of monsters.

But there was civilization, comprising manufacturing and commerce, and attended and regulated by a sort of ethic. There were governmental organizations, and what must have been religious bodies. It was the industrial setup with its mighty factories that interested Ellwood most. He saw that on those planets certain substances quite rare with us were commonplace, and also the contrary. Gold was abundant enough to be used for roofing, whereas ordinary salt was extremely rare. The greatest dearth lay in the scarcity of radium, a vital commodity since it was to the Ursan what the more important vitamins are to us. It was on account of radium hunger that they had been so insistent on mining the Red Spot on Jupiter, despite our inhospitable reception of their ships.

Imperceptibly Ellwood was brought back from the realm of the distant planets, and was kept for a while in what can only be termed an abstract state. There were no pictures or sound in that. Only a flow of ideas. The Ursan was pouring the Ursan philosophy of inter-creature relationship into his consciousness.

It was not at all a bad philosophy. It was cooperative. It recognized the rights of others to live in their own queer ways, and where they conflicted there existed an elaborate code by which they could be compromised.

At length the Ursan reached his finish. Ellwood was back in his own personality, dazed and tired, but immensely satisfied. He knew without knowing how he felt, that henceforth intercourse between him and this monster would be easy. It would not be in dots and dashes or words in any form. It would not be simple telepathy, which after all is but the mysterious conveyances of thinkable pictures. It transcended that. It was super-telepathy, made possible by the amazing electro-magneto-neuro current command available to those with the Ursan metabolism. Somehow the raw, basic idea came over all at once. It was amorphous, instantaneous, and beyond logical analysis. But one communicated.

Ellwood knew his task was successfully completed. The wordless message given him boiled down to this:

"We, the rulers of the Armadian planets about the great sun Gol midway between you and Polaris, have looked your system over and find there is a basis for us to work for mutual advantage. We saw that you were in useful occupation of certain small planets utterly unsuitable for us. We meant to leave you alone, and have left you alone. We also found that you have two other planets, one rich and the other less so, sufficiently large to support our colonies. They are useless to you, and must always be, since your personal structure is so puny and your science elementary. We, therefore, claimed them for ourselves, resisting your ignorant and vicious attacks only in so far as we were compelled to.

"Since I find now that you are ruled by fear, and actuated at times by greed and envy, we know that you will never be satisfied with simply ceding to us what is of no value to you. You want recompense. Very well, at great risk and no small inconvenience, I have come as an emissary. In our part of the galaxy there are many small planets that would be paradisical to you, and on most of them the life forms are even more primitive than your own. If you will grant us unmolested access to Jupiter and Saturn, we will lead you to these trivial minor planets amongst us and grant you equal privileges in return. I am the envoy of Armadia. I offer you a treaty."

"I will convey your message to our ruling body," said Ellwood.

"But it is unthinkable," exclaimed Dilling, chairman of the Council. "Why, think of the risks. How do we know these . . . these *monsters* have any honor? If we allow them to build up immense bases, strip our system of its radium, and nose about at will, it will be but a question of time until they exterminate us. Moreover, it is an ultimatum. We cannot entertain an ultimatum from . . . from . . . from—"

He sputtered off into angry silence, still groping for a word beastly enough to describe the Ursan creatures as he saw them. Ellwood regarded him with quiet contempt.

"It is not an ultimatum," he said coldly. "Alternatives were never mentioned, though there has not been a time in the past half century when the Ursans could not have seared our inner planets from pole to pole whenever they chose. I have seen their engines of destruction and they are unimaginably terrible. They are asking only that we stop beating our brains out and sacrificing our ships in futile nibbling at their radium convoys. We have had half a million fatal casualties to their three. The inmates of the ships we warmed up were only momentarily stunned. The three they lost they lost in offering this friendly gesture."

"Bah," snorted Dilling. "What is friendly about proposing to rob us of untold tons of pure radium when we put such high value on the few pounds we own?"

"The radium in question," said Ellwood, "might as well not exist as far as we are concerned. Our ships have neither the structural strength or the power to negotiate the gravity field of Jupiter, nor our men the stamina to work the mines if they could go there. You are playing dog in the manger. Yet knowing that, and our weakness, they have made an offer. They will cede us planets as valuable to us as the radium sought is to them. They do it from their sense of fair play. You will accept the treaty because you have no other choice. They will take the radium in any event and keep on slapping down any cruisers of ours that try to interfere. They offer peace instead, and commerce. Think, you other gentlemen, of what that promises. Inter-systemic commerce, not only astronomically speaking, but between systems of life that are on radically different chemical and physical levels. Trade between the tropics and the cold countries was profitable. Trade between Venus and us and Mars is profitable. Here you are offered a prospect that staggers the imagination."

Ellwood chopped off his speech and sat down. He had said what was to be said. The rest was up to the Council.

The discussion that followed was heated and lengthy, but in the end common sense won. When he left the chamber it was with authorization to negotiate.

Ellwood approached the Ursan ship for his final interview with the alien ambassador. Shortly he would inherit the interesting wreck for whatever study he wanted to make of it. For the Ursan had broadcast to a waiting horde far out in space that terms had been arrived at. Shortly another Ursan ship would appear, this time with safe conduct, and take his envoy home. Meantime there were the ultimate formalities to be observed.

Ellwood carried with him the English text of the treaty. Both the Terrestrian and the Ursan copies were engraved in basic, systemic English on thick sheets of pure beryllium, a metal totally unknown on the heavy planets. He was to sign with the monster and leave him one set. In his turn the monster was to hand over a copy of the Golic version.

When Ellwood's chair rolled out onto the floor of the control room, the Ursan did what it had never done before. It moved. Inching along on its line of monopods caterpillar fashion, it slowly crossed and met Ellwood midway. Long dormant tentacles slithered out of their sockets and went to work. Two that terminated in the semblance of hands took the beryllium sheets from Ellwood, shuffled them rapidly, and returned them to him. They then reached into a locker overhead and produced a half dozen golden metallic balls. Another tentacle snaked toward a shelf and brought forward an instrument. Ellwood knew, as if by instinct, what he had to do.

The Golic text of the treaty turned out to be the oddest document in the libraries of man. It contained not words, but pure thought—thought impressed on the surface of the strange metallic spheres in the form of regenerative neuronic charges. To comprehend their meaning any intelligent human had only to run them through the instrument provided with them. It was a scanner, and as the balls rolled through, the hidden message on their surfaces suddenly and mysteriously became clear to anyone near by.

Ellwood scanned the Golic text. It was a marvel of clarity of expression. The stipulations contained were the whole thought, without a jot of qualification or reservation. One *knew* what was meant. There was no room for quibbling, even if a galaxy of lawyers undertook the task. There were no shades of meaning, or misplaced commas. There were no ifs

and buts and and/ors, or whereases or parties of this part and that part as cluttered up the Solar version. The Golic text said what the Solar did, but perfectly.

Ellwood signed it by merely giving his mental assent, which by some miracle of alien science became at once a part of the document. Then he put his own signature to the tin sheets, using a stylus. The Ursan signed in similar manner, but employing a special tentacle that terminated in the suitable tool. What he put down for his name was an unintelligible symbol, but it did not matter. The Solar version would always be subordinate to the Golic. It was an anachronism, a sop to legalistic tradition, a thing to be filed in archive vaults and forgotten. If ever there should arise a question, the thought spheres would provide the answer.

After the exchange of documents there was a moment of stillness. The two utterly different organisms—the Earthman and the Ursan—were as motionless as if hewn from stone. They were lost in intimate psychic rapport. There was gratitude and friendliness in it, and mutual congratulations. Each recognized that the other had done a superlative job, and each understood the purity of the other's motive. Then the mood abruptly faded, as if a connection had been snapped. Ellwood felt completely at a loss as to how he should terminate the interview.

At that instant the Ursan did an astonishing thing. A handed tentacle crept over to Ellwood's chair and rested lightly for a moment on the padded arm. Then it slid forward past the bulbous hinge of the wrist joint of Ellwood's armor and found his gloved hand. The handlike Ursan tentacle tip grasped Ellwood's hand and shook it solemnly, up and down. Then it dropped away and retired to its sheath. It was good-by and good luck.

Out in the lock Ellwood waited for the pressure to fall, and the good, clean, cool terrestrial air to come in. There was a lump in his throat and his eyes were moist, and all of the moisture was not sweat.

"How did that Ursan know we shook hands on things?" he muttered. "*I* never told him. Not once."

THE MALIGNANT MARAUDER

by Murrcy Leinster

FROM beginning to end, it was Pete Marshall's show. His show, and the knife's.

Marshall had a big reputation as an archaeologist, and there's no question but that he'd earned it. But the knife ruined him professionally. It was a steel knife. Moreover, it was a stainless steel knife, and Marshall claimed it was at least eight thousand years old, and, he believed, more. But you don't have to know archaeology to realize that people weren't using steel knives eight thousand years ago, much less stainless steel ones. It was absurd.

As a result Marshall was ruined professionally. When you compared the knife with the primitive pottery and chipped flints Marshall claimed to have found with it, it didn't make sense! Still, he got moderately rich out of his patent on the new stainless-steel alloy, and then sank most of the money in a new, select expedition to go back to Yucatan and hunt for some more.

He took just two other men with him, Bill Apsley and Jeff Burroughs, but they were good. Burroughs, in his stolid fashion, knew as much about primitive man as anybody else in America. Apsley wasn't so much of a specialist, but he had an intuitive way of seeing through archaeological problems that had made sense out of nonsense before. In his fashion, he was brilliant.

The three of them sailed with a lot of very special apparatus, and unloaded at a tiny port in Yucatan.

The three white men and the gang they gathered spent four days reaching the place where Marshall claimed he'd found the knife. His trenches were halfway filled in and already overgrown with jungle-stuff.

His gang cleaned them out in a hurry and they spent two weeks doing more work. Of course he wasn't digging up a whole city area. He was looking for something, not uncovering a site. And he found what he was looking for. Or rather, he didn't find what he didn't expect to find. He didn't find any more knives.

The remains of the ancient settlement were there, all right, and the expedition breezed through them. Artifacts were photographed *in situ*, uncovered, and packed. Ashes were picked

over, dirt sifted, everything neatly catalogued, and on again with the trench.

It was archaeology in high gear, and at the end of it Apsley and Burroughs were pleased and happy. They had materials for a fairly complete study of a pre-Mayan culture that had never even been guessed at before.

It seemed to have vanished without traces in the culture of later peoples. And Apsley said flatly that eight thousand years was much too low an estimate of the culture-age. He put it much farther back, about contemporary with the Cro-Magnons of Europe, which was twenty to twenty-five thousand years ago.

"Do you still insist you found that knife here?" asked Apsley.

Marshall nodded without resentment.

"I always figured that it came from somewhere else," he said. "So I had some air-photo topographic maps made of all the country for a long way around. I've traced out just about the most probable line either trading or looting parties from here would travel on. We break camp tomorrow."

That expedition moved like clockwork. One group of muleteers headed back to the coast with pack mules loaded with artifacts from this first site. They'd get more supplies and come on to the next dig. The others would be already working on it. Marshall was systematic. Efficient. He knew what he was doing.

They followed jungle trails for three days, cutting some of them for themselves. On the way Marshall looked over the ground as well as anybody could in jungle country, and shook his head. Then he stopped and got out the induction balances. You know what they are. These had been made to locate landmines and dud shells in the war, and he'd stepped them up to make them really sensitive. This was their first use in archaeology.

Nine feet down in one hole, twelve in another, and only seven in a third, they found more steel knives—with pottery and stone arrowheads. Apsley and Burroughs unearthed them in person at the bottoms of the three holes. The earth was absolutely undisturbed, and they were mixed with ashes and crude pots and stone axes and such stuff. They were just as bright and shining as if they'd been taken off a hardware store shelf that morning.

"All of them identical," said Marshall meditatively when the last was up. "Mass production. Apsley says twenty thousand

years ago! More of them here than farther east. We'll keep going west."

"Mighty unhandy, these knives," Apsley said presently. "How would you hold 'em?"

Burroughs swallowed.

"Marshall!" he said. "They don't fit my hands. There isn't any sense to it."

"I know," said Marshall. "There isn't. Look—I'm going to head for this place. It's over a hundred miles away and the going will be rough. But if there was ever a spot designed for a city site inland, that would be it. I'm going to take a chance and go straight there."

He went away to talk to the brown-skinned man who bossed his labor force. He had forty Indian workmen who were eating high, loafing plenty, and getting paid for it. They thought Marshall was a cross between a wacky fool and Santa Claus.

Presently Marshall came back to where Apsley and Burroughs sat staring at each other.

"Marshall!" said Burroughs. "These knives weren't designed for people to use. What were they? Ceremonial?"

"You guess," said Marshall. "My guess is crazy."

Burroughs and Apsley blinked at him.

"I don't get it," Burroughs complained.

"The metal is wrong," Marshall explained. "Men back in those days didn't know how to make steel, especially stainless steel, and still more especially a better alloy than we've worked out for ourselves. But the handles are even more wrong. Men wouldn't have made knives like these even if they could. So the question is, who—or what—did make them? And what happened to a civilization with that much of a headstart over our ancestors?"

Shamefaced, the other white men looked at each other.

"I made quite a lot of money out of that first knife," said Marshall, "but I'm willing to spend it all to find that out. And somehow I'm afraid I'm not going to like what I find."

It took over a week to get to the place Marshall had picked out as a perfect site for an inland city. On the way they were all pretty tactful. They didn't mention the knives a single time. They talked about the scenery—which was all lush jungle and thoroughly monotonous—and about the grub which was adequate but abominably cooked.

It was a little over a hundred miles airline to their destination, but they had to go roundabout. They would never have

found it but for the air maps. At last, though, they came out into a valley with a lake in it. It was a curious sort of lake. It was almost exactly circular, and was bordered with a stretch of savannah grass growing where the lake level apparently rose and fell with the seasons.

The valley opened out on a level plain ten miles across—cleared, it would have been perfect agricultural country—and then all the ground got tumbled again and there were mountains in every direction.

The valley was plain jungle. There were no pyramids or impressive ruins in view. But Marshall hadn't expected them. He relied on his induction balances. As they descended into the valley he had some good looks over the jungle-top and his expression was satisfied. They made camp near a small stream a half hour before sundown. Apsley saw Marshall's look of contentment.

"You think there's something here?"

Marshall nodded.

"This sort of jungle usually grows pretty even on top," he observed. "Here there are some places where it humps up. I think we've got a real find."

Apsley hesitated a moment. "Marshall, I hope we don't find anything!" he said.

But Marshall got out an induction balance, checked the dry-cell batteries, and put on the headphones. He swung the thing about a couple of times and then moved cautiously through the thick growth around the space his men were clearing even then.

All of a sudden the headphones nearly deafened him.

He jerked them off and rubbed his ears.

"I got it!" he said. "Right there."

He pointed. There was a monstrous hardwood tree where he pointed. It had huge, thick, gnarled roots, and above where one of the roots went underground there was a sort of mound, as if the root were lifting a rock as it swelled. The mound dripped vines, and things grew out of it, but—there's a sixth sense that comes to a man who's done a lot of digging.

"Just for the devil of it, I'm going to see what that is," said Marshall. "It's near the surface, anyhow. Send a couple of men over here with spades, won't you?"

Apsley went back. He was a little bit pale. He sent a couple of the peons over with shovels which they hauled off a mule-pack. Marshall was already poking at the mass. Things were crawling and squirming and popping out of the tangled root-

stuff. You never know how many living things there are until you start poking around in a tropical jungle. Marshall grabbed one of the shovels and thrust in a couple of times, and there came a ring of metal.

Marshall kept his head, of course. He didn't interfere with the making of camp. But he had flares burning around that thing after sundown, and a dozen men working at it. Then he put the whole gang on the job and moved it to the cleared space. Then he and Apsley and Burroughs looked at it.

But it wasn't like anything any archaeologist had ever dug up before. It was what you might call a vehicle of some sort. It was not too large, maybe seven feet long and four feet wide. It didn't have wheels. It had something that might have been a caterpillar tread, only there had been other metals than stainless steel built into that part of it, and they were gone in crumbled masses of corrosion.

"I think that we are now faced with the question," Marshall said.

Burroughs knew primitive man, but he stared at that thing helplessly.

"It's an artifact, but its purpose is beyond me," he said dubiously.

Apsley looked sick.

"I have a feeling that we'd better get away from here," he said slowly.

Marshall glanced at him.

"I mean it," said Apsley. He looked wretched. "I—have hunches sometimes. I guess you'd call this a hunch. Once I felt this way about a monolith in Petra. The cursed thing had been standing for a couple of thousand years. But I had a feeling that it ought to be kept away from. I was ashamed to say anything about it. One day it crumbled and crushed two Arab workmen. I've got a feeling that there's something wrong here. That we'd better get away. If I could, I'd strike camp and leave tonight. I don't know why. I just feel that way!"

Marshall nodded.

"It does feel creepy to look at this contrivance. I suppose you might as well call it an automobile. You notice it has two seats."

"But it can't be an automobile," Burroughs said indignantly. "Other plain facts aside, it's too small."

"For human beings, yes," Marshall said.

Burroughs swallowed with a sort of clicking noise. Apsley and he had carefully skirted that point in their own minds.

The knife handles had been wrong. Now there was this thing, which was a vehicle, with two queerly shaped places in it that could only be seats. But not seats designed for human beings. And not conceivably for human adults.

The three white men were very still for a while. Then they elaborately got to work. No engine was visible, and they looked for it. They found only corrosion, and no gears or cylinders or any trace of them. Presently Marshall pointed out bits of greenish-colored rust that still clung to a bright-metal shaft. Apsley was staring at something else about the thing, then.

"This might be the motor, or one of them," Marshall said. "Anybody who could make an alloy that would stay bright underground all this time would be past using gears. He'd put motors wherever he needed power."

"That is a guess, but it is no guess that this is not primitive," Burroughs said stolidly.

"Hardly," said Marshall. "You can't say primitive after you look at these decorations."

Apsley retched suddenly. The others felt like doing the same thing. Because—have you ever looked at those "optical illusions" that are sometimes printed in believe-it-or-not newspaper features?

You look at them, and now they look this way, and now they look that way, and you wind up with your eyes dazed because you can't decide which way they're suppose to look.

The decorations cast in the bright metal of this thing were something like that. Only instead of making your eyes hurt they did something else to you. The lines and masses were distinct. Horribly so. And you tried to find a meaning in them, and you wound up with an inchoate mass of emotional impressions of which you were partly ashamed, and part of which nauseated you.

"I don't think that human beings are responsible for this art work," Marshall said judicially. "After all, there is an inherent decency in the human race, however often we doubt it. Also, when we set out to be nasty it's usually a matter of simple nastinesses. We don't often blend them."

Burroughs snorted disdainfully. "It's not primitive," he repeated unnecessarily. "It's a sort of art, and it's highly civilized. Primitive painting is simple and representative. There's no attempt at heightening the effect of one color by the use of another. Primitive music is simple, too. It's your civilized man who mixes colors and sounds for more urgent effects. This

stuff is—well—emotional, as all art is. But this has mixed up things that suggest all the most violent and unpleasant emotions possible, and they're blended so that they gain force by contrast with each other. It's a high stage of art, but it's not to human taste. The — creatures who liked this wouldn't be nice company."

Marshall's voice took on a shade of grimness.

"Anyhow they're all dead. And one of their knives was important to our civilization. There's more stuff around that might be important, too."

"I still feel that hunch that we'd be better off away from this place," Apsley said sickishly. "There's no sense to it, but I feel it strongly."

Marshall looked thoughtful. "We'll go to sleep," he said after cogitation. "I'll post a couple of sentries, just in case, and we'll get to work in the morning. It's hard to understand how a civilization as far advanced as this one could have died out without leaving a trace!"

During the night all three of the white men awoke abruptly. There was a queer throbbing in the air. It wasn't a sound. It wasn't a vibration of the earth. It was a sort of pulsation just below the lowest note that the human ear can catch.

Pete Marshall got up and went out of the tent.

There was a fire burning and two of the peons were playing some mysterious game with things that looked like dice but weren't. They were the sentries, watching—so they considered —against animals who might raid the mule corral or the supplies.

"*Un temblor, señor,*" one of them said tranquilly. "*Pero un poquito.*"

An earthquake, but a little one.

Marshall knew it wasn't so, but he said nothing. The pulsation died gradually away. He went back into his tent.

All three of the white men lay awake. They could hear the two peons talking over their game. Speaking to the white men they used fairly intelligible Spanish, but among themselves they used a mixture of Spanish with the remnants of a vocabulary that was pure Maya.

They were quite amiable about their play. One in particular was cracking jokes and chuckling over his own witticisms, poor devil.

Marshall rather envied them their peace of mind. Apsley's hunch worried him. He almost shared it. That art work! But when a civilization has been dead for twenty thousand years,

it's dead! It can't be dangerous! Still—well—it wasn't a pleasant thing to think about.

While the three Americans were at breakfast, the pulsation came again. Apsley noticed it first. You couldn't hear it. You felt it, mostly in your chest. It grew louder and louder—no, "louder" isn't the word. It grew stronger, with a swift rise to a peak of amplitude. Then it died as swiftly away again. That was all.

"Something new, there," Marshall said. "I wonder."

Neither Burroughs nor Apsley made any comment. There simply wasn't anything to say. Marshall concentrated on the problem.

"Here!" he said abruptly. "Counting in everything, including your hunch, Apsley, I've come to a conclusion that hurts. We're archaeologists, and that's all. We've a smattering of the other things archaeology calls for, but no more. If the thing we found last night is an automobile of sorts, it needs a specialist to work on it. We'll take the induction balances and spread out, making a sort of map of any indications we find. If we find one place where the indications are especially promising, we'll make a complete dig of the one area. Or else we'll make a group of small digs until we get something convincing. In other words, we cut down our sights. We'll admit that we're only scouting. We won't try to do more than size up the job and prove it's worth doing. Right?"

Apsley's face was still strained.

"That's reasonable," he admitted. "It's sane. But I wish I felt it was enough. I've still got the hunch that we ought to get the devil away from here."

Again the expedition moved like clockwork. A camp party went on clearing a camping space, and three other gangs set out with Apsley and Burroughs and Marshall. Each of the three took an induction balance, which could be adjusted to register a dime ten feet underground. They spread out fanwise, machete-men going on ahead. But in an hour they were all together again, staring.

"I got indications in a practically continuous line," Apsley said calmly. "There's as much metal underground here as there'd be if New York were buried under this jungle."

"I think my detector is out of order," Burroughs said irritably. "A primitive culture simply couldn't have this much metal! It's too much!"

"We'll start from the lake," Marshall said decisively. "The city would surely front on that. We'll go around the lakeshore

and find out if it was built up all around. Then spread out toward the perimeter. It it's as big as this concentration of metal would seem to imply, there'd be more metal in a dense population than in a small one. We can't hope even to map it. But maybe we can find out how big the city was."

So far they had seen one artifact, and the rest was jungle. But they knew. Silently, they started off again. The lakeshore was half swampy. No trees grew there. Machetes were not needed to clear the way. It was, incredibly enough, absolutely without indication of metal. For a hundred yards beyond it, in the jungle, the detectors registered absolutely nothing. There would come small, sporadic indications. Then, abruptly, masses of metal in such quantities as would be turned up by detectors going over the very heart of a modern city which had been bombed to rubble and covered over with vegetation.

"D'you know," Marshall said, that night, "when you consider this lake—I'd like to have soundings of it—the indications we get are just what we'd find if a whopping big city had been destroyed by—say—a single bomb of fifty or sixty thousand tons of TNT dropped in its middle! That would account for the lake and the absence of metal anywhere near it. The lake would be a bomb-crater. But *what* a bomb!"

There was a sudden throbbing in the air. It grew to a fierce intensity and there were cries from the peons in the encampment.

"Señores! Señores! Un aeroplano! Alla! Monstroso!"

As the three white men came out into the sunset, the sensation of pulsations in the air suddenly diminished. And there were renewed cries from the peons.

They babbled excitedly. After all, they had seen airplanes many times. Not many parts of the world haven't. They were not alarmed. They described a huge, shining thing in mid air over a place near the center of the lake. It was *un aeroplano*, but they had not seen its wings. And it had vanished like magic. It must have been traveling very fast indeed. . . .

Apsley was white as a sheet. But he set his teeth grimly and tried to discuss the apparition calmly. None of the three white men had even glimpsed it, but all the peons had, and their descriptions tallied.

The discussion got nowhere at all.

Early the next day they set to work upon a huge mound a good half mile from the lake's edge. There was metal in it. Plenty of metal. They attacked an almost overhanging side of

the mound and cut through five feet of matted climbers and three feet of mould. Then they struck stone.

They widened the face of their attack and reached a doorway, choked with mould and the roots that had grown inward through millenniums. The doorway was four feet high. Six feet in they came upon emptiness, a choking, fetid open space filled with the rank smell of corruption twice corrupt.

Marshall, gagging, set a charge of powder to burn inside. It would leave a sulphurous reek, but at least it would drive out the stench of ages.

In an hour they were able to go in. Two men came back from the camp with a sixty-pound portable generator and strings of wire and lights. Things slithered away from the lights before the advance of the men, who found themselves in a huge room, completely intact after thousands of years.

On the walls were panels of bright stainless steel. There were heaps of greenish oxide here and there, interspersed with dark-gray powder. There was a hole in the roof of this room, and emptiness above it, under which was another heap of rust and fragments of the same bright steel.

No stairs were to be seen. There were other low doorways, leading to other rooms. Some of those, also, had openings which once had led to the outer air. They were choked with serpentine, clutching roots which fumbled inward in complete futility. Pete Marshall saw one patch where ceiling had fallen and bright metal showed through.

"My gosh" he said. "Steel-frame construction! Twenty thousand years ago! And what sort of concrete would last this long?"

He went on by himself. He vanished. The others looked about them.

There was a jabbering. The peons had gathered before a bright-steel panel on the wall. It depicted a human being, in exact anatomical accuracy. He strained in agony, and about the figure were more designs like those on the artifact of the night before.

They were not conventional and not stylized. They conveyed their meaning directly and with symbolism, as music conveys emotions without words. The designs conveyed emotions which, somehow, made a normal human being ashamed and sick.

"Subjective art," Apsley said in a queer tone. "They moulded their emotional sensations direct. My stars!"

The figure conveyed fear and terror in its pose. That was

all. But the background—or was it the background?—was moulded designs which were not pictures of anything at all, but told much. The only possibie analogy was to music.

As chords are grave or gay, melancholy or inspiriting, the indicated forms conveyed impressions. The figure alone might have been a man struggling against an unseen obstacle. The figure and those designs together gave the feeling of a human being in the grip of such terror and such unthinkable horror—horror far past the fear of death—horror even beyond madness.

The peons had chattered excitedly at first recognition of the figure as an Indian recognizably like themselves. But gradually the chattering stopped. They stared at the plaque as the background made its impact. One or two crossed themselves. They drew away from it uneasily.

"There's another," said Apsley. "Hideous beasts!"

Burroughs again looked at this human figure from the standpoint of a student of primitive man. This figure was at bay with a stone axe. His antagonist or antagonists did not appear. Only the man, with abstract designs about him which uncannily conveyed the feeling of despair. And such despair! The peons murmured as they saw it.

"Quaint," Apsley said. "They made humans the subject of their art, or the occasion of it."

Apsley found a third plaque. It was indescribable. There were two figures, and the emotional effect would send throbbing rage through the veins of any man who looked at it.

Then Marshall came in through a doorway he had to stoop almost double to use. His expression was very strange indeed.

"You chaps come along," he said in an odd, choked voice. "I've something to show you." He spoke abruptly in Spanish to the crowding peons, ordering them to clear the entry place more thoroughly. He led off through the doorway he'd returned by. The others followed. Marshall turned on a flashlight and flung its beam before him. Something slithered out of the room.

"I—don't want them to see this," Marshall said jerkily. "There's a ramp here. Listen! This place was really built! It hasn't collapsed. It's a ruin because the whole top part was shattered by something. Something like an explosion. The thing I've got to show you—"

He swallowed. They came to the ramp. It went up and up, with what might have been a handrail save that it was hardly more than a foot above the ramp level. The air was not

wholly clear here. The odor of incalculable age and dampness and fetor was all about. There was a musky smell. But Marshall led the archaeologists, flashing the light ahead and breathing quickly.

"It isn't possible!" he said feverishly. "When were the laws of perspective worked out? Fourteen hundred? Fifteen hundred? Before that nobody could draw perspective. They simply didn't know how. Then somebody found out, and everybody knew. As soon as they'd seen it done once, they all knew how."

He bent low and almost crawled through an opening under the four-foot height of the doorways on the lower level. He stood in darkness, swallowing noisily as the others joined him.

Then he turned on the flashlight again. There was a mass of glistening stainless steel, mirror-bright, utterly untarnished, only faintly dulled by a coating of impalpable dust.

"You'll see it better if you turn on your lights, too," he said hoarsely. "It will take a minute or two to get what it's all about. But it's not a machine. It's—art, maybe. It must have been made just to be looked at."

Two other flashlight beams came on. They played upon the intricate array of solidified abstract designs about a central mass of metal. This was not in relief but in the round, and the designs were fined out and not repeated so that, from any angle the central mass of metal could be seen. They varied from one end of the mass to the other, too.

"But what is it?" That was Apsley. Then he said angrily: "My gosh! What artists! And what beasts!"

Absorbed, Burroughs blinked at it.

"This is a new trick," he said. "At this end it's an infant. At that end it's an old woman. In between it's all the other ages. But I—I see the whole figure of the infant, and the whole figure of the old woman, and everything else . . . Look at that! Here's where she changes her dress from that of a child to a marriageable woman. Primitive, but you can make it out. There she changes to a matron's hair style. There . . . What the devil is this, Marshall?"

"It's perspective," Marshall said in a curiously taut voice. "Look! We can take a series of pictures of a child as it grows up. In each one, in two dimensions we can give a perspective of three. If we stack a series of pictures of one person at different ages, we've got a series of two-dimensional sections of them. Looking at them one after the other, we can get a sort

of vague idea that they're all the same person, and conceive somehow of a person growing up and growing old. But we won't get perspective. We can't make one three-dimensioned image which blends them all. But these creatures—whatever they were—they did!"

"Confound them," Apsley said harshly. "They've used the emotions of a child for contrast to adolescent imaginings, and the thrilling happiness of early marriage, and—and—*blast* them—they've gloated over everything that's horrible in human life. They've even pointed up their gloating by contrasting it with the dreams of young people! I'd like to smash the rotten thing. I'd like to wipe it out!"

Marshall faced them, with the same tautness in his manner.

"But you miss the point," he said. "Listen, you chaps. We can't take three dimensions and give a perspective of four because we've never had the right viewpoint. But whoever made this had. If you think, you'll realize that you don't see this Indian woman from the front, or back, or from above, or below. You see her from *time*. You see all her ages at once! You see her from a fourth dimension! Now—how the deuce did these creatures learn how a human being looks from a dimension that's none of the three we know?"

There was silence. Marshall snapped off his flashlight. Apsley did the same. Burroughs reluctantly pointed to the doorway with his flash so they could stoop to go through it.

Outside Marshall gave orders. His men piled cut *llianus* and brush over the opening they had cleared. It would keep any large animal out, and snakes and such already had ingress. They fell in behind the white men on the way back to camp.

They had reached the edge of the lake when Marshall paused abruptly. "I'm just as scared as you are now, Apsley. Those devils were civilized! They made steel that was better than any we know how to make, and this art of theirs is amazing. And before you could visualize four dimensions in perspective in three, you'd have to have some command of four dimensions."

"And that means—what?" Apsley asked.

"An impossibility," Marshall snapped. "It would lead to a time-machine."

They walked along the lake shore. It was perfectly round, that lake.

"That had been a tall building," Marshall said almost fretfully. "The bottom was intact. The level above the one where

we were was smashed. What could smash a building of this size. Probably make a lake such as this besides? Fifty thousand tons of TNT going off at once? What destroyed this city? How could such a civilization fall? It should have been invincible against anything contemporary, and if they had weapons to match their other stuff, even modern men would be hard put to it to beat them."

The enigmatic pulsation of the air began. One felt it mostly in his chest. It was faint at first, but it grew stronger and stronger.

"Señores! El aeroplano!"

The peons babbled the words, pointing. Marshall turned, the others with him. And there in mid air above the center of the circular lake they saw the thing. It was the mirror-bright of stainless steel. It was perhaps fifty feet long by twenty thick, and it had no wings or propellers or landing gear.

Along its sides were great doors, not faired into smoothness, but strictly utilitarian. Also there were folded-up things beneath, like the legs of a giant grasshopper, but more complicated and smaller in proportion to the size of the thing.

As they gaped at it, it vanished, fading into cloudiness and then into nothingness within seconds. The throbbing pulsations died away.

"Did you say impossible?" Apsley asked very quietly. "That was a time-machine, Marshall. It couldn't be anything else. When I saw it, I knew! That's what I'm afraid of."

"It was going through," Marshall said grimly. "That changes everything. It could probably stop here. Where—the—devil does it go? I hope it doesn't come back."

But it did.

Next morning Pete Marshall looked as if he hadn't slept. At breakfast he scowled savagely.

"I admit it, I'm scared out," he said. "We're going to make a dash over to the place we got into yesterday. We're going to take out what plaques we can, and that abomination upstairs. Then we're going back to the coast. With that art work to show, we'll be believed. The Mexican Government has sense in such matters, anyhow. We'll come back here with a regiment of soldiers to guard against possible unauthorized looters. We'll have a couple of antiaircraft guns, mounted to command the lake. Then we'll see what we see."

Apsley drew a deep breath. Burroughs looked stubborn, but he kept his mouth shut.

Marshall finished his breakfast in silence. He ordered the camp equipment packed by a gang he left behind. But the three white men, with most of the peons, went down to the lake and headed around its border for the mound into which they'd dug an entrance.

They were three-quarters of the way there, with the peons straggling in their wake along the half-swampy shore, when the queer throbbing sounded in the air once more. The men faced the lake, expectantly. Instinctively the white men turned their eyes in the same direction.

There was a cloudiness in the air, which thickened as the throbbing grew more intense. Suddenly the fifty-foot metal hull flashed into view. It was a good sixty feet above the water. It stayed in view for two seconds or thereabouts, and vanished again. The throbbing died away.

Apsley was white as they resumed their march. Marshall ground his teeth. There were only two things they could do: run away at once, or do as they had planned; take some artifacts and get out quickly, or clear out without anything at all. They went on to the mound.

They moved with speed, at that. Burroughs assumed charge of three men and began to chip one bright-steel plaque out of the wall inside the mound. Apsley set to work with others on a second plaque. Marshall equipped six of them with poles and canvas and went to try to manhandle the round sculpture—if you could call it that—down the ramp. He hoped to be able to sling it in a sort of litter between two mules and get it to the coast that way. All of them set to work.

Marshall could hear nothing at all, deep in the mound with ten to twenty feet of mould and vegetation above him, atop an unguessed-at depth of folded, shattered masonry. Apsley and Burroughs could hear little more. They may have heard the throbbing return, but it was muted, and would hardly be felt distinctly through the four-foot doorway and the tunnel from the open air. It stopped.

Marshall and his helpers were sweating freely when they got the Indian art object into the big room they'd first entered. Apsley had his first plaque down. Burroughs was almost as far advanced.

"These men have worked long enough," Marshall said. "I'll call in some others to start it toward camp."

He bent down and went out of doors. There was nobody near. He stared about him. The peons had vanished. Completely.

Then he saw the thing above the lake.

It was out there above the middle of the water. It was just what they had seen, and just in the same place. The contrivances like grasshopper-legs had unfolded incredibly. They reached down, thin and spidery, to and into the water. They actually upheld the mirror-bright cylinder in the exact spot in mid air where before it had appeared—and vanished.

Directly underneath the cylinder there was a floating object which was certainly new to the lake. There were huddled figures on it. Human figures. The peons, who half an hour since had been cheerfully loafing before the entrance to the mound, were out there.

Then Marshall saw thinning smoke coming from the jungle by the lake's edge. It was white, stifling smoke. And tropic jungle does not catch fire. Not in Yucatan!

In three minutes Marshall had settled on a plan and given orders. The peons were to use their machetes and cut a way through the jungle to the camp, avoiding the shore. Apsley and Burroughs would go with them.

Apsley quietly refused. Burroughs swore, but one of the three white men had to go. The men were to be gotten out of the camp. To the devil with equipment. Get the men away! They could wait out of sight, with a courier service ready to tell them when to run, if necessary. Burroughs would remain somewhere near the camp, taking photographs if he could. He would use his judgment but he was to get out with news of what had happened, and pictures if possible.

"That thing can't fly, or it wouldn't stay out there in the middle of the lake like a stork," Marshall said grimly. "It appeared before in that exact spot, remember. I suspect it has to. I'm going to see what I can do, but if anything happens, this'll be a job for bombing planes."

He watched the men disappear into the jungle, single file and bent over, the lead man slashing a way through creepers and vines for the rest. With no burdens and no need to cut more than space for one man to squeeze through, they could travel swiftly—for jungle work.

Marshall started grimly for the lake shore. Apsley went with him.

Something stirred alongside the mirror-bright object. Then

two things went dangling downward along ropes. One was plainly a human being. The other was much smaller, and there was mirror-brightness about it. But it had members, and they moved as if purposefully.

The two dangling objects, the one human, the other something else, halted fifteen feet above the floating object. Human figures gesticulated wildly from the float. Sunlight flashed on metal. They were waving matchetes. A faint, faint ululation came over the water. The men on the floating thing screamed defiance—imprecations—threats.

There were puffs of steam from the surface of the water. Marshall swore. His hands were clenched. He broke into a run.

"But what are you going to do?" Apsley asked, pelting along beside him.

"I don't know," Marshall cried. "But I've got to do something."

He reached the edge of the water. He shouted furiously, and there was an answering chorus of cries from the peons on the float. One of them suddenly flung himself overboard. Then there was a jetting of steam from the surface of the lake. Then cries.

The man sullenly swam back and hauled himself onto the float again.

Marshall roared imprecations, the more furious because futile. He had no boat. He had a revolver. Back at camp there were some sporting-rifles, and a certain amount of explosive such as he'd used to make a crater at the first dig. There were cameras and induction-balances and rubber-tired wheelbarrows. But there were no weapons with which to attack anything like this!

High up on the brightly-polished thing, an object moved. It was so small that one could only be sure that some object was moving. But instantly thereafter there came a burst of unbearable heat, and a section of green jungle to Marshall's right erupted into flame. A pause, and a second section erupted volcano-like on his left. Then another pause, and treetops overhead exploded horribly.

Marshall ground his teeth and clenched his hands. But no fourth flame of heat appeared.

"That was to scare me, so I'd stay here until they're ready to come after me," he said in an icy voice. "Sneak away through the jungle, Apsley! Tell Burroughs the creatures have heat-

rays. All he knows is primitive men. That's important information."

"He couldn't help seeing," Apsley said calmly.

There were no more outcries from the peons on the float beneath the time-machine. The dangling thing which was not human—it was wearing armor of some sort—continued to hang at the end of the cable ten or fifteen feet from the float.

Once, Marshall almost believed that he saw a cord leading from it to the float. The human figure had been replaced among its fellows. The peons shifted their positions. They were not under restraint, except from swimming ashore. They still had their machetes.

Time passed. A long, long time. Marshall fumed. Then a man leaped overboard and swam strongly to the shore. No jets of steam sprang up to check him. A second man, a third and fourth and fifth. The rest remained on the float.

"They're turned loose," Marshall said, scowling. "At least they were allowed to leave."

"Why not all of them?"

"Maybe they can't swim," Marshall growled. "We'll go and see what they have to say."

He stalked along the lake shore, thrusting through the savannah-grass that grew at the edge.

There was no further threatening stab of heat. Half a mile on, they found the first of the peons just wading out of the water. He was scared, but he still had his wits about him.

Apsley had guessed correctly. They had seen the thing appear above the lake. Something like a boat had come toward the shore. They'd gone down to meet the *aeronauticos*. When the peons saw the stranger-creatures they were frightened, because they seemed so small.

When they would have fled, the jungle burst into flame all around them, and four tiny figures in metal suits—"*como plata, señor*"—like silver—had rounded them up, driving them onto the queerly shaped craft. One man, maddened by fear, had tried to attack the creatures with his machete. Instantly he screamed with pain. One arm and part of his breast seemed to burst into steam. He was out on the float now, moaning.

The rounded-up peons had been taken out to the stilt-supported object, and one of them hauled aloft. Half an hour later—just now—he'd come down with a strange expression on his face, wearing a metal cap upon his head. He said that the people of the *aeroplano* were friends, *muy generoso*, and admirable persons.

Since jets of steam had just kept one of them from escaping, the others had doubted the assertion. Soon he had asked questions which he said the men in the *aeroplano* wished to have answered. Where the men had come from, how many people lived there, what they did here, and if they had ever heard of a city at this place?

Marshall interjected a sharp query. The answer was no. The answers they gave to Juan, who wore the cap, were not translated by him. It was as if he merely wished the dangling dwarf in the suit like silver to overhear.

Keen questioning had gone on. They had told about the white men for whom they worked, and of the white men's marvelous devices. Then Juan—he was the metal cap and strange expression—had said that anybody who wished to go ashore could do so, with a message that the men in the ship wished to speak to the white men, and would come ashore presently. They wished to be friends.

But after this Juan had taken off the cap and immediately his face had become empty and like that of an idiot. He had sat making faces to himself and uttering mewing sounds. He would not speak again, and the man in the silvery suit was hauled up out of sight. Then the rest of the peons had swum ashore.

Marshall led the way toward the camp. On the way he abruptly asked what had happened to the cap after Juan took it off. It had been attached to a long cord, and the little man in shining armor carried it up with him.

Burroughs and the rest of the peons cut their way to the camp a little later. Marshall started to pace up and down, his forehead corrugated. Apsley told Burroughs the news while Marshall scowled and muttered to himself. Before he had finished, there was a cry from the peon who had been set on guard to watch the time-machine.

"Dos poquitos, señor! Dos aeroplanos poquitisimos!"

Two little ones. Two very little ones.

An object darted across the sky. It was not a duplicate of the great machine on stilts. Something whirred above it. It came to a dead stop in mid air directly above the encampment. It seemed to survey the camp. The cockpit was completely enclosed. The whole machine was no more than ten or fifteen feet long. It suddenly moved away, so swiftly that the eye could not quite follow it.

"Helicopters or something like that," Marshall said harshly.

"That settles it. We haven't the ghost of a chance to get away."

"I don't see why not," Burroughs said irritably. "Jungle will hide anything."

Apsley viewed the subject with his usual detachment.

"I see it, I think," he said. "Because they stopped at this place—or time?" When Marshall nodded, he went on precisely. "I have been thinking. That Indian-woman thing proves that they know more about the fourth dimension than we do. It hinted at their ability to make a time-machine. The plaques hinted at a particular ability to perceive emotions. The way that time-machine has been—well—casting back and forth since we've been here has been remarkably like the questing casts of a bird-dog who smells something just before he points."

He looked at Marshall, and Marshall nodded again.

"That is a time-machine," Apsley said. "If it was hunting for a particular moment in which to stop, it is odd that it stopped at just the time we're here in this valley, which probably hasn't had men in it before for thousands of years. Unless —unless *because* we were here." He licked his lips and went on. "After all, the way it appeared and disappeared does seem like it was casting back and forth through time to find a particular moment. So it must have—stopped on our account. And if it could scent us out from the fourth dimension, it's rather likely its helicopters could scent us from a few hundred feet overhead if we tried to duck through the jungle."

"Of course," Marshall said curtly. "Do you realize what happened to Juan?"

Burroughs blinked. Apsley gagged.

"He wore a cap and asked questions," Marshall said savagely. "He asked questions he already knew the answers to! Then he took off the cap—it was on a cord which would be an electric cable—and promptly became an idiot. You see? They could use his brain as a translating device, if he wasn't in it. But they couldn't read it. They wouldn't have had to ask questions if they could. All they could do was make him an idiot and use him as part of a device for communication with us. You see what that implies?"

Apsley moved quickly to the edge of the camp. He was sick. Then another shout came from where men watched the lake.

"Señores! Señores!"

The floating thing was moving through the water. It came matter-of-factly toward the point of the shore nearest to the camp.

When it reached the shore it did not stop. Without a pause it came on up through the shallows and onto dry land. It was, in effect, an amphibious tractor with a flat, wide deck on which to carry a load. It had a small cabin forward which seemed to be transparent plastic.

There were two small figures inside, clad in metal suits which gleamed with an ever-so-faint yellowish tint as they stirred. Small, searchlight-like objects on top of the cabin moved restlessly, wavering back and forth from one group of humans to another.

The peons who had not swum ashore rode on the deck. When it stopped, one of them spoke tonelessly and the others leaped off, helping a groaning comrade to the ground. He was the one who had been burned on arm and shoulder.

One human figure remained seated on the deck. It was—it had been—Juan, whom Marshall had heard cracking jokes as he played some game while on guard the first night of the encampment in this valley. Now he wore a metal cap on his head, from which a wire dangled, leading to the cabin. His expression was of an icy tranquillity. It was unearthly.

"Señores," he said in a curiously emotionless tone, *"los gentiles hombres de la maquina desean de preguntarles algunas cosas."*

It was unhuman, that speech. It was a message from creatures of the thing above the lake, speaking through Juan's brain and lips. His brain translated thoughts into words as he knew, and would translate words back into the thoughts the creatures of the time-machine could understand. The transfer was possible only because Juan's own intelligence was not present to interfere. His brain had become merely a living mechanism.

Marshall growled.

"Very well," he said, in Spanish, because Juan's brain could handle nothing else. "I realize I speak direct to you from the time-machine. What do you wish to know?"

A pause. Juan's face remained emotionless. Then, still without intonation, he asked questions. "How far to the place from which the white men had come? How many people there? They had metal. How many metals did they know?"

"Ninety-four elements, of which some are metals," Marshall answered. The query was to learn the degree of civilization of the white men, who obviously had advanced beyond the Indians, the only men the creatures of the time-machine had known before.

Another pause. The toneless voice again. Why had they come here? What were the legends about the city?

"The city is unknown to any men but us!" Marshall snapped.

The unhumanly inflected voice went on, using Juan's lips and Juan's vocabulary to ask questions he would never imaginably have thought of. How many people in other nations? In all the world? It took time for the world-population estimate of two billion human beings to reach a phrasing Juan's brain could translate. Other questions.

One of Marshall's answers implied the use of power. So men had power, now! What was its fuel?

"The same as yours," Marshall growled.

"What metal is broken up?" Juan's voice said, and Marshall fairly jumped.

For a metal to be broken up as a fuel meant atomic power. Marshall lied, deliberately using Juan's limited vocabulary to confuse the issue.

The voice asked coldly whether men had found it possible to stabilize power so that it did not require constant attention. Marshall said no. Then came questions about weapons; Marshall deliberately multiplied the efficiency and range of human armaments. He suddenly barked a question of his own.

"Where do you come from?"

The reply was tonelessly contemptuous. "An answer would have no meaning to you. From another star."

"And you must wear special suits and helmets or die," Marshall rasped out. "Why do you stay when even our air is not fit for your breathing?"

The question was ignored. There was merely a perceptible delay. Then specific inquiries on power. How did men broadcast their power. With Juan's vocabulary, that came out in Spanish:

"How is power spread through the air?"

Marshall sweated, and said he was a specialist in another field. The questions changed again. Shrewd questions, penetrating questions, utterly without any quality of human feeling or emotion of any sort. A calculating, deliberate, merciless brain formed them, so contemptuous of humanity that it made no attempt to forestall speculation of the purpose behind such quest of knowledge. At the end, Marshall threw in another query.

"Why do you seek men?" he asked.

The toneless voice answered with the same contemptuous baldness of phrasing.

"Pleasure. You would not understand."

"I think I would," Marshall said grimly.

"Never," said the voice icily. "Our race is old as your sun. Emotion is bred out of it for intelligence, but emotion is pleasure. Your race provides us with pleasure. You would not understand that."

"I rather think I do," Marshall said savagely. "But you feel only one emotion. You would like to know why your city, which was great and thriving in the time you came from, is now a jungle. You have the emotion of curiosity, and perhaps of fear!"

There was no answer. Instead, uninflected words continued.

"We shall take back your possessions for study. You will follow to your camp. You will load your belongings on this vehicle. We shall not take any of you with us this time. It would be inconvenient and useless. You are only men."

The thing that had come ashore moved forward. The small things atop it stirred. The jungle before it flared into flame. The tractor rolled deliberately into a very inferno of its own creation. Heat-rays literally burned a path through dense forest.

The men were left behind. Apsley watched it with scientific detachment.

"I am puzzled," Apsley said. "Before they came, I was scared. Now I'm not scared any more. What do you make of all this, Marshall?"

Marshall led the way through the hacked-through path that would lead to the camp without going through the roasting heat of the way the tractor had blasted.

"They use atomic power," he said. "It's dangerous, even to them. The generators have to be watched all the time. They broadcast their power—probably on that account. And they're taking all our stuff home to study, to find out how much we know. By the way, you notice they're wearing garments like diving suits. Our air doesn't suit them. By the color of theirs, I suspect it's mostly chlorine. That would explain why they needed to develop so perfect a stainless steel. With any moisture at all, ordinary iron wouldn't last an hour, and it's the most plentiful strong metal anywhere. I wonder how they held the atmosphere in place over their city? Force-fields?"

"But that doesn't change the fact that things look bad," Apsley said.

"It changes everything," Marshall said sternly. "Look! We've

got to load up their tractor or be burned down. It won't hold all our stuff. We'll keep our grub. Understand?"

They came in sight of the camp. The tractor waited. Behind it a smoking lane of acrid smoke led back to the lake shore.

"Confident devils!" Burroughs was indignant. "They didn't even think we might run away!"

"Useless," Marshall answered. "You chaps keep them busy watching you while I pack up for them."

Apsley was better at it than Burroughs. Burroughs was furious. Apsley created a diversion by arranging that only one of each article was to be loaded, to save space. One wheelbarrow, one shovel, one tent, one induction-balance.

Presently Marshall staggered up with a huge parcel. He put it in place and tied it fast. He arranged the lashings which completed the job. He stood back, brushing his hands grimly.

Juan, the peon with the metal cap and the strange expression on his face, spoke again tonelessly.

"*Bueno pues,*" Juan said. "We shall take this back. And you have curiosity, too. You may know about the city. We will return with our report. Our race will move forward in time, to this age which has two billion humans for our pleasure. We will build a new city, perhaps here, perhaps elsewhere, removing all we wish from the old. And that the human race may not be warned of our existence between the times of our ruling of the earth, we will destroy the early city after the new one is built."

Then Juan—who was part of the communication-apparatus of the creatures in the machine out of time—Juan stepped down to the ground, and took the metal cap off his head, and instantly his features became utterly vacuous. He made grimaces to himself, and little bubbling sounds.

Abruptly the tractor stirred. It moved, with its bulky load of possessions from the expedition. The stuff had been tied fast. It moved off toward the still-smoking lane through the jungle. One of the searchlike things turned until it was pointed at Juan. He exploded in incandescent steam.

Twenty minutes later, Marshall and Apsley and Burroughs stood at the edge of the jungle and watched the metal cylinder above the lake.

The tractor, floating soggily, came out of the water attached to cables. It was hauled up to the bright cylinder on stilts. The two helicopters came back, hovered briefly, and were swallowed up.

The tractor went up and up, swaying, and Marshall's hands clenched tightly. A great side door opened, and the tractor was swung within. The door closed.

Suddenly there was a throbbing pulsation in the air and the metal thing grew cloudy, and the spindly legs began to fold up to its bulk even as they grew misty and unsubstantial. Then the air above the lake was empty.

Marshall smiled, very grimly. Apsley drew a long breath.

"I've got a hunch," he said quietly. "I was scared before that thing got here. Then, suddenly, while we were talking to it down by the shore, I wasn't scared any more. I'm not scared now. What is it, Marshall?"

"Blast 'em!" Burroughs sputtered. "They got some of my notes! And the peons are already loading the mules. They're leaving. We can't make them stay any longer, Marshall."

"That's all right," Marshall said. He added sourly, "Mighty superior creatures, weren't they? Didn't bother to take any of us back because we were only men. Didn't mind telling us what their plans would be because we're too puny to interfere. They take everything they want out of the city and destroy it so the human race won't know anything about them between the two periods when they rule the world. The devil with them!"

He turned and moved back toward the encampment.

"We're leaving, just the same, and staying away," he said. "We want things to work out as they did. If we hung around now, while they made those casts through time for humans, we might mess up the past. But if we stay away they'll never come back."

Apsley followed close behind.

"I've got a hunch, that it's all right," he said. "What causes it, Marshall?"

Marshall grinned mirthlessly.

"They didn't take everything out of the city before they destroyed it, did they?" he answered. "And the way to destroy a city is with a lot of little explosions, not one big one. They didn't take out their works of art, and we saw the rust that was their machines. And there's this lake that says the city was destroyed by an explosion equivalent to fifty thousand tons of TNT going off at one time! That would smash whatever kept their atmosphere so they could breathe, and every one of the race that the explosion didn't kill would die of breathing the air we humans thrive on. They're dead now, every one of them! They've been dead for twenty thousand years!"

His hands closed and unclosed.

"Rotten beasts," he added. "Using humans for pleasure! Making men suffer because they enjoyed it! Cruel beasts! Serves 'em right!"

"What did you do?" Apsley demanded.

"They were so certain and confident after I'd told them about our guns," Marshall said wrathfully. "When I bluffed we had atomic power too, they asked if it had to be watched. And they broadcasted their power. That was it. Atomic power must be tricky. Probably all right with a man on watch, but needing to be watched. So I fixed up something they couldn't watch against! We're only men. They weren't afraid of us. So I took all the explosive we had and made a booby-trap. While it was left on the tractor the way I piled it, it would be all right. But the last thing I did was to pull out a string that armed it. When they started to unload that tractor, eighty pounds of demolition explosives was fixed to go off!"

Frowning, Apsley stared for a moment at Marshall.

"Why are you so sure?" he asked.

"There was an atomic-power unit in the time-machine," Marshall said. "Had to be! They couldn't broadcast power through time. So the machine will go back to their city, and they'll start unloading what they've taken back, and the booby-trap will blow up. In a thing the size of that machine it will raise the devil. The atomic-power unit in the machine will blow. That will be a darn sight bigger explosion. And that will set off the atomic-power unit which runs their whole city and keeps their atmosphere in and does everything else. That'll be an explosion equal to fifty or sixty or a hundred thousand tons of TNT, and it will blow their city to blazes!"

"Maybe—but—it might not happen . . ." Apsley said doubtfully.

"And the answer to that is that it *did* explode!" Marshall waved his hand back toward the ruins. "The city's gone, isn't it? Well, *I* destroyed that city—*twenty-thousand years ago!*"

"Blast the luck!" Burroughs snapped. "A culture like that—we should at least have tried to work out the real cause that doomed it. There was a marvelous civilization, and it vanished utterly. What happened to all its technics, its knowledge, its sciences?"

"Marshall," Apsley said drily.

"Let's say that we all did it," Marshall said. "But nobody'll ever believe us. *We* happened to it!"

But in that he was a bit overgenerous. It was really Marshall's show from beginning to end. His, and the knife's. Only it's four knives now. He has four fine stainless-steel knives, and he's considered a crackpot because he insists they're twenty thousand years old. And Burroughs and Apsley agree with him.

THE TEMPORAL TRANSGRESSOR

by Frank Belknap Long

THE blond Eurasian giant swung in between the big doors, and crossed the room in three long strides. Thick folds of scorched flesh lidded his pupils and his eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep, giving him the aspect of a lean and angry bulldog straining at the leash.

"Sit down, Ivor," a steely voice said. "Over there, where your face won't be in shadows."

Straddling a chair, the giant gripped the seat with both hands, and eased his enormous bulk down upon it. He sat facing the Interrogator, grimacing with pain, fumbling for words that would ease the agony and the shame of his failure.

Invisible lighting flooded the big, blank-walled room, and glimmered on the circular top of the examining unit, which stood against one wall, and encircled an Interrogator whose face was a glacial mask *behind* the glimmer.

"Well, Ivor?" the Interrogator prodded.

"My instructions were to familiarize myself with the First Glass Age Sector, particularly the 'nerve-artery' metropolises on the northeastern seaboard and the population overflow areas surrounding them," the giant said quickly, as though repeating a formula learned by rote.

The Interrogator frowned. "Your specific instructions were much more concrete, weren't they?"

The giant nodded uneasily. Surprisingly he did not feel afraid, though he knew he ought to feel terrified.

"My specific instructions were to blast out a strategic temporal bridgehead in one of those areas. What I actually did was pin-chart the entire seaboard to eliminate the bulge areas."

"Well, suppose you tell me exactly what happened in your own words. I should *prefer* not to interrupt you."

"The largest Glass Age metropolis is New York in New York. But there's a bulge there—a bad one. I decided to blast out the bridgehead in the overflow area surrounding a smaller, coastal bay metropolis a little to the north of New York. Boston in Masschutt . . . Massachusetts."

"Well, well?"

"I blasted out a perfect stasis, clear and sharp from our side, but—"

"But . . . pah. It is a synonym for failure."

The big Eurasian paled, then decided to ignore the interruption. "The time seepage absorber must have dilated a little too rapidly. I was standing about forty feet from the edge of the cliff when I blasted. The concussion lifted me up, and hurled me violently forward into the stasis."

The giant paused, as though he were seeking to convince the Interrogator of his sincerity as much by his manner as his words. The pause was soothing to his bruised ego. It enabled him to dramatize himself as a man who could time his feats of endurance to correspond with the expectations aroused by his words. It also enabled him to relive the entire incident with little more credit to himself.

The Interrogator's brittle fingers made a drumming sound on the flat top of the examining unit. "Go on."

"I allowed for erosion, the blotting out of a half million years of geologic weathering. But I forgot that a slight seismic disturbance could more than offset a complete reversal of the weathering process."

The giant shuddered. "There can be quite a lot of seismic disturbances in a half million years. Instead of advancing, the entire face of the cliff had moved back. There was a new wall, but it was thirty feet behind me. I . . . I dropped forty feet and landed on an outcropping about fifty feet in width, and possibly seventy feet from the bottom of the ravine. The blaster struck the shelf, rebounded, and went clattering on down."

"And you returned without recovering it?"

The Interrogator's voice was no longer steely. It now possessed a tensile edge that would have cut through steel like a knife through putty.

The giant gnawed at his underlip, and met the Interrogator's accusing stare with mingled pride and humiliation. The pride of a wounded tiger that has fought many formidable battles before receiving scars of which it is ashamed; the humiliation which a grievous error of judgment leaves in the mind when stark urgency makes the retracing of a wrong trail a thing not to be contemplated.

"I weighed the risks, and decided against it," he said. "The cliff wall was almost vertical. I might have gone down. I could not have climbed back. The stasis oval was directly above me, thirty feet from the edge of the cliff. I was badly burned—in need of surgical attention."

"That worried you, did it?"

The giant's color rose. "Suppose I'd gone down for the blaster, been captured, and sickened and died a half million years in the past. Where would THE PLAN be then?"

"Go right ahead. Tell me how you safeguarded THE PLAN by not recovering the blaster. Your instructions were to conceal the stasis oval from prying eyes on the other side. You were supposed to go through, and spray it over with a magneto-optical thin film with the same refractive index as the air around it."

"I couldn't—"

"You don't have to tell me. I happen to know you can't spray out a stasis when it isn't grounded. The vibrations would . . . pah! Only saving grace is the glimmering won't be visible from the ravine."

"It won't be!" the giant echoed the words as though they were pearls beyond price. "You've got to stand on a level with a stasis to see it."

"It will be visible from the cliff top," the Interrogator hammered, shattering each pearl with merciless precision. "But don't get the idea I'm worried about just that one oval. If they find that blaster, they'll know they've had a visitor."

The Eurasian's lips were white. "How could they know? They did not believe time travel to be possible. They could *imagine* what it would be like to leave their own age and travel into the past. But they no more thought they could do so than that they could travel to . . . to Betelgeuse."

"You think so?"

"I do, yes. The concept of time *blasting*, of time undermined and made cavernous, would be utterly beyond the comprehension of Glass Age primitives. Quite apart from the contrasting primitiveness of mining and quarrying with crude detonating instruments in three dimensions, the sheer audacity of THE PLAN would—"

"Pah, a mouthful of rhetoric. Now you've spit it out, suppose we strip the binding energies from a few facts. We've blasted out temporal bridgeheads at strategic temporal intervals clear back to the Old Stone Age. The past is honeycombed now, and it's going to become more so. Suppose they find that blaster, blow out a stasis of their own, and start searching for our riddlings.

"Suppose they find one of our riddlings without searching, like the one you left glimmering in plain view when you allowed for erosion, but not for brain shrinkage. If they find the blaster, they'll be all eyes and ears. Suppose they close

in on one of our Sector scouts right after he's blown a stasis, and before he can spray it out?"

The Interrogator had shut his eyes, and seemed almost to be speaking to himself. "The success of the entire PLAN will depend on how quickly we can move back and forth through time. If we attempted to conquer each age separately, if we attempted an age-hopping campaign, the divergence in weapon power alone between the more primitive societies and the atomic power civilizations close to our own age might easily result in a decimation of our forces.

"The struggle in many temporal sectors may go against us at first, but, if we can retreat through the stasis ovals when we're hard-pressed, we'll be in a position to regroup our forces. We'll stage a fluid attack on *all* of the past, a stupendous temporal blitz which will pit age against age until we're victorious.

"Our enemies will have to fight in one age, with a limited array of weapons. We can utilize not only our own weapons, but the weapons of every age, the peculiar military genius of every age in which those weapons originated. Since the location of the sprayed-over stasis ovals *will be known to us alone* we'll command all the arteries into the past, all the temporal bridgeheads."

The Interrogator seemed to have forgotten that one artery had become dangerously insecure through the development of an unforeseen flaw in the mental alloy of the man before him. But suddenly his eyes unlidded themselves and became cobra-opaque.

"Tell me, how did you get back through a stasis that was hovering in the empty air forty feet above your empty skull?"

"I . . . I climbed back to the top of the cliff and took a running leap," the big Eurasian stammered.

"I see. A severely burned man could do that, but it would be asking too much to expect him to go down into a shallow ravine and recover something that's sure to be missed. Tell me, Ivor. Just how much would you have told them? We know they were not squeamish. They had means of getting at the truth, gradations of torture—"

"I don't know," the giant said, with startling candor. "We no longer torture a man when we want him to speak the truth. We put a drug in his food, so that he doesn't even suspect that he has been sentenced to death. We—"

The giant's pupils dilated and he leaped up with a startled cry. "COVERALL said I'd feel better if I drank some . . .

no, *oh no!!* Why are you nodding? COVERALL didn't . . . no, no, wait . . . you must wait! Don't cut me down—not like that—it's horrible that way, it's horrible, it's horrible—"

The compact little energy weapon in the Interrogator's clasp tore a gaping hole in the giant's chest, spun him about, broke his back, and almost cut him in two.

"Things are all right with us now, Eddie," said Betty-Jane Keenan. "But where will we be tomorrow?"

Eddie Keenan stared straight up the hill through the windshield of his roadster, telling himself that now he'd married the girl he'd have to watch his temper. He didn't want to lose any part of his everything, waves and waves of happiness swirling around and around somewhere inside of him. Marriage could break up over a little rock as well as a big one, and it didn't take much to wreck a cottage in the pines on the crest of an argument.

"Eddie, I know I shouldn't say anything about it. You'll think I'm naggging you when I'm only thinking how much happier you'd be if you had a steady income. You know what they say about a man who makes his living by his wits. *Of course* you're clever. Very few people could live as luxuriously as we do in short jumps and spasms. Every seventh week we're in the chips, we're jive-happy. Then we sit on the edge of the cliff patching up a parachute with I.O.U.'s and crisp new pawn tickets."

Eddie gave the wheel a savage twist. "Aw, B-Jane, you're making a mountain out of a rejection slip."

"Am I? The last time you pulled yourself back up by your bootstraps the girl you married almost ran off with a psychiatrist. It just shouldn't happen to such really nice people like ourselves."

Eddie gave the wheel another twist. "How much did I get for my last gag, B-Jane?" he said softly.

"Five hundred dollars—for something with no sense."

"And how long would it take you to save that much if I just sat in a cage thumbing through other people's money? That gag welled up from my subconscious in exactly a tenth of a second. Typing it out took a couple of minutes, but—"

"Yes, I know. But who did you ghost-write it for? A pigeon-chested crooner who'll stick his neck out so far one of these days somebody will mistake him for Thanksgiving's little gift to Lizzie Borden. One of these days he just won't be around, but we will—with nothing to look forward to."

"B-Jane, the trouble with you is you're afraid to grease the roller coaster. You want to feel safe every waking hour. There's no safety in writing gags at twenty bucks a comma, but it's nice work if you can get it. *I* can get it."

"Eddie, you're heading into trouble because people who live by their wits end up at their wits' end. The well dries up, the big, bad, lone wolf of a late-sleeping, time-clock-avoiding genius runs out of ideas. Did you ever know one who didn't?"

"No-oo. Look, B-Jane, that last crack, about my being a wolf. You don't really think I'm a wolf."

"I wouldn't have married you if you weren't. Oh, Eddie, oh, Eddie, oh . . . look out—"

It might have been a worse accident. All the car did was leave the road, turn completely about, balance itself on two wheels and slither down into a ditch.

Neither Eddie nor Betty-Jane was hurt. But the car was in such a condition that just climbing out and ascending to the road left them angry, flushed and winded.

"B-Jane," Eddie stormed. "We were gyped! That salesman gyped us! The next time I buy a second-hand car, I'll go down on my hands and knees and check on its adhesiveness. If its been over too many cow pastures—"

Eddie kicked a stone at the edge of the road, and decided it wasn't big enough. He vented his spleen on the inanimate, allowing expletives which gave Betty-Jane the most intense satisfaction to well up from the depths of his mind without worrying about replacements.

"Eddie, a big stone under one of the rear wheels would be more practical than the heaviest sort of cussing. I'll help you heave. Just find a stone, and . . . hey, be sure it's a big one!"

Eddie had turned and was already advancing across the road toward a woody stretch where gloomy-looking trees clustered thickly. "Well, I'll see if I can find a stone!" he called back over his shoulder.

Betty-Jane could hardly believe her eyes when she saw the "stone." It was massive, and it glittered, and he was cradling it in the crook of his arm the way he'd have cradled a gun if it had been a gun—which of course it wasn't.

It wasn't, that is, at first glance. When he came up over the hump of the road and she got a good look at it her incredulity diminished a little, and she feared she might have to kiss good-by to her sanity.

He'd been gone twenty minutes, a long enough time for

something outlandish to happen. But how could he have wrapped himself in an . . . aura when his gait showed he couldn't have met up with an old brass rail and a row of pink ladies. Certainly the gun wasn't pinkish, and he wasn't backing away from it and making faces. He was holding it.

"B-Jane," he panted. "Look . . . look at this! Look at it, B-Jane! It's some sort of outlandish weapon. There's a cliff back there, and it was lying—"

She knew he'd come straight to her with the gun because he was like a little boy in some respects. He just couldn't keep shining new discoveries to himself. The gun *was* outlandish, as though it had come right out of one of those imaginative science magazines which Eddie was always reading. Visitors from other planets, fantastic future weapons, and —things.

The weapon in Eddie's clasp looked as though a lot of valuable new metals had gone into it, along with some very tensile mental haywire. It had a startling you'll-never-guess-where-*I*-came-from look.

Betty-Jane would have preferred not to try, but she knew she'd have to when she saw how pale Eddie was. Along with the shining new discovery look his eyes held unmistakable glints of panic.

"It was lying in a pool of rain water right at the base of the cliff, B-Jane. How do you suppose it got there? It's a high-bracket piece of hardware, all right—complex, massive. I can't imagine anyone deliberately—"

"I can!" she said, snatching it from his clasp as though it were a razor-edged top he'd won shooting marbles. "Overwork unhinges bright young inventor."

Eddie did not even smile. "B-Jane, if a crackpot invented a weapon as complex as that it might not be—a laughing matter."

"Oh, shut up!"

Betty-Jane was trembling in spite of herself. The gun was complex, all right. The barrel flared, and was so dazzling it blinded her. In fact, it hurt her brain when she concentrated on it, so that for an instant she had the illusion that her skull was being crushed by a nutcracker with invisible prongs.

But the heavy stock was the really complex part of the gun —a gleaming conglomeration of notched disks, wheels, knobs, and dangling strips of metal so intricately welded together they seemed to blend with a glimmering conglomeration of valves, tubes, wheels and dangling strips of metal. Welded

together into a compact unit which seemed almost to blend with a gleaming—

Betty-Jane tore her gaze from the stock and tried to smile. "Eddie, I didn't mean to snap at you like that. But I wasn't seriously trying to laugh my way out of anything. I don't know where the gun came from any more than you do. How could I know?"

The panic in Eddie's eyes was growing. He hadn't dared tell her the gun seemed to be pointing in the wrong direction. Nor that the barrel was actually twisting back up over the stock. It wasn't as pronounced as that—wasn't in fact anything but a kind of impression he got when he stared at the gun steadily.

It had not been in Betty-Jane's mind to take any chances with so strange, so unfathomable a weapon. But suddenly she had raised it to her shoulder and was sighting it along the road. Suddenly, too, her fingers were moving furtively, almost feverishly over the stock, as though in the depths of her mind were Pandoralike stirrings.

It was on the tip of Eddie's tongue to warn her not to be such a fool, that the gun was not to be trusted. But abruptly, before he could shout a warning, she seemed to sense his agitation. She nodded guiltily and started to lower the weapon. Her eyes dilated in sudden horror—

The two island universes which had collided inside Eddie's head took their time in going their separate ways in silence. They left a trail of blazing super-novae, and dizzily spinning giant and dwarf stars, hot, cold, red, blue, and yellow—all in the plane of a superecliptic superimposed on the lobes of Eddie's bruised brain, and the little pools of white-hot lava which studded his spinal column.

Eddie sat up. The first thing he noticed was his torn-off shirt, which was twisted around his legs. Then he noticed with mounting consternation that his torso was sooty and his trousers ripped. There was deep grass on both sides of him, long, luxurious jungle grass, and he was sitting on something moundlike that felt uncomfortably like an ant hill.

Eddie's faculties were suddenly alert—as sharp as the purple-edged blades of lush jungle grass which had grown up about him.

Memory didn't rush back exactly. It descended upon him like a pendulum swinging down toward him through a pea-soup fog. There was startlement at first, and a lightening of the mist, and then it swung very low with a blazing swish.

An explosion. It had begun with an explosion. Light on her face as she turned, the weapon jerking in her hand. He'd screamed hoarsely and tried to duck. The roar had deafened him and then—

Not too clear. His knees had buckled and there had been—a glimmering? He'd been hurled back into a glimmering? He thought he had because he remembered a sensation of floundering in a sea of light that had become suddenly opaque. He remembered nothing else.

He rose swayingly the instant he realized the gray wall inside his head was hindering his explorations. He could see at once that he was alone in the jungle. No, it . . . it wasn't a jungle. It was a sort of clearing in reverse. Right where he stood the grass was waist-high and thick, but there were blue distances in all directions where the grass grew sparsely, and—

The road was gone. It shocked him that he could miss the road more than his wife until he remembered that the missing road had *included* his wife.

A strange look came in Eddie's face—a look not often seen outside of monastic cells and the battle-scarred waste places of the earth. Almost savagely he told himself that now when there was a . . . a wrongness like the beat of vulture wings all about him he'd be less than a man if he didn't slough off the glowing chrysalis he'd worn on the other track. He'd have to become inwardly lean again, a hard, tough fighter who could take *anything* in his stride. With no holds barred, with only himself to worry about—

"Eddie, grab hold of me—hold on to me, and don't let me think!"

Betty-Jane was in his arms before Eddie's mind could adjust to the chill urgency of spinning the leanness out into a cloak to cover her shuddering approach.

"B-Jane, *where's that gun?*"

She gestured toward an ingrown clump of jungle grass at the edge of the clearing that had bunched itself up into a dry oasis without consulting the scenery it had managed to displace. "Right over there, Eddie."

"All right. We'll get around to it. Just a couple of questions first. I was blown through a glimmering into here. What made the glimmering?"

"The gun, Eddie. It blew a hole right through the . . . the old stand. A shining oval in the air. But, if you stand a little ways back, you can hardly see it, Eddie. Inside you flounder. I

started to walk and ended up on my hands and knees. I thought I'd never get through."

Eddie frowned and shut his eyes an instant. His furrowed brow and twitching facial muscles gave him an aspect of watching little sparkling triangulations canceling themselves out in the darkness behind his eyelids.

"Solving anything as insane as this by ear is . . . hold on, maybe I've got something. Maybe I have at that. If . . . if that gun had merely blown a hole in the air, we'd still be at the old stand. But if it had blown a hole in the warp-and-woof stuff of the physical universe—"

"Eddie!"

"Where would we be then?"

"Outside the universe," Jane whispered, feeling like a child who has watched her schoolbooks burst into flames, and must say the right thing before the classroom explodes in her face.

"Well, yes, that's one possibility. But if we were in some unimaginable dimension outside—say in a kind of blister-gall on De Sitter's skin-of-the-orange-turned-inside-out universe, everything would be illogical, mixed up. It isn't at all."

"What's the other possibility?"

"*Time* is a dimension, B-Jane. Time is a dimension, but—what would pure time be like? We just don't know because we could no more live in time than we could live in length without thickness. We live in a world of four dimensions, and time is only one of them. But suppose that gun did something to time?

"Suppose it blew a hole in space-time—the space-time continuum of the physicists—and made a fluid bridge of time between two widely separated space-time frames. Inside the rent you'd have pure time, a kind of stasis in the continuum. Outside—"

"Outside?"

"Two widely separated *ages*."

Betty-Jane made a little whimpering sound deep in her throat. "You mean you think we may be—in the future?"

"Or in the past," Eddie said. "I'm just guessing, understand. I've just knifed down at random and cut myself a slice of something that may turn out to be nuttier than a fruit cake."

"But, who, Eddie, could have invented a weapon like that?"

Eddie was about to reply when he saw in the distance a moving something that made him catch his breath and forestalled a still deeper plunge into the dubious maelstrom of assumptions his thoughts had set in motion. For a full minute the object remained *very* distant, a scarcely visible red dust mote advancing

steadily over the short grass expanse which fringed the long grass for several miles in a circular direction.

There was no reason why so small an object should have chilled Eddie to the core of his being, and filled him with a terrifying sense of urgency. Yet chill him it did, so that his teeth were chattering when it ceased to be a dust mote, and came *loping* toward them.

Betty-Jane screamed when she saw it, and suddenly it was as large as a lion, and growing larger. It moved almost effortlessly, the muscles rippling along its untiring flanks, and through every aspect of its approach there was as much of stealth as of speed, there was no sacrifice of speed, and it moved with the rapidity of a thunderbolt.

Eddie never knew how he reached the clump of tall withergrass where Betty-Jane had left the gun. Neither did Betty-Jane, despite the sobbing cry of relief which welled up from her throat when she met him there.

Eddie snatched up the gun, then remembered he didn't know how to fire it. Frantically he plucked and tore at the stock, but it wouldn't, *it wouldn't,* IT WOULDN'T—

Betty-Jane snatched it from him just as the long grass shook, and the cyclopean cat burst through upon them. She fired from the shoulder, at almost point-blank range.

There was a blinding flash of light, an explosion which ripped at her flesh. The explosion was Krakatoan, and for an instant Betty-Jane was sure that an active volcano had erupted in her face.

The glimmering seemed to precede the explosion by the barest instant, but that, she knew, was an illusion, caused by the fact that sound and light do not travel at the same speeds when convulsing. What she did not know was whether she had blown a hole in the physical universe, or just a hole in the cat.

All she could see was the cyclopean beast etched against the glimmer, its rust-red tusks drooling saliva, its unsheathed claws outspread.

For an instant it hovered directly above her, as though frozen in the act of descending. Then the gaping scarlet hole in its chest became a gushing Niagara, and it went sailing back through the glimmering out of sight.

Before he'd begin his gags Eddie would get up, pace the floor, drink three cups of black coffee, light a cigarette, take six short puffs, crush out the cigarette, examine his haggard face in a shaving mirror, pace the floor, grimace, brush the erasings out of his typewriter, sit down, and—

Then he'd type out the gag, very swiftly with one finger.

It was curious, but Eddie went through the same agony now. He knew the disappearing cat wasn't a gag. It was real, and it was—ghastly. But it wrenched him in the same way, the torturing despair of not being sure, and then the moment of creative frenzy when power flowed into him, and he knew he had something.

He got his arms around his wife just in time. She'd dropped the weapon, and was beginning to sag when he caught her. "You really hit the keys that time," he whispered hoarsely.

She was sobbing and clinging to him. "Eddie," she whispered chokily. "It was the *past* I blew a hole in. That was . . . that was—"

"I know what it was," Eddie soothed. "It was a saber-toothed tiger. They were big, weren't they?"

"Big—" Betty-Jane's eyes were deep pools of liquid horror. "How . . . how . . . how can you . . . take it so calmly?"

"I'm not taking it calmly, B-Jane. But there's something in me— Did it have stripes? No, no, I guess it didn't. Asphalt pit saber-tooths are all petrified flesh and eroded bones, so it could have surprised us more than it did. Now we know. It was dun-colored, with red tusks and whiskers."

Betty-Jane was staring past him at the glimmering. It wasn't the only glimmering. Behind Eddie pulsed the first pale oval she'd blown in time. No, Eddie had said space-time. Inside the oval was time, was time—a bridge. It was time inside the oval —time to stop gnawing at her fingernails and trying to swallow her mouth, time to stop pretending she wasn't already quite mad.

Eddie was shaking her. "B-Jane, listen to me. If you crawled through into here, we can crawl back. But it had better be now! Those rents you blew through the back of the looking glass may fill in without consulting us. Where's that other—"

"Right behind you, Eddie."

Betty-Jane was getting her color back. She had wanted out desperately, but now that the first oval was in plain view behind her husband's right shoulder her eyes were shining and she was staring at the glimmering she'd blown in an opposite direction.

"Well, shall we get started?"

"You mean we—follow the tiger?"

"No!" Eddie almost screamed. "Are you out of your mind? I didn't like the old stand much once, but I do now. I've changed my mind in the last twenty seconds. It was—*is* much

healthier for people like us than an age which includes the scenery inside a cat's stomach."

"Eddie, how long ago were saber-toothed tigers?"

Eddie stared at her. "Well, the *Machaerodus*, the typical genus of a group of long-tusked extinct cats commonly known as saber-tooths prowled through most of the Oligocene, the Miocene, and the Pliocene."

"In basic English, Eddie."

"Well, we are perhaps a half million years back. Or twenty million, depending on whether that tiger was a *Nimravus Machaerodus*, or a *Hoplophoneus Machaerodus*, and what Tertiary system age-scale you'd like for breakfast. There's a terrific disagreement among the experts as to how old you'd be if you traveled through any one age just by aging. For instance, Sir Arthur Keith and Elliot Smith disagree—in a small way, of course—about how long ago was the Pliocene. Smith thinks the Pleistocene began a million years ago, Keith a quarter million. Of course they're not geologists, and—"

"I like Mr. Keith's estimate best, Eddie."

"A saber-tooth might find Smith just as appetizing."

Eddie had found that Betty-Jane could sometimes be placated by facetiousness. She'd stand back and laugh at herself, and stop making appalling suggestions. Sometimes a tiny grain of drollery served up with a straight face could do that for her. It couldn't now. He knew what was coming before she spoke.

"Eddie, if we followed the tiger, how far back in time would we be?"

"Too far." Eddie scarcely recognized his own voice. It was hoarse with strain, and the effort it cost him to speak at all.

"Eddie, we could still go back to the old stand. The two ovals are only a few yards apart, and the one you like best will be here when we get back. You just now said there was something in you—it's in me too, Eddie. A desire to look beyond and all the way through, until we're too old to drag ourselves about.

"When you can know more, when you're able to, you've just *got* to! Eddie, we're going to follow the tiger."

Eddie never knew how he allowed himself to be persuaded. One minute he was standing with his feet firmly planted on the good Late Pliocene earth; the next he was floundering through a bog of fluid time inside a glimmering.

It was awful and he hadn't wanted to and—it was awful. He had to go down on his hands and knees and claw his way out.

Fortunately the ordeal was not of long duration, and only his temples were bursting when he tumbled out into the sunlight and sank in soft mud to his knees beside the cyclopean beast which had preceded him through the glimmering.

The tiger was lying on its back with its short hind paws buried in its stomach, and the blood which had welled up from the gaping hole in its breast had congealed to a red film covering it. It looked even huger dead, and Eddie felt a little sick as he stared wildly about him.

He was standing in a bog much thicker than the one inside the glimmering, above him marched a red sandstone cliff, and closer to him than breathing was the girl he'd married.

"B-Jane, why wasn't I . . . the tiger . . . why wasn't I, the first time you blasted?"

"You weren't standing directly in the line of fire," came in a faint whisper. "That tiger was. Just the concussion or something must have blown you through into where we were before we came through into here. Eddie, get a grip on yourself; you're not dead, so why are you trembling?"

Eddie wanted to believe her. But not helping him at all were the moon-faced painted devils. They were squatting on their haunches in a semicircle around the bog, as though hoping the two ugly-looking strangers with *no color at all* on their faces would just *try* and wade out.

Betty-Jane screamed when she saw them, floundering close to Eddie, and tugging frantically at his arm.

"Eddie, Eddie, ohhh—baboons?"

Even as she cried out Betty-Jane found herself wondering wildly how she could have clutched at such a straw. The creatures didn't in the least resemble baboons except that baboons were pigmented just as gaudily in a less refined way.

They were as large as gorillas, barrel-chested, with long dangling arms and patches of red fur on their chests. But despite their hairiness they were clasping rude, flint-tipped wooden spears, and there was something unmistakably human, or humanoid, in their expressions. A petulance tinged with curiosity, a kind of avaricious just-you-wait-and-we'll-know-all-about-you look.

Blue-purple-orange were their faces, the baggy folds of flesh over their jowls giving them a weird otherness of aspect, giving Eddie the wild idea that he was staring at the inhabitants of another planet.

Then, suddenly, the truth struck him like a bomb from a

rocket gun, shedding dazzlement in all directions. "Dawn men!" he almost hissed.

"Eddie, they *aren't*. No, no, Eddie—their faces! They look like painted buffoons! It's just not possible—"

Eddie stiffened as though bracing himself to face the full impact of an onrushing nightmare. "Bright pigmentation occurs pretty high up in the evolutionary scale," he said, breathing hard. "There are blue-cheeked new world monkeys. The theory, of course, is that it has some erotic—"

"Eddie, don't—I can't stand it. The dawn men I've met in museums—"

"Not cogent!" he flung at her, almost savagely. "You're talking about hit-or-miss reconstructions. All museum have to go on are skulls and bone fragments. Skin pigmentation pure guesswork—from the Trinil skull to the Man from Broken Hill. For all we know there may have been big-brained Miocene gibbons which flaunted every color on nature's palette."

Eddie's own color had ebbed entirely. "Great Scott, B-Jane! They're toting *worked* flints—"

"Is that good, Eddie? Does that date them?"

"No. It means they've jumped the gun on the archaeologists!"

"Eddie!" Betty-Jane shrieked. "Look out!"

The warning came too late. From behind the dead saber-tooth four insane blue-orange faces popped. There was a flutter of red-yellow palms, and a flint-tipped spear whizzed through the air to bury itself in Eddie's shoulder.

Eddie stiffened, a look of utter consternation on his face. Then, he flattened himself, gripping Betty-Jane's wrist and dragging her down into the muck beside him.

His shoulders almost flushed with the muck, the spear quivering in his flesh, he started to edge toward the glimmering on his hands and knees. The oval was less than a yard from the cliff wall, and protecting him in the opposite direction was a towering wall of dead tiger.

There were guttural whisperings from beyond the crest of that lesser barrier, but no more spears came hurtling toward him. To Betty-Jane, advancing at his side, it seemed incredible, the sheerest, most primitive kind of stupidity.

The dawn men actually waited, hardly making a sound, until Eddie was so close to the oval that his shoulders were etched against the glimmering, and *only then* came swarming down over the belly of the tiger toward him.

Betty-Jane fired without taking aim, swiveling about in the

muck, and sloshing the gun upward between her elbows. The concussion spattered mud in all directions, lifted up the inverted beast, and hurled Eddie forward through a splotch of furiously pin-wheeling carnival colors dissolving in a blaze of light.

Warmth. On his eyelids, on his throbbing throat. A tugging and a whispering. "Eddie, you're not hurt, just shaken up. I've got it out. The flint's out, Eddie. But you won't have to look at it. It's in the lake. Eddie, this *is paradise!*"

Eddie opened his eyes. He couldn't believe it at first. The vegetation was a deep emerald green, luxuriant, but not lush, the air balmy, the sky flecked with little fleecy clouds, and, as though that were not enough, the sunlight that was warming him through his clothes sparkled on the waters of a jasper lake so still and lovely it brought a catch to his throat.

"Oh, Eddie, Eddie, it was worth the nickel. It was worth it, and I'm glad they attacked us. I'm glad they swarmed down without giving us a chance to stop and think."

"Nickel?" Eddie said slowly.

"You know what I mean. We've silenced the juke box. In the right kind of juke boxes there are blank records. If you want peace for five minutes, you put a nickel in and tunes stop coming out."

"Oh."

"Eddie."

"Yeah, what is it?"

"We'll go back. All the way back to where it *isn't* peaceful. We'll have to because everybody we know is back there, and if we stayed here we'd be running out. But just let me sit here a minute and drink this in. Then we'll go back."

"Will we? Aren't you forgetting those carnival-faced semi-apes we left squatting around the hole you blew in the other side? They'll be waiting to pay us out. They may even try to come through into here."

Betty-Jane paled. "Eddie!"

"No, I guess they won't. Dawn men feared the unknown, and those glimmerings will be tabu to them. Tabu, in case you don't know, is the custom of setting aside certain persons or objects as sacred or accursed. Those ovals are objects and will be sacred. But we're persons, and if we step back through and get 'em all steamed up again—"

Abruptly Eddie did an incredible thing. He reached over and pried the gun from his wife's cold clasp. "B-Jane, what

makes all of the rare old coins come out of the bottom slot?"

Betty-Jane was staring at him wide-eyed. "I don't know exactly, Eddie. I just sort of played by ear, the way you did when you figured out where we're not."

"Like this?" Eddie asked, moving his fingers back and forth over the stock.

"Eddie, be careful. You'll—"

Eddie had intended to be careful. But something he had no control over deep in his mind, a racial, hairy-chested something that had a deep instinctive horror of going soft, had its own ideas about paradise.

An earth-shaking concussion moved sideways from Eddie's right knee, lifting up his wife, and hurling her with great violence into a glimmering out of sight.

"Eddie, Eddie, I can't stand any more of this! Neither can you. Take me home, Eddie."

Eddie felt dizzy from having floundered through a dozen glimmerings into ages that were terrifyingly remote. He hadn't intended to fire the gun again and again and again, but every age he'd entered had made him lose his head.

They'd been simple accidents and complex ones like that carnivorous dinosaur. Not a Tyrant King, but a very slender, malign little allosaur with withered red forelimbs and a carrion stench. Hideously it had parried for an opening, hissing and dodging about with its forked tongue darting in and out.

They'd gone through from there to meet a dragonfly with a wing span of eighteen feet, and a calamite fern so high up the bare little pinkish fronds growing out from it had made a dent in the stratosphere.

Twice he'd fired in sheer panic, when they'd been nothing tangible to put them on its menu, and compel them to move on. Once he'd given the gun back to Betty-Jane, and that had been a mistake.

The Ordovician landscape which now stretched in all directions from the tight little lava island they'd found on the far side of the thirtieth glimmering seemed chillingly unreal.

A reddish mist swirled about them, the air was sulphurous and almost unbreathable, and most of the distant volcanoes were mere truncated cones which had blown their tops. Those that hadn't gave off occasional dull rumblings and lava streams that looked—hot.

In utter silence Eddie gathered his wife up in his arms and swung about.

Going back, there were so many ways they could have

ended up as fossils that just passing from glimmering to glimmering turned Eddie's blood to ice. It was mostly touch and go, duck and run, with a clashing of teeth too close for comfort in more ages than Eddie could count.

In what was probably the early Eocene there was a distance of fifty yards between the glimmering, and they had to flatten themselves while a herd of tiny, four-toed horses—family *Hyracotherium*—clattered past. They had to sprint wildly to make it in the late Eocene, when the horses were larger and could have trampled them into the dust.

There was something in the Oligocene that should have been much further back. With slippery belly-glidings it had thumbed its snout at the paleontologists and hung around until it was out of date. It wasn't out of teeth.

Only Paradise hadn't changed, and when they stumbled back into it Betty-Jane gave a little sob and sank down at the edge of the lake without bothering to pluck out the spines an infuriated hedgehog platypus had hurled at her three ovals back.

"Oh, Eddie, oh—this is heavenly! I can't help feeling this age was made especially for us!"

"It's just an age like any other age," Eddie grunted, clearing the huskiness from his throat. "An age of luxuriant vegetation in the middle Miocene. The Miocene was just right for our remote ancestors, so why shouldn't it seem like paradise to us? In the Miocene our kind of folk first started using their hands to develop arboreal dexterity, and an intracranial pressure area of dubious survival value."

Betty-Jane did not reply. She had turned about and was staring with dilating pupils at the light collecting in little pools on the shore of the lake. It was to her credit that she did not become hysterical, did not even faint. She did feel a little ill, but it was a steely kind of illness such as a huge bronzed amazon of a woman might feel after plodding home to her native village over at mountain of skulls.

When Betty-Jane's awareness wasn't focused on little chunks of reality, when it embraced vast vistas tragic in scope, she could be both strong and great.

"Eddie."

"Yeah, what?"

"You'd better brace yourself, Eddie. I . . . I don't know whether to tell you, or let you find out for yourself. Perhaps it would be less of a shock if you— Go ahead, Eddie, get up and *look*."

It didn't take Eddie long to discover that something he thought of course would be hovering in plain view was nowhere in sight. Of all the ages they'd traveled through the two pursing ovals had stood out like sore thumbs. Now there was only one thumb, and it beckoned toward the age they'd just left.

Under the shattering impact of palpably evident finalities the human brain will often fuse and act upon impulses on a lower level of consciousness. What Eddie did when he turned from the lake shore was so startling it took away Betty-Jane's breath.

He drew her into his arms and held on to her tight. Then he kissed her and said, a little huskily: "You are beautiful, B-Jane. I don't think I've ever fully realized just how beautiful."

Smoothing her dark hair back from her temples he made a cameo-like life mask of her face, and stood a little away from her as though admiring his own artistry.

"Eddie," she said.

"Yes."

"I've always thought of you as, well, an escapist. But try not to forget we're completely trapped. How completely you haven't realized yet. If I'm a reality to you, I'm glad. You're going to need me, and we're going to need each other. Without something very solid to hold on to we'll be babes in a very terrible kind of trap."

"I know," he said.

Betty-Jane seemed to be trying to spoil the mask he'd made of her. She'd removed herself from his embrace and was kneading her cheeks with her knuckles, as though the putty hadn't set right.

"Eddie," she said, suddenly. "In those imaginative science stories you tried to make me like, exactly what happened when people went back into the past. The paradox of time travel, you called it. Just how is time travel a paradox?"

Eddie stared at her before replying. "Well, if you went back in time you'd change the past. Your mere presence in the past would set a new chain of events in motion. You've heard about the man—he's a bromide now in that kind of story—who goes back and kills his own grandfather."

"I haven't, but go on."

"Don't you see? If he killed his grandfather, he'd never be born, so how could he travel back and kill his grandfather?"

"I think I understand."

Eddie nodded. "There's your paradox. The most obvious

solution is no solution at all. You assume the existence of numerous might-have-been futures, futures which still exist in a kind of ghostly dimension somewhere, running parallel with the strong, main-line future you're going back has changed. Science-fiction writers call them 'alternative futures.'

"But that just can't be the answer, because the instant you accept it exactly six hundred and twelve new paradoxes arise. The most sagacious writers do *not* accept it."

"What do they do, Eddie?"

"They accept the paradox, not the solution. They just go ahead and write a story with such a depth of imaginative insight that it comes out very beautifully in all respects. Because, if you'll think a moment, everything we do is a paradox, from the instant we're born. The white, cold light of the absolute turns prismatic the instant it plays over the little spot where we are.

"When we've called that spot reality we think we've nailed it down. But we haven't. We haven't at all. The right nails are very long and twisted, and are in other hands outside the scope of our perceptions. It has though . . . well, for all we know the main building may still be in the blueprint stage. Reality may be just somebody's wrong guess—a lot of overlapping calculations on a crumpled scratch-sheet, tossed aside for something that makes sense."

Betty-Jane was silent a moment. When she met Eddie's eyes again her eyes were shining. "Eddie, I like that analogy. I like it. A few of those tossed-aside calculations *would* make sense. Why waste them inside a crumpled sheet? Why not lift them out, transfer them to a clean sheet—a new blueprint, Eddie?"

"Huh?"

"A new blueprint for the human race, Eddie. If everyone were like you, if everyone were like you from the very beginning those mean, acrobatic-clownish dawn men right up ahead would have no more chance of developing into real human beings than a gorilla would in the twentieth century. When the little, romping, gag-writing Eddie Keenans catch up with them the stage will be set, and they'll be out in the wings."

Eddie was so startled he scarcely noticed Betty-Jane's sudden dropping of her suppositives.

"Eddie, there won't be any wars of aggression; there won't be any slave empires. The Eddie Keenans just aren't *mean* like that. They'll want to dream and sleep, and yawn and turn over and dream again. But they'll work when they have to, when things get really bad they'll work in inspired spurts.

Oh, how they'll work to hold and widen their bridgeheads.

"Lovely Utopias will well up from their unconscious minds, great, immortal gags, and they'll make them stick. The Eddie Keenans are perfectionists. They'll take an artist's joy in making them stick. Nothing they'll ever do will *really* make sense, but it'll be beautiful. Oh, Eddie, it will be beautiful!"

Almost it seemed to Eddie that Betty-Jane was holding the new blueprint out in the sunlight for him to see. She was holding it out by waltzing around on her toes, her arms upraised above the living flame of her body's grace.

The dark-skinned Eurasian dwarf swung in between the big doors and crossed the room in six impetuous strides.

"Sit down, Mogor," a steely voice said. "Sit down, and let's have it."

The dwarf seated himself with vigor, and then—his confidence ebbed a little. He assumed an aggressively defensive attitude the instant he found himself staring into the Interrogator's cold eyes.

"Move back where your face won't be in shadows. That's it. Now, you followed instructions?"

The dwarf nodded.

"Good. Suppose you tell me exactly what happened in your own words. I should *prefer* not to interrupt you."

The dwarf squirmed under the Interrogator's probing stare. "My instructions were to go back through the stasis my genetic twin-opposite blew in the First Glass Age, and recover the blaster," he said carefully. "But—"

"But . . . pah! It is a synonym for failure."

The dwarf paled, then decided to ignore the interruption. "Unfortunately two Glass Age primitives—a man and a woman—stumbled on the blaster. To be strictly accurate, the man found the blaster, brought it to the woman, and she blasted with it, blew stasis ovals at half-million-year intervals for a distance of"—the dwarf hesitated—"possibly a half billion years."

For the barest instant the Interrogator's face was convulsed, as though a high-voltage current had touched off an explosion at the base of his brain. He shut his eyes and endured—strong emotion, tormenting like a live coal, a thing unutterably shameful in a man whose decisions could not be questioned.

"I didn't see the primitives at all," the dwarf said quickly. "They were gone when I emerged from the stasis, but I discovered what had happened when I filmed the region over

the subatomic displacement auras with a unified field detector. There was an unbroken trail of energy perfect body auras leading back into the past."

"Well?"

"I trailed the primitives back . . . to—"

The dwarf seemed to be having difficulties with his speech. His flesh had paled, so that his face seemed almost Caucasian-white, and there was stark fear in his eyes, a kind of ingrowing panic which seemed suddenly to overwhelm him, so that he faced the Interrogator silent-tongued, and with his lips quivering.

"Well, well?"

"I followed them beyond . . . where it's pure torment . . . to go. Two ages beyond, I steeled myself, I fought what is agony . . . just to describe. The feeling, you can't, mustn't . . . the ghastliness of not being right with yourself. It's like a tight band knotted around your mind slicing deeper and deeper. The knots sink in, become embedded. You've got to get out fast."

The Interrogator's own flesh had paled, but so imperceptibly the dwarf was unaware just how deep an impression his words had made.

"I . . . I concealed an oval as far back as I could stand an agony that kept getting worse. I sprayed the oval over by crouching just inside a stasis they'd blown in an age of luxuriant vegetation far back in the Miocene. Now if they try to return to the First Glass Age they'll never find the stasis. You've got to have an air-film detector to distinguish a sprayed-out stasis from the air around it, and they haven't got one. They're sealed up very far back. That was all I *could* do. I had to get out fast."

The Interrogator's fingers had closed around the compact little energy weapon he'd used to break the back of the dwarf's genetic twin-opposite. But there was something in his nature which made him shrink from inflicting irrevocable injuries on a man who shared a compulsion that was making his brain reel.

"Very well," he said sharply. "That's all for now."

The dwarf sucked in his breath, started to speak, thought better of it and swung about on his heels. There was an alarming unsteadiness in his gait as the big doors swung shut behind him.

For an instant the Interrogator stood as though stunned, watching the doors swing shut. A knotted cord, he told himself

shakily, a knotted cord tightening and tightening was—a perfect description of the sensation *he* experienced whenever he tried to imagine what the remote past was like.

Why had a revulsion against the remote past been seared into his brain before he'd been conditioned to perform the duties of his high office? Why was the remote past so dangerous it had been blotted from the memory of the dwarf? Well, he could find out easily enough. When he knew he'd no longer fear the remote past, and—he could go back himself and take care of those two primitives.

His hands were shaking a little when he reseated himself in the examining unit and vibrated the emergency disk of the COVERALL.

The droning which ensued was abruptly shattered by a coolly efficient voice. "COVERALL, COVERALL speaking. This is Correlator T G 46. What is it, Interrogator V 236?"

"I have reason to believe THE PLAN is endangered by something that has happened in the remote past," the Interrogator said, striving to sound as though he were addressing a subordinate. "I should prefer not to go into details."

"What do you wish to know, 236?"

"I find I can no longer remember what the remote past is like. No, it is worse than that. There is an . . . an uneasiness when I just think about the remote past. I have a feeling that, if I actually went back to, say, the Miocene, and tried to blast a stasis oval the uneasiness would be worse. I say I have a feeling. Of course—

"COVERALL? COVERALL?"

There was no answer.

There was no reason why his palms should feel moist. Yet COVERALL'S silence *was* alarming. A minute ticked by, two—

"Interrogator V 236?" came hoarsely, as though COVERALL were cowering in darkness far off somewhere, willing in its panic to risk a quick look around a dangerous corner, but not daring to raise its voice.

"Yes?"

"This is Correlator T G 49. T G 46 is . . . well, not well. That blotting out of the remote past—it just doesn't make sense."

"No, it doesn't," the Interrogator agreed, his voice rising. "If it had, would I have called you? What right have you to take that tone with me?"

"No right, but—I can't help you. When I think of the re-

mote past it's as though a bar of white-hot . . . no, no, worse than that. I *won't* think about it. You hear? *I won't, I won't, it's horrible, and you can't make me!! You've no right—"*

The Interrogator groaned, and vibrated COVERALL out.

The implications?

No, no, he'd have to fight that. He'd have to stop picturing the past, all of the past, including the worst three minutes he'd ever lived through, as a . . . a tree.

An enormous spreading tree with all of the upper branches shiveling, dying. A tree already dead, with only the lower branches filled with sap. No, no, no, he'd have to stop.

Just a part of the trunk was alive, and there were little eager new sprouts down there trying to topple the dead upper part of the tree.

The lower part, where the sprouts were, went deep, deep down into the soil, so that the tree was really like a gigantic ice floe nine-tenths submerged. Only the upper part was dead, shriveled, but the upper part included the whole human race, and the sap up there where the human race was could no longer go down, down into the distant roots and interfere.

Something new was coming up down there, pushing its way up—small, twisting new shoots far down insisting on a right to grow and harden into branches and become a new tree with wide, lazy leaves and a sun-dappled bole. A new—

The Interrogator's thoughts congealed, and something took hold of him, and something whirled him around. Around and around and around, faster and faster, until on the circular top of the examining unit where his hands had rested were two stringy clots of filmy emptiness, and where his brain had pulsed a hollowness impossibly bright.

EPILOGUE

Soon now, soon, he'll be big and strong like his dad, thought the big little girl with the mud-caked cheeks and tangled, wild hair. Crouching in the long grass, her skin berry-brown in the red sunlight, her mind went back to the lonely years—before she'd found people like her own mom and dad again, after being so long alone for years and years and years. And that little boy who only came to her shoulder now but would soon be as tall as she.

Years and years, and deep in her mind was the strange dim memory still. An automobile upset in a ditch, and a bright, shining light on the road, and she a very little girl climbing

through. Then another light and another light, and she'd kept on crawling through the lights and the woods between, the wild wild woods with the ape creatures, and then—out into here.

And the funny dwarf with the bicycle pump and shiny clothes peering out of the last light, and making the light disappear. And the big ape creatures that had been mom and dad to her until she'd found people just like her real mom and dad had been back when she'd had dolls to undress, and cornflakes for breakfast, and Perkins to talk to, and mom and dad playing bridge away off somewhere, and then coming home with more dolls and upstairs maids and bathtubs, and she'd had to wash behind her ears.

"Junior! Mary Ann!"

Oh, those brats, thought Betty-Jane, standing in the door of the hut in the clearing. Eddie's, and a green-eyed little minx that wasn't at all, even though she'd managed somehow to come running in out of the rain, trembling and afraid, and straight into her heart. A would-be glamor girl, and with Junior not yet forewarned. Six years difference in their ages too, and she setting her cap for him as though she wasn't just a silly little thing with wild twigs snagging up her hair.

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