

# VISION

OF TOMORROW

NOVEMBER 5!

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And many other  
top science  
fiction writers



COLOUR SPECIAL:

*The Impatient  
Dreamers*

By  
WALTER GILLINGS





# VISION OF TOMORROW

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One of the more remarkable features of science fiction magazines is the rapport between their readers and the editor. Readers from all over the world take time out to write to the editor telling him frankly exactly what the writer thinks of the contents of a given magazine. Nothing unusual about this, you may think. After all, readers of all kinds of journals do exactly the same thing. But there is a special difference in the sf field: our readers *care* about the magazine. Criticism, however forthright, is usually meant to be constructive and to help the magazine and its editor.

Our Merit Award feature, which was instituted mainly to provide incentive to authors and better fiction for our readers, is providing us with an additional bonus. Many readers, as well as providing a straight listing—invaluable in itself—are writing interesting letters explaining just why they did—or did not—like a particular story. Such letters are absolutely invaluable because they give the editor a direct insight into the tastes of the readers of his magazine. And it is the editor's job to give the readers what they want, within the framework of his publisher's policy.

Recently one writer, approached by us for material, declined to contribute because he did not agree with our policy. He was quite at liberty to do so, and his turning down of a chance to earn a fair sum of money because of his principles is definitely admirable. But his letter—although an isolated case—gave us pause to wonder if our story policy was being correctly construed.

Our policy can be stated in one word: entertainment. We believe that the primary function of good fiction is to do just that. We believe also that the overwhelming majority of readers prefer to read a magazine that entertains them. And an apparent action story can, when properly handled, be enjoyed by the most mature reader on account of the colour, imagery, and underlying philosophy. A good puzzle, exciting action, a surprise twist, fine writing style or characterisation—all of these things can be entertaining in themselves, whatever the subject matter of the story. As to subject matter, we place no restriction whatever, with one exception: pornography. Pornography has been slow to infiltrate sf—but there are some who claim it has made alarming inroads in recent years. Whether it has or not, one thing is certain: you won't find it in the pages of this magazine.

In this issue eight talented authors offer their special Visions of Tomorrow. We make no extravagant claims, preferring to let our content speak for itself. But we hope that after reading this issue, many more of you may drop us a line letting us know whether our claim to entertain is justified or not.

*The Editor*

# SHAPERS of MEN

by Kenneth Bulmer

*Introducing Fletcher Cullen, galactic travelling man and adventurer extraordinary! This is the first of a series of stories of interplanetary action and colourful worlds, featuring Kenneth Bulmer's newest character.*

1

Just before he jumped into the water Fletcher Cullen took a last quick look down into the control cabin. Dark water slopped against the astronav and the twin pilot's thrones, the right-hand one still holding in a firm useless webwork support the dead body of Marty Ohallaham.

Water sloshed into Marty's open mouth, cleaned away the dribble of blood.

Bits of paper, torn tapes, empty cartons, the assorted detritus of a hard-used spaceship floated on that alien inrushing water.

Fletcher Cullen touched a black-gloved hand quickly to his forehead.

'Good-bye, Marty. We had a few laughs together. You were a good bloke.'

The water looked very wet. Cullen climbed down over the ripped stub of the port atmosphere fin and jumped.

He hit in a flowering splash and water closed over his head. He remained limp and let the air in his lungs float him back to the surface. A few long powerful strokes carried him away from *Firefly*. He turned over on his back in time to see her roll over to port, shudder, roll back to starboard and slip under, the alien sunlight splintering golden from her slender torn hull, a few last pockets of Terrestrial air bubbling up in a gush of foam.

When she had gone all Cullen could hear was the splash of water around him. He had stripped off his space coveralls and now swam with the contained economic strokes of a man in for a long haul against

the tide. Above him the sky showed a deep tinge of indigo. The cliffs he had spotted moments before the ship struck glowed orange now in the sinking rays of the sun—the sun Raj shining down on this almost Terrestrial-type world of Sitaz—and he aimed himself at that beckoning land.

The crack on the head that had laid him out when *Firefly* terminated her abrupt descent on to this world had weakened him. Water kept slapping at him as though resenting the intrusion of a non-Sitazan. At first he thought the cliffs were approaching at a normal speed. After an hour of swimming he had to admit they weren't—they weren't even growing any nearer.

Cullen rolled over on his back for a breather and to consider his position a little more carefully.

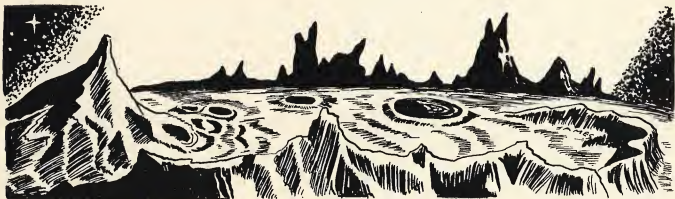
Dropping down on him with a whicker from its vanes lost in the splashing of the sea the gaudy emerald and scarlet flier angled in cautiously. Heads showed starkly through the windows and ports. A grapnel swung dangerously at the end of a line. Water ruffled away from the downdraught.

On the third swing of the grapnel, Cullen reached up, grabbed the padded main member and felt the hook click in under his thighs. Like a prize snapper he was reeled in.

There were two men and two women and an alien in the flier and they looked at Cullen, stranded on the floor and disentangling himself from the grapnel, as though they'd brought up a bucket of stinking fish.

'That's not Ascher!' said the tallest man in a pained voice.

He was big, about six feet two tall, only a few inches shorter than Cullen; he was nowhere as wide across the shoulders. His face looked as though it had been pushed into molten gelatine and the stuff had set in hard ridges and bumps. His eyes showed small and black, pitiless, uncaring of others. He wore some fancy uniform of emerald and scarlet with lots of gold braid.





An energy gun was strapped to his waist. Now he stirred Cullen's ribs with a highly polished cavalry boot.

The other man, smaller, languorous, with sleepy eyes and a loose mouth, wearing a dark brown coverall with a golden insignia over the left breast and a twin energy weapon to the first man's high under his left armpit, smiled emptily.

'Clearly he is not Ascher,' he said in a thin voice.

Cullen didn't much like the cavalry boot prodding his ribs.

The older of the two women, about thirty, she seemed, although with cosmetics and geriatrics she could have been a hundred and ninety for all Cullen knew, leaned forward. Her lips, painted a bright orange, and her eyes, kohled and heavily shadowed, emphasized her raw coarse beauty. She wore a trim dark blue flying suit with brass buttons and it bulged over her breasts and hips, tightly cinched around her waist. Sure, Cullen saw, she had a triplet in the energy guns.

'So he's not Ascher,' she said impatiently. 'So toss him back!'

There was no time to look at the second girl. The alien; a squared box of a body with four prehensile arms and squat legs, topped by a shaggy head like a collie's with four eyes and narrow funnel ears, indicating he was a Phalonim, moved forward with a little skip.

'He may know something to be useful,' he fluted in a tinny whistle.

'Keep out of this, Phoxary,' grunted the big man. His boot moved in again. Cullen caught the boot in his left hand, freed himself from the grapnel and stood up. The big man went over backwards with a crash that shook the flier.

Immediately two energy guns in the hands of the smaller man and the busty woman pointed at Cullen.

The other girl chopped off a scream. Phoxary whistled and skipped back, out of the line of fire.

'Those guns will make a nasty mess of this flier,' Cullen said easily. 'What's the name of that land over there? Beyond the orange cliffs?'

The big man cursed, thrashed around, shoved himself up. His mottled face quivered and the black eyes darted lances of hatred at Cullen.

'You'll—' he began.

The smaller man, in his strangled voice, said: 'That's Nimbar.' He sounded amused. 'Hold it, Gunnar. This peasant may, as Phoxary has so cleverly suggested, indeed know something of Ascher.' He stared at Cullen. 'Well?'

'If he was conning a black ship, a late-model General Electronics *Puma* class, that came in on a low planetary orbit a while back, sure I know. He put a hole in my main reactor and blew all my controls.' Cullen sounded grim. 'He also killed Marty Oallaham.'

'That sounds like Ascher.'

'Don't bandy words with this jikrat!' snapped Gunnar. He clenched a meaty fist. 'Let me soften him up, Travson! I'll guarantee to make him tell us all he knows!'

The slender man, Travson, cocked an eyebrow at Cullen.

'Gunnar wants to work you over, and Roxana wants

to toss you back into the sea. What do you say?’

Cullen had time now to look at the other girl. She stood against a bulkhead, her yellow dress torn from one shoulder revealing white lace and pink flesh. Her thick dark hair hung untidily around her face, which showed not a trace of colour and in which deep blue eyes stared at him with an imploring look. Blue bruise marks showed on the flesh of her upper arms.

‘What’s she tied up for?’ asked Fletcher Cullen.

Gunnar snarled like a choking warthog.

Roxana laughed, shrilly, the evil look of pleasure in her face a blasphemy.

Phoxary moved a little further back, and one of his prehensile arms moved and the spatulate fingers touched nervously against the lensed box-like weapon at his belt.

‘Ascher, we were talking about,’ reminded Travson gently. ‘You had best tell us.’

‘What do you want to know?’ Not,’ added Cullen, ‘that I promise anything.’

‘By Ossifer! This stinking jikrat thinks he can bargain with us!’ Gunnar surged up, his bloated face swollen and ugly.

Cullen looked across at the girl in the torn yellow dress. The wires around her wrists cut deeply. She looked at him like one about to be flogged.

‘Those wires,’ said Cullen. ‘If they aren’t loosened she’ll lose her hands.’

He moved across the cabin in that flowing loose-limbed stride that had deceived many opponents before. He started to unwind the wire. The girl didn’t speak; she looked hungrily at the wires, then at Cullen’s face.

‘It’ll hurt when the wire comes off,’ he said

‘I’ll cope,’ she whispered. Two spots of colour had appeared in her cheeks.

The wire had loosened and he was slipping it off and seeing the flesh crinkled and white, sharp edged, with the blood beginning to ooze back when he heard Gunnar’s cavalry boot scrape the deck. He moved. But he was too late. The heavy ridged butt of the energy weapon smashed down on his head and, for the second time that day, Fletcher Cullen blacked out.

2

Night had dropped over Sitaz by the time he woke up and unfamiliar constellations blazed from a sky in which no moons as yet showed. He tried to lift himself up and felt the pain wash down over his head, neck and shoulder. He winced.

The fier was scudding low over the waves and he could see a faint starshine glow along the near horizon. Dark shadows moved against that glow and he made out the shapes of Travson and Gunnar looking out. They were using long-range binoculars. The busy wench, Roxana, was no longer in the compartment, and the little alien from Phalonim, Phoxary, slept in a corner. Every now and then his rubbery lips blew out and he snored in a blubbery-splashy way.

The girl at his side whispered: ‘You all right?’

‘If someone will give me my head I’ll screw it back on.’

She didn’t laugh. Which, come to think of it, was a sensible reaction right now.

He sat up again and Gunnar lowered the glasses, turned and said with thick satisfaction: ‘Sit quietly, Terran, or I’ll put the boot in.’

‘Did you put my wallet back, Gunnar? Or have you my itchy fingers betrayed you again?’

Gunnar snarled, and Travson, without lowering his binoculars, said: ‘You’re supposed to be looking for the *Vildebeest*, Gunnar. Look.’

‘Yes, well,’ rumbled Gunnar; but he went back to searching the empty sea.

‘What’s this all about?’ Cullen asked of the girl. ‘What’s your name?’

‘I’m Wendy Benson—I’m sorry you’ve become mixed up in this—’

‘Fletcher Cullen. I might get to like it—if we live.’ She shot him a quick look out of those deep blue eyes.

‘Not funny. I know. Tell me all about it.’

‘All I know is that these people landed on my island killed two of my people, took me off and now something’s happened which they didn’t expect.’

‘Your island?’

She moved her body to a more comfortable position. The wires were back on but, like those around Cullen’s wrists and ankles, were not so tightly twisted.

‘I own a small holiday island about fifty miles off the Nimbar coast. The Sitazans sold it to me a long time ago. I think these horrible people were expecting a ship to land there.’

‘That’ll be jolly roger Ascher and the *Vildebeest*,’ said Cullen. The thought seemed to give him pleasure. ‘Oh?’

‘Don’t worry about that. Roll over and let me get at those wires on your hands.’

She squirmed around in the yellow dress which appeared more interestingly skimpy every time Cullen looked. She jammed her wrists into his face and he manoeuvred around until his teeth could bite an end and twist. Lying together like that against the hull they could work in the half-dark. Over her shoulder, she said: ‘Just who are you, Mr Cullen?’

Glad of the respite, his jaws already aching, he said: ‘In plain words, lady, I’m a Galactic bum. I travel where the action and the loot are. I was bringing in a ship-load of Terran coffee—’

She gasped. ‘But that’s not allowed on Sitaz! Why—you’re a smuggler!’

‘Call it what you like. It’s not against any law that makes sense to me to drink coffee. Personally, I detest the stuff. But if these fat Sitazans want to pay in good Galactic money, who am I to disappoint them?’

She made a small sound that might have been a laugh.

‘I think that Gunnar and Travson and the others may be smugglers, too.’

‘Could be.’

‘I wouldn’t know. Hold still.’ He gave a last wrench that nearly removed his left incisor and canine and the wire dropped free from her wrists. ‘Lie still! Chafe your hands. Gently now.’

Soon Wendy Benson was working at his wires. When he was free he lay for a moment breathing deeply. Then, all in a motion that began on the floor and ended at the windows, he rose, palm-edged Gunnar

across the back of the neck, swung, put out a right fist that knocked Travson the full length of the cabin. Hardly breathing any faster, he bent over Gunnar and took the energy gun. He hefted it.

'Now,' he said conversationally, 'We can carry on our little talk.'

Phoxary woke up, blinked at the gun muzzle, whistled.

'It's nothing to do with me, Cullen. I'm a neutral observer.'

'We'll see about that. Just sit there. I've often wondered what the insides of a Phalonim looked like. You wouldn't give me that chance, would you, Phoxary?'

The whistle keened. 'I share your negative doubts.'

'Right, my girl. Tie up these two jokers. Oh,' Cullen added. 'Remember about the tightness of wires on wrists. You know.'

'I know,' she said. The wires went on as though she was baling potatoes in sacks.

Up front in the control cabin he put the point of the gun against Roxana's neck, very gently from his point of view, and said: 'Just put her on autos, Roxana, there's a sweet creature.'

After her initial jump of surprise, the girl did as Cullen told her. He shepherded her back into the main cabin and Wendy, not without a quiet joy, baled her up too.

'Now,' said Cullen, still loosely holding the gun. 'We can find out what's going on. Oh, sure, Phoxary, I know to be a neutral you intend. Just remember that.'

'To remember is to grow old in wisdom.'

'Do you know the way back to your island, Wendy?'

'Yes.'

'Can you fly this crate?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' she smiled at her. 'Do that little thing, will you gorgeous?'

'Yes.'

He laughed. This time she, too, laughed.

'Less than an hour,' she said as she went forward. 'You'll see. That is, a Rajsitazan hour. Then I'm having a bath and it'll take a brave man to stop me.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Cullen said, and added softly: 'I might even join you.'

She favoured him with a long low look over her shoulder, then she went through into the control cabin. Still smiling, Fletcher Cullen bent to talk to the little box-like alien, Phoxary.

### 3

Wendy Benson's holiday island had been fitted up as though under the direct inspiration of a television producer with delusions of grandeur. Luxury culled from a hundred planets competed to give pleasure. Cullen, after a bath—taken alone—and a change into a lavender shirt and dark blue pants, lounged on a terrace overhung with scarlet Trumpet-poppies and ochre and brown lymph-orchids, their scents heady on the night air. He wore soft leather slippers. And, as usual, he had donned his black leather gloves again.

Wendy Benson floated out on to the terrace. Gauzy wisps of clothing trailed, jewels sparkled from her hair

that had been coiled into a massy crown, her colour had been miraculously restored and she radiated an aura of passion and quietude that might have bemused a man with less-strong control of his emotions than Fletcher Cullen.

They were served by silent robots. Everything was perfect. The napery, the silver, the china was impeccable. The wine had been grown on the slopes of Mount Vintus itself, and must have lain undisturbed for a hundred years. The food melted in the mouth in fragrances and tastes subtle enough to bring tears to the eyes of Lord Appetit himself.

Cullen stretched his feet out at last and lowered the half-full wine glass.

'Those birds are safe down in that vault of yours, Wendy?'

'My robots and my people will not forget what they did when they landed here yesterday.'

'Good. We'll call the police first thing—'

She leaned forward, the silver tissue at her breast crumpling like the bow-wave from a speedboat. 'No, Fletcher—I don't think—that is—'

'No?' He raised an eyebrow.

She shook her head. 'No.'

'Well, perhaps you'd like to tell me the rest of it now?'

'The Council of Seven rule Rajsitaz, Fletcher. Their capital city is away on the other side of the world, on another continent, remote from Nimbar, unimportant. Yet the Council of Seven would like to tax us. Simple?'

'I'm not up in local politics. Do they?'

'They try. A full scale invasion, which would be necessary if they tried to rule us as oppressors, is out of the question. We tolerate CoS agents here, that is all.'

'But they want their pound of flesh?'

'Have you been on Rajsitaz before, Fletcher?'

'Nope. This is my first visit. It was Marty's first visit, too.' He unclenched his fist and stared at his hand. Then he put it flat on the table. 'Coffee!'

'They are a pleasant enough people, the Great Occiput alone knows!' She sounded exasperated, as though she loved the Sitazans despite herself. 'They're flesh and blood, like us, yet although they have eyes and ears and noses like us they don't have them distributed in exactly the same locations.'

'I've run around the Galaxy some. I've run across some odd racial developments in my time. Ever meet up with a paired Kh'ruma-floris?' He smiled. 'It's a shaky do.'

She shook her head. 'Travson and Gunnar—and Roxana, too, although she doesn't count—are trying to oust the Council of Seven and take over.'

'Well, bully for them if that means you don't pay taxes.'

'Not take over for us, for them.'

'Oh.'

'They're planning on using my—that is, this continent as a base. Recruit deluded citizens as cannon fodder. They're bringing in arms—'

'Ascher?'

'Ascher. They want to set fire to the planet, destroy every Sitazan on it, and set up their own kingdom.'

'No wonder Ascher took a shot at my ship.'

'The alien aboard their flier, Phoxary, he was the arms factor.'

Cullen chuckled without humour. 'Just as well we locked him up too, then.'

He stared at the girl, plainly aware of her beauty and appealing helplessness. He stood up and paced the terrace. Over to the east a big orange moon was rising and putting strange tints and shades into the colours of the trees and flowers outside the lights from the house. He stopped before her and looked down. She tilted her head at him. She was used to command.

'And you,' Cullen said; 'It was no accident they kidnapped you.'

Like a small girl caught in a white lie, she shook her head. 'No.'

'Ump. You figured you couldn't trust anybody.'

'Can I?' she flashed.

'I think,' he said carefully. 'I think, Wendy, you may trust me.'

'The science of the Sitazans is quite something,' she said as though coming to a decision. 'They moved along biochemical paths earlier than we did. They were tinkering with DNA and the derivatives of Lysergic Acid when we were busily putting saltpetre and sulphur and charcoal together. While we blew our enemies up they—contorted theirs.'

A movement in the orange darkness out beyond the trees took Cullen's eye. 'So?'

'So if Travson and his superiors start this insane revolt to take the planet away from the Sitazans—who have welcomed all aliens with a friendly smile, provided they pay their taxes—the planet will explode. But it will be we humans who will explode—literally and hideously.'

There was movement out there, furtive feral movement.

Slowly Cullen moved away from the table. He had not kept the energy pistols handy. He regretted that, now, now it was too late. Wendy saw the tautness in his face and started up, one hand to the silver gauze at her throat.

'What—?'

Men and aliens boiled over on to the terrace. Wendy gave a single short scream and then stood, a graven statue.

Cullen walked back to the table. He lifted his hands.

Men in dark brown uniforms with much silver glitter of buttons and epaulettes crowded him. Aliens with barrel-bodies and armoured chitinous hides and clashing snappers closed in. In the centre a dapper man with white hair and a lined face that had seen all the mischief and evil of many planets looked sorrowfully at Wendy. He wore a bottle-green uniform with cross belts and a slender sword hung at his right side. His booted feet trod the rugs of the terrace and left smeared mud marks.

'I fear you have been very foolish, my lady,' he said to Wendy Benson. He didn't even look at Cullen as he said: 'Take this oaf away and string him up.'

4

A detail closed in around Cullen and started to march

him off. He looked back at the strutting man in the green uniform.

'I'll remember you, pal,' he said.

The man ignored him. He advanced on Wendy Benson like a spider on its prey. The last Cullen saw, before a pincer the size of a refrigerator door blocked the view, was Wendy standing straight and scornful, her face hard and defiant, the silver gauze shining on her figure.

Around the corner of the house they marched and down a flight of steps into a cool moonlit garden. The moon had cleared the lower strata of cloud and now floated as a pale lemon in the sky. He could smell strange spicy scents and hear the nocturnal calls of alien insects. A great dark green tree spread massy branches. The detail stopped beneath a branch that hung about ten feet from the ground. A rope hissed and flew, caught the branch, hung down, trembling.

'Now see here, lads,' began Cullen.

A bulky crab-like alien with a pair of pincers that held the rope's end effortlessly swivelled eye stalks at him.

'Don't take this personally, chum,' the alien said. 'It's all in the line o' duty for us.'

Cullen looked around at them, half a dozen pincer-armed, scaled, tentacled aliens and three men in the brown uniforms. The men fingered their automatic weapons.

'Of course I understand,' Cullen said easily. 'Life must get pretty monotonous. I mean, when do you get to see the bright lights? When does the liquor come around?'

'That's jus' what I was saying to Ixog here,' said the alien sharply. 'We do all the work and who gets the loot?'

'Those thieving officers'll have it off all the time.'

'That's right,' put in Ixog. He flashed a nipper. 'I figure you're a good six months in pay arrears.'

'Well, you'll never collect now.'

'How's that?'

'It's a very simple wheeze, really.'

Ixog snorted. 'I told you, Bojo. I told you when they came beating their drum. But you were all for it—all for joining up, all the gab gab about free booze and females and see the galaxy—'

Other aliens joined in waving their tentacles excitedly. They started quite a ball.

'The way I see it,' said Cullen, helpfully, 'is find out which side's going to win. You've heard about that super weapon they've cooked up?'

Bojo uncurlled a tentacle with a snap. 'No. Good, is it?'

'The best. It's particularly nasty for chaps with scales—oops, sorry, Bojo.'

'Yeah, well,' said Ixog, 'us blokes with scales don't have it cake all the time.'

Bojo flipped the noose over Cullen's head. 'Still, you'll be well out of it.'

One of the men stepped forward. He sweated. 'You'd better tell us about it before we strings you up.'

'I'd sure like to help you chaps. I mean, you were suckered from your home planets into enlisting with this mob. You could tell those officers where to get off, then.'

5

'That General Hertzog. He really gets up my nose.' 'Hertzog?' said Cullen, wide-eyed. 'You mean you think that Hertzog's on your side? The Hertzog who helped develop the weapon I was telling you about?'

'Cough it up, chum.' An even bigger alien with a writhing mass of greenish tentacles rising from where his head should be pushed forward. His scales shone purple.

'Why, he practically insisted they test it out first, before they bought. Said he could provide the best targets in the galaxy.' Cullen put a hand to his mouth and looked hard at the huge alien's scales. 'I say!' He seemed overcome by his thoughts. 'No, he couldn't mean that—no!' Cullen shook his head. 'No, he wouldn't do that to you lads. Would he?'

A babble broke out in various languages. Tentacles kept poking at scales with electrifying clarity. Cullen lifted the noose from his neck.

Bojo was shouting. 'He ought to know, didn't he?'

Cullen did a fast fade in the direction of the shadows beyond the tree. He headed for the shrubbery and he moved fast and silently. The last thing he heard was Ixog indignantly saying: 'You guys with epidermic skin have it all ways—and I've run out of anti-powder these last three days.'

The darkness closed around Fletcher Cullen only this time it was a friendly cloaking darkness.

## 5

He went around the side of the house fast, stepping across trimmed lawns and avoiding gravel paths. He saw no one. The sounds of the quarrel drifted on the night air, as the various aliens argued it out in the language they had been hypno-taped into understanding tried to dominate their native tongues. Itchy scales were always a problem.

One window in the long flank of the building showed no bright reflection of the moon. A second, smaller greenish moon had swum up into the sky now. Cullen had his leg over the sill of the window when he heard two sounds. One was like that of water running down a sinkhole, the other the unmistakable click of a safety catch being pushed off.

He twisted his head. The alien regarding him was of a race he had not previously encountered. He had two eyes and a nose and a mouth but no Terran ever grew them like that. He wore a short crimson cloak, black in the moonlight, adorned with gems, around his throat a thick jewelled choker sparkled with light. In his hand a very terrestrial Stonham-Argus Mark Twenty pointed at Cullen's navel.

'D'you speak Terran?'

The alien inclined his head. His hair grew like a thistle brush, bright coppery coloured. His hands each had six fingers and the forefinger of his left hand caressed the energy-gun's trigger affectionately.

'I speak Terran with gratifying fluency. You will take a little walk with me.'

'Any time, old top,' said Cullen, cocking his leg back over the sill. 'Only do take your finger off the trigger, 6

there's a good chap. Makes me nervous—and then I get bad-tempered.'

'Your temper will have had time to cool it, son, by the time we are finished with you fertilizer invaders.'

Cullen got the drift of that. They walked across the grass and climbed into a three-place flier. The pilot looked at them in a squint.

'A fine-looking gal,' Cullen murmured as he sat down.

The pilot, whose general arrangement drawings had come out of the same drawer as the first alien's, was yet different in a way that spelled sex. She took the flier off the ground smartly. They spun over the dark tree masses.

A gush of yellow flame snaked from the house. It lanced up in a direct line leaving curlicues of light dropping away along its trail. It struck the flier's rotor head.

They started to plunge for the tree tops. Cullen grabbed for the nearest thing which happened to be the pilot sitting in front of him. Locked together they rolled over into the other alien, knocking his power gun on to the deck. The flier screamed as the blades stripped.

A gigantic smash took all the breath from Cullen's body. Then he saw a thick branch burst up through the deck at his side and go on and up through the roof. Another branch followed the first as the flier slid down into the trees. Leaves smacked his face.

'Get off me, you great lummock! I'm a Sitazan virgin, not a Terran nympho! *Gerroff!*'

Cullen hauled himself up. 'I regret the inconvenience, madam,' he said stiffly. He reached down a hand and grasped her six-fingered one. They climbed out.

The male Sitazan grunted and whoofed and pulled himself together. The three of them began to climb down the tree. The second moon's greenish light began to oust the orange first moon's.

'Dexter and Sinister are both too bright tonight,' grumbled the alien. They reached the ground and listened for a moment. The sound of insects, a small wind, nothing else except, far away, a distant tiny yelling.

'We've got one of you and we're not letting you escape.' The alien hitched up his short trousers, white beneath the cloak. 'Don't hesitate to use your gun on him, Prissee, only try not to kill him.'

'I understand all that, Garganuf. We want to know what he knows.' She looked between the trees. 'It's a long walk.'

Cullen sighed.

'Look, folks,' he began. 'I'm not one of that bunch back there. They're your fertilizer invaders—'

Prissee jerked as he used the word.

'—and they've captured Wendy Benson. They're going to take over your world, not me. I'm just a Galactic traveller.'

The alien girl and man exchanged a quick water-gurgling stream of words. Garganuf turned to Cullen.

'You are a friend of the Lady Wendy? You know her?'

'Sure. Buddy-buddies, that's us. And she's in dead trouble now. This gang of planet-jumpers—'

'We are aware of them and of their unnecessary needs. That they seek necessarily incomplete substructure—'





tures is their misfortune to be. I should explain that I and Miss Prissee here are of Rajsitaz Interplanetary Intelligence—'

'Bullseye in one. Carry on, old sport.'

'Don't you dare!' flashed Prissee.

Garganuf emitted a noise like the last drop of flushed water makes. 'He didn't mean that, girl! Your Terran needs polishing. I'll fix you a needle for it myself.'

'I've never met a more coarse race in the galaxy than the Terrans,' sniffed Miss Prissee.

Cullen took time off to look at her. Her face looked almost human here in the dim forest moons-light. Her crimson cloak over a white tunic and shorts revealed legs that although skinny were still legs. The tunic curved three times in what has euphemistically been called the right places, and Cullen guessed he could span her waist between his hands. Her coppery hair brush rather attracted him. Her mouth trembled now, and if that meant in Sitazan what it meant in Terran then she was guessing too close to his thoughts about her.

'Remind me to take you for a stroll down Bond Street next time we're on Earth,' he said. 'I'll make you the glamour Queen of Rajsitaz.'

'How disgusting can you get, Terran?'

'Hang around, Prissee, and maybe you'll find out.'

A clank sounded from the trees to the rear and immediately the sound of running feet.

'Hold it right there!' a magnified voice boomed. Bright actinic yellow light flooded down on them, blinding them.

6

Directly in the face of that glare Garganuf fired the Stonham-Argus Mark Twenty. The searchlight died. A blasphemous yell arose. Garganuf jumped for the trees. Cullen took off, scooped up Miss Prissee and dived with her full length. A gout of flame clawed at the ground where he'd been standing. He crawled into the trees dragging the alien girl. Her crimson cloak ripped and came off.

'Let me go you sex-maniac!' A six-fingered fist beat at his shoulder.

'Keep quiet, gorgeous, you know you love it.'

A glow started in the trees above him and a timber fell ablaze. Sparks drifted. Yells boomed. He crawled harder, then stood up, yanked the Sitazan girl up, smacked her amply rounded rear and said: 'Get running!' She flung him a scared look and started off. 'And don't stop,' he yelled right behind her. 'I'm on your tail!'

'You perverted beast!' She ran between the trees and Cullen had to exert himself to keep up. There was no sign of Garganuf.

After half an hour they both stopped to try to get their breaths back. Prissee slumped against a tree bole. Her white tunic and shorts were ripped and stained. Cullen's lavender shirt had long since gone, the ruffles catching on a thorn brake. He still wore his black gloves.

'I only volunteered for this assignment because my twins were both getting married.' She put her hand to her lips as she spoke that word.

'Your twins, Prissee?'

'Don't you know, Terran?' She was breathing easier now. 'We Sitazans always breed in triplets. My twins are the other two. We handle these things economically.'

'I heard you were wizards with DNA and such like. We can do clever things, too, cloning, like that—'

'Cloning! That's kid's stuff. Anyway, who wants a civilization on one planet of all the same people.'

'If they were all like you, Prissee,' said Cullen, drawing closer to her, 'I'd sure enjoy myself.'

'You filthy Terran beast! Get away!'

Still laughing he pulled her to her feet. As her six-fingered hand gripped his he looked at her, at her funny blue eyes, and he saw a shadow there, and she trembled suddenly and lowered her lids and her nictitating membranes slid across.

'Prissee! You're blushing!'

She dragged her hand away and her ragged white tunic shook. 'No I'm not. You Terrans are all the same! Sex-mad!'

He lifted a hand to put it reassuringly on her shoulder and she shrank back. He didn't touch her. The feel of her alien body between his hands had been disturbingly unsettling.

'And these other aliens are out to kill you and take over your planet, right, kid?'

'Yes.' She began to walk off. She did walk with a swing, at that, Cullen noticed. 'But we can defeat them.'

Casually, Cullen said: 'I noticed old Garganuf was using a Terran gun.'

'We have our weapons, too.'

'But not so suddenly final ones as a good ol' Terran blaster, eh?'

She rounded on him like a she-tiger. 'What do you think that ghostly General Hertzog wants with our planet? To set himself up as a king, maybe? Act your age, Cullen, if you can stop thinking about sex.'

'So Hairy Hertzog is after some one special thing eh? And you're sure it's not you?'

She halted again in the dim moons-light. 'Which way are you going now? I thought the house was back that way.'

'Quite the Girl Tracker. Sure, the house is back this way. I want to have another little talk with Hairy Hertzog. And I want to see if Miss Benson is all right.'

'I might have guessed there would be a woman in it.'

'Say, Prissee, tell me. Just who is Wendy Benson?'

'She tries to get out of paying her just taxes, I'll tell you that about her.'

'Now, now, Prissee. Jealousy doesn't become you. Gives you a nasty yellowish tinge around the eyeballs—'

'You Terrans! You think every girl is swooning to fall into your arms—'

'Don't tell me you're not, Prissee! Can I have misunderstood your signals, your whispers, your blushes— Oh, Prissee—Duck!'

The armoured and clawed alien who dropped from the branches barely missed the alien girl who had flung herself sideways at Cullen's command. Then Cullen brought his boot up into the crab-like alien's body. It was a Grichal. A claw snapped at Cullen and he backed off.

'Run, Prissee! Get to hell outta this!'

'Grichal-fodder Terran you will be!' the alien purred through a furry mouth. He flicked an elongated claw at Cullen who dodged. The girl ran into the bushes. Backing up, Cullen stepped warily, waiting for the feint from the long slender claw and the savage solid sweep from the shorter but thicker, heavier and immeasurably more powerful carving claw. He didn't try to speak. Grichals had no sense of humour.

'There is nowhere to run, Terran-damned-fodder! Grichals love juicy meat on bones. Better than slop inside exoskeletons. Grichal-fodder, Terran, come to me—'

The long skinny claw flicked. Cullen jumped backwards, grabbed a branch pulled himself up. The big solid carving claw went *thwaackkkk* through the air where Cullen had been, striking a tree trunk and slicing it cleanly in two. The tree-top began to sway, shaking the tree Cullen had climbed. He took a spring for the next branch, missed, plunged down. Leaves slapped his face. He hit on his shoulder and at once rolled over. The Grichal, slobbering over its impending meal, cantered down on him.

Something loud thrummed suddenly overhead. A wash of wind scattered the leaves of the fallen tree. The Grichal clashed his great claw . . .

Prissee's voice, from somewhere up in the air over his head, shouted down: 'Just a moment, Cullen, and we'll have you aboard.'

7

'Deoxyribonucleic acid you Terrans called the big molecule when you discovered it and some of its functions.' The Sitazan talking tucked his legs more comfortably under him on the plastic-covered bench. A soft pink light shone down on him, making his face almost human. Garganuf and Prissee and Cullen, cleaned up and wearing fresh clothes, sat opposite in the spacious cabin of the interplanetary ship.

'We experimented with the so-called life-science based futures whilst you Earthpeople tinkered with physics and electronics. You can create nuclear power at the turn of a switch, we can create human beings at—'

'Really, Bardanuf!' sniffed Prissee.

The old biochemist, whose copper hair was tingeing greenish with age, smiled at the girl. 'You don't fool me, Prissee. Your twins are married, aren't they? About time you had a few triplets yourself—'

'I don't think that is a subject we should discuss before an alien,' said Prissee primly.

'By the Great Occiput, girl! It's all these triple-damned aliens running about our planet that's causing the trouble. You CoS agents should crack your eggs more carefully.'

Garganuf, who had remained suspiciously silent, now coughed nervously, and said: 'Yes, Bardanuf, it was very good of you to rescue us. If I hadn't got to you and back in time poor Prissee would be Grichal-fodder now.'

'Well talk, then, Garganuf. Who is this Cullen human?'

'I'm just a Galactic travelling man,' said Cullen. 'I

keep telling people that. I wish they'd believe me. I'm trying to think of ways to salvage my ship *Firefly*.'

'He knows a great deal,' snapped Garganuf huffily.

'Does he know what General Hertzog and all the aliens he has recruited from different worlds want here? Eh? Do you, Terran from Solterra, do you know what those Occiput-forsaken monsters want here? H'mm?'

'Trying to fiddle their income tax, most likely. Look, Bardanuf. Let's get back to Miss Benson's house. She's in real trouble, and—'

Bardanuf cackled, almost like a human with asthma. 'She can look out for herself, can that one?'

'How's that?'

'Don't worry about her. Hertzog and she have an— understanding, I believe you call it. I'll have to have another needle. I was talking about DNA.'

Cullen stood up. 'To hell with DNA! I want to go back—that girl's in trouble—and—'

'She's in trouble at all, Cullen—and sit down, do, for the sake of the Great Occiput!' snapped old Bardanuf. 'Only because of DNA. If she is, and she won't be. I know. And despite what she may have told you—'

'She told me almost as much as you have—which is to say, damn all!'

'Tch, tch, Cullen,' reproved Prissee primly.

'These aliens, led by this animal Hertzog,' said Bardanuf with a conscious controlling effort, 'are after one especial technique, which is commonly available on planet; but not off.'

'If this will bring the black rabbit out of the coal hole, speak on, Bardanuf.'

'Suppose, Mr Cullen, you had been visiting us here in the normal way. Then—'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Coffee, Mr Cullen?'

'Now how the blue blazes did you know?'

'What would have been one of your earliest chores?'

'I get you. I'd have taken a hypno-tape on the major languages of the planet. One wasn't available when I took off, and anyway, there wasn't time—'

'Precisely, Mr Cullen.' Bardanuf beamed at him as one who has just perpetrated Fool's Mate.

'I must admit, not without some humbleness, that I just don't get it. How does Hertzog come into it?'

'Your culture uses hypno tapes a lot, do they not, Cullen?'

'Yes.'

'We don't need to. Not on Rajsitaz.'

Cullen smiled. 'I'm with you now. Sex-bomb here talked of a new needle because her Terran was slipping. That's the problem we found with biochemical knowledge transference. It worked fine with worms and rats, but injecting RNA and proteins from trained animals into untrained ones isn't quite the same as injecting a complete knowledge of a language into a man's brain and expecting it to stick.'

'We can make any knowledge we choose stick. The remarks my associates may have made about a fresh needle, I am sure, were made lightly, a joke, something you pride yourself on, Cullen.' He smiled. 'Just the same as I do.'

'I'll buy that. So you have RNA memory transference licked.'

'More than that,' Bardanuf chuckled. 'A lot more. It

was a matter of checking out the varying balances of cytosine, adenine, guanine and uracil. The way you arrange these bases on the molecule determines, Cullen. You Terrans with your electronic learning devices gave up too early, because natural elimination voided the implanted substances. You even gave up on recreation of myelin, when myelination finished you thought the brain was finished building too.'

'So?'

'So myelination is the most important key! Keep the fatty cells building and sheathing, get the oligodendroglial cells extruding, and you can build super brains!'

'I'll take your word for it.'

Prissee jerked resentfully at Cullen's tone; but the old biochemist waved her down. 'You don't have to take my word, Terran. We can build a superman, we can give him super powers, and we can stick a hypo in his brain that will make him the abject slave of whoever commands him.'

'Hertzog—?'

'That animal brought his pack of trained alien monsters here to steal the secrets of Sitazan biochemistry. It was just an extra-large piece of violent industrial espionage. We had made certain arrangements to welcome him after his first contact. But this time he was after the big secret.'

Garganuf moved. His face looked unhappy. 'Should you tell this alien all this, Bardanuf?'

'By the Great Occiput, Garganuf! Who's running this show?'

Cullen said: 'So that's that, then, Bardanuf.'

'All right, Terran. I'll lay it on the line for you. Naturally we kept our work a secret; but news at last got out to a galactic villain like Hertzog with his own private army and pirate-hell-hole-planet. He decided to take over Miss Benson's island and use it as a base for invasion.'

'Ascher?'

'Was not bringing in guns as Miss Benson informed you.'

'Now how in nine planets did you know that—?'

'Ascher was bringing in location equipment which Hertzog had to ignore when he came in to clean up the trouble. Now he's waiting on the island for his next wave of ships to come in. They're up there now, waiting. When they come in after the fresh location equipment has been delivered we can say good-bye to Rajsitaz.'

Cullen nodded. 'He'll burn the planet, raze it, after he's got what he wants.'

Prissee clucked unhappily. 'He'll have the techniques to construct as many individuals as he requires, each with super powers and each under his absolute control.'

'And you don't have to have a University degree to predict what he'll do with them!'

'I thought you said cloning was kids' stuff?' Cullen said.

'So it is. Surely this ambition of Hertzog's is that of a deprived underprivileged child getting his own back on the galaxy?'

A wall screen lit up and a collie-like shaggy head with funnel ears showed. 'I've got a blip now, Bardanuf.'

At first Cullen thought the Phalonim was Phoxary;

then he saw slight differences and relaxed.

'Keep on it, Phosphale. That's likely the ship.'

'What ship?' asked Cullen.

'Bolande Yonqu, the man who runs General Hertzog.'

'Runs Hertzog. I get it, then we're in—' Cullen stepped across to the screens, elected a pattern and pressed keys. A fifty-inch screen lit up. It showed the vast lazy curve of a planet with flossy clouds striding the terminator and a brilliant eye of highlight glancing from the day side. In all that brilliance the stars were engulfed; but Cullen knew they were there, surrounding him, all the stars of space.

8

'Since the moment Hertzog took over Miss Benson's home we've had time against us. Bolande Yonqu is the key and I've got to turn that key.' The hypodermic Bardanuf was filling showed full and he withdrew it from the ampoule, checked it, then sealed the tip with instatite and packed the needle into a foamplastic sheath. This he stowed away in a metallic flat box. 'This,' he said tiredly, 'is the key.'

Phosphale's collie-face on the screen said: 'It's a Northern FSY *Konigen* class. If that is Bolande Yonqu—'

'A *Konigen*!' snapped Cullen. 'They're hell on wheels!'

Bardanuf looked crushed. The metal case shook in his six-fingered hand. 'I hadn't anticipated such strength in the location equipment vessel. We Sitazans do not entirely comprehend mechanical and electronic weaponry—this is—'

'Yeah,' said Cullen. 'I know what this is. She's a Sardonius Confederation *Achilles*. She's all of fifty years old and long in the tooth. I bet your IR fails to register in the high octaves. And as for armament, even the Mark III star version only carried popguns.'

'It's the best we could buy in the time,' said Bardanuf defensively.

'Well, she's just not good enough. If you go up against a *Konigen* in this rust-bucket we'll all be frozen meat balls, permanently.'

Prissee shuddered.

'This Bolande Yonqu. He's the key, the king pin?' Cullen stretched one massive hand and took the metal box containing the hypo. 'They shouldn'ta killed Marty Ohallaham. That was their big mistake.'

He went out into the corridor and headed for the lifehell deck. The old spaceship hummed with activity; but it was all for peanuts. Her armour would crumple like charred silver paper under the fire of the *Konigen*'s guns.

Prissee, breathing heavily, her face flushed and her coppery hair glinting, charged after him. Garganuf and Bardanuf followed, twittering apprehensively.

'Lend me your Stonham-Argus, Garganuf.'

The power gun changed hands, from six-fingered to five-fingered.

The life shells looked in reasonable trim. Cullen cracked the seals and eased into the lock. Lights shone at half power. He cursed, failed around, found the straps and belted himself into the pilot's throne. To his rear the shell showed triple rows of empty car-type

seats.

Ready lights glowed on the board. He selected the pattern he wanted, set up for full boost, then turned to see Bardanu's alien face looking at him through the lock.

'Cullen, you don't have—'

'I know what I do and don't have to do.'

Garganuf started to climb in. The CoS agent looked grim.

'Get out of it, Garganuf! This one's on me.'

'This is my job—'

Cullen hit a tab. 'If you don't get your head out of there, old buddy, the lock will decapitate you.'

Garganuf withdrew hurriedly.

The lock clanged shut. It held an empty sound.

He opened up the radio channel. 'Give me fifteen minutes. Then fire everything you have at the *Konigen*. After that—hightail it out of here! Crawl into a hole and pull the planet in on top of you!'

'If you say so, Cullen.' Prisse's voice sounded miserable.

Cullen hit the firing pattern and the lifeshell blasted away from the flank of the *Achilles*.

9

Fourteen and one half minutes later the control board looked like a Christmas tree with indigestion. Red lights pocked the board. His power levels were low and dropping fast. The screens showed him the limitless sparkle of space, star after star as far as his vision would go.

Low in the left hand corner a large blob of light hung, occulting on a five second rhythm.

'Those *Konigen*s are big,' he said to no one in particular.

The air in the lifeshell tasted flat and used up. A hot rubber smell gusted up from somewhere behind the board like a bad night at a fried fish shop. Cullen wiped sweat away and jockeyed the little craft in closer.

His radar and IR telltales remained silent and lightless. So far so good. He looked again at the sweep hand of the pre-set chronometer. Twenty seconds to go.

'They need this location equipment down there bad,' he said to himself. 'Ascher in the *Puma* didn't make it, so now the big boy is coming in in person aboard his *Konigen*. Just give me fifteen seconds . . .'

He flipped the little lifeshell in around the blind side of the huge ship. She showed on his visuals now, a vast grey-green bulk sliding by, pitted with ports and airlocks and weapons mountings. Still his own telltales remained lightless.

The radio channel burped to life.

'Cullen?' The voice grew and faded like distant surf. 'We're firing—as you asked. But it's too late. They've captured the template Benson. You'd better quit now, while you're still alive.'

'Be damned to that!'

'Remember—Bolande Yonqul—the key—' The voice died.

The *Konigen's* alarms set to wide-angle to detect the approach of intercepting battle-wagons had missed the lifeshell. Cullen hung the little craft beside an airlock with a big yellow-painted numeral eight and waited.



Moments later he felt the shudder through the two hulls as the miniature firepower of the *Achilles* hit the big ship.

A radiance grew outlining the curve of hull. Flames shot away attenuating into space. Cullen shrugged on a fishbowl and a halfsuit, turned up the air full blast, and cracked the lifeshell seal. He went across to the lock as though a bulldog had closed its teeth in his pants. The manual revolved with a blur of spokes. He thumbed the button and the airlock cracked. Inside he cycled the lock and shucked the helmet and halfsuit, checked the Stonham-Argus was thrust down his waist-band. Then he stepped out into the corridor.

A shrill bell clamoured like a thousand *Oliver Twists* hitting tin basins. Men in fancy uniforms galloped past. A vast blurry voice Tannoyed from a speaker hitched to the overhead.

'Action stations! Action stations! Full overload lock on! Jump to it!'

Cullen dived into the crowd and was swept along. His grey pants and shirt and short boots couldn't have looked too odd. His black gloves helped, too. A couple of fuzzy-haired Dingalans with purple sashes around their spined shoulders hustled past, their four sets of multiple eyes bugging every which way at once. Everybody seemed to want to get in on the act. Aliens and men began to peel off, heading for grey-steel armour doors that Cullen guessed led to the weapons bays. He split his thin lips in a nasty smile. This great fat *Konigen* was really hot up over the pin-pricks the little *Achilles* was dishing out.

At the next cross corridor he turned right, heading for the centre of the ship.

A red-faced fat man in a berry-brown uniform with a lot of gold braid popped up, working his jaw muscles.

'You're heading the wrong way! What are you, some kind of coward, ducking out—'

Cullen hit him alongside those turkey-gobbling jaws, laid him gently on the deck. The fellow wore a shoulder-sash, bright purple watered-silk with a fancy silver badge in the centre. Cullen stripped it off and threw it over his own left shoulder and head, settled it on his right shoulder.

'It's one way of gaining rank,' he grunted, and heaved the officer up.

A small door with scuff marks around the lock opened to a closet with a semi-sentient cleaning dolly dozing on the floor. Cullen dumped the unconscious man. He prowled along the corridor until he found a junction box painted fire-engine red. A butt-slam from his gun snapped the door open. He studied the wiring and the screwed tags, then he went for broke and spat a gob of energy from the power gun. The box fused then erupted into a catherine-wheel of sparks and gobs of melted metal. Cullen chuckled and loped on up the corridor.

The Tannoy yelled. 'Hits reported in aft sections ten, twelve and fourteen—'

'Damage Control! Get three squads down there! Move!'

Cullen glanced up at the squawkboxes.

'Have fun, chumps,' he said. He wasn't laughing.

He headed up towards the mid-section of the ship. He hit two more junction boxes and, occasionally, shot

out lengths of the ducting and piping flanking the passageways.

The orders flowed faster from the squawkboxes.

'Where are the hits coming from? I can't get a thing—'

His gun was just glowing to cherry red from melting down an important looking junction when three Phalonim marched around the corner up ahead. Their funnel ears pricked up. Their collie-dog heads opened in sharp bars of surprise.

Cullen took off for an intersecting corridor and felt the slugs hit him. Two smashed into his left shoulder, spun him around, slammed him into the bulkhead. Shock dragged a grey fog down over his eyes and he fought to keep it off.

The Phalonim charged up, guns ready for a second salvo. Cullen slumped, then triggered a quick Stonham-Argus burst. The leading alien sprouted a cabbag-sized red-rimmed black hole in his square chest. He screeched and went down. The other two skidded to a halt, the second one got his gun up when Cullen's blast cut his arm and right side away.

The power gun coughed its rosate glow of fire again and the third alien dived sideways, whipped his projectile gun up, fired full in Cullen's face. He felt the crack along his head and everything danced scarlet and yellow and white, fire and thunder and thumbscrews and racks tearing claws of pain down his head.

He got his legs under him and tried to force himself up. His legs were made of chewed dough. He collapsed and saw mistily, limned with light, the Phalonim bringing the gun around to bear down on him.

The Stonham-Argus grunted again and the whole front of the Phalonim blossomed out into red and black gobbets flying out to splatter the bulkhead.

The Cullen flopped back on to the decking and felt the whole mass of the ship fall in on him.

10

Somebody had a meat hook stuck into his head and was dragging him through a dark hole where the reflected light of imp-dancing fires promised that he'd never get out once they dragged him in. He tried to push himself up and felt cold metal under his cheek. He opened an eye and winced and waited a little until the pain went away. He couldn't have been out for more than a couple of minutes.

The three dead Phalonim made a mess on the decking.

Like a man whose legs have been sawed off he stood up, wavering, and then lurched off down the intersecting corridor. Lights burst before his eyes and gongs thundered in his head. But he had to get to Bolande Yonqu.

His left arm felt pretty useless, not that he could feel anything from it. Blood stained the grey shirt all over the shoulder. He reached across with his right hand and tucked his left hand into his shirt. He'd gone a little further when he realized he didn't have the power gun. He couldn't go back for it now.

A scrap of strength he hadn't known he possessed forced his trembling legs on. He found a ladder and fought his way up it. Black tides of pain kept washing

over him and he kept pushing them back. The pain kept him from blacking out, a prod, a reminder, a little jab to keep him going.

A man wearing a brown uniform appeared and shouted and Cullen hit him in the lower abdomen, chopped his neck as he went down. He forged on as though wading through treacle.

He passed steel armour-doors. He heard a distant shouting and the pounding of many feet. He glanced about.

His vision cleared a little, enough so it was as though he was peering through a wobbling raspberry jelly on a kid's birthday party plate. There were a few brown uniforms about him now; but also plenty of bottle-green ones. White and brown and black blobs that were faces turned towards him. A bristle-topped Haf'narun with goggle-eyes and four double-jointed arms got in his way and Cullen cuffed him down. The alien squeaked and ran scuttling.

A haven showed ahead, a shiny door with big ornate handles. He reeled up to it, palmed the starter and as the door opened and he staggered through a covey of slugs ricocheted off the architrave. He stumble-footed through and recognized the bridge anteroom with a few gap-mouthed deck officers in bottle-green. They looked as though they'd been caught with their hands in the till.

The door closed wheezily. Cullen waved his right hand.

'Hey, you monkeys!' he shouted angrily. 'What's going on up here? We've been hit bad aft—haven't you heard the alarms? Where's the big boy?'

The officers milled. They weren't used to space action. 'It's only a little old *Achilles*!' one of them protested. 'An interplanetary scow brought to this goddamned system and stuck together with chewing gum! We've enough—'

'You've enough guts between you to equip a mouse!' yelled Cullen. 'Now get on those damage repair parties! *Mouve!*'

He barged through them, headed for the opposite door. A pounding started on the door he'd left.

'You're not an—' began a Phalonim, squaring up.

Cullen hit the alien in the collie-dog jaw and jumped over him. He went skidding through the next door and heeled it shut behind him. A big Grichal clashed its long feinting claw at him, the carver held trembling and ready a foot above the floor.

'Where's Bolande Yonqu, peasant?' shouted Cullen, pushing the long claw out of the way. He barrelled right up to the Grichal, who pulled back, puzzled. 'Come on, come on, dimwit! Snap it out!'

'On the bridge—'

'At least he's where he ought to be!'

He forced his way past the Grichal. Pain began to flow back from the gash in his head, down his neck, collecting in a pool of pure agony in his shoulder. He waded on, feeling his legs kicking against the floor like footless stumps. An armour-steel door opened and a man with a scarlet face and a bottle-green gold-braided uniform burst through. He was furious.

'What's going on—' he began.

Cullen chopped him hard on the neck putting all his waning strength into the blow. The man went down

with his arm flung at an awkward angle. Cullen went on through.

A *Konigen* class possessed a large and complex bridge structure. Misty light curled in around the edges of the scene and Cullen shook his head, fighting the pain, tried to focus eyes that were like red-hot marbles. Men and aliens at battle stations turned to stare at him. He lurched forward.

'Bolande Yonqu!' he shouted. 'It's an emergency!'

At last through the various chart rooms and message centres and general ready rooms he had penetrated the control centre proper. He put his right hand into his pocket and hauled out the flat metal box. Clumsily he jammed it open and fumbled the plastic sheathing out. The box fell to the decking.

'Come on, come on!' he shouted. 'All the aft sections are shot away!'

Someone bulldozed up to him.

'You can't come in here raving like a lunatic, soldier! Get back to your post! We know what the battle situation is—'

'Like hell you do! There is no battle station left!' Deck officers whirled back to their boards. Lights sprinkled them, mostly green, a clutch of reds and fluctuating oranges indicating where Cullen had smashed his way through the ship.

'There's no indication of extensive damage—'

'Put a general call through to all sections aft of frame five hundred!' boomed a new voice.

Cullen squinted his eyes against the glare and the opening and shutting of his skull. He lurched and fumbled the plastic sheath in his fingers.

Bolande Yonqu moved down the shining deck towards him.

'You've made a nasty mistake, soldier.' Yonqu's voice sounded like steel bars grating against steel piling. His blocky body bulked like a steam boiler. His four arms, each as thick as a horse's gaskin, rolled with muscle. He wore a purple uniform that strained over his leathery skin. His wide grey face loomed over Cullen like a gravestone.

'You'll pull ten years in the cooler for this, soldier! Now get back to your grease hole where you belong!'

Yonqu gestured and men closed in. Cullen wanted to drop. He clawed at the pain in his shoulder, made it writhe in his mind, cradled it, nursed it, used it to force himself to stand up straight. The scene kept flowing in and out of focus and black shadows dropped down and vanished in soundless gouts of white fire.

'General Hertzog—' he got out jerkily.

Yonqu turned back. He reached out his lower right hand with its spatulate fingers like eight bananas on a stem, each glinting with a jewelled ring. He gripped Cullen's shirt and dragged him up. Cullen felt the blooded shirt rip.

'What do you jikrat know of General Hertzog? Speak quick now or you'll never speak again.'

Cullen fell forward. This was his last effort. He toppled forward and the plastic sheathing fell off the hypo and the flat nozzle nuzzled Yonqu's thick sagging neck. Cullen pressed the trigger. The high-pressure jet coughed like a faucet clearing itself and Yonqu jerked back and his hand swung in a flat arc and clumped alongside Cullen's head and the world went up and

around in lights and noise and blackness came down and Cullen caught a single scarlet glimpse of the end of the universe coming up at him in cap and bells and all the lights went out.

11

'Fundamentally the whole show was a confrontation between two differing disciplines of science,' said Bardonuf comfortably, leaning back on the cushions. Around them the subdued lighting of the *Achilles* glowed warmly. Bardonuf took a gentle sip of golden wine. 'The Terran obsession with hard science, physics and electronics and cybernetics, posed problems we weren't equipped to deal with.' He glanced at the Wendy Benson sitting to Cullen's right.

Cullen looked at the Wendy Benson sitting to his left.

She smiled a little nervously. 'I like the Sitazans,' she said. 'They were good to me. My island is a hide-away from the rather coarse galaxy. So I agreed.'

'Plastic surgery, life-sciences,' said the other Wendy Benson amusedly. 'I'm a Sitazan, Fletcher Cullen, yet you thought me nothing else but a Terran.'

'So,' said Cullen. 'When Ascher in his *Puma* spotted me coming in and opened fire and poor old Marty fired right back—'

'You threw the mutant spore into the seedpack, Cullen.'

Garganuf, with Prissece, sat silently, taking it all in.

'You see, Cullen,' went on Bardonuf, in between sips of wine, 'when you slapped Ascher's *Puma* down you interfered with our plan. We'd put our own Miss Benson in ready and waiting. She would have welcomed, more or less, the invaders and then slipped the hypo to Hertzog and to Bolande Yonqu.'

'He acted like little Lord Fauntleroy after I pricked him,' said Cullen. 'Not, of course, that I knew anything about it. Not until I woke up aboard this ship in the sick bay.'

'We may not perfectly comprehend the antics of particles in charged fields, or nuclear engineering on an interstellar scale,' Bardonuf nodded. 'But once we can put our hooks into a man's brain we can control him. Oh, yes, Yonqu and Hertzog came to Rajsitaz to steal the secrets of controlling supermen off the production line; but they failed to reckon with that biochemical technique itself. Once you had stuck Yonqu I had him under my personal control. They all gave in like your terrestrial lambs. The invasion is over.'

Cullen glanced at the template terrestrial Wendy. She smiled nervously back. He switched to the duplicate Sitazan Wendy; she gave him a wider smile, amused, half-mocking. He turned to Prissece.

'Looks like we sex-mad Terrans are of some use after all, then, Prissece?'

She sniffed. 'If I was you, Wendy,' she said to the pair of them, 'I'd not trust this Fletcher Cullen a single inch.'





# NUMBER 7

by Eric C. Williams

*The house at No. 7 Good Peace Road looked a perfectly ordinary house . . . except that no one could go into it, nor come out of it!*

1

The Co-ordinator, South East Region, opened the door of his office, walked three steps down the corridor, opened a door marked 'Technical Overseer, Demolitions' and shouted 'Get down to New Cross, Fred, and see what's holding them up. Murchison's been on the phone about some place he can't crack. Sounds as if he's cracking himself. Let me know.' He threw the door shut.

Frederick Hasty ground his teeth at his superior's sandpaper manners and general unpleasantness. Properly, Hasty ranked high and rated 'Sir', but to Tortman he merited less consideration than the commissioner on the door. Tortman treated Managers like dogs and Engineers like office boys. Although he had no brains, he had, unfortunately, a towering genius for mastering the incredible details connected with rebuilding London, and he had proved this so many times during the long years of tearing down and building up that he was now in the invulnerable position of a demigod. Subordinates who complained about the treatment meted out to them by the Co-ordinator received nothing but sympathy from the Home Office.

Frederick Hasty swallowed his pride, put aside the work he was doing, and went for his overcoat. He was very sharp with the chauffeur.

The ride from New London House overlooking the Thames to New Cross four miles to the south was the usual nightmare. Convoys of removal trucks, convoys of cement trucks, convoys of police proceeding towards disturbances, convoys of rubble-trucks, dust like a thick fog everywhere, sudden cyclones of hot air spinning out from the scene of current demolition where banks of lasers blasted brick and mortar to blazing dust. Bedlam everywhere.

Hasty's chauffeur driven, air conditioned limousine wended its way slowly through the uproar until the Old Kent Road ended and they bumped off on to a road made of crushed bricks along which a seeming never ending line of rubble-trucks came and went. The chauffeur took it very calmly, having survived almost 10 years of these driving conditions. Hasty still found it all very exhausting. When they stopped, he got out and began to enquire his way through the fog and explosive uproar to the Clerk of Works' hut. Almost instinctively he adopted a battlefield crouching trot, dodging from shadowy group to looming crane as if

pursued by snipers.

Murchison was drinking a cup of tea when Hasty squeezed through the dust trap and entered the cluttered office. He waited while Hasty went through a long routine of nose blowing, throat clearing and hat banging.

'How on earth do your men find you, tucked away like this?' complained Hasty at last. 'Got a cup of tea? Tortman didn't give me any idea as to the trouble you've got, of course. I hope it was worth coming for.'

Murchison smiled in a tired way. Ten years of non-stop filth, noise and responsibility had worn him into a dry-faced old man as checrful as a brick. Hasty had not seen him for two years and he was dismayed at the change. Did he look as weary and chewed up as Murchison? Sometimes, working under Tortman's elbow all the time, he felt it.

'I think it's worth it, in fact, I know you'll enjoy this, Fred,' said Murchison. 'You'll be able to put it right in Tortman's lap and watch him batter his brains out on it.'

'That's where he keeps his brains I sometimes think,' agreed Hasty. 'But what are you talking about?'

Murchison got up and began putting on his dust coat.

'We've got a house here we just can't knock down. Lasers don't touch it: dynamite neither. We can't even open the front door to look inside. Come on, I'll show you. If Tortman can sort this one out I'll be disappointed.'

They threaded their way across acres of chaotic, crumbling wall foundations where hundreds of bulldozers roared like mad beasts as they snuffed the earth. Trucks loaded with rubble bounced their way through the choking dust headed for the distant sites of mile wide artery roads. Ahead, blinding sheets of light accompanied by howling columns of dust showed where the lasers were swinging their deadly scythes of light, tumbling street after street of century-old houses. Hasty wondered how anyone could find their way about in such a holocaust. Even through his mouth filter he could taste grit—it billowed about the scene, now black with smoke, now the pure red or yellow of raw brick, surging in dense clouds as walls fell, rolling across the miles of desolation like sand storms. Helicopters circled overhead adding a fine dust of insecticides and antibiotics to the atmosphere.

'There it is,' shouted Murchison into Hasty's ear. He pointed towards a tangle of cranes and mobile lasers gathered some way off on the face of the brick plain.

The men were sitting idle on their machines waiting for Hasty. There was a peculiar half grin of satisfaction on Murchison's face as he led Hasty through the line

of vehicles and nodded to the house beyond. 'This is Number 7 Good Peace Road. What do we do with it?'

Hasty had carefully kept an open mind. He did not believe for a moment that the house resisted the terrible force of laser beams, but he knew Murchison well enough to know there was a man size problem here. He also knew from long experience in the field that as the 'brains' he was expected to solve the problem with the minimum help from the 'brawn'. He put on an air of alert command and walked silently towards the mean, two storied building inspecting it thoroughly for peculiarities. Two inches from the panel of the front door his hand hit an invisible wall, spraining his thumb. He ran his other hand over the smooth obstruction, walking across the narrow face of the building until he came to the raw edge of brick where the next house in the terrace had been sheered off.

'It goes all the way round,' called Murchison, 'and over the top.' He leaned against the giant wheel of a mobile crane and watched unhelpfully while Hasty stood massaging his thumb and attempting to think of some dynamic course of action.

'Let's see what the lasers do,' said Hasty. He joined Murchison who nodded to one of the laser truck operators. The heavy apparatus warmed up and then spat its bolt of light at the building. The invisible wall became instantly blacker than any midnight. It appeared as a high matt black square in the daylight, into which the bolt dropped to utter extinction. Immediately the wall returned to invisibility.

'See?' asked Murchison unemotionally. 'Want to see the dynamite?'

'No,' said Hasty irritably. 'Have you tried digging under the house?'

'A short way,' confirmed Murchison. 'The wall seems to go on down.'

'Well, try it a bit further,' decided Hasty. 'If we can get underneath we could mine it—blow it out of the ground.'

'You're the boss,' said Murchison in his best defeated voice. He went over to a group of men and talked to them. They got on to their diggers and moved in. They dug for some time, reaching down their long metal arms and dragging the clay up. Murchison and Hasty watched in silence.

'All right,' said Hasty at last. 'No use going on. You'll have the lot cave in in a minute. Whatever it is seems to go on quite a way. We'll have to dig under by some other method.'

He stood and thought.

'There's nothing more we can do for the moment. Put a guard on this place so that any change can be reported at once. I'll go back and organize the drill for getting under the house. I'll try to keep Tortman quiet.'

Murchison cracked his face momentarily. 'Don't bother. He's welcome to this. I'd like him to come down and look at this personally. You never know, it might send him crackers. Or he might get in and not be able to get out again.'

They left the strange little house standing dwarfed in its circle of machines.

'What do you make of it?' asked Murchison in a voice he purposely rid of expression.

Hasty did not have such a thick layer of self-protecting armour. He allowed the temper he had felt all afternoon to come through: 'Oh, how the devil do I know what it is! Who do you think I am, bloody Einstein! You know damn well it's nothing to do with science as we know it. There's nothing known on earth will stand up to a laser like that did. Be your age, Murch. Who do you think you're needing?'

'Sorry, Fred,' apologized Murchison. 'I'm not needing you. Just a stupid question. I don't mind admitting I'm nearly daft thinking about the place. I had men on it half a day before I called Tortman, I feel done in.'

He led the way into the hut and threw off his dust coat. 'Fred, you might as well get used to the idea, we're not going to shift that house. It's going to stick like a sore thumb in Tortman's plans. This is science from somewhere we don't know of and Tortman and all his bloody orders will not move it.'

Tortman listened to Hasty's report with a growing expression of contempt. When he had finished, he lifted the telephone and ordered two more engineers to visit the scene.

'Don't look so injured,' he told Hasty in a voice of ice. 'You ought to be grateful I don't boot you out of this office. Get back to your office and sober up. I may not know much science but I know enough.'

The two engineers reported.

Tortman went down the corridor to Hasty's office.

'Have you got that drill for New Cross?'

'No,' said Hasty with hate.

'Why not?' demanded Tortman. 'Hurry it up, Fred. I want to hear this No. 7 place has been lifted out by tonight.'

He slammed the door shut in his usual way.

Hasty managed to get a drill and operators by late afternoon. They drilled at angles towards the region below the house, but no matter how deep their aim the drill always came against an impenetrable wall. Hasty called them off two hours before midnight. He went to Murchison's hut to telephone Tortman.

'We're 200 feet down and still hitting the wall,' he announced.

'Go down to 400 feet,' ordered Tortman instantly. 'Do I have to tell you everything?'

'But you won't be able to lift that amount of soil with the charge we could use,' protested Hasty.

Tortman replaced the receiver without a word.

They gave up at 600 feet. Tortman gave the order over the phone with ugly control. 'I'm coming down there myself,' he said, and Hasty was tired enough to say 'bring your own pickaxe.'

Tortman banged his fist on the invisible wall, kicked it and even tried his penknife on it. He tried to keep an impassive face but he was obviously annoyed. He asked to be raised to the first floor windows so that he could see inside, the ground floor being curtained. He took Hasty up with him on the tackle.

'What is this bloody place?' he asked Hasty in a low voice as they swung fifteen feet above the ground. They looked into a bare room from which even the oil-cloth had been removed. It differed in no way from the million other houses that had been evacuated and destroyed in the grand plan to rationalize London.

'The house is normal,' said Hasty: 'it's the wall round it that's supernormal. I just can't imagine—and I'm too tired to guess.'

Tortman ordered the crane to lift them above the house, and he had sufficient courage to step out upon the invisible horizontal ceiling and to stand suspended in midair to the horror of the watchers below.

On the ground again, Tortman became unexpectedly considerate towards Hasty. He drew him away from the crowd and put an arm across his shoulders.

'Go home and get some sleep, Fred. You look terrible. I want you fresh on this. I'm going to give you this problem because I can trust you to carry out things to their logical ends just as I would do. You know that rebuilding is due to start here in three weeks time: I want that house rooted out by then. I feel I can rely on you not to let the Ministry down. I give you unlimited power. Your signature will be as good as mine in this matter.'

Hasty felt sick.

Over the next few days Hasty tried everything he could think of. He tried acids, electric shocks, X rays, proton bombardment, supersonic and subsonic waves, he had explosive charges sunk deep all around the house and simultaneously detonated, he ordered colossal weights to be dropped on the house from above. Not a speck of dust was dislodged from the grimy walls. The battle front of devastation had retreated by now into the far distance towards the Docks and No. 7 stood lonely and prominent in the levelled plain around it. It attracted idle newspaper men and visiting technicians from other Ministries. All official enquiries were referred to Tortman. He told everybody to mind their own business: when they refused to do this, he had the area cordoned off. But questions began to come in from sources which could not be silenced by rudeness, and Tortman began to get rattled.

'Do something you first-class moron!' he raved at Hasty. 'You've done nothing but spend money since I gave you the job. You've bound up men and machines and you've not achieved a thing. I thought I could rely on you, Fred.'

Hasty leaped from his chair and advanced his face close to Tortman's. He was more rattled than Tortman.

'You can keep the job. I'm stumped. Everybody's stumped. And don't call me a bloody fool, you swine!'

'Calm down, Fred. Don't let it rattle you,' advised Tortman.

'Rattled!' said Hasty breathlessly. 'You pick a funny word to describe it. Here we are up against science from another world, or something, and you tell me not to get rattled. I'm scared stiff. I tell you that every time I batter at that wall I'm expecting all hell to break loose. It could, you know. Whatever is holding that wall in position is more powerful than anything we've got and it might easily get annoyed.'

Tortman laughed savagely. Hasty was sobered by the anguish he saw in Tortman's face.

'Sit down, Fred,' Tortman said, guiding Hasty to a chair. 'I just won't have it. There's no such thing as super science or flying saucers or men from Mars or any of that tosh. This thing has got a natural explanation and you're going to find it. You've worked your

brain raw tackling this from one angle—how to knock down the wall—well, I'll set you on another tack: how to *switch* off the wall.'

Tortman gave his bare teeth smile, as Hasty frowned with incomprehension.

'The house is being protected by someone, and not someone from Mars, but someone from No. 7 Good Peace Road or connected with it. Get that into your head. You won't have to look through a telescope to find who is responsible for this: you'll just have to use your head. Find out all you can about No. 7: who built it, who owns it, who has lived in it since it was built, particularly who was the last occupier: find out if any alterations were carried out in recent years—things like that. Somewhere in that lot will be the answer. It *must* be.'

Tortman said this last so emphatically that Hasty's eyes were fully opened to the panic that must seeth inside his superior.

'O.K.,' he said. 'Thanks for the line. I'll start on it right away.'

'Don't forget,' said Tortman earnestly as Hasty departed, 'there's no such thing as men from Mars.'

'What about Jupiter, though,' muttered Hasty in the corridor.

Hasty set other people to build up the past history of No. 7 Good Peace Road. He selected for himself the easier course of visiting the last occupier of the house, now temporarily resettled in Blackheath.

The vast, prefabricated settlement cube had been built on the ancient Common. It held 20,000 people who slept in dormitories and ate in canteens. It was a hideous, roaring, smelly ant heap, and Hasty thanked his creator that he had been wealthy enough to buy temporary accommodation for himself in St. Albans.

The last occupant of No. 7 had been an Indian, Pani Meerwhani, with his wife and eight children. The man and wife now occupied a minute cubicle holding a double bed and cabinet, their children being accommodated in three different dormitories according to age.

The man spoke in a rapid, precise English that reminded Hasty of the new speaking typewriters. When he learnt that Hasty was connected with the Home Office he exploded in a long and involved complaint about the dispersal of his family. Hasty heard him solemnly to the end. He then said, unconsciously copying the Indian's style: 'I have heard and I will reflect upon this. Now attend to me and give me your answers clearly. During the time you lived at No. 7 Good Peace Road were any alterations made to the electric power supply?'

Pani Meerwhani veiled his watery eyes.

'No changes,' he said smartly.

'Did the landlord ever leave any boxes in the house?'

'No boxes.'

Hasty could see that the Indian was pathologically conditioned against co-operating with officials. Hasty offered the Indian a cigarette.

'There's something queer about that house you lived in,' he said reflectively as if talking to himself. 'It doesn't seem like other houses. Did you notice that when you lived there? Something peculiar altogether?'

The Indian kindled. He jumped from the chair in

which he had sat after his opening speech.

'Very peculiar, indeed. Ah yes, this I say with no fear of controversy, Number 7 Good Peace Road was very strange, very strange indeed, Sir.'

Hasty nodded seriously, and said, 'Um.'

'The spirits wandered often through its rooms. Once in the middle of daylight I saw my eldest son as a grown man walk through in shining robes.'

'Indeed!' murmured Hasty, 'that must have been frightening.'

'Frightening? No, not frightening, Sir: full of strange portent perhaps.'

'How old is your eldest son?' asked Hasty for the want of something to say.

'Fifteen. And you are wondering how I recognized my son as a grown man?'

'Yes,' admitted Hasty, although his mind was in reality far from being so concise.

Pani Meerwhani held up a finger. 'Wait,' he said and walked from the cubicle. Mrs Meerwhani seated on the bed for lack of other space, smiled slightly at Hasty and maintained her silence. The Indian returned after a long, awkward, interval pushing a slightly built boy before him.

'My eldest son, Rao,' said Pani Meerwhani. He pointed to the terrible red blotch of skin on the boy's right cheek. 'You see? But there is also this.' He lifted the boy's left hand. The thumb was missing. Other than these two mutilations the boy was beautiful. His eyes, particularly were more expressive than those of any European boy Hasty had even seen.

'And you saw your son walk through the room?' asked Hasty beginning to be interested.

'He was dressed in gold and he carried a great flower in his left hand. That is why I saw his hand. While he looked upon us we could not move. He smiled at us and walked on. Is this not so, Rao?'

'Yes, father. I came to see you.'

'Well,' said Hasty in some embarrassment. 'Well, what do you make of it? Were there others?'

'Speak, Rao,' said Pani gently.

'There were many,' said the boy in his clear, unflinching voice, 'and we all saw them. There was one man who came many times. He was dressed in black and his face was always sad. He once knelt before me and looked at me with great feeling so that when he was gone and I could move I cried for a long while. And my own visit was to see my mother and father again. I could tell that I was very happy. What it means is something I do not know.'

Hasty sat for some moments in baffled silence. He had come hoping to hear of peculiar machines installed by visiting electricians, or of packing cases deposited under the stairs by the landlord, or some such suggestion of nefarious scientific activity. This necromancy confused him. He rose.

'Apart from the ghosts, nothing physically peculiar?' he asked. And when he had explained in other words what he meant, the answer was 'no'. He left after promising to put Mr Pani Meerwhani's complaint regarding the dispersal of his family before the proper authorities. He was very depressed by his brief interview and by the ghastly surroundings in which it had been held. He sent a bitter letter to the appropriate

housing authority.

Hasty himself interviewed the last landlord of No. 7: a quite hilarious hour of fencing as both had no clear idea what was going on, Hasty being hamstrung by secrecy and by the fantastic nature of the things he wanted to know, the landlord trying to find out, without asking, on which of a thousand possible delinquencies he was being examined. Hasty also read and reread the endless reports that began to come in from the investigators he had appointed. All left a deadening picture of normality in his mind. Only the Meerwhanis' had anything peculiar to tell—and that was bunkum.

Two days before the set date for rebuilding in the New Cross area, Hasty entered his superior's office and silently took a seat by the desk. Tortman raised deep sunk eyes from the document he was reading and surveyed Hasty as if he were a notice board.

'You needn't tell me,' he said bitterly, 'you've failed. That damned house is still standing, isn't it?'

Hasty nodded unemotionally. He had lived this interview so often that he was numb to the reality.

'I wonder you've got the gall to come in here. I entrusted you with this job, Fred, believing you wouldn't let me down. I've stalled off the Minister of Housing and the Prime Minister himself certain that you would get rid of that house for me.'

'Well, there it is,' said Hasty flatly, 'the thing's immovable.'

'Nothing's immovable!' shouted Tortman suddenly. 'Nothing, nothing, nothing's immovable! Do you hear me? You miserable worm, you were beaten before you started. Why do I have to be surrounded by such spineless morons! If you had said to yourself "I'm going to move this house" instead of saying its immovable, it would have gone weeks ago.'

'You say, it, then,' said Hasty mildly, 'perhaps it will listen to you.'

'None of that impertinence, Hasty. This is disastrous for me—you've virtually ruined my career. You deserve to be called a fool. If I go down, I'll see you come with me.'

Hasty took out a cigarette and made himself comfortable.

'Do you mind telling me why you consider yourself ruined. I'm afraid I don't see the connection between one small house and the fate of a nation.'

Tortman grabbed a cigarette for himself from a box on his desk. He accepted a light from Hasty who observed with interest how shaking was Tortman's hand.

'God damn it! I don't have to spell that sort of Ministerial politics for you, do I Fred? If the Bureau of Standards, or the National Physics Laboratory or the Ministry of Technology hear of this, they'll have my head for hiding the house from them. Oh, I admit it—that house is impossible—it could be bigger than the atom bomb—I realize it now, Fred, but it's too late to explain the delay away. When I turn in my report it will all come out and then they'll be at my throat.' He turned his back on Hasty and stared unseeing at a map of London on the wall. 'They all hate my guts, Fred.'

The telephone rang. Tortman turned round and silently picked up the instrument. He listened: 'Yes Murchison, what is it?' He listened intently with his

eyes focused somewhere in Hasty's chest. 'Are you sure!' he exclaimed at one point, 'All right, Murchison,' he interrupted. 'That's enough. I'll be down with Hasty right away. You can tell me the rest when we arrive. Don't let anybody near the place; you understand? no one!'

'What's happened?' asked Hasty standing up.

'My God!' babbled Tortman as he raced for his hat and coat. 'This is worse than ever. There's somebody in the house!'

The air was clearer now, all demolition having ceased, and the house stood up looking many times its real size on the rolled brick plain. A circle of huts, bulldozers and cranes and coil barbed wire made an effective barricade against too close an approach. Murchison conducted them through the defences. He looked a lot fitter, now that the spell of moil and toil was over, but no doubt he would recover his crushed appearance when he moved to destroy Peckham in a few days.

'Is he still there?' were Tortman's first words.

'On and off,' replied Murchison. 'Climb up on this truck, you'll be able to see into the upstairs rooms.'

They scrambled on to the top of the lofty driving cab and eagerly scanned the two upstairs rooms visible to them. Both were empty.

'Now give us the story, Murchison,' said Tortman without taking his eyes from the house.

'One of the men on guard called me about two hours ago. He said he'd seen a man come to the window of the right hand room, there, and look out for a few moments. By the time I got out of the hut there was nothing to see. I hung about for nearly half an hour and was just going to give up when he came again.'

'What was he like?' snapped Tortman.

'Like an Indian, I'd say. He had a sort of turban on. He was dressed in some gold cloth thing.'

'What about his face?' asked Hasty with a catch in his throat. 'Anything special?'

'It's a bit far away, really, but I've seen him twice and a matter of fact he seems to have a big red birthmark over one side of his face.'

Hasty felt his face go cold. 'Did you see his left hand?' he asked.

'No, can't say I did.'

'What is this, Fred?' asked Tortman. 'What made you ask that?' He turned his eyes blazing with hope towards Hasty. 'Do you know anything? Do you know who it is?'

Hasty stared at the house.

'He's been seen before. The Meerwhanis saw him. It's a ghost.'

There was a brief silence, then both Tortman and Murchison made sounds of incredulity and disgust.

'You're soft in the head,' said Tortman in the politest words he could find.

'No, listen,' urged Hasty. 'How could the Meerwhanis describe this thing to me in advance unless they had actually seen it? They said it came in daylight. And others too. The old man said this one in gold was the ghost of his son as he will be, and it's true the boy has a terrible birthmark on his face, and he has the thumb of his left hand missing: this is why I asked about that.'

Tortman had gone red and then white. He looked

at Hasty with a strange desperation in his eyes. He spoke in a husky voice: 'Are you asking us to believe this is a ghost?'

Hasty hung on to his self respect under the impact of those baleful eyes.

'Nothing material can get through that wall, yet somebody is inside. Nobody could be left inside—that's impossible—every house is inspected several times before we come along. And the Indians claim to have seen just such a person while they lived here. What else can you call it?'

Tortman turned away. Murchison gave Hasty a quizzical look and turned, too.

'There he is!' shouted someone.

Hasty felt his heart turn over.

Looking from the upstairs window directly at him was the haunting face of Rao Meerwhani, an older Rao but unmistakable for the beauty of his eyes even if the hideous identity mark on his face had not been visible. He was dressed in what appeared to be swathes of gold cloth which cast warm light into the bare room behind him. In his left hand he carried what Hasty took to be a huge Aster bloom. He had no thumb on his left hand. He smiled at them and half waved the flower at them in recognition, then turned looking towards the door of the room. Suddenly another man was in the room, a tall man dressed in black. He advanced into the golden glow cast by Rao's garb and everybody gasped. It was Tortman; an older, white haired Tortman.

'Oh, my God!' sighed Tortman watching from the truck.

The black Tortman advanced, stumbling almost. As he moved into the brighter light by the window, the watchers could see tears running down his cheeks. He half knelt before Rao and then slowly, as if the weapon was almost too heavy to hold, he dragged a revolver from his jacket pocket and shot Rao in the chest. Transfixed, the watchers saw Rao clutch at Tortman and then fall out of sight below the window. Tortman stood for a moment gazing down at his victim and then cast an agonized look from the window directly at the group on the truck. Jerkily his hand came up and reached inside the breast of his jacket. He drew out a sheet of paper which he awkwardly unfolded using the hand still holding the revolver. He next threw up the sash window, and, reaching out, stuck the prepared paper on to the invisible wall beyond. With another indecipherable look towards his audience he withdrew and, jerking the barrel of the revolver blindly towards his head, shot himself. His body catapulted out of sight.

The watching group remained as if petrified by the silent drama. Suddenly Tortman groaned and swayed. Murchison clutched at him, and then Hasty added his support. For a few minutes there was confusion while the limp body of Tortman was passed down from the cab top on which they had been standing. Hasty ordered a doctor to be brought. Like everybody who had witnessed the incredible events he was too shocked to do more than stand and tremble and suck upon a cigarette. Then the recollection of the sheet of paper stuck to the transparent wall hit him like a physical blow.

'Fetch a camera,' he shouted, and began climbing back to the top of the truck. He banged on the cab top. 'Move in closer.' The truck crept close to the wall of the house, and by craning upwards a little, Hasty could read what was written on the paper. He was horrified to see that one corner of the paper had peeled away from the wall and that another was held by a mere edge. 'Fetch a camera, quick!' he shouted in panic.

He began reading.

'What you have seen me do, I had to do. This accused house has driven me mad. I know it. After watching myself kill the Indian I was never the same. Fred, please try to understand me: the Indian was ruining the Plan. This ugly house is a monument preserving his birth place because he was the first man to transcend Time. The judges in the far future have ordained the monument and by displacing it one millisecond in Time have ensured it will forever scar the Plan. The only way I can think of destroying the house is by killing him so that his teachings will be curtailed and his journeys finished. Perhaps then the memory of

him will die quicker and the monument be abandoned.

'From the day I saw myself shoot the Indian I kept watch on young Rao. After five years I struck up a friendship with him and encouraged him in his speculations. I was with him when he first slipped out of Time, and I was the first pupil to learn his system of Time Yearning. You will read it all in the newspapers in years to come, Fred, how he and I launched ourselves simultaneously into Time vanishing for ever from the eyes of our contemporaries. I went to the Past trying to hit those minutes when Rao was to return for a brief visit. It is very difficult but I shall be successful, of course. Inflexibly I shall succeed. I write this to you, Fred, who know the sacred nature of the Plan, so that you will understand that I did not kill senselessly. The time is near, I know. When I return for brief reorientating visits to Common Time I see in the mirror the same face as I saw that day . . .'

The paper peeled from the wall and slipped down the narrow space between the brickwork and the wall. It came to rest rolled up, script inside. Nobody has ever read the rest of the message. It lies there to this day.

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## SCIENCE FICTION IN GERMANY

A special article by Franz Rottensteiner

German sf means Perry Rhodan. Conceived by Clark Darlton (a pseudonym for Walter Ernsting), rejected by Pabel, who probably thought that the time for such a series was past, Perry Rhodan became a huge success when issued by Moewig, Germany's principal sf publisher. From modest beginnings it soon turned into Germany's number one best-seller in the field, selling now about 300,000 copies every week. In addition to the regular issues, there are second and third editions of older novels, and a fortnightly pocket book. 400 issues after the start, the series has turned into a very compendium of sf: Psi, robots, aliens, space travel, galactic empires and all the rest is there. Forgotten is the first flight to the moon; now Perry Rhodan and his companions, long since turned into immortals, direct galactic wars and face ever new perils. It's Captain Future times infinity, it's E. E. Smith, A. E. van Vogt, Jack Williamson, Edmond Hamilton and Edgar Rice Burroughs all rolled into one. In the press and on TV, the series repeatedly has been accused of fascist tendencies and militarism, of creating a new cosmic 'Fuehrer', but this hasn't diminished the success of Perry Rhodan. A comic strip version has been added, one Perry Rhodan film has been produced with others in the planning stage, a 'Perry Rhodan Encyclopaedia' intends to help the newly initiated to find his way in the cosmic labyrinth; foreign editions exist in the Netherlands, in France, and in the USA Ace books have bought English rights; Gwendayne Ackerman, the wife of Forrest J. Ackerman, has just finished translating the first 120,000 words. Hundreds of Perry Rhodan clubs and fanzines have sprung into existence in Germany, Perry Rhodan Conventions are being organized, and Perry Rhodan buttons help to spread the gospel of the Galactic Administrator.

The extent of the success is something of a mystery, 20

yet several things combined to make it possible: first, the widespread interest in space travel and sf; second, that the series is written by Germany's two most popular sf authors, Clark Dalton and K. H. Scheer, and a team of other entertainers: Willy Voltz, H. G. Ewers and Hans Kneifel; third, there is really everything in the series: those who follow the adventures of Perry Rhodan don't need to read other sf; it's all there.

Other publishers tried to jump on the bandwagon with products of their own, and all failed: Pabel with Mark Powers, Kelter with Ren Dhark, Bastei with Rex Corda, the Saviour of Earth. Only Ren Dhark is still going, but it isn't much of a competition for Perry Rhodan.

Other sf by German authors is restricted mostly to the dime novel series, now but two: Moewig's 'Terra Nova' (a weekly) and Zauberkreis' 'Zauberkreis SF'; an occasional pocket book by a German author appears in the Moewig 'Terra-Sonderband' and the Heyne pb series. But both principally feature translations: Moewig two pbs per month, Heyne three, one of them being a 'SF Classic' such as Stapledon's 'Star Maker' or E. E. Smith's Lensman books. The Moewig, Heyne and Goldmann 'Space Pocket Books' include most well-known British and American authors in their lists, as well as some anthologies. Heyne are doing quite well; many of their books go into second or third printings.

Modern German sf history began in 1953, when Walter Ernsting persuaded Pabel to publish the now defunct 'Utopia Zukunftsromane', in the beginning with a series hero named Jim Parker. Later other novels were included, and two other series founded: 'Utopia Crossand' (meaning Utopia 'big volumes') and 'Utopia-Kriminal' (sf mysteries), both defunct now. The 'Utopia-Magazin' was another short-lived publication; in its pages, the founding of the SFGD (SF Club Germany) was

(continued on page 27)



# People Like You

## DAVID ROME

*The world of the aliens seemed like paradise!*

'Then where is it?' Gail Coulton said.

'I don't know. All I know is that it isn't where we left it six weeks ago.'

'You couldn't be mistaken, Gordon? I mean, have

looked in the wrong place—'

'No,' Gordon Coulton said, rubbing the angle of his jaw with the ball of his thumb. 'It was the right place all right.'

Sunlight flooded through the screen door as it squeaked open. The ten-year-old girl who came in was

as blonde as her mother, grey eyes round with excitement. 'This is a nice house, Li-Li, can we stay here forever?'

'Not forever, darling,' Gail Coulton smiled, but frowning with worry. 'At least I hope not.'

'Why not? It's nice. There are nice people up in the canyon. They've a little girl I can play with.'

'You don't know how long forever is,' Gail patted the shimmer of the girl's head. 'We'll stay . . . for a while . . .'

Gordon Coulton sighed and walked to the screen door. He was tall and lean, a handsome sun-tanned man, his own blond hair cropped short. From where he stood he could see up the canyon to the place where the other house perched on an outcrop of hillside. Gordon pushed open the door and stepped outside.

The Coulton's car was parked beside their house. The car was coated with red dust and the engine block still crackled softly as it cooled. The land the house stood on sloped down to the dirt road which wound upwards from Heckenburg to peter out finally among the rugged peaks of Cody Canyon.

There were no other houses this far up the canyon. Only the Coulton house and the other house higher up.

Gordon rubbed his jaw thoughtfully again. 'I don't see how . . .' he said softly to himself. The screen door banged and Gail and Dorinda came out. Gail was almost as tall as Gordon. Her eyes were grey like his own, grey and farseeing. In the spring sunlight she wore a soft white fabric dress which swirled about her knees as she walked.

'What are you going to do, Gordon?'

'Go up there I guess.'

Her hand touched his arm. 'Do you think you should?'

'There's no other way. We have to find out what happened to . . .'

'What happened to what?' Dorinda said quickly. 'Is something wrong, Li-Li?'

'Of course not, darling,' Gail said. 'You run along and play.'

The girl vanished in the direction of a small stream which tumbled and chuckled past the rear of the house. Gordon Coulton took another step forward, face darkening as he gazed up towards the other house.

'Something is very wrong, Gail. Maybe we shouldn't have come here at all.'

'Well, we're here now. We can't change that.'

Shadows moved on the surface of Gordon's eyes. 'No, we can't. There's only one way to change it . . .'

'Darling, please be careful.'

Gordon smiled suddenly, and turned to his wife. He put both hands on her shoulders. 'I will. I'm the most careful man on earth, you know that. Go and see what Dorinda is up to. Leave this to me.'

Driving up the canyon road, Gordon studied the other house closely as he drew nearer. It was a large house, inclined to sprawl. Paint was badly needed. The yard was a tangle of dry brush.

Gordon turned his car into the drive. He sat quite still for a moment, his eyes on the heavy-tired jeep which was standing under a tin roof at the side of the house. As Gordon shut off his own engine, he heard the blare of a horn, saw a small head bobbing behind

the wheel of the jeep.

'Amanda! Get the hell out of there!' a man's voice bellowed from the screened porch. Gordon saw a big figure moving to the door.

The door shot open and the man came blinking out into the sunlight. Gordon watched him through the side window. The man stood firmly planted, sucking in the great roll of his paunch, face and body sniffing towards Gordon's car.

Gordon got out, crossed the drive towards the watching fat man.

Gordon smiled. 'Hullo there. I'm Gordon Coulton. We just moved into the house down the canyon.'

The man's heavy face remained unfriendly, but Gordon imagined he saw a flicker of interest under the small blue eyes. 'Yeah? That your kid we had up here, couple of hours ago?'

'That's right, I hope she didn't bother you.'

'No more'n our own.' The heavy face nodded and Gordon turned as a dark-haired girl about Dorinda's age came towards them from the jeep.

'Amanda,' the fat man said softly. 'Didn't I tell you once to get the hell out of that car?' Without any change of expression to warn the girl, he stepped forward and swung the flat of his hand against her cheek. The blow knocked her sideways. She recovered, sniffed, bit back tears.

'Get in the house,' the fat man said.

The girl stared at Gordon for a moment and then turned and ran towards the house. The screen door banged. The fat man turned to Gordon and leaked a smile.

'Name's Abbot. George Abbot.'

Gordon held out his hand and the fat man looked at it from hooded eyes for long seconds. Then, with an easy roll of his shoulder, almost in disdain, he took the proffered hand.

'Hot day for this time of year. Guess you could use a beer?'

'Thank you,' Gordon said.

George Abbot led the way to the porch. He motioned Gordon to sit down in one of two wicker chairs. He bellowed into the depths of the house and the girl, Amanda, came out with beer and glasses. Abbot poured, shooting glances at Gordon.

'Saw you arrive down there this mornin'. That's Kate Downy's place still, isn't it? You taking it for long?'

'It was vacant,' Gordon said. 'She said we could have it for as long as we needed it.'

'Vacant?' George Abbot grinned. 'Sure, it was vacant. Maybe once a year Kate finds somebody to live in that house. They take it for a month an' leave after a week. Nothing here for 'em . . .'

Abbot's blue eyes bored curiously into Gordon's.

'Not a damn thing,' Abbot said.

'Well, I'm interested in this area,' Gordon said, sipping his beer. The beer was cool and dark and sweet.

Abbot belched. 'Yeah? What're you interested in?'

'I'm an amateur geologist.'

Abbot's wicker chair creaked. 'You gonna be poking around the canyon, then? Climbing up there an' looking around for . . . rocks?'

'You must know the canyon very well,' Gordon said, ignoring the question.



Abbot's blue eyes settled on the backs of his hands, and he smiled. 'Yeah, I know it pretty well.'

'Do you farm up here?'

'Farm!' Abbot guffawed and banged one heavy hand on his thigh. He sprawled back in his chair, great paunch shaking with amusement. Then he stopped laughing. 'Mister,' he said, 'that's tough red rock under a coating of soil no thicker'n your skin. What in hell would make you think I farm it?'

'What do you do?' Gordon asked.

'Government work,' George Abbot smiled.

'Government w—'

'That Cody River, that trickle of water down there at the bottom of these mountains, it can fill quicker'n a fish can flick its tail. You ought to see it in flood, Mister. Like a yellow sea roaring down the canyon. The river needs watching, and measuring. I watch it. I listen to it breathe.'

'That must leave you plenty of spare time,' Gordon said.

Abbot leaned closer. His small blue eyes were blades, slipping cleanly through Gordon's own. For an instant Gordon read something more than mockery in those sharp eyes. He read greed—and hope.

'I got time to dream,' Abbot said.

There were careful footsteps behind them and Gordon turned. Amanda, the dark-haired girl, stood there. 'Mom says I can go down and play with Dorinda,' she said almost defiantly.

George Abbot peeled back his lips in a grin. 'Sure, sweetheart, you go down there and play!'

Gordon rose to his feet. 'Thanks for the beer. Nice to have met you, Mr Abbot.'

Abbot grinned up at him from his wicker chair.

'Be seeing you again, I reckon.'

'Yes,' Gordon said.

'Why did you bring the child back?' Gail frowned, listening to the sounds of the two girls playing outside the house.

'Abbot is suspicious. He can't be sure of anything, but if I'd refused to have her here . . .'

'We have to take the risk.'

'Gordon . . .' Gail sighed. 'What are we going to do?' She rose from the bed and walked to the window. She stood looking up the canyon towards the house perched on the bluff.

'Put some clothes on for a start,' Gordon smiled.

She turned. Her naked figure was warm and shadowed, a haze of sunlight backlighting her hair. Suddenly Gordon saw the silver trail of a tear slipping down her cheek.

'I'm beginning to be frightened,' she whispered. 'If Abbot knows where it is, why hasn't he told someone? What does he want, Gordon?'

'I don't know,' Gordon said. 'But I'm going to find out.'

The soft sound of her tears followed Gordon away from the house. He climbed swiftly, heading straight up the hillside, ignoring the road. At the top of a barren bluff, he paused to look back.

The canyon stretched below him, the Cody River a vein of silver in the deep shadows of valley: that were no longer reached by the afternoon sun.

The day was almost gone and the altitude was high enough to chill the air.

Gordon glanced at the Abbot house, saw a figure moving in the yard. Then he turned and crossed the bluff, taking bearings from the peaks of the mountains around him. His feet rang on the stony ground. After dark, he thought, the stars would heel dizzily across this high windswept place. The thought lengthened his stride.

Now he moved along the crest of a ridge whose broad flank swept down to the coiling road. The ridge widened and Gordon was retracing the route he had taken a few hours ago. He walked swiftly towards a towering jumble of rocks ahead.

When he saw the empty hollow again, he knew that he had hoped, without reason, to find the *Anhk* there after all. But the flat oval of strangely rich green grass stared back at him and dissolved his hopes.

Nevertheless, he climbed down from the rocks and stepped on to the grass. He had guessed, when he first saw this place, that soil from the eroding slopes had been trapped here, the soil had held the rain coming down those same slopes, and this green eye had sprung up in a red wilderness.

The grass was spongy under his feet as he walked to the centre of the hollow and stood looking down at a smaller circle of yellowed grass.

The circle measured four feet from edge to edge. Gordon walked slowly around it. Finally, he bent to his haunches and probed the withered grass with his fingers. His blond hair caught the play of sunlight as he drew a line with his eyes to a cleft in the wall of red rock surrounding him.

He rose again, dusting his hands on his slacks. He walked straight to the cleft and stood looking down towards the road. The slope was steep but not, he thought, too steep.

The sun was falling into the dark teeth of the mountains on the other side of the canyon. A cold wind began to blow, stirring Gordon's hair.

Gordon walked back down the road. Lights were burning at the windows of the Abbot house as he passed. When he got home he found Amanda Abbot waiting to be taken home.

The little dark-haired girl was curiously silent as Gordon drove her back up the road. Once or twice, he felt her eyes on him but whenever he looked she would be staring at her own reflection in the dark window.

Gordon turned into the drive of the Abbot house. The jeep was missing from under the tin roof.

'I'll walk you to the door,' Gordon told Amanda.

'I'll be all right.' Her eyes looked wide in the first faint starlight.

Gordon put one hand on Amanda's shoulder. 'Why are you frightened of me all of a sudden?'

Amanda's eyes widened a little more and she ran around the house to the kitchen door.

Gordon stood outside the screen door, looking in. Amanda had let the door bang shut behind her and vanished inside. A patient, tired woman with the same dark hair as Amanda smiled through the soft mesh at Gordon.

'Mr Coulton?'

'Yes, I brought Amanda home.'

'Please come in for a while. It isn't often we get new neighbours up here.'

The door squeaked open. The kitchen was warm and smelled of food cooking. Amanda sat on the far side of the room, on a high stool, kicking one pale leg. Her eyes came to Gordon's and then darted away.

'I've made coffee,' Amanda's mother said.

'I'd like a cup,' Gordon said. 'Very much.'

Amanda was fishing in the pocket of her skirt. She took out half a candy bar, unwrapped it carefully and began eating it.

'Be careful your father doesn't see you with that,' the woman said warningly.

Amanda chewed without expression. Her dark bright eyes watched Gordon across the room.

Her mother poured coffee. 'Did you and Mr Coulton's little girl have fun?'

Amanda's head shook.

'No?' her mother said, raising her eyebrows at Gordon.

'Don't tell me you two girls quarrelled?'

'No,' Amanda said. 'I just don't like her, that's all.'

'Now, Amanda, that's not a nice thing to say. I'm sure Dorinda is a sweet girl.'

'She's scary,' Amanda said. Her dark eyes shone as she looked at Gordon now. Words tumbled out, 'She doesn't eat candy. And she says she isn't ten years old, she's almost a hundred! And'—Amanda leaned forward and completed the sentence in a stage whisper—'she can fly.'

Gordon said sharply, 'I've warned Dorinda about these stories of hers—'

'It wasn't a story,' Amanda said. 'She showed me.'

'Now, Amanda, that's enough,' Mrs Abbot warned. She turned to Gordon with a smile. 'Tomorrow they'll be the best of friends again. These children! Such imaginations!'

The screen door opened. Gordon turned. He hadn't heard the sound of the jeep, but George Abbot stood watching him. The slab face held eyes that flashed and glittered with emotion that seemed to well from somewhere deep inside the fat man.

'Coulton . . .' George Abbot nodded. 'Glad you're here. I was gonna drive down to see you.'

'Coffee, George?' Mrs Abbot asked, percolator in her hand.

'No coffee,' Abbot said, watching Gordon. 'I've got something to show our good neighbour here.'

'Show me?' Gordon said quietly, sipping coffee. 'Now what on earth could you have to show me?'

'Why not come and see?' Abbot smiled. A face muscle twitched.

'George, you're not going out again?'

'Just outside. Into the night air. Where Mr Coulton and I can talk.'

Gordon smiled. 'Now I'm curious.'

'Thought you might be.'

Abbot put one hand in the pocket of his jacket and took something out. He tossed it in his palm. It looked like a piece of rock. But Gordon took an involuntary step forward, his heart leaping.

'What is that?'

'You're the geologist,' Abbot smiled. 'I thought maybe you could tell me.'

Abbot's smile died. He yanked open the screen door

and went out into the darkness. Gordon murmured something, put down his cup of coffee and followed Abbot into the night.

The sky was clear, blazing with stars. Abbot walked to where the jeep was parked and climbed behind the wheel. His massive bulk remained still as Gordon joined him.

Gordon said softly, 'Well.'

'Take a look, Mr Coulton.' Abbot handed the cube of black rock to Gordon.

The black tingled in Gordon's hand. 'What do I look at?'

Abbot laughed, a burbling gush of amusement that shook the seat of the jeep, made the springs creak. 'No choice about that. You look at what's in there. No way I could figure to change channels on that thing. But maybe'—Abbot's grin flashed in the starlight—you can show me how.'

Slowly, Gordon lifted the black cube to his eye. He gazed into the cube and it was no longer small and opaque. It contained a vast silvery sky, a limitless blue sea and a curve of shaded red beach. On the beach sprawled naked brown men and women, all of them beautiful, all with shining blonde hair. As Gordon gazed at the scene in the cube, a group of blonde people rose and ran down to the sea. They joined others sporting in the foaming breakers. They swam and dived with grace and energy, lost in pleasure.

Along the beach, blonde children played in the sand, small bodies burned brown by the sun.

'Look at those people,' George Abbot whispered heavily at Gordon's side. 'Look at that place. Is that any place on earth?'

Gordon's skin prickled and chilled. He lowered the cube from his eye. 'This is incredible. Where did you get this?'

Abbot's seat creaked again. 'Take a guess . . . Mr Coulton.'

'I haven't any idea. I've never seen anything like it before.'

'Maybe you should take another look at those people.'

'What do you m—'

'Pretty wife you've got . . . Coulton. And that kid of yours . . . Blonde and fine looking, just like those people in that thing there.'

'I don't understand.'

'Sure you don't,' Abbot said softly. 'You don't understand how I got that little gadget, do you, Coulton? Maybe,' Abbot said, his voice falling to a throaty whisper, 'maybe you want to buy it from me?'

'Buy it—?'

'It . . . and something else . . . something even stranger . . .'

'You're talking in riddles,' Gordon said.

'Think so? Have it your way, Mr . . . Coulton. I'm in no hurry. I ain't going . . . anywhere. I can wait until you're ready to talk terms.'

'Are you trying to tell me that you've got something I want?'

The seat springs creaked. It was a long time before Abbot's laughter subsided. Then he said, 'Something you want, Coulton? I've got everything you want!'

His big fist closed on the black cube. He stepped out of the jeep and went chuckling softly back towards the

yellow lights of the house.

'So now we know,' Gordon said.

'Abbot has the *Anhk*. What payment does he want for its return?'

Gordon closed the suitcase he had been packing and turned to look grimly at his wife. 'Whatever he wants, he won't get it. I think I can make Abbot show me where he has hidden the *Anhk*.'

Gail's eyes widened. 'No violence, Gordon. If we harm him, our travel permits will be revoked for all time.'

'I know that,' Gordon said in irritation. 'Leave this to me. Go and wake Dorinda now.'

Gail went out of the room and Gordon heard the muzzy voice of his daughter as she stirred puzzledly from sleep. His watch showed five after midnight. He checked the windows and the rear door. When he came into the lighted living-room again, Gail and Dorinda were ready. They both wore coats. Dorinda wore hers over pyjamas.

Gordon carried the suitcase to the car and put it in the trunk. Gail and Dorinda climbed in and waited while Gordon went around the side of the dark house and switched off the power. He could hear the stream tumbling along softly in the darkness.

Gordon returned to the car and slid under the wheel. Dorinda's voice piped in the stillness as he twisted the ignition key: 'Where are we going?'

'Very soon,' Gordon said, 'we're going home.'

In Heckenburg, Gordon found a small hotel for Gail and Dorinda. He brushed his wife's lips with his own as the desk clerk watched.

'Be careful,' Gail whispered.

Gordon smiled palely. 'The most careful man on earth,' he reminded her.

He drove fast on the way back to the house, headlights boring through the night. A hundred yards before he rounded the final bend, he pulled off the road and drove slowly down into a depression where the car would be out of sight.

He stepped out, turning up the collar of his coat. A bird hooted somewhere high overhead. He looked up at the stars, at constellations which were familiar now, but still alien to him as they always would be.

Gordon walked swiftly to the house he had left not long ago, approaching from the rear, crossing the stream and pausing when the low outline of the roof was close against the starglow. He cast around until he found a place to hide among the tangled brush.

The night passed slowly. Gordon remained completely motionless, his face and blond hair lit by the light of the moon which rose briefly before dawn.

The sky began to lighten. Still as a corpse, Gordon waited.

The sun rose to warm him.

The brush crackled and rustled with life as creatures nosed curiously up to him and went uncertainly on their way.

An ant travelled across the pale curve of his cheek. Gordon waited.

At ten by his watch, a small dark-haired figure in jeans and sweater came down from the Abbot house and turned in the front gate. Amanda walked to the rear door and stopped. She pulled at the screen door



and found it bolted. She stepped back and tossed her head in girlish disdain.

On her way back to the front gate, she stopped again. Gordon saw her bend down and pick up a shapeless object from the ground. She looked at it puzzledly. She shook it and Gordon heard the faint shrill cry:

*Li-Li.*

Amanda dropped the shapeless thing in fright and ran out of the gate.

A few moments after Amanda vanished into her own house, up on the bluff, Gordon saw George Abbot emerge at a run. Abbot climbed into his jeep, reversed savagely to the road, and came downhill at high speed, trailing dust.

Abbot swung the jeep into the yard, twenty feet from where Gordon crouched. Gordon watched Abbot prowling around the outside of the house. The fat man tried the doors. Then he picked up a piece of rock and used it to smash a window. Falling glass tinkled in the morning air. Abbot unlatched the window, opened it and vanished inside the house.

A few minutes later, the front door burst open and Abbot came out. He checked in the yard, feet planted, and stared around the canyon, eyes slitted. Gordon could see the rise and fall of his paunch as he sucked air.

Abbot climbed into the jeep and gunned back on to the road. He made a right turn, towards Heckenburg.

Gordon rose from his hiding place without stiffness. He ran to the stream, forded it and reached his own car. Abbot's jeep came twisting down the mountain

round seconds later. Gordon waited until he passed, then reversed out.

Abbot kept going towards Heckenburg for so long that Gordon began to worry. But finally, nosing cautiously around a bend, Gordon saw the jeep turning up a sidetrack, streaming dust against the blue sky as it climbed a long spine above the deep gulf of the canyon.

Gordon followed in the car until the going got too rough. Then he pulled off the track and parked out of sight. He stepped out into the sunlight and stood for a moment, getting his bearings.

He took longer than he could spare to marshal the energy to rise from the red baked earth. He envied Dorinda her facility, her playful use of what to Gordon was a destructive effort.

Abbot was gone.

Fifty feet above the ridge, Gordon spun slowly, searching the trail. He saw that it petered out into a red wilderness a few hundred yards higher up the canyon. He moved that way, skirting the dizzying drop into the deep cold shadows where the Cody River was a glinting thread.

He saw the jeep.

And then Abbot.

The fat man had climbed from the trail to a cave only a few yards from the jeep. As Gordon watched, Abbot ducked inside the cave. Gordon drifted closer, keeping the burning eye of the sun directly behind him. When Abbot emerged from the scimitar of shadow at the cave's mouth, Gordon saw the look of relief on his heavy face.

Gordon lowered himself swiftly to earth, out of sight behind a screen of thorny brush. He heard the engine of Abbot's jeep kick over. The sound growled past on the trail and dust rose in a thick, choking blanket. Gordon stepped out into the track and watched the jeep dwindle in the direction of the main road.

Smiling, Gordon turned to look towards the mouth of the cave.

He went up there to be sure—just as Abbot had.

The *Anhk* was there.

They returned that night. Gordon nosed the car to a halt at the same spot and they all climbed out. It was a clear chill night, stars frosting the vast black dome of the sky.

'I'm going to be sorry, you know,' Gordon said. 'Sorry for so many reasons.'

'We've had a wonderful holiday,' Gail said, hugging his arm. She smiled at Dorinda as they stood beside the silent car. 'Haven't we all had a wonderful time, darling?'

'Yes, Li-Li,' Dorinda said. 'but I'm glad we're going home.'

'Come on,' Gordon said.

They walked up the trail. Dorinda was eager to rush on ahead, but Gail held tightly to her hand. She knew that Gordon wanted to savour these last few minutes.

She smiled a little at the way he kept stopping, breathing deeply as though the mountain air was wine.

'Would you have been sorry if we'd never found the *Anhk* again?'

Gordon stood looking down at the starlit river, far

down between walls of blackness. 'Earth is a beautiful world. But we could never stay here. You know that . . .'

'But are you sorry we can't?'

'Yes, in a way. But I'm glad we're going home too, Gail.'

'Gail,' she said musingly. 'Dorinda, Gordon and Gail. Such quaint names. Do you know, darling, I think I'll go on calling you Gordon after we get home.'

They moved up the ridge towards the cave. 'No you won't,' Gordon said. 'The language will be gone, the names too.'

The cave was above them now. They watched the small blonde-haired girl climb quickly up towards its dark mouth.

And then she screamed.

They saw Dorinda struggling with someone at the mouth of the cave. Her cries rang down to them. Gail's hand clamped painfully on Gordon's arm.

'It's *him*! Abbot!'

Gordon went up the stony slope at a run. The cold air burned his lungs. Abbot had twisted Dorinda's arm up behind her back. He moved out into the starlight now, a rifle in his free hand, aimed at Gordon's chest.

'Take it easy, fella.'

Gordon saw the danger in Abbot's glittering eyes. He halted, hands stiff and ready at his sides, muscles quivering. Dorinda's mouth opened in a small, sharp cry.

'Please . . .' Gail said, joining Gordon. 'Don't hurt her. She's just a child.'

'Child?' They saw the flash in Abbot's eyes. 'That's a human word, folks.'

'What do you want?' Gordon said softly.

Abbot's smile shone. 'Dumb bastard. Did you think you'd trick me so easy? I guessed you'd be up here soon. So I kept watch . . . I want to know who you are . . .' Abbot said.

'All right,' Gordon said. 'We're not earth people, as you seem to have guessed. We come from a world known as *Larnhkorn*—'

'I had to hear it,' Abbot's tongue flicked over his dark lips. 'I had to hear it before I could believe it!'

Suddenly he let Dorinda go. She ran to Gail, sobbing, and buried her face against her.

'I found your ship,' Abbot said. 'Took me a while to figure out what it was. Too small and light, I thought at first. Then one day I was tapping over it with a screw-driver, and it opened up for me—woom! A four-foot globe outside, and *inside* it's as big as an airliner. All those gadgets! I knew it was a spaceship. Thought I'd go to the authorities, maybe sell my story to the news magazines, make a little out of it.' Abbot licked his lips again. 'Then I found that little cube of rock in the ship. Don't know what made me look into it. And I saw your world . . .'

Gordon started to speak, but Abbot gestured with the rifle.

'I knew you'd come back, whoever you were. So I took the jeep up there one day and shifted the ship to here. I waited for you to come lookin'. Me being the only one here in the canyon, I knew you'd come see me.'

'What do you want?' Gordon asked softly.

'I put field glasses on the Downy place when you were

there. Saw that pretty wife of yours going about without nothing on but her skin. That's what I'd like—'

'Gail—?' Gordon asked softly.

'Those others like her. On your world. The world I saw in that little black box of yours.' Abbot moved the rifle and his mouth tightened. 'I ain't asking you, I'm telling you. You're taking me with you.'

'Just you, Mr Abbot?' Gail said quietly, her hand on Dorinda's blonde hair. 'What about your wife and daughter?'

'Just me,' Abbot said, baring his teeth in a smile. 'Reckon I'll make out without 'em . . . among people like you . . .'

Gordon nodded slowly. 'All right, Abbot. We have no choice. Our travel permits forbid violence of any kind. We must agree to your terms.'

'Sensible,' Abbot said pleasantly. 'Real sensible of you, folks.'

'You can drop that projectile weapon,' Gordon snapped in sudden impatience.

Abbot watched Gordon's face for a moment, and then slowly lowered the rifle. His hand slackened, and he tossed the gun aside.

'I should warn you,' Gordon said. 'Our ways are a little different to your own—'

'Yeah, like you live longer, and you can fly. And you like going around in the skin. That's okay with me.' Abbot's plastic lips peeled back in a grin.

'There are other things . . .'

'I'll learn as I go,' Abbot leered.

Gordon shrugged and for a moment, in the starlight, his eyes glammed blackly.

They entered the cave. The *Anhk* stood gleaming in a shaft of starlight. Gordon stepped forward and made a *tinging!* sound in his throat. The side of the black globe opened. They moved one by one into the vast and shimmering interior of the starship.

'You do not want to change your mind?' Gordon

asked Abbot.

'How many times do I have to tell you, fella?'

Gordon depressed a switch and the door closed behind them.

'We are on our way.'

Abbot's jaw dropped. 'On our way. You mean—?'

'Our course is preset. Back to our own world.'

Abbot took something from the pocket of the leather jacket he wore. He looked into the black cube and grunted. 'I can't wait to get there.'

'To get where?' Gordon asked quietly.

Abbot showed him the cube, impatiently.

'Why here. To this place I can see in here.'

'That isn't our world,' Gordon said.

Abbot blinked. 'Not your world—?'

Gordon shook his head. 'Those people are the *Numanids*, the nearest race to your own. They are humanoid like yourselves. But in fact, they breathe what to you would be poison gas. You can never go there, Mr Abbot.'

'But this little black box! Why—?'

'We had no earth people as models, to fashion ourselves after. So we used the *Numanids*. We keep in contact with them for constant reference—'

'As *models*?' Abbot's eyes were stretching wide.

'We came to earth on holiday. So of course, it was necessary to look like earth people.'

'But—' A scream seemed about to burst from Abbot's bulging throat. 'But if you're not like us, *what are you like*?'

Gordon smiled. He turned to Dorinda and took something grey and shapeless from inside his coat.

'You almost left this behind, my pet,' he said gently.

Dorinda took the thing from her father. 'My dolly!' she said happily, hugging it to her.

The shapeless thing gave a faint shrill cry.

*Li-Li!*

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## SCIENCE FICTION IN GERMANY

(concluded from page 20)

announced in 1955 and German sf fandom began. The club still exists, and independently from it, a big and vigorous fandom has arisen, producing literally hundreds of fanzines and organizing several sf cons every year.

Best of the amateur publications are 'SF-Times', an invaluable source of information on what is happening, sf wise, in Germany and the rest of Europe, including the Soviet Union; 'Anabis', a magazine published in Berlin in an edition of 1,000 copies, photo-offset, and 'Robot', which concentrates on discussion of the new thing in sf, but doesn't neglect the classics of the past. Jürgen Mercker's 'Solaris' also publishes many articles on sf, some of them being translations from the English.

Among the Conventions, the biggest event will be the Hei-Con (Heidelberg-Con) in 1970; German fandom is bidding for the World SF Con; should the bid fail in spite of the support from British fandom, the convention will be organized as a European affair.

Most interesting is perhaps the emergence of fandom in the other Germany, the Communist-ruled 'German Democratic Republic'. In West-Germany, the advanced

printing equipment of fans reflects the growing wealth of its owners; in East-Germany what few fanzines there are are poorly duplicated, and only now have fans succeeded in convincing the officials that they are not conspirators; without official recognition of some sort it would be almost impossible, and certainly very dangerous, to organize themselves.

Pocket books and magazines are virtually non-existent in the GDR; but books have large editions. Whilst Carlos Rasch, Günter Krupkat and Lothar Wise are well-known German authors and there are many translations from the Russian, the Czech and the Bulgarian, the most popular sf author in East-Germany is the Pole, Stanislaw Lem. His books appear in editions of about 250,000 copies each, hardbound, and they are frequently to be found on the general bestseller list. Despite his popularity, however, only a few of his books have appeared there, apparently for political reasons. In the GDR they prefer a clearly recognizable 'socialist moral', and Mr Lem's books are more complex, ending indeed often on an ambiguous note.

Generally, the situation is currently very bright both in East-Germany and in West-Germany; both in the professional field and in fandom.

# The Impatient Dreamers

## WALTER GILLINGS

THESE ARTICLES, tracing the growth of British magazine science fiction and its attendant fandom over the past 40 years, are proving as popular with the younger generation of devotees as with those who can recollect the days when a sf story in an English periodical was something to shout about—especially if you were the author. Here Gillings tells of his first encounters with British story-writers who, in 1931, had contributions to make to the field as it was being developed in the U.S.A., even if they could find little encouragement at home.

### 3: SHADOW OF THE MASTER

The Rise of American science fiction in the late 1920s brought opportunities to the British writer, no less than to the reader, mostly denied to him by editors and publishers in his own country. Sf tales were seldom if ever to be found in British periodicals, unless they were of the sort that catered for schoolboys.

The exceptions were occasional tales by a few established authors such as appeared in *The Strand* or *Pearson's Magazine* (where Wells and Conan Doyle had set the fashion), and novels produced for the meagre book-buying public which were invariably pretty timid in their fantastic appeal. The notable exception in this category was Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, which appeared towards the end of 1930 and got very good reviews, though I hardly noticed it at the time. Or, if I did, I was not moved to get hold of the book until several years had passed and I suddenly realized just what I was missing.

If it had appeared in the last ten years, the Sunday papers would have been fighting among themselves to serialize that book before publication. Only lately has it been reprinted; and there are still some who call themselves sf fans who will confess they have not read it, or even heard of it. What it meant to us in the mid-1930s, when you could buy a hardbacked cheap edition for a bob, is indescribable; but, undoubtedly, we'd never had it so good, what with *Star Maker* and all.

Before then, the only pieces of new British sf I encountered that were at all adult in approach were in the *Radio Times*. I vaguely remember a serial by Bohun Lynch, whose *Menace from the Moon* (one of my favourite rarities) I later found among the shilling

remainders on a railway bookstall. The atmosphere of that serial, which was set in the future yet had somehow to do with the past, haunts me still; yet it was never published in book form, as far as I can discover.

The great H. G. Wells had so firmly entrenched himself as master of the scientific romance, and had covered the field so thoroughly, that most editors and publishers seemed convinced no lesser writers could produce more than an inferior imitation of his work. Nor, indeed, could many of those who had the nerve to try, until Stapledon, a lecturer at Liverpool University who knew nothing of American sf, astounded the critics—and us—with his masterpiece.

It was soon after initiating the Ilford Science Literary Circle that I wrote my first article demanding, 'Why do we neglect scientific literature?' and describing 'What the Americans are doing.' This I hurled, defiantly, at the editor of a topical weekly rejoicing in the name of *This and That*, which I patronized because it ran regular articles on astronomy and similar topics which were treated fairly imaginatively—until they got on to the matter of space-travel, then appearing in the news on the strength of Herr Oberth's researches and Max Valier's ill-fated rocket experiments.

All I got was a brief editorial dissertation on the omnipotence of Verne and Wells—and my article back. Then, within a month, the cover of the February 1931 *Pearson's* caught my eye. It showed a monstrous caterpillar knocking over a London bus and introduced a three-part serial by G. R. Malloch, the Scottish writer who died some years back, titled 'Winged Terror.' Not since Mr H. G. Wells wrote 'The War of the Worlds' for *Pearson's Magazine* has there been so thrilling a story', the editor declaimed. That was an exaggeration, I decided when I'd read it; but the first instalment set me off on another article in which I made the same plea for science fiction and commended this effort as a step in the right direction.

Though my manuscript came back, its message did not fall on deaf ears. 'I quite agree with you,' said this editor, more amenably, 'that it is high time our more imaginative authors turned their attention to scientific subjects . . . and I hope that this story of ours will be followed by others as interesting.' It was a pity that author Malloch did not follow up his advantage by writing a sequel in which he might have exercised his imagination well enough to decide how his monster insects came to be—a point that seemed to elude him as well as us.

Other stories did follow, almost immediately—but not in *Pearson's*. The cover of *Chums* for the following May was even more arresting, since it showed a rocket-ship evidently on its way to the Moon. Closer investigation revealed that the issue contained two stories which had appeared eighteen months before in an issue of Hugo Gernsback's *Air Wonder Stories*: Ed Earl Repp's 'Beyond the Aurora,' and 'The Second Shell' by Jack Williamson. Vastly intrigued, I turned my guns on the editor, who confessed that the idea had been to give science fiction a trial. He added that if I could put them in touch with any writers who could offer them more of the same, they would gladly pursue the experiment.

Fair enough . . . But where were our British authors

who could emulate Messrs Williamson and Repp? I little realized that there was one, at least, in Sheffield, who had been contributing sf to both juvenile and adult publications since the days before World War I—George C. Wallis, whose later writings I was to use in *Tales of Wonder*. Not until then, though, did I discover that the author of 'The World at Bay,' which I had read in *Amazing's* last issues for 1928 (and which was actually serialized in the *Daily Herald* while I was still at school), was an English writer who had appeared even earlier in *Weird Tales*.

By 1931, it became evident that there were a few British writers who had recognized the opportunities presented by America's sf magazines. In the February issue of *The Writer* appeared a piece by one Gray Usher asking, 'Will there be a science-story boom?' This question was inspired solely by the *Pearson's* serial, and prompted the suggestion put forward so often of recent years—that sf might prove a rival to the detective story. It went on to indicate the varying requirements of the magazines concerned, recommending them specially to English freelancers not only for the high rates they paid for acceptable material, but because their editors would explain why rejected MSS. were unsuitable—a procedure practically unknown in these latitudes.

To *The Writer*, then, went another of my propaganda articles, which was promptly declined as such but duly printed in the correspondence columns. Here I took issue with Mr Usher, on patriotic grounds, for encouraging British writers to send their science fiction abroad. 'If there is to be a boom,' says I, 'let us have it in England.' But the letter from the editor of *Chums* gave me something on which to construct what became, in July, my first published article in a periodical other than my own paper. Even more satisfying than the cheque was the paradoxical fact that it appeared in a journal which offered advice to tyro authors. It was Editor Kennedy Williamson, that patient mentor of many successful writers, who accepted my MS.; and neither of us could have imagined that, twenty years later, when I had amassed a fund of experience in several different fields, I should actually follow in his wake as Director of Hutchinson's correspondence school for aspiring authors and journalists . . .

In assessing British sf prospects in 1931, I also drew on the experience of an author who had been in touch with me, following my earlier piece in *The Writer*, to applaud the efforts of the Science Literary Circle and express a wish to visit us; his home was at Clapham Common. With his approval, I reported in my article that though this 'well-known author' had published some fifty thrillers, he had only recently persuaded an English editor to accept any of the sf he liked to write. A full-blooded interplanetary adventure novel of his had, in fact, just been issued by his regular publisher. It was *Vandals of the Void*, which also appeared in the current *Wonder Stories Quarterly* and was the subject of my first essay in book reviewing—in the *Ilford Recorder*. I still have the autographed copy with which the author presented me. The inscription reads, simply: *With all good wishes. Yours sincerely, J. M. Walsh.*

Jim Walsh, as he came to be known years later among his friends of the so-called London Circle—

informal group which met weekly in a pub in Fetter Lane, which gained some resultant publicity as 'The Pub of the Universe'—has been dead now for eighteen years. His sf output was not great, compared to the long run of detective and spy thrillers which supplied his bread and butter, including such intriguing titles as *The Images of Han* and *The Mystery of the Green Caterpillars*. But his enthusiasm for science fiction was a great incentive to me in the days of the Ilford Circle, which he visited twice before it closed down in the summer of '31.

To our little group, seated comfortably in our host's drawing-room chairs, his recital of his early struggles as a part-time writer was as fascinating as his yarns of life in his native Australia, where he had been sheep and cattle man, auctioneer and newsgather before he settled down to authorship in 1923. And when we got down to our subject, his views on the possibility of life on other worlds were interesting enough to serve as the basis of a special *Recorder* write-up on *THE CASE FOR THE MARTIANS*.

The first professional writer to pronounce his blessing on our efforts for sf was also the first to confirm my suspicion that the task of converting British editors to our cause was going to be far from simple. Despite the steady success enjoyed by his other work, Walsh had not easily persuaded his publishers to experiment with *Vandals*, which had been turned down by almost every magazine in England, including those which had cheerfully serialized his mystery stories. His 'Terror Out of Space,' which finally appeared in *Amazing Stories* under his Haverstock Hill pseudonym, met with the same cool reception among British publishers who, he assured me in his letters, were very chary of this sort of material.

'Even the papers that tell me they are on the lookout for something original seem to think this is too original. They admit the chances are that there will presently be a boom in sf, but they are all waiting for someone else to take the lead; then they will follow!'

I was to find out the bitter truth of all this for myself before very long. Note that word 'presently,' too! Though we were not to know that a second World War was to intervene, it wanted another twenty years before we saw anything like a boom in sf in this country. It would have spared me much abortive effort, perhaps, if I had given up the struggle before I started. Yet, for all his futile arguments, Walsh stubbornly adhered to his belief that British sf had a future, and continued to punctuate his thrillers with stories which his agents failed to sell to anyone but Gernsback—until the coming of *Tales of Wonder* and *Newnes' Fantasy*.

At the same time, unbeknown to us, other British writers were suffering much the same setbacks—or avoiding them by sending their stories straight to America. Witness the editorial footnote to my letter in *Wonder Stories* revealing our high intentions, which hailed 'the English response to the sf movement now sweeping the world,' thus:

'England, the birthplace of H. G. Wells, is now acknowledging the meaning and significance of sf

and we believe that this movement begun by Mr Gillings will spread rapidly. We want to accord it our enthusiastic support. Of late many splendid stories have been coming out of England, men like George B. Beattie and Benson Herbert carrying on the Wells tradition. With an ever-enlarging reader-interest stimulated by the Literary Circle . . . and more and more Englishmen of talent turning to science fiction, we believe that old England will closely follow America in its devotion to this new art.'

How Mr Beattie got in there I was never quite sure. From the allusions in the few stories he contributed to *Wonder* in 1931-32 it is obvious that he knew this country pretty well, but I was never able to discover his whereabouts: he was probably another Australian. But Benson Herbert—with whom I was to be associated in a publishing venture some fifteen years later—had just made his debut with 'The World Without,' and John Beynon Harris was not far behind with 'Worlds to Barter.' His name and address had been printed, conspicuously, six months before, when he was pronounced winner of a \$100 prize slogan contest run by *Air Wonder Stories*—which by then had been merged with *Science Wonder*, so that his 'Future Flying Fiction' tag was never used. Somehow or other, though, I must have overlooked all this; because five years passed before I made contact with Harris, Herbert, Festus Pragnell and W. P. Cockroft, talented Englishmen all, by the simple expedient of requesting their addresses from Mr Gernsback in the name of the Science Fiction League.

Two other contrasting personalities, one of whom was to become a lasting contributor to the field, volunteered their own names and addresses—and a fellow feeling for sf which was to develop into a genuine friendship through the years. They were both Liverpolitans, as forthright Eric Frank Russell insisted they be called, rather than Liverpoolians. And his modest compatriot, Leslie Johnson, agreed with him, on this point at least. It was not always so easy to subscribe to Russell's contentions, however persuasive his talk . . .

Les Johnson is, perhaps, best remembered for his pioneer secretarial work for the British Interplanetary Society, in association with Phil Cleator, who founded it in Liverpool in 1933. But he was, first and foremost, a sf fan and secretary of one of the oldest fan clubs in the country. The Universal Science Circle (whose president was Colin H. Askham, a radio ham who became one of the first vice-presidents of the B.L.S.) took its cue from the Ilford Science Literary Circle, even to the extent of attracting members by inserting printed slips in the magazines dispensed by local dealers. The somewhat grandiose title was hardly too ambitious for the half-dozen members who, in 1932, assembled to discuss the various sciences which interested them—and to draw on a library of nearly two hundred issues. For their ultimate aim was 'to facilitate the distribution and use of modern scientific knowledge in all its branches—truly a worthy and magnificent object for any club!'

It was science first, science fiction second; but it was all to the same end, which ever way we tackled it. Meanwhile, the studious Liverpolitans sent felicitations to the British Science Fiction Association, which I would seem

to have inaugurated (without the aid of members or charter) in anticipation of other local organizations making better progress than the Ilford Circle. Circle Secretary Johnson also bruited abroad its indefinite aims in letters to the American magazines, including the new *Astounding Stories*; while I, in *Wonder Stories*, requested 'still more enthusiasts to carry on the good work and spread our message still further afield within the old country.' To which an editorial footnote responded:

'We see no reason, with the continued splendid work of Mr Gillings, supported by our popular author, J. M. Walsh, why there should not be a branch of the Association in every hamlet of England.'

Hamlets, indeed! Not just villages . . . But we could hardly hope to equal the Women's Institute. Thriving branches in a dozen major cities or towns would have satisfied us; and places which looked promising, apart from Liverpool, were Manchester, Leeds and Blackpool. At the noted resort, a contact of Johnson's known as Jack Fearn was operating. Some of the press cuttings I circulated as evidence of the Ilford Circle's leisurely activities brought a brief acknowledgement, formally signed 'John Russell Fearn', which congratulated us on 'a very original movement' and gave no hint of the avid, voluminous correspondence we were soon to exchange; nor of the terrific impact he was to make on the American sf scene within a year or two.

There were well-wishers, too, on the other side of the Atlantic, who expressed their feelings in *Wonder's* letter columns. Such as Pearl Hamilton Elliott, of Long Island, who wrote:

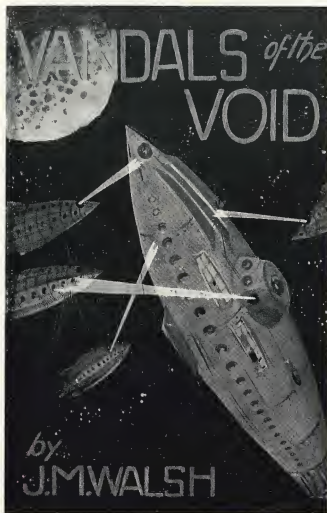
'Anything to bring America in closer harmony and goodwill with the rest of the world will be more beneficial than all the churches put together.'

Those were, in fact, the days of Isolationism; and the bonds of friendship which a mutual interest in sf eventually forged between the fans of Old and New Worlds must have played some part in breaking down the barriers erected after the first World War. Certainly, I found American writers and editors willing to extend hands both friendly and helpful across the Atlantic, when at last I had need of their aid. But, for the present, I still tried to convince British editors of the scope existing for a home-produced magazine; while the newsgang crusaded against the free entry of U.S. pulps which sold at threepence a copy as back numbers.

For these were also the days of Depression. And I made so little impression on cautious editors that even I got depressed and almost threw up the sponge. Things were, in fact, at a pretty low ebb all round by 1934, when I was galvanized into fresh activity by what I—and others—considered the most lamentable error ever made in the name of British sf: the short-lived two-penny weekly, *Scoops*, which was virtually doomed to failure from the start.

(In the next issue Walter Gillings tells how 'Britain's Only Science Story Weekly' came to grief after twenty weeks, the victim of misdirected appeal.)





## Pioneers of Science Fantasy

Jacket design for "Vandals of the Void", published here in 1931, is typical of the period—except in its subject-matter which was so unusual that the publishers still called it a "mystery novel".

It was probably the first time an interplanetary skirmish had ever been depicted on the dust cover of a 7/6d. book. . .



*J. M. Walsh*

J. M. Walsh, successful writer of mystery novels, found that British editors did not want him to write science fiction. As seen by a *Wonder Stories* artist in the 1930's . . .

Olaf Stapledon, Philosopher and Fantasy writer, whose "Last and First Men" relates the future of man over the next 2,000,000,000 years . . . The masterpiece of SF which is, perhaps, only exceeded by the same author's "Star Maker".



PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM • J. B. PRIESTLEY  
GILBERT FRANKAU • DENIS MACKAIL ETC., ETC.

The FEBRUARY  
**PEARSON'S**

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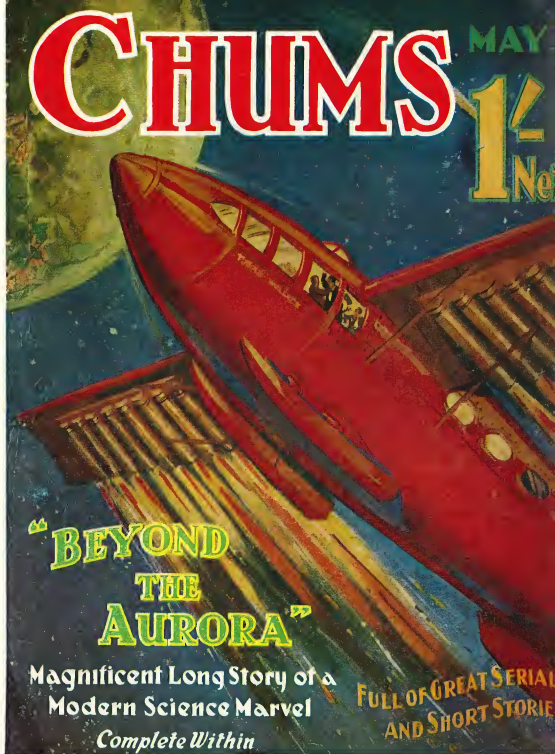
A  
STRIKING  
INCIDENT  
FROM

**WINGED  
TERROR**

A BRILLIANT STORY  
OF IMAGINATION

by **G. R. MALLOCH** Begins on Page 109





*THE PEARSON COVER*

Not yet weaned, but quite a terror when he is roused . . . G. R. Malloch's giant insect story, presented in *Pearson's* in 1931, got another airing in *Fantasy* in 1939.

*THE CHUMS COVER*

American SF gets a good show from the ultra-British *Chums* . . . Neither Ed Earl Repp nor Jack Williamson got his name on the cover.

Ken Slater's

# FANTASY REVIEW

ESCAPE INTO SPACE by E. C. Tubb

(Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 188pp 24s.)

Geldray has been building a star-ship, a government project. All perfectly in order—except that he has private plans to make the vessel a colonising project; a scientist has estimated that released radiation from atomic tests and the like has approached a level likely to destroy the world. Edward Smith is interested in power—power over men, political power, for himself. He intends to destroy Geldray and Project Star and Melgrath, the politician who has been supporting the starship building, by proving misuse of public funds. On the wave of popularity he can create Smith intends to ride to power, supported by his (unofficially) uniformed Citizen's Corps, and to take over the government.

The misuse of funds is true; Melgrath, Geldray, Professor Michele and others engaged on the project have been diverting the funds in order that the 'trial' ship shall be self-supporting and able to carry in hibernation sufficient colonists to enable some other planet to be settled by mankind. Pressed by the knowledge of Smith's intentions, they stock and prepare the ship as well as possible; even to the extent of kidnapping to make up as big a quota of colonists as possible. Even so, completion has not been achieved when Smith strikes, using his illegal C.C. as an armed force to take-over the construction site and the field. But the ship has been sealed, and Geldray awaits Smith in the construction office, attempting to bargain with him. When this proves impossible and Smith is about to order an attack on the ship when Geldray makes his final move—sending the ship on its way, and himself and Smith and a large number of other people to death in the back-blast from the ship's reactors.

The action of the story follows the ship; whether the increase of radiation does make life on Earth intolerable we never know for sure—nor do the ship's officers, crew, and colonists. Professor Michele, master-mind of the space-drive, is killed on take-off; the pilot-computer acts a bit stubborn, but finally an orbit around a likely planet is established and one man makes an attempt at an exploratory landing—and he is just communicating something of apparently great surprising/alarming importance when contact with him is lost and the starship switches into 'M-space' (the place where the star-drive works) to avoid a collision with—a meteorite? Another

orbit is established, a landing made, and not only can nothing be discovered that would give reason for the surprising/alarming information that didn't come, but no trace of the crashed scout vessel or its occupant can be found. This is accepted as possible—a planet is a large place—and they settle down to form a colony. Not too successfully—the life-forms are just too hostile, too inedible, and just to make continuing life really difficult, Terran life-forms and their offspring don't survive pregnancy. Into the bargain some of the kidnapped colonists are trouble makers . . .

Mr. Tubb neatly concludes the trials of the poor Terran settlers with an earthquake, and the few survivors depart in the starship to return to Earth, landing in what I feel could be a great big paradox—although a 'perhaps' thought in one character's final musings does give an alternative to the paradox.

I fear that although I enjoyed the story it seemed to be somewhat unsatisfactory. This may in part be due to the defeat of the colony—I'd rather have seen them surmount their difficulties and to h... with Mr. Tubb's plot line. Again, it may in part have been due to the great screen on anonymity which Mr. Tubb drew over the vast majority of the people involved. True, it is not possible in a story of this kind to develop more than a few of the characters—and those can only be displayed in stereotype—but I could never quite get the feeling that there was really anyone else there, until Mr. Tubb took one of them by the scruff of the neck and hauled him into place as a mutineer, or as a victim of some wild beast's attack. I've tried to estimate the number of people on the ship—without referring to any specific figure that may be in the book—and I find I have no idea. Fifty or five hundred. Certainly not less than fifty; and I'm sure not more than five hundred—but even as 'ranging shots' those figures are pretty far apart! Again, I found it hard to accept the reasoning behind the 'exposure to the natural environment of the planet during pregnancy leads to the death of both mother and offspring' theme. Agreed that such a condition is possible, and is a virus infection, the suggestion that complete isolation in a sterile atmosphere during pregnancy could avoid the fatal result hardly seems to meet the case. Nor can I see that retreat to the starship and departure from the planet would have helped. That, of course, might be the solution to the paradox . . . Maybe Mr. Tubb was thinking deeper than I thought!

# LUCIFER!

## E.C.TUBB

*The man who wore the ring was a very special person, who led a very special life. Rich, powerful, adored by women. But fate can play strange tricks sometimes! LUCIFER! will long be remembered by Ted Tubb's many followers as one of his most outstanding stories.*

It was a device of great social convenience and everyone used it. Everyone, in this case, meaning the Special People all of whom were rich, charming and socially successful. Those who had dropped in to study an amusing primitive culture and those who, for personal reasons, preferred to remain on a world where they could be very large fish in a very small sea.

The Special People, dilettantes of the Intergalactic Set, protected and cosseted by their science, playing their games with the local natives and careful always to preserve their anonymity. But accidents can happen even to the superhuman. Stupid things which, because of their low order of probability, were statistically impossible.

Like a steel cable snapping when the safe it was supporting hung twenty feet above the ground. The safe fell, smashing the sidewalk but doing no other damage. The cable, suddenly released from strain, snapped like a whip the end jerking in a random motion impossible to predict. The odds against it hitting any one particular place were astronomical. The odds against one of the Special People being in just that spot at that exact time were so high as to negate normal probability. But it happened. The frayed end of the cable hit a skull, shredding bone, brain and tissue in an ungodly mess. A surgically implanted mechanism sent out a distress call. The man's friends received the signal. Frank Weston got the body.

Frank Weston, anachronism. In a modern age no man should have to drag a twisted foot through 28 years of his life. Especially when he has the face of a Renaissance angel. But if he looked like an angel he was a fallen one. The dead couldn't be hurt but their relatives could. Tell a suicide's father that his dead girl was pregnant. A doting mother that the apple of her eye was loathesomely diseased. They didn't bother to check, why should they? And, even if they did, so what? Anyone could make a mistake and he was a morgue attendant not a doctor.

Dispassionately he examined the new delivery. The cable had done a good job of ruining the face—visual identification was impossible. Blood had ruined the suit but enough remained to show the wearer had bought pricey material. The wallet contained few bills

but a lot of credit cards. There was some loose change, a cigarette case, a cigarette lighter, keys, wrist-watch, tiepin . . . They made little rustling noises as Frank fed them into an envelope. He paused when he saw the ring.

Sometimes, in his job, an unscrupulous man could make a little on the side. Frank had no scruples only defensive caution. The ring could have been lost before the stiff arrived in his care. The hand was caked with blood and maybe no one had noticed it. Even if they had it would be his word against theirs. If he could get it off, wash the hand free of blood, stash it away and act innocent the ring could be his. And he would get it off if he had to smash the hand to do it. Accidents sometimes made strange injuries.

An hour later they arrived to claim the body. Quiet men, two of them, neatly dressed and calmly determined. The dead man was their business associate. They gave his name and address, the description of the suit he was wearing, other information. There was no question of crime and no reason to hold the body.

One of them looked sharply at Frank. 'Is this all he had on him?'

'That's right,' said Frank. 'You've got it all. Sign here and he's yours.'

'One moment.' The two men looked at each other then the one who had spoken turned to Frank. 'Our friend wore a ring. It was something like this.' He extended his hand. 'The ring had a stone and a wide band. Could we have it please?'

Frank was stubborn. 'I haven't got it. I haven't even seen it. He wasn't wearing it when he came in here.'

Again the silent conference. 'The ring has no intrinsic value but it does have sentimental worth. I would be prepared to pay one hundred dollars for it and no questions will be asked.'

'Why tell me?' said Frank coldly. Inside he felt the growing warmth that stemmed from sadistical pleasure. How he didn't know but he was hurting this man. 'You gonna sign or what?' He turned the knife. 'You think I stole something you call the cops. Either way get out of here.'

In the dog hours he examined what he had stolen. Sitting hunched in his usual corner of the canteen, masked by a newspaper, to the others in the place just another part of the furniture. Slowly he turned the ring. The band was thick and wide, raised in one part, a prominence which could be flattened by the pressure of a finger. The stone was flat, dull, probably a poorly

ground specimen of the semi-precious group. The metal could have been plated alloy. If it was a hundred dollars could buy any of a dozen like it.

But—would a man dressed as the stiff had been dressed wear such a ring?

The corpse had reeked of money. The cigarette case and lighter had been of jewelled platinum—too hot to think of stealing. The credit cards would have taken him around the world and first class all the way. Would a man like that wear a lousy hundred-dollar ring?

Blankly he stared across the canteen. Facing his table three men sat over their coffee. One of them straightened, rose, stretched and headed towards the door.

Scowling Frank dropped his eyes to the ring. Had he thrown away a hundred dollars for the sake of some junk? His fingernail touched the protuberance. It sank a little and, impatiently, he pressed it flush.

Nothing happened.

Nothing aside from the fact that the man who had risen from the facing table and who had walked towards the door was suddenly sitting at the table again. As Frank watched he rose, stretched and walked towards the door. Frank pressed the stud. Nothing happened.

Literally nothing.

He frowned and tried again. Abruptly the man was back at his table. He rose, stretched, headed towards the door. Frank pressed the stud and held it down, counting. Fifty-seven seconds and suddenly the man was back at his table again. He rose, stretched, headed towards the door. This time Frank let him go.

He knew now what it was he had.

He leaned back filled with the wonder of it. Of the Special People he knew nothing but his own race had bred scientists and, even though a sadist, Frank was no fool. A man would want to keep something like this to himself. He would need to have it close to hand at all times. It would need to be in a form where he could use it quickly. So what better than in a ring? Compact. Ornamental. Probably everlasting.

A one-way time machine.

Luck, the fortuitous combination of favourable circumstances, but who needs luck when they know what is going to happen fifty-seven seconds in advance? Call it a minute. Not long?

Try holding your breath that long. Try resting your hand on a red-hot stove for even half that time. In a minute you can walk a hundred yards, run a quarter of a mile, fall three. You can conceive, die, get married. Fifty-seven seconds is enough for a lot of things.

For a card to turn, a ball to settle, a pair of dice tumble to rest. Frank was a sure-fire winner and in more ways than one.

He stretched, enjoying the shower, the impact of hot water driven at high pressure. He turned a control and gasped as the water turned to ice and made goose pimples rise on his skin. A cold bath in winter is hardship when you've no choice, a pleasant titivation when you have. He jerked the control back to hot, waited, then cut the spray and stepped from the shower drying himself on a fluffy towel.

'Frank, darling, are you going to be much longer?'

A female voice with the peculiar intonation of the

inbred upper classes; a member of the aristocracy by marriage and birth. The Lady Jane Smyth-Connors was rich, curious, bored and impatient.

'A moment, honey,' he called and dropped the towel. Smiling he looked down at himself. Money had taken care of the twisted foot. Money had taken care of a lot of other things, his clothes, his accent, the education of his tastes. He was still a fallen angel but there was bright new gilt on his broken wings.

'Frank, darling!'

'Coming!' His jaws tightened until the muscles ached. The high-toned, high-stepping bitch! She'd fallen for his face and reputation and was going to pay for her curiosity. But that could wait. First the spider had to get the fly well and truly in his web.

A silk robe to cover his nakedness. Brushes to tidy his hair. A spray gave insurance against halitosis. The stallion was almost ready to perform.

The bathroom had a window. He drew the curtains and looked at the night. Way down low a scatter of lights carpeted the misty ground. London was a nice city, England a nice place. Very nice, especially to gamblers—they paid no tax on winnings. And here, more than anywhere, high prizes were to be won. Not just for cash, that was for plebeians, but make the right connections and every day would be Christmas.

London. A city the Special People held in high regard.

'Frank!'

Impatience. Irritation. Arrogance. The woman waited to be served.

She was tall with a peculiar angularity, an overgrown schoolgirl who should be wearing tweeds and carrying a hockey stick. But the appearance was deceptive. Generations of inbreeding had done more than fashion the distribution of flesh and bone. It had developed a ripe decadence and created a mass of seething frustrations. She was clinically insane but in her class people were never insane only 'eccentric', never stupid only 'thoughtless', never spiteful or cruel only 'amusing'.

He reached out, took her in his arms, pressed the ball of each thumb against her eyes. She strained back from the sudden pain. He pressed harder and she screamed from agony and the stomach-wrenching fear of blindness. In his mind a mental clock counted seconds. Fifty-one . . . fifty-two . . .

His fingers clamped down on the ring.

'Frank!'

He reached out and took her in his arms, heart still pounding from the pleasure of having inflicted pain. He kissed her with practised skill, nibbling her gently with his teeth. He ran his hands over her body, thin material rustling as it fell from her shoulders. He bit a little harder and felt her tense.

'Don't do that!' she said abruptly. 'I hate anyone doing that!'

One bad mark. Frank counted seconds as he reached for the light switch. With darkness she squirmed, pushed herself free of his arms.

'I hate the dark! Must you be like all the others?'

Two bad marks. Twenty seconds to go. Time for one more quick exploration. His hands groped, made contact, moved with educated determination. She sighed with pleasure.



He activated the ring.

'Frank!'

He reached out and took her in his arms, this time making no attempt to either nibble or bite. Her clothing rustled to the floor and the skin gleamed like pearl in the light. He looked at her, boldly admiring, and his hands moved in the way which gave her pleasure.

She closed her eyes, fingernails digging into his back. 'Talk to me,' she demanded. 'Talk to me!'

He began counting seconds.

Later, as she lay in satiated sleep, he rested, smoking, thinking, oddly amused. He had been the perfect lover. He had said and done the exact things she wanted in the exact order she wanted them and, more important than anything else, had said and done them without her prompting him at any time. He had been a reflection of herself. An echo of her needs—and why not? He had worked hard to map the blueprint of her desires. Exploring, investigating, erasing all false starts and mistakes. What else could he have been but perfect?

He turned, looking down at the woman, seeing her not as flesh and blood but as the rung of a ladder leading to acceptance. Frank Weston had come a long way. He intended to keep climbing.

She sighed, opened her eyes, looked at the classical beauty of his face. 'Darling!'

He said what she wanted him to say.

She sighed again, same sound different meaning. 'I'll see you tonight?'

'No.'

'Frank!' Jealousy reared her upright. 'Why not? You said—'

'I know what I said and I meant every word of it,' he interrupted. 'But I have to fly to New York. Business,' he added. 'After all I do have to make a living.'

She caught the bait. 'You don't have to worry about that. I'll speak to Daddy and—'

He closed her lips with his own. 'I still have to go,' he insisted. Beneath the covers his hands did what she wanted them to do. 'And when I return—'

'I'll get a divorce,' she said. 'We'll be married.'

Christmas, he thought, as dawn paled the sky.

*Come, fly with me!* said the song, me being a gleaming new Comet, two stewardesses all legs and eyes and silken hair with a 'you may look at me because I'm beautiful but you must never, ever touch' attitude, a flight crew and seventy-three other passengers only eighteen of which were travelling first class. Room for everyone and Frank was glad of it.

He felt tired. The night had been hectic and the morning no better. It was good to sit and relax neatly strapped in a form-fitting chair as the jets gulped air and spewed it behind in a man-made hurricane which sent the plane down the runway and up into the sky. London fell away to one side, the clouds dropped like tufts of dirty cotton and then there was only the sun, a watchful eye in an immense iris of blue.

Go West, young man, he thought smugly. Why? For no reason other than he liked to travel and a little absence could make a heart grow fonder. And there was a kick in flying. He liked to look down and think of all the emptiness between him and the ground. Feel

his stomach tighten with acrophobia, the delicious sensation of fear experienced in perfect safety. Height had no meaning in a plane. All you had to do was to look straight ahead and you could be in a Pullman.

He unstrapped, stretched his legs, glanced through a window as the captain's voice came over the speakers telling him that they were flying at a height of 34,000 feet at a speed of 536 miles per hour.

Through the window he could see very little. The sky, the clouds below, the tip of a quivering sheet of metal which was a wing. Old stuff. The blonde stewardess was far from that. She swayed down the aisle, caught his eyes, responded with instant attention. Was he quite comfortable? Would he like a pillow? A newspaper? A magazine? Something to drink?

'Brandy,' he said. 'With ice and soda.'

He sat on the inner seat close to the wall of the cabin so that she had to step from the aisle in order to lower the flap and set out his drink. He lifted his left hand and touched her knee, slid the hand up the inside of her thigh, felt her stiffen, saw the expression on her face. It was a compound of incredulity, outrage, interest and speculation. It didn't last long. His right hand reached out and dug fingers into her throat. Congested blood purpled her cheeks, eyes popped, the discarded tray made a mess as her hands fluttered in helpless anguish.

Within his mind the automatic clock counted off the seconds. Fifty-two . . . fifty-three . . . fifty-four . . .

He pressed the stud on his ring.

The flap made a little thudding sound as it came to rest, the brandy a liquid gurgling as it gushed from the miniature bottle over the ice. She smiled, poisoning the punctured can of soda. 'All of it, sir?'

He nodded, watching as she poured, remembering the soft warmth of her thigh, the touch of her flesh. Did she know that he had almost killed her? Could she possibly guess?

No, he decided as she moved away. How could she? To her nothing had happened. She had served him a drink and that was all. That was all, but—?

Brooding he stared at the ring. You activated it and went back fifty-seven seconds in time. All you had done during that period was erased. You could kill, rob, commit mayhem and none of it mattered because none of it had happened. But it *had* happened. It could be remembered. Could you remember what had never taken place?

That girl, for example. He had felt her thigh, the warm place between her legs, the yielding softness of her throat. He could have poked out her eyes, doubled her screaming, mutilated her face. He had done that and more to others, pandering to his sadism, his love of inflicting pain. And he had killed. But what was killing when you could undo the inconvenience of your crime. When you could watch the body smile and walk away?

The plane rocked a little. The voice from the speaker was calm, unhurried. 'Will all passengers please fasten their safety belts. We are heading into an area of minor disturbance. You may see a little lightning but there is absolutely nothing to worry about. We are, of course, flying well above the area of storm.'

Frank ignored the instruction, still engrossed with



the ring. The unpolished stone looked like a dead eye, suddenly malevolent, somehow threatening. Irritably he finished his drink. The ring was nothing but a machine.

The blonde passed down the aisle, tutted when she saw his unfastened belt, made to tighten it. He waved her away, fumbled with the straps, let the belt fall open. He didn't need it and didn't like it. Frowning he settled back, thinking.

Time. Was it a single line or one with many branches? Could it be that each time he activated the ring an alternate universe was created? That somewhere was a world in which he had attacked the stewardess and had to pay for the crime? But he had only attacked her because he'd known he could erase the incident. Without the ring he wouldn't have touched her. With the ring he could do as he liked because he could always go back and escape the consequences. Therefore the alternate universe theory couldn't apply. What did?

He didn't know and it didn't matter. He had the ring and that was enough. The ring they had offered a lousy hundred dollars for.

Something hit the roof of the cabin. There was a ripping sound, a blast of air, an irresistible force which tore him from his seat and flung him into space. Air gushed from his lungs as he began to fall. He gulped, trying to breathe, to understand. Arctic cold numbed his flesh. He twisted, saw through streaming eyes the plane with one wing torn loose, the metal tearing free as he watched, the plane accompanying his fall to the sea five miles below.

An accident, he thought wildly. A fireball, a meteor, metal fatigue even. A crack in the cabin wall and internal pressure would do the rest. And now he was falling. Falling!

His fingers squeezed in frenzied reaction.

'Please, Mr Weston.' The blonde stewardess came forward as he reared from his seat. 'You must remain seated and with your safety belt fastened. Unless—?' Diplomatically she looked towards the toilets at the rear of the cabin.

'Listen!' He grabbed her by both arms. 'Tell the pilot to change course. Tell him now. Hurry!'

A fireball or a meteor could be dodged that way. They could find safety if the course was changed fast enough. But it had to be fast! Fast!

'Quick.' He ran towards the flight deck, the girl at his heels. Damn the stupid bitch! Couldn't she understand? 'This is an emergency!' he shouted. 'The pilot

must alter course immediately!'

Something hit the roof of the cabin. The compartment popped open, metal coiling like the peeled skin of a banana. The blonde vanished. The shriek of tearing metal was lost in the explosive gusting of escaping air. Desperately Frank clung to a seat, felt his hands being torn from the fabric, his body sucked towards the opening. Once again he was ejected into space to begin the long, stomach-twisting five mile fall.

'No!' he screamed, frantic with terror. 'Dear God, no!'

He activated.

'Mr Weston, I really must insist. If you do not want to go to the toilet you must allow me to fasten your safety belt.'

He was standing by his seat and the blonde was showing signs of getting annoyed. Annoyed!

'This is important,' he said, fighting to remain calm. 'In less than a minute this plane is going to fall apart. Do you understand? We are all going to die unless the pilot changes course immediately.'

Why did she have to stand there looking so dumb? He had told her all this before!

'You stupid cow! Get out of my way!' He pushed her to one side and lunged again towards the flight deck. He tripped, fell, came raging to his feet. 'Change course!' he yelled. 'For God's sake listen and—'

Something hit the roof. Again the roar, the blast, the irresistible force. Something struck his head and he was well below the clouds before he managed to regain full control. He activated and found himself still in space, gulping at rarified air and shivering with savage cold. To one side the shattered plane hung as though suspended, a mass of disintegrating debris as it fell. Tiny fragments hung around it; one of them perhaps the blonde.

The clouds passed. Below the sea spread in a shimmer of light and water. His stomach constricted with overwhelming terror as he stared at the waves, his lurking acrophobia aroused and tearing at every cell. Hitting the sea would be like smashing into a floor of solid concrete and he would be conscious to the very end. Spasmodically he activated and, immediately, was high in the air again with almost a minute of grace in which to fall.

Fifty-seven seconds of undiluted hell.

Repeated.

Repeated.

Repeated over and over because the alternative was to smash into the waiting sea.

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## TROJAN HORSE - -

Another powerful story by E. C. Tubb

- - featured next issue!

# THE ADAPTERS

by Philip E. High

*In recent years Philip E. High has won a reputation as the author of several exciting novels, most of them published in America. Vision Of Tomorrow is privileged to herald his return to short fiction with this fascinating story of a rather unusual invasion of the Earth . . .*

Pryor crouched in a hollow and squinted across the swaying grass. He looked what he was, a long-time fugitive. Tattered, burned brown, emaciated and bearded.

The grass, heat-hazed in the July sun, looked sleepy, gentle and quite without danger but to Pryor's experienced eye there were warning signs.

Here and there, patches of grass drooped listlessly or were turning brown. Way over to the left, an oak tree was weeping as if in anticipation of Autumn. With every breeze, a swirl of leaves, brown at the edges, drifted downwards from the branches.

Oh, yes, they were around here, all right, no doubt about that. A long time since they had been this way, so long that he had become careless.

No use going on in any case, the game would have pulled out in droves and the potatoes upon which he had relied so long would be rotting in the soil wherever they had passed.

Pryor began to edge backwards out of the hollow, wriggling, pushing with his fingers, but continually moving backwards into the long grass.

The trouble was that you couldn't always see the Invaders, the temperature had to be just right or you had to get them between you and the sun. The only time you could really see them was in rain, in rain you could spot them miles away.

He continued to wriggle away, but backwards, watching, in case some of those warning signs drew closer. If he could make the trees behind him, he would be more or less safe.

Pryor had survived five years by the careful use of a large number of escape routes. Once in the woods he would sprint for the old culvert which ran under the highway and lose the pursuit.

The Invader seemed incapable of penetrating caves or narrow openings and also trees slowed him up. Once he had lost the scent or whatever it was he followed by, you were more or less safe. You needed, however, a good mile, for the Invader once he had the scent, never gave up. He would follow through light or darkness at a steady six miles an hour and, since one could not run at top speed forever, he finally caught up.

He was also hideously patient. Pryor had once nearly

starved to death hidden in the cellar of a ruined farmhouse. The Invader knew he was there and had waited at the entrance for five solid nights and days.

Like most fugitives, Pryor was armed. He carried a thin, long-bladed knife which he had learned to throw with considerable accuracy. He also carried a heavy Luger in a crude but quite efficient holster at his hip.

Both weapons were quite useless against the Invader. He used the knife for game and he clung to the Luger because it provided an illusory sense of confidence. He had only ten shells left for it anyway—say nine, the last one was reserved for himself.

*There!*

He froze, rigid as a dead tree. Only the dark eyes, slitted against the sun, moved in the haggard bearded face.

Yes, he had it just right, a shimmering outline, the rolling grassland distorted behind it. Like soap bubbles they were, only they weren't round and there was no phantom rainbows.

It was still, that could be a good sign unless it knew he was here and was using its peculiar faculties to find him.

Fortunately it was not between him and the trees, at least not that one, there could be others.

He glanced briefly at the sky in a half-formed anticipation of a miracle, perhaps it would rain, but the blue was cloudless.

He cursed silently and desperately in his mind. You could see them in the rain.

He recalled briefly a January day some two years ago when from the safety of Grey Hill he had really seen them for the first time.

He had counted a full eighteen but it was their height which had struck him first. He had never realized they stood a good twenty feet in height nor that they had *shape*. A misty semi-transparent shape but something which had outline.

They had been drifting across the cold, rainswept grass of Dawson's plain in a wide arc, misty, unreal and slightly bowed like the ghosts of cowed monks in meditation.

It was the arc which was troubling him now—a hunting arc which could all too easily close into a tight circle. If the one he could see was the middle one, the rest could be closing in.

Something approaching panic flooded his mind but survival discipline locked his limbs. If you panicked you were lost.

Sweat began to trickle down his face, cutting lines in the ingrained dirt but Pryor was in control of himself again. Muscle movement was almost imperceptible

yet, inch by inch, he was still moving backwards towards the trees.

It seemed to him that time became everlasting or locked in eternal stasis. The sun burned into his back, the same blades of grass seemed level with his eyes and the murmur of insects became a tumult of shouting people. He was locked, stuck here unmoving like a butterfly on board with an invisible pin through his back.

The sky seemed to rock from side to side above him and, then, unbelievably, he found himself in the shadow of the first tree.

He paused only to quell the beating of his heart and then rolled and assumed a crouching position in a single fluid movement.

He did not look to see if the Invader was close or still in the same position. He flung himself in the thicket and bracken which surrounded the trees and went crashing into comparative safety.

He liked thicket and bracken, close trees, tall rocks and narrow openings. Such obstacles didn't stop the Invaders but it cut their speed by three quarters which gave a reasonable margin to pull well ahead.

Maybe, he had often thought, the trees took energy from them for, wherever they went, they left death behind them. Grass would wilt and turn brown, wild flowers die and the trees would shed their leaves and stand like winter skeletons in the bright summer sun. If you touched where they had passed, the soil was hard and the grass brittle to one's fingers. Root crops rotted in the soil and, in rain, the Invader left a trail of ice and glittering frost particles behind him.

Pryor didn't know much about them, he had been driving towards the city when he had run into the first wave of panic-stricken refugees coming out.

Abandoning his car, already caught in a monumental jam from a multiple pile-up, he had run with the rest infected with their panic.

Garbled accounts had come to him from individuals in the exodus. Stories of the Invaders appearing in hundreds in the streets and how people fell woodenly forward when the phantom beings touched them. Apparently the same thing had been happening all over the world.

These memories were in his mind as he plunged through the undergrowth careless of sound. A hundred yards to the culvert would bring him out in Striker's Wood on the other side of the highway and he should be safe there.

Above him a faint whimpering sound began and he slowed his pace, keeping close to the trunks of the trees. They would have to put in appearance too, just to complicate things.

He cased the Luger out of its holster and flicked off the safety catch. He would only use it if the thing got in his way. He glanced quickly upwards and caught a glimpse of it passing above the trees some two hundred feet to his left. Way out! But it would be back, like the Invaders, the Flyers never gave up. They were, of course, one and the same. The Flyers had begun to appear about a year after the invasion and had been increasing in numbers ever since.

The difference was, of course, that the Flyers were unmistakably machines. Spheres of what looked like



ALFIE QUINN

opaque, faceted glass through which vague unsubstantial shadows were just visible.

He caught a glimpse of another some fifty feet to his right and felt a coldness in his stomach. There was more than one, this was a hunt.

The culvert! He leapt at it, splashing through the inch deep water on all fours.

The dank brick walls gave an illusion of solidity, of cover, of safety but he knew he must not stay in it. If they had seen him enter, they would stand guard at either end until starvation forced him into the open.

Before he was half way through, the voice began. A voice which he had heard before too often, a voice which seemed to be speaking almost in his ear and to which thick rock and stone presented no barriers. A curiously high-pitched, staccato and unhuman voice.

*'Attention. Attention fugitive. We know you are there. Come out into the open, give yourself up, we mean you no harm.'*

'Like hell, you don't,' said Pryor under his breath. When he came out into the open, an Invader would be waiting to roll over him like a cloud of lethal gas. He'd seen it happen. He had a partner once, no—no, not quite, Nina had been more than a partner, she had been like a refuge of safety and love in a wilderness of despair. He could still see her again in his mind falling stiffly forward and the Flyers descending as she fell.

He'd been two hundred yards away and quite incapable of helping—not that he could have done.

In his cave at night, tears still came into his eyes when he thought of her. Sometimes, too, he thought he heard her voice but when he turned her rough and filthy bed of dry grass and leaves was empty.

*'Do not be insane, fugitive, we are here to help you, to save you. A few hours more and it will be too late. This is not an arrest, this is a rescue party. Can you not understand we are trying to save you?'*

He reached the end of the culvert and, because the stream was shallow and overhung with branches, continued on all fours.

The voice went with him:—

*'The transparent beings who appear to hunt you are not enemies but friends. Let us help you, give yourself up—'*

He reached the end of the branches, left the stream and crawled through a thorn thicket.

*'In the city you will be clothed, fed and given medical attention—'*

God, an open glade! He ducked back into the thicket. As he did so, something went whimpering above and a hazy shadow passed over the grass.

That was close. He began to crawl round the glade, his arms beginning to shake from exhaustion. In a minute he'd have to rest or fatigue would betray him when he needed energy most.

He rolled into a hollow and lay there panting. Once he had been a nutritional expert and, in the last five years, he'd learned all the effects of malnutrition first hand. Folding up in a short sprint was one of them. A diet of potatoes and berries with an occasional raw rabbit or bird didn't exactly build up stamina.

*'In the city you will receive medical care—'*

He said: 'Ha! ha!' derisively and nearly aloud.

City! What city!

About a year ago, driven by forces within himself which he was unable to explain, he had made the fifty mile journey to Holman Heights from which, he knew, he could look down on the city.

There was no city or, to qualify, no city ever made by man. Gone were St Mary's Church, the steel mills, Jacob's Hill, the Technical Institute, Knight's Bridge and the sleepy river which it had once spanned.

Where the city, his city, had once stood, was a kind of raised block upon which metallic and precisely identical buildings were laid in even rows. City? What kind of city was that, which, at ten miles, looked like a black table-top into which had been driven row upon row of brass-coloured studs.

*'We have identified you, fugitive. Your name is Roger Pryor. Be sensible, Pryor, come out into the open, give yourself up, time is running out—'*

Pryor showed his teeth briefly in an unmistakable snarl and started to crawl again. So they knew his name now, well that was cosy. What did they expect—that he should now burst forth from hiding, hand outstretched?

He reached the opposite side of the glade and stood half erect. The trees were large here, thick trunks, spreading branches, take it steady, eh?

*'Will nothing make you listen to reason, Pryor? We don't want to flush you out but we may have to. You have only four hours left, four hours, Pryor. We are trying to save you before the time runs out—'*

Let 'em talk, let them talk their damned heads off—if they had heads. Another mile and he would be in Gorse Valley, let them flush him out of that. Since the landslide three years ago, the valley had become a bewildering tangle of fallen trees, soil and boulder, in many places a virtual tunnel of escape.

*'Are you so bigoted, so steeped in pre-conceived ideas that you are unable to grasp the possibility of a benevolent Invasion? There was no TIME for niceties, can't you accept that? Draw a parallel, Pryor. Consider a native village suddenly faced with Bubonic Plague. Skilled medical attention in the district would have only one duty—inoculate the entire population. Witch doctors, taboos and even physical resistance would have to be swept aside with explanations later—'*

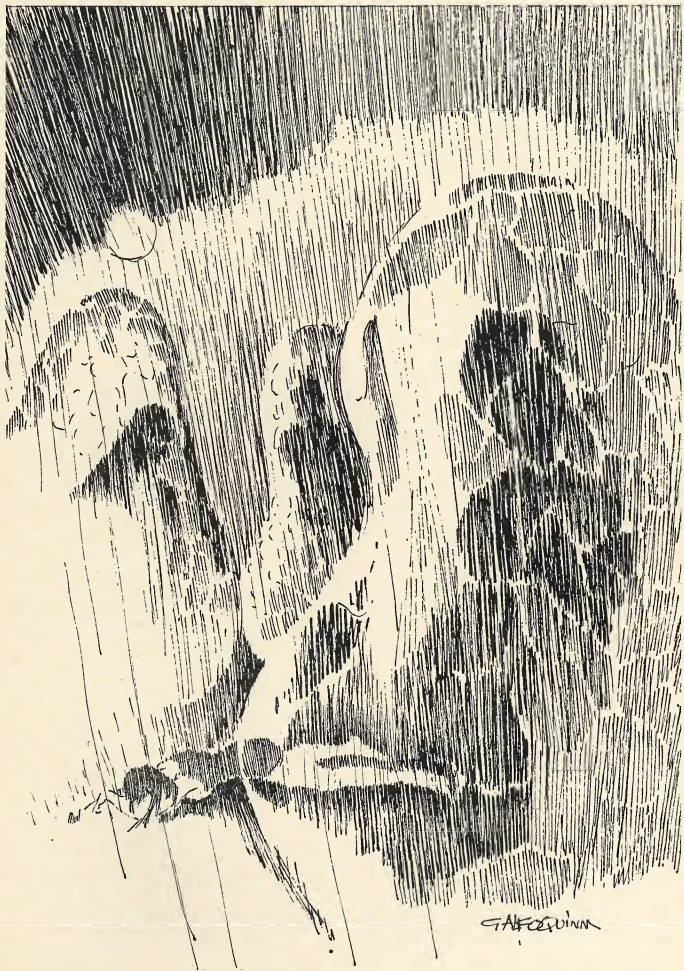
Pryor smiled inwardly. So now they were appealing to his reason. Carefully worded arguments aimed at a man who had once regarded himself as moderately intelligent. Logical and convincing arguments even which he might have listened to from a man but never from a high pitched thing which spat vowels like bullets.

He became aware of individual whimpering sounds and realized that there were more than two flyers. Got to make it to the valley fast, this was more than a hunt, this was a fine-tooth-comb operation. Must be ten or twelve of the damn things.

He quickened his pace, darting from tree to tree in a crouch, gun ready in his hand. If there were ten flyers, how many Invaders were there, twenty, thirty? They could be standing among the trees like invisible sentinels.

*'Pryor, if you won't listen to reason, we have a name for you. Listen—Nina. Repeat—Nina—'*

He stopped dead as if suddenly frozen.



GARQUIN

*'Did you hear that name, Pryor? Does it still have meaning for you? Nina, still waiting for you, hoping, praying you'll see sense—'*

He raised his head slowly, seeing the tangle of branches and leaves above him through a kind of watery mist. He was aware of his eyes smarting and blinked them furiously. The liars, the dirty rotten liars. They had no right to use her name, no right, no damn right at all. In that staccato inhuman voice, it seemed a sacrifice.

Something circular went whimpering directly above and in sudden uncontrollable fury, he raised the Luger and squeezed the trigger.

The report made Pryor jump, he heard a faint thud of impact and the slug go whining away at right angles. He knew he had made a mistake before his finger slackened on the trigger. He'd betrayed his position.

He turned and sprinted but before he had taken twenty paces, there was a dry rending sound and a strangely liquid sort of impact.

He had the impression of a sort of purple beam lashing at the ground and then, about eighty feet ahead, three trees crowned in sudden flame and plumed upwards in swirls of black smoke. Where they had stood was a wide blackened space.

Before he could take it in, trees plumed to fire and dust all round him.

He stood still, suddenly frozen with uncertainty. What did he do now? They'd never take him alive.

*'You're boxed, Pryor, do you follow? We have burned a forty-foot ring right round your hide-out. You cannot escape from your own private wood without exposing yourself. Give yourself up—'*

Pryor was suddenly inflicted with a mixture of violent emotions, frustration, terror, inexplicable grief and fury. He suddenly found himself shouting hoarsely. 'You'll never get me alive, never, you understand that? You hear me?'

*'We hear you, Pryor. You are not the first, we have met many others like you and we have developed certain methods for dealing with such situations.'* The voice stopped abruptly.

It seemed to Pryor, as he stood there, that the Luger tingled oddly in his hand and that something tugged at the knife in his belt but the feeling seemed to have no relation to fact.

Very carefully and very slowly he sat down. Might as well take it comfortably for the last few minutes of his life. If they wanted him, they'd have to come and get him or, if they preferred it, they could burn down the rest of what they called his private wood. He'd be gone where they couldn't follow long before the flames reached him.

Seemed funny they appeared to want him alive. No doubt they had some nice sadistic little game lined up for him when they got him. Alternatively, maybe the Invaders wanted him themselves, perhaps, they got a kick out of rolling over a human being so that he fell frozen and rigid. Frozen! There might be something in that, like ants and wasps, they might want frozen food for—

He cut the thought half completed and half rose, starting about him. The air was filled with vague and unfamiliar sounds, muted and heavy, like enormous

rain drops, only it wasn't raining.

Something attracted his attention to his left and slightly above him and, as he looked, a thick branch began to sag slowly as if bending under an ever increasing weight. Then unbelievably, it began to drip heavily.

It wasn't true, this was hysteria, he was seeing things, hallucinations due to exhaustion and malnutrition. Yet all around him, he saw, the forest was melting. Trees were leaning tiredly sideways, running together like tallow candles in a hot oven.

*'Do not be alarmed, Pryor. We cannot wait to starve you out or keep chasing after you and, in three minutes, all your cover will be gone.'*

Pryor shouted an obscenity and put the Luger to his temple.

The trigger refused the pull. The safety catch? No, no, he tested furiously and it came off in his hand. Dust drifted down from somewhere inside the weapon.

He flung it from him but when he pulled the knife from his belt, the blade was as limp and as useless as damp cardboard.

Slowly he stood erect, so this was it, in resignation was a curious calm and an almost detached sense of imminence.

Above him the flyers had arranged themselves in a circle but still moved slowly around him. To Pryor it conveyed a suggestion of idle and off-beat curiosity but, of course, they could afford to stand by now.

At ground level, all around him, everything was distorted. Invaders, must be hundreds of them and clearly closing in, nothing he could do about it, was there?

In the brief moments before they got him, Pryor lifted his head and pulled back his shoulders. Quite unconsciously he gave an impression of dignity and nobility before the first Invader rolled over him like an invisible cloud.

It was like death and it wasn't or not as he had imagined death. It was pain, it was suffering, it was rending and violence, it was compassion, authority, regret, relief, perhaps dying was divine madness?

Physically it seemed to Pryor that something struck him a savage blow with a hammer of ice at the back of his neck. The world spun away and he clawed for it desperately. Something reached and held him to it—by his fingernails. Rival forces sank hooks into his heels and pulled from the opposite direction. Somewhere, way out in an endless darkness, someone screamed, he thought it was himself but the scream seemed too far away. Divine Madness, yes, light, colour, sound, great blue trees swinging from cloud to purple cloud in a riven scarlet sky.

Blue faces, voices booming from hill tops, their echoes shaking his body so much that his bones seemed to grate together.

*'LEAVE HIM HERE—HERE—HERE—here—'*

It seemed he opened his eyes and blue alien faces was bending over and towards him.

*'Easier for him to adjust—adjust—adjust—'*

Blackness suddenly engulfed the blue faces and he seemed to fall very slowly from a vast distance on to a hard surface.

He knew, when he opened his eyes, that he was not dead. He did not know what had happened but he

knew he had not died. He could see tree tops, smell damp vegetation, hear birds. Yes, he was lying on his back and there, not twenty feet away was the rusted hulk of a motor vehicle.

He was on the highway, something had wrapped him in a damp-proof rug and put something soft under his head. With some effort he struggled upright, surprised to find himself uninjured.

Beside him, on the ground were four small cans and, fixed to one of the cans was a printed note.

Without removing it, he read the small and peculiarly cramped words, frowning:—

*You have been unconscious for three hours. In the course of the next few days, certain changes will become apparent to you. Make your way to the nearest city in your own time, there is no coercion. Food, clothing and medical attention will be provided on your arrival.*

He shrugged faintly. Life had changed suddenly from endless pursuit to a terrifying puzzle. He was firmly convinced, however, that the change was not benevolent. If he had been spared this time, it was for something more unpleasant later. As for going into the cities, it would be the hell of a long time before he took a risk like that.

He picked up one of the cans which was stamped 'NUTROMEAL' Simple instructions were provided for opening and re-sealing the can. Within, when he opened it, were ten neatly packed capsules about an inch in length—

*'Place capsule in mouth and chew. Do not swallow whole';* and then, in large letters, *'SUFFICIENT FOR TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.'*

Pryor permitted himself a mental guffaw, who did they think they were fooling? Almost in a gesture of defiance he placed one of the capsules in his mouth and began to chew on it angrily. They might think they could fool the uninstructed but as nutritional expert, they—

His thought seemed to fade out suddenly in a kind of wondering ecstasy—this was magic! The capsule was all and everything he wanted it to be, all his hungering five-year dreams in every single chew. It was roast pork, steak, turkey and all the exquisitely cooked delicacies his mind could conceive. He didn't try to explain, maybe it hypnotized his taste buds or something, who cared?

He chewed for the last time, aware of a growing and unfamiliar feeling of content and well-being. The conception of compressing twenty-four hours nutrition into an inch-long capsule was, of course, a pipe dream. Nonetheless, it induced after consumption—he yawned prodigiously—a pleasant, feeling of fullness, comfort, sleepiness and—

When he awoke, dawn was breaking but there were none of the inner gnawing sensations and pangs of hunger which were so familiar.

He rose unhurriedly, packing the remaining cans carefully about his person. There was enough for weeks if the things really worked and—a more urgent question jumped into his mind, *why?* Could there be any truth in the line they had once tried to hook him with, some sort of mass inoculation?

It might have convinced him if there had been any thinking human to back up the story. There were the

Invaders, the Flyers and some blue-skinned oddities, but what else? Human cities had gone, pile after pile of rusting wreckage were the monuments of human vehicles on a human highway. If Humanity survived, it was not around here. This thing he had eaten, nothing human had cooked up that, not in five years. Then there were the voices, the chattering monkey voices which, even allowing for amplification distortions, contained no human intonation or inflection.

He glanced down the highway, piled with wreckage and rapidly giving way to moss and weed. Sixty miles, dead straight, would lead him smack into a city, an alien city. He smiled twistedly and trudged away in the opposite direction.

After about a mile, however, he became aware that something was wrong. There were none of the familiar signs of danger—he seemed curiously untroubled about the Invaders now. No, this was something subtle, something which he should be able to pin-point but couldn't.

He looked about him but could see no change. The bright July sun shone from a cloudless sky, an occasional breeze stirred the tops of the trees and all seemed normal.

He figured it was around ten in the morning and yet, somehow, somewhere, something was wrong.

A fat blue fly sailed past his face, he swatted at it but missed, and watched it settle on the door of the rusting automobile which was exposed to the sun. The creature spread its wings slightly as if warming itself and then, abruptly, fell off. Once it buzzed feebly from the long moss into which it had fallen but did not rise again.

It was then he realized what was wrong—the silence. There were no bird calls and the buzz of insects was almost non-existent.

He frowned unseeingly ahead, could it be true that some sort of plague was sweeping the world? Better keep going and watch points.

He watched but the pattern didn't fit. It was true that every second, insect sounds were becoming less and the reasons for it more obvious—the insect world was dying, en masse. Flies or bees, enfeebled and erratic, fell into the grass and did not rise. There was a continuous shower of caterpillars grubs and minor insects from the trees, all were dead or dying. Ant hills, swarming mounds of life three days ago, were now so many heaps of soil and twigs and completely without movement.

He noticed also that blossoms were drifting from trees and wild flowers wilting.

The Invaders, that was it, the final assault, sweeping across the Earth and destroying everything.

He felt a sudden and almost overwhelming fury. The final indignity! Earth being defaced, scourged and sterilized for the Invader, like an old garden plot being sprayed with chemicals to rid it of weeds. Soon Earth would be as barren as sprayed soil, stripped of her forests and plains and everything which had made her what she was. Then, of course, the Invader would step in and replace the lost life with his own ecology. Nightmare plants would writhe up where forests had grown and perhaps glittering fields of wire replace the grass.

It was not irrational, man had gone and with him his cities, this was the next logical step.

Pryor walked on through a forest which was as silent as a tomb. Insect sounds no longer existed and the birds were silent.

Sun, shafting down between the leaves and branches, occasionally touched his body with warmth but the forest seemed as dead and as cold as an abandoned cathedral.

After about ten minutes walking he came to the end of trees and automatically stopped. Below him, long grass sloped downwards to a narrow valley. Beyond, similar slopes rose again, slowly giving way to timber and rock.

Pryor studied the valley carefully but he had the curious feeling that it was clear, nothing was looking for him any longer.

Something attracted his attention on the opposite side of the valley and he stiffened. Smoke! A curling black spiral rising up in the still summer air.

It was not a natural phenomena, Pryor had seen too many spontaneous conflagrations in the early days of the invasion not to recognize one now. No, this was a controlled fire, a camp fire but a hell of a big one.

Moved by both curiosity and inexplicable alarm, Pryor began to make his way cautiously across the valley. Although mostly grass, there were plenty of small trees and shrubs to provide cover.

He made the downward slope without incident and only half conscious of the hardness of the soil. A narrow stream wound its way through the foot of the valley but he saw at once that something was wrong with it. It was covered in a thick hard film of some substance which was quite obviously lethal. Insects, flies, water creatures and even a small fish were visible trapped within it and were clearly quite dead.

He found a narrow section and leapt it easily. Still keeping to cover, he began the ascent of the opposite slope.

Within a hundred feet of the fire, however, there was a sharp report and something snapped close to his right ear.

He dropped and rolled under the nearest bush. Someone up there had a rifle and knew how to use it.

Rifle? No Invader would use a rifle, surely? The explanation came to him in a sudden flash of insight. Up there was a fugitive like himself, determined to survive at all costs.

What the hell was he doing building a fire which could be seen twenty miles away?

He shouted: 'I'm a friend.'

There was another shot and a small gout of earth near right hand.

'Get lost.' The voice sounded thick, oddly shaky and slow of delivery as if the speaker were recalling long forgotten words and spelling them out to himself first.

'You hear me down there? Get lost, one step more and I'll let you have the next one straight in the guts, see? These slugs are soft-nosed, they'll knock a hole in you as big as a dinner plate.'

'Listen, I'm a friend—'

'Sure, friend, I watched you coming, what do you think I am—stupid? Think a few ragged clothes and a beard turn you into a human being? I've a pretty powerful pair of binoculars up here, think about that.'

'Now, look—'

'No, "friend", you look. If you're so damn well disposed, suppose we do a deal, suppose you turn that damn thing off as a beginning, eh?'

'I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.' Pryor was aware of a growing irritation, the conversation had degenerated into an exchange of riddles.

'I've told you,' he shouted. 'I'm a human being like you.'

'With that voice, looking like that?' There was a derisive laugh. 'You think I'm blind *and* deaf, little alien brother? Try moving, try making a break, see how blind I am.'

The thick, faltering voice paused and then went on. 'I've been waiting for this, waiting five years, five years of being chased like a wild beast. Five years of being sought by your phantoms, chased by blue-skins and being yammered at from the sky;— 'Give yourself up. Come out into the open. We mean you no harm.' I wasn't stupid then and I'm not stupid now. One day, I said to myself, I'll have one of those creeps pinned down tight and it'll be my turn. If you want to get out of that cover alive, friend, turn it off or signal your friends to do it.'

'Turn what off? I haven't a clue what you're talking about.' Despite a mounting apprehension, Pryor was close to losing his temper. The man had obviously once been well educated and, although sounding insane, appeared to possess an elusive logic.

'Knock it off for pity's sake.' There was another derisive laugh. 'You don't think I really swallowed that guff about some sort of cloud passing through the solar system do you? No, you've got some damn machine doing this. If you want to come out of that cover alive, friend, press the "off" switch.'

Pryor, a retort ready, did not answer. Somehow, suddenly, there were too many riddles he was not trying to answer himself. 'With that voice, looking like that?' What the devil did the man mean by that remark?

Almost forgetting the marksman above him he scowled in front him, seeing, without really taking it in, that the grass around him was slowly turning to a leprous white. He moved his hand slightly and three white blades broke as he moved. They were as brittle as—

Pryor stopped thinking suddenly with the choking feeling that he was holding his breath against his will—*his hand was bright blue.*

He drew it towards him frantically and tried to lick it clean. A lot of grime came off leaving a filthy taste in his mouth but his skin remained blue—blue like the aliens!

He was suddenly afflicted with the beginnings of understanding and a desperate desire to know.

'You up there, listen (Did his own voice sound staccato now?). Listen, I'm prepared to make a deal, almost any deal for information.' It was a lie, he knew it and was unashamed.

'What kind of information?' The thick slow voice was nakedly suspicious.

'That about the cloud passing through the solar system.'

'You crazy or something? It's your propaganda.'

'You want that deal or don't you? Repeat all you can remember.'



There was a long pause, then: "They—you said that a cloud of cosmic gas—whatever that is—would be passing through the solar system which, although not visibly affecting light, would cut the sun's heat by ninety per cent. The gas would take at least thirty years to pass through the system and that's all I can remember, now what about that deal, friend?"

Pryor did not answer, he was remembering.

'You have only a few hours left, we want to save you—'

'A mass inoculation, regardless—'

A shot ploughed into the soil about two feet from his body.

'You hear me down there?'

Insects falling from the trees in thousands and not a thick strange substance' on the stream but ice.

Another shot, this time less accurate.

'Don't think I'm beaten, damn you.' The voice quivered audibly. 'The colder you make it, the bigger I'll build the fire, simple.'

Pryor did not hear. Yes, he could feel the sun on his body because they'd caught him, he'd been inoculated—no, *adapted*. An alien race had adapted mankind for survival, a benevolent race which, seeing the danger, had launched a massive survival mission without the time to explain why. A mercy-first mission.

From above came a single muffled shot, not aimed at him and a faint thud. He knew what had happened, the cold was closing in too fast.

He rose, unconsciously heading towards the city, not an alien city but a city constructed to withstand the ice in which it would soon be buried.

It could be true, really true that Nina was waiting, blue like himself but it was what she was inwardly that mattered. He quickened his pace. Nina!

He was well on his way when darkness fell, well on his way when the evening clouds blotted out the stars and the first snow of the new ice age came sifting down through the dying trees.



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# THE NIXHILL MONSTERS

by BRIAN WATERS

*Man has an inborn fear and mistrust of anything that is different, in common with many other animals. In this story one of Australia's most promising new writers gives us a poignant glimpse of a possible confrontation brought about by man's instinctive reactions.*

I

The figure appeared from between the bushes at the side of the road, and leapt out into the path of the car in a series of quick convulsive movements. Graham slewed the wheel around as his wife screamed a warning, and stamped his foot on the brake. The car slid wildly on the loose-surfaced road, bounced over the small drainage trench at its edge and plunged into the scrub. He whipped the wheel back in an attempt to avoid a tree, heard a dull *crunch* as the rear of the car slid into it, and felt the car rear up over some low obstacle before it slammed to a halt against a stump.

There was a moment's silence as the engine stalled, then Graham called anxiously, 'Alice, are you all right?' Around them a cloud of red dust began to settle.

'I think so,' Alice replied doubtfully, brushing her hair back from her eyes and fumbling at the catch on the seat belt. 'Did you . . . did you hit it?'

'I'm not sure. I think it jumped aside at the last moment.'

'What was it? It couldn't have been human. It was glowing, its features were . . .' Alice's voice faltered at the recollection of the face she had seen only a few feet in front of the car.

'I've never seen anything like it,' admitted Graham, reaching forward and switching off the ignition with a shaking hand. He picked up a map from where it had fallen, and after he had looked at it briefly he said, 'There's a town about a mile away but it can't be very big. It mightn't even have a garage. Do you feel well enough to walk; you're sure you're not hurt?'

'I'll be all right, I'd rather walk than stay here,' said Alice, then she shrieked and clutched at Graham's arm, 'Oh Graham—it's come back!'

It had approached swiftly, inhumanly swiftly, and now stood about fifty feet away, making incredibly jerky movements with its head and limbs. Its whole body shone as though it was illuminated by sunlight, even though the car and the creature were in the shade of a giant ghost gum. But it was the face which held their attention, even though it was difficult to see because of the creature's frequent abrupt small movements, yet even these were not enough to conceal that the face was hideous in the extreme. No accident, no disease could change a person's features so completely, create the sallow translucent skin, the clearly marked bone structure, or bring into such prominence the

major arteries and veins. The creature uttered a sound, a shrill high pitched intonation which sent a shiver down Graham's spine, but as he flung open the door, afraid that they might be trapped inside the damaged vehicle, the creature turned and ran off at unbelievable speed, disappearing between the trees.

'Alice, you'd better not stand. You're as white as a ghost.'

Her mouth was dry from shock, and she swallowed with difficulty before she could reply, 'It wasn't . . . it wasn't human was it.'

'I don't know. It was more like some horrible caricature of a man,' he replied, putting his arm around her shoulders. 'Come on, we're getting out of here. Maybe that thing, whatever it is, is as frightened of us as we of it—it certainly took off when I opened the door—but we're not staying here to find out.'

Graham offered his wife a half full bottle of squash, and she gulped down a few lukewarm mouthfuls before leaving the car.

They made their way out over the red sandy soil to the dusty road. The creature was standing motionless at least two hundred yards away, watching them. Graham nudged his wife and they stumbled forward, glancing back every few seconds to see whether the creature made any attempt to follow. It disappeared into the scrub a few minutes later, and Alice urged her husband to hurry, more afraid than ever now that she could no longer see it.

Fifteen minutes later they came on a bullet-scarred sign bearing the name Nixhill, and a little later they caught sight of the town, a collection of about a dozen houses, a store, a garage-café, and a small hotel. The street was deserted, not a person, not even a dog was in sight, but as they approached the garage a man appeared in the doorway, a shotgun clutched tightly in one hand. One look at his face was sufficient to convince Graham that the mechanic too had seen the creature.

'We've had an accident,' said Graham as they drew closer. 'Is there somewhere we can get a drink, and where my wife can rest—it's been quite a shock.'

The man lowered the gun. 'Of course, bring her inside. I'm sorry if I gave you a fright. Queer things have been seen around Nixhill today, and we're none of us taking any chances.'

Graham guided his wife through the doorway into the café. Alice visibly jumped when the mechanic called, 'Mogs!'

A few moments later a woman scurried in from the back of the café.

'Couple have been in a car accident,' the mechanic explained.

'Are you hurt? Shall I call a doctor?' the woman asked. 'We can get one down from Peterborough in half an hour or so.'

'No, we're okay, just shock and a few bruises,' Graham replied. 'We'd appreciate a cup of tea.'

'I'll get you one, won't be a moment.'

'What happened?' asked the mechanic as the woman left the room. He dragged an oily rag from the pocket of his overalls and vainly tried to wipe the grease from his hands.

'Something sprang out on to the road right in front

of us. I swerved to miss it and went off into the scrub. It was about a mile from here. The car will have to be towed in.'

'Something jumped out in front of you?'

'It looked like a man, but I'm sure it wasn't.'

'So you've seen the monster too. How long ago?'

'Must have been half an hour ago now.'

'Too long. No good searching now, the thing travels so fast that it could be anywhere.'

'You've seen it then?' asked Alice.

'We've seen it. It came into the town this morning, at about nine, and everyone who saw it cleared out smartly. Even the dogs didn't like it. They flew at it, not that it did them much good. It shot three of them and the rest ran off.'

'You mean it's armed?'

'It's damn hard to watch what it does, it doesn't stand still for a moment, but we think it had some sort of a pistol. Each dog was shot right through the centre of the forehead, the accuracy was uncanny. We don't expose ourselves much now. We've been waiting, wondering whether it'll come back.'

'Does anyone else know about this?' asked Graham as the woman returned bearing a teapot.

'A cop came in from Peterborough about two hours ago and he's been taking statements ever since, but I don't think he believes us. Perhaps when he hears what you've got to say it'll be different.'

Graham and Alice crossed the road to the hotel, and since there was no chance of them being able to make Broken Hill that day Graham booked a room for the night.

'You get some rest,' Graham suggested. 'I'll be back soon.'

'Do you have to go?' asked Alice, kicking off her shoes and sitting on the bed.

'Have to see what can be done about the car. Don't expect anyone will be too keen to go out and get it.'

'You're not going out!'

'Not before I see you again anyway.'

When Graham returned almost an hour later he was encouraged to see that some colour had returned to his wife's cheeks.

'You've been a long time,' she said.

'I've arranged for the car to be brought in,' he replied. 'Ted Mallory, that's the chap we spoke too, is prepared to go out. He says business is slack and he can't afford to knock a job back. But he made damn sure that the car's no more than about a mile out. I'm going with him to lend a hand.'

He expected his wife to protest, but she said mildly, 'Be careful.'

'I've spoken to the cop and he's inclined to believe that there's something funny going on around here. He's put a call through to Adelaide and they're sending a team up to investigate. Should arrive in about four hours.'

'If the creature isn't human she must be from some other world. How could she have got here?'

'I don't know Alice. And why would she come here? Her, did you say her?' he asked as the implication of Alice's comment finally registered.

'I've been lying here thinking, trying to remember

what the creature looked like. That horrible face, the tremors that seemed to run through her body—I'll never forget those as long as I live. But there was more than that. She was wearing what looked like tight fitting fawn coloured overalls, and I'm sure the figure was that of a woman.'

'Was it?' said Graham. 'I didn't notice.'

'First time you've ever noticed a woman was a woman,' said Alice smiling. 'I didn't realize it either, not at the time, but I'm sure I'm right.'

Graham tried to remember what the creature had been like, then slowly shook his head. 'No, I don't remember.'

'Do you think she's alone?'

'It's hard to say. A couple of kids said they'd seen two creatures out in the Watkin's paddocks, but Mallory doesn't believe them. I'd better go; he'll be ready to leave by now.'

The truck was parked in front of the garage, and Graham carefully moved the shotgun to a safer position before climbing on to the seat. Mallory drove slowly while Graham kept a watch for the car. He sighted it finally, rather more distant from the town than he had guessed, and Mallory drove the old truck straight into the scrub without any precautions, so that they came on the creature unexpectedly.

As the truck drew up Graham flung the door open and jumped clear. The sight of the creature no longer shocked him, and even his fear was overlain by an intense curiosity. Only vaguely did he realize that there was an element of danger in remaining exposed, but there was no shelter nearby and he held his ground. The creature stood, poised as if ready for flight, and as Graham observed it he knew Alice had been right, it was a female, though almost as tall as himself.

He called, 'Who are you, but in a blur of movement the creature leapt to one side, and an instant later there was the roar of a shotgun. The creature moved again, her hand going to a holster at her waist and coming up at an impossible pace. She moved as she fired. The second barrel of the shotgun blasted out a hail of pellets, and simultaneously there was the sound of shattering glass. Graham turned to see Mallory easing himself out of the truck, the window of which was starved by the impact of a shot.

'You all right Ted?' Graham called, swinging back to look at the creature, only to find that she had disappeared in the brief time that he had turned away.

'Collected a few small cuts from flying glass,' he replied, dabbing a handkerchief at his cheek. 'Too close for my liking though. Do you think I hit it?'

'I doubt it. Let's have a look at those cuts,' Graham demanded. He stepped closer and looked at Mallory's face.

'Nothing serious. Do you want to go back?'

Mallory looked around carefully before replying. 'Maybe we've scared it off for the time. What the hell could it have been—I've never seen anything quite so ugly. Make sure you keep a close watch in case it comes back. I'll lift your car and we can tow it away.'

Graham looked inside the car. The icebox had been opened, a half dozen bottles of drink thrown out and icewater spilled on the floor of the car and on the

ground nearby. He guessed the creature had been looking for something to drink, for the weather was hot, with the temperature in the upper nineties. The food, the little that they carried, had not been touched.

'I'll have a look at the car as soon as I've seen the cop,' declared Mallory on their return to Nixhill. 'The frame doesn't seem to be warped so there's a good chance I'll be able to make the necessary repairs.'

Graham found his wife on the hotel verandah anxiously waiting for him to return, and briefly he explained what had happened.

'It seems to me that Mallory was altogether too quick with his gun,' said Alice.

'Perhaps you're right, but don't feel too much sympathy for the creature,' he retorted. 'She isn't just a harmless animal, she's intelligent and armed, and perhaps just sufficiently frightened to be a real danger. Mallory was lucky he wasn't killed.'

'Did she take anything from the car?'

'I don't know, I haven't checked. She'd probably have kept well clear if it had been cooler, but she must have been desperate for a drink.'

'Let's go down to the car,' said Alice. 'We'll need to bring our luggage in.'

The car stood in the shade near the garage, and while Alice began to pick up the items scattered on the floor of the car Graham unlocked the boot. He had just lifted the second case on to the ground when Alice cried excitedly. 'I've found something.'

'What is it?' he asked anxiously.

She handed him an irregularly shaped piece of brown paper, apparently torn from a paper bag, on which were the words, '*Please forgive me. I did not mean to cauz yu harm.*'

'It looks like the work of some so-called humorist,' declared Graham. 'Someone must have got to the car after it was towed in.'

'Are you going to show this to the police?'

'No,' Graham replied as he folded the paper and put it in his pocket. 'I can well imagine what comment they'd make.'

They returned to the hotel with their luggage, meeting Mallory at the door, and he apologized, 'I'm sorry I haven't had a look at your car yet; the cop kept me longer than I expected.'

'There's no hurry.'

'The cop would like to see you when it's convenient.'

Graham and his wife carried the cases to their room, and when they had finished unpacking Graham said, 'I'd better go down and give the story to the police. I shouldn't be too long.'

'I thought you said you wouldn't be long,' protested Alice.

'I'd barely finished telling the cop what happened when the police car arrived from Adelaide, and I had to go over it all again. After that I was speaking to Mallory about the condition of the car. It seems it's not too bad.'

'How many police came up?'

'Three, one of them a surgeon. There's also a Dr Meisson, a physicist from W.R.E., so they're evidently taking this whole affair seriously.'

'Do you know what they're going to do?'

'They think the creature's after water, and the only two farms in the immediate neighbourhood are guarded. Probably the creature will come here. I gathered that they're laying a trap.'

'You mean they're going to kill her?'

'I'm sure they don't want too, but that weapon of hers wasn't a conventional pistol, according to the doctor the injuries to the dogs looked more like burns. Once they've seen what the creature looks like—well, if she tries to escape or resist I wouldn't bet too much on her chances.'

It was soon after midnight when Graham was woken by the sound of shots, and as Alice sat up in bed alongside him he slipped out and crossed to the door which led on to the verandah. Before he realized it Alice was at his side, and he whispered, 'You stay here.'

'No, I want to see what it is too,' she protested.

There was a distant cry of, 'It went this way,' and Graham moved forward to the corner of the building, from where he could see the creature, huddled up by some bushes, gasping and vainly trying to hide, an almost impossible task because of the faint glow which emanated from her. As Alice ran up the creature turned and saw them, and her pistol came up and bore midway between them.

'It can't escape, we've got it trapped,' came another voice. 'I think it's gone to ground over by the hotel.'

'Graham, it's hurt, it's been shot,' cried Alice. 'We have to do something.'

Graham looked at the blue stain on the creature's shoulder and warned, 'Don't go any nearer, she might shoot. And that glow, God knows what's causing it; radioactivity maybe.'

'The others will kill her if they see her. She doesn't mean any harm. Please Graham, let's help her.' Alice stepped forward before Graham could interfere, and he marvelled at her courage. The muzzle of the weapon swung towards her, then stopped, and finally the weapon was put away. Alice reached forward and touched the creature, then gave a little cry and jumped back.

'What is it?' cried Graham, running forward to pull Alice away.

'She feels funny.'

'Come away while there's still time,' Graham pleaded.

'No,' Alice replied determinedly. 'She's so helpless now.'

The creature was watching them closely and Graham reluctantly signalled it to follow them. For a moment it hesitated, then it rose abruptly to its feet.

The creature ran to the tap, and as soon as Graham had closed and locked the door he tried to pull her away. He let go and stepped back as he felt the same eerie sensation that Alice had experienced earlier, but a moment later the creature doubled over and gave two or three faint cries, then collapsed on to the floor.

'We'll have to try and stop the bleeding,' said Alice.

'I think she's fainted from exhaustion and heat prostration,' said Graham, helping Alice to lift the creature on to the bed, and watching while Alice uncovered the wound, washed and bound it. She had barely finished when there was a knock on the door and a voice

called, 'Are you all right in there?'

'Yes, we're okay,' Graham replied after a little prompting. 'I thought I heard something come this way a few minutes ago.'

'We saw your light. I thought I'd better check. There doesn't seem to be anything around now. Keep your doors locked.'

'We will,' Alice replied.

The creature was unconscious, and Graham carefully removed the pistol from its holster and examined it briefly before putting it on a table away from the bed. There were two pockets in the creature's overalls, and from one he took a few personal items, surprising only because they were so conventional—a handkerchief, a comb, and a few other odds and ends. The other pocket contained a small notebook, and Graham took it nearer the lamp.

'The writing is in English, at least it's in that curious child-like combination of letters we saw before,' he said.

'What does it say?'

'Give me a chance to read it.'

He read in silence for several minutes, until his wife's curiosity reached the breaking point, when he explained, 'Four of the pages bear symbols and comments which I can't interpret, but they seem to be technical notes of some kind. I'll read out the only bit I've found which I can understand.'

'Nixhill Monsters—weird creatures in the vicinity of the small town of Nixhill; human in general form but possessing grossly distorted features and colouring and wholly different to ourselves. Managed to overcome initial feeling of revulsion and attempted contact. This failed because of the extreme hostility of the creatures, and their low metabolic rate. Their reactions are slowed to an extent which seems scarcely possible, and their speech is of very low frequency, drawn out, and unintelligible.'

'It seems that following the oscillator instability at T minus three seconds projection was accompanied by displacement failure along all axes. No recognizable features have been discerned in this area. The flora, fauna and general countryside are completely alien, and the day is longer than our own by an order of magnitude. Yet these creatures have a written language basically similar to our own, indeed it appears to closely resemble the archaic forms of Terrene.'

'Is that all?' asked Alice.

'I'm afraid so, but it tells us a little,' Graham replied.

'So she is from another world,' said Alice, looking back at the still figure lying on the bed. 'Her world's so different from ours that she even considers us monsters . . .'

'I wonder,' said Graham.

'But she said so in her notes. Everything here . . .'

'Do you remember seeing the film on television last night? The comedy?'

'Yes, I remember. Slapstick. I didn't like it much.' 'Remember the chase scene? The quick jerky movement of the actors? Wouldn't you say this creature's movements were much the same?'

'You're right. I've been trying to remember where I'd seen them before. What can it mean?' A frown creased her forehead as Graham crossed to his case and

drew out a portable tape recorder and switched it on. 'You've got the wrong speed, it's too fast,' protested Alice as a shrill voice spoke rapidly in short bursts of noise. She paused, then added, 'It's the creature's voice. How did you . . .'

'It's your own voice speeded up,' Graham replied.

'I don't understand.'

'I'm not sure I do either. Does it mean that we could understand her speech, and she ours if hers was slowed down, or ours speeded up? Our written languages are similar, perhaps the spoken languages are too. Maybe she didn't come here in a ship, maybe she just stepped into a machine. She spoke of a projector.'

The creature stirred, and Alice moved to her side with a glass of water. For a moment the creature hesitated, then she felt the bandage at her shoulder, and without taking her eyes from Alice she drank deeply. Graham put a piece of paper in front of her when she had finished. On it was written, 'Who are you? Where do you come from?'

The creature puzzled over the message for a time and then scribbled a sentence. Graham looked at it, nodded and muttered, 'Of course.'

'Is it that strange language?' asked Alice.

'Yes. She wrote that her name's Pamela Felicia Green, that she was born in twenty one seventy two, that her age is twenty five, and that she's a European citizen on loan to the International Temporal Research Centre, Cairo. She's the second subject to be projected in time.'

'Through time—travelled through time,' echoed Alice.

'Through space and time. So man's even dabbled with time, and this is the result of one of his early blundering experiments.'

'Why blundering?'

'She mentioned equipment failure in her notes, and now it seems to me that although she projected successfully her time rate might have failed to match ours. Something went wrong, and it had the effect of making her own local time very fast. This explains how she can run so quickly, by her own standards it would only be normal pace, while we'd appear incredibly slow by comparison.'

'And this explains why her voice is so shrill and rapid.'

'Yes. She speaks at a normal rate, but as the sound waves cross the time anomaly between us more fit into a period of our time, and so the frequency rises.'

'But why is she so hideous? Two hundred years . . . surely we're not going to change that much in so short a time.'

'I think I hoped she was from the remote future so that her changed appearance might be the result of normal evolution. But like you say this couldn't happen in a couple of hundred years. The change must have been due to a sudden severe mutation in her ancestors, and I guess we know the only power man has which can produce so great a change.'

He picked up the pen and paper, and quickly wrote, 'You are in Nixhill South Australia. The year is nineteen sixty nine.'

The creature read the message, then wrote that the projection had been intended to carry her only two years into the past, where she should have stayed for fifteen days before returning to her origin point.

There was a noise outside, and someone called, 'There can't be any doubt about it, the blood trail leads to the hotel. The creature's gone to ground around here somewhere. Pair off, Riley, Mallory you . . .'

Graham was no longer listening. He scribbled a warning, but momentarily the creature ignored it, for she had been staring at Graham, and suddenly she reached out and gently touched his face. He flinched but did not draw away, and as she ran her fingers lightly across his cheek an expression of emotion which could only have been a smile appeared on her face. She wrote, and Graham quickly read, 'You wonderful people, people of my own kind, you have risked so much to help me. I'll always remember you. My time of endurance in this period is almost up. The whole program is instituted at projection, and I should revert to my time of origin.'

There was no possibility of interfering, no chance of giving a warning. In a matter of a second the creature had retrieved her pistol and was at the door, and by the time Graham and Alice reached the door she was already in the street. In the faint moonlight they saw her run and weave as a series of shots rang out, then she fell spreadeagled on the ground. Alice cried out and buried her face in Graham's shoulder, and he led her to where a small group was already gathering.

A fierce anger welled up inside Graham, and he was too choked by emotion to speak. When he finally managed to do so he snarled, 'You bastards, you've been hunting her down like a pack of dogs.'

The police surgeon, kneeling by the creature, looked up in surprise.

Alice sobbed, 'Is she dead?' and the surgeon replied, 'No, but she's been hit on the hip and ankle, and another bullet's gone in under her ribs.'

'I'll get a car,' said one of the men standing nearby. 'Will she live?' demanded Graham.

The surgeon rose to his feet and shook his head. He recognized the fury that Graham barely held in check, and moved back a pace. 'She's badly hurt, and I just don't know enough about her to be able to help.'

The glow about the creature began to lessen, the skin became less transparent, the features began to change.

'What fools we were, what stupid fools,' said Dr Meisson, looking up from the open notebook that he had taken from the creature's hand. 'We couldn't hear her as she really spoke, the sound waves changed frequency in crossing from her world to ours. And so did the light.'

'What do you mean?' asked Graham.

'We never saw her as she really was. All we saw was

her infrared image, the wavelength of which shortened to appear to us as visible light. The visible light she reflected would be up in the ultraviolet somewhere.'

'So she never was a monster, there is no mutant race of the future, she's as normal as any of us here.'

'I can't understand why she didn't realize . . .' began Alice.

'It must have been too early in their research programme, they could never have anticipated this effect, not after a single test. The poor girl, cast among a land of monsters.'

'Monsters?'

'Ourselves. She couldn't see us in our true form any more than we could see her. All she saw of us was our ultraviolet image. And not only us but everything, the animals and plants, the countryside, everything,' said Dr Meisson.

'She did though, towards the end,' said Graham. 'When she knew who we were, when she realized she was in a country of the earth, a country of the not too distant past she knew, her history told her that we were normal.'

'You think she knew?' asked Alice.

'I'm sure of it. That's why she touched me.'

The woman lay conscious on the ground. The glow, due solely to the differing reflectivities of materials in the infra-red and visible regions, had gone. What remained was a human being, differing only in her extreme beauty. The language she had used was explicable now, it was no more than English, rationalized over two centuries of use to become wholly phonetic.

Alice bent down as the woman, her voice deepening to the pitch of a man's gasped, 'Nothing more than the phenomenon of Partial Drift, and I failed to recognize it until it was too late. I'm sorry, there was so much I could have done.'

She lay back, moving more and more slowly, her features distorting horribly, taking on a bluish tinge. She became unreal, ephemeral, a mere outline.

'Is that—is that what we looked like to her?' asked Alice.

'Yes. Her time rate's slowing, it's much slower than ours now. We're losing her, she's slipping away,' replied Dr Meisson.

The police officer dropped the ghost of a pistol and Dr Meisson the notebook as they too passed through identical and simultaneous changes, to disappear as the woman vanished.

'Will she be all right?' asked Alice.

'I think so,' Graham replied. 'We can only hope that the advances in medical science in the next two hundred years will equal the advances in the science which sent her here.'

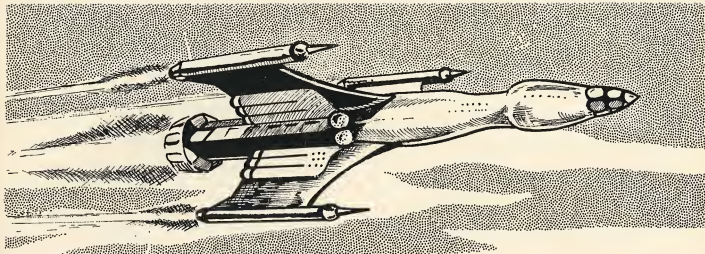
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## Sydney WORLD TO CONQUER J. Bounds

Through the ship's viewport, Crane studied a world of coral islets, low-lying jungle and flat sandy beaches. Four-fifths of the surface appeared to be under water. The ship circled once but he saw no sign of building though the planet was inhabited.

The aborigines resembled a cross between man and bat. Crane watched a group of them glide on membranous wings in a thermal current. *Poor devils*, he thought pityingly.

Across the control room, Artur Ziegler, commandant of the task force, rubbed the back of his hand over a stubbled jaw. He was fifty, thickset, with short-cropped hair and cold eyes.

'It looks possible,' he said. 'What do you say, Leo?'

Crane made an effort to pull his thoughts in line with Ziegler's; he knew there was not the slightest use in protesting his lack of data—the commandant's military mind insisted on snap decisions.

'I agree. It's possible.'

Ziegler nodded at the pilot.

'Ground ship!'

Crane wished that Marie were not present. He had already argued himself out of her favour.

'Is it really necessary to exterminate a whole species, Artur? Surely some form of co-existence—'

'You know we need every square inch of land for our own people. That fact is unpleasant but true. And we are under orders. Ziegler was adamant.

Crane turned in silent appeal to Marie Dufresne.

'The race must survive,' she said flatly, the harshness of her voice contrasting with her plumpness.

'You're too sensitive, Leo—despite an appearance to the contrary!' Ziegler laughed.

'Maybe so.' Crane said. 'But if we hadn't polluted Earth with radiation we shouldn't be faced with this appalling task.'

'Conscience bothering you? Don't go soft on me . . .'

'I'll do my duty.'

'You will.' Ziegler's stony eyes bored into him. 'I have a short way with traitors.'

Crane shifted uneasily. His beetle-brows and rough manner, the granite cast of his features gave him an air of toughness he did not feel.

'I'm loyal to Earth,' he said. 'Can you doubt that the survival of my own race is important to me?'

'There should be no room for doubt,' Ziegler returned drily.

Crane gave his attention to the viewscope. The ship was lower, passing through cloud; below lay a planet suitable for colonizing, and men needed it.

One ship to land and report—and, not far away, the war fleet in radio contact and all set for an extermination programme. Further off, the ships of the settlers awaited their promised home.

Crane's hands clenched till the nails dug into his palms. If only it didn't have to be *this* way, he thought. But Earth was desperate and the starships could not drive on forever; the aborigenes had to go. There wasn't room for both, and they might prove dangerous. This was man's last chance and no risk could be taken.

Earth was doomed as the slow fires of radiation crept over its surface, removing all possibility of return. The colonies on Mars and Venus could not exist without support from the mother planet, and so the survivors searched the starways for an earth-type world where men could live outside of domes—and they were equipped to take it by force.

Marie turned on flat heels and left the control room. Crane went after her.

'I hope this won't make any difference, afterwards,' he said, laying a hand on the starchy greyness of her uniform.

'That depends.'

There was no warmth in her tone, no sparkle in her eyes.

'Surely you don't think—'

'I'm a woman and I want a home and security for my children. I don't care how many aliens die just so long as I get that. You'd better think again, Leo.'

Crane felt a cold wind blow over him. It had not always been like this between them; he remembered how responsive she could be.

'I only meant—' he said miserably.

Marie walked away.

Crane brooded as he went back to his post. He was torn in two by duty and conscience, and he was losing Marie. Now Ziegler threatened his life . . .

It was some relief to leave the ship and breathe air that didn't come from a chemical plant. This air had bite to it, and brought strange exciting scents. More important, it was non-poisonous—men could live here.

The ship had landed on a wide strip of sand between the jungle and the sea, and the sun was a bright ball in a steaming sky. Crane set up his Basic Translator a little apart from the ship, and waited. His skin prickled every time he remembered he was on alien soil.

There was movement under the palms. Eyes watched. Crane's pulse raced as his subconscious equated the unknown with fear.

The aborigenes came like excited children, tired of playing hide-and-seek. They were smaller than he'd

guessed from a distance, not one over four foot high, though their wing span was considerably more. Seen against the jungle, their skin had a greenish, leathery quality and their heads reminded him of portraits with displaced features, familiar yet disturbing.

They carried no weapons and approached without guile. Curious but polite, they formed a group round Crane and his machine. A few of them spread their wings and circled overhead.

Crane's fear dissolved. He put on a helmet and held out its twin. One of them grasped the idea and fitted the second helmet to his own head.

'Welcome to Asylum,' the voice of the aborigene boomed inside Crane's skull.

'We come in peace,' he lied.

'We hope you will stay long.'

'Thank you, I am called Crane—'

'—and I, Kiaor.'

The Translator equated sound waves with brain impulses and automatically converted one language into the other. It was fine for practical everyday things, but not so good with abstracts. And Crane was short of time. In the quickest possible time he had to estimate their IQ and ability to resist Earth's onslaught.

He demonstrated the use of the wheel, pulley and lever. If Kiaor was not familiar with mechanics, he grasped the basic principles with ease. During several hours probing, Crane's respect grew and he formed a liking for Kiaor; he stopped himself thinking about the results of his work.

He established that their intelligence was hardly less than that of Earthmen. They learnt quickly to use the tools he provided and showed recognition of the geometric forms he drew in the sand. Their delight in using the Translator became apparent—they *wanted* company!

Crane gestured at the ship.

'We live inside,' he said. 'Where do you live?'

Kiaor flapped his wings and rose into the air, beating towards the jungle. Crane followed on foot. He pushed through broad-leaved vivid-green foliage, with insects buzzing about his head. Beside a stream in a clearing he found a number of huts made from wattle; the few artefacts he saw were of clay and undecorated.

Leo Crane returned to the ship without joy. He steeled himself to make a preliminary report—after all, his own race needed this world. He found Ziegler picking his teeth.

'They're friendly,' he said, 'and show no distrust. I doubt if they have any concept of war at all. Their extermination should prove a simple matter to us!'

'Well, don't sound so sorry about it,' Ziegler snapped. 'You should be glad.'

'Are you sending the signal?' Crane asked bluntly.

'Not yet, Leo. First reports are encouraging, but I want to know a little more. There's something strange about this world. The plant life grows at truly astonishing speed. There are insects, and fish in the rivers. Marine life is extensive, but the only intelligent life appears to be the "Fliers" . . . and there are no animals. Why?'

Crane ate aboard ship and then wandered along the beach. It was hot as Asylum moved towards perihelion. They had no sure knowledge of the planet's orbit, but



rough calculations showed it to be an elongated ellipse.

The sky throbbed with colour, the sea seemed a little higher. There were no mountains on this world and the jungle sprouted in thick profusion.

He made his way over the coral to where Marie stood staring into the water. Underfoot, brittle crags and sea-drenched weed made the going treacherous. He slipped, and put out a hand to break his fall. Razor-sharp coral slashed into his hand and he felt stinging pain.

His whole arm seemed to be on fire. He trembled with weakness, senses reeling.

'Marie,' he cried. 'Help me!'

She turned at the sound of his voice and came swiftly to his side.

'What is it, Leo?'

'Faint,' he whispered. 'I never felt so faint—'

She knelt and lifted his arm, wiping away the blood. Professionally she studied his wound; it had swollen in an ugly manner.

'The coral must be poisonous,' she decided.

Before darkness closed about him, he heard her hail the ship.

Vision wavered. Voices came and went. Leo Crane found that he could move again. He lay abed in the ship's sick bay and his arm was in a sling, his hand masked by bandages. His sight steadied on Marie.

'You're no angel,' he said, 'so I guess I'm still living!'

'It's nice to have you back, Leo. At one time I didn't think you'd make it. The coral poison is new and we had no antidote—until Kiaor brought in the leaves of a native plant. The danger's past, but you must rest.' She paused. 'Kiaor saved your life where we failed.'

Crane felt a warm glow of friendship for the aborigine; and then Ziegler stalked into the sick bay.

'How's the patient, nurse?'

'He'll live,' Marie answered quietly.

Ziegler advanced to the foot of the bed and stood frowning at Crane. He rubbed his jaw.

'I thought I'd better tell you myself, Leo. I've sent for the fleet. We're taking over.'

Marie protested: 'You shouldn't have told him yet. He's not strong enough.'

Crane roused himself with an effort. Kiaor had saved his life—now Ziegler threatened to exterminate Kiaor's race.

'I'm all right,' he muttered. 'Bring my clothes, Marie, I'm getting up. Artur, tell me what's happened while I've been lying here.'

'Not very much,' Ziegler admitted. 'Except that we're close to perihelion and I don't like the way the sea is rising. If we're going to have natural problems, I don't want interference from the natives. Asylum is our home now.' His cold eyes drilled into Crane. 'You'd best accept that, Leo.'

'The price I don't like,' Crane said, struggling into his clothes. He dispensed with the sling.

'Don't do anything silly,' Ziegler warned. 'You can't help them, and I'd only have to restrain you.'

Crane glared back.

'Leo!' Marie said sharply.

He relaxed. 'At least let me thank Kiaor while there's

still time.'

Ziegler nodded, and left.

Marie touched Crane's arm. 'It'll be all right,' she said, 'afterwards.'

Crane shook himself free, not bothering to answer. He walked out of the ship. The sun was huge and glaring in a sky of hot, swirling mist; the sea was ominously high. He moved towards the Translator, searching for Kiaor. The Flier recognized him and glided down to the beach.

'I have come to thank you,' Crane began. 'I know that you saved my life.'

'We are pleased,' Kiaor replied. 'It is good to help. You will stay, now?'

'Oh yes—we'll stay!'

Crane resisted an impulse to tell what he knew. There was no sense in that. They had nothing to resist the might of Earth's war fleet, but he felt guilty in his silence.

Kiaor showed him a metal plate engraved with a linear design. The metal itself was unusual, and it was old. He returned to the ship and handed the plate to the metallurgist.

'It's been under water, I'd say,' the expert commented. 'Interesting that. At least we know there are metals here capable of resisting the action of the sea.'

The design meant nothing to Crane, beyond indicating that the aborigines had an art-form. He felt restless, a desire to help them without betraying his own race, and wandered into the jungle. It was hard work hacking a way through matted undergrowth with only one good hand, but the exercise served to numb his uneasy conscience.

Deep among the greenery he became aware of an unpleasant smell, and advanced cautiously seeking its cause. Half-buried under leaves and stalks he found the remains of rotting shellfish . . . far from the sea.

And then Crane began to understand.

The war fleet was already on its way and time was short. He considered going to Ziegler with his theory, but decided against it. The commandant would be sceptical and might well annihilate the Fliers before Asylum provided irrefutable proof.

Crane didn't feel like taking the responsibility for exterminating a whole species on a world men couldn't use . . .

Leaving the jungle, he walked quickly along the beach. He saw Kiaor beside the Translator and joined him. After they had both put on the helmets, Crane said:

'Your people must hide. Ships are coming from the sky to kill you. Don't waste time. Hide where you'll be safe and presently the ships will go away. They won't bother you again.'

'How is it you know all this?' Kiaor asked.

Crane hesitated, ashamed. But he must convince him—nothing less than the truth would do.

'My race is looking for a home. We destroyed our own and will not hesitate to wipe out your people to gain this world.'

Kiaor's alien eyes stared into his.

'You need not have told us,' he said 'Truly you are a friend to the Fliers.'



Crane turned as a voice bawled: 'You damned traitor!'

He saw Ziegler running hard, a gun in his hand. Marie was behind him. Ziegler fired twice and missed. Kiaor rose with a great flapping of wings and Ziegler stopped to take deliberate aim—then Marie jerked his gun arm.

'Run, Leo,' she screamed. 'Run!'

Crane judged he would not be allowed time to explain his action. He loped towards the jungle, noting that the sea almost reached to the ship and that there was not a flier in the sky. It was hotter than ever and sweat poured off him as he slid between palm trunks and plunged into cover.

The air was like steam and a huge sun filled the horizon.

Crane heard sounds of pursuit, and Ziegler's voice, rising on a note of hysteria:

'I'll hunt you down and kill you if it's the last thing I do!'

Crane kept moving. It was practically impossible to move silently, or without leaving some signs of his passage—but Ziegler's rage effectively blinded him. Crane went on until the noisy pursuit ended, then flung himself to the ground and burrowed into a thicket. He lay there, panting.

A steady drip of moisture was the only sound in the jungle. Crane considered what he should do; he could not stay where he was for long—that would be dangerous. It seemed best to make his way cautiously back to the ship. Later—he reminded himself that time was passing—he must get to Marie and explain. Even Ziegler would see it his way once the facts became obvious.

How close was the fleet? He hoped the Fliers had found good cover . . .

A hot wind rose as Crane set out. He circled to arrive at the ship from a different quarter, and waited in shadow, studying the beach. He saw signs of activity. The Translator had gone and men were gathering up equipment and taking it into the ship. *Into the ship.* They were preparing for take-off!

Alarmed, Crane broke cover and ran along the shingle, waving. He saw Marie, and shouted. She started towards him, hesitated, looked back. Looking for Ziegler, Crane thought.

The sea lapped at the base of the ship, the coral was completely covered and water seeped into the jungle. It was hot. The wind became a roar—or was it the wind? Crane had never felt so frightened before.

'Go back,' he shouted at Marie. 'Back to the ship!'

He stumbled on, slipping and sliding, buffeted by the wind—and Marie ran towards him. Then he saw the water . . . a tidal wave fifty feet high bore down on them at terrifying speed. Crane's throat dried up. He halted. Never had he felt so helpless—and he saw the ship rise on flaming jets.

That enormous wall of water, bearing with it uprooted trees, paralysed him and the roar of it blotted out all other sound. Marie's face went white, her mouth opened but no cry reached him. She stumbled, and he forced himself forward to meet her. He had no hope now the ship was gone.

The wall-like wave towered above him and reached

far away on each side. There was no escaping it. It seemed to grow in volume as if all the oceans were gathering to leap far into space. It roared down on them . . .

Crane sensed the movement of wings overhead. Startled, he looked up. Kiaor's people swooped down from the sky. Two of them seized Marie and carried her aloft, out of the path of the torrent. He felt himself gripped under both arms—a wrench—his feet left the ground.

The crest of the wave lashed him in passing; spray broke and drenched him; then he was above the sea's new level and soaring higher. The Fliers winged their way over the ocean and, from his vantage point in the sky, Crane saw new land on the horizon—steaming mud, weed-covered crags and stranded, dying fish.

Presently they landed. Kiaor spoke in his own tongue and Crane answered. They had no Translator, but there was little need of words. Actions spoke so much louder.

Marie, sobbing, ran into his arms and he held her to his chest and stroked her face. When she quieted, he said soberly;

'This is our home now. We've no choice—the ship won't be coming back. There'll be many dangers to face and life won't be easy, but with the help of Kiaor's people we'll survive.'

She lifted her head and he saw that her eyes were shining.

'What woman ever truly wanted a choice?' she murmured, and nestled closer to him.

Ziegler rubbed a hand over the bristle on his jaw. He felt tired and dispirited. The memory of the tidal wave rushing down on Marie and Crane was something he would never forget—but he'd had no choice. He had to take the ship up, or perish.

As they circled Asylum for the last time, he scowled at the planet which had seemed to offer hope for mankind. It was a death trap for land animals. Man could never survive there.

He stared long at the sight of a world with its entire water mass piled high on the sunward side . . .

'A hellish orbit,' commented the astrogator. 'A very elongated ellipse. When the planet's far out, the sea finds its natural level—but as it approaches perihelion, the oceans are drawn up by the sun's gravity till they are concentrated in one half of the globe. No wonder there are no animals! And this is a regular recurring phenomenon.'

Crane guessed, Ziegler thought dully, and I was too bull-headed to listen. He turned to his signals officer.

'Get this off at once. To officer commanding war fleet: no purpose in proceeding further, planet unsuitable for colonizing.'

The officer saluted and hurried away.

Ziegler took one last look below. There was no point in landing—neither Crane nor Marie could have survived that deluge. He offered up a silent prayer; then his eyes took on the quality of stone. His commission was specific.

The ship shuddered. Rockets flared briefly. Ziegler drove on through the interstellar void, seeking yet another world to conquer.



**PRISONER** *in the*  
**ICE**  
Brian Stableford

*A student at Vanburgh University in York, Brian Stableford is one of a number of rising young British writers of SF, whose work we shall be presenting in our pages. His first novel, CRADLE OF THE SUN, has been published by Sidgwick & Jackson, and his present short story portrays a fine control of character and atmosphere, as well as posing an intriguing problem—*who IS 'The Prisoner In The Ice'?

The great ice sheet rose and fell like a range of hills, from the western horizon to the east, and from north to south. In the west, the dim sun was setting in a blaze of blood, lighting the ice with a rose gleam which flickered through the glacial valleys and lit the castellate peaks of each sparkling serac with a million red stars.

The three tiny men, thickly clothed with fur mittens and dark glasses, mounted on skis, had ceased their slow, resolute plodding to the south. Light patches of fog denied them the sight of the farther reaches of the ice blanket in many places—particularly in the direction in which they were travelling. From the side of the ice-hill at whose peak they stood, they looked up at a darkening sky, lit by hundreds of stars which seemed reflections of the ice rather than of the heavens. A thin, corpse-white layer of snow carpeted much of the ice—towards the north and east blurred cobalt by the evening sky.

The many colours of the ice did not surprise the travellers—they had grown up on the ice sheet, lived with it, and had seen it in all its forms.

The distorted sun shimmered and shivered as it set, its heat ineffectual against the glaciers. Below them and away into the distance ran a sluggish river of slush, which must have been saline to run in this cold world. It was stained brown, and sheer faces of ice marked where it had eaten its way deep into the glacier. At the slim belt where the water lapped the ice was a trailing line of green algae, and where it divided to flow around a rock island, stunted trees, grasses and sedges grew—scraping a living even from this hostile environment.

While they watched the moving river—which resembled nothing so much as a scar, but to them was beautiful—the sun was swallowed by the dull curtain of mist over the horizon, bringing premature night to the land of snowclouds, packed ice and silence. The darkness hung listless, with an absence of promise. The night was a gigantic solitary pupil, filled in its cold clarity with frozen sparks that were stars.

Their pin eyes searched the country: smooth humps like crystal balls, giant seracs with siletto battlements and lightning-forked towers, misty blurs that were cloaks of snow. The whole scene shone with a mysterious light which seemed to emanate from nowhere—an echo of day rather than reflection of starshine. Another man in another time and place might have called it magical—to them it was commonplace. *Their* eyes persistently returned to the water which, unaided by man-made heat, ploughed its own way through the glacier.

A shifting of the ice, a settling as its foundations crumpled before the digestion of the salt stream, sent them hurrying for firmer ground. It broke their paralysis, and their silence.

'My God!' yelled Murrell, more to that God than to his companions. He slipped and slithered down the ice, ignoring the precariousness of the collapsed banks, till he could dip his boots into the water. He took a mitten off to take the wooden cup from its fastening at the side of his pack, dipped it into the water and tasted it. Instantly he spat it out—not because it was cold, but because it was salt. He was used to cold. 'It's a river,' he yelled, glorying in the words.

Butler and Heriot descended more slowly, taking care over the softer ground. Murrell darted back to them and hurled himself upon Heriot. 'Don't you realize what it means, Frank? We've won!' He shouted it in exactly the tone of triumph he had used when he had shouted to the city: 'The ice is melting!' It hadn't touched a chord then, and it didn't now. Heriot pushed him away.

'*Won!*' said Butler scathingly. 'We haven't won. We've escaped with our pants on and our hides intact and damn all else. That's winning?' Butler was bitter. Most men in the city were bitter. You got born and you grew up in an environment which reminded you every second of your waking existence that man hadn't got what he once had—that you were living under duress. That compared to man-before-the-ice you were a stupid, futile barbarian.

'You cynical bastard!' spat Murrell. 'You've got so used to the ice that it's your cocoon. You're afraid to come out of it. You just can't cotton on to what's happening, can you? The ice is *melting*. We've come through. We're on the road back.'

'I'll take a long time. It didn't all come in a day. You won't see the end.'

'Of course not, but you won't even see the beginning. We've fought, and we've lost a lot of men, a lot of our possessions. We huddled into our little plastic igloos and lived like cavemen. It's a pretty sorry victory, sure. But what matters is *we won!*'

Heriot lost interest in the pointless argument—it had all come out before. Butler and Murrell had squabbled ever since they left the city. He turned to more practical employment—pitching the tent on a spot that was safe from the insidiously devouring river—on good, solid ice, protected from the harsh wind. The enemy might be weakening, but he was still by far the stronger. The words of the argument floated back to him though—Murrell and Butler were yelling at the top of their voices, because it was good, warming employment if you argued in this fashion rather than quietly.

'Won, you bloody fool? Won?' Butler was shouting. 'I'll tell you what we *lost*. We lost our civilization, our homes, our technology, our society, our lives. We left our comfortable houses and factories and offices to scabble about in a stupid little plastic dome we call a city, because it was all we could keep warm. We lost our electricity and our gas. All our effort, every drop of sweat we shed, we put into keeping the cold at bay. We turned into *savages*, mindless primitives knowing only that we *had* to keep the fires going.' Murrell tried to break in, but Butler in full flight was irresistible. 'And some day a poor fool called Murrell comes dashing into our beautiful dome and says "The ice is melting. The temperature is one degree up." Only another forty-five degrees and we'll be at nice, comfortable

freezing point. Hal-le-lujah!

'So what should we have done?' Murrell took over. 'Sat tight and frozen? *That's* your idea of winning? Not even bothering to fight. We *fought*, Jim, we fought with every drop of sweat we had, just as you said. And now we pull through. For the first time there's a steady rise in temp. For the first time you can look at the ice sheet and be able to wonder whether somewhere there isn't a limit to it, whether there isn't some place without a roof of ice. And so we come to look. And are we full of hope and exuberance, rejoicing that at last we have a chance? God! Heriot never says a word from one day's end to the next and you spend the hours telling me that it's stupid, futile, wrong. You're mad, you know that? Man has just fought his hardest battle, and he's showing signs of winning his greatest victory. And you whine. Who are you, Jim Butler, to stand there and say it wasn't goddamn worth it?'

Heriot screamed—just once, then he apparently collected himself. Murrell was with him in a couple of dozen bounds. Butler tried to emulate him, but slipped down the slope in the wake of slush Murrell sent down the collapsed bank, and ended up knee deep in the slow river.

Heriot was part way round the curve of the ice-hill, just out of sight of the two men and the tent he had erected further up the slope. He was standing in front of a wall of sheer, smooth, glass-ice. Murrell grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him round. He was quite calm now, and simply shrugged, jerking a thumb towards the face of ice.

Murrell looked up at the wall of ice. Forewarned, it was simply a shock—he did not scream.

Staring at him from clouded eyes, black lips stretched back over bloodless gums, revealing six-inch ivory scimitars and footlong canines, was a beast from a nightmare. Hate and madness seemed frozen in its pink, faded eyes and cadaverous body, frozen in death to remain with it as long as its encapsulation lasted. It was caught in what grotesquely resembled the last desperate moment of an upward leap, legs wide apart, talons extended and splayed, as though raking the ice for a foothold it never found. How many years, wondered Murrell, had passed since it had struggled so fiercely to escape a snowdrift, perhaps finally to yield its carcass as a monument of the winter which never ended? When would the ice release its emaciated frame to the long overdue spring and the accelerated putrefaction so initiated?

'Oh, Jesus!' whispered Butler as he staggered up the hill to join them.

'What is it?' asked Heriot.

'I don't know,' said Murrell. The suddenly quiet voices seemed odd. None of the men had even seen an animal except for the carefully preserved cattle in the city. Somewhere, there might be birds, or polar bears even. But in the ultimate analysis, all life on the ice sheets of old depended on the sea, or water of some description, for its livelihood. The only water of any duration for many, many years, had been man distilled from the ice.

They had books, of course—books in which there were pictures and accounts of the old world life. Faded

books they were now, because they co-existed with man, and therefore were susceptible to the bacterial life which man inevitably harboured. But pictures and figures gave no real impression of dimensions.

Plants had survived, of course. Their demands for water were not so large, nor were they heterotrophic. But only a few of the hardiest and most tenacious species had clung on through the *really* bad years a century or two ago. How man had survived that period, heaven alone knew. There were no records, and only verbal accounts. But now the temperature was steadily rising. It rose, in fact, at an unnaturally rapid rate, but these men were not to know that—to them it would hardly have seemed impossible for the whole ice-field to evaporate in a single day. All they were really aware of was that the ice was there, and that was not the 'natural' state of affairs. Ergo, any pacc at which it chose to depart was too slow.

'Is it alive?' asked Heriot credulously. Certainly, it seemed so—arrested as it was in its grotesque leaping position.

'Yes,' breathed Butler, as though he had just been struck by a flash of inspiration. 'Yes, of course.'

Murrell frowned with astonishment. 'Don't be stupid, it can't possibly be alive. It's just that crazy position. That's purely fortuitous, of course—it didn't freeze instantaneously you know. It took a long time—and during that time the body simply became distorted into that position.'

Miraculously, Butler refrained from arguing. He seemed entranced by the animal. He looked at it so long and hard that Heriot thought he must be trying to stare the beast out.

'It's a cat,' said Butler. Murrell shrugged. Here, at least, was something he could not contradict. Words hovered on his lips, as though he were going to debate the point anyway, but he remained silent.

'And it's in suspended animation,' finished Butler. Murrell made a derogatory but wordless comment, and turned away, marching round the angle of the hill to the tent. It was pitched on reasonably flat ground, positioned so that it was safe from most conceivable onslaughts. It was secured perfectly. Heriot did the job well, admitted Murrell. Perhaps his near-perpetual silence was wisdom. He visualized a three-cornered match of wits such as he and Butler indulged in, and realized that Heriot was far from stupid if he simply kept his opinions to himself.

First Heriot, then Butler joined him in the tent, and he secured the flap. Heriot silently worked the small stove till the pale blue flame was of satisfactory dimensions. Equally silently, he took the ice he had cut, and melted it.

There was no shouting in the tent, by common consent, and opinions stated in a normal voice were not challenged. The loud arguments were, after all, a way of keeping the mind off the cold. A party marching through the icelands in tomb-like silence could kill itself by sheer meditation upon its plight. Perpetual jokes were one solution, but hot argument had the double satisfaction of keeping one warm inside and releasing tension.

'What do you think melting of the ice really means?' asked Butler as he slid into his sleeping bag. Despite

his denial of Murrell's points, it was the subject uppermost in his mind—as it was in the minds of his companions.

'It means the end, or the beginning of the end,' said Murrell soberly and sincerely. 'It means a chance to get back the life we once led. Who knows? Beneath it all, our cities may still be intact. I think it's the end of the storm.'

'How about you, Frank?' questioned Butler.

'It's a beginning,' said Heriot slowly. 'But not our beginning—I think it's a new beginning altogether. The world's been cleansed, if you like metaphors, and it's ready to start all over again. There's going to be a new world built, and I don't think we have any part in it. We're an anachronism. Just a cockroach in the walls who's managed to escape fumigation.'

Murrell sighed. 'If there's a new world, we've sure as hell earned ourselves a place in it,' he murmured.

'What's your view, Jim?' asked Heriot.

'You know,' said Butler pensively, 'I think you're right. I never quite realized it until I saw that monster out there. That really brought it home. The world's in suspended animation, you see—all of it. It's been resting—pupating maybe—but it'll start rebuilding any time. And I think we've forfeited our place in that new world. We didn't submit, you see. We fought. All the while we struggled and kicked to stay on top. But all that time, the world might have been really trying to help.'

Butler, decided Murrell and Heriot independently, was slightly crazy. Butler thought the same about them, of course. For men, it was nothing new.

'That animal out there isn't alive, Jim. You know that,' Murrell spoke almost gently, in complete contrast with the domineering tone of his customary argument.

'Oh yes it is,' contradicted Butler, almost like a child, staunchly refusing to discredit its own beliefs. 'It's waiting, that's all. One day it'll complete that leap. You won't see it, and I won't. But it will. There'll be fish in that river, too, and birds to eat the fish. And cats to chase the birds. Only there'll be no men, Doug, none at all—because we left ourselves out.'

Heriot awoke to the sound of an ice axe on hard ice. He frowned for a second, then shrugged it off.

Outside would be exactly the same as yesterday—there may even have been a slight fall in temperature, and certainly the temperature would fluctuate during the day. But at the end of weeks and months, allowing for seasonal alterations, the temperature was observed to be steadily rising. Even taking months and years, the rise was dramatic. But then, the fall had been dramatic. The old papers told that—the insidious fall in temperature which was hardly noticeable was, by nature's standards, cataclysmic. Forty years, it had taken, before the graph had evened out, and forty years it would take to rise again. How many years there had been in the interim, Heriot did not know. Odd how no one had managed to do a simple thing like keep a calendar. Hundreds of years, in any case, must have passed.

'What's that damn noise?' asked the dull voice of Murrell.

'Ice axe,' replied Heriot. 'Must be Jim.'

'Well why, damnit?' Murrell sat up in his sleeping bag, then pulled himself out of it. Both men went outside. It was a fine day, by their standards. No snow yet—though there were signs of a blizzard later—and the sun shone fairly clearly. The river still ran, and no more subsidences had taken place. They turned the corner, following the sound of the axe.

Butler was busy attacking the face of the ice which contained the animal, with practised blows of the ice axe.

'What are you doing, Jim?' asked Heriot.

'Cutting out the creature. I think it's alive. You don't. All right, let's have a look.'

'But Jim,' protested Murrell loudly—returning to his outside manners. 'It isn't possible for the thing to be alive.'

'How'd you know?' shot back Butler.

'All the books say it isn't possible for things to be preserved in ice. All right, I know it looks realistic. But it just isn't so, believe me.'

'All the books say! You think this ice just happened, don't you? You know how long those books say ice ages take. Or don't you believe in the ice, either?'

'No, I don't know how long ice ages take.'

'Millions of years, say your books which say ice doesn't preserve things. How long's this one taken? Five hundred years if that. Is that natural? Is that the ice your books say can't preserve life.'

'Ice is ice,' retorted Murrell. 'The fact is, it's here and it's going. It's stupid to attach any metaphysical connotations to it.'

'Why? Are you prepared to go along fighting with everything you've got against the environment which spawned you? Are you?'

'This environment never spawned me. It never spawned Man. The environment which spawned man was the one before the ice. And that's what we're going back to, because we've pulled through.'

Heriot touched Murrell on the shoulder, and held out an ice axe. Murrell stared at it for a moment, then took it with a nod. Both of them joined the assault on the ice wall—Heriot carefully and scientifically, Murrell roughly, hacking at it with all his strength.

They worked for an hour—the animal was buried deeper than it appeared, of course—real depth in a denser medium is always greater than apparent depth. By that time they had the head protruding, and the shoulders, enclosed in a capsule of ice only an inch or two thick.

'Well,' said Murrell, 'are you satisfied now or do we have to hack the whole thing out before breaking the ice around it.'

'No,' countered Butler. 'If it is alive, it is better to leave it trapped. Loosing it would be foolish.'

Murrell pulled back his axe for a blow at the head. Butler grabbed his arm. 'No, you bloody fool—what are you trying to do, crush the thing. Let Frank do it—he's best at careful work.'

Murrell and Butler stood back a few yards while Heriot tapped gently at the ice, like a sculptor shaping a face. He seemed to make no impression for the first few minutes, and his companions grew impatient. Then the ice fell away from the lower jaw, pulling with it a large quantity of fur and some flesh. Murrell grinned, and Butler made an effort to show no dis-

appointment.

Oblivious, Heriot knocked the ice away from the jaws. Then, slowly, he worked around to the ice on the eyes, and inside the open mouth. After a few moments of experimental tapping, he turned away.

'Can't do it,' he stated simply. 'Get something to melt the stuff away, if you want any more doing.'

'No!' howled Butler. 'You'll kill it.'

Murrell laughed, and suddenly Heriot joined in. The bigger man grabbed Butler by the back of the neck and rammed his face almost into that of the beast.

'You stupid idiot. Go on, smell! Use your eyes and your nose.' Butler wriggled. 'That thing,' continued Murrell, 'has been dead for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years. And you know it.'

Butler subsided, and Murrell released his grip.

'What do we do now?' asked Heriot.

Murrell shrugged. 'Not much point in taking more ice off the thing. It stinks as it is. Leave it and let's get on.' Butler was still standing, staring at the beast now half-in, half-out of the cracked face.

Murrell and Heriot began packing the equipment and the tent. As they collapsed the tent, there was a slight shudder.

'What was that?' asked Murrell.

Heriot looked round. 'The river?' he suggested tentatively.

'No, too far away. *This* lot couldn't subside. It'll be a long time before it eats away this patch.' There was another slight jarring as the ice seemed to slip.

'Nevertheless,' said Heriot quietly, 'it is subsiding. Get the things together and run for the peak of the hill over there.'

Then the ice seemed to collapse—it fell a good two feet. Heriot remained erect but dropped his rucksack and the tent. Murrell sprawled. Then he realized what was happening. 'There's water *underneath!*' he yelled. 'This thing's being eaten away by moving water right underneath us. It's nothing to do with the river.'

'Run!' Heriot was already moving, clinging to the things he had picked up. 'Butler!' he yelled. Butler was still invisible round the angle.

Murrell picked himself up and joined Heriot in the mad scramble for solid ground. The ice seemed to fall and bounce again. Only long practice at keeping footing on ice maintained Heriot and Murrell on their feet.

Then, suddenly, they were on solid ice again—at least, it looked solid. So, thought Heriot, had the last piece.

'Did you manage to save everything?' asked Murrell. Heriot nodded.

'Good,' said Murrell. 'I lost some clothes, but the tent and stove are the important items.'

'Stove?' echoed Heriot.

'You haven't got it?'

Heriot slowly shook his head.

'Oh my God,' said Murrell, swallowing.

'Where's Butler?' said Heriot.

'Oh no.'

'Let's go look.'

The ice seemed safe enough now. They walked tentatively, keeping as near to the edge of the subsidence as possible. Then they came round the corner which

separated them from Butler.

There had been a subsidence here, too—and a slip. 'We shouldn't have hacked away at that face,' said Murrell. Heriot nodded. The face had collapsed—simply folded up. And Butler was caught in the fold. He was positioned below and between the outstretched forelegs of the beast, now canted forward.

'He said it would complete its leap one day,' said Heriot.

'I don't think he envisaged being underneath it.'

'If I hadn't found the bloody thing, we might have been gone by now and never known about it.'

'Ah, wasn't your fault. One of us would've taken a stroll anyway. It's as much that crazy bastard's fault as anyone's. Insisting on digging it out.'

'Yes,' agreed Heriot, almost in a whisper.

They turned away, looking for the stove. They found it—smashed and flattened. Murrell threw it away, into the sluggish river of brown slush.

'We'd better go home,' he said.

'Sure,' said Heriot, 'but what about water and warmth?'

'We have the lamps, haven't we? We've got heat—not much but it should see us through. We grew up in the ice, remember—cold means nothing.'

Heriot half-laughed. 'Okay, we live. We get back. And for what? Have we found our new land in the south? Hell, all we found was a putrefying relic that for all we know has been there since before the first man was born. Is that a good sign for the future? After coming all this way to see that, are we overflowing with hope? Ah, let's go home.'

Having delivered himself of this embittered speech, he set off at a quick march, casting glances up at the sky. The promise of the morning had evaporated while they chipped the beast free. It was sullen now, black clouds moving very rapidly from the west. Murrell accompanied him in silence to the equipment they had left, silently picked it up, and began to walk north.

'We won anyhow,' he said in a low voice—probably to himself—after a while.

'Say that once more and I swear I'll knock your teeth down your throat.'

'Sorry.'

'You saw that animal,' said Heriot without raising his voice. 'You saw it. It looked alive—alive enough to fool Butler. Alive enough to fool me, too, at first. But when we hacked it free, what did we have? Putrefying flesh! Only the *illusion* of preservation. And I'll lay odds that when the ice has gone, and we can walk on *soil* again, that that's all we have. An illusion. We haven't survived the ice any better than that beast did. We just stayed on top of it, held it back.'

'That's nonsense,' said Murrell. 'There's all the difference in the world.'

'No there isn't. This ice melting doesn't mean a return to our old life. We can't just march back into the houses and turn the televisions on. We can't simply take up our jobs where our ancestors left off. This will be a *new* world. And with it will arise new things—new life. And what are we? Leftovers from the first—a few paltry specimens of a near-extinct species. A few little pieces of decaying flesh.'

'I don't understand you, Frank. Or Butler. As far as



you're concerned, we might as well have jacked it all in the moment the ice arrived. That's not our way of doing things. We fight for what we get. We always fight—we always have. We fought the ice, and the ice is losing. Whatever we find in your new world, we'll fight that, too. And we'll win.'

'Yes, we always fight. But don't you see, you can't keep up a continuous fight forever. You can't sustain a war permanently or the war gets on top of you, and suddenly you aren't fighting for Man any more, you're fighting for the war. And can't you see, even though you're still fighting, you've lost from that moment on. You must have time to recuperate—time to grow again. We can't just march out of our ice city and start fighting the new land—and it will be a fight. It won't grow acres of wheat and potatoes just on our say-so. We'll have to fight, and we've been fighting so long we simply don't have the strength. The ice may not have killed us, but it's trounced us so thoroughly we haven't any energy to fight any more for hundreds of years. One might admire your spirit, or your sort of spirit, Doug—but your reasoning's slipped.'

Arguing with Heriot wasn't like arguing with Butler in a lower voice. Butler shouted you down with contradictions and hurled epithets. Heriot didn't just contradict, he added reason and alternative. And Murrell had really nothing but his resolve to reply with.

'We've won,' he said simply. Heriot did not attempt to carry out the threat he had offered earlier, because it was simply a resignation from the argument, and not an assertion.

They trudged on, in silence. It began to snow, and snow hard. Progress became difficult—almost impossible. They debated stopping, but they were wriggling on

the horns of a dilemma—without heat they couldn't sit it out, and in the storm, they couldn't go on.

They tried, of course—until, inevitably, something happened. Murrell, without being able to see more than a few yards, and that carpeted with snow, fell down a crevasse.

Heriot lay on the edge and shouted to him, but there was no reply. Murrell was either dead or unconscious, and therefore potentially dead. Heriot considered the situation. Murrell had had the tent. He had a sleeping bag and one single, solitary lamp—plus fuel and a lighter. The fuel wouldn't last him till he reached the city, but the fuel was not a controlling factor any more. The lack of a tent was now the ace card.

He was potentially dead—as dead as Murrell.

Slowly, he walked—not towards the city, because of the crevasse, but just anywhere. For the sake of walking.

There was a dull noise in the west—not the blizzard, because that was silent except for a distant keening of the wind.

He looked for it, and found it. It was the river. Not necessarily the same river as before, but similar. It was moving faster—swollen. The snow was adding to its volume, or seemed to be—the saline was probably absorbing the snow in preference to the ice on which it ran. Or was it? Heriot wasn't quite sure exactly what it did mean. In fact, he wasn't sure it meant anything.

The river had been Murrell's ray of hope—a symbol of the end. To Heriot, it was a different end, and a different beginning. Tiredly, he sat down to watch, in his imagination the rising of a new sun, and new shadows to canopy the reborn Earth.

## THE MERIT AWARD

Each issue, *Vision of Tomorrow* will pay to the author of the leading story in the issue, as determined by the reader's votes, a bonus in addition to our regular rate. In this way, we will reward authors of outstanding stories, and provide extra incentive to create better fiction for our readers.

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In my opinion the stories rank as follows:

No. Here

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..... *The Nixhill Monsters* by Brian Waters  
..... *Lucifer!* by E. C. Tubb  
..... *World To Conquer* by Sydney J. Bounds  
..... *Shapers Of Men* by Kenneth Bulmer  
..... *People Like You* by David Rome  
..... *Number 7* by Eric C. Williams  
..... *The Adapters* by Philip E. High

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## COMING NEXT ISSUE



DICK HOWETT

'Dr. Sussrind,' Gongi patted his cheeks, 'are you alright?' Sussrind smiled idiotically. 'Woof,' he said softly.

'Woof?' Gongi recoiled. 'What kind of answer is that?'

'A dog-man's answer,' Sussrind said, his eyes wide and unfocused. 'Woof. I'm back from a hunting trip.' He rolled over onto hands and knees, pushing his buckled helmet to one side. 'I'm a dog-man, what else?' His eyes swung to bear with interest upon Miss Swiss.

'What kind of a dog are you,' Gongi asked.

'A Dalmation of course. Arruff.'

'Uhuh.' Gongi sat back on his haunches. His occupation greatly assisted his ability to assess. 'I get it. You have a sublimated desire for Miss Swiss. But as a doctor it would be highly unethical for you to develop a passion for a patient. So, in order not to lose her, instead of curing her you have, probably unconsciously, actually encouraged her in her self-deception. Your dog, man's faithful, loyal and devoted friend. And instead of keeping her away from me you created in your own mind an acceptable excuse to perhaps ever further enhance her condition.'

'Arrowrrr. You're so right.' Sussrind crawled forward to sniff at Miss Swiss's sniffing nose, then padded off around to carry his proboscis to her rear.

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