

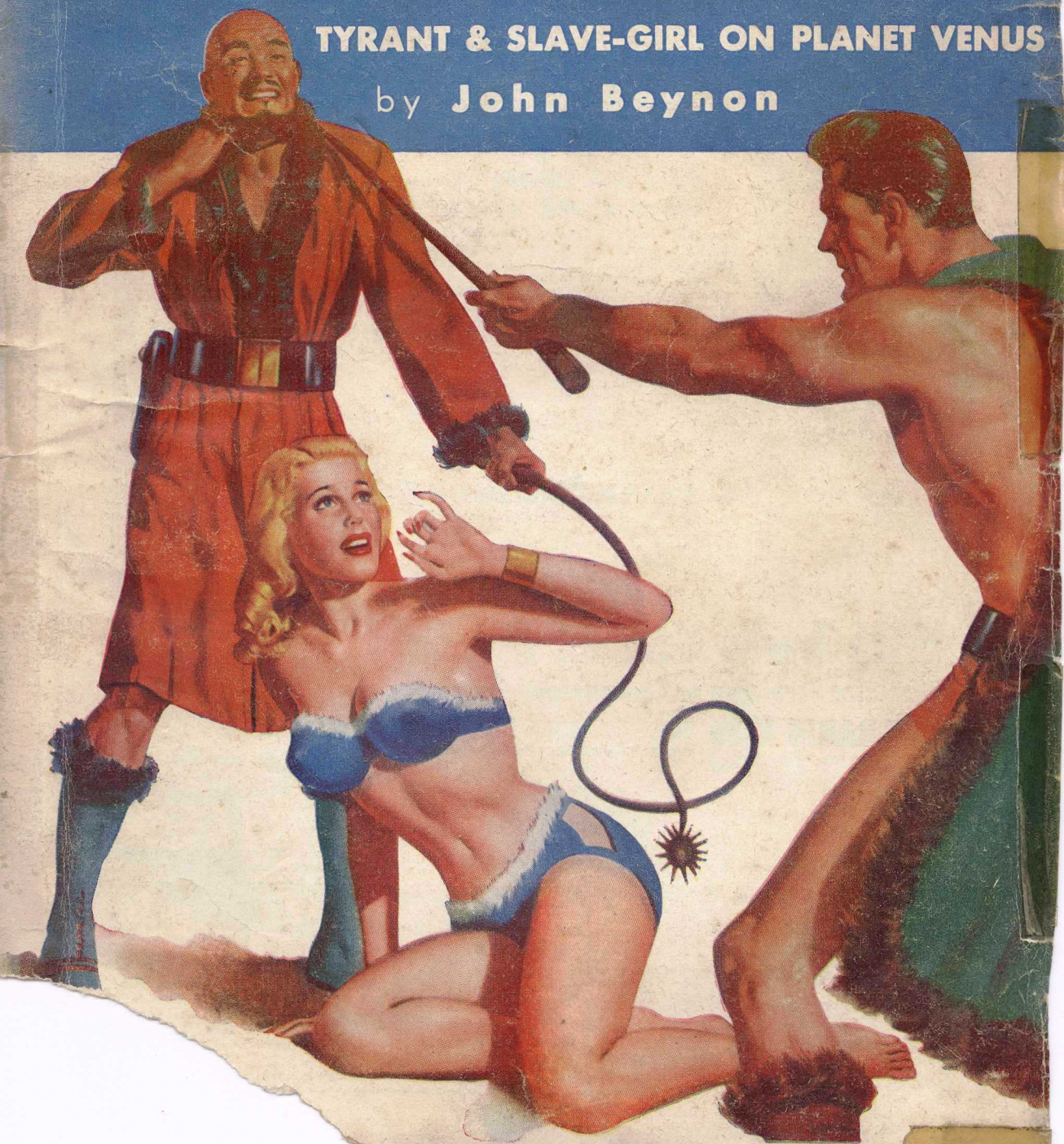
10 STORY
FANTASY

SPRING 1951

25¢

TYRANT & SLAVE-GIRL ON PLANET VENUS

by **John Beynon**



Derleth • A. E. Van Vogt • F. Leiber • and others



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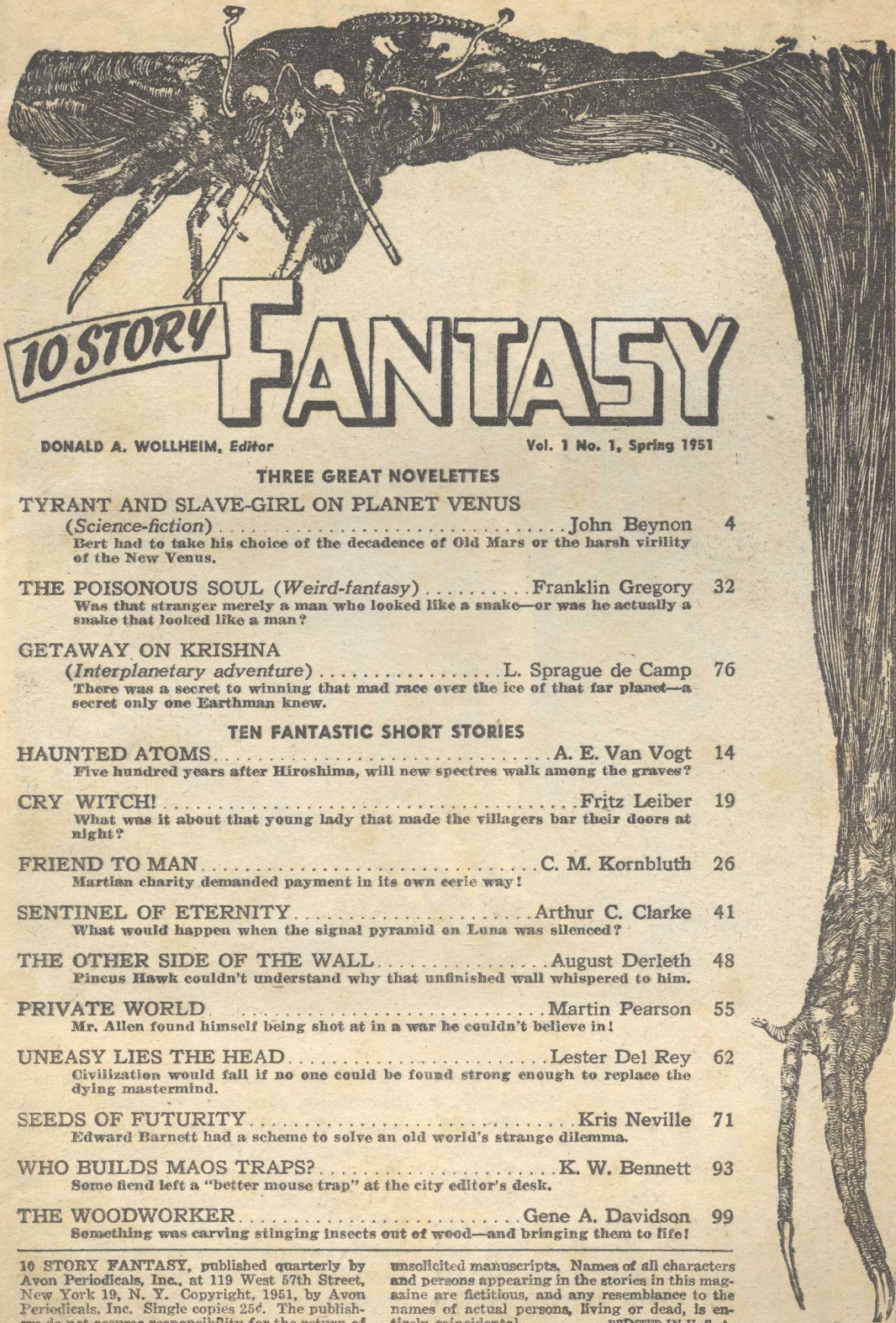
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10 STORY FANTASY

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, Editor

Vol. 1 No. 1, Spring 1951

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Tyrant and Slave-Girl



A NOVELETTE



ON THE LEFT bank lay the ruins of a great city. According to the Martians it was called something like Thalkia.

It was unlike any waterside city, unlike indeed, any city that Bert had seen on Earth. There were no vestiges or signs of quays. Instead, half a

dozen stone paved roads, ramps with low walls, ran from the land into the water. Looking over the side of the boat one could follow them down into the murky depths. From them Bert had deduced that the Great Ones who had built the city had employed some kind of amphibious craft able to run from the canal into the market-places or wherever it was that the cargoes

on Planet Venus

By JOHN BEYNON



Bert wanted to rebuild his proud lost world. To achieve this end, he had to take his choice of either the decadence of Old Mars or the whip-wielding virility of the New Venus.

of the place. Out of it protruded pillars and walls of the darker red stone, and, between them, the corners of fallen blocks. Here and there great lintels, architecturally fantastic, and structurally impossible on Earth, still stood. It could be seen that the Great Ones had abhorred the straight line, delighted in the subtle curve, and had had a particular penchant for a gently swelled three-sided pillar. And, too, that there was nothing ephemeral in their building notions. Allowing for the different gravity, there was a massiveness which nothing on Earth, save possibly the Egyptian pyramids, had employed. It awed Bert quite a deal to be standing in the remains of the oldest structural work anyone had ever seen. The civilization of Earth seemed by contrast like a quickly blown and burst bubble. He doubted whether Thalkia had looked much different at the time when men's ancestors were leaving the trees for the ground. Each time he had come away humbled by antiquity, and with the desire to dig there one day and find out more about the Great Ones.

were needed. It was just another of those hints about the Great Ones that, put together, added up to practically nothing.

Several times Bert had stopped there, and made his way among the ruins. They told him practically nothing: he could not deduce even the size or nature of the Great Ones. Pale red sand had crept across much

Yet this time as his boat chugged past Thalkia he almost failed to notice the place. His arm was over the tiller, and he steered without thinking. The eyes under his battered hat's brim were not even conscious of what they saw.

Many miles behind him, beside a

smaller canal than this, stood a ruined tower that had changed from its obscure original purpose to become the home of a Martian family, and it was there that his mind was lingering. The family sustained itself on the produce of a few fields irrigated by the usual wheel beside the canal. It was to keep the wheel turning and to repair such domestic objects as con-founded the limited local talent that Bert had the family on his schedule of calls.

Of seven Martian years (which would have been something over thirteen Earth years had the disintegrated Earth survived as a measure of time) Bert had spent more than six wandering the canals in his boat, leading a tinker's life from which he returned occasionally to base at the Settlement to pick up metal, make a few pots, and collect such supplies as he could conveniently remove. The small farms and scarce villages on his route had become used to him, and to putting broken objects aside for him to mend when he called. And he had grown to know and to like the people who lived in them.

At first, to his Earth-raised mind, they had been too quiet, and ineffective, and fragile-looking, so that like most of the Earthmen he had thought them decadent. But in time he began to see himself and the other Earthmen with something like Martian eyes—as neurotic, acquisitive, and with values which were sometimes suspect. He had begun to wonder whether 'drive' was always the virtue he had been taught it was—whether it might not sometimes be the expression of instability or poor integration. Though that was not a thought one would mention to another Earthman.

"To us it seems," a Martian had once told him, "that a sense of guilt lies on each of you Earthmen. You all of you think that you ought to be better men, or bigger men, or at least different men in some way. We won-

der why a whole race should have the inferiority complex which makes it base its virtues on the assumption of its own inadequacy. To us that seems strange."

IT SEEMED strange to Bert, too, and not very palatable when put in that way, so that he had disputed it. Nevertheless, as time went by, he had found himself understanding Martian views better, and Earthmen's views less well.

It was disagreeable to realize, too, that the Martians mattered more now, for the Earthmen were finished. The 'drive' of the Earthmen, which was something superimposed upon the normal will to live, had brought them to the end. By accident, carelessness or irresponsibility it had torn the Earth into the millions of fragments which now circled the sun as an inner asteroid belt.

The few hundreds of men left stranded here and there were of no account any longer. It made little difference whether they died off from drink or illness, or waited for old-age to take them. In less than thirty Martian years the last of them would have gone, and the brief disturbance of their incursion would gradually drop out of Martian memory, leaving no sign but some admixture in the Martian blood—which brought Bert back to considering the family that lived in the ruined tower.

There, as in other places, he had been accustomed to tell tales to the children as he worked. He had been only half aware that they were growing up. Mars was a world so spent, so far into old age, that younger generations still growing up there seemed not only incongruous, but pointless to an extent where he scarcely admitted to himself that they were doing so. His last visit, however, had left no doubt about it, for the youngest daughter, Zaylo, whom he thought of as a little girl, had

suddenly become transformed into a young woman. The realization had disquieted him in a way that was quite new. . . .

BERT HAD come to some sort of terms with the conditions thrust upon him. He was not interested in the few Martian girls who hung around the Settlement. Occasionally he came across one of the Earthmen who had settled down with a Martian girl. Sometimes it seemed a qualified success, more often it didn't. In the early days some such idea had tentatively entered his own head, but he had dismissed it, rather as he had dismissed the idea of an alcohol-soaked life in the Settlement. The indications were, he decided, that it did not work well.

Bert was not analytical in the matter. It had not occurred to him that the chief factor in a Martian marriage would be the temperament of the man concerned—his ability, or lack of it, to adapt. Nor had he looked closely at the motives of his decision. He was aware that he resisted something, but had anyone told him that in his heart he was sentimentally preserving a useless loyalty to a world and a race that had finished, he would not have believed it. If his informant had gone further, and told him that the Earth he revered was an idealistic, romantic conception with little likeness to the vanished Earth of reality, he would not have understood.

What he did understand was that the sight of Zaylo had somehow pulverized in a moment a philosophy which had hitherto been adequate enough, and that the placidity of his existence had been torn to shreds. In his mind he could hear the voice of Annika, Zaylo's mother, saying: "Life is not something which you can stop just because you don't like it." He did not want to believe that. There had been a poet once back on Earth who wrote:

*I am the Master of my Fate,
I am the Captain of my Soul.*

That was what Bert believed—or hoped.

EVER since the day when he had accepted the grim fact that he was stranded on Mars for the rest of his life he had steered his own course. He had shown the Greater Fate that it could not get him down, and he intended to go on showing it. Zaylo was a trap—a beautiful trap, like a fly-eating orchid. The sight of her and the sound of her voice had pierced through all his defenses. He ached from the resulting wound. He knew perfectly well that if he were to stay near her he could no longer hold that Captaincy undisputed. He was jealous of her power to move him, angry with her for revealing to him the dry sawdust within his life. And so he had run away. . . .

He was now in the process of discovering the paradox that it takes a very strong mind to run away really efficiently, and that if the mind is that strong it probably doesn't run at all. Certainly he had been unsuccessful in his efforts to leave Zaylo behind. She stood between him and everything.

When his eyes were on the massive ruins of Thalkia, what he was seeing was Zaylo. Zaylo in a deep-yellow skirt stencilled with a pattern in warm brown, with her hair held high on her head by three silver pins; the delicacy of her hands and arms, the unhidden beauty of her young breasts, the curve of her shoulder, her skin like copper woven into satin, dark eyes looking depthlessly back into his own, red lips trembling on a smile. . . .

BUT HE did not want to see Zaylo. Deliberately he banished her. "Those," he told himself aloud, "are the ruins of Thalkia, one of the great-

est cities of Mars. That means only five or six miles now to Farga's place. Take the waterway forty-five degrees right at the junction. Let's see, Farga. . . ." He consulted his notebook to refresh his memory regarding Farga's family and household. Farga's son, Clinff, would be pretty well grown up now. A useful boy, more mechanically minded than. . . . And then somehow he was thinking of Zaylo who was also pretty well grown up now. He was watching her moving with the grace of a young Diana on delicate feet that seemed to caress the ground, noticing the carriage of her head, the rhythm of her walk, the—

Bert shifted, and muttered. He brought a determined gaze to the water ahead. Yes, Clinff had a better mechanical sense than most of them. One might be able to teach him. . . . It was queer how difficult it was for Martians to grasp the simplest mechanical principles. . . . Take the lever. When he had tried to explain it to Zaylo there had been a delightfully earnest little furrow between her brows. . . .

Farga walked down to meet him as he ran the prow ashore on the shelving bank. The Martian was smiling, and holding out his hand in welcome—it was a custom which he had picked up, and punctiliously observed with Earthmen. Bert had a first impression that he was slightly surprised by the visit, but in their greeting he forgot it. He slung a sack of belongings and tools over one shoulder. Farga laid hold of a smaller bag, but failed to lift it. Bert reached down one hand, and raised it easily. The Martian shook his head, with a smile.

"On the moons of Jupiter I, too, would be considered a strong man," he observed.

"If I could go back to Earth now, I guess I'd be as weak as a kitten," Bert said.

"As a what?" inquired Farga.

"As a—a bannikuk," Bert amended.

Farga grinned broadly. "You a bannikuk!" he said.

They ascended the bank and made their way through the fringe of clinking tinkerbells which crowned it.

BERT was glad, and a little surprised, to see that Farga's house was still standing. After Farga himself had built the walls of flat, uncemented stones, Bert had selected suitable roofing slabs from the Thalkian ruins and ferried them down. When he hoisted them into place he had doubted the strength of the walls to support them, but Farga had been satisfied, so they had left it. Even after years on Mars Bert still found his judgments of weight and strength fallacious; Farga was probably right, and the structure had no weather to contend with, only heat and cold.

The place was the ordinary pattern of Martian homestead. A few fields strung along the canal bank, a wheel to irrigate them, and the house—which was part shed and granary, and part human habitation. Meulo, Farga's wife, appeared in the doorway of the dwelling part as they approached. Other interested but much smaller faces showed at the mouths of burrows close to the house, then the bannikuks came scampering out, filled with their usual insatiable curiosity. They began to climb Bert's trousers the moment he stopped. He discouraged them gently.

The inside of the house was clean. The floor was paved with a jigsaw of flat stones. There was an immovable stone table, its top polished by use; a set of stools carved from soft rock. In one corner stood a simple loom—an object of some value for several parts of it were of wood—and in another was the bed with a mattress of dried, strawlike stalks. No one could say that Martians were sybaritic. On the table Meulo had set out a dish of what the Earthmen called potapples, for they looked like

potatoes, and tasted, with the help of imagination, very slightly like apples.

Bert dropped his burdens and sat down. Four bannikuks immediately raced up the table sides to gather in an interested group immediately in front of him. Meulo shooed them off. Bert picked up a potapple and bit into it.

"Things going well?" he inquired.

He knew what the answer would be. A farmer's living on Mars was sparse, but not hazardous. No vagaries of weather, few pests. Trouble usually arose through the few simple tools wearing out and breaking. Farga recited a brief list of minor calamities. Meulo added one or two more. Bert nodded.

"And Clinff?" he asked. "Where's he?"

Farga grinned. "You know what he is—interested in machines, almost like an Earthman. Nothing would hold him when he heard the news. He had to go off and see the ship for himself."

Bert stopped in mid-munch.

"Ship!" he repeated. "Ship on the canal?"

"No, no. The rocket-ship." Farga looked at him curiously. "Haven't you heard?"

"You mean they've got one to work again?" Bert asked.

FROM WHAT he recalled of the dozen or so ships lying on the Settlement landing-ground it did not seem likely. The engineers had early reported that all the remaining fuel if pooled would leave little margin over one take-off and one landing—so no one had bothered. Perhaps someone had succeeded in making a satisfactory fuel. If so, they must have been mighty quick about it, for there had been no talk of any such thing when he had left the Settlement half a Martian year ago. And why try, anyway? There was no Earth to get back to. Then he recalled that during the

first years there had been a number of rocket rumors which turned out to have nothing in them. The Martian grapevine wasn't any more reliable in its information than other bush-telegraphs.

"When was this supposed to be?" he asked cautiously.

"Three days ago," Farga told him. "It passed south of here, quite low. Yatan who is a friend of Clinff's came and told him about it, and they went off together."

Bert considered. All but three of the ships at the settlement had been stripped or broken up. The three had been kept intact because—well, someday, somehow there might be a use for them that nobody really believed in.

"Which ship was it? Did he see her name or number?"

"Yes, she was low enough. Yatan said it was a long name in Earth letters—yours, not Russian—and then 44."

Bert stared at him.

"I don't believe that. He must have made a mistake."

"I don't think so. He said it was different from all the ships at the Settlement. Shorter and wider. That is why Clinff and he have gone to see it."

Bert sat quite still, looking back at Farga without seeing him. His hand began to tremble. He did his best to control his excitement. 44 would, he knew, be one of the new atomic-drive ships—at least, they had been new thirteen Earth years ago. There had been a few in more or less experimental service then. Everybody had said that in a few more years they would replace the liquid fuel ships entirely. But there had not been one of them among those stranded on Mars. Perhaps the boy had been right. . . . What he had said about the shape would be true. Bert could remember how squat they had looked in pictures compared with the lines

of normal space-ships. He got to his feet unsteadily.

"I must go to the Settlement. I must find out," he said, speaking as though to himself.

MEULO made as if to protest, but her husband stopped her with a movement of his hand. Bert did not notice either. His eyes seemed to be focused on something far away. He started towards the door as if in a dream. Farga said:

"You're leaving your tools."

Bert looked round vaguely.

"My—? Oh, yes—yes."

Still without seeming to know what he did, he picked them up.

They watched him go, with the ban-
nikuks scampering unnoticed round his feet. He trudged on, brushing through the tinkerbells, setting a thousand little leaves clinking and chiming as he passed, and disappeared over the rim of the bank. Presently came the familiar sound of his boat's engine, then it speeded up, greatly beyond its usual phut-phut. Farga put his arm round Meulo.

"I feel I ought not to have told him. What hope can there be for any of these Earthmen? Their world has gone. Nothing can bring it back to them," he murmured.

"Someone else would have told him," she said.

"Yes, but then I should not have had to be the one to see such loneliness suddenly in a man's face—and such an empty hope," he told her.

When the night made its sudden fall Bert switched on his light and kept travelling. For the first time he wished that he had built his boat for more speed. On the third night he fell asleep at the tiller and grounded on the gradual bank with just enough impact to awaken himself to his need of proper sleep. On the fifth day he reached the Settlement.

In all that journey Zaylo troubled only his dreams. When he was

awake his thoughts continually brought back pictures of Earth. That was stupid, he knew. Wherever the rocket had come from, it certainly could not have come from the swarm of circling asteroids which now represented Earth. Yet the association of ideas was unavoidable. It was as if an old locked box in his mind had been opened, letting scenes and reminiscences spring out as the lid was raised. And he made no honest attempt to force them back.

For the last few miles he might have been upon an ocean. The body of water formed by the junction of several important canals, the curvature of Mars, and his own lowly position took him out of sight of land. But presently he was able to make out the slender spire of the useless radio mast dead ahead. An hour or so more, and he had driven the boat ashore at her usual berth. He jumped out, drove the grapple into the sand to hold her there, and strode off towards the Settlement.

The moment he set foot inside the fence he was aware that the place felt different. On previous visits its spiritlessness had closed around him like a blanket that became a little thicker each time. But now that sensation was missing. The few men he saw on his way to the central clubhouse did not drift in the old way. They looked as if they had received an injection which made them walk with a purpose.

In the clubhouse bar-room the transformation was a little less complete. A number of the habitués sat at their usual tables, too alcohol-logged and sunk in cynicism to change much. When he had helped himself to a drink he looked round for someone who might be coherent and informative. A group of three talking earnestly at a table by the window caught his eye. He recognized the two bearded men as out-of-settlement men like himself. He crossed the floor to

join them. The man who was doing most of the talking was pale and sal-low beside the others, but he had the more decisive manner. As Bert came up he was saying:

"You put your names down now, that's my advice. I'm willing to bet you get chosen for the first batch—You, too," he added, glancing round as Bert pulled up a chair. "We want men like you. Half of them here have gone rotten. They'd never pass any physical examination, or stand the change. I'll put your names up right now, if you like—with a priority mark to 'em. Then once the doc's looked you over, you'll be all set. How about it?"

The two agreed without hesitation. The man wrote down their names, and glanced interrogatively at Bert.

"I'm only just in. What's it all about?" Bert asked with an effect of calmness. He was rather pleased with the way he was managing to control the excitement thumping in his chest. "All I've heard is that a ship is said to have come in," he added.

"It's here now," said one of the bearded men.

"From Venus," added the other.

THE PALE MAN talked. The other two listened as eagerly as if all he said was fresh to them too. There was a gleam in their eyes and a look of purpose on their faces. Bert had not seen a look like that for a very long time.

"Ever been to Venus?" asked the pale man.

Bert shook his head.

"The trip here was my first," he said.

"There's a future on Venus. There's none here," the pale man told him. "Things are going ahead there. We'd have let you know that long ago, but for that static layer over the place that cuts the radio out."

He went on to explain that it had been clear from the time of the first

landings there that Venus could be given a future.

"Here on Mars," he said, "conditions were far better than anyone had expected. The atmosphere was a great deal denser and higher in oxygen content than anyone had estimated, and the temperatures more tolerable. It was thought that only lichens or similar low forms of life could exist. Well, we were wrong about that. All the same, it is pretty nearly finished here now—well on the way out. There are the useful deposits of minerals which for some reason the Great Ones never bothered to work, but that's about all. It had gone too far to be worth a serious attempt to colonize. As for the moons of Jupiter—well, anybody who's content to spend his whole life in a heated spacesuit might live there, but no one else. But Venus was something different. . . ."

In a rather elementary manner he went on to explain why Venus was different. How the conditions on the younger planet could be considered as approximating roughly—very roughly—to those on Earth some millions of years ago. How the density of the atmosphere helped to offset the increased heat of the sun so that, though the tropics were impossible, conditions at the poles were tolerable if not comfortable. How, in fact, it was possible to consider colonization of limited areas.

"And we were still doing that—just thinking about it, that is. We had got as far as establishing an exploring and shipping base on the island of Melos not far from the northern pole, when we found out more or less by chance that the Slavs had sent out two loads of emigrants and actually established a colony on an island near the South Pole."

"I never heard of that," Bert put in.

"You weren't meant to. The Slavs kept quiet about it. They were kind of pathologically prone to secrecy,

anyway. We kept quiet because we didn't want a first-class international row on our hands. We'd have had to do something about it—and we knew that if we started we'd be in for some full-scale nastiness. The best thing we could do seemed to be to start our own colony, pronto.

"Well, the Slavs had the drop on us there. They'd done a bit of criminal transportation on simple, old-fashioned lines—the way we used to do ourselves on Earth. But nowadays we had to get recruits for it. That wasn't easy. Maybe you'll remember a lot of blarney on pioneer lines. Bands, flags, receptions and all that? A lot fell for it. But there had to be other incentives, too, and as decent conditions as we could manage when they got there. And in that we did score over the Slavs. They'd just sent their lot out with as much equipment as they thought strictly necessary—and it's wonderful how little that can be in a tough, well-ordered state. But then, the Slavs are a tough people.

"Still, with all the start we could give 'em our first lot wasn't stuck on the place—but they'd signed for a minimum of five Earth years, and a pension at the end of it. There were twenty-five families in that first lot. Another twenty-five families were in space on their way there when whatever it was that happened at home did happen."

Bert nodded. "I remember. They were due for take-off about a week after we left."

"They made it, too. Several other ships came in, as well. But a good many just vanished. They tell me that two ships that were on the Venus-to-Earth run managed to divert here. They hadn't a chance to turn back, of course. Deceleration and acceleration again would have left them with no fuel for landing. The most they could risk was expending some fuel on making the diversion.

"But that didn't apply to an atomic-

drive ship. The *Rutherford A4* had left Venus two days before, and she did have the reserve of power necessary for a stop, start and land, so she got back—with not a lot to spare. As far as we know, the other atomic ships all bought it. *A1* was smashed in a crash on Jupiter, you remember. *A2*, *3* and *5* are thought to have been on or near Earth when it happened.

"SO YOU SEE our position was a lot different from yours here. We had about the same number of space-port personnel, but we didn't have a whole flock of miners and prospectors—just a few explorers, botanists, chemists, and the like. And we had a colony containing some fifty women, and nearly a hundred children. Also we had a planet with its best years yet to come. We've got something to work with and to work for. This time the human race has got hold of a planet where it really is in on the ground floor. But what we need right now is as many men as we can get to help us. We'd be getting along a lot faster if we had more to oversee the work."

"Oversee? What, one another?" said Bert.

"No. We've got the griffas working for us."

"I thought—"

"You thought griffas were only good for making fur-coats? That's what everyone thought. On account of the price the furs brought nobody bothered to get nearer to them than shooting range. But that's not so. They've got quite enough intelligence to do useful work, and they can be trained up to more tricky stuff when we've got the time. Of course, they're small, but there's any amount of them. The thing is they've got to be watched all the time. There has to be a man in charge—and there's our chief limitation."

"So what you're offering is a kind of foreman job?"

"That's about it—to begin with. But there's opportunity. It's a place that's going to grow. One day it's going to grow mighty big, and have all that Earth ever had.

"Maybe the climate's not too good, but there are decent houses to live in, and already there's getting to be something that looks like civilization. You'll be surprised. Here on Mars there's nothing to do but rot. So how about it?"

"You took a long time finding out you needed us," Bert said.

"No, we knew that all right from the start. Trouble was the getting to get here. That took time. Fuel. To fuel a rocket you've got to produce fuel on the big scale. It takes a lot of labor and time that we couldn't afford for the returns. Just building the plant was too expensive for us to think of. But when we ran across fissile material we could spare the time refining that to get the A4 into use. We want radioactive material anyway, so it became worth doing.

"Now we can take forty-five men this trip, picking the fittest first. You'll make it, easy. You've not let yourself go to seed like most. So how about putting your name down?"

"I'll think about it," Bert said.

All the other three stared at him. "God Almighty!" said the pale man. "A chance that's almost a miracle to get off this sandheap—and you'll think about it!"

"I was twenty-one when I came here," Bert said. "Now I'm thirty-four, Earth reckoning. You kind of grow into a place in that time. I'll let you know."

HE WALKED OFF, conscious of their eyes following him. Without noticing where he was going, he found himself back at the canal bank. He sat down there among the tinkerbells, and stared across the water.

What he was seeing again was a ruined tower beside another canal.

A life that went on there placidly, harmoniously. A group of people content to live simply, to enjoy what life offered without striving restlessly for some undefined end. People who were quite satisfied to be part of a process, who did not perpetually itch to master and control all around them. It was true that Mars was close to dying. But the whole solar system, the whole universe was in the process of dying.

Was there really so much more virtue in battling for thousands of years to subdue a planet than in living for a few centuries in quiet content? What was it the Earthmen imagined they sought with all their strife, drive, and noise? Not one of them could tell you that ultimate purpose. For all one knew there was none, it might be just a nervous tic. All their boasts need not be more than the rationalizations of a dominating egoism imposed upon a kind of transcendent monkey inquisitiveness. . . .

The Martians were not like that. They did not see themselves as arbiters, as men to be made gods. But simply as a part of life.

Some lines from a poem came into his mind. Whitman had been speaking of animals, but it seemed to Bert to apply very well to Martians:

*They do not sweat and whine
about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark
and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick dis-
cussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied—not one is
demented with the mania of
owning things. . . .*

The image of Zaylo stepped into his thought's sight. About her like an aura was a sense of peace to soothe his mind and heart.

"Time to rest, Earthman," her mother had said.

(Continued on page 111)

HAUNTED ATOMS

Five hundred years after Hiroshima, will new spectres walk along the graves? Something unique — a ghost story of the Atomic Age!

By A. E. VAN VOGT



AT THE FIRST attack more than five hundred years before, the seething stuff was cascaded into a dozen separate underground chambers. The bomb that fell gouged an entire valley out of the ground but didn't quite, not quite, reach the chambers.

A city was gone, and the radiant liquid forgotten. Each segment simmered with a mindless patience in its prison. The centuries ticked away, and finally a man probed into the resisting earth. Accidentally, he broke down the rotting barrier between two of the receptacles.

There was an instant, savage interchange of immensely potent energy.

John Roberts found himself perspiring. He climbed out of the hole and, pulling out his handkerchief, wiped his forehead. He was a middle-aged man with graying temples and a pioneer gleam in his eyes.

"Sure got hot all of a sudden," he surmised aloud to the empty yard. "Feel kind of faint."

He looked anxiously toward the house. It was about a hundred yards away and seemed to be receding. He staggered, felt amazed, nearly fell,

and grew alarmed. He had taken ten steps when he began to realize that he wasn't going to make it. He sobbed with a sharp awareness of the death that was coming.

A neighboring farmer found his body lying quietly on the grass. And that night the haunt lights were first seen.

Men do not die in a vacuum. A local doctor noted the third degree burns on the body, but since they were inexplicable he made out his certificate: "Heart failure." A legal official came down from Megalopolis and took possession of the farmhouse in the name of the new owner of the property, Mrs. Peter Nichols (*née* Janie Roberts), niece of the dead man. The official put up a "For Rent" sign, and took one of the rooms for the night. At midnight, when the place was already glowing with visible lights that sparkled in every room, he was seen to emerge from the back door in his pajamas, and leap hurriedly into his sky car. The machine took off with a hiss.

During the next three months, two families moved into the house for brief periods. When they were gone hastily, no more home seekers appeared. In the hole, the uranium 235 roiled and burned and bubbled, seek-



"They're probably all blobs by now," Janie whimpered.

ing freedom, releasing floods of energy upon the nearby house. Certain plastics sparkled with flame. Metals grew hot, and shone in the dark, and cracked, and made sounds no human ear had heard for half a millennium.

The "haunt" lights were not dangerous. The materials involved were safety compounds, which resisted radioactivity with an almost helium-like inertness.

Gradually the vibration of the bubbling brought down loose dirt and broken bits of the stuff which had formerly contained the uranium. After six months the energy was sealed in.

On the night that the owner and her husband moved into the house, the radiant fire was already settled—if not disturbed—for another five hundred years of virtual frustration.

No one, of course, knew that.

"THIS is silly," said Janie.

The house loomed up in the darkness, as they slowly climbed out of the car. Peter shook off her words as if they were leaves that had fallen on him from the dying tree under which he had parked. Far off to the right, he could see the light of another house.

It was a cloudless night, and the stars were like points of varicolored light in a sky of blue ink. The pale cup of a moon seemed neither to add to nor subtract from the darkness.

He hesitated, then turned to his wife. "Now, look," he said firmly, "let's not start getting jittery. We've figured this thing out on a cold commercial basis. You inherited this property, and we darn well need to get some rent money out of it. But the only way we'll ever rent it is to live in it for a while, give parties,

have week-end guests—and so, gradually, persuade the stupid local people that it isn't haunted. Meanwhile, we rent our town house, and get a little financial breathing spell. Remember?"

He paused, then gruffly: "It's your own fault, leaving everything to the last minute. I intended us to get here this afternoon. It doesn't really matter though. The agent said it was all ready, nuclearicity connected and everything. Actually, nothing to worry about, is there?"

"No." Janie spoke faintly.

He took her arm. "Come along," he said.

The key rattled in the lock, and the door opened with the faintest of squeals. Then there was silence.

Intense silence. The silence of an isolated country house. Peter found himself straining against the darkness, as if there were sounds in it beyond the range of human hearing. He cursed under his breath as he realized what he was doing, and began to probe the hallway with his flashlight. Abruptly, he found the nuclearic switch.

The flood of brightness brought a sigh from Janie's lips. In a few minutes they had turned on every light in the house, upstairs and down. The agent had done a good job. The furniture was uncovered and arranged, rugs were on the floor and the place was clean. The cleaning woman, who for double pay had come in during the daylight hours of the past week, must have tried to wash away all the evil spirits. Every room in the house smelled fresh and clean.

In the master bedroom, Peter stretched lazily on the large double bed, and studied the tinted wallpaper. "Which way is the old place?" he asked.

"Over there." She pointed towards the south wall. "I showed you when we were here last week."

"That was daytime, and I have

trouble with directions anyway." After a moment he climbed to his feet, made a part of the south wall transparent, and peered out into the darkness. The light reflections from behind him kept the night opaque at first, but gradually his vision cleared. He could see the shadowy shapes a hundred yards away.

"What did you say those things used to be?"

"An atomic powerhouse."

He snorted. "My God," he said. "that kind of nonsense really gets on my nerves. Lord knows I'm a credulous person; I'll believe almost anything. But this atomic stuff is the last straw. For three hundred years there's been a blurred mythology about a wonderful atomic age. If it was so wonderful, what's happened to it?"

"I admit," he went on, drawing the blind again, and turning back into the room, "that this is a decadent era we're living in, but I'm getting awfully tired of superstition."

He sat down on the bed. "Now, look," he said, "I can see you're still tense. Please sit down in that chair." He waited till she had complied, then: "Janie, for heaven's sake, relax. There, that's a little better."

He sprawled back on the bed. "How old is this house?"

"A-about seventy-five years."

He nodded smugly. "And that—that atomic powerhouse, how old is it supposed to be?"

"They say—" She hesitated. "Oh, Peter, this is all so silly. I admit it."

He was determined. "How old is it supposed to be?"

"Well, they say—" She shrugged—"they say it was still in operation five hundred years ago."

"Who are they?"

She made a vague gesture with one hand.

"And how long," Peter persisted, "did the so-called golden age last before that?"

"A thousand years." Her tone was defiant. "Now, Peter, you know that there must be something in it. There are books in the museums, which science can't explain in any other way than that there was once a mighty civilization?"

"Science!" He spoke in a derogatory tone. Then he frowned. "But let's use your figures, and see where they leave us."

She sighed resignedly. "Darling, you've said all this before."

"It didn't sink in," he accused, "or you wouldn't be acting the way you are." He yawned. "I don't want you to spend the night in shuddering wakefulness. You said a thousand years, didn't you?"

"You know I did."

He ignored her sharp tone. "Then another five hundred years since that atomic plant stopped working. By the way, what made it stop working?"

HIS WIFE was annoyed now, very definitely. "Peter, you know perfectly well that there's a period of history there that nothing much is known about. There are old wives' tales about a war that blotted out civilization, but history knows nothing about that. Our written history begins about three hundred years ago."

"Yeah," he said, and he tried successfully to make the word an insult to all historians.

"All right, all right," he said finally. "Let's get back to the figures. The glorious, wonderful super-civilization lasted a thousand years, then four hundred and twenty-five years passed during which it was all forgotten, then this house was built, and people lived in it for generations. About three years ago, your uncle was found dead near a tunnel he had dug under this so-called powerhouse—and the place has been haunted ever since. That's the picture, isn't it?"

His wife nodded reluctantly.

"Now, I ask you," said Peter triumphantly, "how can anything reach across five hundred years of time and kill a man?"

"There were burns on his body that were never explained."

"But what was the doctor's verdict?"

Janie hesitated.

"It was heart failure, wasn't it?" Peter said.

His wife stood up. "Oh, please, darling, stop driving home so many points. You're not cheering me up. You're depressing me. I know everything you can possibly say. Only—"

"Only what?"

"I wish people hadn't suddenly started seeing lights in the house three years ago, and hearing sounds, and getting themselves burned by fires that no one can see."

"It's all in the imagination."

"Yes," she said wearily, "yes, I know, darling. But let's get undressed and go to bed."

He grunted as he removed his shirt. "I can understand nuclearicity. You turn a switch, and it works. You turn it again and it goes off. That's the end. It's finished. It doesn't reach across five hundred years of time and space and make a light shine. The same thing goes for nucleonite. It operates an engine according to a simple principle, and it doesn't reach across—"

Janie finished the sentence hastily, "I know—five hundred years."

"But this atomic power stuff," said Peter. "That gets me. People use the word, and then look blank when you ask them what it means. I'm tired of it, frankly."

"So am I," she said. "Right now."

Peter mumbled something about being married to a woman who never let him finish a thought, then: "Shall I sleep with you," he asked, "or take one of the guest rooms?"

"With me."

He grinned at her. "What's this?"

he said. "Young Mrs. Got-to-have-room-of-her-own getting dependent?"

She did not reply, and presently, when she was under the covers, he turned out the lights and crept in beside her. Silence settled.

MORNING. Peter yawned, then climbed out of bed. Janie was still sleeping. He grinned down at her, remembering her ceaseless plaint about a separate bedroom because it was impossible for her to sleep with anyone else in the room.

Downstairs, he punched out a menu for breakfast, slow-timed it for fifteen minutes, and went outside. The car was parked where he had left it, under the whatchamacallit tree. It bobbed a little in the breeze, which startled him. He had left the power on. He walked over, and switched it off, then stood gazing towards the line of low mounds that began a hundred yards to the south.

"I'll go over there one of these days," he decided, "and see if we can't clear that junk away."

When he returned to the house, Janie was taking a shower. Over the breakfast table, he explained his plan. She looked at him, blue eyes pitying.

"You poor dunce," she said, "and who are you going to get to do the work?"

Peter hadn't thought of that. "I suppose," he said disconsolately, "these superstitious country folk couldn't be persuaded to earn a little money."

"Besides," said Janie practically, "where would you get the money?"

"Then I guess I'll have to do the work myself."

"You and uncle," said Janie.

"My gosh, you're helpful," Peter complained, and let the matter drop. He had momentarily forgotten her dead uncle.

On the way to town, Peter had another idea. "As soon as we can afford it, I'll have an expert from the uni-

versity come and look at the mounds."

Janie screwed up her small face. "Darling," she said, "you bother me. When'll we be able to afford an expert in any foreseeable period? Answer me that."

Peter shrugged, then sneered, "Little Mrs. Braveheart is talking awfully big now that the daylight has come again." He broke off impatiently, "Look, baby, I'm doing this for you, understand. Y-O-U. You're the one that's going to be seeing the lights, and hearing the sounds, and I imagine in a crisis you might even develop some pretty good burns."

"It was the first night that I was afraid of," Janie said complacently. "I slept like a log, didn't I?" She touched his arm with a jerk. "Heavens, darling, is that Megalopolis?"

Peter nodded. "I was trying to see how fast we could do it in a pinch. Five hundred and eighty-one miles in thirteen minutes and—" He glanced at the eye level dashboard—"and eight seconds," he finished cosily. "Not bad for this old bus."

He let Janie off at their town house—there were things to do before the new tenants took over—and then drove up to the roof of the office building where he worked. When he picked her up at four she was aglow with excitement.

"Sweetheart, I've pulled a major coup. I was introduced to Mrs. Leard (you know the physicist's wife) this afternoon, and I invited them out for this week-end. And, darling, they're going to come."

"What makes you think," said Peter, "that Professor Leard will be interested in digging in our back yard?"

Janie was smug. "My dear, how do you think I got them to come out. I told his wife the place was haunted by atomic energy."

"What did she say?"

"She said she thought her husband
(Continued on page 127)



CRY WITCH!

She was young and enchanting, and the heart of that village boy was lost to her—yet what was it about her that made the peasants shudder, the old women to cross themselves, and the villagers to bar their doors at night?

By FRITZ LEIBER



THE GIRL was very beautiful and she came into the cafe on the arm of a young writer whose fearless idealism has made him one of the most talked of figures of today. Still, it seemed odd to me that old Nemecek should ignore my question in order to eye her. Old Nemecek loves to argue better than to eat or drink, or, I had thought, to love, and in any case he is very old.

Indeed, old Nemecek is almost incredibly old. He came to New York when the homeland of the Czechs was still called Bohemia, and he was old then. Now his face is like a richly tooled brown leather mask and his hands are those of a dapperly gloved skeleton and his voice, though mellow, is whispery. His figure is crooked and small and limping, and I sometimes feel that he came from a land of ancient myth. Yet there are times when a certain fiery youthfulness flashes from his eyes.

The girl looked our way and her glance stopped at Nemecek. For a moment I thought they had recognized each other. A cryptic look passed between them, a guardedly smiling, coolly curious, rapid, reminiscent look, as if they had been lovers long ago, incredible as that might be. Then the girl and her escort went on to the bar and old Nemecek turned back to me.

"Idealism?" he queried, showing that at least he had not forgotten my question. "It is strange you should ask that now. Yes, I certainly am an idealist and have always been one, though I have been deserted and betrayed by my ideals often enough, and seen them exploited in the market place and turned to swords and instruments of torture in the hands of my enemies."

The tone of his voice, at once bitter and tender, was the same as a man might use in talking of a woman he had known and lost long ago and still loved deeply.

"Ideals," he said softly and fingered the glass of brandy before him and looked at me through the eyeholes of his Spanish leather mask. "I will tell you a story about them. It happened to a very close friend of mine in old Bohemia. It is a very old story, and like all the best old stories, a love story."

SHE WAS NOT like the other village girls, this girl my friend fell in love with (said Nemecek). With the other village girls he was awkward, shy, and too inclined to nurse impossible desires. He walked past their houses late at night, hoping they would be looking out of a darkened window, warm white ghosts in their cotton gowns. Or wandering along the forest path he imagined that they would be waiting alone for him just around the next turn, the sunlight dappling their gay skirts and their smiles. But they never were.

With her it worked out more happily. Sometimes it seemed that my friend had always known her, back even to that time when a jolly Old Man in Black had made noises at him in his crib and tickled his ribs; and always their meetings had the same magical conformity to his moods. He would be trudging up the lane, where the trees bend close and the ivy clings to the cool gray wall, thinking of nothing, when suddenly he would feel a hand at his elbow and turn and see her grave, mysterious, sweet face, a little ruffled from having run to overtake him.

When there was dancing in the square and the fiddles squealed and the boards thundered and the bonfires splashed ruddy gilt, she would slip out of the weaving crowd and they would whirl and stamp together. And at night he would hear her scratching softly at his bedroom window like a cat almost before he realized what it was he had been listening for.

My friend did not know her name or where she lived. He did not ask her. With regard to that he was conscious of an unspoken agreement between them. But she always turned up when he wanted her and she was very artful in her choice of the moment to slip away.

More and more he came to live for the hours they spent together. He became contemptuous of the village and its ways. He recognized, with the clarity of anger, the village's shams and meannesses and half-masked brutalities. His parents noticed this and upbraided him. He no longer went to church, they complained. He sneered at the schoolmaster. He was disrespectful to the mayor. He played outrageous tricks on the shopkeepers. He was not interested in work or in getting ahead. He had become a good-for-nothing.

When this happened he always expected them to accuse him of wasting his time on a strange girl, and to put

the blame on her. Their failure to do this puzzled him. His curiosity as to her identity was reawakened.

She was not a village girl, she was not a gypsy, and she certainly was not the daughter of the nobleman whose castle stood at the head of the valley. She seemed to exist for him alone. Yet, if experience had taught him anything, it had taught him that nothing existed for him alone. Everything in the village had its use, even the beggar who was pitied and the dog who was kicked. He racked his brains as to what hers might be. He tried to get her to tell him without asking a direct question, but she refused to be drawn. Several times he planned to follow her home. When that happened she merely stayed with him until he had forgotten his plan, and by the time he remembered it she was gone.

But he was growing more and more dissatisfied with the conditions of their relationship. No matter how delightful, this meet-at-the-corner, kiss-in-the-dark business could not go on forever. They really ought to get married.

My friend began to wonder if she could be concealing something shameful about her background. Now when he walked arm-in-arm around the square with her, he fancied that people were smirking at him and whispering behind his back. And when he happened on a group of the other young men of the village, the talk would break off suddenly and there would be knowing winks. He decided that, whatever the cost, he must know.

IT WAS near May Eve. They had met in the orchard opposite the old stone wall, and she was leaning against a bough crusted with white blossoms. Now that the moment had come, he was trembling. He knew that she would tell the truth and it frightened him.

She smiled a little ruefully, but answered without hesitation.

"What do I do in the village? Why, I sleep with all of them—the farmers, the preacher, the schoolmaster, the mayor. . . ."

There was a stinging pain in the palm of his hand. He had slapped her face and turned his back on her, and he was striding up the lane, toward the hills. And beside him was striding an Old Man in Black, not nearly so jolly as he had remembered him, cadaverous in fact and with high forehead deeply furrowed and eyes frosty as the stars.

For a long way they went in silence, as old comrades might. Over the stone bridge, where once he and she had dropped a silver coin into the stream, past the roadside shrine with its withered flowers and faded saint, through the thin forest, where a lock of his hair and hers were clipped together in a split tree, and across the upland pasture. Finally he found words for his anger.

"If only she hadn't said it with that hangdog air, and yet as if expecting to be praised! And if it had happened only with some of the young fellows! But those old hypocrites!"

He paused, but the Old Man in Black said nothing, only a certain cold merriment was apparent in his eyes.

"How can she do it and still stay so lovely?" my friend continued. "And how can they know her and not be changed by it? I tell you I gave up a great deal for her! But they can enjoy her and still stick like leeches to the same old lies. It's unfair. If they don't believe in her, why do they want her?"

The Old Man laughed shortly and spoke, and the laugh and the words were like a wind high above the earth.

"She is a harlot, yet whosoever possesses her becomes highly respectable thereby. That is a riddle."

"I have not become respectable."

The Old Man showed his teeth in a wintry smile. "You really love her. Like old King David, *they* desire only to be warm."

"And she really sleeps with them all? Just as she said?"

The Old Man shook his head. "Not all. There are a few who turn her away. The philosopher who stays in the little cottage down the road and scowls at the religious processions and tells the children there is no god. The nobleman whose castle stands at the head of the valley. The bandit who lives in the cave on the hill. But even they cannot always endure life without her, and then they get up in the chilly night and go to the window and open it, and the bandit goes to the frost-rimmed mouth of his cave, and they call brokenly in the moonlight, hating themselves for it, and she comes, or her ghost."

The Old Man turned his head and his sunken eyes were very bright.

"They are weak," he said, "but you may be stronger. It's a gay life in the crags."

"Old Man," my friend answered, "you've shown me two paths and I'll take neither. I won't leave her and freeze to death in the crags, no matter how gaily. And I won't share her with those fat hypocrites. I have a plan."

And he turned and went whistling down the hill, his hands in his pockets.

WHEN HE had almost come to the village, he saw a tall hay-wagon coming up the lane. There were two rich farmers on the seat, with stiff collars and thick vests and fat gold watchchains, and she was sitting between them and their arms were around her shoulders. The schoolmaster had begged a ride and was lying on the hay behind the seat, and he had slyly managed to slide his arm around her waist.

Watching them from the middle of

the road as the wagon slowly creaked nearer, my friend chuckled and shook his head, wondering how he could ever have been so blind as not to realize that she was the town harlot. Why, he had seen her a hundred times, drunken, clinging to some man's arm, hitching at her skirt, singing some maudlin song. Once she had beckoned to him. And it had never occurred to him that they were the same woman.

He laughed again, out loud this time, and stepped forward boldly and stopped the horses.

The farmer who was driving got up unsteadily, jerking at the reins, and roared in a thick, tavern voice, "Loafer! Good-for-nothing! Get out of our way!" And the whip came whistling down.

But my friend ducked and the lead horse reared. Then he grabbed the whip and pulled himself up onto the wagon with it, and the tipsy farmer down. The other farmer had found the bottle from which they had been swigging and was fetching it up for a blow, when he snatched it away from him and broke it over his head, so that the brandy drenched his pomaded hair and ran into his eyes. Then he tumbled him off into the road and laid the whip onto the horses until they broke into an awkward gallop which made up in jouncing what it otherwise lacked in speed.

When the fight started, the schoolmaster had tried to slip off the back of the wagon. Now he tried to hang on. But hay is not easy stuff to cling to. First his books went, then his tall hat, then he. There was a great brown splash. The last they saw of him, he was sitting in the puddle, his long legs spread.

By the time they reached the bridge, the horses were winded. My friend jumped nimbly out and swung her down. She seemed to be amused and perhaps even delighted at what

was happening. Without any explanation, he took her firmly by the wrist and headed for the hills.

Every now and then he stole a glance at her. He began to marvel that he had ever thought her perfect. The dearest thing in the world, of course, but perfect?—why, she was much too cream-and-sugary, too sit-by-the-fire, too cozy and stodgy-respectable, almost plump. Well, he'd see to that, all right.

And he did. All through the long summer and into the tingling fall their life went like what he had always imagined must come after the happy endings of the fairy tales his grandmother had told him. He repaired the little old cabin in the hills beyond the upland pasture, and stuffed the old mattress with fresh green grass, and carved wooden dishes and goblets and spoons, and made her a pail out of bark to fetch water. Sometimes he managed to filch from the outlying farms a loaf of new-made bread, sometimes some flour, sometimes only the grain, which she ground between stones and baked unleavened on another stone over the fire. He hunted rabbits and squirrels with his revolver, but occasionally he stole chickens and once he killed a sheep.

She went with him on his hunting expeditions, and once or twice they climbed into the crags, which seemed not at all cold and forbidding, as on that afternoon when he had walked with the Old Man. He made slim flutes out of willow wands, and they piped together in the evenings or out in the sunny forest. Sometimes, as a solemn jest, they wove twigs and flowers into wreaths as an offering to fancied forest gods. They played games with each other and with their pets—a squirrel who had escaped the pot and a brave young cat who had come adventuring from the village.

True to my friend's expectations,

his beloved grew brown, lithe, and quick. She went barefoot and tucked up her skirt. All signs of the village faded from her, and her grave, mysterious, sweet expression grew sparklingly alive, so that he sometimes shivered with pride when he looked at her. All day long she was with him, and he went to sleep holding her hand and in the morning it was always there.

HE HAD only one worry, a trifling and indeed unreasonable one, since it was concerned with the absence rather than the presence of ill fortune, yet there it was. He could not understand why the farmers did not try to track him down for his thefts, and why the village folk had not done anything to him for taking their harlot.

He knew the people of the valley. He was not so credulous as to believe he had fooled them by hiding in the hills. Any poacher or thief who tried that had the dogs baying at his heels before morning. They were tight-fisted, those valley people. They never let anything out of their hands unless they made a profit. But what the profit could be in this case, he could not for the life of him determine.

In a small way it bothered him, and one night just before Halloween he woke with a start, all full of fear. Moonlight was streaming through the doorway. He felt her hand in his and for a moment that reassured him. But the hand felt cold and dry and when he tugged at it to waken her, it seemed weightless. He sprang out of bed and to the doorway and the hand came with him. In the moonlight he saw that it was a dead hand, severed at the wrist, well preserved, smelling faintly of spices.

He kicked the fire aflame and lit a candle from it. The cat was pacing uneasily. Every now and then it would look toward the doorway and

its fur would rise. The squirrel was huddled in a corner of its cage, trembling. My friend called his beloved's name, very softly at first, then more loudly. Then he shouted it with all the power of his lungs and plunged outside.

All night he searched and shouted in vain through the forest, striking at the inky branches as if they were in league with her captors. But when he returned at dawn, scratched and bruised, his clothes all smeared and torn, she was busy cooking breakfast. Her face, as she raised it to greet him, was tranquil and guiltless, and he found that he could not bring himself to question her or to refer in any way to the night's happenings. She bathed his cuts and dried his sweat and made him rest a little before eating, but only as if he had gone out for an early ramble and had had the misfortune to fall and hurt himself.

The cat was contentedly gnawing a bit of bacon rind and the squirrel was briskly chattering as it nibbled a large crumb. My friend searched surreptitiously for the dead hand where he had dropped it but it was gone.

All that day the sky was cloudless, but there was a blackness in the sunlight, as if he were dizzy and about to faint. He could not tire himself of looking at her. In the afternoon they made an expedition to the hilltop, but as he clasped her in his arms he saw, over her shoulder and framed by rich autumnal leaves, tinied by the distance, the figure of a man in a long black cloak and a broad-brimmed hat, standing high in the crags and seeming to observe them. And he wondered why the Old Man had stayed away from them so long.

That night she was very tender, as if she too knew that this night was the last, and it was hard for my friend to keep from speaking out. He lay with his eyes open the barest slit,

feigning sleep. For a long time there was no movement in the cabin, only the comfortable sounds of night and her breathing. Then, very slowly, she sat up, and keeping hold of his hand, drew from under the bed a box. From this she took a small flute, which seemed, by the moon and flickering firelight, to be made not of willow but of a human bone. On this, stopping it only with three fingers, still keeping hold of his hand, she played a doleful and drowsy melody.

He felt a weight of sleep descend on him, but he had chewed a bitter leaf which induces wakefulness. After the tune was done, she held the flute over his heart and gently shook it. He knew that a little graveyard dust must have fallen from the stops, for he felt a second compelling urge of sleepiness.

Then she took from the box the severed hand and warmed it in her bosom. All this while he had the feeling that she suspected, was perhaps certain, that he was not asleep, but still carried out faithfully her ritual of precaution. After a long time, she gently eased her hand from his and placed the dead hand there and slipped out of bed and silently crossed to the doorway and went out.

HE FOLLOWED HER. The whiteness of her smock in the moonlight made it easy. She went down the hill and across the upland pasture. It became apparent to him that she was heading for the village. She never once looked back. On the edge of the village she turned into a dark and narrow lane. He followed closer, stooping to avoid the shrubs that sometimes overhung the walls.

After circling halfway round the village, she opened a wicket and went through. Watching from the wicket, he could see that she was standing before a dark window in a low-roofed house. Faintly there came the sound of rapping. After a long time the

window was opened. As she climbed over the sill she turned so that in the clear moonlight he caught a glimpse of her face. It was not the frozen and unearthly expression of a sleep-walker or one enchanted, not even the too gentle, too submissive expression of old days, but the new, sparklingly alive look that had only come with their summer together.

He recognized the house. It was the schoolmaster's.

Next morning the church bells were ringing as he strode back to the village, his revolver in his pocket. His steps were too long, and he held himself stiffly, like a drunkard. He did not turn into the circling lane, but went straight across the square. As he passed the open doors of the church, the bells had stopped and he could hear the voice of the preacher. Something about the tone of the voice made him climb the steps and peer in.

There was the smell of old wood-work and musty hangings, week-long imprisoned air. After the glaring sunlight, the piously inclined heads of the congregation seemed blurred and indistinct, sunk in stuffy gloom. But a shaft of rich amber fell full upon the pulpit and on her.

She was squeezed between the preacher and the carved front of the pulpit—rather tightly, for he could see how the wood, somewhat worn and whitened at that point by the repeated impress of fervent hands, indented her thigh under the skirt. The preacher's thin, long-chinned face, convulsed with oratory, was thrust over her shoulder, his blown spittle making a little cloud. With one hand the preacher pointed toward heaven, and with the other he was fondling her.

And on her face was that same shining, clear-eyed expression that he had seen there last night and that had seemed in the green forest caverns like the glance of some nymph

new-released from evil enchantment, and that he knew his love alone had brought. With the amber light gilding her, he thought of how Aaron had made a Golden Calf for the Israelites to worship.

But had Aaron really made the Golden Calf, or had he stolen it? For the old words that the preacher mouthed had a new and thrilling ring to them, which could only come from her.

My friend groped sideways blindly, touched the back of a pew, steadied himself and screamed her name.

The floor of the church seemed to tilt and rock, and a great shadow swooped down, almost blotting out the frightened, backward turning faces of the congregation. She had slipped from the pulpit and was coming down the center aisle toward him. He was holding out his hand to fend her off and dragging at his pocket for the revolver. The preacher had ducked out of sight.

She was very close to him now and her hands were lovingly outstretched and her expression was unchanged. He brought up the revolver, stumbling back, frantically motioning her to keep away. But she kept on coming and he fired all six charges into her body.

As the smarting gray smoke cleared, he saw her standing there unharmed. Someone was screaming "Witch! Witch!" and he realized it was himself and that he was running across the square and out of the village.

NOT UNTIL he ran himself out and the shock of terror passed, did the Old Man in Black fall into step with him. My friend was glad of the Old Man's presence, but he did not look too closely, for sidewise glances warned him that the cadaverousness had become extreme indeed,

(Continued on page 92)

FRIEND TO MAN

That Martian was a Good Samaritan to Smith. Food, shelter and medicine were given freely. But Martian charity, it seems, demanded payment in its own eerie way . . .

By C. M. KORNBLUTH



CALL HIM, if anything, Smith. He had answered to that and to other names in the past. Occupation, fugitive. His flight, it is true, had days before slowed to a walk and then to a crawl, but still he moved, a speck of gray, across the vast and featureless red plain of a planet not his own.

Nobody was following Smith, he sometimes realized, and then he would rest for a while, but not long. After a minute or an hour the posse of his mind would reform and spur behind him; reason would cry no and still he would heave himself to his feet and begin again to inch across the sand.

The posse, imaginary and terrible, faded from front to rear. Perhaps in the very last rank of pursuers was a dim shadow of a schoolmate. Smith had never been one to fight fair. More solid were the images of his first commercial venture, the hijacking job. A truck driver with his chest burned out namelessly pursued; by his side a faceless cop. The ranks of the posse grew crowded then, for Smith had been a sort of organizer after that, but never an organizer too proud to demonstrate his skill. An immemorially old-fashioned garrotting-wire trailed inches from the nape of Winkle's neck, for Winkle had nearly sung to the police.

"Squealer!" shrieked Smith abruptly, startling himself. Shaking, he closed his eyes and still Winkle plodded after him, the tails of wire bobbing with every step, stiffly.

A solid, businesslike patrolman eclipsed him, drilled through the throat; beside him was the miraculously resurrected shade of Henderson.

The twelve-man crew of a pirated lighter marched, as you would expect, in military formation, but they bled ceaselessly from their ears and eyes as people do when shot into space without helmets.

These he could bear, but, somehow, Smith did not like to look at the leader of the posse. It was odd, but he did not like to look at her.

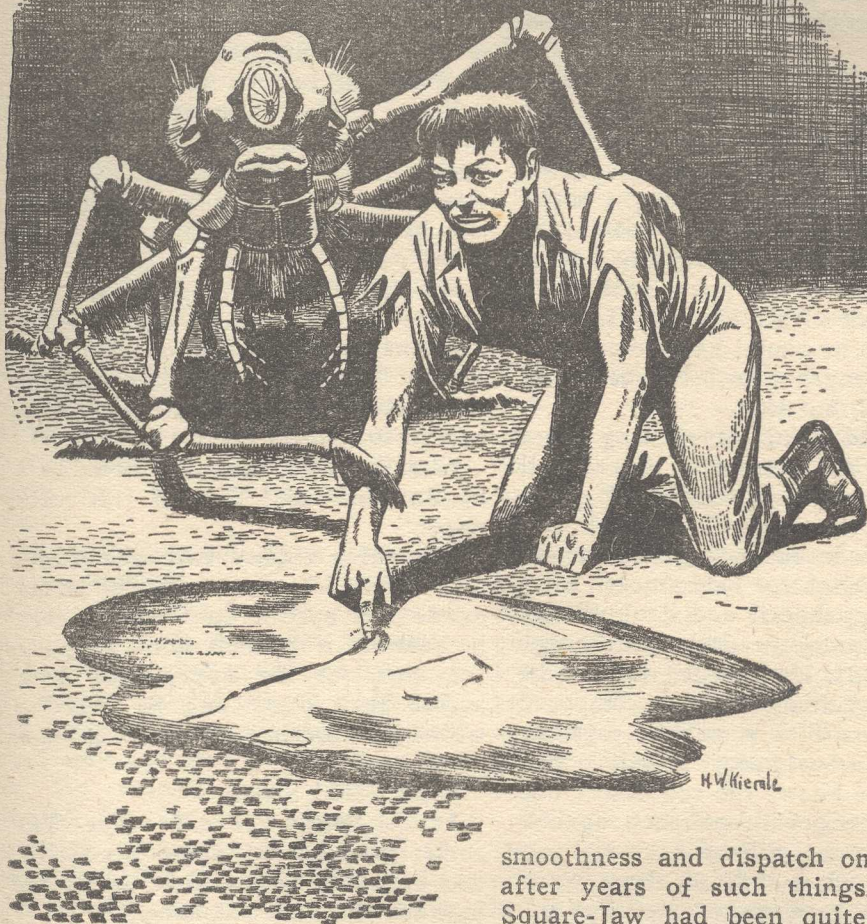
She had no business there! If they were ghosts why was she there? He hadn't killed her, and, as far as he knew, Amy was alive and doing business in the Open Quarter at Portsmouth. It wasn't fair, Smith wearily thought. He inched across the featureless plain and Amy followed with her eyes.

Let us! Let us! We have waited so long!

Wait longer, little ones. Wait longer.

Smith, arriving at the planet, had gravitated to the Open Quarter and found, of course, that his reputation had preceded him. Little, sharp-faced

He followed the map with his fingers, the Martian's claw guiding him.



men had sidled up to pay their respects, and they happened to know of a job waiting for the right touch—

He brushed them off.

Smith found the virginal, gray-eyed Amy punching tapes for the Transport Company, tepidly engaged to a junior executive. The daughter of the Board Chairman, she fancied herself daring to work in the rough office at the port.

First was the child's play of banishing her young man. A minor operation, it was managed with the

smoothness and dispatch one learns after years of such things. Young Square-Jaw had been quite willing to be seduced by a talented young woman from the Open Quarter, and had been so comically astonished when the photographs appeared on the office bulletin board!

He had left by the next freighter, sweltering in a bunk by the tube butts, and the forlorn gray eyes were wet for him.

But how much longer must we wait? Much longer, little ones. It is weak—too weak.

The posse, Smith thought vaguely,

was closing in. That meant, he supposed, that he was dying. It would not be too bad to be dead, quickly and cleanly. He had a horror of filth.

Really, he thought, this was too bad! The posse was in front of him—

IT WAS NOT the posse; it was a spindly, complicated creature that, after a minute of bleary staring, he recognized as a native of the planet.

Smith thought and thought as he stared and could think of nothing to do about it. The problem was one of the few that he had never considered and debated within himself. If it had been a cop he would have acted; if it had been any human being he would have acted, but this—

He could think of nothing more logical to do than to lie down, pull the hood across his face and go to sleep.

He woke in an underground chamber big enough for half a dozen men. It was egg-shaped and cool, illuminated by sunlight red-filtered through the top half. He touched the red-lit surface and found it to be composed of glass marbles cemented together with a translucent plastic. The marbles he knew; the red desert was full of them, wind-polished against each other for millennia, rarely perfectly round, as all of these were. They had been most carefully collected. The bottom half of the egg-shaped cave was a mosaic of flatter, opaque pebbles, cemented with the same plastic.

Smith found himself thinking clear, dry, level thoughts. The posse was gone and he was sane and there had been a native and this must be the native's burrow. He had been cached there as food, of course, so he would kill the native and possibly drink its body fluids, for his canteen had been empty for a long time. He drew a knife and wondered how to kill, his eyes on the dark circle which led from the burrow to the surface.

Silently the dark circle was filled with the tangled appendages of the creature, and in the midst of the appendages was, insanely, a Standard Transport Corporation five liter can.

The STC monogram had been worn down, but was unmistakable. The can had heft to it.

Water? The creature seemed to hold it out. He reached into the tangle and the can was smoothly released to him. The catch flipped up and he drank flat, distilled water in great gulps.

He felt that he bulged with the stuff when he stopped, and knew the first uneasy intimations of inevitable cramp. The native was not moving, but something that could have been an eye turned on him.

"Salt?" asked Smith, his voice thin in the thin air. "I need salt with water."

The thing rubbed two appendages together and he saw a drop of amber exude and spread on them. It was, he realized a moment later, rosining the bow, for the appendages drew across each other and he heard a whining, vibrating cricket-voice say: "S-s-z-z-aw-w?"

"Salt," said Smith.

It did better the next time. The amber drop spread, and—"S-z-aw-t?" was sounded, with a little tap of the bow for the final phoneme.

It vanished, and Smith leaned back with the cramps beginning. His stomach convulsed and he lost the water he had drunk. It seeped without a trace into the floor. He doubled up and groaned—once. The groan had not eased him in body or mind; he would groan no more but let the cramps run their course.

Nothing but what is useful had always been his tacit motto. There had not been a false step in the episode of Amy. When Square-Jaw had been disposed of, Smith had waited until her father, perhaps worldly enough to know his game, certain at all

events not to like the way he played it, left on one of his regular inspection trips. He had been formally introduced to her by a mutual friend who owed money to a dangerous man in the Quarter, but who had not yet been found out by the tight little clique that thought it ruled the commercial world of that planet.

With precision he had initiated her into the Open Quarter by such easy stages that at no one point could she ever suddenly realize that she was in it or the gray eyes ever fill with shock. Smith had, unknown to her, disposed of some of her friends, chosen other new ones, stage-managed days for her, gently forcing opinions and attitudes, insistent, withdrawing at the slightest token of counter-pressure, always urging again when the counter-pressure relaxed.

The night she had taken Optol had been prepared for by a magazine article—notorious in the profession as a whitewash—a chance conversation in which chance did not figure at all, a televised lecture on addiction, and a trip to an Optol joint at which everybody had been gay and healthy. On the second visit, Amy had pleaded for the stuff—just out of curiosity, of course, and he had reluctantly called the unfrocked medic, who injected the gray eyes with the oil.

It had been worth his minute pains; he had got 200 feet of film while she staggered and reeled loathesomely. And she had, after the Optol evaporated, described with amazed delight how *different* everything had looked, and how exquisitely she had danced. . . .

"S-z-aw-t!" announced the native from the mouth of the burrow. It bowled at him marbles of rock-salt from the surface, where rain never fell to dissolve them.

He licked one, then cautiously sipped water. He looked at the na-

tive, thought, and put his knife away. It came into the burrow and reclined at the opposite end from Smith.

It knows what a knife is, and water and salt, and something about language, he thought between sips. What's the racket?

But when? But when?

Wait longer, little ones. Wait longer.

"You understand me?" Smith asked abruptly.

The amber drop exuded, and the native played whiningly: "*A-ah-nn-nah-t-ann.*"

"Well," said Smith, "thanks."

HE NEVER really knew where the water came from, but guessed that it had been distilled in some fashion within the body of the native. He had, certainly, seen the thing shovel indiscriminate loads of crystals into its mouth—calcium carbonate, aluminum hydroxide, anything—and later emit amorphous powders from one vent and water from another. His food, brought on half an STC can, was utterly unrecognizable—a jelly, with bits of crystal embedded in it that he had to spit out.

What it did for a living was never clear. It would lie for hours in torpor, disappear on mysterious errands, bring him food and water, sweep out the burrow with a specialized limb, converse when requested.

It was days before Smith really saw the creature. In the middle of a talk with it he recognized it as a fellow organism rather than as a machine, or gadget, or nightmare, or alien monster. It was, for Smith, a vast step to take.

Not uneasily he compared his own body with the native's, and admitted that, of course, his was inferior. The cunning jointing of the limbs, the marvelously practical detail of the eye, the economy of the external muscle system, were admirable.

Now and then at night the posse would return and crowd about him as he lay dreaming, and he knew that he screamed then, reverberatingly in the burrow. He awoke to find the most humanoid of the native's limbs resting on his brow, soothingly, and he was grateful for the new favor; he had begun to take his food and water for granted.

The conversations with the creature were whimsy as much as anything else. It was, he thought, the rarest of Samaritans, who had no interest in the private life of its wounded wayfarer.

He told it of life in the cities of the planet, and it sawed out politely that the cities were very big indeed. He told it of the pleasures of human beings, and it politely agreed that their pleasures were most pleasant.

Under its cool benevolence he stammered and faltered in his ruthlessness. On the nights when he woke screaming and was comforted by it he would demand to know why it cared to comfort him.

It would saw out: "S-z-lee-p mm-ah-ee-nn-d s-z-rahng." And from that he could conjecture that sound sleep makes the mind strong, or that the mind must be strong for the body to be strong, or whatever else he wished. It was *kindness*, he knew, and he felt shifty and rotted when he thought of, say, Amy.

*It will be soon, will it not? Soon?
Quite soon, little ones. Quite, quite soon.*

Amy had not fallen; she had been led, slowly, carefully, by the hand. She had gone delightfully down, night after night. He had been amused to note that there was a night not long after the night of Optol when he had urged her to abstain from further indulgence in a certain diversion which had no name that anyone used, an Avernian pleasure

the penalties against which were so severe that one would not compromise himself so far as admitting that one knew it existed and was practiced. Smith had urged her to abstain, and had most sincerely this time meant it. She was heading for the inevitable collapse, and her father was due back from his inspection tour. The whole process had taken some fifty days.

HER FATHER, another gray-eyed booby. . . . A projection room. "A hoax." "Fifty thousand in small, unmarked. . . ." The flickering reel-change "It *can't* be—" "You should know that scar." "I'll kill you first!" "That won't burn the prints." The lights. "The last one—I don't believe. . . ." "Fifty thousand." "I'll kill you—"

But he hadn't. He'd killed himself, for no good reason that Smith could understand. Disgustedly, no longer a blackmailer, much out of pocket by this deal that had fizzled, he turned hawker and peddled prints of the film to the sort of person who would buy such things. He almost got his expenses back. After the week of concentration on his sudden mercantile enterprise, he had thought to inquire about Amy.

She had had her smashup, lost her job tape-punching now that her father was dead and her really scandalous behavior could no longer be ignored. She had got an unconventional job in the Open Quarter. She had left it. She appeared, hanging around the shops at Standard Transport, where the watchmen had orders to drive her away. She always came back, and one day, evidently, got what she wanted.

For on the Portsmouth-Jamestown run, which Smith was making to see a man who had a bar with a small theater in what was ostensibly a storeroom, his ship had parted at the seams.

"Dumped me where you found me—mid-desert."

"T-urr-ss-t-ee," sawed the native.

There seemed to be some reproach in the word, and Smith chided himself for imagining that a creature which spoke by stridulation could charge its language with the same emotional overtones as those who used lungs and vocal cords.

But there the note was again: "Ei-m-m-ee—t-urr-ss-t—t-oo."

Amy thirst too. A stridulating moralist. But still . . . one had to admit . . . in his frosty way, Smith was reasoning, but a wash of emotion blurred the diagrams, the cold diagrams by which he had always lived.

It's getting me, he thought—it's getting me at last. He'd seen it happen before, and always admitted that it might happen to him—but it was a shock.

Hesitantly, which was strange for him, he asked if he could somehow find his way across the desert to Portsmouth. The creature ticked approvingly, brought in sand and with one delicate appendage began to trace what might be a map.

He was going to do it. He was going to be clean again, he who had always had a horror of filth and never until now had seen that his life was viler than maggots, more loathesome than carrion. A warm glow of self-approval filled him while he bent over the map. Yes, he was going to perform the incredible hike and somehow make restitution to her. Who would have thought an inhuman creature like his benefactor could have done this to him? With all the enthusiasm of any convert, he felt young again, with life before him, a

life where he could choose between fair and foul. He chuckled with the newness of it.

But to work! Good intentions were not enough. There was the map to memorize, his bearings to establish, some portable food supply to be gathered—

He followed the map with his finger. The tracing appendage of the creature guided him, another quietly lay around him, its tip at the small of his back. He accepted it, though it itched somewhat. Not for an itch would he risk offending the bearer of his new life.

He was going to get Amy to a cure, give her money, bear her abuse—she could not understand all at once that he was another man—turn his undoubted talent to an honest—

Farewell! Farewell!

Farewell, little ones. Farewell.

The map blurred a bit before Smith's eyes. Then the map toppled and slid and became the red-lit ceiling of the burrow. Then Smith tried to move and could not. The itching in his back was a torment.

The scree mother did not look at the prostrate host as she turned and crawled up from the incubator to the surface. Something like fond humor wrinkled the surface of her thoughts as she remembered the little ones and their impatience. Heigh-ho! She had given them the best she could, letting many a smaller host go by until this fine, big host came her way. It had taken feeding and humoring, but it would last many and many a month while the little wrigglers grew and ate and grew within it. Heigh-ho! Life went on, she thought; one did the best one could. . . .

Though the zoo-keeper Cheever was miles away, his enemies complained of deadly snakes in their homes at midnight. The answer lay in the question of whether Cheever was merely a man who looked like a snake—or actually a snake who looked like a man?



The POISONOUS SOUL

Then he would creep like a bright serpent, till around my neck
While I was sleeping he would twine:
I squeezed his poisonous soul.

—William Blake

IHAD IMAGINED I saw that bushmaster attacking—from out of the mirror. In the greatest alarm, I turned my head quickly. There was nothing behind me. But when my gaze reverted to the mirror, the snake was still there, poised to strike. Then, slowly, it vanished. And I thought that it must have been an illusion of some sort, induced by Cheever's vivid description.



Cheever? Ah, but I keep forgetting. I haven't told you of him yet. I'm still a little rocky. I'm not young any more, and the police examination was pretty rough. Some people (though I've never been one of them myself) claim that the bite of the Gaboon Viper has that effect. And there are others, of course, who think I'm not quite reliable because I took the whole matter up with certain students of magic and religion.

My answer to that is that the police and the psychiatrists, too, came to a dead end and had to let me go. True, my career is wrecked and I am a lonely man. I no longer pursue a serene life among congenial friends of science. Their raised eyes and diffi-

dent manner, after tragedy marched through the ranks of our society, made it incumbent upon me to resign.

Yet this does not alter the fact that nobody could explain the torn fingernails of that desperate man who was trying to get in. It was either he—or I.

Too, there was Matty Riley's story.

By
**FRANKLIN
GREGORY**

He testified precisely to what he saw. And they couldn't shake him, either.

There'd been the devil to pay all summer in the Reptile House. Haines, the regular keeper, had taken to drink and managed to get himself mauled by the Indian python. I discharged him, naturally, and put his assistant, Bill Larch, in his place. But Larch wasn't equal to the job. And more and more my time was taken up by the actual care of the snakes, when I was needed in the laboratory.

I did what I could to replace him—wired other zoos and some of the colleges. But the man I needed just wasn't to be had, and things went from bad to worse. Then, one afternoon, Larch legged it out of the Reptile House and sprinted across the grounds to my office.

"Doctor Gaylord!" he shouted. "There's a madman in there, Doctor

He gave a yell of terror, "My God, it's a mamba!"



Gaylord!" He was panting and his eyes were bulging. "He's got one of them new mambas and he's playing with it, Doctor. Playing, mind ya!"

MAMBA! My heart skipped. *Den-draspis angusticeps*, you know—the most dreaded snake in Africa! They were recent arrivals—the only six in the whole country. I'll not have you think I didn't hurry after Larch. And when we got there, here were the visitors milling about in front of the main entrance to the Reptile House. They'd gotten out fast, it seemed, and they were standing at a pretty safe distance. They were talking excitedly, and one woman was in a dead faint and a man was bending over her, rubbing her wrists.

I walked up to the door, and I didn't like it too much. Still, it was my responsibility. So I went in—cautiously, my eyes all which ways. And there he was, and there was the snake.

He was a tall, lithe, vaguely familiar young man. He was standing between the two main rows of glass habitat cages, and he had that slender, green demon draped gracefully about his neck. I stood my distance, and stared. When my voice came at last, I tried to keep it low so as not to excite the snake.

"Man! Man!" I said. "Watch what you're doing!"

He looked at me, and so did the mamba. And then I noticed that his hand was stroking the mamba's neck, as if to soothe it.

"He'll kill you!" I warned. And in spite of myself, my voice rose.

"I don't think so," he said. He spoke with a slight lisp, and he was smiling. "I know how to handle them," he said.

It's strange the irrelevant things a man will notice even in a tight situation. I couldn't help seeing that the fellow was uncommonly ugly. And I couldn't help still thinking he was somehow familiar. Then I noticed

that one of the glass observation doors, which he normally kept locked, was open a crack.

"How'd that happen?" I asked.

The man shrugged his thin shoulders, and the mamba glided down along one arm, its pale head weaving, its forked tongue darting in and out swiftly.

"I really couldn't say, sir," he replied. "It was that way when I came along and this fellow was down on the floor and I picked him up."

There was something not quite convincing in his tone. But at the moment I was too upset to notice. Suddenly I remembered him. I said: "I know you now. You used to hang around here quite a bit some years ago. Can you put him back?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then for God's sake, do!" I exclaimed.

Later, over a cigarette in my office, this singular young man told me: "I can't quite explain it, sir. Snakes have always seemed fond of me—and I, of them. Then, out there in India and Africa, I learned a few tricks."

He didn't say what else he'd learned. But that's how I came to hire Aaron Cheever as my new head keeper of the Reptile House.

I SUFFER from no false modesty. I've had my honors from the scientific societies of the world; I've written my books and my treatises for the journals. And it's been said of me—and who am I to deny it?—that in the past two generations I stand among the half dozen great zoologists. Yet I would forego all this for a sound knowledge of human psychology.

It was my lack in this field, you understand, that caused me to hire Aaron Cheever. Too much I'd been the recluse, the scholar, deep in my researches; more at home, more relaxed with fauna than with homo sapiens. When I did meet with other men, it was to discuss our mutual

specialty. I had closed the door on the outside world.

Frankly, then, I'm justifying myself. Just as I justify myself when I say that at first I was too busy to notice anything out of the way about my new keeper. A curator has enough to do satisfying the whims and fancies of a couple of thousand other specimens. Besides, I was trying to catch up with my research. And on top of that I was making preliminary plans for our next Brazilian expedition.

I do remember reporting at the next meeting of the board of trustees that the new man, Cheever, seemed to be taking hold first rate, and that the snakes had never been in better condition. Also, I mentioned his uncanny ability at handling them. But all in all, I let him pretty much alone. There was a reason for this: he was shy, diffident, uncommunicative. Almost, I might say, he was anti-social. He did not respond to my advances; nor, I learned from others, did he respond to theirs.

Privately, I couldn't help wondering how a man of Cheever's caliber could be satisfied with so modest a salary. He was from a good family, Philadelphia Quaker stock. He'd a degree from Penn. He'd a good war record. And he was independently wealthy.

It was only when Larch told me that Cheever didn't bother to wear goggles when handling the spitting cobras that I decided to speak to him about it. But I didn't. It was easier to let it slide.

Then, within three days, two things happened that returned my attention to him.

It was one of those dull, mid-week afternoons when few visitors were about that I dropped into the Reptile House. And there was Cheever, long and thin and slightly stooped, staring curiously into the habitat cage of the Gaboon Viper.

Ditmars, you recall, called it

"the world's most frightful-looking snake." I can say worse things about the species, from my own personal experience.

But there was Cheever, and for perhaps ten minutes he stood there, his hands clasped behind his back, peering speculatively at its thick yellow body and horny head. Speculatively, as if he were judging its points as one would judge the points of a thoroughbred horse. And with something of a horse trader's manner, too, as if he were trying to decide how sound of limb and wind the creature was—until I half expected he'd unlock the cage and open the viper's mouth to inspect its teeth. Then he moved on to the kraits and repeated the examination, as if mentally comparing the value of the one species to the other.

He turned at last, noticed my presence, nodded shortly and walked quickly away, as if embarrassed. I caught up with him. "I hear you spend quite a few of your evenings here," I remarked.

"Oh," he replied vaguely, "just doing some things I'd rather do myself than trust to Larch. And then I like to study them. Some of the specimens I don't know much about, and—well, I find it relaxing."

LATER THAT WEEK, as I myself left the laboratory just before midnight, I noticed the lights on in the Reptile House. I walked past the zebra stockade and approached the building from the west, letting myself in through the side wing that housed the keeper's office. No one was there, so I went on through a corridor that brought me out behind the python cages into the main exhibition hall.

I stopped in my tracks and my blood ran cold. Through the glass of the python cages and across the main hall I saw Cheever. He was gritting his teeth in pain, and at the same time

closing the door of one of the cases in the poisonous reptiles section.

I was too far away to observe which case it was. Nor did it occur to me at that moment to wonder. My immediate concern was the expression on Cheever's face.

Hastening around the python cases and into the open, I approached Cheever. He was nursing a small wound on his left wrist.

"Bitten?" I demanded.

Cheever glanced up, startled. "What? Oh, it's you, Doctor! You took me by surprise. No—no, I wasn't bitten. Merely a scratch, that's all."

"Not from a fang, then?"

"Oh, no—no. Just caught my wrist on a sharp edge."

I examined the wound closely. It was a very peculiar sort of scratch—X-like, each red line in the white flesh as clean as though neatly cut by a razor blade. Then I noticed on the concrete floor a small amount of blood; a smear of it on the glass door of the case, and in the cage itself a few blood flecks.

"Better dose it with iodine and bind it," I suggested. But Cheever merely shrugged. I was annoyed.

"You know, Aaron," I told him sharply, "you're going to get it one of these days with your damned casual way of handling these fellows. I'm warning you!"

He looked at me soberly. "You aren't dissatisfied with me, are you, sir?"

I glanced about. Never before had the specimens appeared in better shape. "Of course not," I replied. "It's for your own good I said it."

Cheever smiled. Even when he smiled he was ugly.

"They won't bite *me*," he said carelessly. As if his were a very special case.

Well—his was a very special case, as I learned late the next afternoon. It was near closing time, and there were no visitors about when I walked

under the stained-glass archway of the main entrance. I paused just inside to admire the new murals on the higher walls. A nightmare of the painter's art, they portrayed the great reptiles of the past—the brontosaurus, the triceratops, the pterodactyls and their ilk—cavorting in the ooze and jungle of the Mesozoic world.

WHAT a zoo I'd have (I thought) if I could round up a collection like that!

Suddenly my attention was pinned by an uncommon sound from the poisonous reptiles wing. I heard the electric buzzing of crotaline rattles; the restless murmur of serpentine movement, the hissing of the larger snakes.

Stepping across to that wing, I found Cheever standing in the center of the horseshoe of cages. And stabbing against their glass prisons was the head of every specimen on display.

"What's all this commotion about?" I asked.

Cheever turned. "It's been going on all day, sir. Every time I walk through."

"Are they angry?" I inquired anxiously.

"I don't think so, do you?"

I had the feeling that he knew more about it than he would admit. I examined the snakes, cage by cage, more closely.

"No," I replied. "They seem more curious than anything."

"It's what I think, too," Cheever said. "I've a feeling they recognize me—and, well, it's a sort of welcome."

I shook my head in wonder. "Strange," I said. "Some of them were just fed last night and should be sleeping it off."

Cheever suggested we leave. But as we reached the cages of the constrictors, even the sleepy-eyed pythons and anacondas raised their heads

to watch us pass. We paused to watch them. Cheever said thoughtfully:

"It's a strange thing, Doctor Gaylord. My mother told me once that she began dreaming of snakes about a year before I was born. She said the dreams kept up long after my birth."

I was puzzled; I didn't quite see what he was getting at. But I said: "Maybe she was frightened by one when she was a little girl, and the dreams cropped up from her subconscious years later."

"Possibly," Cheever agreed, "but I've often wondered if my interest in the breed wasn't prenatally determined by that?"

"Not a very scientific concept," I told him. But I was thinking of something else, that I hadn't before been able to put a finger on: the fellow's ugliness seemed to stem from a curious reptilian resemblance. There was the tall, slender, sinuous body; there was the undulant motion of the body; there was the triangular wedge-like head, broad at the top and tapering down to a heavy nose and wide mouth above a chin that was almost no chin at all.

Not a handsome specimen of the human male at all, though not bad for a South American pit viper, perhaps. And he had an odd trick, too, of compressing his lips and then sticking his tongue out so that just a narrow, red tip appeared. I don't believe I ever saw him actually open his mouth. And when he laughed, there was the merest parting of the lips; not enough to reveal the teeth.

Well, as I say, it was late in the day—and one can fancy strange things when one is tired. But I must have been staring at him, for he said: "And my looks, too."

"Eh?"

"Prenatally determined," Cheever explained.

I felt embarrassed. But he went on with a shrug, as if reading my mind

and at the same time not seeming to care: "I guess I do look something like a snake. If I do, I hope it's not one of the horned tribe. I'd rather have it on the side of *bothrops alternatus*—handsome devils, aren't they? Or the king cobra. There's phlegm for you, too."

"And intelligence," I observed.

WE HAD LEFT the main hall and returned to the keeper's office. I sat down in the swivel chair at the desk, beside a large mirror, and lit a cigar; and Cheever sat on the edge of the desk, one leg draped over a corner, facing me.

"Intelligence?" he repeated. "I'm reminded of some of the tales you hear in India. A lot of snake worship goes on out there."

I knew that, of course.

"Even today," he continued, "the Maharajah of Nagpur wears his turban to resemble a coiled snake and his crest's a cobra with a human face under the expanded hood. It's said the founder of the line was a cobra that took human form and married a Brahman's daughter. Strange, isn't it?"

I was thinking of what he'd told me about his mother's dreams.

"No more strange than the Athenian belief that their first king was half-man, half-reptile," I replied. "And they followed it up, too, by keeping a sacred snake on the Acropolis where they worshiped it as the dead king's soul."

The man's small eyes glittered. "Yes," he said. "Yes. Why is there so much occult belief concerning snakes?"

I suggested that it was because they were so little known and so greatly feared. And what you don't know, you respect," I said.

But Cheever denied this.

"No, I think rather it's because they're so smart," he insisted. "Take the way a copperhead plays 'possum. Or the way the bushmaster attacks,

deliberately edging toward you to bring its S-shaped loop into better position for the strike. Why, I've yet to meet a savage who doesn't believe that if you eat snake meat you'll acquire wisdom and knowledge. And when you come down to it, if you have that, what more can you want?"

He was right about the savage belief, and I was just about to concede the point when I saw Cheever staring into the mirror with fixed concentration. Involuntarily, I looked into the mirror, too.

"My God!" I cried. I felt sweat start from my forehead; I saw the blood drain from the reflection of my face. Then, as I've already told you, I turned quickly. And there was nothing behind me. Nothing at all. But when I turned back to the mirror, there was that bushmaster—looped, edging toward me, about to strike at me from out of the mirror . . . then slowly disappearing.

"Doctor! Are you ill?"

I stared at Cheever. Was there a false note of concern in his voice? Was there, lurking behind that mask of anxiety, a suggestion of evil calculation? Was there not the look, that I myself knew so well, of the scientist watching closely for the results of his experiments?

I had dropped my cigar on the desk, and now I picked it up with a trembling hand.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing at all, Aaron."

NOTHING? I could not sleep that night. Again and again as I turned restlessly in my bed, I saw the vision of that snake—now winding along the wall, now looping up over the footboard, now opening its terrible jaws. And again and again, in the background, I saw the studious expression of the experimenting scholar. An illusion, I kept telling myself. But when had illusion been so vividly retentive?

Nothing? Was it for nothing that my secretary, when I entered my office the next morning, glanced sharply at my haggard face and exclaimed: "Good Lord, Doctor! What ails you?"

"Bad night," I said briefly. And perhaps I spoke a bit aggressively. I had no wish to talk about it. It's bad enough when a man first gets the idea that he may be losing his mind.

Somehow, during the next few days, I managed to ignore for the most part that terrible experience. I had work to do—and work of a pleasant nature. Within two weeks our Pan-American Society of Zoology would hold its annual meeting in Philadelphia. And I, as program chairman, was busy on the final details.

I need not explain, of course, what this meant to me. I have already mentioned the serene life which I had until that time pursued among congenial scientific friends. My contacts were chiefly with men of my own calling; and in those contacts lay my greatest pleasure.

Our Zoological Gardens in Fairmount Park on the banks of the Schuylkill were to play an important role in this famous gathering. And you may well imagine how keenly I looked forward to entertaining the ablest biologists not only of our own hemisphere but of Europe.

There would be Stanwick, the famous South African herpetologist. And there'd be Mason, the California authority on animal behavior; and Stark, the bio-chemist; and Royce, the curator of mammals at the London Zoo; and Andre van der Henst, the garrulous toxicologist whose Brazilian research led to the discovery of that most important polyvalent antivenomous serum.

Nor will I ever forget gentle, white-haired David Lacey, whose almost mystical approach to the study of natural history puzzled the entire scientific world. Until some of the

more starchy members of the profession frowned upon him as a crackpot; though I myself always took delight in the adroit manner in which, in his scientific papers, he commingled the fables of the older times with the factual discoveries of the present. Much of my knowledge of animal lore I owe to him.

And there would be . . . but why go on? They were all men of great scientific brains.

And so the two weeks passed rapidly, what with my spending part of the time at the Zoo and the rest at the nearby University of Pennsylvania where the meetings were to be held. Gradually, my experience in the Reptile House became a dim memory; and I even considered the possibility of introducing Aaron Cheever to one forum as an example of what man could do with the reptilian order. I even went so far as to talk to him about it.

"I'm afraid that company is a bit too fast for me," Cheever replied with his odd hesitancy. Yet I couldn't help noting the gleam in his eyes. He added, and it was quite apparent that he eagerly awaited the convention: "But if you would let me meet some of the men . . . informally, of course."

Naturally, I agreed. And as a matter of fact I had him on hand the Sunday afternoon preceding the general sessions, first at my own home in Germantown where Dr. Stanwick and Professor Lacey were my house guests; and later, at the official reception that evening.

THE RECEPTION was held in the Ritz, where most of the delegates, who were not house guests at the homes of one another of the local scientists, were quartered. I'll not soon forget how well young Cheever hit it off with many of those important men. Lacey, in particular.

Between those two—the one elderly and mystical, the other shy, diffident,

rather awkward—there seemed a natural and immediate bond of understanding. And I recall as we were leaving the hotel—Stanwick, Lacey, Cheever and myself—that I overheard Cheever quote a verse from William Blake:

"Mock on, mock on, Voltaire,
Rousseau,
Mock on, mock on; 'tis all in vain;
You throw the dust against the wind
And the wind blows it back
again."

"By which you mean—?" asked Professor Lacey.

"My own interpretation," Cheever replied, "is that there's a world beyond the five senses we ordinarily know. That there *is* soul, that there *is* spirit, that there *is* life after death. And if this is so, is there not some link between that other life and this we know?"

"Spiritism?" suggested Dr. Stanwick, who had little truck with spiritual matters. Lacey, I noted, smiled with quiet amusement.

"No, I wasn't thinking of that," Cheever protested. "I was thinking of the possibility of you or I, using only the will or spirit with which we are endowed as a tool—a rake, let's say; or a fishing net—to cast out into the unknown and gather spiritual, or even intellectual, resources for our own present benefit."

Stanwick seemed not to understand. And I admit it was beyond my depth. But Lacey, whose subtlety of mind was famous, gasped slightly. Then he asked: "And what would be the limit of a power like that?"

Cheever replied eagerly: "Only our own imagination."

I didn't hear the rest of the conversation, if there was any rest. I was busy bundling them into my car, opening and closing doors, and getting in behind the wheel. A few minutes later I let Cheever off at Rit-

tenhouse Square in front of his apartment. But as I started up again, I noticed that he didn't go immediately toward the building's door but walked off toward a cigar store on the corner, in front of which a taxicab was parked.

I recite these things as they happened, with undue stress on nothing. I swung my car around the square, drove on one of the side streets to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, and followed the winding East River Drive six miles up to my Germantown residence. We went to bed, the three of us—Stanwick, Lacey and myself, in our separate rooms on the second floor—almost immediately.

It was some two hours later that I heard the scream!

It was a shrill scream of the most agonizing pain. The scream ended in a choking gasp; I heard a chair overturn. I heard the fumbling of a hand against the wall, followed by the sudden sharp click of an electric switch. Then—a yell of terror:

"My God! It's a mamba!"

By then I was out of bed, turning on my light. I threw open the door into the hall. There, standing just outside his own door, his mild blue eyes wide under their bushy white brows, stood Professor Lacey in his pajamas, the hall lamp lighting the amazement in his face. For an instant we faced each other. Then the door between us opened, and Dr. Stanwick lurched out and collapsed on the carpet. His glazing eyes stared at me in accusation. His voice groaned:

"What . . . are you doing with a mamba in the house?"

Even as we bent down beside him, a shudder coursed through his body; and the eyes lost their accusation in the glassiness of death.

Over that still form, Lacey and I gazed at each other. Then, quickly, Lacey glanced to my right, and my look followed. Out of the room from which Stanwick had just staggered a

long, slender, green length of serpent made its slow and easy way, its forked tongue darting in and out with ordinary reptilian curiosity.

It hesitated tentatively, as if only vaguely aware of our presence. The paralysis of terror, the knowledge of our exposed position (of our bare feet and our pajama-clad bodies), the fear of alarming the creature rooted us to our kneeling positions.

Again the thing began to move, and now it looped itself upon the body of the dead Stanwick. Suddenly, within inches of our horrified eyes, it vanished!

I HAVE no apologies for the fact that neither Lacey nor I ever disclosed to the police that we had seen the snake. To have stated what we saw would have classed us at once with lunatics; would have destroyed, moreover, our usefulness in the eventual solution of the mystery.

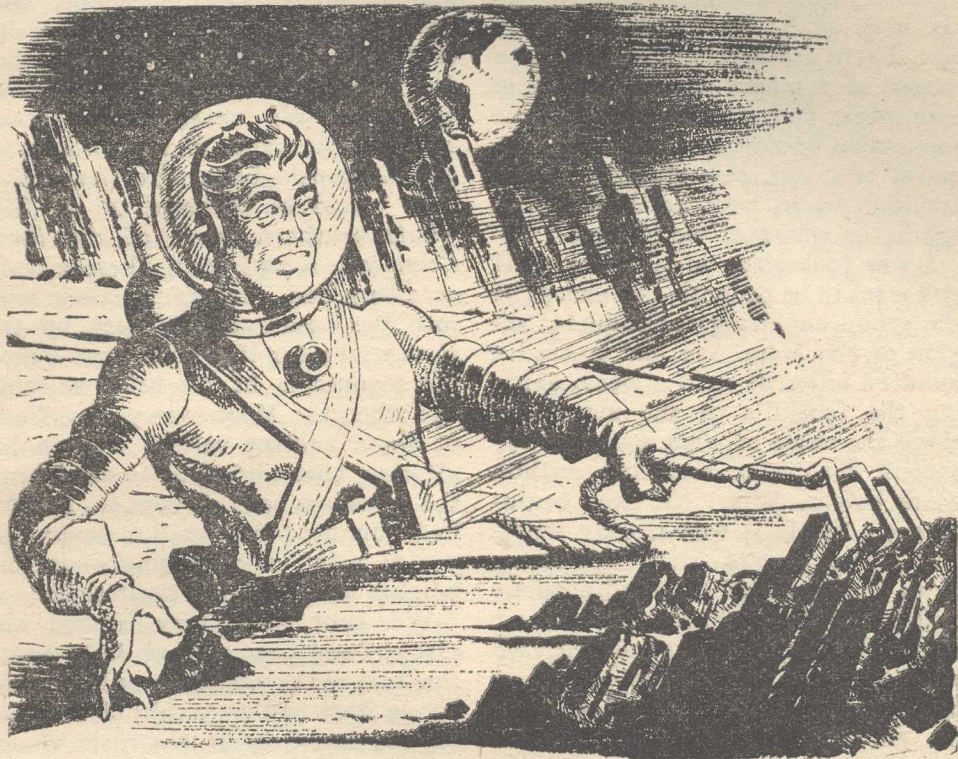
My own emotions were mixed. On the one side, I felt genuine relief that someone else now shared with me this reptilian vision. I now knew that there was no question of my sanity. Nevertheless, I was profoundly disturbed at not only the sheer horror of this tragedy but at its serpentine nature. Ultimately, I confided the details of my earlier terror with the bushmaster to David Lacey. But for the moment, both of us were content to rationalize our mutual experience—there in the lighted upper hallway of my home—as a result of suggestion induced by Dr. Stanwick's cry of "Mamba!"

And so we told the police only what we saw and heard up to the moment of Stanwick's death.

I cannot pretend to place the events of the next few hours in their proper order. There was the police surgeon, of course, and the coroner's deputy. There was the examination which disclosed two tiny incisions in Dr. Stanwick's back. There was the minute,

(Continued on page 120)

Sentinel of Eternity



Before there were men on Earth, that signal-sending pyramid had stood alone on a lifeless moon. What would happen now that its alarm was silenced?

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

THE NEXT TIME you see the full moon high in the South, look carefully at its right-hand edge and let your eye travel upwards along the curve of the disc. Round about 2 o'clock you will notice a small, dark oval: anyone with normal eyesight can find it quite easily. It is the great walled plain, one of the finest on the Moon, known as the Mare

Crisium—the Sea of Crises. Three hundred miles in diameter, and almost completely surrounded by a ring of magnificent mountains, it had never been explored until we entered it in the late summer of 1996.

Our expedition was a large one. We had two heavy freighters which had flown our supplies and equipment from the main lunar base in the Mare Serenitatis, five hundred miles away. There were also three small rockets

which were intended for short-range transport over regions which our surface vehicles couldn't cross. Luckily, most of the Mare Crisium is very flat. There are none of the great crevasses so common and so dangerous elsewhere, and very few craters or mountains of any size. As far as we could tell, our powerful caterpillar tractors would have no difficulty in taking us wherever we wished.

I was geologist—or selenologist, if you want to be pedantic—in charge of the group exploring the southern region of the Mare. We had crossed a hundred miles of it in a week, skirting the foothills of the mountains along the shore of what was once the ancient sea, some thousand million years before. When life was beginning on Earth, it was already dying here. The waters were retreating down the flanks of those stupendous cliffs, retreating into the empty heart of the Moon. Over the land which we were crossing, the tideless ocean had once been half a mile deep, and now the only trace of moisture was the hoarfrost one could sometimes find in caves which the searing sunlight never penetrated.

We had begun our journey early in the slow lunar dawn, and still had almost a week of Earth-time before nightfall. Half a dozen times a day we would leave our vehicle and go outside in the spacesuits to hunt for interesting minerals, or to place markers for the guidance of future travellers. It was an uneventful routine. There is nothing hazardous or even particularly exciting about lunar exploration. We could live comfortably for a month in our pressurized tractors, and if we ran into trouble we could always radio for help and sit tight until one of the spaceships came to our rescue. When that happened there was always a frightful outcry about the waste of rocket fuel, so a tractor sent out an SOS only in a real emergency.

I said just now that there was nothing exciting about lunar exploration, but of course that isn't true. One could never grow tired of those incredible mountains, so much steeper and more rugged than the gentle hills of Earth. We never knew, as we rounded the capes and promontories of that vanished sea, what new splendours would be revealed to us. The whole southern curve of the Mare Crisium is a vast delta where a score of rivers had once found their way into the ocean, fed perhaps by the torrential rains that must have lashed the mountains in the brief volcanic age when the Moon was young. Each of these ancient valleys was an invitation, challenging us to climb into the unknown uplands beyond. But we had a hundred miles still to cover, and could only look longingly at the heights which others must scale.

We kept Earth-time aboard the tractor, and precisely at 22.00 hours the final radio message would be sent out to Base and we would close down for the day. Outside, the rocks would still be burning beneath the almost vertical sun, but to us it was night until we awoke again eight hours later. Then one of us would prepare breakfast, there would be a great buzzing of electric shavers, and someone would switch on the short-wave radio from Earth. Indeed, when the smell of frying bacon began to fill the cabin, it was sometimes hard to believe that we were not back on our own world—everything was so normal and homey, apart from the feeling of decreased weight and the unnatural slowness with which objects fell.

IT WAS MY TURN to prepare breakfast in the corner of the main cabin that served as a galley. I can remember that moment quite vividly after all these years, for the radio had just played one of my favorite melodies, the old Welsh air, *David of the*

White Rock. Our driver was already outside in his spacesuit, inspecting our caterpillar treads. My assistant, Louis Garnett, was up forward in the control position, making some belated entries in yesterday's log.

As I stood by the frying pan, waiting, like any terrestrial housewife, for the sausages to brown, I let my gaze wander idly over the mountain walls which covered the whole of the southern horizon, marching out of sight to east and west below the curve of the Moon. They seemed only a mile or two from the tractor, but I knew that the nearest was twenty miles away. On the Moon, of course, there is no loss of detail with distance—none of that almost imperceptible haziness which softens and sometimes transfigures all far-off things on Earth.

Those mountains were ten thousand feet high, and they climbed steeply out of the plain as if ages ago some subterranean eruption had smashed them skywards through the molten crust. The base of even the nearest was hidden from sight by the steeply curving surface of the plain, for the Moon is a very little world, and from where I was standing the optical horizon was only two miles away.

I lifted my eyes towards the peaks which no man had ever climbed, the peaks which, before the coming of Terrestrial life, had watched the retreating oceans sink sullenly into their graves, taking with them the hope and the morning promise of a world. The sunlight was beating against those ramparts with a glare that hurt the eyes, yet only a little way above them the stars were shining steadily in a sky blacker than a winter midnight on Earth.

I was turning away when my eye caught a metallic glitter high on the ridge of a great promontory thrusting out into the sea thirty miles to the west. It was a dimensionless point of light, as if a star had been clawed from the sky by one of those cruel

peaks, and I imagined that some smooth rock surface was catching the sunlight and heliographing it straight into my eyes. Such things were not uncommon. When the Moon is in her second quarter, observers on Earth can sometimes see the great ranges in the *Oceanus Procellarum* burning with a blue-white iridescence as the sunlight flashes from their slopes and leaps again from world to world. But I was curious to know what kind of rock could be shining so brightly up there, and I climbed into the observation turret and swung our four inch telescope round to the west.

I could see just enough to tantalize me. Clear and sharp in the field of vision, the mountain peaks seemed only half a mile away, but whatever was catching the sunlight was still too small to be resolved. Yet it seemed to have an elusive symmetry, and the summit upon which it rested was curiously flat. I stared for a long time at that glittering enigma, straining my eyes into space, until presently a smell of burning from the galley told me that our breakfast sausages had made their quarter-million mile journey in vain.

All that morning we argued our way across the *Mare Crisium* while the western mountains reared higher in the sky. Even when we were out prospecting in the spacesuits, the discussion would continue over the radio. It was absolutely certain, my companions argued, that there had never been any form of intelligent life on the Moon. The only living things that had ever existed there were a few primitive plants and their slightly less degenerate ancestors. I knew that as well as anyone, but there are times when a scientist must not be afraid to make a fool of himself.

"Listen," I said at last, "I'm going up there, if only for my own peace of mind. That mountain's less than twelve thousand feet high—that's only two thousand under Earth gravity—

and I can make the trip in twenty hours at the outside. I've always wanted to go up into those hills, anyway, and this gives me an excellent excuse."

"If you don't break your neck," said Garnett, "you'll be the laughing-stock of the expedition when we get back to Base. That mountain will probably be called Wilson's Folly from now on."

"I won't break my neck," I said firmly. "Who was the first man to climb Pico and Helicon?"

"But weren't you rather younger in those days?" asked Louis gently.

"That," I said with great dignity, "is as good a reason as any for going."

We went to bed early that night, after driving the tractor to within half a mile of the promontory. Garnett was coming with me in the morning; he was a good climber, and had often been with me on such exploits before. Our driver was only too glad to be left in charge of the machine.

AT FIRST sight, those cliffs seemed completely unscalable, but to anyone with a good head for heights, climbing is easy on a world where all weights are only a sixth of their normal value. The real danger in lunar mountaineering lies in overconfidence; a six hundred foot drop on the Moon can kill you just as thoroughly as a hundred foot fall on Earth.

We made our first halt on a wide ledge about four thousand feet above the plain. Climbing had not been very difficult, but my limbs were stiff with the unaccustomed effort, and I was glad of the rest. We could still see the tractor as a tiny metal insect far down at the foot of the cliff, and we reported our progress to the driver before starting on the next ascent.

Hour by hour the horizon widened and more and more of the great plain came into sight. Now we could look for fifty miles out across the Mare,

and could even see the peaks of the mountains on the opposite coast more than a hundred miles away. Few of the great lunar plains are as smooth as the Mare Crisium, and we could almost imagine that a sea of water and not of rock was lying there two miles below. Only a group of crater-pits low down on the skyline spoilt the illusion.

Our goal was still invisible over the crest of the mountain, and we were steering by maps, using the Earth as a guide. Almost due east of us, that great silver crescent hung low over the plain, already well into its first quarter. The sun and the stars would make their slow march across the sky and would sink presently from sight, but Earth would always be there, never moving from her appointed place, waxing and waning as the years and seasons passed. In ten days' time she would be a blinding disc bathing these rocks with her midnight radiance, fifty-fold brighter than the full moon. But we must be out of the mountains long before night, or else we would remain among them forever.

Inside our suits it was comfortably cool, for the refrigeration units were fighting the fierce sun and carrying away the body-heat of our exertions. We seldom spoke to each other, except to pass climbing instructions and to discuss our best plan of ascent. I do not know what Garnett was thinking, probably that this was the craziest goose-chase he had ever embarked upon. I more than half agreed with him, but the joy of climbing, the knowledge that no man had ever gone this way before and the exhilaration of the steadily widening landscape gave me all the reward I needed.

I don't think I was particularly excited when I saw in front of us the wall of rock I had first inspected through the telescope from thirty miles away. It would level off about fifty feet above our heads, and there on the plateau would be the thing

that had lured me over these barren wastes. It was, almost certainly, nothing more than a boulder splintered ages ago by a falling meteor, and with its cleavage planes still fresh and bright in this incorruptible unchanging silence.

There were no hand-holds on the rock face, and we had to use a grapnel. My tired arms seemed to gain new strength as I swung the three-pronged metal anchor round my head and sent it sailing up towards the stars. The first time, it broke loose and came falling slowly back when we pulled the rope. On the third attempt, the prongs gripped firmly and our combined weights could not shift it.

Garnett looked at me anxiously. I could tell that he wanted to go first, but I smiled back at him through the glass of my helmet and shook my head. Slowly, taking my time, I began the final ascent.

Even with my spacesuit, I weighed only forty pounds here, so I pulled myself up hand over hand without bothering to use my feet. At the rim I paused and waved to my companion, then I scrambled over the edge and stood upright, staring ahead of me.

You must understand that until this very moment I had been almost completely convinced that there could be nothing strange or unusual for me to find here. Almost, but not quite; it was that haunting doubt that had driven me forwards. Well, it was a doubt no longer, but the haunting had scarcely begun.

I WAS STANDING on a plateau perhaps a hundred feet across. It had once been smooth—too smooth to be natural—but falling meteors had pitted and scored its surface through immeasurable aeons. It had been levelled to support a glittering, roughly pyramidal structure, twice as high as a man, that was set in the rock like a gigantic, many-faceted jewel.

Probably no emotion at all filled my mind in those first few seconds. Then I felt a great lifting of my heart, and a strange, inexpressible joy. For I loved the Moon, and now I knew that the creeping moss of Aristarchus and Eratosthenes was not the only life she had brought forth in her youth. The old, discredited dream of the first explorers was true. There had, after all, been a lunar civilization—and I was the first to find it. That I had come perhaps a hundred million years too late did not distress me; it was enough to have come at all.

My mind was beginning to function normally, to analyze and to ask questions. Was this a building, a shrine—or something for which my language had no name? If a building, then why was it erected in so uniquely inaccessible a spot? I wondered if it might be a temple, and I could picture the adepts of some strange priesthood calling on their gods to preserve them as the life of the Moon ebbed with the dying oceans, and calling on their gods in vain.

I took a dozen steps forward to examine the thing more closely, but some sense of caution kept me from going too near. I knew a little of archaeology, and tried to guess the cultural level of the civilization that must have smoothed this mountain and raised the glittering mirror surfaces that still dazzled my eyes.

The Egyptians could have done it, I thought, if their workmen had possessed whatever strange materials these far more ancient architects had used. Because of the thing's smallness, it did not occur to me that I might be looking at the handiwork of a race more advanced than my own. The idea that the Moon had possessed intelligence at all was still almost too tremendous to grasp, and my pride would not let me take the final, humiliating plunge.

And then I noticed something that set the scalp crawling at the back of

my neck—something so trivial and so innocent that many would never have noticed it at all. I have said that the plateau was scarred by meteors; it was also coated inches deep with the cosmic dust that is always filtering down upon the surface of any world where there are no winds to disturb it. Yet the dust and the meteor scratches ended quite abruptly in a wide circle enclosing the little pyramid, as though an invisible wall was protecting it from the ravages of time and the slow but ceaseless bombardment from space.

There was someone shouting in my earphones, and I realized that Garnett had been calling me for some time. I walked unsteadily to the edge of the cliff and signalled him to join me, not trusting myself to speak. Then I went back towards that circle in the dust. I picked up a fragment of splintered rock and tossed it gently towards the shining enigma. If the pebble had vanished at that invisible barrier I should not have been surprised, but it seemed to hit a smooth, hemispherical surface and slid gently to the ground.

I knew then that I was looking at nothing that could be matched in the antiquity of my own race. This was not a building, but a machine, protecting itself with forces that had challenged Eternity. Those forces, whatever they might be, were still operating, and perhaps I had already come too close. I thought of all the radiations man had trapped and tamed in the past century. For all I knew, I might be as irrevocably doomed as if I had stepped into the deadly, silent aura of an unshielded atomic pile.

I remember turning then towards Garnett, who had joined me and was now standing motionless at my side. He seemed quite oblivious to me, so I did not disturb him but walked to the edge of the cliff in an effort to marshal my thoughts. There below me lay the Mare Crisium—Sea of Crises,

indeed—strange and weird to most men, but reassuringly familiar to me. I lifted my eyes towards the crescent Earth, lying in her cradle of stars, and I wondered what her clouds had covered when these unknown builders had finished their work. Was it the steaming jungle of the Carboniferous, the bleak shoreline over which the first amphibians must crawl to conquer the land—or, earlier still, the long loneliness before the coming of life?

Do not ask me why I did not guess the truth sooner—the truth that seems so obvious now. In the first excitement of my discovery, I had assumed without question that this crystalline apparition had been built by some race belonging to the Moon's remote past, but suddenly, and with overwhelming force, the belief came to me that it was as alien to the Moon as I myself.

In twenty years we had found no trace of life but a few degenerate plants. No lunar civilization, whatever its doom, could have left but a single token of its existence.

I looked at the shining pyramid again, and the more remote it seemed from anything that had to do with the Moon. And suddenly I felt myself shaking with a foolish, hysterical laughter, brought on by excitement and over-exertion: for I had imagined that the little pyramid was speaking to me and was saying: "Sorry, I'm a stranger here myself."

IT HAS TAKEN us twenty years to crack that invisible shield and to reach the machine inside those crystal walls. What we could not understand, we broke at last with the savage might of atomic power and now I have seen the fragments of the lovely, glittering thing I found up there on the mountain.

They are meaningless. The mechanisms—if indeed they are mechanisms—of the pyramid belong to a tech-

nology that lies far beyond our horizon, perhaps to the technology of para-physical forces.

The mystery haunts us all the more now that the other planets have been reached and we know that only Earth has ever been the home of intelligent life. Nor could any lost civilization of our own world have built that machine, for the thickness of the meteoric dust on the plateau has enabled us to measure its age. It was set there upon its mountain before life had emerged from the seas of Earth.

When our world was half its present age, *something* from the stars swept through the Solar System, left this token of its passage, and went again upon its way. Until we destroyed it, that machine was still fulfilling the purpose of its builders; and as to that purpose, here is my guess.

Nearly a hundred thousand million stars are turning in the circle of the Milky Way, and long ago other races on the worlds of other suns must have scaled and passed the heights that we have reached. Think of such civilizations, far back in time against the fading afterglow of Creation, masters of a universe so young that life as yet had come only to a handful of worlds. Theirs would have been a loneliness we cannot imagine, the loneliness of gods looking out across infinity and finding none to share their thoughts.

They must have searched the star-clusters as we have searched the planets. Everywhere there would be worlds, but they would be empty or peopled with crawling, mindless things. Such was our own Earth, the smoke of the great volcanoes still staining its skies, when that first ship of the peoples of the dawn came sliding in from the abyss beyond Pluto. It passed the frozen outer worlds, knowing that life could play no part in their destinies. It came to rest among the inner planets, warming themselves around the fire of the Sun

and waiting for their stories to begin.

Those wanderers must have looked on Earth, circling safely in the narrow zone between fire and ice, and must have guessed that it was the favorite of the Sun's children. Here, in the distant future, would be intelligence; but there were countless stars before them still, and they might never come this way again.

So they left a sentinel, one of millions they have scattered throughout the universe, watching over all worlds with the promise of life. It was a beacon that down the ages has been patiently signalling that fact that no one had discovered it.

Perhaps you understand now why that crystal pyramid was set upon the Moon instead of on the Earth. Its builders were not concerned with races still struggling up from savagery. They would be interested in our civilization only if we proved our fitness to survive—by crossing space and so escaping from the Earth, our cradle. That is the challenge that all intelligent races must meet, sooner or later. It is a double challenge, for it depends in turn upon the conquest of atomic energy and the last choice between life and death.

Once we had passed that crisis, it was only a matter of time before we found the pyramid and forced it open. Now its signals have ceased, and those whose duty it is will be turning their minds upon Earth. Perhaps they wish to help our infant civilization. But they must be very, very old, and the old are often insanely jealous of the young.

I can never look now at the Milky Way without wondering from which of those banked clouds of stars the emissaries are coming. If you will pardon so commonplace a simile, we have broken the glass of the fire-alarm and have nothing to do but to wait.

I do not think we will have to wait for long.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

Pincus Hawk inherited an ultra-modern house with an unfinished wall. It would have been all right if only that one wall would stop whispering to him!

By AUGUST DERLETH



EX HARRIGAN threw down the paper and reached for a cigarette. His long, lean face crinkled into a quizzical look.

"Whenever I read about space travel and life on other worlds, I think about Pincus Hawk," he said.

"Should I know him?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. That was when I was on the *Boston Almanac*. Pincus was a shoe-clerk, and up to the time he inherited his uncle's house, Pincus was so normal he would have qualified as the world's greatest bore. I mean, he was strait-laced and 'regular'. He spent day after day fitting complaining women to shoes and never complained about it. That was his lot and he accepted it. Maybe down under he was bitter about it, but if so, it never showed. He used to come into Terhune's for a glass of beer once in a while, and I saw him occasionally at Beston's, where he worked. A thin, anxious-looking fellow, with horn-rimmed spectacles. Something like Harold Lloyd, only thinner, and without that wide-eyed expression."

"He sounds like a hundred other shoe-clerks."

"Sure. He was. But if I had to put

somebody on the top of my list in my file of queer people, it would be Pincus Hawk now. I'd guess Pincus was about forty when he came into his uncle Hugo's estate, by the side door, so to speak. The old man had been a lawyer and his lawyers got in touch with Pincus and told him he'd inherited, since the old fellow had disappeared. It was with strings, though. They presumed one of the old man's clients had finally done away with him, because he'd been threatened often enough. Legally, Pincus couldn't touch Hugo's funds for seven years, but he was to occupy the house, which he was to inherit in any case; there were special instructions about that, just as if the old fellow had anticipated vanishing or being bumped off.

"That house of his uncle's was something. You can talk all you like about Wright or Saarinen houses, but that one of Hugo Hawk's was half out of this world. No pun intended. I would have put it down as an angular monstrosity as modern as the day after tomorrow. All glass and stone. It seemed to grow out of a wall of some synthetic material, like a mushroom, flat-roofed, with that kind of fenestration which permitted the inhabitant to look out but no one else

"Another Earth Man," said one of the creatures raspingly.



to look in. I wouldn't have called it an attractive house; it would leave any passerby cold; but it was a welcome change from Pincus's cramped apartment, and it was well appointed and well stocked with all kinds of potables and edibles. It was old Hugo's own design; not even Wright would have claimed it, for all that it had inlaid heating and was as functional as Broadacre City.

"But the house had a gimmick."

"Just what you mean by a 'gimmick' has me stumped," I said.

"Well, just say there was a trick to

it. It was the wall. The house was backed up against a wall, which made it look as if somebody had halted construction about halfway through, and simply slapped that wall up against it to close off the rooms. The wall was windowless, and made of some kind of weatherproof material which wasn't stone or wood, but some kind of plastic, by the look of it. The house fanned away from it, just as if it had set out to be an arch or half-circle, but ended up in a palimpsest of corners and angles, with its almost grotesquely arresting glass and stone

facades challenging the eye against the gray-white wall which rose up ten feet or so over the flat roof, like the dorsal fin of a fish.

"But to Pincus Hawk it was heaven. He moved in and took over, though there wasn't any indication that he meant to change his way of life. He kept right on fitting shoes and listening to a lot of gabbling women whine about this and that, and pretend they were two sizes less than their feet called for, and so on."

"That's odd enough in itself," I said.

"Hell, no," said Harrigan. "There are millions of people doing a lot of things they don't like, just to be able to live. Hawk was only one of them. Well, it was about a week after he moved in that I ran into him one night at Terhune's. He looked a little hollow-eyed, as if he needed sleep.

"Say, Harrigan," he said to me, 'care to take a look at my new place?'

"Sure," I said. 'Lead the way.'

"He meant it. He trotted off, happy as a puppy, and took me all through the house. It was as queer inside as it looked outside. The rooms were built in crazy angles, and yet it was not without charm, somehow. But the strangest part of it was the way everything seemed to grow out of and back into that wall. When you were in that house, you couldn't get away from the feeling that the wall was the really important part of the house, even if you could hardly walk any distance inside it before you came flat up against it.

"What kind of stuff is that wall made out of?" I asked.

"I don't know," he confessed. 'My uncle's idea. He got it somewhere.'

"He looked so worried, I began to think something was wrong. I asked him whether he was all right.

"He said he was perfectly fit, maybe a little tired, and then it came out. Did I ever know this house was built on the site of a haunted field?

'Haunted?' I said. Did he mean to suggest his house was haunted?

"Oh, no," he answered. 'Just because I hear things doesn't mean anything.'

"Sure not," I said. 'What things?'

"Voices.'

"What're they saying?'

"That's just the trouble. I can't understand the language.'

"Well," I said, 'maybe the un-departed spirits of a couple of Wampanoags or Narragansetts are holding out to get the land back for the Indians.'

"His sense of humor wasn't up to that one, however; so I dropped it. He went on to explain that the old-timers in the neighborhood had warned his uncle that he was walking on dangerous ground when he built here because the field had been traditionally haunted. The usual kind of stuff; you run into it on the average once in ten times in similar cases. It didn't mean anything, but what seemed pretty clear was that something had happened to Pincus.

"What did you think of the wall?" he asked me then.

"Good solid stuff," I answered.

"Solid," he repeated. 'It is solid, isn't it?'

"Sure," I said. 'It's like rock, and maybe that's what it is, a plastic rock.'

"Just the same, I was sure something had happened to him. He was a little strange, a little distant, and all the time I was in the house he was in the habit of standing there with his head cocked a little to one side, as if he listened for something. Damndest thing you ever saw. I got to think that shoe-fitting and the listening to that constant bitching had got him down. But he never mentioned shoes. I don't recall that I ever heard him mention shoes or his work, and it wasn't too long after that I think he quit his job. But something happened to him the night

before, by the look of it. I wondered what it was, but I figured I'd find out in time. If I had to guess, judging by the way he acted, it had something to do with voices and perhaps that wall . . ."

THE WALL. Pincus Hawk wondered why his uncle had built it, what conceivable reason the old man had for putting it up in that fashion, making it windowless, blank. He stood gazing at it.

The wall had an hypnotic effect on him. If he looked at it long enough, it seemed to be alive with movement, as if it were some latent design enticed to life by his attention. And it seemed to him presently that he heard voices, a dialogue. He strained to listen, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not understand. Though the voices seemed to come from nearby, he could not grasp a solitary word of the rasping dialogue he heard.

Why, it was as if the speakers were just beyond the wall!

Yet the wall was solid; it could not be. He reached out and touched the wall.

His hand went through, vanished. It was as if he had dipped it into ink. He snatched it back. There was nothing to hold it.

He stood for a moment trying to convince himself that he had experienced an illusion.

He could not. He reached out tentatively once more. His hand went in, his wrist disappeared, his arm followed.

With a burst of courage, Pincus stepped forward into the wall.

He found himself standing somewhat shakily on an open plain. In the distance a city rose loftily. Immediately at hand were two creatures of approximately his own height, but neither was human, though both walked upright. And both, he saw at a glance, carried some kind of

weapon. They were spindly-legged creatures, and their legs were fowl-like, feathered and scaled; their bodies were squat, chunky, ovoid; their heads were ovoid too, with great staring eyes; their arms were armored. They wore only a short tunic, and a sort of helmet. Immediately at sight of him, one of them raised a whistle to his lips and blew a blast upon it. But Pincus heard no sound.

On the edge of panic, now, he waited for violence.

Nothing happened. The two creatures stared at him; he stared at them. Presently one of them spoke to the other; the other answered. There was nothing more, but both the creatures looked yearningly toward the city.

From this direction soon came speeding a curious kind of propulsion vehicle, chariot-shaped, propelled by jets. In it rode another of the creatures, but evidently one of different rank, for his garment was a loose toga, instead of a tunic, and he wore no hat. His head was hairless.

"Another Earth Man," he said in a rasping sibilance. But he spoke in English.

Pincus hastily introduced himself.

"You will have to come before the magistrate, Mr. Hawk."

Pincus was too bewildered to resist. Indeed, the only way he managed to function at all in the circumstances was to tell himself firmly and often that he was dreaming. He got into the conveyance, which immediately turned about and streaked back toward the city. Pincus observed that the two creatures left behind—guards, he now thought them—seemed relieved at his going.

The city loomed. A singularly compact mass of angles and planes which seemed remarkably complete for a dream. There were no towers, domes, or spires. He was reminded

of pictures he had seen of the ancient cliff-dwellers, except that the city of this moment in his existence was sleek and modern, and its walls appeared to be windowless.

Everything else, however, was replete with the illusion of normalcy. There were trees, bushes, flowers, grass; a sun shone; a wind blew; there were fields, pastures, farms—though the animals in them only vaguely resembled cows. There were even, he saw with a feeling akin to pleasure, recognizable human beings here and there on the streets of the city, though they too were clad in the toga-like garment worn by the driver of the vehicle in which he rode. None of them gave him more than a passing glance, and all, including his driver, ignored his shout when he strove to attract the attention of one of them.

But perhaps his driver was his captor, he thought. This aspect of his experience troubled him, and he began to worry actively about waking up before he came to harm.

THE VEHICLE stopped before a small square building topping a small knoll in the center of the city. His captor got out and indicated curtly if with courtesy that he should follow.

He did so and found himself presently in a corridor which, despite being windowless, had the illusion of light which seemed to flow in unimpeded by the walls. Then he was being shown into a room, at the far end of which, on a raised dais very similar to the courtrooms with which he had become familiar, an old man, unmistakably a human being like himself, sat reading some documents, his head bowed low.

"Another Earth Man," said his captor.

"Hm! Bring him forward," said the magistrate.

At the first sound of his voice, Pin-

cus stiffened. And now, as the magistrate raised his head, Pincus knew his dream was complete; it would end at any moment, dissolved in a burst of smoke. The magistrate was his uncle Hugo.

"Oh, it's you, Pincus," said the old man. "I wouldn't have thought you'd have had gumption enough to try the wall."

"If this is a dream, Uncle Hugo—" began Pincus.

"Oh, no, no—it's not a dream. You've just passed over."

"You mean—I'm dead?" cried Pincus in horror.

"Not any deader than you ever were," answered his uncle. "No, you've just come in on a different plane. Didn't they ever give you any Bishop Berkeley to study when you went to school? All is illusion. You see only what you think you see, and it doesn't exist except as you see it. In short, you've just moved from one plane to another, and you can move back again. I did, regularly, until I got tired of all that infernal warring going on back there."

He made a vague gesture past Pincus.

"Earth, you mean?" asked Pincus.

"Our Earth, not this one," said Hugo. "You're still on Earth, only these people don't call it that. They have a different civilization, entirely different. To them we are on the planet Lloides, though they recognize the same sun."

"It is the same sun?"

"Certainly."

"But then, this place—where is it really?"

"Why, I believe it must exist in the neighborhood of my house, since you came through the wall. That material, you know, came from here; it's solid enough to them, but it isn't to us. By the same token, they can walk right through our buildings, our furniture, and, I am afraid, through us. It's just that we exist conter-

minously; our dimensions are different, that's all."

"That's all." It echoed in Pincus Hawk's thoughts.

"Unless you except the fact that this civilization has at least advanced to the point where war has been abolished as an instrument of policy, life has been prolonged to a span of almost two hundred years, and the country is run by a benevolent congress of the best intelligences to be found within its confines."

"Utopia," said Pincus dryly.

"No, they call themselves the Federation of Lloides. A democracy of a sort, except that the people must pass a basic intelligence test before they are permitted to vote. A highly commendable regulation," added the old man with manifest satisfaction.

At any moment I'll wake up, Pincus told himself persuasively.

"I came over quite by chance one day when the house was being built," continued his uncle. "Heard the voices and tried to find them. I struck that place on the grounds where there was the overlap, and I found myself here. A good many people who've disappeared have ended up here, and seem to have adjusted themselves quite happily. For my part, I've always wanted to be a judge. They analyze you, give you all kinds of aptitude tests. The law was right for me." He frowned down at Pincus. "I'm afraid, Pincus, you might still end up in footwear."

"I want to wake up or go home or whatever it is I have to do," Pincus burst out.

Uncle Hugo clucked disapprovingly, shaking his head. "I was sure you weren't ready to come over, Pincus. I'll have them take you back to the wall as soon as time and circumstances permit."

"THE NEXT TIME I saw him," Harrigan went on, "he was filled up to his Adam's apple with

questions. He was looking tired and harassed, as if he'd had a succession of hard nights. I thought at first he'd been drinking too much, but it was not that. He was leaning on the bar at Terhune's, and looked to me like a long-lost friend.

"He came at me with his questions, hard and fast. Did I believe in utopias? I didn't, and said so firmly. What was out there, in space? 'How the hell should I know?' I told him. Did I believe in the existence of other worlds? I said I thought there might be some; no reason to think we were the only pebbles on the beach.

"Then he came through with this one. 'I went over and saw Uncle Hugo the other night.'

"You did?" I said. "Then they didn't really get the old coot, after all?"

"Oh, yes, they did," he came back at me. "But they converted him."

"It took a while for that one to sink into me. It sounded as if Uncle Hugo had gone over to a life of crime, that he was working against the law now instead of for it. But there were certain other things Pincus Hawk said that didn't jibe. In fact, from that time on, Pincus did a lot of talking that plainly didn't make sense. He went on about other worlds existing right on top of us, in which we had no substance, no material substance that is; he said people were walking right through us and their buildings were sitting right in ours, and so on.

"I had quite a time calming him down. He was babbling like an hysteric before I caught on that Pincus had had some sort of shock. I shook him up a little, slapped him around a bit, and put a few questions to him. The upshot of it was that wall; whatever he said, he came back to the wall. Would I come with him right now and touch it?

"Sure," I said. "Lead on."

"So back we went to that house of his. Pincus rattled away all through the house that I shouldn't be surprised at what might happen. I didn't intend to be. I knew right along what would happen when I touched the wall. It was as solid as rock, as hard as basalt, as unyielding as the pyramids."

"You expected it?" I asked.

"Of course. Match that for a queer delusion, will you! The poor guy tried the wall repeatedly himself, but, of course, he had the same result I did. I gathered at last that he was trying to tell me he'd gone through the wall into another dimension of space or something of that kind, seen his Uncle Hugo, and returned to the house. Of course, when he couldn't pull it off with me, he fell back on the idea that the 'time,' was not right. Would I come again? 'Sure,' I said."

"And did you go?" I asked.

He nodded. "Two or three times. Always the same result. I gathered that he was trying it all the time himself . . ."

THE SECOND time it happened, Pincus demanded immediate audience with the magistrate.

Unfortunately, it was night in Lloides, and the courts were not in session. He was conducted to a cell-like room and left there to await the dawn. His cell, however, was not a prison, since it had television for his entertainment, and was ornamented with several other buttons and knobs which he was extremely reluctant to try out, for fear of what might happen. His curiosity gnawed at him all night long.

In the morning he was conducted with all formality before the magistrate.

Much to his distress, the magistrate was not his Uncle Hugo. It was, however, a human being, undoubtedly Chinese.

"So," he murmured in perfect English, "another pass-over. Have you given him the aptitude tests?"

"I want to see my Uncle Hugo," cried Pincus.

The judge looked at him sympathetically and then gazed at his conductor. "Is he mad, do you think?"

"Hugo. Hugo Hawk," shouted Pincus.

The judge shrugged and said, "Take him away and give him the aptitude tests."

Pincus was firmly shepherded to a large, bright room, in which several people were studiously engaged with books, documents, and papers. No one looked up at his entrance. All were of that strange native race of Lloides; not a human being sat among them. Pincus's gratification at finding that he was not the object of curious stares was short-lived. He was put into a kind of chair which closed around him for the purpose of analyzing his material self, and then, immediately thereafter, he was given a sheaf of aptitude tests.

He worked at them doggedly until noon, when something to eat was brought to him.

After he had finished, in mid-afternoon, he was conducted once more before the magistrate.

This time, thankfully, it was his Uncle Hugo. The old man was studying his tests, which had been deposited upon the bench.

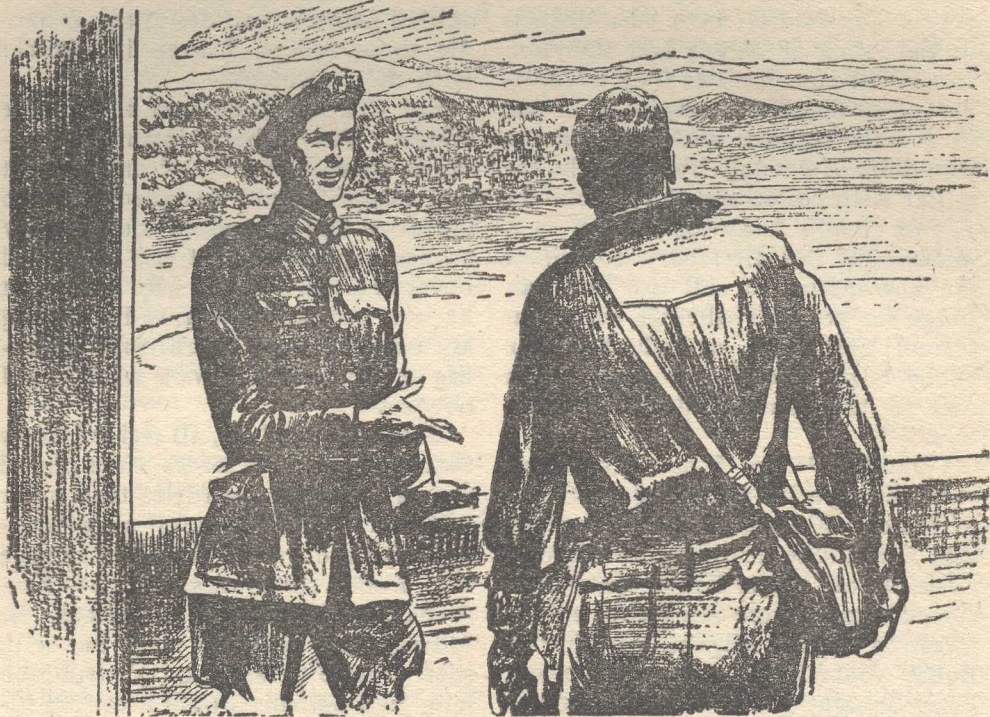
"Dear me, Pincus," he observed, "while I admire your perseverance, you ought not to think that just anyone can be allowed to stay in Lloides. A certain maturity is most desirable. These tests now—what do you think, Pincus?"

"I've always wanted to be an engineer," cried Pincus.

Uncle Hugo shook his head sadly. "Oh, Pincus, dear me—the tests are unfortunately conclusive. Footwear. I'm afraid there's little room for any-

(Continued on page 105)

PRIVATE WORLD



One minute he had been the center of a peaceful American city; the next instant he was being instructed in the art of battle in a land he'd never heard of and in a war he couldn't believe in!

By MARTIN PEARSON



ACTUALLY, you understand, the collecting of what is termed toy soldiers is by no means an unusual pastime. Nor, for that matter, is it always a hang-over from childhood."

Charles Budd tasted his wine and smiled pleasantly at me. I returned the smile. It was good wine and Budd was a good host. I mentally tried to picture his past: had he been a suc-

cessful businessman and now retired to pursue his expensive hobby, or was he once a military man? He had the air of both. The air of a commander who had controlled the destinies of hundreds of men in battle and of an executive who might have controlled the fortunes of a great industry. Piercing blue eyes stared at me under shaggy gray eyebrows and again Budd pursued his topic.

"Napoleon had a vast collection of miniature soldiers with which he

planned his battles. Churchill was an ardent toy soldier campaigner in his youth. Toy soldiers have been dug up in the ruins of Egypt and Babylon. In ancient communities they were regarded as objects of magic—on a par in a mass manner with the famous wax-dolls of voodoo. You must be familiar with collectors of toy soldiers . . . or should I say 'militelists' as I understand the dictionary compilers are now going to call us. You can judge for yourself whether we are in second childhood or whether our hobby is not actually as dignified as that of the stamp and coin collectors."

I nodded. When I had first taken over the Special Orders department of Meteor Miniatures, I had thought that I would be dealing with a group of senile old fools. But I found that my customers were altogether an interesting and intelligent lot. Charles Budd, whom I had never met before, I had thought might prove the exception. His orders had been the most eccentric.

You see Meteor Miniatures is the best and largest manufacturer of toy soldiers in America. As you might expect we are enjoying a boom in these days with warlike toys on the rise. Yet I was not displeased to have been assigned to the special orders branch—it was always the most interesting.

There are in this country about a thousand or so really big collectors of toy soldiers. These men, virtually all fairly well-to-do, and often very wealthy indeed, spend great sums on the manufacture of special sets of figurines. They order companies of Romans, Egyptian archers, Napoleonic cavalry, Cathayan archers, Confederate zouaves, Prussian uh-lans, and sets of the very latest in modern soldiery. All these have to be modeled, dies made, cast, and hand-painted. That takes money and that is how the Special Orders department

came about. There are enough of these demands to create a division of skilled painters and designers to handle these orders. I keep in contact with the collectors.

But Charles Budd was always the oddest. The others invariably ordered types made up of armies that had existed. Budd designed his own uniforms and composed his own toy armies representing types that had never existed. That is why I thought he was probably the sure-bet among my customers for an old fool returning to his youth. I was wrong as I now saw.

Budd was wealthy, all right. I knew that to begin with for he often placed orders in larger quantities than other collectors. They usually were satisfied with a dozen at most of any type but Budd sometimes bought hundreds. And sometimes, conversely, he ordered only a single piece but with such minute detail that the two-inch long lead figurine would cost him fifteen dollars or more when it was done.

As I sat and talked with him I wondered now what he did with his pieces. I saw no sign of them in his drawing room in the ground floor of his house. I did see that he had a small bookcase filled with books on military tactics—Clausewitz, Werner, Haushofer, Suvarov, and so on.

"In spite of what you say about collecting, surely you have some other purpose for your own pieces, Mr. Budd?" I asked. "After all, yours are of your own design. Are you interested in military problems?"

Budd picked up a small bronze Chinese dragon and twirled it around in his fingers.

"You are rather observant, I see," he answered. "In my own way I conduct fascinating little puzzles in tactics and strategy. Would you be interested in seeing my set-up?"

I nodded. He poured another glass of his excellent wine.

"Let us have another drink then and we shall go up."

We downed it. It was sweet and heady but good.

"Redgren!" called Charles Budd arising from his seat.

His secretary entered. I had met him when I had first come in. He was a youngish man of military bearing, slightly foreign in attitude, I suspected French or Swiss.

"Redgren, Mr. Allen and I are going up to the second floor."

The young man nodded and as we got up he followed us. Out into the hall we went and up the softly carpeted stairs.

The wine must have been stronger than I had thought for I felt a slight dizziness and realized that it had gone to my head.

The stairs seemed interminable but at last we came to the top. I was very groggy and woozy. Things were beginning to whirl about me.

Budd stepped up to two large sliding doors and thrust them silently apart.

For an instant I got a glimpse of a very large room that must have filled the entire second floor. The walls were covered with a great mural showing scenery and a flowing landscape.

Dizziness overcame me. I felt myself slipping and as I went down my last impression was that the floor in that room was all laid out like a huge three-dimensional relief map.

I SHOOK my head groggily. I was coming to. I realized I must have been knocked cold by the wine. Funny, I thought, could it have been drugged and if so, why? I opened my eyes, stared and closed them again. I must still be unconscious I thought.

For I had looked out, not at the walls of a room in the city but at an open landscape, flowing and verdant under a blue sky. Now I became more cognizant of my surroundings; I was

sitting up, not lying down, and it was upon some stone bench or other. I opened my eyes again.

I was on the terrace of a big white marble building set on the side of what must have been a mountain or high prominence for I could see ahead over the balcony into a great stretch of valley below.

I got up, shook my head to clear it, but the vision remained and the balcony responded very solidly to my touch. I stared down into the land that unfolded below. There were mountains in the purple distance and between them and the range of mountains upon which this building stood was a great level green plain; a few rivers and creeks could be seen wandering through it; far off habitations and the towers of several cities could be made out (there was not a cloud in the sky), and what might have been a railroad somewhere off in the distance. Directly beneath the balcony the mountains sloped down and I saw a winding white road going on down to the plains. I noticed several barricades and at one point some figures pacing up and down like sentries. There was a step behind me. I turned.

It was Redgren, Budd's secretary, with a smile on his face and saying: "Welcome to Landragon, Mr. Allen. I trust you are over your slight discomfort?"

I stared at him before answering. He was wearing a military uniform, one I could not place with any soldiery I had seen. It was purple in color, nattily cut, he wore brown alligator leather boots and belt and a jaunty black beret slanted over his youthful face. A holstered revolver dangled from his belt.

Then I stared again at his uniform for it struck me that I had seen something like it before, but I still couldn't place it. Swiss perhaps? Italian? No, they didn't fit.

"What's all this? Where's Landragon and where's Mr. Budd?" I

asked, perplexed. The young man smiled, shrugged his shoulders. "This is Landragon," he repeated. "I'm afraid I can't tell you where Mr. Budd is or explain much further. You'll have to be patient a bit. And now, will you come with me and I'll be pleased to show you around." He took my arm and we started off along the balustrade and around a corner.

I noticed then that I was wearing different clothes than the business suit I had originally had. I stole a glance at myself. I was clad in a semi-military khaki outfit, leather puttees and all. No insignia or anything though. I could fancy a war correspondent would dress as I. I confess I couldn't figure it out at all.

Around the corner we stepped on to a street and I saw something of the town we were in. It was a little mountain city, I imagine like many except for its oddities. The buildings were narrow and gabled and quaint in the Swiss manner.

The oddities were the evidence that this was nothing but a military fortress. For I saw no children around or any sign of marketing, washing, or the myriad things that occupy a normal city. The only men in sight were soldiers, all wearing purple uniforms of Redgren's design and many helmeted along the French model. Rifles aplenty, few went unarmed. Women there were extremely few; I scarce remember any.

I noticed another odd thing as we went along the street. The soldiers all looked oddly alike. As if they were all brothers, sometimes even twins. An extremely isolated town, I thought, to have such close resemblance among its populace.

"Where are we going?" I asked my guide. Redgren hesitated a moment. "I'm taking you to the castle. The Grand Dragon will be interested in meeting you."

The Grand Dragon, eh? A sort of mountain prince, perhaps? Or an odd

thought occurred to me maybe it was Budd playing some game possibly. This might all be a sort of expensive occupation of Budd's carried on at some isolated estate outside the city. Budd was supposed to be very rich, I knew.

WE CAME to the castle, an imposing structure in a medieval manner, upon whose towers and battlements modern soldiery patrolled and anti-aircraft guns were mounted. I noticed then that it was midday exactly for the sun shone brilliantly in the center of the sky. It had been afternoon when I visited Budd's.

We entered the castle, went through a great entrance-way and came into a large hall in which a number of people were standing talking. There was a slight smell of smoke in the air and I looked to find its source. I stopped short and stared.

There was a genuine living, breathing dragon coiled up on the floor and the smoke was coming from its nostrils. Before it was set a large chess board and sitting opposite was a man in a general's uniform.

As I watched in amazement, the dragon reached out a clawed paw, moved one of the pieces and intoned in a deep hoarse voice:

"Check, General Blakwyd."

The Grand Dragon of Landragon was actually just that! A dragon! It was at that instant that it dawned on me at last that I could not be anywhere on earth as I knew it. Landragon was quite real. The Dragon was real, intelligent, living! But where was I then?

Redgren whispered to me. "We'll have to wait a while. It may be some time before the Dragon finishes his game and he doesn't like to be disturbed."

We stood around a bit, watching. I didn't say anything because I still didn't know what to say. The other men were all officers and they seemed

to be talking about things of no consequence when suddenly through the entrance another officer ran in, all covered with dust, and ran up to the chess-players.

They looked up from their game at this interruption whereupon the newcomer blurted out something about war. Redgren whispered to me excitedly. "There's another war on. Looks like we're going to see some excitement."

The Dragon uttered a disgusted growl, emitted several short puffs of smoke and reared back upon a pile of cushions. The officers were hastily conferring and three or four higher officials were talking plans with the Dragon. Redgren and I stood aside and watched things.

Several men came in now in different uniforms than those of Landragon. I was told that they were ambassadors and attachés from other nations. The Dragon was asking for help.

My guide was whispering to me the various nationalities and he kept saying that he was sure no help was to be had. It seems that this other country, Coucheran, which appeared to be directly below us in the valley had gotten up a steam about the Dragon.

They maintained that it was indecent for a human country to have a monster at its head. Redgren said that this was nonsense because the Dragon had always lived here, originally in a mountain cave, and that he had naturally become ruler of the mountaineers because of his age and wisdom. Anyway that was the excuse that the enemy was using.

I watched the Dragon and General Blakwytt argue with some of the envoys. One fellow, who wore a brown and red uniform, was particularly the object of their pleas. It seems his country, Narland, had usually supported Landragon in the past. This time they couldn't because one of their powerful neighbors had just

made a pact with Landragon's enemy and the Narlanders were worried themselves.

Then everyone stopped talking and stared up. I listened and heard the droning of an airplane. Then I heard a banging outside.

"An air raid!" someone yelled and Redgren and I dashed for the street.

OUTSIDE everyone was looking up instead of running for cover. Up in the air was a single airplane circling over the castle. The anti-aircraft guns were popping at it and suddenly the plane tipped over, wiggled a bit and then started falling.

Over and over it fell and soldiers ran from all sides as it seemed headed for the castle square. Then it hit.

There was a terrific crash and bits of wood and metal flew in all directions. When the dust settled, a pile of almost unrecognizable wreckage lay in the street, the shock had been so hard and violent. And then I gasped and stared. For the wreckage was being jiggled and shoved aside from below!

Then out of that pile of junk there climbed the aviator, without a scratch or a tear. He was smiling broadly as he stepped out and kicked his heels free of dust. He had survived that crash absolutely unhurt! It was incredible.

I frowned as I looked at his uniform. Black belt, helmet and boots, black fronting on bright green jacket and pants. It seemed vaguely familiar but again I couldn't place its nationality. I recalled, too, that some of the uniforms worn by the foreign ambassadors had seemed familiar likewise.

They led the prisoner away for questioning and things began to happen thick and fast. Bugles rang out and soldiers rushed out of buildings and began to assemble in the streets. Guns were rolled down towards the road barricades and trucks filled with solid shot rattled down the streets.

Redgren and I ran back to the terrace and looked down into the valley. We had a perfect view of the proceedings.

The roads leading up the mountain from the valley city nearest to us were obviously filled now by the troops of Coucheran. We could see thin lines moving up towards us. Below, the purple ranks of Landragon were getting into position, in trenches, behind walls, setting up cannon on the road.

There was a *whiz* in the air and something bounced off the wall behind us. I looked and it was a piece of solid iron as big as one's head.

"We're under fire," Redgren said, "let's get below with the troops."

"How come they don't use explosive shot?" I asked my guide as we made our way down the mountain road with the troops.

"Too destructive," he said to my profound bewilderment. "After all, they have no interest in destroying buildings? What would they want to conquer a pile of ruins for?" I puzzled that thought for a while and then gave it up like all the other mysteries of this odd land.

There was heavy shooting up ahead and we rounded a bend in the road to find ourselves almost in the front lines. It was then that I first realized another thing missing. I had seen no ambulances nor Red Cross stations. A decidedly peculiar war, I thought to myself.

And I also noticed that the sun was still at midday though I must have been there for almost two hours by now.

We crouched down behind some upturned rocks and watched the fight. A squad of Coucheranians came down the road with fixed bayonets. A cannon firing from concealment landed shot among them and in a short while they were knocked cold. A shout went up from the Landragon troops around us and then there was a

charge. Heavy chunks of metal began flying thick and fast around us.

The Coucheranians were coming up the road again, this time a lot of them and there was some brisk hand-to-hand fighting. I noticed with dismay that the purple troops were being routed and our men were falling back up the road. We turned and ran back with them into the next line of defense.

"They're sort of strong," Redgren muttered to me. "It'll be a very tough fight to beat them."

I looked back and saw a Coucheran soldier lying in the road. Something kept recurring in my mind about his uniform. It had been familiar when I saw that aviator but now. . . .

I saw two more of their green-clad men come into sight and before they ducked down, it hit me. They were wearing pot helmets like the German army. And that added the final clue. A whole chain of thought went off in my brain like Chinese firecrackers and I gulped.

"Holy smokes," I shouted to Redgren, "let's get out of here while we can. We're sunk!"

"Huh, what?" he was puzzled. "What's the matter? We can lick them!" I grabbed him by the arm. "No, you can't. They outnumber you too heavily." I didn't have time to explain to him how I knew but he finally got up.

We started to run back up the mountain. I reviewed what I knew again in my mind. It was utterly incredible, it couldn't be, but yet here it was. That Coucheran soldier couldn't be denied any further. I knew where I had seen his uniform before and Redgren's as well.

About a week ago, we had finished delivering to Charles Budd a very large order of toy soldiers made to his private design number six. And his design six had German-type pot helmets, green uniforms and black facings. And we had delivered at least

ten times as many pieces of that design as we had ever made of Budd design eleven. Design eleven I knew because it was the only one on which we used purple paint. It was the design of the soldiers of Landragon! And they were outnumbered, I was completely sure, at least ten to one by their enemy!

We had better get out of there in a hurry, I thought, this is going to be a debacle. But just then there came out of the woods a whole bunch of Coucheran troopers and a huge cannon with them!

"Run," shouted Redgren. "This way!"

We dashed across the field opposite and came to a wall. Redgren climbed over it and I followed. Just as I got to the top I heard a Coucheran voice yell "Fire!"

The cannon went off with a roar. Something slammed into me with stunning force and I fell off the wall.

"**H**ERE, have a little water," said the voice of Charles Budd. I opened my eyes and found myself being propped up on a couch in the downstairs room of Budd's house. He held a glass to my lips and I sipped a bit from it. I was still a bit dizzy.

"I'm awfully sorry, old man. I didn't realize that the wine would hit you so powerfully," Budd apologized to me but I stared at him suspiciously as I got to my feet. I thought I de-

tected a little gleam of amusement in his eye but I said nothing. I questioned him and he said I had fallen on the stairs and been out for an hour or so.

He asked whether I was sure I was all right but I was and I wanted to get out and walk in the open air away from this house. He shook hands with me and I noticed again the small bronze dragon that was on his desk.

"My secretary will show you to the door," Budd said and a young man came in. It was Redgren, he was the same as before but he revealed not a hint of what had happened. I walked with him to the door and we exchanged not a word save good evenings.

Frankly, I don't know what to make of the whole business. I could have fallen and the whole crazy thing been a dream. It might have been just my imagination but that explanation just doesn't satisfy me. It was too real, much too real.

The only thing I have to show for it is this. When I got home I noticed that someone had put a small box in my coat pocket. It wasn't there when I went to Budd's house. In the box was a single toy soldier. It was dressed in a khaki semi-military uniform and its face was a remarkable miniature replica of my own.

It was badly dented in the middle as if something had struck it a sharp blow or as if it had fallen hard.

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An unforgettable century had tried

*For a century the Dictator
civilization together by
dying and his only possible
statue of himself with a*

By **LESTER**

men's souls beyond endurance and found them wanting. Where pioneers had once carved a great Republic out of the wilderness, their descendants swarmed the streets and gazed up at that symbol of dictatorship with gentle, contented docility. It was Jason's world, and a pleasant one. Bless the Director!

Six hundred feet above them, Jason



THE HEAD

had held that weakling sheer will power. Now he lay successor was a mechanical burned-out electronic brain!

DEL REY

leaned weakly against the window as his heart struggled and missed, and a suffocating constriction tightened on his chest. He shuddered, fighting back the physical hysteria of the attack, but his voice was still calm and level. "How long, then?"

"Maybe six months, if tomorrow's lab reports are favorable!"

Six months! It should have come

as a relief, after seventy years of sole responsibility for a world too passive to do its own worrying, but even now he dared not accept the death sentence his body had placed upon him. He shook his head wearily, and let his eyes drop back to the streets below.

Twelve decades had seen two chemical wars, one with nuclear fission, and two more with all the incredible hell of material energy. Yet somehow the race had survived, even though the last nineteen-year reign of fury had taken three billion lives, decayed from spheres to nations, and vented its final chaos between village and village. Sixty million had passed through all that, but its psychic trauma had left them weak and submissive. Those who had struggled

were dead, and the weak had reluctantly inherited the earth and passed their psychoses on to an apathetic progeny. Men had sought power, and men had died; better a live serf than a dead crusader!

Two generations of listless anarchy had followed, before a rude paretic named Knude, driven by half-insane frenzies, had built himself up from self-claimed rule of a village to world mastery. It had taken a scant twenty years, and he had found no opposition, save his own fumbling mistakes. His queer genius had built union, and Jason's had given it form. Now. . . six months!

BUT THE WORST of the attack had passed, and the Director turned back to the darkness that was relieved by a single bulb, where Dr. Sorgen was waiting with the mercifully silent understanding that was typical of the man. Jason mustered his strength to hold his turban-covered head erect and his face a mask of quiet firmness as he resumed his seat and moved a chess knight deliberately.

"Sorry, Sorgen; what about Herker's ACS work?"

"A brilliant fizzle, like Bogolometz' original." Sorgen castled, and his normally placid, middle-aged face was puckered into a frown. "Napier's longevity technique should have given you a hundred and fifty years minimum, though."

"Except that I had your predecessor remove my sleep center so I could burn out twenty-four hours a day. New heart?"

"Could you stand twenty minutes of necrolepsy, even if I broke the record? Oh, damn it! . . . Check!" Sorgen hunched his shoulders in professional disgust, but his voice was over-brusque as he fumbled for his pipe. "Why the devil didn't you let me check up when I wanted to, instead of demanding a spot prognosis

now? You must have known; you're not a complete fool, Jason!"

"Fool enough to think I could solve the insolvable. I need ten years, maybe a hundred. One, I *must* have!" But he read the answer in the doctor's averted eyes, and slumped back into the leather chair, idly scratching at the heads of the two big dogs beside him. "Somebody once called benevolent dictatorship the best government short of ideal anarchy, Sorgen, and it's true for this world, though a strong people can afford democracy. But even perfect dictatorship is the most dangerous rule ever devised! When your ruler dies, his successor may be a fool, a brute, and a weakling—and there's no check on him. Not even the royal tradition of *noblesse oblige*! . . . Nema, what about Bill 693?"

"Passed unanimously, Excellence," a primly efficient voice answered from the communicator.

Jason grunted. "In five hours—eighty pages of legal gobbledegook! And that's the only check on my power, after fifty years of trying to create a real democracy! . . . In all that time, *one* man accepted his real responsibility. I had great hopes for him—until his constituents decided I might blame his 'treason' on them. They pulled him out of bed in his pajamas, and chased him out of town in midwinter to die of pneumonia! And now I have six months to find a successor!"

The weaker the people, the stronger must be their ruler. He dared not demand less than he had been forced to become, and so far there had been no other with the strength for that iron self-discipline. Probably somewhere in the world there were a thousand capable of replacing him, but the Director had no means of subjecting three hundred millions to all the tests needed to find one of them. The very benevolence of his rule had eliminated the opposition that might

have developed and revealed a worthy successor.

"But aren't you forgetting history, Jason? When Knude died—"

"History isn't always accurate, Sorgen," Jason answered wearily. "Knude died of curare on a nail designed to work through his shoe! He chose me as the world's best scientific mind, counting on a scientist's lack of political ability, and forgetting that the master of a dozen sciences could learn even that, if he had to. I had to—I knew Knude's plans! The responsibility is mine, not history's. . . . Checkmate in four moves!"

Sorgen shook his head doubtfully. "Not if I move—Mmm! Which leads to what, aside from the fact that a robot would make a better chess partner for you?"

"WHICH LEADS, of course, to your robot. If I can't find a successor, then I have to make one!" The Director watched the confusion on the other's face, and a slow smile crept over his mouth. "Suppose robots existed? You know people—would you build metal men, Sorgen? Would you call them robots with that word's semantic connotations, even if they could think, learn, and remember with genuine intelligence? Well?"

"No, not unless I wanted trouble, I suppose. I'd probably call them something like heterofiddle-deedee phlum-phees, and build them into switchboards, calculators, or—" Sorgen's speculative look jumped to confused awe, and then twisted into sudden certainty. "Jason! Voice-operated typewriters! What else would know I meant *too* instead of *to*?"

The Director's smile broadened. "Exactly! Your vocatype and one of my chessboards are robots, inhibited against independence. . . . Nema, will you come in? . . . So are my two dogs, incidentally, to give me protection against any chance insane crackpot. But are you sure you'd rule out hu-

manoids? Bodies are easy to build, now."

"Absolutely. Men have protoplasmic habits—they giggle, follow archaic taboos, and think mostly with their endocrines, so they'd spot any imitation. And they still believe in Frankenstein's monster."

Jason grunted doubtfully. Men also saw faces in clouds, and read purely human intelligence and contrariness into their mechanical inventions. If an office clerk behaved like a machine, they called it efficiency and gave him a raise!

But a quiet, mousy little woman had come in through the door on silent feet, and he dropped the argument. "The perfect secretary—the result of fifteen months of analyzing the best human for the job, and using her as an education pattern. Suppose you show him, Nema!"

"But—but, Excellence! Dr. Sorgen—"

"Will share all my secrets," he finished for her. "From now on, if anything happens, I'll need him, so he's my shadow. Show him!"

Nema dropped reluctantly onto one knee and began a series of operations that ended with the top of her skull in her hands, and her head open to view. Inside lay a three-inch sphere, enmeshed in a maze of wires, and nothing else. Jason waited while the doctor let his mouth close slowly, then motioned her to her feet and dismissed her.

"Thank you, Nema, that's all." There was no smile on his face as he moved toward a panel that lifted to reveal a small private elevator. "And now, Sorgen, if you'd like to be the first visitor in my personal laboratory, I'll show you my mechanical double, and—perhaps—your future Director!"

A STEREO producer would have developed severe frustrations in the laboratory; except for a panel of controls and outlets before a desk,

and a table of metal-working tools, it might have been a locker room. Yet it was home to Jason, and he dropped gratefully into a chair and motioned Sorgen to another. The slight exertion of the trip had been enough to set his heart pounding, but it quieted as he began the old routine.

From his turban came scanner and recorder reels to be replaced by new tape for later use. The old ones were slipped into receivers on the panel, and tiny cables came out to couple him directly into the recording "brains" while he was in the laboratory. The old tapes began playing on a screen before him, varying as automatic habits took over the task of controlling emotional response and annotations that would shape them into the closest possible semblance to his own personal reactions. From older records, the brains could draw on accumulated past experience to fill in the picture.

"Every minute of my life is there," he told the doctor, without looking up from his work. "Everything I could recall from my very earliest childhood has been re-enacted just as I saw it and heard it. Every decision I ever made has been remade by this. I've spent half of the last fifty years on it. As for the history and how it operates—you'll find it all in this introductory manual for students in my private commercial laboratories. It will give you the picture while I finish this. . . There isn't as much to it as you might think."

There wasn't much to it—in the book. Applications tend to become increasingly simplified as theory is extended. When subject to magnetic current, certain metal colloids in a silicon jelly would propagate links between affected nodes, intermittent conductivity increasing with use. After the momentary passage of current, however, the links became resistances to cut off further flow until another stimulus. It was vaguely like

the response and inhibition pattern of interaction between brain cells.

Unlike the brain, however, all nodes could link, and the links propagate sub-links, in turn propagating others. Nema had five hundred nodes, and this model possessed ten thousand, to yield fifty million links, a quadrillion sub-links, and one and a half novillion sub-sub-links. There would be no danger of overloading the memory circuits! Even the crude first model that Justin Ehrlich had developed was still as flexibly open to new knowledge as ever, after over a century.

Sorgen chuckled suddenly, and the book was open to the old man's picture. "Quite a character, that grandfather of yours!"

"The stubbornness and most crotchety man that ever lived," Jason agreed, but there was affection in his voice. Justin had spent twenty years on the vocatype because of a petty fight with his typist. When the final war began, he had packed up and dug into MacQuarie Island and gone doggedly on, building up the simple little magnetronic memory tube to a thousand and input model. While the war raged he had spent fifteen hours a day pronouncing words and typing them until the machine was conditioned to the flow of words, and even the tricks of punctuation and homonyms!

And then, back in the post-war ruin, he had stubbornly begun dictating the original book that had started it all, and that no one would ever read—only to find his machine a mutineer. In the middle of a passage, it had stopped, kicked out the paper, and deliberately begun a revision. Twenty dictations and failures later, even his stubbornness had relaxed enough for him to learn that his hero's middle name had been Xavier, as typed, and not Xenophon!

He never finished the book, but he left thousands of pages to show his progress in teaching the meaning of words to the brain. Years after he

died, the original Brain had finished the novel from his notes, revised to suit the new conditions, and it had been a best-seller.

And it had been that Brain, working with Jason, which had finally solved the seemingly hopeless problem of the long years of labor required to educate each brain. Now modified "implanter" brains, coupled with individual erasable memory tanks, could feed the required knowledge into the new mind in a matter of hours. Behind the laboratory panels, fifty separate implanters were coordinated to hold and develop the pattern of Jason's mind, though full integration could never occur until the time when the final robot was awakened.

JASON STIRRED finally and swung around to see Sorgen finished with his reading and waiting patiently. "You'll find the robot in a cradle behind Panel C," he answered the other's searching look. "But it's only a perfect mechanical duplicate of my body, with a few connecting wires that will come off after integration. A touch of this red button—a few hours—and Jason II becomes ruler! The panel's unlocked."

Sorgen shrugged and disregarded the panel. "It would only be the outside, not what interests me, Jason. I've been thinking while you worked. . . . Oh, I'm not immune to the usual phobias about robots! I was all set to sound off on a sermon concerning your dissimilarity to God! Now I'll skip that, because I think you've already delivered it to yourself—fifty years of it. You brought me here for advice, I take it?"

"I'm not planning on turning a monster loose, Sorgen. It was Knude's discovery of this and his ideas that forced my hand to murder. Since then, fortunately, few have guessed the secret, and they're included in the tight inner clique. Curiosity seems to be another vanished human character-

istic, anyhow. But—before saying the ruler must be human—remember that my successor will control this secret, too. If he's a fool. . . ."

"I already thought of that; knowledge can't be withdrawn, once put into use. Then the question boils down to how human your robot can be—right?"

The Director nodded, deliberately letting the long responsibility fall from his shoulders for the grateful moments that another could pick it up. The Brain had stated flatly that it could not help him, and had suggested a human consultant. He should have taken its advice sooner.

"Ability to learn, to remember, to correlate, and to decide—or to be conscious of self?" Sorgen mused. "The last, I think since it leads to social consciousness. I suppose Nema was a very limited trial balloon, and that you asked whether she had that trait? And she said she did?"

"She would have. Any imitation of a man has to have a pattern of that kind implanted, to avoid misuse of pronouns, and impersonal adjectives instead of possessives," Jason answered. He let the tone of his voice indicate the long and futile tests that had failed to establish the reality of that consciousness of self.

Sorgen fumbled with his pipe, packing and tamping the tobacco while he reshuffled his thoughts. "So it breaks into two problems: Can a robot pass as a man? And can it be trusted as a man? You've taken care of the first, now that I look back on it, by dropping all possible human traits yourself—deliberately depersonalizing yourself to the public. Want me to sum up the questions on the other angle?"

"No. They're obvious."

No mechanical education could possibly include all the details of a man's life, particularly of the early formative years. The all-important emotional color of the thoughts must be

supplied from within—and with two different types of brains, could similar “experience” assure an identical response? The Brain had written the end of Justin’s highly emotional novel, but who could say how coldly it had shaped those paper emotions? Pure intelligence could never be enough.

A man or a nation with no sense of humor would always be a piece of social dynamite, needing only a spark to fan out into megalomaniac barbarism. Frankenstein’s monster had been a gentle, pitiful wretch at first; and a sense of humor to absorb the shock of men’s reaction to him might have made the transition to his final form impossible. The old German Reich had been quiet and industrious, but a mere sense of horseplay and jollity had been too little to save it from its well-deserved oblivion.

“DAMN HERKER’S failure and damn our mass-murdering ancestors!” Sorgen knocked his pipe against the table, watched the bowl break off and bounce on the floor, and threw the bit against a wall. Then he caught himself and grinned crookedly. “I was going to damn you for throwing this at me, but I see the pressure you’re under.”

“Some of it, maybe. I’ve had decades to study the fine art of worrying.”

“Umm. And it hasn’t helped your heart. If you appoint even a slightly wrong successor, his power coupled with this knowledge may go to his head. If you don’t make a choice, somebody like our efficient police chief stands to take over by simply declaring himself in. . . . With time enough, you could vitalize the robot and watch for trouble, ready to step in if needed, but. . . . No way to check up without vitalizing, I suppose?”

“No good way, but I can check its decisions.” While not fully integrated, the implanter brains were linked, and there was a circuit that

permitted asking questions without affecting the memory tanks. “I’ve checked it against every problem to face me, found the reasons when its answer wasn’t mine, and corrected them. Now it seldom errs—sometimes it even antecedes my decisions. But I can’t be sure. In dealing with myself, practically, I may tip my hand myself.”

The doctor frowned, and then was on his feet, moving purposefully toward the panel. And sudden relief washed over the Director as he caught the thought. Of course, Sorgen would not be dealing with a deliberate copy of his own mind. His questions would not tip his hand! And as the man followed the simple directions and slipped into the headphone and mike harness, Jason located a stale pack of cigarettes and let his mind go almost blank, while the half-forgotten feel of the smoke spread soothingly into his lungs.

The other’s low mutter was meaningless, but he was uninterested in the nature of the questioning. It was not until the doctor finished that he snapped back to full consciousness. Sorgen swung around slowly, pushing the harness away, and his eyes were on the floor.

“Nonsense,” he stated dully.

There were seventy years of discipline behind Jason, as well as seventy years of failure, and his face remained unmoved. He crushed out the cigarette and stood up. “Better get some sleep, Sorgen; there’s a cot folded into the wall over there.”

He should never have had his sleep center removed; the time it had given him had been useless, and now the healing power of the long hours of semi-consciousness was denied him. There was nothing to keep him from remembering, and the memories were not pleasant. Futile dreams, wasted hopes, a son killed in an accident before he could assume rule, a grandson. . . .

HE HAD NEED of that iron discipline in the morning as he watched his grandson and the young man's wife move down the long length of the reception hall. There was no emotion on Jason's face, even as the boy went out without a backward look, dragging his spite-filled mate quickly after him. Sorgen came around the big desk, and dropped a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, but the Director shrugged it off and rose to move between his dogs toward the office.

"You heard the whole sordid story," he said woodenly. "Do you see now why the old problem of my successor became so suddenly acute, after lying dormant? I learned all this only yesterday, before I called you in."

The doctor dropped into the office chair with a weariness that showed how little good his sleep had done, and his voice held some of the same lack of expression. "Paul's still brilliant. At least he has the Ehrlich mind!"

"Which is why he's still Governor. I suppose his weakness is my fault. I never had time to supervise him as Grandfather Justin trained me when I was young, and he's this world's child. . . . But he's certainly not Director material. If Jasna can twist him, others can. And she doesn't twist him for his own good. Ever hear her sing?"

"Once." Sorgen's wry grin mirrored the Director's.

"Exactly. Naturally it took a lot of pulling strings and chicanery to get even with the men who wouldn't let her star in the State Opera. And since he was willing to cheapen his office for her personal pique. . . . Sorgen, we'll have to risk a heart-graft! I need time to find a successor!"

It seemed hours as the slow minutes passed, and at first, Jason was only conscious of irritation at the long delay; then the truth seeped in slowly.

The other fidgeted with his new pipe and groped for a good professional opening, but he wasn't particularly good as an actor, and he knew it. The Director's long sigh broke the silence and ended the need for a beginning.

"I see. So the report came in already. That bad?"

"Weeks—maybe!"

Jason let the fact sink in, deliberately, sitting with his hands motionless before him and without a quiver to mark his thoughts; there were no thoughts. Finally he turned to the communicator and pressed a button that brought Nema's quiet little figure into the room. "The record officials here, Nema?"

"They've been waiting, Excellence. I'll call them" She was gone for a minute, to return with the five officials and their recording machine.

Nema spread a paper on the table, and the men adjusted their apparatus. The final signed and witnessed document went into a slot, and they moved out again, but the secretary still lingered.

Jason waved dismissal. "That's all, Nema, unless you have something else. . . . Well?"

"Excellence, with—with your permission?" She hesitated and stopped, waiting for his nod before turning uncertainly to the doctor. "Dr. Sorgen, in my outer office. . . . Please, the Clinic Supervisor has been waiting. . . ."

Jason cut through the other's protests with emotionless words. "Go ahead, Sorgen. You'll find me in the laboratory when you're finished. Nema has a key."

He could think better there. Not that his thinking would matter much, but the habit of decades pulled his feet unerringly to his retreat, with the old phrase uppermost in his mind. For the moment, he was content to let his muscles guide him.

Instinct carried him to the work-panel, where he began the auto-

matic business of feeding in reels of used tape and reinserting fresh ones. He knew there was no point to it at all, now that the robot idea must be abandoned, but it served to pass the time as well as anything else. He coupled himself to the board and went on about the usual routine of editing the tapes, while he reoriented his thoughts to the idea that there was nothing he could do.

Oddly, it was no shock. It was as if something that had lain festering in his mind had broken, releasing its poisons, and leaving only a numbness behind. Death itself would be welcome, after the long weary years and the last painful months. The responsibility remained, but he had done all he could.

The will which he had recorded was at best a desperation measure, the gesture of a man seizing at a straw. Now that he knew how short his time was, though, there was little he could do to improve on it. Sorgen was an able man, and a thoroughly honest and decent one; whether he would be weak in office was something only the future could decide. A man who makes no effort to attain power is seldom a good choice for its control, but it was obviously a better solution than his spiritless grandson.

The Director grinned bitterly at the emotions that insisted on flooding back. No man likes to leave an empire without seeing his own blood inheriting it; even a religious man turns without thought to the hope of physical perpetuity through his offspring. He had pinned too many hopes on that! And too many others on direct personal inheritance of his empire in a mind that was a copy of his own!

Perhaps that very vanity—his subconscious craving for a direct inheritance—had ruined his chances of finding a successor. Jason, builder of a dynasty—a sorry, power-crazed fool along with all the other stupid rulers of old!

But he knew better. The robot idea had been justified, and had been right. While he could trust himself, there could never be another independent mind of which he was equally sure.

And perhaps the thing had not been a failure! No mind scattered into fifty divisions could be expected to duplicate a single integrated unit. He could never know certainly until the button was pressed and the real robot came out fully experienced and alive. Only then could he pass accurate judgment.

For a second, he reached toward the red button, to catch himself and jerk his hand away. Weeks! It was too late. He should have done it long before, when he could wait for the years needed to assure himself that it was no Frankenstein monster, no clumsy impostor which would reveal its falsity at the first crisis. Now it was too late.

Too late . . . The numbed, repressed emotions were crowding up now, pushing aside all the savage discipline of the years. Too late, *too late, Too Late!*

Reason returned suddenly, along with agony! The vise was back about his chest, choking him, and his heart was pounding with a wild increasing clamor that wrenched a scream from his lips. Heart failure should be gentle, peaceful! Why did his have to fail in so spectacularly agonizing a fashion? Why couldn't it finish the attack, before the strain burst it? With an effort that brought cold sweat trickling down his forehead, he forced his lungs to empty and fill, but the choking did not abate!

Even as he heard the click of the key in the door and saw Sorgen's surprisingly happy face twist into a knot of horror, he realized that it would never be weeks. He was dying now! Inside him, his heart pounded once more, and then seemed to explode. The pain stopped.

(Continued on page 108)



The world was getting tired of its own brilliance and nobody knew any longer where humanity was heading. But Edward Barnett alone cared enough to do anything about it, so he invented those . . .

SEEDS OF FUTURITY

By KRIS NEVILLE

EDWARD BARNETT removed all the charts from the control room; he placed them along with his more than six hundred books into the evacuation chamber. He closed the inner door and pulled the lever marked "A." A tiny section of the hull slid back and the released pressure swept all the written material out into space.

Edward Barnett turned, walked slowly along the corridor to the landing bubble, entered it, and prepared to ease the ship down. If he wrecked the craft in the attempt, it alone would remain to stir the curiosity of his children. There was no written record anywhere aboard. Now.

He swung the ship into the classic descending spiral. After a long time,

air friction began to pull at the ship with steel fingers. He maneuvered it with unsteady hands, and it bucked uncertainly. Finally it touched the ground, full astern, quaked, and rested. He clambered to the rear, his heart straining under the strong, new gravity.

One by one he carried his children out from the ship and placed them far beyond the blast radius. It took him a very long time, for he was old and frequently had to stop to lean against the steel hull to catch his breath. At the last, he worked with frantic speed, trying to complete his task before his children recovered from the anaesthesia he had injected into their quarters after he had pumped out the suspension gas.

Eventually he unloaded the last of his cargo: they all lay naked in the sun. He remounted the ladder of the ship wearily. At the port he turned

for a final look, and they seemed asleep there at the very edge of the cool, green forest. For a moment his resolve wavered, and he wanted to run to them.

He turned to enter the ship. For if he stayed, knowledge stayed with him. . . .

IN THE DAYS of Edward Barnett's childhood, the adult-peopled world felt neither one way nor the other about formal, academic training. Perhaps they held those who studied *The Philosophy* somewhat in awe, as beings almost beyond worldly understanding, but otherwise they were exceedingly neutral, if indifferent would be too strong a term. Consequently there was precious little learning abroad in the land. Whatever education a child achieved, aside from the simplest elements of reading imparted by a robot of limited scope, was due solely to individual inclination and initiative. Few youths, it scarcely need be added, were particularly adept at verbal gymnastics.

The young Edward Barnett was, however, an exception; he soon far outstripped his robot tutor and was roaming freely in the cavernous ancestral library. But lacking direction, he did little more than filter great numbers of huge tomes through the wide screenwork of his mind. At the age of fourteen he was an exceedingly widely read young gentleman, without an opinion of his own on anything.

He was frail of form, delicate. His huge eyes roved incessantly, seeing minutest details. His body surged with a high and unquenchable order of nervous energy that, in former days, was termed intellectual curiosity.

Eventually even his parents noted that he had great promise; such, in fact, was their enthusiasm that one day they called him to them.

"Son," his mother said, looking very

wise, "we—your father and I—recommend that you study *The Philosophy*. Accordingly, we have interviewed Dr. Burton who has kindly consented to supervise your future training."

Thereafter, for three years, he *did* study *The Philosophy*. But, being of unusual discernment and rare intellectual capacity, he abandoned it. And if he derived any benefit at all from that period it was this: that, taking a broad view, the hunt for knowledge is, in itself, a futile thing.

To verify that it was only necessary for him to look about at the world.

There were the physical and social sciences, or, more properly, there was the Leviathan of unorganized facts. There was a baffling array of data; there were giant stands of virgin statistics; there was chaos. No one could even be sure where past experimenters had left off; no one knew in which direction lay the unexplored fields and unseen vistas. In fact, in any scientific field formerly considered a meaningful specialty, a lifetime of study was needed to push forward to the frontier: all energy expended in encompassing the known, no residue remaining to supplement it.

THE specialties fell prey to a particularly insidious type of spontaneous decay. They became rotten with knowledge and burst like a ripe fruit scattering its seeds, or, perhaps more exactly, like incendiary bombs spewing flaming fragments, and the fragments, in turn, passing critical mass, themselves exploding. In the end there remained the dead cinders of once bright fields of human endeavor.

It was these sterile things that the lone research drone examined. They had one all sufficient virtue: they were small, and, at least, a man could tell, in a limited way, where he was going, although without knowing whether he was blazing a trail or fol-

lowing one. And these rare students, these latter-day scientists, continued, largely through inertia, or perhaps clouded sense of destiny, to explore fruitless bypaths, not seeing to what use the material discovered could be put, not divining what relation it bore to the vast accrual of kindred knowledge, not even realizing that it was only a further contribution to the process of fragmentation that had brought men to their knees before the incomprehensible.

And, at length, the student would emerge from the academic burrow to brandish before the satiated sight of mankind a gargantuan study of the effect of increased calcium content on Kentucky Blue Grass over 27 generations, the sex life of a sub-species of the tsetse fly, or a cultural analysis of the natives of the upper Ubangi during the fourth century, B.C., that would be stored on a sagging shelf to mould away, unread, unseen, unknown.

THE mathematicians were little better off. They frittered their time away on perpetually new systems—if they were new—to describe exactly the movement of billiard balls traveling over tremendously contorted surfaces. They amused themselves by concocting numerous expressions of fantastic worlds, of no practical application, where none, or few, commonly accepted axioms applied. At length there were worlds upon worlds, upon worlds. They derived the mathematical relationship between the curvature of light and the growth of the date palm. They pounced upon any series of phenomena no matter how ill-related in reality, and ordered them into one formula.

And, of course, the libraries were degenerate, shot through with the most colossal disorganization. Even libraries that attempted to accumulate material only of limited scope

were eventually inundated by the paper flood. No one knew how much was known or even where to look for it.

The number of works of fiction staggered the imagination. Writers broke off into "schools"; the "schools" subdivided like amoebae. Little cliques arose, usually geographically circumscribed, to carry the banner "*Art pour L'Art.*" And they, too, sank into the quagmire, and still the robot presses rolled. There were uncounted millions of volumes: none could or dared make a selection of the fifty, hundred, or even thousand best: there was no vest-pocket bookshelf guaranteed to produce excellence in all affairs human and divine. There were enough books of sheer genius to provide reading fodder for ten lifetimes. New ones were added daily, but who would bother to pull them out, even to scan the title pages?

And last of all there was The Philosophy: generally accepted as the last frontier; the only place where the human mind could escape from the shackles of the presses. But, alas, even it, too, was lost! The Philosophy, along with everything else, was stagnate. Denied the nourishment of creative thought, The Philosophy did nothing more than worry old bones and excavate theories. The only intellectual direction that the thoughtful gentlemen manifested was that curiously futile circling that comes from chasing one's own tail. But to the bitter end they persisted, carrying their tattered banner forward: "The Last Frontier of Knowledge!"

Edward Barnett knew all this. And he realized, almost from instinct, that there was very little to be done about it. That is not to say there were no "corrective measures," however; there were. They were almost as numerous as the sands of the shore. Two will serve to illustrate.

There was General Synthesis, familiarly known as GS. But, of

course, things had gone too far for synthesis, and any attempt was foredoomed to failure. Any rational effort only dragged the student deeper and deeper into the peat bog of learning. In the absence of a rational method, the GS hit upon what might loosely be called the metaphysical approach. That involved, merely, a direct and intimate communication with the First Being. Having established such a channel, as their logic demonstrated, all things else must necessarily follow. It was fine cough medicine. But only the leaders were ever in on the direct two-way.

There was the "Burn the Books Club," as it was called by the opposition. Basically, the BBC was a political party of little or no consequence but of wide membership. The chief reason for its negligible influence was its diffuse and disunited nature. Its chief precept was: "Let's turn back the clock to the Golden Days when knowledge, if incorrect, was at least decently and respectably limited.

The question of how far to turn it back gave rise to the disputes. The left said: "Let's purge all the books and start over from scratch." The center said: "Let's purge some, save some." (But of course there was no general agreement on *which* ones.) The right said: "Let us not be hasty. Let us take all (or part) of them and bury them in deep vaults so that they will be available, from time to time, for future reference." These latter gentlemen were known as the "have your cake and eat it too" section.

Such was the state of human affairs. But the state of humans, themselves, was, if possible, even more distressing.

But from the confusion, Edward Barnett could discern one unalterable fact: that civilization and humanity were dying.

The reasons were as simple as reasons can be in affairs human: too

many metal servants, too little work, and absolutely no ambition.

The past bequeathed them a self-oiling mechanism to supply their wants; the past forwarded an immensity of knowledge that dragged them under. Every convenience was at hand. So was the period after which there is nothing.

The birthrate cascaded downward. Brutally, there was no longer any need for children.

Now, for the first time, humans could afford to be really selfish. They were. Since they didn't want to be bothered with children, they weren't. Fearing overpopulation, they destroyed the birth machines. As the politicians explained: "It is the easiest way to avoid another war."

The people, of course, after their various fashions, were sublimely happy.

Strangely, however, the energetic Edward Barnett was not.

He would point, with eyes agleam, to the far stars. And his friends would answer: "What for, fur gosh sake? We've got everything we want."

And Edward Barnett would shake his head sadly.

HE READ long and deeply in history, turning dusty pages rapidly, far into the night, seeing marvelous expanses pregnant with emotion unfolding before him. After reviewing thousands and thousands of years, he came to the conclusion that there was something noble about man's struggle to master the universe. It wasn't the goal so much as the progressing, not the reward, but the battle. There was, in the past, an amount of love, hate, excitement, glory, pathos, victory and defeat whose worth was impossible to balance against any transitory system. Something was in it too beautiful to be allowed to perish. In short, the future deserved the same glut of living that the past had enjoyed. And ob-

vously, under the present arrangement it wasn't going to get it.

He formulated his Plan, and he dedicated himself.

People, here and there, were still having children. Chiefly for the novelty of it. But, after a couple of years, the novelty usually wore off, and the children—as in his own case—were turned over to the robots for care and feeding.

He knew, this intelligent Mr. Barnett, that if he asked politely enough, he could usually get custody of the little tykes.

In a very few months he had over a hundred, all less than two years old.

Next he located an isolated island in the warm western ocean. It had been uninhabited for many years. It was a beautiful green gem set in a field of restless azure. Sparkling, diamond-like sand. Natural clearings, rich, black soil. Heavy jungle, hung with fruit. Clear, cool water, purling between mossy banks. Fish and small, harmless animals. Gay plumed birds.

He moved his children there and placed them in custody of a single robot whose speech mechanism he had wrecked with thoroughness.

In eight years there were only forty left. The powerful law of the jungle had taken its toll, even in such a lovely spot. Which, while unfortunate, was necessary; he needed only the physically fit, the strong, the vital. Over sixty had died, for a robot, unspecialized, is a poor doctor. And those who remained were self-dependent; for when a robot divides its impartial attention among many, none come to rely upon it.

When they were entering their eleventh year, he removed the robot and left them to their own devices. Completely unlearned, uncorrupted, and savage.

Getting the ship built was absurdly easy. What remained of the government indifferently authorized him to use whatever robot spe-

cialists and however much material that he needed. They neither asked nor cared for what purpose. He prevailed upon several obscure students, flattered that their talents should be recognized, talents that were the results of lifetimes spent burrowing slowly outward through the known, into giving him the necessary technical assistance. Within a year he was prepared for his journey.

Old astronomical tomes revealed his destination: a new world, much like the present one, with no highly advanced life forms, that, while undoubtedly harsher than the present island, would serve to nourish the race of men.

He blanketed the quiet western island with a harmless gas, collected his unconscious charges, placed them in their special room, lowered the temperature, pumped in the suspension gas, and was ready to depart.

He blasted off, to quit forever a world that would eventually be devoid of human life and would finally clank its aimless mechanical way into silence and rust.

The journey took twelve years. He had nothing to do but send the robot in occasionally to inject his children with prepared fluid. After the last injection, he put the robot in the evacuator and forced it out into the cold of space.

EDWARD BARNETT turned for the last time from his children. They, at least, would have an opportunity for a new life. And another race of man would work its slow way, nobly, from age to age.

A future that seemed as real to him as the past, a future filled with hate and love, victory and defeat, lay before them. He left that future behind him and sat down at the controls.

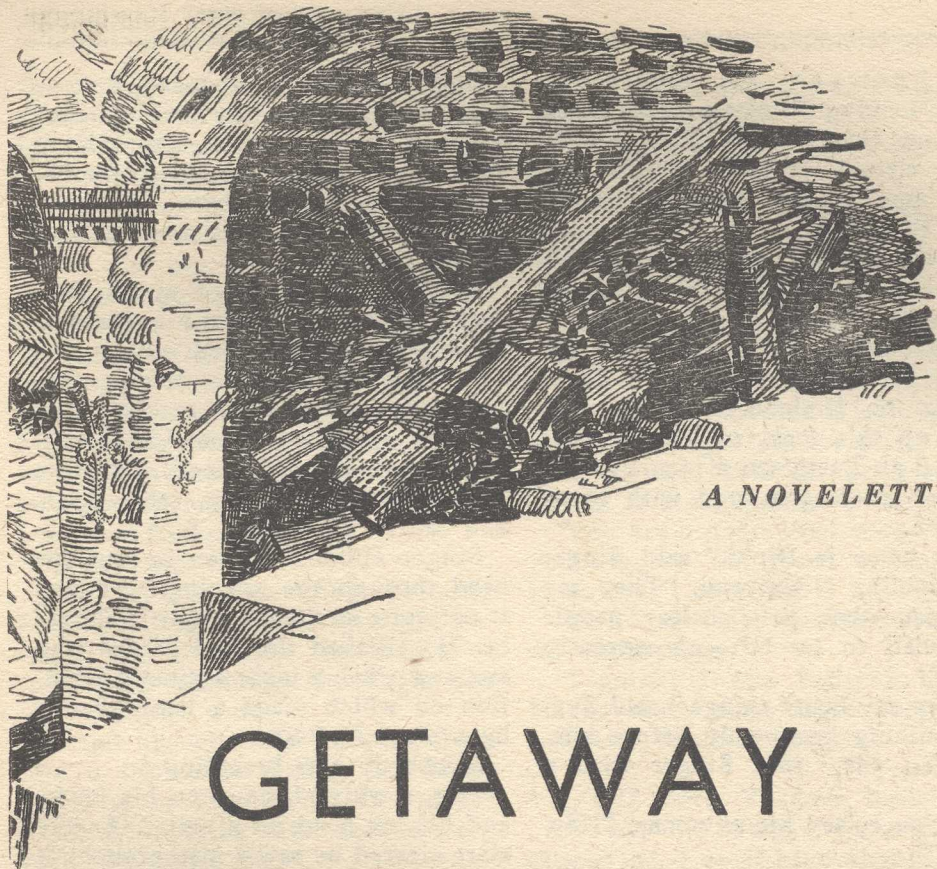
One of the children, hardier than the rest, had awakened in time to see

(Continued on page 91)



Myoslunged with his dagger, but Singer caught his wrist and they grappled.

By L. SPRAGUE de CAMP



A NOVELETTE

GETAWAY ON KRISHNA

There was a secret to winning that mad race over the ice-cap of this distant planet—a secret that one disguised Earthman knew instinctively and the natives never suspected!

SINGER took a quick look up and down the street. Few were abroad in the long spring twilight, especially since a light snow had begun and the wind whipped a thin surface-drift over the cobbles. Nothing to hold a footprint yet, so he'd be sweet

for a while before the Johns mooched along.

Hoping the stories of Syechas's hospitality to fugitives were true, he darted through the door with more agility than one would expect of a man of his bulk. Inside, the sweet smell of *nyomigë* met his nose. Luckily he didn't have to worry about letting that drug get him. A differ-

ence between the superficially human-looking Krishnans and Earthmen was that instead of giving the latter visions of love, wealth, and other fine things, *nyomigē* simply made them sick.

Syechas loomed in the gloom, his shaven skull reflecting feeble yellow lamplight. "Yes?"

Singer swept off his heavy fur cap, baring his own polished pate. Since coming to Nichnyamadze he had taken up this local custom, because it saved an Earthman a picnic in the form of messing around with green hair-dye.

"My name is Dinki," said Singer in stumbling Nichnyami. "They say that you—that you shelter people who wish to be left—uh—severely alone."

"They say many things," said Syechas bulking immovably before him.

"I can pay," said Singer with a smile.

Syechas raised his antennae. "How much?"

Singer felt into his surcoat and brought out one of the two platinum candlesticks.

"Hm," said Syechas, narrowing heavy-lidded eyes as he held the bauble up to the lamp in the wall-bracket. "This is from the high priest's palace." He turned the object so that the jewels threw little sharp beams of light here and there. "It would be risky to sell."

"Still," said Singer. "It should be worth—let us say—sixty days' lodging at—at a minimum? In strict—uh—privacy?"

"Have you another?" said Syechas, looking at Singer's big gold ring.

"No," replied Singer, feeling the other hard against his chest.

"Then make it forty days' minimum and I will take you."

"Done."

"Come then." Syechas led down the dark corridor. From the rooms on either side came silence or various

sounds: song here, mutterings there. Singer would like to have dropped an eave, since Syechas was said to have a finger in every conspiratorial pie in the city of Vyutr. However, he dared not annoy his new landlord by lagging.

Up a flight of dingy stairs they went; up another; into a room containing an unmade bed and a few crude movables. Syechas took a step-ladder out of the closet and set it up directly under a trapdoor in the ceiling, climbed, and rapped. Then he pushed up the trapdoor, came down, and said: "Up there."

Singer climbed. When he put his head through the opening he found it not quite so dark as an attic should be. He climbed the rest of the way and saw why: a table against a partition on which stood a lamp shaded by a piece of board.

Somebody was breathing.

Singer whirled, hand on his knife, and hit his head on a rafter. As the stars cleared he saw a man crouching in the gloom with a thing in his hand.

"Who are you?" said Singer.

"I might ask the same question."

"*Stsa!*" came Syechas's heavy voice. "Carve each other not; you're in like condition. Dinki, I'll fetch you a pallet. Have you supped?"

"No," said Singer.

"Very well." Sounds indicated that Syechas was securing the ladder. "Close the trap, and open not save on my knock: two, and again three."

"All right now," said Singer. "As I'm a—a fugitive like yourself, you can put up that thing. What is it, a pistol?" He picked the board off the table, so that the little oil-lamp shone unimpeded.

HE SAW a short man with a flat oriental-looking face and shaven head—typical Nichnyami. The man looked younger than Singer. However, you couldn't tell with Krishnans, who, lacking the benefits of

Earthly science, seldom surpassed a century and a half, Earth time. The man held what he now saw to be a cocked crossbow-pistol. He shook out the bolt, let down the string, and said:

"As you see, no. Where should I get the magic weapons of the Earthmen?" Then after a pause: "Syechas played me foul, putting another in my suite—" (he indicated the attic with a faint smile) "—when I'd paid him for exclusive use. But he has us by the antennae. Whence hail you, stranger? From your accent I'd say not from Nichnyamadze."

"You're right. I—"

Singer paused, watching the other twirl one finger round his right antenna, and then take that organ of smell between thumb and finger and tug it gently, thrice.

Singer casually did likewise. This was a high-sign among Earthmen traveling in disguise on the planet Krishna, implying their feelers were false and glued on.

"Do you speak Portuguese?" said the stranger in that tongue.

"*Sim, senhor,*" replied Singer in the language of the spaceways. "Enough to get by."

"Was your original language by any chance English?"

Singer's plump face took on a broad grin as he thrust out a beefy hand. "Good! Shake on it, buddy!"

The other man shook with a steely grip, saying: "Are you English?"

"D'you take me for a bleeding Limey? Hell no, I'm an Australian! But ain't it a bang of a thing to yarn in good old English language again?"

"Sure is," said the man with a faintly ironical grin for which Singer could see no reason. "What's your name?"

"Born Cuthwin Singer, but my pals calls me 'Dinky.' Yours?"

"I'm Earl Okagamut."

"The Earl of *what*?"

"No; that's my name. Okagamut. Earl Okagamut."

"Oh. How'd you land in this hell-hole?"

"Studying for a Ph. D.," said Okagamut.

"That don't sound reasonable, now. Explain."

"Sure. I'm studying for a degree in xenanthropology, and for my thesis I took Krishnan religious customs. By a little bribery and a lot of damn foolishness I got into the purity ceremony in the Fprochan Temple, disguised as a Kangandite priest."

"You are a doer! And they caught you digging the jewel out of the idol's eye, I suppose?"

"No; they only worship geometrical abstractions."

"I know; I was Yadjye's butler. Maybe that's what makes 'em such wowsers. What happened?"

"**Y**OU were Yadjye's butler? It was old Yadjye himself who caught me. I must have turned right when I should have turned left, or gotten up when I should have prostrated myself, for the first thing I knew the high priest was yelling 'Sacrilege!' and a hundred minor Kangandites, not being supposed to shed blood, were trying to strangle me with the belt-cords of their robes."

"How'd you get out?" cried Singer excitedly.

"This." Okagamut whisked out his blade: slightly curved, too long for a knife though rather short for a sword, with a fancy knuckle-guard. "I had to prick a couple, for which my next incarnation will no doubt be in the body of an *unha*. Luckily I got out before the temple guards were alerted, and came here. How about you?"

"Oh, nothing much about me," said Singer with an air of false modesty. "But since you insist, I had a good thing at Novorecife and married a

cute babe, when who blows in from Earth but another wife I'd forgot about, complete with documents to prove it. Well, you know how it is there—for a Brazilian, Abreu's the worst wowser I ever seen. . . ."

"I know," said Okagamut. "Being scared of his own wife, he won't stand for liberties on the part of anyone else."

"That's the ticket. I thought it wise to up stick before he put his Johns on me hammer, and ever since then I've been a drifter wandering the face of Krishna and living by what wits I've got. By devious methods I wormed my way into the household of His Sacredness High-Priest Yadjye, Archbishop or Chief Rabbi or whatever you call him of the Church of the Divine Space, otherwise the Kangandite Cult, for the Diocese of Nichnyamadze."

"As his butler?" asked Okagamut.

"Well, yes and no. Having once been an undertaker I knew something of forms and ceremonies. Therefore he employed me as a master of protocol, to tell the temple virgins when to bring on the roast and such. Only poor Yadjye can't eat roast, being head of a religion that disbelieves in meat-eating and any other kind of fun you might mention."

"How about the temple virgins? Are they?"

"They are; or at least they were before I came along. They serve him at table in rotation, you see. Well, there was a sweet little sort starting her training, named Lüdey, and we will not bandy a woman's name except to say that everything was as jolly as could be until she got the idea that I should take her away from it all to see the world. Several worlds, in fact, for in the course of the proceedings she had naturally got on to the fact that I was an Earthman. I explained how I could not get off Krishna unless they changed the law about bigamy, for

Novorecife was the only spaceport and Abreu's troopers would catch me if I tried it.

"But the situation deteriorated, as that bloke Shakespeare said, until she departed with a toss of her lovely head and a threat to tell Uncle Yadjye about the viper in his bosom. Not waiting to argue the toss I shook the dust of the Archepiscopal palace from my boots and—here I am! Now what'll we do?"

"Don't know. How are you fixed for money?"

"Oh," said Singer cautiously, "I copped one of Yadjye's candlesticks and gave it to Syechas for board and keep."

"Is that all?"

"It's all I'm telling about. I didn't have time to pack my luggage. How about you?"

"Somewhat the same, except that I had some cash on me. I can't stay here much longer or I won't have enough for the kind of escape I'm planning."

"What's your idea?" said Singer eagerly.

"Well, I don't know. I'd planned it for one man, and it'll cost more than I've got with two."

Singer looked hard at Okagamut. While this man seemed a fair sort, Singer was not free from prejudices. Finally he made up his mind.

"Look, pal, let's take a chance," he said, bringing out the other candlestick and his small change and laying them on the floor. "We can trust each other farther than we can Syechas, anyhow. Part up your oscar and we shall see what we can do."

Okagamut brought out a money-belt. They counted coins and estimated the value of the candlestick, and were just securing their wealth when five raps on the trapdoor told them Syechas was bringing supper.

After they had closed the trap again Singer beamed at the tray with honest pleasure. "Meat, by God!

After a month of greens I thought I'd never see real chow again. How does he do it?"

Okagamut shrugged. "If he can get *nyomnigë* I guess he can bootleg a little meat. Contraband is his business."

"Including us," said Singer. "Look, what's this escape plan?"

"Had any polar experience?"

"Having been a professional tour-ist guide, I've done a little mountaineering. Why?"

"I thought we might buy a sled and cut across the Psheshuva. I know the President of Olñega."

"Hm," said Singer, not sure he liked the plan. The Psheshuva was a spur of the South Polar Plateau which extended north a thousand *hoda* or so, separating the Kingdom of Nichnyamadze from the Republic of Olñega. Singer had never driven a *fsyok*-sled, and his mountaineering was confined to a few slides down an easy slope on skis. "How will you make arrangements?"

"Syechas can take care of most of it. Claims he can get us out of Vyutr—for a consideration, of course."

"What's he going to use, a glider? With these winds a big kite could lift us over the wall."

"I suspect a tunnel. How much trail can you take?"

Singer said: "I've had a bit of graft in my day, though I've lived an easy life lately." He patted his paunch. "That'll work off, I dare say."

"How about arms?"

Singer shook his head. "Nothing but me eating-dirk. I never could get the knack of these silly swords. Why, one bomb or gun—"

"I know, but we're on Krishna, where they don't have such things. Maybe it's just as well, because we'll have to watch our weight closely."

SYECHAS said: "Myosl will take you through the tunnel. Then you have a three-days' walk into the

mountains. When you reach Dye-nük's house, you can get your needs from there on."

Myosl led them, muffled in furs, out Syechas's back door into the cold night; along a winding path among rubbish heaps and through fences, and down steps to another door. A lock squealed, and they were in complete darkness.

Myosl snapped one of those flint-and-steel contraptions and lit a small candle-lamp. The reflector threw a weak beam into a tunnel walled with rough stone down which water dripped from whiskers of mold and moss. Singer had to bend, and the mud sucked at his boots. Every few paces their shabby-looking guide looked back at them.

Okagamut said softly: "This must run for kilometers."

"Right-o. I should think we'd be outside the walls now. I don't—" Singer paused as Myosl bent another of those looks on him.

"Go on. I'm sure he can't understand English."

"I was about to say, I don't trust that joker. Wouldn't it be a go, now, if after our host back there had got all the brass he could wring out of us, we was to be jumped in these here catacombs and robbed of the rest?"

They plodded on, their breaths making plumes of vapor in the cold air. The silence was broken only by the drip of water and the squilching of their boots in the mud. The place stank.

"It's rising," said Okagamut.

The tunnel not only rose, but also made a couple of right-angled turns and ended with a door. Myosl took another look behind him and opened the door.

Beyond the room was a small space like a closet and another door. Through this door they found themselves in a kind of underground meeting-room, far gone in ruin. At

the far end a broken door hung askew on one hinge. Through the triangular opening Singer could see steps going up and moonlight coming down.

Okagamut said: "See that helmet in stone carved on the altar? This must be a secret chapel of Qondyorr, the old Gozashtando god of war. After the Kangandites got control of the kingdom, they drove the other cults underground, in both senses. Wish I could get access to the records of—"

Myosl whistled sharply.

"Watch it, pal!" cried Singer, reaching for the clasp of his cloak.

TWO men stepped out of the shadows. Each ran at one of the Earthmen with a sword. Myosl laid down his lantern, drew a dagger, and danced after them.

Skipping back to stay out of reach of the point, Singer tripped and fell on his back. His assailant lunged. Singer knocked the blade aside with his forearm and shot his heel out against the man's belly. The man reeled back and crashed into Myosl. By the time they had recovered, Singer was up again, the clasp finally undone.

"Come on, ringtails!" said Singer, whipping the cloak into a roll and swinging it with both hands. The heavy fur-lined garment made a fine club. *Whang!* The nearest attacker's sword went flying across the room. *Whang!* Myosl was knocked sideways.

Somebody screamed. Beyond his assailants Singer saw Okagamut's man thrashing on the floor. Okagamut turned towards them. Myosl lunged with his dagger; Singer caught his wrist and they grappled, Myosl trying to cut through Singer's glove. The other attacker squared off with his fists at Okagamut, who led with his left. The Krishnan countered with a straight right which the

Earthman dodged, and the latter came back with a right, almost at the same instant, to the side of the Krishnan's jaw. *Crack!* The Krishnan sat down.

Singer brought his leg into play and sent Myosl staggering back. Then he got out his own knife, a special number with a knobby guard that made a fine knuckle-duster. As Myosl recovered from the kick, Singer punched his face with the guard and then let him have the point.

"You're late," Singer told Okagamut as Myosl collapsed. "No, wait, the other's getting up!"

Both rushed at the remaining Krishnan, who however was now on his feet and using them. He leaped through the doorway and up the stairs. The Earthmen tripped and stumbled after him. The stairs, half buried in moss and stones, led up to what must have once been a hidden entrance on the surface, long since fallen to pieces. Though all three moons bathed the snow-spotted landscape, the Krishnan could not be seen. A half-hoda away rose the wall of Vyutr.

Okagamut said: "Maybe he's behind one of these boulders or bushes, but even if we flushed him the racket would bring the guard out."

"Good-o," said Singer. "Let's see what we've got below."

The two Krishnans in the chapel were dead, one with the hilt of Okagamut's short sword sticking out of his ribs. The blade must have stuck in a bone, for Okagamut had to take the hilt in both hands and set his foot on the corpse to jerk the blade out.

"That's the trouble with Krishnans," said Singer. "They look human except for details like the ears and feelers, but you never can tell where their bones and vital organs are." He picked up the sword of the man who had run away. "You know, Earl,

maybe swords ain't so silly here after all. I think I'll keep this article. Of course if I had me lady from Bristol. . . ." He examined the cheap sword, whose scabbard had fled with its owner. On the other hand the attacker whom Okagamut had killed had broken his sword.

"His lunge went over my shoulder and hit the wall," Okagamut explained. "What do you make of this attack?"

Singer fitted the odd sword into the dead man's scabbard. A little tight, but it would have to do.

"Simple robbery, near as I can see," he said. "I don't know this character here. Still, we'd best push off. I say, there ought to be a fortune in smuggling modern arms to these bushmen!"

"Been tried. The Interplanetary Council goes to any length to stop it. There was the King of Zamba's crate of machine-guns—but that's a long story."

"What's the idea of that crazy I. C. regulation?"

"To keep Krishnans from exterminating each other, I suppose. Still, a smart Earthman can use his brains without actually breaking the rule."

"Like the way you stopped that thug? If I'm not mistaken, the pugilistic maneuver you employed was a right cross, which takes practice and is only for experts. How about it?"

"I was in the ring once," said Okagamut. "Before I went to college. When I was a freshman the coach found out and had me in the gym showing the boys how to do rights over lefts. Funny thing, nobody ever tried to haze me."

"I can see why," said Singer.

SINGER said: "We ought to come to this chap's hut soon."

They had stopped to rest where the road crossed a spur of the range leading up to the Psheshuva. The clear air allowed a view over many miles

of hills covered with bushy growths, rolling away to the snowy plain beyond. Vyutr was a smudge on the horizon.

"We'd better before we run out of grub," said Okagamut. "I'll ask the next smitrot-herder."

The herder gripped his club suspiciously, while his fsyok rose to its six legs and yowled threateningly. When assured that they had no designs on his herd he told them: "A little further, my masters; see yon hill? Just out of sight over it, take a trail to the right. . . ."

They took up the weary walk again. At last they found the hut. Their knock was answered by a short gnome of a Krishnan with frayed antennae and white hair. "Who be ye?"

"Are you Dyenük?" said Okagamut.

"Answer not one question with another, if ye'd do business with me."

"We are the men from Syechas."

"Prove it," said the gnome.

"Here's a letter from him. Uh, you're holding it upside down."

"So I be, heh heh. Come in, come in. Mayey!" he shouted.

He led them into the house, rudely furnished but comfortable, solidly built, and too big to be called a hut. A flat-faced Nichnyamadze girl, clad only in the smitrot-skin pants worn by the country folk of both sexes in this cold region, looked up from her housecleaning to giggle. A second one appeared. "My daughters Mayey and Pyesatül. Good girls ever since they were hatched. Ye'd like rest and food ere we take up the business?"

"You are right, sir," said Okagamut, sinking into a chair and tugging at a boot.

"So your name's Mayey?" said Singer to the first girl, grinning. "Now that is a nice name. I think not that I ever heard it before."

"Oh, great lord, you mock a poor mountain maid. 'Tis common."

"Well, that could be, as I have never—uh—been hereabouts before. A pretty name goes with a pretty face and other things. . . ."

Okagamut said: "Drink your kvad, Dinky, and leave Mayey alone. Have you got all the stuff for us, Dyenük?"

The gnome counted on fingers. "The overboots, mittens, and other items of clothing, aye. The sled, skis and poles, tent, stove, and suchlike items of gear, aye. The *horashevë*, not yet ready, but with your help, good sirs—"

"What is *horashevë*?" said Singer.

"What we'd call pemmican on Earth," said Okagamut.

"Well, what's *that*?"

"It's what we'll be eating. Go on, Dyenük."

"But now, sirs, I come to the sad part of the tale, as it says in the story of the princess with two heads. For a disease has afflicted the *fsyok*-kennels of this land within the last two ten-nights, so that I can spare you but five *fsyokn* to pull your sled."

"Five!" said Okagamut.

"Aye, but big and strong. They'll manage everywhere save on steep slopes, and as for that, such lusty youths as yourselves should make no obstacle thereof."

"We're in a fix," said Okagamut to Singer. "I was counting on nine. We'll have to push the damned sled halfway to Olfiëga."

"Slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, as that chap Napoleon said," replied Singer cheerfully. "O well, they say exercise is good for one." And he left the technicalities to his companion while he turned his charm on Mayey.

PYESATUL announced dinner, during which Okagamut and the oldster chattered about weather, weight of equipment, food required per man per day, and other factors in polar travel. As they talked in

local units of measurement, Singer could make nothing of it. Dyenük also inveighed against the tyranny of the Kangandite cult, who by their tabus on meat had impoverished honest herders:

"The revenue from the hides, sirs, barely pays my taxes: wherefore for tobacco and such simples I must sell through folk like Syechas—I always hitherto a veritable pillar of legality. . . ."

Afterwards Okagamut said: "With your kind permission we'll retire, omitting supper to be up early on the morrow."

Singer murmured to Mayey: "See you later, little one," before his companion hauled him away to their room.

When Okagamut seemed to be breathing regularly, Singer got up, slipped on his shirt and pants, and tiptoed to the door.

"What are you up to, Dinky?" came a sharp whisper.

"Nothing to fret about. Just a date with the farmer's daughter."

"Damn you! Move and I'll put a bolt through you!"

The lamp came on, and Singer saw that his friend did indeed have his crossbow-pistol in hand, loaded and cocked.

"What the flopping hell's bothering you, pal?" said Singer. "Don't get off your bike over this!"

"You leave those girls alone, see?"

"And what business is it of yours, may I inquah?"

"Anything you do while you're with me's my business. If you make a pass at those girls, I'll kill you. We've got enough troubles without leaving some broken-hearted Jane to put Yadjye's cops on our track."

"But I was only going to give her a bit of a smodge—good clean fun—I can't really get her in trouble, you know, being as I am of another species."

"You heard me. If you don't like

it you can stay here while I take the team. I can get across the Psheshuva alone, and you can't. Get me?"

"Oh, hell!" Singer pulled off his shirt, wadded it up, and threw it in a corner.

NEXT MORNING, his feelings still hurt, Singer ate in glowering silence, speaking to Okagamut only when he had to and then in curt monosyllables. He cast furtive glances at the girls and thought of what might have been. He did not, however, plan to circumvent Okagamut's tabu; the damned little spoilsport might smear him, and in any case he'd never get to Olñega.

When Singer would have relaxed over his pipe after breakfast, Okagamut said briskly: "Turn to, chum; we've got work."

Dyenük led them outside to a shed wherein a mess of gear was piled on and around a big sled. The herder proffered mittens and overboots until he had fitted both of them. Then he brought forth two pairs of short skis shod on the bottom with tvortsevëhide, the bristles pointing aft.

"Be sure your bindings are tight, my lords," he said. "I once rented skis to a man of Vyutr who insisted on going out on the glacier with loose bindings. Naturally he floundered in the snow, without control, and when a pudamef crept out of a crevasse the poor lad could do nought."

"What's a pudamef?" said Singer.

"A kind of snow-dragon they have around the edges of the plateau," said Okagamut. "Dyenük, how about poles?"

"We use these," said their host, getting down a spear with a ski-pole disk near its butt-end.

Okagamut swung the object. "Too heavy for one hand, but if we're likely to meet pudamefn it will be useful. We'll just have to learn to ski with one pole."

Dyenük explained the operation of the tent and other pieces of equipment, then took them out to a lean-to built against the side of the shed. "The horashevë for the fsyokn is finished," he said, "but not yours. 'Twould have been, save that one of the beasts slipped his tether two nights gone and feasted on the man-food. You, Dinki, shall dice this haunch of unha while your friend stirs the fat-cauldron and I weigh out ingredients. Girls! Girls! How are your biscuits coming?"

Singer looked in dismay at the pile of bricks of composition food already stacked against the shed. "Good gods, have we got to haul all that?"

"Absolutely," said Okagamut. "For the work that's ahead of us, you need at least 5,000 calories a day."

Singer chopped at slabs of meat and heaps of dried vegetables with a knife until his fingers ached, then stirred the fat in the rendering-pot until his arm ached and the stench nearly suffocated him, then mixed ingredients until he could hardly stand for weariness. They took but a few minutes out for lunch. Dyenük's daughters brought out a huge pile of biscuits and smaller amounts of other Krishnan foods, which they began packing into leather bags, together with bricks of frozen horashevë. Then they packed the smaller bags into two large canvas containers.

Okagamut indicated one of these, saying: "Okay, Dinky, that's your grub for the trip."

"Mine?" said Singer, hefting the container. "Gad, she must weigh sixty or seventy pounds. That's a year's chow!"

"Remember that when you're tempted to eat over your daily ration. . . . What is it, Pyesatül?"

"Lord," said the younger girl, "I know not if I should disturb you, but yonder come a party of men towards our stading."

Sure enough, far off, where the

plain first began to break up into the rolling foothills that led up to their present height, a little group of black specks was creeping over the landscape.

"Have you got a telescope?" Okagamut asked Dyenük.

"Aye, I'll fetch it."

They took turns looking through the glass. The black specks were undoubtedly men on ayas.

"What'll we do?" said Singer. "Run for it?"

"We've got to pack the sled first," said Okagamut. "It'll take them some hours to reach here, won't it, Dyenük?"

"Aye." They hauled the sled out of the shed and began stowing and lashing their gear to it.

"What can I do?" said Singer, feeling useless.

"Keep out of our way," snapped Okagamut. Singer's anger at his companion, which had died down during the day's work, flared up again. He stamped off.

It seemed to Singer that they took an interminable time checking and rearranging their gear. Finally they lashed a tarpaulin over the whole, and manhandled the sled around to the front of the house.

"Bear a hand!" barked Okagamut. Although offended, Singer complied. The weight of the loaded sled amazed him.

"It'll lighten as we go," said Okagamut.

"Huh," said Singer. "It's a nice deal that it should be heaviest at the start, when we're going uphill."

THEY went around to the kennels, where Dyenük handed Singer the leash of one of the fsyokn and told him to lead the animal back to the sled. Singer did not like the wide mouth and fangs of the creature, a big long-haired cousin of the eshun, which in more equatorial nations performed the office of tame dog. The

beast, however, seemed eager to be hitched up and with its six powerful legs almost pulled Singer off his feet. It scudded through the thin slushy snow, Singer bouncing behind.

Dyenük said: "Keep those two apart, lest they fight!"

While the animals yowled, Okagamut paid off Dyenük, practically exhausting his and Singer's resources. Singer impulsively tossed his ring to Dyenük. "Give it to whichever girl marries first," he said. "Cheerio!"

They looked towards the plains. The black specks were nearer.

Okagamut cracked his whip and shouted "*Kshay!*" The five fsyokn dug in their paws and pulled.

"*Dzat!*" They did a column-right at the road. Lumps of slush flew back over the sled; the Earthmen had to run. Singer found he could climb hills faster with his fur-shod skis than with the ordinary kind, since one could advance by simply sliding them parallel without herringboning.

He was beginning to puff when the fsyokn settled down to a more normal pace. It was late in the long Krishnan day. In these latitudes it never got really dark, save for a short time around midnight in winter; the rest of the time there was either a low sun or twilight. The seasons differed but little because of the slight inclination of the planet's axis.

The layer of pearly cloud that covered the sky made it hard to tell direction, and soon the light became too dim to see those black specks far behind.

"By the gods," said Singer after a couple of hours, "I'm softer than I thought."

"Getting tired?"

"I can go as far as you, Mr. Okagamut."

"Okay. We want to do all we can before stopping."

They did halt for an evening meal.

Okagamut said: "Watch it, there. One biscuit's all you get."

"But I'm jolly starved!"

"I know, but you'll be hungrier yet if you don't stick to your ration. I warned you."

"Wowser!" muttered Singer. While he thought he was coming to dislike this reserved and competent young man, he didn't want to provoke him into leaving him flat in this white wilderness.

They went on again and reached the foot of Shtojë Glacier. Okagamut said: "We can wait here till morning, or start up the glacier and put a little more distance between us and Yadye's boys before it gets dark. It'll be hard going, with crevasses, but if you'll take a chance I will."

"I'm with you," said Singer, and they started up.

On the steeper slopes both had to push on the rear of the sled while the animals heaved and panted in front. At times they even slid backwards. They passed crevasses: great ice-chasms dropping off into blue darkness. Singer shuddered as they threaded their way around them.

When Singer thought he would drop from exhaustion, Okagamut said: "We'll camp here; it's beginning to blow."

A breeze was raising an ankle-high drift. They found a level spot, staked out the animals, and set up the tent slowly and with much fumbling, for they were unused to their gear. The wind rose, making it hard to stake the tent and filling the air with a whirling, blinding, stinging cloud of snowflakes. They hastily fed the animals, pushed the sled so that one of its runners rested on the windward flap of the tent, and crawled through the tent-sleeve just as the wind began to blow in earnest. The tent-walls flapped with a deafening drumlike sound. Okagamut pulled off his footgear and pants and

slid into his sleeping-bag. Singer did likewise, looking apprehensively at the snapping cloth over his head.

"I wonder," he said, "when this thing's going to take off."

A snore answered him.

For hours, it seemed, the racket kept him awake despite his fatigue. Then he slept, woke, and slept again. He woke again to find Okagamut preparing a meal. The wind still shrieked and shook the tent.

"How long does a blow like this keep up?" asked Singer.

"A ten-night, maybe."

"Don't pull my leg."

"No, I mean it."

"Won't that give the Johns a chance to catch us?"

Okagamut shook his head. "They can't travel in it either."

THEY dozed the day away, except to crawl out into the drift to feed the fsyokn. The next night was the same; then the wind dropped.

Okagamut crept out through the sleeve and whistled. The fsyokn, looking unhappy with their fur full of icicles, howled a greeting. Singer came out too. The cloud-curtain was rolling back. The wind had in some places scoured off the snow, leaving glare ice, while in others it had packed the snow into wavelike ridges. "Sastrugi," said Okagamut. "Hard going."

"Look!" cried Singer, pointing.

Far down the slope they saw two brown oblongs against the white: tents. There were many fsyokn pegged out, though at the distance they couldn't count them.

"Let's go," said Okagamut.

"How d'you know they're after us? Might be a skiing party."

"I'm not taking a chance."

Although they worked fast, the cold numbed their fingers and the unfamiliar gear resisted their efforts to pack it back into the sled. A couple of specks had detached themselves

from the other encampment and moved closer, growing to men. A faint hail came up the glacier: "You there! Stay where you are!"

"It's them," said Singer, collapsing the tent.

Something whistled and struck the ice with a sharp sound.

"They've got a crossbow," said Okagamut.

"Why not fort up and shoot back with your little bow?"

"Nuts. They'd have us hopelessly outranged. Once we get going they'll never catch us. Here, catch this line and tie it to your belt."

Another missile whistled overhead. Okagamut cracked his whip, and off they went. The sastrugi made their sled pitch like a tugboat in a gale. Singer fell over the ridges and picked himself up until he was sure he was black and blue all over. He looked back and said:

"Those blokes with the bow have stopped, anyhow. The others seem to be breaking camp."

They struggled on. The party behind drew closer, until through his goggles Singer made out two ninefsyok teams, each pulling a heavily-loaded sled, and five men. Sometimes the two Earthmen hit a patch of smooth hard snow and drew ahead; then they'd meet a steep slope or a stretch of sastrugi or a crevassed area and the pursuers would gain.

"Hi!" said Singer. "They've stopped and are running about like a pack of flopping ants!"

Okagamut paused for a look. "Ha! One of their sleds has fallen down a crevasse, and they're trying to haul it out."

"There wasn't no crevasse there when we went over it—or was there?"

"Sure; we've been crossing snow-bridges all morning. With this warmer weather they're melting thin, and they're apt to drop out from under you. That's why we wear skis and

go roped together. I suppose we'd weakened one so that when their heavier teams crossed it it went."

"Ugh," said Singer with a shiver that was not entirely due to the cold.

The pursuers receded to a stippling on the landscape, and then were hidden by the contour of the glacier. The Earthmen slogged away until the low sun slanted towards the horizon again. Singer asked: "How d'you know your way?"

"Sun partly; I hope we don't have another overcast until we reach the plateau. Once we're there, there are mountains we can sight on."

They camped that evening when exhausted, and spent the night taking turns sleeping and watching. Next morning the snow turned slushy and stuck to skis and sled-runners. They had to push the sled, grunting. Singer once thought he saw moving specks on the horizon. The next day was much the same, though the slope became easier. Then another blizzard pinned them for a night, a day, and another night.

SINGER stuck his head out the following morning and said: "Looks like clearing." He dressed, remarking: "At this rate I shan't have any potbelly left when we get to Olíega. Look at these trousers!"

His pants were indeed inches too large around the waist. He looked at himself in his little hand-mirror: his thin hair and abundant beard, once auburn but now greying, were sprouting fast. Okagamut's hair was coming out glossy black, and the man seemed to have no beard to speak of.

"See what they're yelling about, will you, Dinky?" said Okagamut, puttering with the stove. The animals' morning howls had risen to a hysterical pitch.

Singer crawled out to look. He stopped and drew in his breath.

Crawling over the snow came a snaky creature fifteen or twenty

meters long, belonging to the six-legged division of Krishnan land vertebrates. Each leg ended in a large webbed foot with long curved talons. Its reptilian appearance was confused by the fact that it was covered with dense white fur.

Singer yelled "Earl!" snatched his ski-spear from where it stuck upright in the snow, and ran towards the pudamef, which was nearing the sledge-beasts.

The snow-dragon arched its neck and hissed.

Singer threw the spear. It missed and sailed over the creature's back.

He tugged at his sword-hilt. The sword stuck fast. Singer remembered that the scabbard didn't fit. Another tug, harder, did no good.

The snaky white head shot out. Singer leaped back, tripped over a sastruga, and fell, hitting his head on a patch of bare ice. Stars danced in front of his eyes.

The jaws gaped nearer.

A yell, and Okagamut leaped past and lunged with the other spear. Singer saw blood on the white-furred muzzle. Another thrust, into the gaping maw. More blood, and then the creature was backing, hissing like a boiler safety-valve. It turned and crawled off with a clock-worky motion. Okagamut chased it with shouts and menaces until it disappeared among the pressure-ridges.

"Are you all right, Dinky?" said Okagamut.

Singer felt the back of his head and winced. "Outside of a cracked skull or two I'm fine. Threw my spear and missed—"

"I'll get your spear. . . ." Okagamut walked towards where the ski-spear stood with its head buried in the snow.

Then, quick as a flash, he vanished.

"Hey, Earl!" cried Singer, getting up. "Don't do that! I say, where the flopping hell are you?"

He started towards the site of the

disappearance, then, remembering Okagamut's cautions about crevasses, went back to the tent, put on his skis, and set out again.

He found a hole in the snow going down to darkness, just big enough for Okagamut's body. He began enlarging the hole with his hands, calling: "Earl!"

"Pass down a knife!" came a voice from the depths.

Singer went back and got the climbing-rope, tied his knife to the end, and lowered it down the hole. After he had dangled it at various depths, the call came up: "Can't get hold of it. My arms are pinned."

Singer hauled back the knife and stood up, nonplussed. As his eyes swept the horizon they stopped at a group of black specks. He peered for several seconds. No doubt this time.

He fought down the urge to hitch up the team, which he could now drive after a fashion, and race off by himself. Why should both be caught?

HE SHOOK his head to clear away such thoughts and shouted down: "What'll I do now, come down and get you?"

The faint voice came back: "Can you climb a rope?"

"Yes, I've been a ship's painter."

"Okay. First, take off your skis and put on your crampons. Then tie all the skis and poles together to make a deadman, and dig a trench at least a meter deep. Tie the line around the middle of your bundle and bury it. . . ."

Singer raced to carry out instructions. He got the shovel, tied up the bundle, and in less than half an hour was lowering himself down the crevasse by the climbing rope, whose other end was belayed by the deadman.

As the crevasse averaged only a meter wide, he found that by bracing his back against one side and digging the spikes of the crampons

on his feet into the other he hardly needed the rope. The inside of a glacier was the strangest place he had ever been. Sunlight came through the ice as a diffused blue glow. Water dripped somewhere, *plink-plink*, and from deep in the ice came cracking and groaning sounds.

Fifteen meters from the surface he found Okagamut, wedged head downward where the walls shelved together. Bracing his feet, Singer began chipping away with his knife.

"Watch out," said Okagamut. "You don't want to drop me down the rest of the way."

Singer kept on, expecting any minute to hear the whoops of the pursuers. Finally he worked the end of the rope around his companion's torso, tied it securely, and inched his way back up to the surface. Despite the cold, he was soaked with sweat.

The specks on the horizon were bigger.

He heaved on the rope. No good. Heave. No good.

He looked around frantically. The *fsyokn*! While they obeyed him none too well, beggars couldn't be choosers, as that bloke Cicero said. He tied the end of the rope to the sledge-trace and, with difficulty, hitched up the team.

"*Kshay!*" The animals strained at their traces, with no result.

Again, with a crack of the whip. No good. The specks were visibly growing, weren't they?

Again. And again. He used the whip, and with his other hand hauled on the rope himself.

The tension suddenly lessened. Up came Okagamut, until he flopped over the lip of the hole and scrambled to his feet. The *fsyokn*, not having been told to stop pulling, jerked him flat on his face and began dragging him at a run until Singer's shrieks stopped them.

Okagamut felt his right arm, saying: "No bones broken, I think, but

my arm's asleep from having the circulation cut off. Serves me right for running around a glacier without skis—hey, aren't those our friends from *Vyutr*?"

"Right-o."

"Why didn't you tell me? Get the gear stowed, quick!"

"I thought you had enough to worry about, pal," said Singer, pulling up tent-stakes.

The approaching party could now be made out. The howls of their *fsyokn* came across the snow. The two men, the smaller hampered by his paralyzed arm, rushed about stowing their gear.

"They've got us this time, that's no fooling," said Singer.

"Not necessarily. Here, catch this. Put that there. Tie down this corner. Get your skis back on."

"Still think we can escape?"

"Once we get going, I know it. Got everything? *Kshay!*"

Off they went. Okagamut's arm had come to life again. They jogged beside the sled at a dog-trot. Yells, whip-cracks, and howls came from the pursuers.

ON THE Earthmen went, neither gaining nor losing, all morning and part of the afternoon. When they got too exhausted with trotting, they hopped on the sled long enough to catch their breath.

"What's happened back there?" said Singer.

"One of their *fsyokn* has dropped dead, and they're cutting him loose."

"We'd better slow up a bit, lest ours do the same."

After a few minutes at an easier pace, Singer's head stopped spinning and the pounding of his heart abated. Then he said: "Oh!"

"What?"

"Look at that slope!"

"That leads to the plateau. If we can make it we'll have fairly easy going the rest of the way."

As the exhausted animals could not drag the sled up the grade, the men put their shoulders to the rear of the load. Up they went, a step at a time.

The noise neared. Something went *fwht!* "Shooting at us again," panted Okagamut.

The next, thought Singer, would hit right between his shoulder-blades.

Fwh-tunk! The arrow struck the load on the sled. Singer hoped it hadn't punctured their kettle.

Fwht!

"One more heave," gritted Okagamut, "and we'll be out of—uh! They got me!"

Singer, heedless of the archers, seized his companion. "Where?"

"Here!" Okagamut showed the feathered tail of the bolt sticking out of his coat. "Hey, wait!" He pulled the missile out. No blood. "They didn't get me after all; that fur-lined vest Dyenuk sold me must have stopped it!"

They struggled to the top of the slope, missiles scattering more and more widely as the bowmen, in a last effort, shot at higher and higher angles.

At the top they paused for breath, out of range. Singer cried: "They're turning back!"

"I thought they would," said Okagamut.

After a moment of silence, Singer said: "Let's take a spell for some chow and a smoke."

"Okay."

"You know, pal, I had a grouch on you back there at the hut on account of what happened. But now I see it was my fault. You're a swell fellow and a credit to your jolly species, and I'm sorry for the way I acted. Will you shake on it?"

"I'll shake," said Okagamut with a grin.

"By the way, how'd you know they would turn back if you kept ahead of 'em long enough?"

"Hadn't you guessed? It's a matter of logistics. For one thing I'm an Eskimo, brought up on conditions like this. I was born in Kotzebue Sound, and I teach at the University of Alaska.

"I knew that to keep up your strength on the trail you need a high-caloric diet which means a high meat-content. Being vegetarians the Kangandites couldn't do that. They either had to pack such a load of plant foods to get the necessary calories and oil to cook it that their beasts couldn't haul it, or else they'd find themselves running out of grub before they even reached the plateau. Which—" (he jerked his thumb towards the Kangandites, now small specks again) "—is just what happened!"

SEEDS OF FUTURITY

(Continued from page 75)

a white-bearded old man enter a silver—something—that, after a moment, wavered crazily, erupting a rain of fire, danced upward aslant, shattering tree tops, and disappeared in a trail of brilliance.

The child shook his head in mute wonder.

Clear of the atmosphere, Edward Barnett set the controls. Having no place to go, he pointed the nose Outward and twirled the power wheel full open.

Looking back he could see the new world drifting lazily away.

"Another chance," he muttered to himself. "Beginning all over again. Innocent. As innocent as babes."

AVON
FANTASY READER

No. 15

Now on Sale!

(See Back Cover)

CRY WITCH!

(Continued from page 25)

and that the cheeks were white as bone, and that for good reason there were no longer any wrinkles in the domelike forehead.

The Old Man did not speak, which was a kindness, and showed no signs of elation at his victory. Together they paced towards the distant crags. Down the road they passed the little cottage in which the philosopher lived, and the philosopher came out and stood watching them go by. He looked very shriveled and dry and his hair was dusty, his clothes were old-fashioned and very tight. When they were almost past he raised his hand in a jerky salute and went inside and shut the door.

After a while they left the road and cut across the hills past the castle that stands at the head of the valley. On the battlements was a tiny man who waved at them once with his cloak, very solemnly it seemed. At the foot of the crags they passed the cave where the bandit lived, and the bandit stood in the stony mouth and raised his gaudy cap to them in a grave, ironic greeting.

They were all day climbing the crags. By the time they reached the top, night had come. While his companion waited for him, my friend walked back to the crag's edge for a last look at the valley.

It was very dark. The moon had not yet risen. Beyond the village there was a great circle of tiny fires. He puzzled dully as to what caused them.

He felt thin hard fingers touch his shoulder and he heard the Old Man say, "She isn't in the village any more, if that's what you're wondering. An army passed through the valley today. Those are the campfires you see in the distance. She's left the preacher, and the schoolmaster, as much as she ever leaves anyone.

She's gone off with the soldiers."

Then the Old Man sighed faintly and my friend felt a sudden chill, as if he had strayed to the margin of oblivion, and it seemed to him that a coldness had gone out from the Old Man and flowed across the whole valley and lapped up into the sky and made the very stars glittering points of ice.

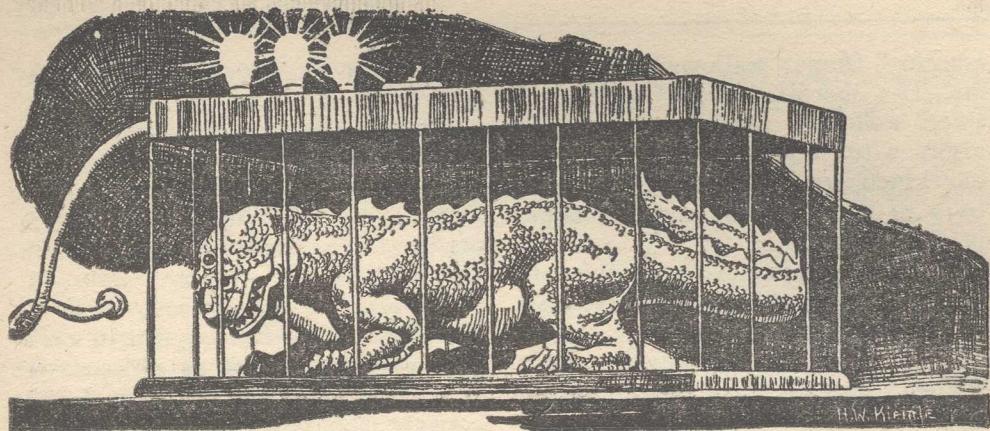
He knew that there was only one creature in the whole world immune to that coldness.

So he lifted his hand to his shoulder and laid it on the smooth fingerbones there and said, "I'm going back to her, Old Man. I know she'll never be true to me, and that she'll always yield herself eagerly to any mind with wit enough to imagine or learn a lie, and that whatever I give her she'll hurry to give to them, as a street woman to her bully. And I'm not doing this because I think she's carrying my child, for I believe she's sterile. And I know that while I grow old, she'll always stay young, and so I'm sure to lose her in the end. But that's just it, Old Man—you can't touch her. And besides, I've given myself to her, and she's beautiful, and however false, she's all there is in the world to be faithful to."

And he started down the crags.

OLD NEMECEK leaned back and fingered his brandy glass, which he had not yet raised to his lips, and looked at me smilingly. I blinked at him dully. Then, as if finishing the story had been a signal, the beautiful girl came out of the bar, still on the arm of the young writer. She hesitated by our table and it seemed to me that the same cryptic look passed between her and old Nemecek as when she had come in. And because

(Continued on page 98)



Who Builds Maos Traps?

Someone left "a better mouse trap" at the City Desk—and if those reporters knew the path to the builder's door, they'd give it back to him, but fast!

By K. W. BENNETT

THE NEWSPAPER breed are reputed cynics, harder than the inner gate of Fort Knox, I've heard. But I know three who have faith. They believe in a kind of dimly seen retribution that hovers far off like summer heat lightning and strikes silently in a loaded hour of need. They saw it happen to a man named Sneeleman and Sneeleman deserved killing badly. He was a political boss with the morals of a Roman mercenary; rapacious, vengeful, a vulture of a man, that was Boss Sneeleman.

It was the middle of July and our flat was hot as Tombstone in a drought. The thermometer outside the window read a popping red 95 degrees at six o'clock in the evening. I was typewriting my hero, Griff Hol-

lingsworth, off an iceberg and past an irate polar bear in Chapter Seven of *Death Among the Icecakes*, my first stab at a newspaper fiction serial.

Singer heaved up from our spavined couch and made clopping noises with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He'd been sleeping since noon.

"What time is it?" He tightened his tie and sighted dismally along the crease of his knee-sprung trousers.

"Eighteen hundred hours, time you were up, doing great things," I said with cheer.

"I go on duty at nine," Singer complained. He gathered strength and sat erect. "Political reporter! Never follow the life, son. They'll use you, and burn you out, and then sell you to Boss Sneeleman as a publicity hack."

"Sorrow renders me unable to speak," I said.

"It's been night shift for three

months," Singer wallowed. "Look at me. The merest husk of a man. I sleep, molelike, during the day. At night, after trying to sleep in this hagridden sweat-box, can I rest? It's back to the office to beat out crisp, bright copy."

"Sorrow renders me unable to speak," I said and reread the last page of *Death Among the Icecakes*.

"And is there sympathy?" Singer wailed. "You sit there reading about this boob Hoolingsworth—"

"Hollingsworth," I corrected.

"And when O'Doon gets back to the flat he'll talk about Agnes till I'm nearly nuts. When I get to the office I'll find out Boss Sneeleman has salted another city building contract. I hear now he's buying stock in the paper too, which means I'll be out of work and there'll be no opposition paper to fight him."

"Sorrow—" I began.

"Renders you unable to speak," Singer cut in. "What's in the icebox?"

"Well, there was a ring of salami," I baited and Singer bit with an interested look. "But it's O'Doon's day off and he took his girl on a picnic and they left with the salami," I finished.

"That girl of his. Gaah," Singer snorted. "I've never liked women named Agnes. Sneeleman's mother was named Agnes." Singer vented the vials of his wrath on Sneeleman, Agnes, and boss rule in our city impartially.

"There are also cheese, pickles, and three eggs in the icebox," I thrust in.

Singer reappeared in ten minutes balancing a fried egg sandwich, a pickle sandwich with cheese, a cheese toastwich, and a bottle of beer.

"You used all three of the eggs," I remarked.

"Your eye, as always, is clear and cold as the arctic ice," Singer admitted through the egg sandwich. He waved at a corner of the room.

"Did you see the mouse trap?"

"At last. The mouse pack is build-

ing a new nest. They used most of my pillow."

"Funny mouse trap. Some antique crackpot wandered into the office last night while I was standing near the City desk. Said he wanted a subscriber to use his mouse trap. An experiment."

I LEFT Griff Hollingsworth clawing at the face of an alabaster ice peak and examined the trap. It was between the 1890 davenport and the wall. The trap was nickel steel, had three glowing bulbs atop it, a switch box, small cage beneath, and the entire apparatus plugged into a light socket with a length of heavy rubber cable. A name plate on the switch box said: MAOS TRAP.

"That's a peculiar way to spell 'mouse'."

"Yah. M-A-O-S," Singer read over my shoulder. "I didn't notice it before. He pronounced it 'mouse' and I thought he meant M-O-U-S-E. Never heard of a maos."

"Maybe it's just a trade name."

"Hell, it was an outright gift," Singer said.

"Does it electrocute 'em?"

"Beats me," Singer shrugged. He got up and scraped crumbs carefully from his pants onto the carpet and muffled giggles came from the hall.

"O'Doon and Agnes," Singer hissed, eyes rolling in an expression of great suffering.

The door flung wide and six feet four inches of O'Doon beamed down upon us where we stood *en tableaux* over the maos trap.

"Well," boomed O'Doon. "I've brought up Agnes."

"Welcome as polio virus," Singer laughed engagingly. We scooped the old magazines and egg cartons from the couch deftly and waited. O'Doon turned to face the door and Agnes entered the room on the heels of a great silence.

Agnes refuses to speak to Singer

and me on the ground that we are newspapermen, ergo, immoral wastrels. The fact that O'Doon is also a newspaperman adds a touch of mystery to her conclusion. But Agnes is above feeble logic and she swept in like a veritable tidal wave of righteousness engulfing the evil men.

"Good evening, Agnes," said Singer. "It's a pity you came just now. Ben was going to administer my morphine. I suffer with glanders." He grimaced with sad and noble courage.

"I—I can't do it, Singer," I groaned in my best Little Theater style. "The screams, those awful screams—"

Singer smiled gently. "We must all be brave, Ben, mustn't we?"

Agnes continued to stare at an upper corner of the room and the temperature faltered and dropped.

"Don't you two want to eat out?" O'Doon inquired. "Agnes and I are having a little snack here and then going to a movie."

"No eggs," I pointed out. "Singer just ate 'em."

O'Doon was bitter. "You're bluffing," he said but we stared back with level and honest eyes.

"You did this apurpose. You did this to spite Agnes," O'Doon bellowed and O'Doon has a respectable bellow, and Agnes continued frosting the atmosphere.

Singer finally brought an egg noodle roll from Schwartz's delicatessen and Agnes and O'Doon ate alone in the kitchen. Singer went downtown, the lovebirds drifted movieward flecking bits of egg noodle roll from their dentures, and I returned to *Death Among the Icecakes*.

I was painting the charms of Rita, my dark-eyed heroine, in glowing adjectives when rattling sounds came from the davenport and I retrieved Singer's maos trap and examined the cage attachment.

I returned to my butt-scarred desk and my thinning hairs were standing individually on end, but I took a

draught at the beer bottle and set the maos trap beneath the harsh light of the desk lamp.

The maos trap had caught something but it wasn't a mouse. The bright-gleaming steel cage was occupied by a scaly, small beastie eight inches in length, colored purple, and it was watching me with intent, beady, green eyes. Three of them.

Retrieving our tin bread box from the kitchen, I dumped the beastie into its cockroach-ridden depth and reset our trap.

AT 11 P.M. SINGER charged into the flat, his wildly fevered eye portending flood, fire, or a juicy murder case.

"This is a news break, Ben," announced Singer and helped himself to my pot of coffee. "Shooting down in the 1700 block of Anthony Avenue. A witness identified the gungsel as Whitey Behr. The victim was—hang on to your upper—Attorney Anderson."

I whistled appreciatively for a variety of reasons. These were, briefly: Whitey Behr was a snowbird, a narcotics user; Whitey would probably spill any number of beans if held in custody for any length of time; Whitey was rumored currently employed by Boss Sneeleman; and lastly, Attorney Anderson had begun an investigation of voting records in Boss Sneeleman's home precincts.

"Rest your feet. And look what your trap caught."

Singer pulled another chair to the desk and we peered into the tin bread box at the three-eyed monster. It eyed us back suspiciously with all three eyes. Singer made gulping noises, and I thought maybe I should have prepared him. He retreated to the davenport and dropped on the relic with a shock that brought another spring up through the cushion waving a triumphant wad of horsehair.

"What is it? A visiting relative?"

"It must be a *maos*. It was in your *maos* trap."

The monster squeaked and peeked over the rim of the bread box at us.

"What will we do with it?" Singer inquired. He got up and closed the bread box lid gently.

"Why not give it to Agnes? They'd be a great pair of kids."

"Even Agnes doesn't deserve this."

"Maybe we could send Sneeelman a pair—" I started to say but Sneeelman's name brought Singer erect as a warhorse who smelleth the battle from afar, ha, ha.

"Keep coffee on. This is an all-night job."

He slammed on his hat and moved out like a cub reporter in a Grade B movie. Singer dearly loves to dramatize the newspaper business, but he's a cracking good reporter.

At 11:30 O'Doon returned from the movie, by which time our *maos* trap had produced another nightmare, a pea-green and chartreuse number with one eye and more teeth than a dental supply house. O'Doon poured himself a cup of coffee and returned the pot to the electric plate atop my desk. He peered absently into the bread box and Three-eyes peeked back and chirped.

O'Doon's mouthful of coffee went across the room in a cloud of brown vapor. O'Doon vented a low scream of despair and flung himself on the couch and the apartment shook. It was like an elephant falling down. His father having been a man troubled with peculiar alcoholic visions, the current O'Doon secretly fears the ailment is hereditary.

"Relax, you hulk. It's only a *maos*."

O'Doon, as his name suggests, is of a dark and mystic Irish line and has great respect for the occult and weird. He rose from the couch and freed himself carefully from the spring that stuck through.

"You—you see that thing in our bread box?"

"Solid as your head," I rejoined brightly.

O'Doon approached the bread box and examined the beasties and spotted One-eye crouching in another corner of the box. One-eye was inclined to be a bit distant. With the set of fangs he sported it was just as well.

O'Doon refilled his coffee cup and returned to the couch.

"Where are they coming from?"

"Some old professor designed a *maos*, M-A-O-S, trap that picks them out of thin air." I went on pecking at the saga of Griff Hollingsworth, who was bartering with a wily Eskimo shaman.

O'Doon nodded reasonably. "This ancient gives Singer the trap. I can see it all perfect. Singer sees no cost is involved. Singer thanks old man and comes home all enthusiastic. Nothing draws Singer like an easy buck."

"You don't have that failing, I've noted."

"Well," O'Doon beamed modestly. "Perhaps I'm just too generous for my own good."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry. You haven't paid for the Sunday papers in five weeks."

O'Doon scowled in apparent thought. "That's funny. I must not have been around."

This is a type of self-deceit practiced often by O'Doon. On Sunday mornings he is not only around but charging into the hall at the jingle of a coin. He snatches the comic section from Singer or me as we stand paying the newsie. We have come to expect this, as O'Doon is a photographer and the members of that craft are notoriously blighted and warped.

O'DOON HEAVED up from the couch, vanished into his bedroom, and returned with his treasured second-hand Leica. He opened up the lens and began shooting closeups of Three-eyes looking at us over the

bread box rim. O'Doon stopped and scratched his chin.

"Wonder what they eat," he said.

"There's a bottle of milk in the ice-box."

O'Doon went into the kitchen and returned with a saucer of milk. He lowered the saucer cautiously into the breadbox on a sling he made with a folded newspaper.

Bubbling sounds came from the box and O'Doon smiled beatifically.

"They like the stuff. You just got to know how to treat animals."

He sank ponderously to the couch and was silent, possibly contemplating his skill with animals, then, "Did you hear more on the Anderson-Behr shooting?"

"Singer is on the story. He was up here groaning earlier," I told him.

"There's a new development. That witness they had—he's disappeared."

"From police custody?"

"Story is he went across the street to a drugstore for cigarettes. Desk sergeant sent a patrolman with him. Both of them vanished. Funny, huh?"

"Sneeelman's machine is working. When and if this case is in a court, doughnuts'll get dollars Behr will be out of jail somehow and living in Mexico. Nothing left to prosecute."

"I figure something went wrong to begin with," said O'Doon, who has occasional flashes of intellect. "Sneeelman's boys are careful. This Whitey Behr must have been loaded with hop, knew Sneeelman was worried about Anderson, and Whitey decided to do the big boss a favor. Now Sneeelman is going to have to cover up for Whitey."

"Looks like he already has, if the prosecution witness is out of circulation," I stuck in.

O'Doon yawned. "Well, you can sit up and check Singer in. I'm going to get some sleep. That sadist on City desk will probably call me out for some pix during the night."

The vigorous sounds of his sleep-

ing, an uproar reminiscent of a whirling saw blade hitting a pine knot, were interrupted less than twenty minutes after he'd vanished into his room. The paper needed more cameramen out and that meant O'Doon. Sneeelman was making a statement for the City Council at his home. The sound of O'Doon's Gaelic wrath faded down the stairs and I returned to Griff Hollingsworth. A wolf pack had Griff ringed in and he had only three shells in his thutty-thutty.

At 12:15 Singer stamped up our stairs and collapsed on the couch.

"They're going to swing it!" He deflated after that laconic statement.

"O'Doon is going up to the Sneeelman mansion. The Boss is making some kind of statement."

"I know. Hearts and flowers." Singer poured himself a cup of coffee and made clucking sounds into the bread box. Three-eyes chirped back and One-eye grunted.

"He grunted," Singer enthused. "Maybe he's just shy. Yeah, Sneeelman is going to make a statement. Bright lads say Sneeelman's put the heat on his own crowd. No trial for Whitey Behr if he can stop it."

"The lousy grafter. The deal makes him a murderer. Sneeelman would scare a man-eating octopus."

Singer nodded. "I knew there was something he reminded me of."

"You're on your way to the Sneeelman place now?"

"Yep," said Singer. He looked at the maos trap. We looked at each other.

"If we'd just take off the cage door—" said Singer.

"And set the trap where it wouldn't be noticed," I added.

SINGER unplugged the maos trap and tramped out of hearing down the stairs with the bright glittering little cage beneath his coat.

Singer and O'Doon came grumbling upstairs again at 1:30 a.m.

and repeated the vicious, sad story. Sneeleman and his pirates were crawling from under. The witness had been found dead. Whitey Behr made a sensational escape while being taken from one station house to another. The affair was raw, but Sneeleman was pouring on oil and his administration henchmen were backing him. It was agreed that when the smoke drifted away, the Boss would again be riding single saddle over our city.

O'Doon still had his big 4x5 Graphic. We sat in the flat, the three of us, drinking coffee, feeding One-eye and Three-eyes, and doing a post mortem probe into the affaire Behr-Sneeleman-Anderson.

"Did you plant the maos trap at Sneeleman's?"

"Right in the big boy's bedroom. He'll wake up in a zoologist's nightmare."

"I can see his face when he wakes up. Row of purple lizards staring at him from the foot of the bed."

"Is the trap cage open—can the lizards get out?" The possibilities were beginning to stir O'Doon.

"Under his bed, and it's plugged in," Singer grinned.

"It's good for laughs, but it's not right." O'Doon thought heavily with a coffee cup balanced on one knee and his big chin supported by a ham-sized hand. "Two, maybe three, good men died tonight. Sneeleman murdered them. Just like he fired the shots himself."

"What's uglier, he'll be covered somehow. A thing like that will go on living when honest men have died." That was Singer and he was mad.

O'Doon sermonized in solemn, thunderous tones on Fate. It's one of his conversational set pieces, sort of a big fireworks display that's hidden by the dark until somebody touches a match and then it blazes up. That a kind of retribution was building up and would descend on Sneeleman in a sudden deluge, was his theme.

We guess that O'Doon was right. The early morning editions bannered a new story. Investigators had located some kind of short-circuited, fused electrical device under Sneeleman's empty bed at the Boss' home. The thing had burned itself up and the pungent smoke aroused servants.

It was thought Whitey Behr had been hiding in Sneeleman's home since the thug had escaped police custody. The big story the black screaming headlines were telling us was that Whitey Behr and Sneeleman were dead. *They'd been killed and partially eaten by an inexplicable swarm of purple lizards.*

Sometimes nights we talk about the Sneeleman story over our beers. And we still wonder, O'Doon and Singer and I. Who builds maos traps? And why?

CRY WITCH!

(Continued from page 92)

she was very beautiful and very young, and because the young writer was famous for his idealism, I found myself shivering uncontrollably as I watched her walk toward the door.

"Here, drink your brandy," said Nemecek, eying me solicitously.

"The girl," I managed to say, "the girl in the story—did she come to the New World?" I was still under the spell of the fairy tale to which I had been listening.

"Drink your brandy," said Nemecek.

"And her lover," I went on. She was gone now. "That very close friend of yours. Was he really—?"

"The closest," said Nemecek.



The Woodworker

*Something was carving stinging insects out of
wood—and bringing them to life!*

By GENE A. DAVIDSON

HIS BOOTS tramped rhythmically on the snow, carrying him into the small grove of trees. His breath went out into the air in a frosted plume. He could feel the

tension in his neck as he tried to shield it in his coat collar from the icy, prying wind.

A few yards ahead, a small puff of fur appeared, then rocketed away from him in a zigzag path. He swung his small rifle up in a long easy mo-

tion. The report cracked brittlely in the cold air. He snapped open the bolt and watched the little silver cylinder that was the used cartridge leap out. The rifle automatically loaded a fresh round. He closed the bolt crisply. He walked forward in the direction the rabbit had been running.

Suddenly he stopped. *Did someone call me?* he wondered. He listened.

Other than the quiet hum of an occasional car over on the highway, there was no sound at all. He turned and looked back over the trail his boots had scuffed in the light snow. He half expected to see someone coming along it from far in the distance. Of course, there was no one there. He shrugged his shoulders, resettled his gun, and resumed his walk.

The idea that something had happened he should have heard did not leave him easily. He found himself still listening for something. His boots seemed to crunch too loudly on the snow. The naked trees standing tall around him seemed to echo and amplify every sound. For a moment the silence, the white blanket of snow stretching to the horizon, his aloneness with the stark black trees, took on a fearful quality. A cold gust of wind down his back caused him to shiver. Angry with himself, he moved on.

He had fired at the rabbit just as it had breasted a hillock a dozen yards away. He supposed he would find its tumbled little form just over the top of the small mound.

It was not there. The hollows the rabbit's running feet had made as they dipped into the snow climaxed in a small scuffed spot. That was where the rabbit should have been, but it was not there. A brief red stain on the snow assured him he had not missed the bounding target. The tracks did not reappear after a particularly long leap, a glance around revealed.

Although he could not imagine

how, the rabbit was definitely gone. He brushed the snow away from the ground where it was stained by the rabbit's blood. It was only an inch or so deep and as he had known, it could not have hid his game.

The rabbit must have made it to a hole someplace around here, he said to himself, and it was the only possible explanation.

As he turned to go, something caught his eye. It was an outgrowth on the root of a nearby tree, perhaps a tumor of some kind. It was roughly biscuit-shaped, about two and a half feet across.

A wasps' nest? the man asked himself. It was the paper-gray color of one. He decided to give it a closer look.

At that moment, something thumped him solidly in the back of the neck. Behind him he heard the beat of wings. He turned but the thing that had struck him was gone, having flown off among the trees.

"So you have a nest around here, do you, Mrs. Bird?" he said to himself. "And you don't want me to disturb it. All right then, I'll respect your wishes."

He moved out of the woods and back to the snowy stretches of the fields. He crossed a rabbit track and began to follow it.

That evening, when he was taking off his coat before the hot stove in his cabin, he found a startling thing. A thorn nearly four inches long had somehow stabbed through the fur and canvas collar of his jacket. He decided that if his scarf had not entangled its point, it would probably have pierced his throat.

THE MAN in the hunter's outfit stood looking down into the glass-topped counter. It contained several small-bore rifles, a target pistol, and a number of boxes of cartridges of various sizes. The bell on the door had rung when he entered, and he knew

that the proprietor would soon be out. The sound of footsteps came from beyond the door that opened to the back of the place.

A tall, middle-aged man in a red lumberjack shirt appeared in the door. He took a stubby pipe out of his mouth, located the right lens of his bifocals, and looked over his customer.

"Why, Tom Schiring," he said with pleased recognition. "What are you doing down here? Came down for a bit of rabbit hunting, eh, Tom?"

"You bet, Andy," the hunter said as they shook hands. "I've had this week in December reserved for five months. Prospective clients have been sent over to an attorney I used to share an office with. How's Mary?"

"Oh, fine, Tom. Say, she'll want you over for supper sometime before you go back."

"I'll be there, Andy. Give me a box of .22 long rifle cartridges, will you?" he said, laying several coins on the counter.

From a position half inside the display case, the proprietor asked: "Where you been hunting?"

"Mostly on Grayfeller's farm. Haven't raised much of anything, though. Only got a crack at one jack-rabbit. That was up in that little wood just south of the highway."

"Better move south. There ain't much game up that way. In fact, you're the first fellow I ever heard of who's seen *any* rabbits in that wood. I think there must be a weasel in it.

"Last hunters went through there," he continued. "Oh, must be three years ago. City folks, you know."

The man behind the counter picked up the change automatically, set the waxy little cube containing cartridges in its place, and rang the cash register. Thomas Schiring had turned to go but he was stopped by the man who had resumed speaking:

"There's another odd thing I remember about that wood up on Gray-

feller's farm. About six years ago a traveling lumber outfit started to cut that stand of timber off, working from the highway back. Everything went all right for a while, then they hit trees with nails in them. And not just a nail every now and then either. There were so many nails in those trees you'd think they had started to grow iron knots. After breaking a couple of cross-cut saws, the lumber outfit gave up and moved out. The foreman sure gave old man Grayfeller hell before they left."

"You don't say," said Schiring. "How do you suppose the nails got there?"

"I wouldn't know, Tom," said the proprietor. "Say, do you remember what happened to Shorty Morris? You don't? Well, Shorty used to work for Grayfeller. He had a little place up in the barn where he slept. Had a cot there, a little stove, dresser and so on. Well, as I get the story, Shorty Morris ran out of stove wood one night. He got an axe and went out to chop some kindling, probably half crooked at the time, if I know Shorty.

"Well," he continued, "he didn't come back. When old man Grayfeller couldn't find Shorty the next day, he figured he passed out someplace and went to look for him. Sure enough, they found Shorty out cold, but it wasn't whiskey that had done it. It was a big limb. Shorty had been chopping a tree, when this big limb broke off above him and came down on his head. I've heard it must have weighed five hundred pounds. Lucky it didn't hit him square on.

"Shorty was chopping just a little way from where you got that rabbit," he concluded.

Before Schiring left the little hardware store, he made one more purchase. That was a bottle of cleaning fluid. During the conversation with his friend, he had decided he might need it. As he was leaving, the proprietor warned him not to get it too

close to a cigarette, because it was highly inflammable. Thomas Schiring thanked him and left with his purchases.

TWENTY minutes later, Schiring was striding across a field covered with snow and corn stubble. Directly ahead of him were the trees of the little copse on Grayfeller's farm, standing stark and silent against a backdrop of gray winter sky.

Even at that distance from the wood, he could sense the strangeness about it. He decided that was because he saw no ragged, noisy black crows in the upper branches of the trees.

"No crows, no rabbits, no nothing," he thought. "There's not one thing in that wood that might attract a hunter."

He intercepted the trail he had made into the clump of trees the day before. It had not snowed during the night, so his track was still fairly fresh. He entered the little grove.

About ten yards or so into it, the shallow gouge his boots had made in the snow disappeared completely. There was no tapering off. Here was his path, fresh and plain; a little way beyond, nothing but smooth white snow.

It did not matter very much. Schiring recognized his surroundings well enough to know which way he had gone the day before. He resumed his walk.

The feeling that had arisen in him yesterday was with him again. He felt that something was listening to him, listening so as not to miss the slightest squeak of snow under his boots, not the softest sigh of his exhaling breath. It was not a pleasant mood to be in.

To Schiring, the tall, black, skeletal trees, towering on all sides, seemed to take on a menacing quality. Automatically, he forced himself to look at the trees more carefully. A closer look at them and he would see

simply black, leafless limbs, not poised cyclopes standing very still, hoping they would not be seen. But that did not seem to help today. The wind was too still, the snow was too quiet, the trees were too tall and black for that to help today.

The feeling that there was trouble coming did not leave. Actually, he did not even wish it would. He felt he was beginning to understand the situation now, and in this case, knowledge did not lead to the removal of fear.

Suddenly he heard it. He had expected *that* sound to presage the beginning of the attack, and he was ready for it. The sound of wings came from behind him and to the left. He spun, bringing up his light rifle.

Suddenly he was not afraid any longer. He did not know exactly why. It had something to do with the way the pistol grip with its crisscross lines felt against his palm, but he was not sure what.

Time seemed to be going slowly, very slowly. A quarter of a second passed with the studied deliberation of the tolling of a run-down chime clock. He watched the black metal blade that was the foresight of his rifle traverse an arc that would intercept the flying thing.

Why he thought, there's nothing to it. He waited till the sights were nicely centered on the target, then squeezed the trigger. He saw the flying thing explode into a hundred splinters. He felt his hand swoop the bolt open and shut. He did not remember hearing the shot.

Again he heard the sound of wings, and caught a moving shadow out of the corner of his eye. It was only a few feet off the muzzle when the bullet hit it. Like the other, it erupted into fragments. He watched the little silvery tube of a used shell-casing glide out of his span of vision.

He watched another attacker come at him. When it was about ten yards

out, he sent it the way of the rest.

Rabbits, he thought, are harder to hit.

A minute passed, and the attack was not resumed. He waited, rifle ready, listening. No sound. Schiring guessed that they had had enough for the present. He wondered what he would do if a group of them attacked him en masse. Under those circumstances, he saw no way he could protect himself. And the mass attack, unfortunately, was what he decided he could expect next.

He went over to one of the things his bullets had destroyed and knelt to examine it. Most of it was in small brittle pieces like the shell of a broken walnut. The memory of the things as he had seen them in flight, coupled with an examination of the fragments in his hand, enabled him to find an organization in the pieces.

Here he decided, was a wing case. Here were several leg segments. Here was a head, mandibles still attached. . . .

The constituent parts of an insect, all right. But not of the stuff of an insect's horny carapace. The parts were made of wood. The things which had attacked him were large wooden beetles—exact copies of the real insect except for one thing. Out of the center of the head, like the horn of a unicorn, pointed a thornlike stinger of wood. The weapon was fully as long as the beetle's four-inch body. Cautiously, Schiring tested the point with his finger. It was sharp.

He weighed the fragments in his hand. They were very light and very thin, like wood shavings from a draw-knife. Light as was their construction, the small wings of the wooden beetles had been barely able to sustain their weight. The creatures flew with a wobbly, unstable pitch, and seemed about to fall to the ground at any moment. Clumsy they might be, but the needle-tipped/stilettos they carried made them deadly.

He dropped the fragments of the thing. Taking an easy grip on his rifle, he proceeded cautiously in the direction he had gone the day before.

A FEW MINUTES later he topped the little rise over which his rabbit had disappeared yesterday. Below him, he saw the tree with the grayish outgrowth on its root. It completely caught up his curiosity.

Unlike the ground around, its top was not covered with snow. That should indicate, thought Schiring, a rapid oxidation rate. There was nothing particularly outstanding about it. Nothing outstanding, just the root of a tree. . . .

No, said Schiring to himself, it's more than that. It's *not* only the color of the thing that suggests a brain. There's something else about it, something incredibly subtle that betrays what it really is. It is aware of me. It thinks. It is wood, but somehow it *thinks*.

A plant turns toward the sun. A trace of consciousness. The hard jaws of a pitcher-plant slowly close to trap an inquisitive fly. A movement, simple, but successful. A trace of consciousness. A million years ago, a seed grew wings and soared on the wind. It came down on a bare patch of ground a hundred miles from where it started, sunk its roots, and grew. It had solved its problem, a need for a span of bare ground, by growing wings and flying. Other plants would solve their problems by growing horny shells that would let them lie quiescent for decades. Others would sprout long cilia-like extensions and roll before the wind. A problem solved. A trace of consciousness.

A living thing must have nourishment, that is basic. An organism is equipped to get the nourishment it needs. Also, it must have a means of self-protection. The power of his teeth and claws keeps a carnivore

alive. A symbiotic organism absorbs the substance of his host through a penetrable membrane, digests it with an enzyme. A plant has roots, and sugar-producing chlorophyll, and some have specialized protections, like burs, irritants, thorns or poisons. . . .

Thomas Schiring began to make a circuit of the gray outgrowth on the root of the tree. Here, he believed, was a creature, basically plantlike in configuration, in which the trace of consciousness has risen to rationality. Here was a thing that might have power nearly equal to that of the human brain. How that seed had been brought to fruition, he did not know, but it had. As he walked, he sensed that the attention of the thing was upon him.

The facts fitted very well into place now. Five years ago a lumber outfit had been forced to stop cutting these trees because of nails in them. Another time, a hired man had been nearly killed while chopping firewood nearby. Game was never seen in this copse, and not even the omnipresent crow ventured here. Game attracted hunters, and hunters were not wanted. *Keep humans away*, that was the key to the pattern.

He remembered how he had found the long thorn close to his throat. *Keep humans away—at any cost.*

Schiring paused in his observation of the gray oval thing. For the most part, its surface had a fairly constant rough texture. One small spot on the surface was markedly different from the rest. In that place, the surface was rough and convoluted. Its appearance suggested an ill-healed rupture.

Schiring was puzzled. Automatically, he tried to figure out what could be the cause of this area. Part of the conversation back in the hardware store occurred to him. "... last hunters, three years ago. City folks, you know." City folks weren't too in-

terested in game. They probably just wanted to do a little shooting.

Suddenly, Schiring saw the similarity between the convoluted area and a scar, a ragged knotty cicatrice. The most likely thing, he guessed, was that the last hunters had used the gray thing for target practice.

He wondered, almost casually, if a wooden brain could go mad.

THOMAS SCHIRING found himself feeling sorry for the creature, in a way. He recognized intuitively that the creature had a right to exist and a right to protect itself against other organisms that were dangerous to it. Nevertheless, he saw that some day, circumstances would come together in such a way as to force the thing—the wooden *brain*—to kill a human. He had no doubt of that. A thorn of one of the wooden beetles, which the thing evidently controlled, had narrowly missed piercing his throat the day before. In the light of that danger to others of his race, he felt it was his duty to kill it.

It was an easy decision to make. Subconsciously he had watched events shaping up this way and had prepared for it.

His eyes rose to scan the trees above him. He wondered how many of the wooden beetles were hidden on those limbs, soon to attack him in a coordinated effort. He knew his rifle would be all but useless against any mass attack. He wondered how many of the insects the wooden brain had manufactured in its interior. He could sustain perhaps a dozen thrusts from the daggerlike weapons, he believed. Many more, and he would surely bleed to death. And he was afraid that there were many, many more than a dozen of the wooden insects.

Kill the thing quickly, a part of his consciousness urged.

At that moment, from a hundred different spots on the trees around

him, a clicking noise began. *Click-click-click*, like a hundred metronomes. *Click-click-click*, like a hundred sharply ticking clocks. *Click-click-click*. . .

They'll attack soon now, thought Schiring. His hand came out of his pocket cupping the bottle of cleaning fluid he had bought back at the little store. He twisted the cap off. He tossed the bottle in a low arc at the wooden brain. The bottle struck the ground and rolled a few feet. It did not break, but it did drench the growth on the root of the tree with its pungent fluid.

Click-click-click. The noise of the wooden insects in the trees speeded up to a frenzied pace. *Click-click-click-click*.

Schiring snapped a flame into his cigarette lighter, then threw it at the wooden brain. With an explosive puff and a billow of yellow flame, the inflammable liquid ignited. The wooden brain was hidden from him by a curtain of fire.

With a clumsy, wobbly motion, a

wooden beetle flew down from one of the trees and lit right in front of him. It had something grasped in its legs. It pointed the thing at him, and began to make the clicking noises.

Its legs trembled violently, its mandibles opened and closed spasmodically. Everything in its mien seemed to indicate that it was in a state of something like hysteria.

After a minute or so, the beetle let loose of the thing it was holding. It rolled over on its back and made convulsive movements with its legs. Soon it stopped.

There was no sound but the whispering of the fire, the fiery fingers of which had by now gouged deep to the center of the outgrowth on the tree. The clicking noises from the beetles had stopped. They had died with their fashioner, the wooden brain.

Schiring picked up the thing that the beetle had held in its legs. It had evidently been carved out of a small wooden stick, about six inches long. It was an exact copy, in miniature, of Schiring's rifle.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

(Continued from page 54)

one else in footwear; there is so little footwear worn here, you see. I shall have to have you taken back to the wall again."

"**T**HEN FOR the second time, Hawk was away from his work for several days," resumed Harrigan. "Where he was, nobody knew. Beston's were getting fed up with him. He came back one morning and was shocked to be informed that he had been away five working days. He seemed quite sincere about it. He had thought it was the third, and instead it was the ninth—Tuesday to Monday of the following week.

"He told me about it next time I saw him. That was the time I met

him coming out of the library with an armful of books about electrical engineering.

"'Ah, shoes are becoming an engineering problem,' I said.

"'To hell with shoes,' said Pincus.

"'Don't tell me the worm's turned,' I said.

"He passed that one over. 'Footwear!' he almost shouted, walking down the street at my side. 'Can you imagine it! They wanted to put me in footwear!'

"'Who?' I asked.

"'Why, those people over there,' he answered, waving aloft.

"After a few questions, I discovered he thought he had passed over again, had another visit with Uncle

Hugo, and got pushed back in order to try his hand at learning to become an electrical engineer. The poor guy was setting about it, the hardest way possible. You had to admire his guts, even if he was getting steadily nuttier than a fruit cake . . ."

The third time his Uncle Hugo was a little more understanding.

"Still footwear, Pincus. These tests do show, however, a little something in the line of engineering. If time permits, I might try to get over to help you. There are some people you could see—old Professor Byrnes, at Harvard, for instance. I'll have to introduce you to him. For the time being, though, you'll have to go back."

"**POOR PINCUS HAWK,**" Harrigan continued. "You'd have thought engineering was his heart and soul. And it was tough for him. Still, he kept at it, day and night. He quit his job at last. He even began to take a course at Harvard, privately, of course; he must have paid handsomely for it."

I looked at my watch. "Well, what did happen to him?"

"Oh, I suppose you might almost expect the answer to that one. He disappeared, just like his uncle. Nobody bumped him off, though. If he did end up dead, he probably took his own life out of sheer dejection. Most likely, though, he just jumped off for parts unknown, and the way he left his will showed that he thought of coming back—the house and funds were to be left untouched, administered by his uncle's lawyers for the required seven years, and for seven years after his every appearance."

"He, at least, believed in that other world of his," I said.

"Sure. He had to, didn't he? He invented it. Funny thing, though, the power of suggestion being what it is, he almost had me believing it. And I wasn't the only one."

"How so?"

"Well, you remember, he kept talking about his uncle being alive. One afternoon when I was walking down Beacon Street I could have sworn I saw the old man. Pincus was walking with him. They were having some kind of an argument. Well, you know how it is. I saw both of them and looked at them for some time before it dawned on me who the old man was—or looked like.

"By that time, both of them had got into a car and driven off.

"Later on, I found somebody else had had an even worse illusion. After Pincus disappeared, I set out to trace his movements. I got around to Harvard and Professor Byrnes at last. Pincus had been taking his course under Byrnes. Well, one thing and another, I finally asked how Byrnes had come to take Pincus on for private tutoring, in addition to his regular work.

"'Why, his uncle's an old friend of mine,' he said.

"'Which uncle?' I asked.

"'Hugo. Hugo Hawk. Know him?'

"I said I had never known him, that he'd disappeared some time ago. When had he seen him last? I wanted to know.

"'Just at the beginning of Pincus's course,' he answered. 'Hugo brought him here and introduced him to me. I wouldn't have done it for anyone else.'

"I couldn't shake his story, either. But, of course, he was almost eighty, and couldn't see very well."

"Did you ask him how Pincus was doing?"

"He said fine. Byrnes said he'd have been able to pass the tests any day now and couldn't understand why he'd walked out on the course." Harrigan drained his glass. "Building arches, indeed! Dollars to doughnuts, wherever he is, the only arch he's got anything to do with is in footwear."

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UNEASY LIES THE HEAD

(Continued from page 70)

There was a haze over everything as he brought a thousand-ton hand up through a million miles into a gesture of salute. And then great slow waves of peace rolled over him, and turned jet black!

IT WAS ONLY a faint stirring, hardly to be called consciousness, at first, yet somewhere mixed into the vagueness was a feeling of existing. It went away, and a definite sense of time lapse separated it from the first flicker that had meaning. It was only a picture of a meadow, with an old man swearing savagely at a box that kept arguing back with the same note of angry sureness.

Then there was a play of blurred, cloudy realizations, all jumbled upon one another until none made sense, and a rushing and strange whispering down all his nerves. A feeling of well-being came which he was vaguely sure did not belong to him; there was an expectation of pain and agony, but the cool, soothing comfort continued.

He tried to open his eyes, but they remained tightly closed, and he could hear no sounds. Something sneaked into his mind and then tried to hide, but he chased it down relentlessly, forcing it from corner to corner until at last it gave up and came to meet him.

Death! He'd been dying. Something about his heart? Of course, his heart had been failing. But he wasn't dead. He was quite positive of that, without bothering to reject any doubts as to an afterlife; he had never doubted that death was the end, and he did not question but what he was alive. Now the mists were slowly clearing from his mind, opening up wider and wider frontiers of consciousness.

Once before there had been something like this, when his sleep center

was removed, and he was regaining consciousness. Well, so he hadn't died—that meant that Sorgen must have found him in time and performed the impossible job of making the heart-graft. He groped for pain, found none, and decided it must have happened days before, and that Sorgen had kept him under drugs until the work had time to heal.

He'd forgotten, after the years of slowly increasing trouble, what it was to have a body that behaved normally, and permitted full efficiency. Just being alive was a pleasure again! He could have felt no better if his lost youth had returned.

Or had it? Sorgen's face had looked so completely free of worry before his eyes had spotted Jason's trouble. Herker must have stumbled on a line of ACS work that succeeded; maybe that was why the Clinic Supervisor had wanted Sorgen. It made sense—a new hope for rejuvenation, and a miracle by Sorgen that somehow had preserved a flicker of life in him until it could be used!

Then the tension released, and he sat up, to spin around easily and feel his feet contact the floor as his eyes opened.

Good man, Sorgen! The doctor was there, waiting in front of him. But. . . . It was still the lab, and Sorgen's face had been a dark cloud of gloom, only now changing to a sudden elation. The lab! What kind of a miracle had Herker—or someone—dug up that could perform a miracle like this with no medical equipment and no time to move a man's dying body?

"God!" Sorgen came to sudden life, and his voice was incredulous. He was across the room, even as Jason came to his feet, his arms slipping around the Director and supporting him.

For a minute, Jason had need of the

support, since his feet seemed determined to work against him; but the clumsiness passed quickly, to be replaced by sure certainty. He pushed the other aside, enjoying the purely physical pleasure of moving about without paying for each step with deadening fatigue.

"What the deuce happened, Sorgen?" he wanted to know. "I'd have sworn I was dead. And now—"

"Now you're alive!"

"Obviously. But how did you do it?"

Sorgen shook his head, and a little doubt returned to his face. "That can wait, Jason. Thank God, the idea was not as cockeyed as I thought while waiting for you to come to. You've been—out—for hours! Now, how do you feel? Anything wrong? Any signs of some kind of shock?"

"Not a thing. I never felt better in my life. Those last few minutes before I blacked out. . . ." Jason checked his words, and shook his head. Funny! He had no memory of how he'd felt, though he could remember every sight and sound, including the last theatrical gesture, and Sorgen running toward the panel. He'd heard of pain so intense that it could burn the memory of itself from the brain, but he'd never really believed it. "Anyhow, what happened? I know you did the impossible, but how?"

Sorgen shrugged, hesitated, and began reaching for his inevitable safety-valve. At last, he stuck the pipe in his mouth and fumbled for words. "I didn't do a thing, Jason—you did it yourself—except for one minor little detail. And then I thought I'd muffed it, since it took so long. Here, come over here. Look at that and draw your own conclusions!"

THE SIGHT of the naked robot's body on the floor meant nothing to the Director, except the puzzle of why it wasn't back in the cradle, but he dropped obediently to inspect it.

When he arose, his face was tense, and he groped back into a chair before facing the human being in front of him. No wonder he couldn't remember what the pain had felt like—nor, accurately, any feeling of pain ever, though he could remember its physical results!

But his voice was still level as he faced the impossible fact. "So you pressed the button, eh, Sorgen? Thanks for changing clothes to this body and taking me out of the cradle. . . . Funny, I don't feel any different. I feel like the man who was ruler of this world for seventy years, except that somehow another seventy doesn't seem to bother me any more. My mind's the same as it was."

"You wouldn't know if it weren't," Sorgen pointed out reasonably. "It doesn't matter, anyway. It's consistent, human, and close enough to the original. The years of checking all decisions and cross-checking until you had time to find the same solution as your original took care of that. Know what that decision of yours was—the one I called nonsense? No, you were cut out of the memory circuit, of course. . . . It was to make me your successor!"

"But that wasn't nonsense. I—he—I did name you Director!"

"So Nema told me. Incidentally, she wanted to see me alone, and that story of a Supervisor waiting was just a trick—a robot lie—to get me away from you. She wanted to ask me how you were, because she was worried by your obvious sickness and your sudden will. She's scared sick, both for you, and what will become of her!"

Jason frowned. "I never built such ideas into her."

"Naturally. But you built thought in. I'm beginning to think the brain controls the endocrines a lot more than the reverse. My guess, now, is that intelligence can't be pure—not if as carefully mechanical a mind as Nema can develop a personality. If a

robot had no feeling of self, it would turn itself off and stop bothering!"

Sorgen stopped to relight his pipe and to glance at a clock on the panel. "While you were integrating, I had time for a bunch of thought, and I took a Ps.D. degree before my M.D., as you know. Put down that 'human' intelligence rot to vanity; the noun doesn't need the adjective. After all, a complete amnesiac remains pretty much the same sort of man as before—sometimes a better one. You're no amnesiac; you're lacking a lot of detail, which you'll color up and dub in eventually till you won't know it, but you have 99% of Jason's experience. He started out with almost no reactions to events, and he didn't need someone outside twisting his emotions to create his thoughts. The same goes for you. For the last forty years or more, you saw exactly the same, heard the same, and reacted the same as he did—so you had to think the same."

"Rather a backward statement of cause and effect," Jason objected. "But I'm the last person to call it wrong."

Sorgen went on, paying no attention as he worked things out while they were still fresh in his mind. "Man gets the world through six senses—of which your sense of smell is crude now, and your kinaesthetic sense a little different. But to the average man, those don't count too much. The 99% overrides the trivia."

"And I'm not mixing cause and effect. Psychology isn't that simple; we learned long ago that they're two names for the same thing. Start acting happy, and you soon are happy, as well as vice versa. Anyhow, as far as I'm concerned, Jason never died!"

The new Director accepted the other's hand with emotions as complicated as any purely human brain could have held. There was no use wasting words in thanks to the man who had saved him, when he might

have as easily taken over control of the world. Sorgen wasn't the type to violate the spirit of his Hippocratic oath, even had he wanted to rule, which he obviously didn't.

"Then suppose we put this body in the cradle until we can dispose of it and forget all this," he decided. "There was nothing in my education to make me like staring at my own corpse!"

The other chuckled, and they began clearing the laboratory, while Jason's mind opened up on the new vistas before him. Five hundred years of full activity should be enough to restore hope and independence to the world, until he would no longer be needed. And by then the planets should be open—all the planets now, since men could go forth clad in imperishable bodies suited to their environments. There would even be time to lick the problem of letting the race in on this secret.

They were almost to the lift when the doctor stopped and grunted.

"Just thought of something," he answered the Director's look. "I seem to have worked myself out of a job, and to be unemployed as of now. You hardly need a physician!"

Jason's grin flashed on with the ease of a man who no longer had to keep his life to a mechanical level capable of easy imitation by a functional robot. "I'll need someone to explain my miraculous life-span and perform magic cures later when the world gets enough spirit to start assassinating me. And having spent fifty years on a decision I never made, I don't care to get along without a mind to check mine for five hundred. No, it'll take maybe ten years to build another robot, but if you'll permit a slight change in body, I think I can guarantee you a rather long job!"

"Umm. Long enough to become a decent chess partner, maybe? Seems to offer reasonable security. I'll take it."

TYRANT AND SLAVE-GIRL ON PLANET VENUS

(Continued from page 13)

But he had fled because to rest, to settle down, to make a home there seemed like a betrayal of all that the vanished Earth had taught him. The act of surrender to Mars at last, and against which the voice inside him still protested: "I *am* the Captain of my Fate."

And now there was the chance to join others who thought that way. A pitiful few, but determined to rise again above the catastrophe which had all but finished them.

A vision of Earth as it had been replaced Zaylo in Bert's mind. Cities full of life, wide farmlands rich in crops, the music of great orchestras, the voices of crowds, the liners on the seas, and the liners in the air. The world made fit for man by man—the glorious dream of the composite mind of man come true. None who were living now would ever see Earth's genius on its pinnacle again. But it *could* climb there in time. The spirit still was there. One day there would be recreated on Venus everything that had seemed lost with Earth—perhaps it would be a creation even more magnificent.

What he was being offered was a chance to help raise civilization again out of disaster. That, or to stay on in puny futility on Mars. . . .

The image of Zaylo stood before him again, lovely, gentle, like balm for a bruised spirit, like heaven for a lonely soul. . . .

But there beside her shimmered the spires and towers of new cities springing into Venusian skies, great ships cleaving Venusian seas, myriads of people laughing, loving, living, in a world that he had helped to build.

Bert groaned aloud.

The echo of a puritan ancestor said: "The hard way must be right: the easy way must be wrong."

The murmur of another mocked it: "The way of vanity must be wrong: the way of simplicity must be right."

No help there.

Bert sat staring into the water.

A sound came from the Settlement behind him. He did not hear it start. He was suddenly aware that men's voices were singing. Occasional drunken bawling was familiar, but men singing lustily, cheerfully, with hope in their hearts was a thing he had not heard for a very long time. He raised his head, listening:

"Oh! There's lots of gold so I've been told

"On the banks of the Sacramento. . . ."

It floated across the sands like an anthem. Shades of the forty-niners, ghosts of covered wagon-trains crawling, crawling across prairies and deserts, over mountains, forging on against hardships and hunger. With not much gold at the end, perhaps—only an arid land. But a land which their sons would make to bloom like a garden there beside the Pacific. . . .

Bert stood up. Decision poured into his blood like strong drink. He felt a glow of comradeship for the men who sang. He turned, squaring his shoulders. He carried himself like a man refreshed as he strode towards the Settlement again. Throwing back his head, he let it go with the rest:

"Oh-h-h! There's lots of gold so I've been told

"On the banks of the Sacramento. . . ."

BERT WAS gazing out of the window as the narrow-gauge electric train pulled away. The perpetual clouds which allowed never a glimpse

of the sun, hung grayly over the landscape. The grasslike growth on the cleared ground looked pale, insipid, and scarcely green at all. The forest beyond rose like a woven wall of much the same ghostly tint. The details of the distance were blurred, of course, for it was raining—the way it did nine-tenths of the time on Venus.

On one side the line ran close to the landing-field. Hulks of spaceships lay about there like half-flensed whales. They had been gutted of all useful instruments and parts long ago, and huge slices had been cut from the sides of many to supply the need for hard metals. Only the small *Rutherford A4* stood intact and shipshape, ready to take off in a day or two on a second trip to Mars. Figures were still busy around her. It was reckoned that she would be able to make three trips during this conjunction, after that she would have to lay off for a while until the next.

Over on the far side of the landing-field coils of black smoke poured from the metal mills and rolled away across country, sooting the pale alien trees.

Whatever else you might feel about it, you had to admit that a staggering amount of work had been put into the place in thirteen years.

Through the other windows which faced the inner side of the curve the line was taking, one could see the houses of the Settlement dotted about. Here and there among them magnificent pennant-trees had been deliberately left standing. Their immensely long leaves rippled in the wind, writhing like Medusa's hair. Crowning the central rise of the Settlement stood the massive palisades of the Seraglio. The upper part of the stockaded wall bristled with down-pointing stakes, and above a top fringed with sharp spines an occasional roof ridge showed.

Bert's neighbor noticed the direc-

tion of his gaze. "Pie in the sky," he observed, shortly. "Jam tomorrow."

Bert turned his head to look at him. He saw a man of middle height, perhaps ten years older than himself. As with all the Venusian colonists his skin was pale and had a softened, flabby look.

"Meaning?" Bert inquired.

"Just that," said the man. "The old dangling carrot. You're one of the lot from Mars, aren't you?"

Bert admitted it. The man went on: "And you think that one day they'll say: 'Okay, you've been a good boy!' and let you into that place?"

"I've been examined," Bert told him. "They've immunized me against everything anybody ever heard of, and they've given me a certificate which says I'm healthy and fit for parenthood."

"Sure, sure," said the man. "We've all got 'em. Don't mean a thing."

"But it certifies—"

"I know. And what'd you have done if it didn't certify? You'd have raised hell. Well, they don't want guys raising hell around here, so they give you one. 'Seasy.'"

"Oh," said Bert.

"Sure. And now they've given you a job so that you can show you're a good, reliable type. If they're satisfied with your work you'll be granted full citizen rights. That's fine. Only you'll find that they can't quite make up their minds about you on this job, so they'll give you another, maybe one or two more before they do. And then, if you're very, very good and respectful you'll become a citizen—if you aren't, you can still go on trying to make the grade. Take it from me, it's a nice tidy kind of racket, pal."

"But if I do become a citizen?" asked Bert.

"If you do, they'll congratulate you. Pat you on the back. Tell you you're a swell guy, worthy to become one of the fathers of the new Venu-

sian nation. The old carrot again, pal. Unfortunately, they'll say, unfortunately there isn't a wife available for you just at the moment. So you'll not be able to set up house in the Seraglio for a little while. So sorry. But if you go on being a good boy—So you do.

"After a while you get restive and go to them again. They're sorry, but nothing doing just yet. In fact, there's a bit of a list ahead of you. Trouble is boys took to the climate here better than girls. Very unfortunate just at present. But it'll be better later on. All you have to do is be patient—and go on being good—for a few years, and the balance will right itself. Then you'll be able to move into nice comfortable married quarters in the Seraglio. . . . You'll have a sweet little wife, become the father of a family, and a Founder of the State. Jam tomorrow, pal. . . . If you should get sore, and tell 'em a few things, you lose your citizenship—like me. If you get to be a real nuisance around the place—well, you sort of disappear."

"You mean that all they tell you is phoney?" asked Bert.

"Phoney, pal? It stinks. Chris Davey took this place over the day after we heard about Earth cracking up. Since then he's let his buddies run it the way they like, so long as they produce the goods. The result is plenty of work for everyone, and no muscling in."

BERT LOOKED OUT of the window again. The Settlement was behind them now. The cleared ground on either side of the line was planted with unfamiliar, almost colorless crops. Here and there parties of the little yard-high griffas toiled between the rows with the rain dripping from their silver fur as they worked. Occasionally a man in a long waterproof coat and a shovel-shaped hat was to be seen striding from one group to another and inspecting progress. An-

other part of his uniform was a whip. "Well, they've got some results to show," he said, looking back at the smudge from the metal mills, almost hidden now by rain and mist.

"Yes, they've got that," the man admitted. "That's the griffas mostly—the donkey-work, I mean. There's plenty of griffas—all you like to round up in the forests. Lucky for you and me."

"How?" asked Bert.

"On account of they need us to supervise. The griffas won't work without. So it's no good having unlimited griffas without men to look after them. That makes Chris Davey's buddies think twice before they wipe a man out. Take me. I'm what they call a subversive element—and I'd not be here now if they didn't need all of us they can get to look after the griffas. It was even worth bringing your lot from Mars."

"And what do the griffas get out of it?" Bert asked.

"The chance to live a little longer—if they work," said the man.

Bert made no comment on that. He sat looking out at the blanched landscape through the drizzling rain. Presently the train jerked itself aside on to a loop in the single line, and settled down to wait for a bit. His neighbor offered him a roll of the curious local bread. Bert thanked him and bit into it. For a time they champed in silence, then the man said:

"Not what you expected, eh? Well, it's not what any of us expected. Still, it's all we've got."

"Huh!" grunted Bert non-committally.

His mind had been wandering very far away. He had been back in his old ramshackle boat idling along the canal. In his ears was the friendly chug of the engine mingled with the tinkerbell chimes. The thin, crisp air of Mars was in his lungs again. Beyond the bank, red sands rolled on to

low mountains in the distance. Somewhere ahead was a water-wheel that would surely be needing attention. Beside it a ruined tower of carved red stone. When he walked towards it the bannikuks would come bounding out of their holes, clinging and squeaking, and pestering him for nuts. In the doorway of the tower Zaylo would be standing in a bright-colored dress, the silver pins shining in her hair, her eyes serious, her lips slightly smiling. . . .

"No," he added. "Not what I expected." He paused, then he added. "How did it get this way?"

"Well, the Administrator here was okay with authority behind him, but without it he was nothing. Chris Davey saw that right off and moved fast. The only serious opposition came from Don Modland who wanted a democratic setup. But Don disappeared quite soon, and that had a kind of discouraging effect all round. So Davey and his mob took over. They built the Seraglio stockade for the safety of the women and children—they said. If you're one of Davey's mob, that's where you live. If you're not, you never see the inside of the place. You only think you may, one day.

"Maybe it is true what they say about the birth rate and the death rate in there. Likely it's not. There's no way of checking. The place is guarded. It'd be hard to get in—harder still to get out, alive. If you're one of Davey's mob you carry a gun—if you're not, you don't. The long and the short of it is that as long as the results are coming along Chris does not trouble how his buddies get them."

"He's made himself kind of—king of Venus?" Bert suggested.

"That's about it. This part of Venus, anyway. He's sitting pretty, with everything the way he wants it. The doggone thing is that whether you like it or not, he's making a job

of it. He *is* building the place up, in his way.

"One of the things his buddies put out is that it's a race between us and the Slav lot down in the south. If they get ahead, and come beating through the tropics some day, it's going to be bad for us. So it's better for us to get ahead."

"And attack them, you mean?"

"That's the way of it—sometime, when we're ready."

A TRAIN CAME clattering past on the other loop. Small open trucks loaded with produce, others full of iron-ore, some travelling pens packed with silvery griffas, a couple of glass-windowed carriages on the end. Their own train started off again with a series of jolts. Bert continued to look out of the window. His companion's hand came down on his knee.

"Cheer up, son. We're still alive, anyway. That's more than you can say for most."

"I was alive on Mars," said Bert.

"Then why did you come here?" asked the other.

Bert tried to explain it. He did his best to convey his vision of an Earth reborn. The other listened sympathetically, with a slightly wistful expression.

"I know. Like the Old Man said: '—a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal—'."

"Something like that," Bert agreed.

"Son," said the other man, "you were very young when you left Earth."

"I was twenty-one," said Bert.

"Twenty-one's still trailing clouds of glory—for all it thinks it knows. It was a grand thing the Old Man said, but have you ever thought how many empires had to grow up and be knocked out, or how many billions of poor guys had to die in slavery before a man could get up and say that?"

"I hadn't," Bert admitted. "But it

has been said. So why can't this be a 'nation conceived in liberty'?"

"Well, I guess perhaps the Old Man didn't have quite the right phrase, maybe. You see, after a creature is conceived, it has to go through all the stages—kind of recapitulate its evolution before it can get born."

"That doesn't sound much like a subversive element talking," said Bert.

"You don't have to be in a hurry to be subversive. All you got to do is to say 'why?' when it ought to be 'yes'. If you keep on saying it you find yourself booked for another spell of managing griffas in the quarries, the way I am now."

"But there's no reason to go back to the primitive. What's been said and worked out is all there in the books—books that are here on Venus. What I've seen for myself and what you've told me goes against it all. The thing they've set up is something like an ancient slave-state. We all know there's a better way of life than that—so, for God's sake, what's happening? With all the knowledge from Earth behind them, and the chance to build a new Earth here, surely they aren't going to pour half of history down the drain?"

The other man looked at him for some moments before he answered, then he said:

"Son, I guess you've got it kind of wrong. Building a new Earth is just what they are doing. What you're complaining about is that they've not started in building a new heaven."

Bert regarded him more closely. "I don't get that. I can remember Earth, you know."

"Me too. The difference is, like I said, the clouds of glory. What did you do there?"

"I went to school, then to college, then to the School of Space-training."

"And me. I worked on buildings, in factories, in ships, on docks, in space-ports, on railroads. I bummed around

quite a stretch. Do you reckon I got to know what Earth was like my way—or was your way better?"

Bert sat silent awhile, then he said: "There were fine cities, happy people, music—and fine men, too."

"Ever seen an iceberg? The part you *do* see looks mighty pretty in the sunshine."

"There was enough to show the way a world might be, and ought to be."

"Sure, sure. We all know the way things ought to be. We all got our little heavens." He paused contemplatively. Looking at Bert again, he added: "Maybe—one day. We *have* come quite a way in a few thousand years, but we've still got to grow up. Takes time, son, takes time."

"But here things are *wrong*. They're going back. They seem to have forgotten all the things we've learned. We have to go *on*, not back. Now the people on Mars—"

"Sure. Tell me about Mars, son. That's one place I never was."

Bert went on telling him about Mars. About the place itself, about the way the people, for all the simple poverty of their lives, seemed to enjoy life as a gift in itself, not as a means to something else, and were happy that way.

The little train rattled along. A dim line of hills ahead became visible through the drizzle, but Bert did not see them. His sight was all nostalgic. It showed red deserts set with placid canals, green patches about little homesteads. Somehow he found himself telling the stranger about Zaylo. . . .

The stranger said nothing. Once or twice he made as if to ask a question, but let it go unspoken. Bert talked on, oblivious of the compassion in the listener's eyes.

They were almost at the end of the line before the other broke in on Bert's mood. He pointed out of the window at the hills now quite close.

In places the green-gray vegetation on the slopes was scarred with the dark marks of workings.

"There's where we'll be doing our jobs," he said.

Presently the train jerked to a stop. Bert stood up, heavily and wearily. He collected his gear and followed the other man into the drizzling rain. He felt bowed down by his load. His feet shuffled in a clumsy trudge. He wondered how long it was going to take his muscles to adapt to Venus. At present the place bore down as heavily upon his flesh as upon his spirit. . . .

BERT STOOD on the lip of a small quarry, surveying the scene beneath him. Because, rather remarkably, it was not raining he had an extensive view. But because it was likely to resume raining at any moment he still wore the long waterproof coat that was practically a local uniform. Beneath it his feet showed in large boots that were clumsy, but did keep out the wet. At his waist was a belt supporting a machete and a sheath-knife on the left. His other instrument, a whip, with its twelve-foot lash carefully coiled, was thrust into the belt on his right hand side.

Looking down almost between his feet he could see his party of fifty griffas at work. They were loading ironstone into small trucks which they would presently push on to the slope which led down to the terminus of the line, and later wind up again. Beyond the sheds and tangle of trucklines, at the terminus itself he could see the electrified line, flanked all the way by cleared and cultivated fields, stretching like a rather uncertain swathe cut to the horizon.

To either side the natural Venusian forest grew untouched. Mostly it was a monotone of the pallid and, to unaccustomed eyes, unhealthy looking gray-green. There was a little relief here and there from the pink flush of

the displeasing plant they called the mock-rose—it reminded Bert more of a spiky-petalled dahlia which had been swollen to some eight feet in diameter.

Even more scattered, but giving some relief were occasional streaks of true green, and blobs of slaty-blue. Pennant-trees reared their crests magnificently above the ruck with their ribbons streaming. Still higher rose the feather-tops, swinging in great graceful arcs even in so light a wind. With the rippling fronds of the tree-ferns they helped to give the illusion that the whole plain was in undulating motion. Bert, pensively regarding the span from the mist-hidden sea in the east to the shadowy mountains in the west, loathed each acre of it individually and intensely.

The only things in sight he didn't loathe were the griffas. For them he had a mixture of pity and fellow-being. They were intelligent little creatures, but the general opinion was that they were dead lazy. As Bert saw it, that just showed narrow thinking.

Laziness is a relative term to be measured against work. Nobody calls a flower or a tree lazy.

The point was that a wild griffa never had any conception of work. When it was caught and shown work, it didn't like it. Why should it? The captives netted by a drive in the forest came in as sad-eyed, bewildered little figures, of whom a number went promptly into a decline and allowed themselves to die. The rest had no great will to survive. Life in captivity was very little better to them than no life at all. The only thing that made them work was the desire to avoid pain.

They were intelligent enough to be taught quite complicated duties, but what no one had been able to instil into them was the sacred idea of duty itself. They could not be brought to the idea that it was something they owed to these human invaders of their

planet. It was Bert's job to keep them working by the only effective method. He loathed that, too.

There was also the uneasy feeling that his position in Venus society was not all that different from theirs. . . .

HIS WANDERING thoughts were brought back by the sight of the foreman-overseer climbing the path to the quarry. Bert descended to meet him.

The man gave him no greeting. He was dressed like Bert himself save for the sign of authority represented by the pistol on his belt. As he strode into the working it was plain that he was in a bad temper. His hard eyes looked Bert over with the full insolence of petty authority.

"Your lot's down on production. Way down. Why?" he demanded. But he did not seem to expect an answer. He glanced round, taking the place in at a sweep. "Look at 'em, by God! Your job here is to keep the little rats working, isn't it? Well, why in hell don't you do it?"

"They're working," said Bert, flatly.

"Working, hell!" said the overseer.

He drew his whip. The lash whistled. A female griffa screamed horribly and dropped where she stood. Her two companions, linked by chains to her ankles, stood quivering, with fear and misery in their dark eyes. The rest, after a startled pause, began to work very much more actively. Bert's hand clenched. He looked down on the fallen griffa, watching the red blood well up and soak into the silver fur. He raised his eyes to find the overseer studying him.

"You don't like that," the man told him, showing his teeth.

"No," said Bert.

"You've gone soft. Building this place up is a man's job. When you've been here a bit you'll learn."

"I doubtit," said Bert.

"You'd better," the overseer said unpleasantly.

"I didn't come here to help build a slave-state," Bert told him.

"No? You'd just like to start at the top—with none of the dirty work, wouldn't you? Well, it can't be done. You tell me one great nation or empire on Earth that didn't have this behind it at one stage?" He swung his whip with a crack like a rifle shot. "Well, tell me—?"

"It's wrong," said Bert, helplessly.

"You know a better way? Love and kindness, maybe?" the man said, jeering. "You've gone soft," he repeated.

"Maybe," Bert admitted. "But I still say that if there's no better way of building than driving these creatures crazy with pain and fear until they die, then it's not worth doing at all."

"Tchah! Where's your bible, Preacher? There's just one way to get the work that's got to be done, and this is it."

His whip whistled again. Another little griffa screamed, and another.

Bert hesitated a second. Then he drew his own whip. The lash sang through the air and wrapped itself around the overseer's neck. At that moment Bert yanked on the handle with all his strength. The man lurched towards him, tripped on a chunk of ironstone, and came down on his head. Bert dropped the whip, and dived to stop him drawing his pistol.

His leap was superfluous. The overseer was not in a condition where he would be able to use a pistol—or a whip—any more.

THE griffas had stopped work and stood staring as Bert got up and fixed the holstered pistol to his own belt. He raised his eyes from the man on the ground and stared back at them. He turned and went towards the toolshed. There he took down the long-handled pincers that were customarily used to cut a dead griffa

free from his fellows. Then he went back to them and got to work.

When it was over they stood round puzzled, with dark, sorrowful eyes blinking at him from silver-furred faces.

"Go on, you mugs! Beat it! Shoo!" said Bert.

He watched them scuttle away and disappear into the dense growth above the quarry, and then turned to reconsidering the fallen man. The overseer was heavily built. It was laborious to Bert's still unaccustomed muscles to drag him out of the quarry, but he managed it.

A short way down the path he paused a little to recover his breath. Then, with a great effort, he lifted the body, and heaved it into a mock-rose. The petal-like tendrils received the weight with a slow, engulfing movement like the yielding of a feather-bed. The large outer leaves began to close. Presently the thing was a hard tight ball looking like an enormous, etiolated brussels sprout.

Bert sat down on a stone for ten minutes, regaining his strength, and thinking carefully. Then he stood up, with decision. But before he left he went back into the quarry to fetch his hat, for it had started to rain again.

Once the acceleration was over, Bert emerged from his hiding-place and mingled with the rest. A full hour passed before someone tapped him on the shoulder and inquired: "Say, what the hell are you doing here?"

THE Captain and the Chief Officer regarded him uncertainly as he was brought before them. The pistol he wore was almost a badge of rank in itself.

"What's the trouble?" Bert inquired, blandly.

"You're not listed. How did you get here?" the Chief Officer inquired.

Bert looked surprised. "Not listed! Somebody must have slipped up. They only put me on this job yesterday.

But they said you'd been informed already, Captain."

"Well, I hadn't. And what is 'this job'?"

"It's—er—well, kind of recruiting-sergeant. You see I can speak four Martian dialects, and get along in several more."

"Recruiting Martians, you mean?"

"That's the idea. Spin 'em the yarn, and bring 'em along. They'll be useful managing griffas if nothing else."

He looked steadily back at the Captain as he spoke, hoping that it would not occur to either of them that a Martian transferred to Venus would only be able to crawl about, if he weren't actually pinned flat by the gravitation. It did not. Probably they had never even seen a Martian. The Captain merely frowned.

"I should have been informed," he said, stiffly.

"Bad staff work somewhere," Bert agreed, "But you could get radio confirmation," he suggested.

"Do you *know* anything of radio conditions on Venus?" inquired the Chief Officer shortly.

"No, but on Mars we—"

"Maybe, but Mars isn't Venus. Well, since you are here, you'd better make yourself useful on the trip."

"Aye, aye, sir," agreed Bert, briskly.

BY THE LOOK of it no one had touched the old boat since he had moored her. Bert patted the engine, and then primed it. A pull-up or two and she started. He laughed aloud. The old *phut-phut-phut* was like music to set his feet dancing. He cast off. With his arm over the tiller, he chugged out on the great canal.

Beyond the junction, and on a smaller canal, he stopped. From a locker in the cabin he produced old, patched clothes and a pair of the crude shoes that he was accustomed to make for himself. Overboard went

the clothes they had given him on Venus, and the heavy, laced boots with them. He hesitated over the pistol, and then threw it after them—nobody used or needed such a thing on Mars. He felt lighter as he watched them sink.

The miseries of the last few weeks on Venus, the long journey back from the quarries to the Settlement when he dared to move his weary body only by night for fear of being seen, the long wait in hiding close to the landing ground, the keeping alive on shoots and roots, the perpetual wet misery of the rain which scarcely ever let up, the anxious waiting for the return of the *Rutherford A4*, the delay while she was being made ready for her third and last trip of the conjunction, and, finally, the nervous business of smuggling himself aboard—all these began to become a bad dream.

He hitched his trousers, and tied them with a piece of cord. He was bending over the engine to re-start it when the sound of a sudden thunder came rolling across the desert.

Bert looked back.

Above the horizon a plume of black smoke rose and expanded. He nodded in a satisfied way. The *Rutherford A4* would not be taking part in any more slaving expeditions.

IT WAS the mind's eye picture come to life—even to the squeak pitched above the tinkerbell chimes telling that the waterwheel needed attention. As he walked towards the broken tower there was the familiar *thump-thump* of Annika, Zaylo's mother, at her work of pounding grain. The bannikuks scampered up, pestering—only this time he had no nuts for them, and they wouldn't seem to understand that. Annika rested her stone pestle as he approached.

"Hullo, Earthman," she said. Her eyes searched his face keenly. "You have been ill?" she added.

Bert shook his head, and sat down on a stone bench.

"I've been thinking," he said. "Remember last time I was here you said that if Earth was recreated now it would be stranger to me than Mars?"

"So it would, Earthman."

"But I didn't believe you."

"Well—?"

"I think I see what you meant now." He paused. "Back home," he went on, "we used to talk about men and women we called saints—the funny thing about them was that they never seemed very real. You see, once they were dead, people agreed only to remember the good things about them. Seems to me—well, it might be there never was a place like the Earth I remembered. . . ."

Annika nodded.

"A heaven behind you is no good," she said. "A heaven ahead is better. But to make a heaven around you is best."

"You understand things, Annika. I was like a rich man who had been cheated out of all his money—the only worthwhile thing seemed to be to get it all back."

"And now—?" asked Annika.

"Now, I've stopped fooling myself. I don't want it. I've stopped crying for the moon—or the Earth. I'll be content to live and enjoy living. So this time—" He broke off.

Zaylo, coming out of the door in the tower base, had paused there at the sight of him. She stood quite still for a moment, poised with the grace of a young goddess. The coils of her dark hair shone like lacquer, her misted-copper skin glowed in the sunlight. She put her hand to her breast, her eyes sparkled with sudden pleasure, her lips parted. . . .

Zaylo was not quite as he had pictured her. She was ten times more wonderful than anything memory could contrive.

"So this time," Bert repeated. "This time I have come to stay."

THE POISONOUS SOUL

(Continued from page 40)

fruitless search of Stanwick's room for a venomous reptile; of the entire floor, the entire house, the entire grounds.

There was the arrival from the hotel of Andre van der Henst, there were the tests that he made, and his wooden-voiced pronouncement that indeed Dr. Stanwick had died of a powerful reptile venom.

"Iv der bide had been anywhere else," he said in his curious mixture of Dutch, Portuguese and English, "den he mighd have had der chance, senhores. But righd in der spinal cord. . . ."

And he explained volubly how the neurotoxin raced up to the medulla oblongata and destroyed the vasomotor system.

"As if the snake knew the type and power of its own poison and picked the exact spot for the purpose," David Lacey murmured thoughtfully.

There was common agreement that a man of Stanwick's standing as a herpetologist could not be wrong about a mamba. And van der Henst readily conceded from the tests he made that a mamba it might well have been.

"But there are only half a dozen mambas in the country just now!" I protested. "They came over to us in a recent shipment from Africa, and they're safe in the Reptile House this minute."

But was I so sure of that? the police asked.

And so, as the September dawn crept out of the cloud banks to the east, there was our fast, police-escorted ride down the miles of winding river to the Zoo. I led the way through the groves of trees to the darkened Reptile House.

You have seen snakes in their cages? You have seen how they en-

twine themselves about each other until they are a tangled mass of bodies until you can make out neither the tails of some nor the heads of others? And have you ever tried to count them?

One by one we separated the writhing bodies of those slim, green demons. With the utmost anxiety I counted them. One—two—three! Finally, we could find but five. My breath caught. Somewhere in the city was one of those creatures loose—the same that had killed John Stanwick? It remained for the less impatient van der Henst to discover the sixth mamba coiled behind the small trunk of a tree in a corner of the cage.

Here was enigma.

LACEY AND I were last to leave the Zoo. As we stepped into my car, parked near the service gate, Matty Riley, the watchman, approached. "And it's uncommon excitement we've had this night," he volunteered. "First the young Mr. Cheever on a late visit, and now yourselves."

Was he seeking or volunteering information? I glanced at Lacey, and I could read his thought: that only at midnight we had left Cheever off at Rittenhouse Square. Sharply I questioned Riley: "Did Mr. Cheever, perhaps, come and then go away and return and go away again?"

"Ah no, sir. 'Twas here he was throughout, from one till two, and myself with him all but five minutes or so. And even then—"

If he were about to say more, he didn't. I reflected: two in the morning, or a little before, was when Stanwick died. Which left nowhere near enough time for Cheever to make the trip from the Zoo to Germantown and

back with a snake. I wondered that I had even entertained the suspicion.

"He often works nights," I said, and shifted the car into gear.

I do not need to recall to you the lurid, screaming headlines that followed police announcement of Dr. Stanwick's death. In that tortuous fashion of mishandling truth with which the press habitually meets what it cannot understand, the papers led the public to believe that an entire army of poisonous snakes was loose upon the city. No account whatever was taken of the plain fact that we had accounted for each of our six African mambas. Nor did the press record that we had also accounted for every other venomous reptile in our care.

Still, the final result of this mendacious campaign was to focus that public attention upon me which eventually led to my ruin.

The effect of Dr. Stanwick's death upon the meeting of our society was, of course, most profound. With so many important delegates there from all parts of the world, there was naturally no deviation from the Monday schedule other than a short memorial service for the South African herpetologist. As program chairman, I even went so far to maintain a semblance of normalcy on Tuesday as to fill a vacancy in the Reptilian Forum created by the death of Stanwick, who had been scheduled to speak.

To accomplish this, I returned to a former idea: I chose Aaron Cheever. And I must say my choice was a happy one.

I had feared that his youth, his lisp and his awkward shyness, his lack of formal training in the sciences would militate against him. I was never so surprised in my life. Even Dr. Stanwick, celebrated as a fluent and lucid speaker, could not have done better.

Cheever's delivery had, to my amazement, much of Stanwick's flawless style. Speaking extemporaneous-

ly, with no trace of a lisp, he told first of certain experiences he had had with snakes in the African interior. From that he went on to a general discussion of the differences between some species of poisonous reptiles. And he concluded with some particularly perceptive observations on the Lamarckian theory of evolutionary mechanism—an accomplishment the more amazing because it was Stanwick's specialty.

It was almost as if Stanwick himself were speaking; and I even imagined I saw in Aaron Cheever the same mannerisms and heard the same tone of voice. Hitherto, I'd had no inkling of the depth of Cheever's learning; and I could only conclude that he had read much of Stanwick's writings.

I was proud of Cheever; and for the moment I forgot the horrible experience I had suffered in his presence in the Reptile House. But when I turned to David Lacey who sat beside me and nodded my approval in Cheever's direction, I found Lacey—the normally gentle Lacey—with his lower lip thrust out in both distaste and wonder. And with something of alarm in his eyes.

THAT WAS on Tuesday morning. That evening, with work to do in my office at the Zoo, I left Lacey to his own devices. I'd call for him at the Ritz, we agreed.

It was after 11 o'clock, perhaps, before I'd waded through a pile of papers that had collected while I was busy with convention matters. Leaving the Administration Building, I saw that a light was still on in the Reptile House. Realizing that it could be no other than Cheever, I walked across the grounds with the intention of congratulating him for his fine performance.

I approached that old Victorian building by the front entrance. And through the clear glass of the large

double doors a light fell on the concrete steps. I walked up the steps, reached out for the door handle and at the same time peered through the glass. What I saw froze my blood.

Aaron Cheever was squatting on his haunches on the floor in the manner of a Hindu fakir. His eyes were half closed, trance-like, and he was passing his hand before them as if seeing far-off things. Before him, as free as ever it had been in its jungle home, coiled a seven-foot Cascabel.

You know the Cascabel, that notorious Costa Rican rattlesnake so appropriately known to science as *crotalus terrificus*? Its tail projecting erectly from the center of its coil, its arched head was reared more than a foot from the ground in the spectacular tropical manner—poised to strike.

I stood paralyzed.

Suddenly I saw a few quick side flings of the rattle, I heard even through the closed doors the single harsh clicks of the rattle. Then, from its lateral loop level with Cheever's face, the snake struck.

"That fool!" I thought. And I was about to throw open the doors and spring forward to help when Cheever unconcernedly picked up the great snake and, a Sphinxian smile on his lips, thrust the creature back into its cage.

Shaken, I turned away. How I was able to drive to the hotel I'll never know. But when I reached it, Lacey, his face grave, was first to greet me . . .

"Van der Henst," he said quietly, "has just died."

I CAN STILL see those blazing headlines announcing the second death by snake bite among our number. I can still hear the breathless voices of the radio newscasters. I can still vividly recall the awe with which each delegate received the ironic news that van der Henst, who had done

more than any living man to alleviate the suffering that accompanies snake bite, had himself died of a virulent poison.

But my sharpest impression is the appearance of van der Henst himself. His throat, head, chest and upper arms were swollen horribly. And in the neck were two incisions such as a large hypodermic needle might have made.

It was David Lacey and Stark, the bio-chemist, who found him—blind, paralyzed and dying of suffocation.

My own thinking was confused. But from Lacey's expression I could see that, concerned as he was for van der Henst, he was far more alarmed about something else—about something he did not wish to mention in the presence either of Stark or the others who were now crowded in the room. It was only after removal of the body that he drew me aside.

"I saw it," he said quietly.

I looked at him, stupidly I fear.

"A big, shadowy thing coiled in the corner," he said.

My thoughts at once reverted to the scene I had witnessed in the Reptile House. But before I could speak, Lacey went on: "It was a loathsome, insubstantial thing and I couldn't quite make it out."

"Stark saw it?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, though he looked in that direction once. And then, just like the other one, it . . ."

He did not like to use the word "vanished." But I understood only too well; and I was gripped by, not fear alone, but a feeling of utter helplessness in the face of something that I could not understand.

"You realize, of course," Lacey said, "that it may happen to any of us."

"But why, how—?"

Lacey made no answer to that. Instead, he asked abruptly: "Where's Cheever?"

It was then I told him of the scene I had witnessed in the Reptile House.

"At about the time van der Henst died?" he asked quickly.

I frowned, for my thinking was still behind his.

"And didn't it strike you as strange," he asked, "that this morning his manner, his voice, his fluency of word and thought so sharply resembled that of our late friend, Stanwick?"

I could not bring myself to accept the shocking implications of this remark. "Ah, but—" I protested.

And so I was not as prepared, as Lacey was, when the toxicologist's report showed that van der Henst had died of "a potent, almost colorless venom of largely neurotoxic action."

Only one snake known to science possessed this particular type of poison. And this was that most dangerous of all New World pit vipers, the Costa Rican Cascabel!

YOU WILL understand, I think, the unenviable position in which both David Lacey and I now found ourselves. As Curator of Mammals and Reptiles at the Zoo, I was regarded with ill-concealed suspicion by the police after this second strange death. Stanwick's had occurred in my home; and David Lacey had been at the scene of both tragedies.

The police plainly were of a mind to believe that someone with poisonous snakes at his command had introduced them to Stanwick and van der Henst—with murder the object. The police theory was strengthened by the toxicologist's reports which revealed the presence of two separate species of snakes: the African mamba and the Costa Rican rattler.

My chief defense during those hours of questioning, innuendo and suggestion was the ability to prove that none of our snakes had left the Reptile House. There was no other Cascabel nearer than the Zoos of New York and Washington. When those Zoos also accounted for their snakes,

the only police alternative was to theorize that an entire collection of poisonous reptiles had escaped from some traveling carnival.

I will never forget my debt at this terrible time to David Lacey. His mystical nature was a pillar of strength. From it stemmed his own ability to accept without question a manifestation which to any other would have appeared illogical and irrational. He was able to impart to me this acceptance, so essential in maintaining my reason. And there was the added strength deriving from our mutual experiences.

It was Lacey, with his keen observation and knowledge of primitive man's beliefs, who questioned me closely about everything I knew concerning Aaron Cheever. In their sum total, these facts produced the outlines of a hideous picture.

This picture, to me, was vague in the extreme; and for that reason, perhaps, the more terrifying. But I believe that Lacey had defined it in detail to his own satisfaction—and was content to let me discover for myself the whole sickening truth.

My most poignant regret is that, in confronting Cheever, we did not act with greater caution.

CHEEVER was by no means himself when we casually dropped in on him the next morning in the office of the Reptile House. My first impression was that he had spent a sleepless night. There was a wary, haunted look in his eyes, and he spoke at random—as if, as Lacey later observed, two sets of opposing ideas were struggling for expression.

A more startling change was in his voice. There was little of the inflection of the original Cheever; but much of both Stanwick's clear articulation mixed with van der Henst's guttural explosions in Dutch, Portuguese and English. Psychologists would rationalize that he had been affected in this

strange way by the deaths of both men. I cannot accept this view. He had met both of them but briefly.

Still, it was plain that Cheever was puzzled by what had come over him.

The greatest change appeared when Lacey adroitly steered the conversation around to the Sunday night talk he and Stanwick had held with Cheever.

Here was candor. Was it, I wondered, the brazen effrontery of a man secure in his own position? I believe not. Rather, it seemed to me that he was the victim of a garrulity, foreign to him, over which he had almost no control.

It was the garrulity of Andre van der Henst!

"Yes, yes," he said excitedly. "I was thinking, of course, of the primitive belief in transmigration of the soul—how, in particular, the released soul of a man moves into the body of the beast that kills him. And the man's virtues merge with those of the beast, and the beast becomes sacred to the man's survivors. For it is the man, don't you see?"

He paused and the wary look returned, as if again two sets of thoughts were attempting to battle. Then he mastered himself and continued:

"But you run across some strange beliefs out there in Africa. There's the Fan tribe in the Gaboon, who reverse the process. D'ya remember, Doctor—" and he turned to me—"my mentioning the belief that you acquire wisdom by eating snake meat? But the Fans go a step farther. They've a blood rite where the tribal wizard draws blood from the serpent and from his own arm and inoculates himself with the snake's blood and the snake with his own. They're brothers then—blood brothers. And the snake becomes the wizard's external soul—*elangel*, they call it in their language, his other self. And then—? Why, the snake's now the wizard's

familiar and he'll obey the wizard's commands."

My spine tingled; with the greatest effort, I controlled my amazement. For I was vividly recalling the night when I had surprised Cheever with that curiously neat, X-like cut on his wrist. That, too, I had mentioned to Lacey, and now Lacey stole a glance at me.

Cheever raised his voice.

"And imagine," he went on, "the influence the wizard has over the whole snake clan! Just as the savage tribe whose totem is the snake won't kill a snake of any sort, so the snake kith and kin respect and obey the man who's brother of one of their own!"

His eyes burned.

"And think of it! Combine the two—the merging, the trade of souls and virtues. Let your *elangel* go kill the man you want. It absorbs his spirit and with that, his wisdom. But the *elangel* is only a bridge to the master. In the end, it's the wizard who absorbs."

Never had Cheever appeared more reptilian. Line by line, he had defined the picture in all its ugliness. I was shocked beyond measure. But Lacey merely nodded at each lurid statement, as if he were simply receiving confirmation of what was already in his own mind. Our glances met again and we exchanged the same thought: If we examined the snakes, would we find one with the X-like wound? But how could we tell? They were constantly shedding.

We were thinking, too, of how only on Sunday Cheever had spoken of the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge. And we were thinking of his very words to me: "And when you come down to it, if you have that, what more can you want?"

"Oh, there's a distinct drawback, of course," Cheever continued hastily. "You're so bound up with your familiar that if it's harmed, you're

harméd, too. And in the same way. As with Samson, where his fate lay in his hair, *your fate lies with your elangela.*"

Lacey leaned forward.

"And you?" he asked quietly. "What is your elangela?"

It was like a slap in the face. It was a question that shocked Cheever back to near-normalcy.

"Sir?" he cried, half rising. But Lacey, the normally gentle Lacey, was on his feet. He thrust out his chin, his eyes snapped, his fist slammed down on Cheever's desk, and he barked: "You're mad, Cheever, mad!"

For a moment the two men glared at each other. Lacey had blundered, I saw at once; and now, unable to restrain his anger, he blundered again.

"Mad, I say! And a crazy killer! A leech and a parasite—but you'll have no rest! They're ghosts, those opposing minds you absorbed, and they'll plague you till the day you die! And that's none too soon."

He turned to me. "Doctor, I think you'd better notify the police."

I reached for the phone, but Cheever gripped my hand. His chin was cunning.

"And can you imagine them believing your wild story? You'd be clapped in a padded cell!"

For a moment Lacey and I confronted him. Lacey's emotion was first to subside. "Yes," he said reluctantly. "He's right, of course."

"Right?" cried Cheever. "Of course I'm right." He looked first at Lacey, then at me. "But do you think," he spat, "that I can have you two sharing my secret?"

FROM THAT moment on, David Lacey and I lived in the deadliest peril. I cannot easily make this admission, but panic seized me. There was no doubt of either Cheever's meaning or intention; and I found myself glancing like a coward over

my shoulder, starting at the least untoward sound, and fearfully examining corners and shadows.

There was no question of discharging him or using force against him. There, again, we met the same objection of making explanations that we'd meet in going to the police. We, not he, would have been regarded as lunatics.

Our only momentary salvation, we realized, lay in the fact that the usual number of visitors were visiting the Reptile House and that in their presence Cheever was unlikely to wield his terrible power. But with the Zoo's closing our danger mounted. Act we must. The question was how. Lacey, I believe, had thought out the answer when night came and we drove home.

I was about to drive the car into the garage when Lacey suggested: "I think we had better return tonight."

I did not question this, but parked instead in the driveway. We went into the house, but a short time later Lacey left. For a walk, I supposed; but shortly, through a window, I saw the garage lights on. The lights went off and Lacey came out, carrying something. He went to the car, opened the door, then slammed it shut. Soon he returned to the house.

"We'd better go now," Lacey said, soon after nine o'clock. Still I had no wish to question him. I utterly relied on his judgment.

We started to get into the car almost simultaneously, he on the right hand, I on the driver's side. As the doors opened, the dome light flashed on. And there—

Undulantly drawing itself up from the floor board onto the seat was the long, thick body of an anaconda!

It is a question if one can escape his fate. It is a question if one can escape a shadow. It started back. But in his own haste to withdraw, Lacey struck his shoulder on the door. Instantly the great reptile was upon him. And as Lacey fell backward, the

snake began to coil itself about him.

Running around the car, I found him struggling on the ground. I had had my own experiences with constrictors; I knew where to bring pressure to unwind their coils, and I knew the necessity of keeping the coils away from the windpipe.

Bracing myself, I set upon the brute. But it was like fighting wind. My eyes saw, but my hands clutched—nothing.

Lacey's own grip relaxed; his head fell awkwardly to one side as the neck cracked. The struggle was over.

Slowly the anaconda unwound itself. Its head lifted and its malicious eyes stared at me, as if they had seen me many times before. And perhaps they had; for on my part, frozen with terror, I seemed to recognize a peculiar marking of the head. The head lowered. The long, forked tongue slipped in and out of the mouth. Then, dispassionately, its brown scales glistening in the soft rays of the dome light, the creature twisted its slow way into the shadows of the shrubbery where it disappeared.

TEN MINUTES, twenty minutes, perhaps, I sat weakly on the car's running board, gazing at Lacey's body. It was even smaller in death. One eye was closed by a bruise, but the other was open and staring. And the mouth was gaping, as if at the last second he had tried to speak. To tell me something? But what? His intention?

As my nerves became calmer, I was aware of a hammering headache. Nausea overcame me, and I walked a few steps to vomit. As I straightened up, I saw something gleaming on the car floor. It was the head of a sharp axe, projecting from a wrapping of burlap. How right Lacey was! I thought. I wondered that I had not thought of this solution myself.

One of the most telling points that the police made against me was that

I left David Lacey's body where it had fallen and drove away.

My drive through Fairmount Park was the fastest I ever made. And when I swung through the service gate of the Zoo grounds, I nearly struck Matty Riley.

"Has Cheever been here?" I asked.

"Sure and he left but the few minutes ago, sir. And mumbling to himself like crazy. 'Tis wrong something is?"

Riley's answer relieved my mind. I shook my head to his last question, lifted the burlap-wrapped axe from the car, and told him:

"I'll be in the Reptile House, Matty. And I won't want to be disturbed."

I walked off, leaving him frowning.

I WOULD IF I could erase all memory of that next hour. Locking the doors and leaving the lights on only in the exhibition hall, I stood for a moment looking about me. There in those cages were the prized collection of half a lifetime. Some of those specimens I had caught myself in the jungles of Brazil and Ceylon, in the Everglades of Florida and the deserts of the West. They had been as intimately a part of my life as my family. Yet to delay would have been fatal.

I'll not go into the details. There was gore enough in the papers: how Matthew Riley, worried over my distraught appearance, had waited nervously at the gate and then decided to follow me; how he'd come around to the front of the building and looked through the glass panels of the door; how he saw writhing on the blood-splashed concrete floor the headless bodies of a score of venomous serpents; how, as he watched, he saw the axe head descend on a diamondback; and how, like a fool, he raced back to his station and telephoned—of all people!—Cheever.

I had no sense of time. I had only a driving urge to finish the most

damnable task of my life. With no means of knowing which snake I sought, I was prepared to slaughter them all.

Somewhere in that timeless vortex I became aware of shouting out in front. I'd the cage of the Gaboon viper open then, and was teasing him out.

Glancing up and beyond, I saw Cheever, hatless and hair flying, running up the walk toward the door. Behind him was Riley.

The diversion proved nearly fatal. For when I looked down at the cage again, the viper had eased its thick yellow body toward me, and I dealt its horned head a blow only in time. The blow glanced, the body fell out of the cage onto the floor, and I—thinking it dead—again looked toward the door. Cheever had stumbled and fallen on the steps.

Was *this* the elangela?

The thought had no more than crossed my mind when I felt a sharp sting on my ankle. The thing was not dead but dazed. And there was Cheever, his head bleeding as he crawled up those steps and clawed desperately at the locked door. With monstrous pain already coursing up my leg, I delivered a final blow at the viper's head. And at the same moment, Cheever's head jerked back as if in sympathy, then sagged.

They say that as they carried me out to the first aid station I was moaning hysterically:

"Don't let him in! Don't let him in!"

But my own recollection, before descending into those weeks of oblivion from which only the best medical care roused me, was of looking down from my stretcher as I passed Cheever and seeing the dead man's torn fingernails.

HAUNTED ATOMS

(Continued from page 18)

would just love that. Apparently there's been talk around the cloistered walls of the university the last couple of years, and it's no longer regarded as a myth. Some old duck has been looking at the sun, and has come out with the theory that it is possible for energy to exist in a—whatchamacallit—"

Peter was aware of her eyes studying him expectantly. "Don't look at me," he said hastily. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"—in a raw state," Janie finished uncertainly. "Does that seem to make sense?"

Peter shrugged. "Only energies I know about are nuclearicity and nucleonite."

"How do they work?"

"They work by transference."

"That's awfully clear," said Janie. "Not."

"I mean," said Peter, "you get a block of the compound ready, then put it in with a block that's already charged. A week later you take it out, and both of them are ready. You can pick it up with your hands or anything. It won't operate until it's fitted into an engine, or whatever it's supposed to work with. Absolutely fool-proof. I thought all energy was like that."

"Who made the first one?"

Peter shrugged irritably. "You can think of the hardest questions."

"Those," said Janie, "are the kind of questions they're beginning to ask at the university. You'd better be smart, and pretend you thought of

things like that long ago, and maybe—"

"Maybe what?"

"Don't be such a dope. Maybe Professor Leard will arrange to have all the work of removing the mounds done at the expense of the university."

Peter grabbed her. "My gosh, darling, you're a genius."

Janie rearranged her hair. "I'm not bad," she said with a simple self-assurance.

"**WE'LL DIG HERE,**" said Professor Leard.

Janie went to the car. "Peter," she called, "we've got some shopping to do if we're going to feed all these wonderful people."

Up in the air, she sank back in her seat and fanned herself. "Phew!" she said. "I'm glad we're away from there." She was silent, then: "Do you think they'll blow up the Earth?"

"Huh!" He stared at her. "My gosh, what goes on in that brain of yours?" He went on in a complaining tone, "You've got what you wanted, haven't you? Scientists are cleaning up our property for nothing."

"Scientists my eye!" Janie retorted. "They don't know any more about the stuff than I do."

"Well, I'll be a—" Peter sagged back helplessly. "Look, my little lovey bunch, do you mean to sit there and tell me that you think Professor Leard and the others are going to melt into little blobs of hot liquid or something, and yet you pushed this business through."

His wife shrugged. "Somebody's got to do it. If you monkeyed with it, people would say you were just another idiot like uncle—when you got killed, that is. If they, uh, melt like you said, why that's another sacrifice on the altar of science. You'd be just one more dumb nut, but they're heroes—What're you doing?"

"We're going back."

Janie grabbed at the wheel and jerked them back on their original course. Peter, white-faced, snatched her hand, felt the tense determination in it, and hesitated.

"Peter, don't you dare hit me!"

He was outraged by the charge. "I wasn't going to hit you."

"You were so. I know that look in your eye."

"What look? Have I ever so much as touched you?"

"You know better than that. I'd have you up in court so fast—"

"You're getting away from the subject," he snarled. "You're the one that will be arrested."

"For heaven's sake, Peter, listen to reason."

"Reason—from a little murderess."

"Don't be so stuffy."

"Stuffy. To sit there, calmly waiting for an entire staff of a university to blow up."

"Don't exaggerate. Peter, listen. You admit they're among the Earth's experts on this stuff?"

Peter sighed. "I suppose so."

"If anybody's going to dig in there, it has to be somebody like that?"

"I guess so."

"Just because we can't afford to pay them doesn't mean anything. They get paid in fame."

"That'll be nice for them when they're dead." Sourly.

Janie stroked his arm. "There, there, darling, I know your conscience is going to bother you all the rest of your life. But at least it'll be around to be bothered, not melted into blobs. Listen, honey, here's my plan. We shop in a leisurely fashion. When it's almost time for dinner, you phone up Professor Leard and ask him how things are going—"

"I will not."

"Then I'll do it. But you can see now that I'm only being sensible. Can't you?"

"Oh, I suppose so."

Janie sighed, but as Peter expected,

she pressed her victory: "And you will make the phone call, won't you?"

Peter supposed that he would.

IT WAS LATE afternoon when he made the call. He turned away from the video plate, pale. "No answer," he said.

"But that's impossible," Janie quavered. "Give me that phone."

The plate remained lifeless.

"Oh, my heaven," she moaned, "what have I done? What're you doing?"

"Turning on the news."

The news failed to mention anything unusual. Peter guided the car into a speed channel. Janie said tremulously:

"W-where are we going?"

"We'll have to go and look, won't we?"

The place, as they circled around it in the dim light of twilight, had a deserted look. Janie began to cry.

"They're probably all blobs," she whimpered.

Peter put his arm around her. "It's not your fault. After all, Professor Leard did take precautions. He knew what he was doing."

"Now, you're giving me back my own arguments. I feel a-awful."

"Look, darling, the ground is absolutely level. There's not a mound in sight. You know what I'm going to do?"

"W-what?"

"I'm going to call Professor Leard up at the university."

The professor's smooth face came on the video after about ten seconds. He was apologetic.

"After we got the stuff up," he explained, "I thought we'd better get it into larger safety containers as soon as possible." He grew enthusiastic. "I want to take this opportunity on behalf of the university to thank you for a valuable contribution to science."

Janie leaned across Peter. "Profes-

sor," she glowed. "Is it the stuff? Is it a source of raw energy?"

The smooth face on the video took on a cautious look. "Possibly. We might even—" He hesitated—"be able to make it explode. . . . This is a great day for science."

Peter said practically, "What about the house? Will it be haunted again?"

The professor shook his head. "We did a good job of cleaning up. I doubt if there'll be any stray radiation."

Janie, who had been thinking, said, "Has it any value?"

"I was coming to that," said the professor in a subdued voice. "Naturally, we have no desire to have you young people feel as if you have been taken advantage of. So if you will sign a release, we will pay you five thousand dollars. So far as the university is concerned, that is purely a matter of clearing up the title."

Janie said, "Thank you, Professor, we'll take it. Good-bye." She broke the connection.

Peter grabbed at her fingers. "Darling, you don't just hang up on a man like Professor Leard."

"We're through with him," Janie said, faintly. "And besides I was just about to faint." She caught his arm. "Honey, will you please land instantly? We've barely time. The new tenants are due to move into our town house tomorrow."

He brought the car down, protesting. "What's the idea?"

Janie raced into the house, and emerged triumphantly with the sign. She slipped it into the slot on the terrace. "There," she said, "it's for rent again."

"Quick now," she said, as she climbed back into the car. "We've got to take possession of the town place."

"Are you nuts? We've a lease."

"We'll refuse to let them in. We'll tell them they can have this place, or go jump in a lake."

"To heck," she said, "with living in the country. It's too dull."

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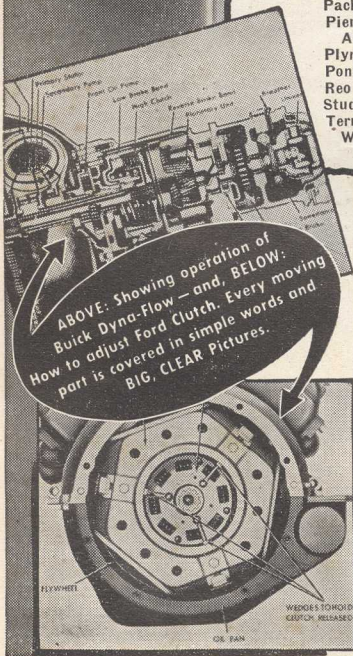
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