

MAC 7

AMAZING

35¢

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

JULY

ASIMOV
SHECKLEY
BRADBURY

SHORT NOVEL:

COLLISION COURSE!
By Robert Silverberg



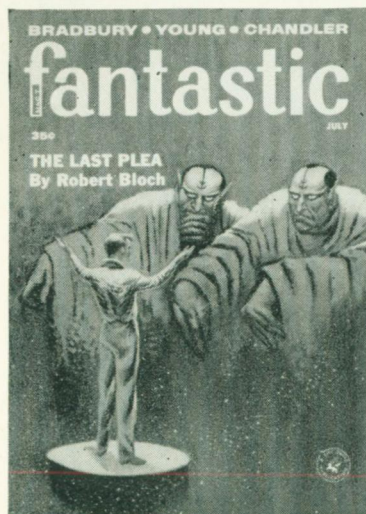
*there's plenty of
good reading
in July*

FANTASTIC!

THE LAST PLEA

by Robert Bloch

In this off-beat story, you'll meet the Devil in a new guise—as an actor's agent with a diabolical plan for foisting a weird brand of "talent" on the American public!



PLUS: a quartet of wonderful stories by these favorites—Robert F. Young, Ron Goulart, A. Bertram Chandler, and Ray Bradbury.

Don't miss the July issue of FANTASTIC—

**on sale June 18
only 35¢**

AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, Vol. 33, No. 7, July 1959, is published monthly by Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, William B. Ziff, Chairman of the Board (1946-1953), at 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago 5, Illinois. Second-class postage paid at Chicago, Illinois. Subscription rates: U. S. and possessions and Canada \$3.50 for 12 issues; Pan American Union Countries \$4.00; all other foreign countries \$4.50.

AMAZING

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

JULY

1959

Volume 33

Number 7

Publisher

MICHAEL MICHAELSON

Editorial Director

NORMAN M. LOBSENZ

Editor

CELE GOLDSMITH

Art Editor

SID GREIFF



SHORT NOVEL

COLLISION COURSE

By Robert Silverberg..... 84

SHORT STORIES

IF THE RED SLAYER

By Robert Sheckley..... 7

READY, AIM, ROBOT!

By Randall Garrett..... 13

DOLL-FRIEND

By Robert F. Young..... 34

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

By Ray Bradbury..... 50

THE TRAITOR

By Jack Douglas..... 55

ODD BIRD

By Shelly Lowenkopf and
Jerry J. Williams..... 70

FEATURES

THE UNUSED STARS

By Isaac Asimov..... 141

EDITORIAL..... 5

THE SPECTROSCOPE..... 79

...OR SO YOU SAY..... 81

COMING NEXT MONTH..... 54



Cover: ALBERT NUETZELL

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY, One Park Avenue, New York 16, New York. William Ziff, President; W. Bradford Briggs, Executive Vice President; Michael Michaelson, Vice President and Circulation Director; H. B. Sarbin, Secretary; Howard Stoughton, Jr., Treasurer; Albert Gruen, Art Director.



Fill in and mail the coupon below . . .

You'll get 2 issues of
Amazing Stories
FREE!

Here's how . . .

ONE YEAR (12 issues) of AMAZING STORIES would cost you \$4.20 if bought individually. But if you fill in the order form below, you can have a full year of AMAZING delivered right to your home for only \$3.50! This low subscription rate brings you the equivalent of

2 issues free!

And during the next twelve months, you'll read the best science-fiction being written or published anywhere—twelve complete novels (one in each issue) written by such masters as E. E. Smith, Charles Eric Maine, Robert Bloch, Poul Anderson and Fritz Leiber. You'll also read the finest short works in the field, written by outstanding s-f writers of today, as well as an occasional vintage masterpiece by one of science-fiction's immortals.

Fill in and mail coupon today!

AMAZING STORIES • 434 South Wabash Avenue • Chicago 5, Illinois

- ☐ Please enter my subscription to AMAZING for one year for only \$3.50.
☐ Sign me up for the special 2-year rate of only \$6.50. (This brings me the equivalent of *more than five issues free!*)
☐ Payment enclosed. ☐ Please bill me.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE _____ STATE _____

AM 7-9

E d i t o r i a l

THE selection of outstanding young Americans as potential explorers of space raises an interesting question in the field of incentives and rewards.

At a recent meeting of the American Rocket Society, an aeronautical engineer, Dr. T. F. Walkowicz, pointed out that incentives for exploration have been on a steady downgrade ever since the day when Christopher Columbus landed on a Caribbean Island. Chris was proffered such delicacies as a knighthood, a title (Admiral of the Ocean Sea), a lifetime job, ten per cent of all the material wealth his discoveries yielded, plus an option to share in the yield of future expeditions.

Here we can see the beginnings of some of the favorite devices used nowadays to reward captains of industry: a title (vice-president), a job contract, profit-sharing, and stock options. (Of course Columbus mishandled his interpersonal relations and wound up in the pokey.)

But what future does today's (or tomorrow's) space explorer have to look forward to? A parade? The Medal of Honor? A kiss from a Hollywood starlet?

Dr. Walkowicz proposes that Congress offer our space hero not only a gold medal but—and here he gets down to business—one million dollars, *tax-free* (italics ours!).

Perhaps, however, Dr. Walkowicz is being too naive about the starry-eyedness of today's young astronaut. He is not entirely ready to take the credit and let the cash go. On the contrary. The Mercury Astronauts—the first seven young men chosen as potential orbiters of earth—hired, in virtually their first official act, a lawyer to help them winnow the fabulous offers for magazine rights, movie rights, television rights, dramatic rights, book rights, serial rights, and any other kind of rights you can think of.

Evidently our first man in space will plan his re-entry orbit so that he will parachute down roughly into Radio City, only a few minutes from the editorial offices of *Life Magazine*.

THE LARGEST SCIENCE-FICTION AUDIENCE IN THE WORLD WILL SEE THIS ADVERTISEMENT!

FANTASY & SF BOOKS & MAGS lowest prices, list free.
Werewolf Bookshop, 7055L Shannon Road, Verona, Pa.

THIS AD, which appears in AMAZING'S classified section, will be seen this month by the largest science-fiction audience in the world. As the Verona, Pa., advertiser can tell you—it's smart to place your classified ad where it will be read by *real* science-fiction enthusiasts!

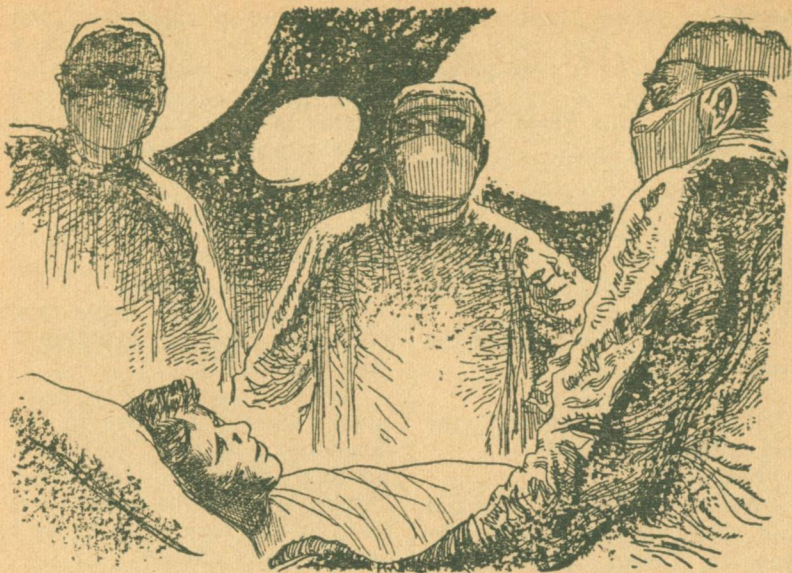
If you have something to buy, sell, trade—or if you would like to get in touch with s-f fans throughout the world—try AMAZING'S classified columns. It's sure to bring fast results. Yet it costs so little: just 25¢ a word, including name and address or box number. (Minimum message is 10 words.)

Simply fill in the handy form below—and mail it today!

| | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| _____ (1) | _____ (2) | _____ (3) |
| _____ (4) | _____ (5) | _____ (6) |
| _____ (7) | _____ (8) | _____ (9) |
| _____ (10—\$2.50) | _____ (11—\$2.75) | _____ (12—\$3.00) |
| _____ (13—\$3.25) | _____ (14—\$3.50) | _____ (15—\$3.75) |
| _____ (16—\$4.00) | _____ (17—\$4.25) | _____ (18—\$4.50) |
| _____ (19—\$4.75) | _____ (20—\$5.00) | _____ (21—\$5.25) |

**CLIP COUPON, ENCLOSE PAYMENT AND MAIL TODAY TO:
AMAZING STORIES, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.**

Use separate sheet of paper for additional ads.



IF THE RED SLAYER

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

*Death is not the ultimate horror
in this war. On the contrary.*

I WON'T even try to describe the pain. I'll just say that it was unbearable even with anesthetics, and that I bore it because I didn't have any choice.

Then it faded away and I opened my eyes and looked into the faces of the brahmins standing over me. There were three of them, dressed in the usual white

operating gowns and white gauze masks. They say they wear those masks to keep germs out of us. But every soldier knows they wear them so we can't recognize them.

I was still doped up to the ears on anesthetics, and only chunks and bits of my memory were functioning. I asked, "How long was I dead?"

"About ten hours," one of the brahmins told me.

"How did I die?"

"Don't you remember?" the tallest brahmin asked.

"Not yet."

"Well," the tallest brahmin said, "you were with your platoon in Trench 2645B-4. At dawn your entire company made a frontal attack, trying to capture the next trench. Number 2645B-5."

"And what happened?" I asked.

"You stopped a couple of machine gun bullets. The new kind with the shock heads. Remember now? You took one in the chest and three more in the legs. When the medics found you, you were dead."

"Did we capture the trench?" I asked.

"No. Not this time."

"I see." My memory was returning rapidly as the anesthetic wore off. I remembered the boys in my platoon. I remembered our trench. Old 2645B-4 had been my home for over a year, and it was pretty nice as trenches go. The enemy had

been trying to capture it, and our dawn assault had been a counter-attack, really. I remembered the machine gun bullets tearing me into shreds, and the wonderful relief I had felt when they did. And I remembered something else too . . .

I sat upright. "Hey, just a minute!" I said.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought eight hours was the upper limit for bringing a man back to life."

"We've improved our techniques since then," one of the brahmins told me. "We're improving them all the time. Twelve hours is the upper limit now, just as long as there isn't serious brain damage."

"Good for you," I said. Now my memory had returned completely, and I realized what had happened. "However, you made a serious mistake in bringing *me* back."

"What's the beef, soldier?" one of them asked in that voice only officers get.

"Read my dogtags," I said.

He read them. His forehead, which was all I could see of his face, became wrinkled. He said, "This *is* unusual!"

"Unusual!" I said.

"You see," he told me, "you were in a whole trench full of dead men. We were told they were all first-timers. Our orders were to bring the whole batch back to life."

"And you didn't read any dogtags first?"

"We were overworked. There

wasn't time. I really am sorry, Private. If I'd known—"

"To hell with that," I said. "I want to see the Inspector General."

"Do you really think—"

"Yes I do," I said. "I'm no trench lawyer, but I've got a real beef. It's my right to see the I.G."

They went into a whispered conference, and I looked myself over. The brahmins had done a pretty good job on me. Not as good as they did in the first years of the war, of course. The skin grafts were sloppier now, and I felt a little scrambled inside. Also my right arm was about two inches longer than the left; bad joiner-work. Still, it was a pretty good job.

The brahmins came out of their conference and gave me my clothes. I dressed. "Now, about the Inspector General," one of them said. "That's a little difficult right now. You see—"

Needless to say, I didn't see the I.G. They took me to see a big, beefy, kindly old Master Sergeant. One of those understanding types who talks to you and makes everything all right. Except that I wasn't having any.

"Now, now, Private," the kindly old sarge said. "What's this I hear about you kicking up a fuss about being brought back to life?"

"You heard correct," I said. "Even a private soldier has his rights under the Articles of War. Or so I've been told."

"He certainly does," said the kindly old sarge.

"I've done my duty," I said. "Seventeen years in the army, eight years in combat. Three times killed, three times brought back. The orders read that you can requisition death after the third time. That's what I did, and it's stamped on my dogtags. But I wasn't *left* dead. Those damned medics brought me back to life again, and it isn't fair. I want to stay dead."

"It's much better staying alive," the sarge said. "Alive, you always have a chance of being rotated back to non-combat duties. Rotation isn't working very fast on account of the manpower shortage. But there's still a chance."

"I know," I said. "But I think I'd just as soon stay dead."

"I think I could promise you that in six months or so—"

"I want to stay dead," I said firmly. "After the third time, it's my privilege under the Articles of War."

"Of course it is," the kindly old sarge said, smiling at me, one soldier to another. "But mistakes happen in wartime. Especially in a war like this." He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. "I remember when the thing started. It sure looked like a pushbutton affair when it started. But both us and the Reds had a full arsenal of anti-missile-missiles, and that pretty well deadlocked the atomic stuff. The invention of the atomic damper clinched it."

That made it a real infantry affair."

"I know, I know."

"But our enemies outnumbered us," the kindly old sarge said. "They still do. All those millions and millions of Russians and Chinese! We had to have more fighting men. We had to at least hold our own. That's why the medics started reviving the dead."

"I know all this. Look, Sarge, I want us to win. I want it bad. I've been a good soldier. But I've been killed three times, and—"

"The trouble is," the sarge said, "the Reds are reviving their dead, too. The struggle for manpower in the front lines is crucial *right now*. The next few months will tell the tale, one way or the other. So why not forget about all this? The next time you're killed, I can promise you'll be left alone. So let's overlook it this time."

"I want to see the Inspector General," I said.

"All right, Private," the kindly old sarge said, in a not very friendly tone. "Go to Room 303."

I went to 303, which was an outer office, and I waited. I was feeling sort of guilty about all the fuss I was kicking up. After all, there was a war on. But I was angry, too. A soldier has his rights, even in a war. Those damned brahmins . . .

It's funny how they got that name. They're just medics, not

Hindus or Brahmins or anything like that. They got the name because of a newspaper article a couple years ago, when all this was new. The guy who wrote the article told about how the medics could revive dead men now, and make them combat-worthy. It was pretty hot stuff then. The writer quoted a poem by Emerson. The poem starts out—

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain thinks he is
slain,
They know not well the subtle
ways
I keep, and pass, and turn
again.

That's how things were. You could never know, when you killed a man, whether he'd stay dead, or be back in the trenches shooting at you the next day. And you didn't know whether you'd stay dead or not if you got killed. Emerson's poem was called "Brahma," so our medics got to be called brahmins.

Being brought back to life wasn't bad at first. Even with the pain, it was good to be alive. But you finally reach a time when you get tired of being killed and brought back and killed and brought back. You start wondering how many deaths you owe your country, and if it might not be nice and restful staying dead a while. You look forward to the long sleep.

The authorities understood this. Being brought back too often was bad for morale. So they

set three revivals as the limit. After the third time you could choose rotation or permanent death. The authorities preferred you to choose death; a man who's been dead three times has a very bad effect on the morale of civilians. And most combat soldiers preferred to stay dead after the third time.

But I'd been cheated. I had been brought back to life for the fourth time. I'm as patriotic as the next man, but this I wasn't going to stand for.

At last I was allowed to see the Inspector-General's adjutant. He was a colonel, a thin, gray no-nonsense type. He'd already been briefed on my case, and he wasted no time on me. It was a short interview.

"Private," he said, "I'm sorry about this, but new orders have been issued. The Reds have increased their rebirth rate, and we have to match them. The standing order now is six revivals before retirement."

"But that order hadn't been issued at the time I was killed."

"It's retroactive," He said. "You have two deaths to go. Good-bye and good luck, Private."

And that was it. I should have known you can't get anywhere with top brass. They don't know how things are. They rarely get killed more than once, and they just don't understand how a man feels after four times. So I went back to my trench.

I walked back slowly, past the

poisoned barbed wire, thinking hard. I walked past something covered with a khaki tarpaulin stenciled *Secret Weapon*. Our sector is filled with secret weapons. They come out about once a week, and maybe one of them will win the war.

But right now I didn't care. I was thinking about the next stanza of that Emerson poem. It goes:

Far or forgot to me is near;

Shadow and sunlight are the same;

The vanished gods to me appear;

And one to me are shame and fame.

Old Emerson got it pretty right, because that's how it is after your fourth death. Nothing makes any difference, and everything seems pretty much the same. Don't get me wrong, I'm no cynic. I'm just saying that a man's viewpoint is bound to change after he's died four times.

At last I reached good old Trench 2645B-4, and greeted all the boys. I found out we were attacking again at dawn. I was still thinking.

I'm no quitter, but I figured four times dead was enough. In this attack, I decided I'd make sure I stayed dead. There would be no mistakes this time.

We moved out at first light past the barbed wire and the rolling mines, into the no-man's-land between our trench and

2645B-5. This attack was being carried out in battalion strength, and we were all armed with the new homing bullets. We moved along pretty briskly for a while. Then the enemy really opened up.

We kept on gaining ground. Stuff was blowing up all around me, but I hadn't a scratch yet. I started to think we would make it this time. Maybe I wouldn't get killed.

Then I got it. An explosive bullet through the chest. Definitely a mortal wound. Usually after something like that hits you, you stay down. But not me. I wanted to make sure of staying dead this time. So I picked myself up and staggered forward, using my rifle as a crutch. I made another fifteen yards in the face of the damnedest cross-fire you've ever seen. Then I got it, and got it right. There was no mistaking it on this round.

I felt the explosive bullet slam into my forehead. There was the tiniest fraction of a second in which I could feel my brains boiling out, and I knew I was safe this time. The brahmins couldn't do anything about serious head injuries, and mine was really serious.

Then I died.

I recovered consciousness and looked up at the brahmins in their white gowns and gauze masks.

"How long was I dead?" I asked.

"Two hours."

Then I remembered. "But I got it in the head!"

The gauze masks wrinkled, and I knew they were grinning. "Secret weapon," one of them told me. "It's been in the works for close to three years. At last we and the engineers perfected a de-scrambler. Tremendous invention!"

"Yeah?" I said.

"At last medical science can treat serious head injuries," the brahmin told me. "Or any other kind of injury. We can bring any man back now, just as long as we can collect seventy percent of his pieces and feed them to the de-scrambler. This is really going to cut down our losses. It may turn the tide of the whole war!"

"That's fine," I said.

"By the way," the brahmin told me, "you've been awarded a medal for your heroic advance under fire after receiving a mortal wound."

"That's nice," I said. "Did we take 2645B-5?"

"We took it this time. We're massing for an assault against Trench 2645B-6."

I nodded, and in a little while I was given my clothes and sent back to the front. Things have quieted down now, and I must admit it's kind of pleasant to be alive. Still, I think I've had all I want of it.

Now I've got just one more death to go before I'll have my six.

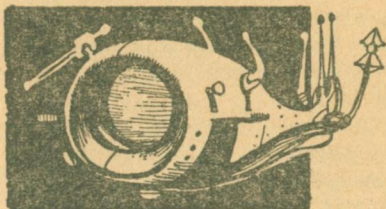
If they don't change the orders again.

THE END

READY, AIM, ROBOT!

By RANDALL GARRETT

The featureless round ball hovered in the air—and only one man knew the secret of its mask of innocence.



ROSS UNDERHILL slipped one hand casually into his coat pocket, felt the hardness of the gun there, and said: "I'm looking for Mr. Quentin Thursday."

The secretary said: "Your name, please; I'll check it against the appointment list."

With his hand still in his coat pocket, Ross aimed the gun carefully at the secretary, hoping that the policeman standing at his side wouldn't notice the slight movement.

"My name is Ross Underhill," he said quietly. Then he pressed the trigger of the handgun in his pocket.

The beam, silent, invisible,

and unimpeded by the fabric of the coat, speared into the secretary. Death came instantly.

Ross and the cop next to him stood there for several seconds. No outward sign disclosed that the robot secretary had ceased to function. Then the door at the far side of the office, no longer held tightly locked by the automatic circuits of the robot secretary, swung silently open, as if to beckon them.

"I guess we can go in, Ross," said the police officer.

Ross grinned. "Let's go." He walked toward the door, at the same time pulling his hand out of his pocket, leaving the gun nestled securely in the pocket.

Then he followed the cop into the inner office.

The robot secretary, its neu-
rotronic brain burned out by the
radiations from Ross Underhill's
gun, had no objection whatso-
ever.

Ross was ready, now, for
whatever Quentin Thursday
might have to say. Thursday
could say anything he liked,
and—

As the two men crossed the
threshold into the inner office,
they took one look and stopped.

"What the hell!" said the offi-
cer softly.

Quentin Thursday wouldn't
say anything. He was quite ob-
viously dead.

"You'd better take a look at
him, Sergeant," said Ross. But
the suggestion had been unnec-
essary; Sergeant Hurst was al-
ready walking toward the desk.
He walked all around the corpse,
taking a good look. Then he
touched one of the hands that
lay on the desk.

"Dead at least an hour," he
said. "Coagulator pistol."

Ross nodded silently. The
corpse had the all-over blue look
and the odd, bloated stiffness
that indicated the protein change
within the cells and the nearly
instantaneous clotting of the
blood that resulted when a
coagulator was used.

Hurst didn't touch anything
else. He took one more look
around, then said: "Let's get
back to the outer office. We'll
have to call Homicide."

"I don't suppose he could have

killed himself?" Ross asked, al-
though he knew the answer in
advance.

"Killed himself? And then
hid the gun, I suppose?" The
sergeant grinned. "Not likely.
Come on."

The two of them walked back
to the secretary. "I want a call
placed to FEDeral 3-333-333, Ex-
tension 97. Sergeant Jameson
Hurst calling."

The secretary didn't answer.
It just sat there, a squat, oblong
metal box the size and shape of
an office desk, its lights dead, its
various panels closed.

Hurst frowned. "Did you
hear? Respond!"

Nothing. The robot was dead.

"That's queer," said the cop.
"It was all right a minute ago."

Ross Underhill was thinking
frantically. He had burned out
the robot's brain, not knowing
that Quentin Thursday was dead
on the other side of the door. If
they found out what he'd done,
they'd have reason to think that
he'd also cooked Thursday.

Hurst said: "Underhill, you're
an expert on neutron robots;
what's the matter with this one
all of a sudden?"

"Brain burned out," Ross said
promptly. There was no need to
beat around the bush about
something that he should have
known. It would be very suspi-
cious if a robotocist didn't know
right away what was the matter
with the thing. "Either that," he
went on, "or else the main con-
nections from the brain to the

rest of the machine have been severed. And I doubt that."

"Why?" Hurst was curious.

"No time," Ross told him. "To sever all those connections would take at least five minutes, and they wouldn't burn through all at once by accident. But the brain can be shorted accidentally."

Hurst looked back at the machine. "Queer. Why should it—" He stopped abruptly. "We'll have to go to one of the other offices in the building to use the phone. Let's get going on the double."

The room was full of people. In the inner office, the police lab technicians were taking photos and prowling around with other instruments, checking everything.

Ross Underhill was seated in the outer office, trying to look relaxed, leaning against the back of the couch. Next to him sat Sergeant Hurst, not looking quite so relaxed.

There was a reason for it. Captain Liddel of Homicide was scowling at him.

"Let's get this straight, Hurst," said the captain. "You came up here with Underhill to what?"

"To serve a subpoena, sir." Hurst swallowed, then went on to explain. "Mr. Underhill is a friend of mine, Sir. He knew I was off duty, so he asked me to come with him in case Thursday got rough. Thursday has—had—a reputation for getting nasty

with people he didn't like. And he didn't like process servers."

Captain Liddel turned his head and focused his attention on Ross Underhill. "May I see the subpoena, Mr. Underhill?"

"Certainly." Ross reached into his coat pocket and pulled it out—being careful not to disturb the gun that was there.

Liddel looked it over. "*Underhill vs Thursday*. What were you suing him for?"

"Breach of contract. I designed the neurocircuits he's been using on the new BZ-7 automatic kitchen he's put on the market. He claimed he'd designed them himself and refused to pay me." He noticed the look on the captain's face and grinned. "I know, Captain; it looks like it might be a motive, but it isn't. I'm a professional roboticist, and a good one. The money I'd lose if Quentin Thursday failed to pay was important, but it wasn't that important. I wouldn't gain anything by killing him, anyway. That wouldn't get me my money."

The captain nodded, but his suspicious look didn't go away. His expression said clearly that he'd look more deeply into the story. "Where were you between 1300 and 1500 hours this afternoon?" he asked.

"Home," said Ross. "At least, I was most of the time." He paused. He might as well tell as much as he could. "I was right here about 1310," he admitted. "The robot secretary told me Thursday was out, so I headed

for home to do a few things before he returned."

"You came here to serve that subpoena?" Liddel's eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you have Hurst with you then?"

"I didn't have the subpoena then. I didn't decide to sue until 1520 or so. Then I registered with the Court and got the subpoena issued."

"And then you went to get Hurst?"

"That's right."

"And you can't prove where you were between 1310 and 1520?"

Ross shook his head. "No. I was home. I didn't know I'd need an alibi."

Liddel started to say something else, but a voice from across the room interrupted him.

"Hey, Captain! The brain's burned out, all right. I can't quite see why yet, but it's still warm from the overload." It was the police roboticist who had been looking at the secretary. He had partially dismantled the mechanism and was looking at the plastic case which housed the neurotronic brain.

Then another voice. This time, it came from the inner office. "Captain, come here a second, will you?"

Liddel turned and walked across the room to the inner office.

When he was gone, Sergeant Hurst turned to Ross.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" he asked.

"I didn't kill him. Believe me, Jamie, he was worth more to me alive than dead." He paused, then added: "A hell of a lot more."

Captain Liddel stuck his head out of the door to the inner office. "Sergeant, come here a minute."

Hurst rose, and Underhill leaned back again in the couch. When the sergeant was out of sight, Ross Underhill slipped his hand into his coat pocket, eased out the gun, and pushed it into the crack between the armrest and the foam cushion of the couch. He knew they'd find it eventually; he knew they'd pin the burning of the secretary on him. But meanwhile, he had to have time.

When the gun was safely hidden, he stood up and walked over to where the police roboticist was dismantling the dead robot.

"How does it look?" he asked conversationally.

"Damned peculiar," said the technician. "I can't figure out why it burned out. Can't figure it at all." He glanced up from his work. "Ross Underhill. You're the guy who designed those Thinkers?" It was half a question, half a statement.

Ross grinned. "I'm the guy, I guess."

The technician nodded his approval. "Beautiful job. They can find a flaw in the evidence in no time."

Ross frowned a little. "Not ex-

actly. They're nothing but a double-checking logic machine with a verbal feed-in. They can't find a flaw in the evidence, only on the interpretation."

"Oh, sure," said the technician, going back to his work, "but it's still amazing to watch a detective outline his theory on how a crime was committed and have the Thinker point out the errors in his theory. We've sure uncovered a lot of evidence that way—looking for stuff that has to be there, I mean."

"There'll be improvements," Ross said.

"Yeah. Damn! I can't see what happened to this secretary! Look here; the third iota stage is seared through in the J sector, but . . .

He and Ross spent the next several minutes talking shop. Ross did most of the listening, only offering innocuous suggestions now and then. But when the technician stood up with an odd look on his face and said: "Well, I'll be damned!" Ross was ready to throw in the sponge.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You know," said the technician, "for a while, I was beginning to think someone had burned it out with a gamma-ray projector. I'd just about decided that was it."

"What made you change your mind?" The voice was that of Sergeant Hurst, who had just come out of the inner office.

The technician said: "Well, Sergeant, you said that you and

Mr. Underhill weren't out of this room more than a minute, so there wouldn't have been time. Besides, I found something here." He pointed into the brain case. "Take a look."

Hurst peered. "What? That little scratch?"

"That's right. It's on the memory bank. Somehow, it got a little scratch—piece of sand or something in the lubricant."

"You mean a little scratch like that can burn out the whole neurotronic brain?" Hurst asked.

"Sure," said the robotocist. "Oh, it could be done without burning out the brain, but it'd take an expert. That scratch is what did it."

"Mmm." Hurst turned toward Underhill. "Go on in the office, Ross. Captain wants to speak to you."

Ross Underhill shrugged and went into the inner office, leaving Hurst and the technician to discuss the scratch on the robot's brain.

Captain Liddel still looked suspicious, but not quite so much so. "You did quite a bit of work with Thursday, did you, Underhill?"

"Not really," Ross said. "I worked for him for about six months, on and off. Free lance stuff, you understand; I was on a small retainer salary, but all I was really paid for was the work I actually delivered. Most of it was relatively unimportant, inexpensive circuit work. It was the complete redesign of that

robot kitchen that was hard work and would have cost him money—if he'd paid."

Liddel nodded. "I was wondering if you'd ever been in his office before?"

"A couple of times," Underhill admitted.

"Do you happen to know what might have been in that niche?" The captain's finger pointed toward a section of the wall. A panel had been opened to disclose a previously concealed cupboard in the wall.

Ross Underhill frowned. Hell, yes, he knew what had been in that panel—but did he dare admit it now?

"I didn't even know that place was there," he said truthfully.

"Take a good look at it," said Captain Liddel evenly. His iron-gray eyes were coldly watchful.

Underhill obediently walked over and looked inside, being careful not to touch anything. It was a small cabinet, cubical, a little less than eighteen inches each way. There were two small, grooved electrodes in the bottom of it.

"It looks like a recharging station for a free robot," said Underhill.

It was one of the simplest circuits to build into a small robot. Even back in the nineteen-forties, small mechanisms had been built which would automatically go to a specific place to recharge their batteries when they needed it.

"Got any idea what kind of

robot it was?" the captain asked.

Underhill spread his hands. "There are lots of small robots—firefighters, floor cleaners—lots of them."

Liddel frowned. "I know. To be honest, I don't quite see why it would be of any interest. But someone broke the lock on it and then slid the door shut again."

"The lock was jimmied?"

"That's right." Captain Liddel shrugged. "I thought maybe you could shed some light on it." He picked up a piece of paper from the top of Quentin Thursday's desk. "Maybe you can tell me something about this. We found it in the desk drawer." He handed it to Underhill.

It was a list of names and times.

Graydon—1400

Meinster—1450

Manetti—1500

"Looks like a list of appointments," Underhill said.

Liddel nodded. "But why should he write them down? His robot secretary would keep a list."

"I can answer that," Ross Underhill said. "Quentin Thursday didn't really trust robots; he always kept lists and made notes. It was his way of double-checking the robot, you see."

Liddel nodded again. "Yeah. Do you know any of those names?"

"They're familiar, but I couldn't be sure they're the same people. There aren't any first names there."

"We'll decide that. Who are they?"

Underhill tapped the list. "The first one might be Phil Graydon. He's a robot repair technician—works for Branhurst General Repair Company. The second guy might be James Meinster; he's an inventor—has fingers in all kinds of pies."

"We know Meinster," said the captain. "Who's the third man?"

"Could be Gus Manetti—Augustus Manetti. He's in the same business I'm in—free-lance robot design engineer."

Liddel nodded. "Okay; we'll check. And don't worry—we won't tell them where we got the information."

"I'm not worried about that, Captain; I have nothing to hide, either from you or from them." He pointed at the list. "Besides, it could be three other guys with the same last names."

"You don't believe that," said Liddel, "and neither do I."

He glanced again at the corpse that still sat in the chair at the desk. "Damn it! The newscasters are really going to be on our necks. This makes the ninth one in two months. And we haven't got a single idea." Then he looked up at Underhill again. "Okay, Underhill, you can go, but don't go anywhere out of town without notifying the police department."

Fifteen minutes later, Ross Underhill was sitting in a bar on Fifth Avenue, trying to decide what he should do. Of all

the things he did not want to do, getting nabbed on a murder charge was right up near the top of the list. Of course, it would be nice if he could tell them who the real murderer was, but—hell! He was no detective!

He sat in a darkened booth, staring at his drink, trying to put things together.

"Shove over, Ross. I want to talk to you." The voice was hard, but it still retained a touch of friendliness. It was Sergeant Jameson Hurst.

"Hullo, Jamie. Go ahead, sit down. What's eating you?"

"You. I figured you might tell me something you didn't tell the captain." Hurst pushed his big bulk into the booth and signaled for a beer.

"What makes you think so?" Underhill asked.

Hurst scowled. "Don't give me that, Ross. You've already pulled one funny one on me; don't pull another. I've known you for years, and I've always thought you were straight, but now you've got me wondering."

"What was the real purpose of your going to Thursday's office?"

Ross downed half his drink and looked at Hurst for a moment.

"Okay," he said finally, "I'll give it to you. All I ask is that you check up before you run me in for a killing I didn't do. Fair enough?"

"If you didn't do it, you're safe. If you did, I'll nail you. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly." Ross Underhill stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. "So here it goes.

"This is the ninth coagulator killing in the past two months, right?"

Hurst moved his head a little. "Right. So?"

"Would you be happy to know that you've already got the killer?"

"Yeah. Who?"

"The late Mr. Quentin Thursday."

Sergeant Hurst picked up his beer and sipped at it. "Go on. Draw me a picture."

"There's nothing much to it. Thursday was doing expensive killings for hire. He had an almost foolproof method."

"No method is foolproof," Hurst said.

"Come off it, Jamie," Ross said in exasperation. "You know that nobody has a lead on the eight previous killings. You don't have a suspect, you don't know how it was done. All you know is that a man is found dead, shot by a coagulator. And it isn't easy to get hold of a coagulator.

"A coagulator has an effective range of about fifteen feet, so you know that the killer must have been close to the dead man in each case. And yet, there's never any indication that the late lamented even suspected whoever was in the room. Or even suspected that there was anyone in the room at all.

"That makes it pretty tough to figure, doesn't it?"

"All right," Hurst said, "so it's tough. And you claim that the man in the room was Quentin Thursday?"

"I didn't say that; I said Thursday killed them, but I didn't say he was in the room with them. He wasn't."

"Who was?"

"Nobody. Nobody at all."

Hurst looked dangerous. "What the hell are you trying —" Then, suddenly, his eyes widened. "Robot," he said softly.

Underhill nodded. "Exactly. A small robot, about the size of a regulation football, with a coagulator mounted in the nose. All Thursday had to do was give it instructions, and it went out and killed the men who'd been fingered. Nothing to it. When you know the set-up."

Hurst slumped back in the seat and stared into space. "That's what the recharging station in Thursday's wall was for. He kept his little killer there."

"Sure," said Underhill.

"What a setup! I didn't know a robot like that could be built. How the hell did it maneuver? How did it get up to that niche?"

"I know what you're thinking," said Ross Underhill. "I knew that your Captain Liddel was wondering about it, too. Most recharging stations are down on the floor, so that the little robots can just roll in on wheels, recharge, and go their

way. To have one halfway up the wall looked funny."

"So?"

"So, it didn't have wheels. It was jet operated. Small wings, and powerful baffled jets—so quiet that they barely whispered, but powerful enough to keep the robot airborne."

Sergeant Hurst whistled very softly. "That explains how it got in and out of places without being seen or heard. No wonder we couldn't figure out who did those killings. Who designed it, do you know?"

Ross Underhill nodded slowly. "Yeah. I know. I did. It's my brainchild."

"I see," said Hurst. "I see. No wonder you didn't want to talk."

"I didn't design it as a killer," Underhill said. "It was supposed to be a camera device. Thursday told me he had an idea for TV and movie cameras. He wanted to mount them in a self-levitating device, which would do away with dollies and stuff like that. And it could be robot operated so that the cameraman could control it remotely or let it do its own work, if necessary. It would be a hell of a nice gadget for news coverage; it could get into places where a human being couldn't go."

"All Thursday did was mount a coagulator in place of the camera, you see. Or rather, he must have had it mounted; he didn't know anything about robot operation, so he must have had someone else do it for him."

"How'd you find out all this?" Hurst asked.

"He tried to kill me with the damned thing. Since I'd built it, he wanted me out of the way. He sent the thing into my apartment last night."

"How'd you get away from it?"

Underhill grinned. "You haven't seen my apartment lately. You know that big mirror I had in my bedroom? Well, I'd moved it into my office to do some tests with a microbeam reflector. That damned robot of mine came floating in the window, saw my reflection in the mirror, and beamed it with the coagulator. A robot isn't very bright, you know. Fortunately, a coagulator beam won't reflect. I dropped behind my desk when I saw what it was. It assumed that I was dead and went back to Thursday."

"What were you up to today?"

Underhill rubbed his jaw. "Well, I had to find out. I couldn't be sure that Quentin Thursday was really the man behind the killer robot. Someone might have bought it from him and made the conversion themselves. So I went to Thursday's office to ask him."

"Wasn't that kind of dangerous?" Hurst asked. "If he was out to knock you off, he might have done it in his office."

"Nope," said Ross Underhill, "not Quentin Thursday. He wasn't the type. I knew him

pretty well. I knew that he wouldn't kill me if he could possibly be connected with it. I'd be safe in a public place like that—I mean, at 1300 in the afternoon, there would be several people in his outer office, so he couldn't get away with anything."

"So you went there and spoke to him?"

"I went there, but I didn't speak to him. As soon as the secretary relayed my name to the inner office, he refused to see me. He was busy. I knew better than that."

"So then you went and got the subpoena," Hurst said.

"That's right. I knew then that he was guilty, so I brought suit. Perfectly legal, too; he actually did owe me the money for that robot kitchen—and for his killer. I'd let things slide because he'd been late before, but I decided to use it as an excuse to get into his office. I wanted you with me because I wanted to catch him red-handed with the robot in his wall niche."

"You knew about the wall niche?"

Ross shook his head. "Nope. But I knew it had to be in his office somewhere. I figured that if you were with me, we could nab him with the goods, see?"

"Yeah—but why didn't you just tell me?"

"What proof did I have? Besides, you would've wanted to do it all legally, with a search warrant and everything. All he needed was two minutes warn-

ing, and he'd have had the robot going elsewhere—a long ways away."

Hurst finished his beer and signaled for another. "That makes sense. I—*hey!*" He looked sharply at Ross. "If all he needed was a minute or so, how come you figured you could get in? All he had to do was have the secretary delay you long enough to get rid of his killer robot." His eyes narrowed. "I thought it was damned funny about that secretary going dead."

Ross Underhill sighed. "Yeah. I was carrying a gamma projector in my pocket. You'll find it stuffed down in the couch in Thursday's outer office."

"The captain's probably already found it, I—"

Something buzzed very softly. Sergeant Hurst glanced at Ross and then lifted his wrist to his lips. "Sergeant Hurst," he said into the wrist microphone, anticipating the caller.

A voice spoke into the speaker in his ear.

"Yes, sir," said Hurst. "He's with me now; I'll bring him in." A pause, then: "Yes, sir, I will. Right away."

He dropped his hand and said to Ross: "Finish your drink. The captain wants to see you at headquarters."

Three days later, Ross Underhill sat morosely in his cell, staring at the floor. Across from him sat Martin Blaine, his lawyer.

"It looks bad, Underhill," Blaine said.

"I know," Ross Underhill said, without looking up. "How much longer?"

"The preliminary hearing is in ten minutes." Blaine was a thin, balding man with a nervous manner. "I think we'll be able to confuse the prosecutor a little. There's no motive yet, as far as I can see."

"What about the killer robot I told Hurst about?"

"They can't use Hurst's testimony; that's hearsay. And they can't force you to testify. They still haven't found the robot."

A police officer came up to the door of the cell and activated the electrolock. "All right, let's go. Judge Hogbotham wants you up there early."

Fifteen minutes later, Judge Hogbotham was saying: "The purpose of this preliminary examination is to determine whether anyone should be bound over to stand trial in Circuit Court. The prosecutor will begin."

The prosecutor was a sleepy-looking individual with a slight paunch and a baritone voice. He looked over the accused, Ross Underhill, then looked at the judge.

"If the Court please, it is the contention of the prosecution that the deceased, Quentin Thursday, was murdered for gain. We will attempt to show that the defendant, Ross Underhill, had both motive and opportunity."

"Very well; proceed."

"Call Police Sergeant Jamieson Hurst."

Hurst was sworn in. He told his story—exactly what had happened on the afternoon of the killing.

"Did you search the accused immediately after the discovery of the body, Sergeant?" asked the prosecutor.

"No, sir," said Hurst.

"Why not?"

"At the time, I saw no reason to. I had no reason to think he had done it."

The prosecutor looked angry and addressed the Court. "I'd like to remind the Court that this is a conclusion of the witness and should not be admitted as testimony."

Blaine stood up. "I'd like to remind the Court," he said in his reedy voice, "that this is the prosecution's witness."

"The answer will remain," said Judge Hogbotham. "Proceed."

"Have you any reason to believe that the defendant may have been armed?" the prosecutor asked.

"Yes, sir," said Hurst.

"Explain, please."

"A gamma projector was found in the sofa near the spot where Underhill was sitting. His fingerprints were on it."

The prosecutor nodded. "This was after the body had been discovered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it possible that he might

have had more than one weapon on him?"

"Objection!" said Blaine. "A gamma projector is a tool, not a lethal weapon. Only prolonged exposure to its effects can kill a man."

"Sustained," said the Court. "Rephrase the question."

"Is it possible," asked the prosecutor, "that the defendant may have been carrying something besides the gamma projector?"

"Objection." It was Blaine again. "It has not been proved that the defendant was carrying the projector."

"His fingerprints were on it," snapped the prosecutor.

"That hasn't been proved, either. Witness has so stated, but witness has not qualified as a fingerprint expert."

The prosecutor turned to the bench. "Your Honor, my next witness will be a police laboratory technician who will state that the fingerprints are most definitely that of the defendant. If the Court wishes, I will have Sergeant Hurst step down for a few moments and ask the technician to testify."

"Your Honor," said Blaine smoothly, "that won't be necessary. We stipulate that the fingerprints were those of the defendant. We further stipulate that the projector was in possession of the defendant and was placed in the sofa at the time suggested by the witness."

The prosecutor looked flabbergasted.

"Why did you object, then?" the judge asked.

"Your Honor, I must insist that the prosecutor lay a proper foundation before he asks certain questions."

"Prosecution is so instructed," said the judge. "Proceed."

"Thank you, your Honor," said the prosecutor. He turned back towards Hurst. "Sergeant, was anything else found in the room which had any bearing on the case?"

"Yes, sir. A Nordling-Fenshaw coagulator."

"And where was it found?"

"In the same sofa, sir."

Ross Underhill tried not to show the shock he felt. Someone had put a coagulator in that sofa! Oh, brother! That cooked it!

The prosecutor looked triumphant at Blaine. "Will the defense stipulate to the coagulator, too?"

"Certainly not," snapped Blaine.

"Very well. Cross examine."

Blaine got up and walked over to the witness chair. "Sergeant Hurst, were there any fingerprints found on the coagulator?"

"No, sir, there were not."

"Can you give any reason for there being fingerprints on the gamma projector and not on the coagulator?"

"The coagulator had been wiped off, sir, but the projector hadn't."

"I see. Now, you were sitting

next to the defendant during the time in question?"

"Not all the time. Most of it." Hurst went on to explain what he had done.

"Doesn't it seem odd to you that the defendant would have wiped off one of the objects and not the other?"

"Objection!" said the prosecutor. "That calls for a conclusion of the witness."

"Sustained," said Judge Hogbotham.

Ross Underhill pondered the evidence. What had happened? How could he have walked into a trap like that?

The next witness was a technician who testified as to the effective range and the action on the human body of a coagulator. It was established that it was impossible to pin down a coagulator death within a period of time less than six hours because of the effect on the human body. Rigor mortis set in immediately, and the temperature of the body dropped as the body's own energy was used to denature the protein in the tissues.

"In other words," said the prosecutor, "it is possible that the killing took place only seconds before Sergeant Hurst and the defendant entered the room?"

"That's right; yes, sir."

Ross could see where the testimony was heading. The police were going to contend that he had shot Thursday through the door of the office just before he had gone in with Hurst! And

then he had concealed the weapon in the sofa.

Witness number three was the technician who had been in Thursday's office with the police, the one who had taken the robot secretary apart. After qualifying him as an expert witness, the prosecutor said: "Now, would you please tell the Court your conclusions as to what caused the death of the robot?"

"Not 'death,'" the technician said importantly. "Since the neurotronic brain of a robot is technically not alive to begin with. We speak of the 'total randomization of impulses' in the brain."

"I understand, sir, but isn't this 'total randomizing' in the neurotronic brain of a robot commonly called 'death'?"

"Oh, yes—by the layman."

Judge Hogbotham leaned forward. "The witness will remember that most of the people in this courtroom are laymen as far as his expert testimony is concerned. I would prefer that the witness refrain from using technical jargon as much as possible. It will, of course, be permitted if it is necessary to draw fine technical differences; the Court has no wish to hamper the testimony of the witness unduly."

"Uh—thank you, your Honor."

"Proceed."

The prosecutor repeated the question.

"The cause of—uh—'death',"

said the technician, "was the application of high-intensity gamma radiation to the brain itself. This causes the impulses within the brain to become completely random, so that the brain can no longer function logically or rationally."

"Could such randomization have been caused by the gamma projector in the Exhibit Box?"

"It could."

"Your witness," said the prosecutor.

Martin Blaine rose and smiled in a friendly manner. "I wonder," he said, "if there might be anything else which could have caused the death of the robot. Was there any damage done to it? Physical damage that could *not* have been caused by a gamma projector?"

"You mean the scratch?"

"If there was such a scratch, yes. Could a scratch cause the total randomization of a neurotronic brain?"

"It could, but it didn't in this case."

Blaine looked a little surprised. "Oh?"

"Just a minute," interposed the judge. "Witness has mentioned a scratch. Nothing has been said about this scratch before. Before we go any further, I'd like to have a description of this scratch."

The technician nodded. "Yes, your Honor. The scratch was noticed . . ."

He went on to describe the scratch and its location.

"What could have caused it?" the judge asked.

"A grain of abrasive dust in the cooling lubricant solution is usually responsible for such things, your Honor."

"And it could have caused the death of the robot in question?"

"It could have, but it didn't. You see, when the gamma gun was found, I was asked to do a more detailed analysis of the randomized brain. The scratch did not go through the B-K layer, the outermost section of the brain. A scratch would have to go through the F-2 layer to cause complete randomization. It did not go that far."

"I see," said the judge. "Go ahead, Counsellor."

"What could the scratch have done?" Blaine asked.

"That's hard to say. I'd have to know the reactions of the non-randomized brain. It's hard to tell from a 'dead' brain. The scratch is in the memory area, but that's all I could tell you."

"And it definitely could not have caused the randomization of the brain?"

"Definitely not."

Blaine nodded. "Thank you. That's all." He went back and sat down beside Underhill while the prosecutor called his next witness.

"How does it look?" Ross Underhill whispered.

"Just hold on. We're doing all right."

"The hell we are! They've practically proved method and opportunity."

"Just hold on," the lawyer repeated.

The next three witnesses were called in, one after the other, to establish the time of Quentin Thursday's death—which could not be done by medical evidence. Ross Underhill perked up his ears and listened carefully as Mr. Philip Graydon was called to the stand. Graydon had been number one on the little list that Thursday had had in his desk.

The prosecutor had Graydon establish that he was a control circuit repairman, and that he had had an appointment with Thursday at 1400 hours on the fatal afternoon.

"Now, Mr. Graydon, at what time did you arrive at the office of the deceased?"

"At approximately 1403 or 1404. I was a little late." Graydon was a short, thin, nervous, balding man with a pencil-thin mustache, a skirmish line of hairs on his upper lip.

"And what was the nature of your business?"

"I have been doing a certain amount of circuit work for Mr. Thursday—control and sensory circuits, that sort of thing. I went up to discuss the details of one of his new line of kitchen robots."

"This, then, was a purely business call?"

"It was. Certain sensory circuits weren't functioning properly. Mr. Thursday didn't like their reactions."

The prosecutor nodded. "And

he wanted you to make some changes in the brain circuits?"

Graydon shook his head. "Not the brain. I'm not a neurotronic brain specialist; I simply work with the circuits that make the machine move. The nerves and muscles, so to speak, not the brain."

"I understand. Now, I ask you: Was Mr. Quentin Thursday alive when you came to his office?"

"Yes, sir. Very much so, sir," said Graydon.

"Was he alive when you left him?"

"Yes, sir," Graydon said positively, "he was."

"About what time was that?"

"I should say around 1445."

"How can you place the time so accurately?"

"I had to catch a subway to Boston. It left at 1500, and it's about a twelve minute walk from Thursday's office to the station. I caught the train easily, so it couldn't have been much later than, say, 1447 when I left. On the other hand, I didn't have to wait long for the train, either. A minute, maybe."

"I see. Was there anyone else in Mr. Thursday's office while you were there?"

Graydon said: "Not in the inner office, no. But there was a man waiting in the outer office when I left."

"Did you recognize him?"

"Yes. It was James Meinster."

"Are you personally acquainted with Mr. Meinster?"

"I know him by sight, and

I've spoken to him once or twice. I've seen him around Mr. Thursday's office several times."

"And he was waiting in the outer office, you say?"

"That's right."

"At approximately 1445?"

"That's right."

The prosecutor turned to Blaine. "Your witness."

Blaine rose to his feet. "If the Court please, I should like to call Mr. Graydon back later for cross-examination. Right now, I would like to hear the rest of the prosecution's testimony."

"Granted," said the judge. "Go on, Mr. Prosecutor."

"I call Mr. James Meinster to the stand."

Meinster was in his late forties, heavy set, graying, and very distinguished looking. He was sworn in, and identified himself as a professional investigator.

"I put money into businesses that no one else will back," he explained. "I usually have an eye for a good investment that looks risky to a bank."

"I see." The prosecutor put his hands behind his back. "Mr. Meinster, when was the last time you saw Mr. Quentin Thursday?"

Meinster identified the time.

"You were in his office," the prosecutor said. "At what time was that?"

"Well, the appointment was for 1450, but I was a few minutes early."

"Was there anyone else in the outer office with you?"

"In the outer office? No, not at first. I walked in and spoke to the secretary robot—told it I was waiting to see Thursday. At about 1445, a man came out. Walked on by me, as though he was in a hurry. I waited five more minutes, or so, and then the secretary told me to go in."

"This man who walked out—was he known to you?"

"Slightly. It was a man named Graydon. Met him once or twice."

"I see. Now, you went in to Mr. Thursday's office. Was Mr. Thursday alive at that time?"

"He was. And he was alive when I left."

"We'll get to that in a moment, Mr. Meinster," said the prosecutor. "Now, can you tell us what your business with Mr. Thursday was?"

"He had asked me to back a new line of kitchen robots he wanted to put out. I was there to discuss the details."

Ross Underhill tried to keep his face calm; his lawyer had told him not to display too much anxiety. But Ross kept wanting to chew his fingernails or tear his hair or anything else to relieve the tension that was building up within him.

The trial seemed to drag on and on. No, not *trial*; he had to remember that. This was just a preliminary examination, to show cause why he should be held for trial. No matter what was found out here, the trial it-

self would be the big battle, unless the judge decided not to bind him over.

The next witness was Augustus Manetti, who identified himself as a free-lance robot design engineer.

"Did you have an appointment with Mr. Quentin Thursday on the day in question?"

"I did."

"At what time?"

Manetti, a big, hulking blond-haired man, folded his arms over his chest. "The appointment was for 1500. I was there on the dot."

Manetti went on to explain that he had only recently begun to work for Thursday on robot design. Ross Underhill thought sourly to himself: *Yeah; Thursday hired Manetti after he'd thrown me out.*

"You showed up for the appointment on time," the prosecutor paraphrased. "And was Mr. Thursday alive at that time?"

"I don't know; I didn't get to see him."

"How did this happen?"

"I went to the secretary—the robot—and gave it my name. It said that I had no appointment for that time. I tried to get it to call Mr. Thursday to verify the appointment, but it said that Mr. Thursday had given it orders that he was not to be disturbed."

It was at that moment that the answer flashed into Ross Underhill's mind. Suddenly, as if he had had the picture drawn for him, he knew what had happened that fatal afternoon.

He leaned over and began whispering furiously into Martin Blaine's ear. As he talked, Blaine's eyes grew wider.

At last he whispered back to Underhill. "All right. But I'll have to stall. I'll try it."

When the witness was turned over to Blaine, he stood up and began cross-examining, boring into every bit of Manetti's testimony. Underhill listened, but nothing more came out that would be of any interest to him. He kept his eyes on the clock as the hand moved slowly toward time for the noon recess.

At last, the judge said: "Could this cross-examination be interrupted for lunch, Counsellor?"

"Certainly, your Honor."

"There will be a recess of one hour. This Court will reconvene at 1300 hours. All witnesses are instructed that they will appear at that time."

In the cell of the Felony Jail, Ross Underhill stood by his bunk while the guard let his lawyer and Sergeant Hurst in through the grilled door.

"It's unusual to allow a member of the police department to set in on a conference like this," said Martin Blaine, "but there's reason for it."

Sergeant Hurst nodded. "If Ross is innocent, I'll do everything I can to get him off."

"Thanks, Jamie," Ross said. "Just to give you something to think about, do you remember exactly what happened when we went into Thursday's office? Aft-

er I killed the secretary, I mean."

"Why—sure. We went in and found him dead. Quentin Thursday was—"

"Who went into the room first?"

Hurst frowned. "Why, I did. I was on your left, so I was naturally closer to the door."

"Then how did I beam down Thursday, shooting through the door, without hitting you? Tell me that."

Hurst blinked. "I guess you could have done it, but I'm damned if I see how. It wouldn't be easy."

"It sure wouldn't. I'd have to aim past you so that the vibrations wouldn't hit you. That would mean I'd have to take the gun out of my pocket."

Hurst considered that. "Not necessarily; I don't think my testimony on that would stand up in court."

"I'm not trying to convince the Court, Jamie; I'm trying to convince you. What do you think?"

"I believe you," Hurst said. "Now, how do we get you off?"

"Okay, listen. If I didn't do it, it must have been one of the other three who were there this afternoon, right?"

"Probably. Although there could be a fifth person that we haven't found yet."

Ross shook his head. "If we start off on something like that we'll never get anywhere. Let's just stick to the suspects we have." He felt in his pockets,

found them empty, and then accepted a cigarette from Hurst.

"The whole thing hinges on that little scratch on the robot's brain. When was it put there, and how, and by whom?"

"Go ahead, Ross," the sergeant said. "I'm listening."

Ross went ahead.

"The Court will come to order," said Judge Hogbotham. "The defense will continue with cross-examination."

Martin Blaine rose. "If the Court please, I would like to dismiss Mr. Manetti for the moment and recall Mr. Meinster to the stand."

"Very well. Call Mr. Meinster."

As Meinster went to the witness box, there was a slight commotion in the rear of the courtroom. Sergeant Hurst came in, wheeling a stand on which sat an object covered by a sheet of canvas.

"What is this?" asked the judge in some surprise.

"Merely an exhibit for the defense, your Honor. I will ask that it be admitted in evidence later."

"Proceed."

"Thank you." Blaine turned to the witness. "I think you stated, Mr. Meinster, that you arrived at Quentin Thursday's office at about 1445 and left at about 1510?"

"That's right."

"When you left, Mr. Meinster, did you take anything with you?"

Meinster paled a little. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you carry any object from that office which you had not had in your possession previously?"

Meinster hesitated for a moment, then: "No, I did not."

"Let the record show that witness hesitated," said Blaine. Then he walked over to the canvas-covered object on the stand and whipped off the cloth. "I ask you, Mr. Meinster, if you have ever seen this before."

It was a small, metallic oblate spheroid about the size of a regulation football. At one end was a lensed opening; at the other end were several tubes, and there were other tubes projecting from the sides.

Meinster paled even more. "Yes," he said finally, "I've seen it."

"When?"

"Uh — in — uh — in Quentin Thursday's office."

"Was that the last time you saw it?"

Suddenly, Meinster clamped his lips shut tightly. "I refuse to answer that question on the grounds that it would tend to incriminate me."

"Oh?" Blaine leaned forward. "Now, surely, Mr. Meinster, it is better to be indicted for robbery than for murder, isn't it?"

Meinster said nothing.

Blaine turned to the judge. "If your Honor will permit, I would like to demonstrate this object. I'd like to show how it works."

The judge looked somewhat

baffled, but he nodded his okay. "You may proceed."

Blaine went over to the control board. "This is a robot which has been preset to search for a certain man and then take his picture. Right now, it has in its memory several men. If it sees any of them, its mechanism will operate."

"Is it perfectly harmless?" asked the judge.

Blaine turned to Ross Underhill. "It is, isn't it, Ross?"

Underhill stood up. "I built it myself. It contains nothing but a camera, a brain, and sensory and control apparatus. It is as harmless as a cleaning robot." Then he smiled. "Unless someone has planted something in it since I saw it last, it's perfectly harmless."

"Proceed," said the judge.

Blaine pressed a button on the control panel. The little mechanism coughed a couple of times, then rose silently into the air. Then it hovered and began to turn slowly, as though it were looking over the men in the courtroom—which, in a manner of speaking, it was.

It turned and stared at Meinster. Meinster looked at it apprehensively, but said nothing.

"Mr. Meinster," Blaine said suddenly, "isn't it true that you jimmied open the electrolock on Thursday's door?"

"I refuse to answer," said Meinster, without taking his eyes off the floating robot.

The robot's muffled jets hissed

a little, and it swiveled around and stared directly at Philip Graydon, the repair technician.

Graydon screamed.

In the judge's chambers, half an hour later, Judge Hogbotham said: "I still do not completely understand, Mr. Underhill."

"It's fairly simple, your Honor. It was that scratch on the brain that bothered me, you see. It was much too precise to have been done by accident. It erased part of the memory, but not all of it. It *could* have been an accident, but I assumed that it wasn't and went on from there.

"When was it put there? It had to be before I got there.

"Who put it there? An expert, obviously. No layman could have been that precise. No layman could have incised out the exact spot where the memory of that afternoon's appointments was without either taking all the memory or burning out the brain.

"Since I knew it wasn't I who had done it, it must have been one of the other three. From the first, I thought it had to be either Graydon or Manetti, since Meinster isn't a robot man. Then, when Meinster said that the robot had let him in, I decided that it must be Manetti."

Martin Blaine chuckled. "Then Manetti fouled you up by testifying that the robot wouldn't let him in."

"It only fouled me up for a minute, really. Then I knew that it had to be either Graydon or

Meinster. Meinster just might have known more about robots than he let on.

"What happened was this: Philip Graydon kept his appointment with Thursday at the time he said he did. He had evidently been working with Thursday on the killer robot; he was the man who had put the coagulator in it instead of the camera that I had put in. But Thursday wanted to get rid of Graydon, just as he had tried to kill me.

"Graydon decided to get Thursday first, so he killed him with the coagulator. Then he went out to the outer office and made that little scratch on the secretary's brain at just the right place to remove the appointment list, not knowing that Thursday had a written list.

"Then he heard someone at the door of the outer office—Meinster. He shoved the coagulator into the sofa cushions and pretended to be coming out of Thursday's office. The idea he had was to deny that he had been able to get in to see Thursday. But when he found out that the whole brain had been burned out, he changed his story."

"If he'd stuck to it," said Sergeant Hurst, "you would really have been in trouble because you were the only one who had been in there previously."

"Yeah," Ross agreed. "Anyway, Meinster came in. The secretary told him that he was not on the appointment list, since that had been scratched from its memory. Meinster didn't like

that at all. He stormed over to the door and jimmied the electrolock—it's easy to do. Then he got a shock when he found Thursday dead.

"I think you'll find that he had an interest in the killer robot, too, only he didn't know it was supposed to be a killer. He had money in it as a spy device. He knew that he couldn't get any of his money back with Thursday dead, so he decided to take the robot and have it duplicated later, claiming it as his own. But he didn't know it had a coagulator in the nose instead of a camera."

"I take it," said the judge, "that the device you demonstrated in the courtroom was not the one that Meinster stole. You couldn't have risked that."

"That's right, sir. It was one of my own that I had in my apartment; Sergeant Hurst got it for me. It isn't even a robot; just the operating shell without a brain. But Meinster thought

it was the same one that he had taken—and so did Graydon.

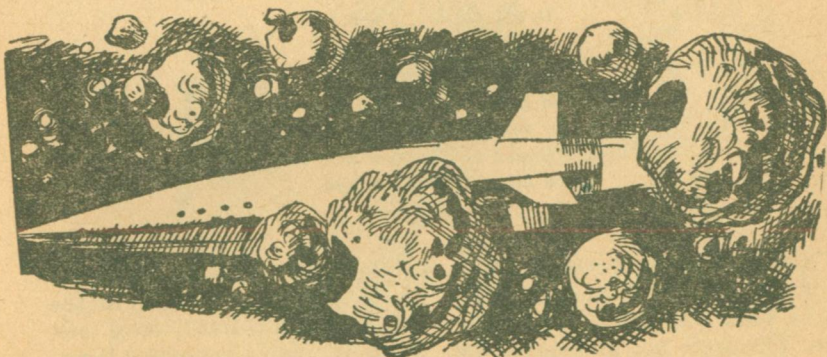
"Meinster wasn't worried when it pointed at him. He thought it was just a camera device, anyway. But Graydon knew that the robot in Thursday's office had a coagulator in it, and he knew that Thursday had given the robot his recognition pattern. So he panicked."

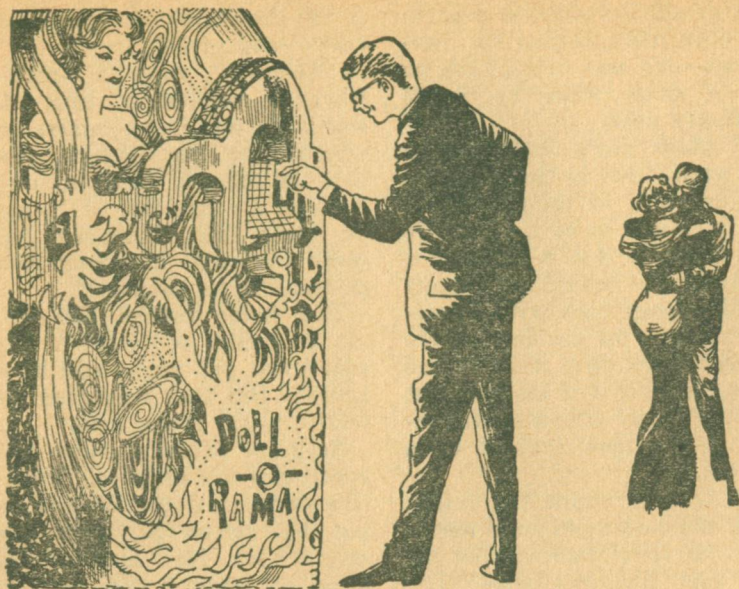
The judge rubbed his chin. "If he hadn't confessed in the courtroom, you might still be in trouble. But that was good detective work, young man."

Sergeant Hurst's snort was good-naturedly derisive. "Detective work, my foot! He was going by guesswork, pure and simple. He just assumed he knew the answer and went on from there. There was no chain of evidence leading positively to Philip Graydon."

Underhill grinned broadly. "Sure. But, what the hell, Jamie, that's all Sherlock Holmes ever did."

THE END





DOLL-FRIEND

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

He had a beautiful wife. But the girl he really loved came out of a slot machine — warm and soft and clinging and unalive.

OF ALL the doll-friends Carter had ever danced with, Edie Four was by far his favorite. The mere act of depressing keys E, D, and 4 on the console

of the huge juke-doll box gave him a thrill comparable to the thrill Aladdin must have felt when he rubbed his magic lamp; and the mere sight of her when

she emerged, all tall and golden in a golden gown, was in itself well worth the half dollar it cost to bring her to life.

It was a truism to say that all doll-friends were beautiful. Man, working with his lathes and his shapers and his plastics and his photoelectric cells, was a creator in his own right, and while unlike God he could not endow his products with souls, he could, and did, endow them with a physical perfection unmatched by any product ever to have come off the celestial production line. However, Carter's preference for Edie did not stem solely from her physical allure: she had personality, too.

When he said something to her, she didn't respond with the clichés the other doll-friends used. For instance, when he made a flattering remark, she didn't come up with an archaic bromide like, "I'll bet you say that to all the girls!" Instead, she'd say something like, "I'm going to write that down in my diary when I get home tonight, and sleep with it under my pillow." Or, if he asked her for a date—jokingly, of course—she didn't quote Paragraph 16 of the Doll-Friend Handbook, the way the others did. Instead, she'd drop her eyes demurely and say something like, "I'd love to Floyd, but you know what peo-



ple would say," or, "What would your wife think!" Naturally Carter knew that the first shift E-D-4 manipulator in the upstairs control room was responsible for everything she said as well as everything she did; but he preferred to pretend that it was Edie, and Edie alone, who danced and talked with him, and spiked his cup of life with the golden spirits of romance.

"Personally," he said one evening, "I don't give a damn what my wife would think. And if I thought I could get away with it, I'd sneak you out the backdoor sometime and take you riding in my Cadillac!"

"But what good would that do you, Floyd? My manipulator would simply break contact and call the police. And you'd feel awfully silly being picked up with a rag doll on your hands."

"You're not a rag doll!"

"Without my manipulator I'm the equivalent of one."

Carter looked deep into the blue lenses of her eyes. "Who is your manipulator, anyway?"

"You know I'm forbidden to tell you."

Abruptly he whirled her between two of the booths that bordered the dance floor, and stole a kiss. "Anyway, tomorrow's Saturday," he said. "And my wife works full time Saturdays, but I only work half a day. I'm going to monopolize you all afternoon!"

He whirled her back to the dance floor and they wound deft-

ly in and out among the other dancing doll-friends and their partners. It was the last dance of the day that he had time for, and he concentrated on enjoying it. The music became a pink cloud beneath his feet, and Edie turned into a golden-haired goddess.

"You *do* like me the best, don't you?" she said to his shoulder.

"Compared to you, the others are nothing but paper dolls," he whispered to the ribbon in her hair.

But for all his levity he felt depressed when the dance came to an end and he had to escort her back to the juke-doll box. They said good night, and she blew him a kiss over her shoulder as she re-entered the magic portal with her synthetic sisters. Carter headed for the bar straight-away.

He brooded over a beer, staring idly at the door behind the bar that opened on the stairs leading up to the control room, wondering absently why he never saw the manipulators come and go when they changed shifts. Presently he realized that this time when he'd asked Edie for a date, he'd only been *half-joking*. Moreover, Edie — or, more accurately, Edie's manipulator — must have realized it, too. He waited for at least a modicum of embarrassment to apprise him that his infatuation had not quite exceeded the bounds of reality; but all he felt was a poignant regret that the treasured 3:00-7:00 P.M. interval of

the day was rapidly drawing to a close.

At five after seven he left the Doll House and walked the three blocks to the corner where he met his wife every week-day night. They took an airbus home—Marcia's Chevrolet was being summerized, and Carter couldn't see exposing his Cadillac to the hazards of city driving—and sat silently in the semi-darkness, gazing idly at the projected photon signs that filled the April sky. Once the airbus flew right through one that said, TRY A CAKE OF CLOUD SOAP AND SMELL LIKE AN ANGEL, and he felt Marcia wince beside him.

He withheld his usual comment to the effect that it was high time she divested herself of her goddess-robos of idealism and accepted the *status quo*. He was too worn out from the grueling 9:00 A.M.-3:00 P.M. stint at Brainstorm, Inc. to feel like arguing. Glancing sideways at her and noticing the bluish crescents beneath her dark liquid eyes, it occurred to him that she was probably tired, too.

Well let her be tired! he thought. No one was making her work—no one except her own stubborn self. Lord knew, *he'd* never forced her to go out and get a job. That was her own idea—and like most of her ideas, there was no talking her out of it. He was willing to bet, though, that in another month or so she'd talk herself out of it. Working in an age as subject to psychological pressures as the Age of

Mass-Creativity was, could become a pretty rough proposition, even when you had a job as easy as the one she claimed to have.

In their split-level apartment, Marcia slipped out of her coat and went into the kitchen. Carter removed his own coat and turned on the 3V set. Presently Marcia reappeared in the kitchen doorway. "Steak and French fries or ham and scalloped potatoes?" she asked.

"Steak and French fries," Carter said.

She returned to the kitchen to open the appropriate vacuum-pac, and he sat down to watch the seven-thirty edition of the Up To The Second News. Her after-image lingered on his retina: tall and dark of hair; classic of features (except for the too-full lower lip); stately of neck and shoulders; Munroesque of breasts . . . He regarded it wonderingly, trying to understand, as he so often had before, how anyone could be so promising to look at and yet be so frustrating to live with. At length the after-image faded, and he turned his attention to the news.

One of the roving cameras had just picked up the aftermath of a collision between an aircab and an airbus. The airbus, in falling, had lodged between two apartment buildings, and white faces were protruding from its windows, mouths round with screams which the audio unit was as yet too distant to

pick up. Above the scene, a rescue 'copter was hovering in the night sky, blades gleaming in the starlight, and beyond its transparent hull the crew could be seen preparing to lower a huge magnet. Carter leaned forward tensely. The best part about live news was its utter unpredictability: not even the producers knew how any given event would come out.

Marcia came into the room. "The table's set, Floyd. Would you like to sit down now?"

"No, not now! Look what's happening. Quick!"

She glanced at the screen, turned away. At that very moment the airbus slipped free and fell the rest of the way down between the two buildings. The audio unit was now in position, and there was the gratifying crunch of metal, the rasp of steel on stone, followed by scream after scream after scream.

"Boy, that was a good one!" Carter said.

"Sounded like a one hundred percenter," Marcia said. She turned down the volume. "Do you want to eat now, or wait and see the blood?"

Carter stood up. "You make it sound like I'm a monster," he said indignantly. "I'm no different from anybody else."

"I know you're not."

The flat tone of voice she used made the statement seem like an accusation. For a moment he was tempted to call her

on it; then he shrugged his shoulders and followed her into the kitchen. Her opinion of him had ceased to matter some time ago; it had never mattered very much in the first place.

No, that wasn't quite true, he amended, sitting down and picking up his knife and fork. It had mattered very much when he had married her ten months ago. But that was before he'd had any idea that her high-flown intellectualism had awakened the puritan in her, thereby distorting not only her attitude towards the technological utopia in which she lived, but her attitude towards sex as well.

They ate in silence, till Marcia's Venerian aris flew down from its cage and perched upon her shoulder. "Bread and circuses! Bread and circuses!"

Why don't you teach him to say something funny? Carter nearly said; and then he remembered all the times he really had said it, without result, and went on eating.

"'Rapunzel, Rapunzel. Let down thy hair!'" the aris said, and made three swift blue circles around the room and re- alighted on Marcia's shoulder.

"Hush, Sir Gawain!" she said. "Can't you see we're eating?"

"'The sea is calm tonight, the tide is full—'"

"Hush!"

"'Ah, love, let us be true!—'"

Marcia's fork made a little clattering sound against her plate. She laid it down carefully

and picked up her coffee. Some of it spilled when she raised the cup to her lips, and she set the cup back down again. She stood up. "Excuse me," she said. "I'm not very hungry." She put Sir Gawain back in his cage and closed the door; then she left the kitchen.

Carter listened to her footsteps on the split-level stairs that led to the bedroom, listened to the bedroom door close. Presently he resumed eating. He was inured to Marcia's moods.

His thoughts shifted back to Edie and his eyes lifted to the kitchen clock. 8:00 P.M. Eighteen hours to go before he could see her again. He grimaced. Not that the hours themselves mattered so much: it was the way in which he must spend them that was distasteful.

First, the long dull evening in the living room, drinking more than was good for him; and then the long, semi-sleepless night in the same room with a physically irresistible woman who considered an act of love detrimental to human dignity; finally, the weekly Saturday morning Mass-Think . . .

While bringing the salaried employees of a firm together for periodic ideation sessions was not a particularly new practice, enough innovations had been added during the past few decades to lend it a new look. The *modus operandi* at Brainstorm, Inc., was as follows: First, Mr. Morrow, the firm's president,

seated the employees around the conference table and passed out two truth tablets to each one. Next, he read Paragraphs 124 and 199 of the section of the revised labor law that dealt with management's right to utilize harmless drugs in the "elicitation of maximum output from salaried employees." (Paragraph 124 said in effect that the user would remember only disconnected fragments of what he said—or, in the case of a group, disconnected fragments of what the members of the group said—while under TT-narcosis; and Paragraph 199 said in effect that any employer who utilized the association words and phrases that emanated from an employee's subconscious during TT-narcosis for any purpose not directly related to the advancement of the firm's economic welfare, was subject to 10 days in jail, or a \$1,000 fine, or both.) Then he told them to take their tablets, and after they had done so, he instructed them to hold hands with the persons sitting on either side of them. Finally, he dimmed the lights, announced the first subject on which he wanted their subconscious reactions, and turned on the 3V cube that rested in the center of the conference table.

The first subject on this particular Saturday morning was "milk," and the first image to appear on the four vertical sides of the cube was a large glass of it. Taped music, in response to the pressure of Mr. Morrow's

knee on a switch beneath the tabletop, began flowing from hidden wall-speakers.

For a while the music had the acoustics to itself. Then: "Kidney stones," Harris of Accounts, who sat across the table from Carter, said.

"Old Mother Hubbard," Miss Stokes, who sat on Carter's right, said.

"I got drunk the day of my mother's funeral," Minton of Innovations, who sat on Carter's left, said.

"Prunes," Carter, who was more aware of Miss Stokes' clammy hand in his, and her somewhat sere countenance hovering at the edge of his vision than he was of the image on the 3V cube, said.

The glass of milk transmuted to a mother nursing her child. Brahms' *Lullaby* sounded softly from the wall-speakers.

"Malthus," Miss Stokes said.

"I must remember to get my mother a birthday present," Harris of Accounts said.

"Foam rubber," Miss Brennan, who sat between Harris and Mr. Morrow, said.

Carter glanced across the table at her, instinctively comparing her deftly painted countenance to Miss Stokes' withered one; her full bosom to Miss Stokes' flat one. Once upon a time, before he'd married Marcia, he and Miss Brennan had had many a tentative tête à tête by the drinking fountain, and he toyed momentarily with the

idea of resuming them. Miss Brennan, if the yearning looks she leveled at him every now and then could be used as criteria, would be more than willing. Then, as the truth tablets he had taken, finally took complete control of his faculties, his thoughts faded away and his attention wandered back to the cube.

Mother and child had disappeared, and the Horseshoe Falls, with water whitened to represent milk, had taken their place. Brahms' *Lullaby* had blended into Beiderbecke's *In a Mist*, and Miss Stokes was saying, "I much prefer the Victoria Falls in Southern Rhodesia. They're far more magnificent . . . and cleaner, somehow . . ."

"I think it's about time I turned in my Edsel Jr. for a Cadillacette," Harris of Accounts said. "The difference in riding comfort might be just what the doctor ordered."

"Wonder what it would be like to drown in milk," Minton of Innovations said.

"Black coffee," Carter said.

"I have two pairs of them," Miss Brennan said, "and I keep the extra pair hidden in the secret compartment in the bottom drawer of my vanity."

The Horseshoe Falls blurred, became a dairy bar filled with rosy-cheeked children downing tall glasses of milk. Beiderbecke's *In a Mist* became Feurtado's *Milk Bar Romp*.

"Den of Iniquity!" Miss Stokes said.

"Maybe I should turn it in for

a Lincolnette," Harris of Accounts said.

"Micromastia," Miss Brennan said.

"Twin beds," Carter said.

The dairy bar was replaced by an endless progression of newly-filled milk bottles issuing from a huge filler. Feurtado's *Milk Bar Romp* gave way to Metz's *Industrial Rhapsody*—

"Bottle babies are the best!" Miss Brennan said suddenly.

"Splendid!" Mr. Morrow said. He brightened the lights. "The very slogan the Dairymen's League was looking for! Nice going, Miss Brennan. An hour from now you won't remember what I'm saying, but there'll be a substantial little bonus included in your paycheck next week to remind you. Now we'll try subject No. 2. Ready, everybody? . . ." He dimmed the lights—

"Toothpaste!"—

Carter was glad when noon came. There was a quality about Mass-Thinks that gave him an unclean feeling, and it was a pleasure to extricate his hand from Miss Stokes' and walk out of the conference room. She trailed after him all the way to the street: she'd always had a romanticized crush on him, and lately she'd been acting sillier towards him than ever. It was almost as though he'd been encouraging her, though nothing could have been farther from the truth.

He was half-afraid she might

suggest their having lunch together, but she did not. Instead, after a simpering good-bye, she hurried off into the noonday crowd. He remembered, then, that like Miss Brennan, she too held down two jobs. He gave a sigh of relief and headed towards his favorite restaurant.

He ate leisurely. The Doll House didn't open till two o'clock, and actually all he gained on Saturdays was an extra hour with Edie; but an hour was an hour. While he ate, a strange word kept popping into his mind, and he occupied his thoughts with trying to figure out what it meant and where he'd heard it. The word was "micromastia."

"Mastia," he was pretty sure, denoted a mammary condition, and the prefix "micro" left little doubt as to the nature of that condition. As to where he'd heard the word, that wasn't hard to figure out: unfamiliar words were always popping into his mind after a Mass-Think. He wondered out of whose subconscious this one had emanated, and immediately Miss Stokes' starry-eyed face rose above the horizon of his intuition. He gave a little shudder.

Halfway through his meal, he looked up and saw Miss Brennan sitting several tables away. He nodded to her, but she went right on eating, and he assumed she hadn't seen him. He returned his attention to his plate, wondering why so attractive a girl should be crowding thirty

and still be unmarried, or even engaged; but he didn't pursue his thoughts for any distance, because he didn't really care, and when he looked up again she was gone.

He finished his meal, smoked a cigarette over a second cup of coffee, then paid his check and took a slow walk to the Doll House. The doors were just opening when he got there, and he made a beeline for the juke-doll box. No one was going to beat his time with Edie if he could help it.

"Hi," she said, when the magic portal delivered her into his arms. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," he said, whirling her onto the floor.

After dancing to *Deep Space*, *Ecstasy* and the *Cadillette Blues*, they sat out a dance in one of the rear booths. Carter ordered a beer. "Well," he said, after the waiter had left, "did you decide to let me take you for a ride yet?"

"I told you what would happen if you did. My manipulator would have the police down on your neck in two minutes flat and I'd turn into a rag doll."

"You and your manipulator!" Carter said impulsively. "I'll bet she's an old maid with acute micromastia!"

A silence, softly backgrounded by the music and the susur-rus of the dancers' feet, fell between them. Presently: "Perhaps I am," Edie said.

He caught the slip of the tongue, and instantly he was

contrite. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that," he said. "It just came out, somehow."

"It's all right, Floyd."

The music ended. "I've got the next dance," he said.

"All right."

When she re-emerged from the juke-doll box to the strains of a slow waltz, he held her close and pressed his cheek against her hair, in an effort to atone for his remark. He was astonished when, without the slightest warning, she looked up into his eyes and said, "Do you still want me to go for a ride with you?"

"Yes, but your man—"

"She's decided to cooperate."

They moved mutually into a corner, came to a standstill. "But how—" Carter began.

"It's very simple. Tonight, after they close, I'll open the juke-doll box from the inside, go out through the backdoor of the building and meet you in the alley."

Carter swallowed. He realized belatedly why doll-friends were so popular: they provided a hitherto nonexistent outlet for men like himself who only wanted to *half-cheat* on their wives. "Suppose something should go wrong," he said. "Suppose—"

"I didn't think *you'd* be afraid!"

"I'm not!"

"All right then. They close at midnight. I'll allow an hour for the bartender to clean up and lock the doors, and then I'll slip

outside. You can drive right up to the backdoor—the alley's plenty wide enough. I'll meet you there at one o'clock."

One o'clock, Carter mused. Marcia would be in bed long before then; he could easily leave the apartment and drive the Cadillac into town. And even if she should awake while he was gone, all he had to tell her when he returned was that he hadn't been able to sleep and had gone for a ride in order to relax.

A thought occurred to him: "But won't there be another E-D-4 manipulator on duty then?"

"She goes off at midnight. After she leaves, I'll—my present manipulator will take over again."

Carter took out his handkerchief, blotted his brow. "Well—"

Edie put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "One o'clock, darling," she said. "All right?"

Carter replaced his handkerchief in his pocket. "... All right."

"Come on. Let's dance!"

"Chicken and dumplings or chow mein?" Marcia asked.

"Chicken and dumplings," Carter said.

He felt tired. Not even the eight o'clock *Up To The Second News* interested him, though there was a good street fight and an excellent three-alarm fire on. He hadn't left the Doll House at six, as was his usual custom, but had stayed to see what Edie

would be like under the control of the second shift manipulator. He'd been disappointed: she was just as lacklustre and as lackadaisical as the rest of them.

After supper his tiredness turned into stupor, and he dozed off in his 3V chair. When he awoke and glanced at his watch he was startled to see that it was almost midnight.

He checked the bedroom to see if Marcia was asleep, then he went out to the kitchen and washed and shaved, running the water slowly and keeping his razor at low speed. Finally he retied his tie in front of the kitchen mirror, and combed his hair. Sir Gawain, awakened by the light, chortled sleepily to himself in his covered cage, uttering a muffled word now and then, that he had picked up during the day. But Carter didn't pay much attention: he had too much on his mind.

The kitchen clock said 12:29 when he left the apartment and took the lift down to the basement. He walked through the subterranean passage to the parking building, took another lift up to the first level, which was reserved for Cadillacs, and drove his car out into the street. His watch said 12:35 when he turned toward the brightness of the business district.

For a while the unconventional nature of the adventure gave him a feeling of guilt. It wasn't natural, he told himself, for a normal man to crave the purely

idealistic companionship which was all any mannequin, either animate or inanimate, could give him; and the fact that he, Carter, did crave it, allowed only two conclusions: either he was abnormal—or abjectly lonely. However, he was confident of his normalcy—indeed, it was his very averageness that had estranged him from his wife—and by the time he pulled into the alley behind the Doll House, his feeling of guilt had transmuted to one of anticipation.

His watch said 1:02, but his headlights picked up nothing but bare brick walls and empty doorsteps. He switched them off and sat in the darkness, waiting. He smoked one cigarette after another; his heart thudded in his throat. He looked at his watch again: 1:23. It occurred to him that it might be fast, but then he remembered that he'd checked it with the kitchen clock before he'd left. He was beginning to wish that the old custom of adorning steeples and domes with timepieces still prevailed so that he could check it again, when he heard the sound of a door opening and closing. Presently a familiar shape separated itself from the building shadows and slipped into the seat beside him. "Hope you didn't have to wait long, darling," Edie said.

He backed out of the alley, swung down the street. Soon they were on the highway. "Drive fast, darling," Edie said, the April wind in her hair.

Aircabs and airbuses had done much towards eliminating highway congestion, but there was still enough traffic to make fast driving precarious. So when the speedometer needle reached 75, Carter held it there. But Edie was far from satisfied. "Faster," she urged. "Faster!"

"What's the hurry?"

"No hurry, darling. "I just love to go fast, that's all."

It wouldn't hurt to humor her a little, he decided. He let the needle creep up to 85 . . . 90 . . . Far down the highway a tri-trailer truck, its headlights blazing, rounded a curve.

"Put your arm around me," Edie said.

He did so, after a moment's hesitation.

"Faster," she said. "Faster!"

"We're going fast enough. What's the matter with you, Edie?"

"I've got micromastia. I'm an old maid with acute micromastia!" Abruptly she giggled. "Kiss me, darling!"

Shocked, Carter tried to push her away; but she put her arms around his neck and, with surprising strength, pulled his face down toward hers. The headlights of the tri-trailer were much closer now, and approaching with meteor-like swiftness. He tried to apply the brake, found his leg interlocked with hers. "No, Edie. Stop!"

"I won't stop."

"You'll get us killed!"

"Not us. You."

He saw her then. Not Edie,

but the embittered spinster who was Edie's soul; sitting grimly in the manipulation room back in the city, still smarting from the unintended allusion to her shame, setting her lover up like a tenpin for the tri-trailer to send caroming. He had heard rumors about the manipulators, rumors that he hadn't believed till now: about how they were old maids who found vicarious pleasure in dancing through their mannequins with other women's husbands, flirting with them, holding hands with them; kissing them . . . And all the while he saw her, he was seeing the tri-trailer, too, with its vehement headlights flashing on and off in wild warning, and hearing the insistent trumpeting of its horn. By now, Edie had managed to pinion his one free arm to his side, and the Cadillacette, out of control, was drifting over into the path of the tri-trailer's trajectory. In a moment he would be guts and gristle scattered on the highway, the bloodied remnants of what once had been a man—

And then, an instant before collision was inevitable, Edie gave an anguished cry and grabbed the wheel. She turned it savagely. There was the rush and the roar of the tri-trailer's passing, and a wild careening. Finally there was the gradual return to sanity, as Carter, once again in control, slowed to a shaken stop.

Edie was limp in the seat be-

side him. He shook her furiously. He slapped her plastic face. Her blue eyes regarded him glassily. Her lovely head lolled on her foam rubber shoulders.

Presently he let her slip from his hands and slide to the floor. He U-turned and started back to the Doll House.

He parked the Cadillacette in the alley, got out and tried the backdoor. It was still unlocked. He returned to the Cadillacette, picked up the rag doll lying on the floor, carried it inside and propped it in a sitting position against the juke-doll box. Then he headed for the door behind the bar that opened upon the stairs leading to the control room.

He ascended them slowly. Riser-lights bathed his feet in rose-colored light; a plush stair-carpet swallowed his footsteps. In the second-floor hallway, brighter lights burned. It was a long hallway, stretching into the next building; through it and into the next. No wonder he had never seen a manipulator enter through the bar: they had their own entrance.

The control room, however, was directly above the bar, just as he had always imagined it to be. A sign on the door informed him that only licensed manipulators were allowed inside, but a light burned within, and the door was ajar, and he shouldered it aside and stepped brazenly into the sanctum sanctorum.

It was a room of many rooms. Dozens of narrow doors lined its

walls, and above each door was a metal plate with a euphonious combination of letters and numerals stamped upon it. He walked along, reading them, till he came to the one he wanted. The door beneath it was open, and he stepped into a brightly lit cubicle.

The cubicle was empty. He had expected it to be: the open doors and the still-burning lights were unmistakable testimony to the flight of the soul of E-D-4. But, while the cubicle was empty of Edie's soul, it was far from being empty of her soul's equipment.

Wires of all sizes ran singly and in groups from the walls, ceiling and even the floor, to the arms, base, back and footrest of a large reclining-chair. Above the chair, a metallic helmet, reminiscent of a twentieth century hair-dryer, was suspended in such a way that the chair's occupant could raise or lower it to whatever level was desired. Metal contact straps lay open on the arms and footrest, waiting to be closed.

He felt the seat. It was still warm. He wondered suddenly what it would be like to be a doll-friend.

He sat down, raised his feet upon the footrest and closed the contact straps around his ankles. He leaned back and lowered the helmet over his head. He discovered that he could close and open the other set of contact straps by a slight downward pressure

of his wrists. He closed them and felt with the fingers of his right hand for the switch that should logically be within their reach. He found it presently, and pressed it—

Semi-darkness suddenly enveloped him. He found himself sitting in a cramped position, his back propped against a cold metallic object. Tentatively he stood up . . . and found himself standing on the edge of the dance floor beside the juke-doll box. He was wearing a golden gown. His hair fell to his shoulders.

He was Edie.

He took a step. Another. He felt the floor beneath his feet. Her feet. He raised his . . . her hand, touched his . . . her face. He felt the pressure of his . . . her fingers on his . . . her cheek.

He danced. All alone. In the half-darkness. Through the pale puddles of neon light that seeped through the front window from the street. He ran upstairs into the control room and looked at himself reclining in the chair in the E-D-4 cubicle. He ran back down again.

He had never dreamed that manipulator and mannequin were so completely one. But then, he had never dreamed, either, that a manipulator would attempt to kill him through her mannequin merely because he had called her an old maid with acute micromastia.

The fact was still difficult to digest. It was almost impossible to imagine a woman, even an

embittered spinster, whom he had never even seen, wanting to kill him because of a chance remark. But he was only assuming he had never seen her. Perhaps he *had* seen her—

Perhaps he *knew* her . . .

He had been walking aimlessly around the dance floor. Now he came to a dead standstill. He felt Edie's gown billow coolly against Edie's thighs. He felt Edie's fingers digging painfully into Edie's palms. He heard his words, distilled through Edie's mechanical larynx, issue incongruously from Edie's lips—

"Miss Stokes!—"

But it *couldn't* be Miss Stokes! Miss Stokes was kind and gentle. Miss Stokes was totally incapable of murder!

Yes, but so was Edie's manipulator.

But Miss Stokes worked for Brainstorm, Inc.—

Yes, from nine to three weekdays and from nine to twelve Saturdays—and it was common knowledge that she held down two jobs. She could easily work a part-time afternoon shift at the Doll House during the week, and a full one on Saturday. It was possible.

But Miss Stokes *liked* him. In her silly way, she *loved* him—

Yes, but might not her loving him have encouraged her to become a licensed manipulator on the chance that she might some day have her love returned vicariously?

But Miss Stokes was an ineffectual old maid!—

Yes. An old maid with acute micromastia . . .

Carter returned Edie to the juke-doll box and left the Doll House. He drove home, hardly aware of the turns he took or the buildings he passed. In the apartment the first thing he did was to go out in the kitchen and open a bottle of brandy.

He took a long pull, and sat down at the kitchen table. He noticed that his hands were trembling. He wasn't surprised: finding out that someone you'd known for years had tried to murder you just because you'd called her an old maid with acute micromastia, was enough to unnerve anyone.

Awakened by the kitchen light, Sir Gawain commenced to chortle in his cage. "Mi—mi—"

Carter shook his head. He still could hardly believe it. Miss Stokes. Poor starry-eyed Miss Stokes; sitting beside him every Saturday morning at the Mass-Think, holding his hand; giving him a monogrammed tie clasp for Christmas; making eyes at him like a schoolgirl whenever he passed her desk—

"Micromastia," Sir Gawain said. "Micromastia!"

Carter had raised the brandy bottle halfway to his lips. He lowered it slowly back to the table. His hands were trembling so badly now that it nearly slipped from his fingers.

He thought back: he couldn't remember having spoken the word aloud. In fact, he *knew* he

hadn't spoken it aloud. And Sir Gawain wasn't telepathic. For all his mimical abilities he was still nothing but a bird.

Then—

Carter got up and tore the cloth cover off the cage. Sir Gawain blinked up at him reproachfully. "Micromastia," Carter said.

"Micromastia," Sir Gawain repeated. "*Acute micromastia!*"

Carter shivered. He let the cover fall to the floor. He walked through the living room and up the split level stairs to the bedroom. He looked inside.

Marcia's bed was empty.

In the living room he dialed the operator and asked what time it was. The hour she gave him was a half hour in arrears of the hour registered on his watch.

He returned to the kitchen. To the bottle of brandy. Why? he asked himself. Then: How?

He took the second question in his stride: Any woman could become a manipulator. Any woman could neglect to tell her husband where she worked, especially if her husband wasn't even interested enough to ask. And any woman could slip a mild soporific into her husband's coffee to insure his sleeping sound enough and long enough for her to set his watch and the kitchen clock half an hour back so that she could keep a vicarious date with him without his catching on.

But the first question threw him—

Why?

And then he made a discovery: an act without apparent motivation automatically threw the person who had performed it into a different perspective, and permitted insights that might otherwise have been impossible—

Suddenly he saw his wife for the first time—her emotions seeking expression and her mind steadfastly denying them expression; her highly-sexed body craving his body the way his body craved hers, and her intellect simultaneously repelled by his gross appetite for gory news, bewildered by his passion for doll-friends . . .

Suddenly he realized that only as a doll-friend herself—as Edie—could Marcia become unself-conscious of the sex her real body was overcharged with, and which she was afraid of, and thereby become her own natural, charming self.

As Edie, he had fallen in love with her.

Had she fallen in love with him?

And had his remark about Edie's manipulator being an old maid with acute micromastia turned her love to hate?

But why should it have? A remark like that should have evoked amusement in a woman with Marcia's Munroesque qualities. *Marcia* wasn't an old maid with acute micromastia.

Wasn't she?

Wasn't she really—in a figura-

tive sense—far more of an old maid than Miss Stokes was? Miss Stokes would have welcomed love at least, had it ever come her way; but it never had. It must have come Marcia's way many times, but she had never welcomed it. She had repelled it, instead, or at best endured it. So wasn't she afflicted with an acute micromastia all of her own, and wouldn't his having thrown her shame into her face have antagonized her beyond the bounds of reason because, while the remark wasn't remotely true in the sense intended, it was overwhelmingly true in a sense that hurt far more?

There was the sound of footsteps in the hall.

Marcia, driving wildly through the streets of the city and the suburbs, shocked by what she had tried—and failed—to do; shocked, perhaps, into a new awareness of herself. Coming

home now; repentant, frightened—

How much of her unhappiness could have been averted if he had only tried to understand her before? How much of her real love could have been his if he had only made some concession to her intellectual idealism, had even *half*-tried to attain the impossible nobility she wanted in a man? Perhaps it wasn't too late. Perhaps he could still help her. If she would only let him. If—

A key turned in the hall door. He went into the living room and stood in the darkness, waiting. The door opened slowly. She hesitated on the threshold for a moment, silhouetted by the hall light, looking searchingly into his eyes. And then she was in his arms, sobbing.

"It's all right, Marcia," he said. "It's all right, darling."

THE END

Your copies of

AMAZING
SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

are valuable!



**Keep them neat...
clean...ready for
instant reference!**

Now you can keep a year's copies of AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION STORIES in a rich-looking leatherette file that makes it easy to locate any issue for ready reference.

Specially designed for AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, this handy file—with its distinctive, washable Kivar cover and 16-carat gold leaf lettering—not only looks good but keeps every issue neat, clean and orderly.

So don't risk tearing and soiling your copies of AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION STORIES—an exciting source of reading enjoyment. Order several of these AMAZING SCIENCE FICTION STORIES volume files today. They are \$2.50 each, postpaid—3 for \$7.00, or 6 for \$13.00. Satisfaction guaranteed, or your money back. Order direct from:

JESSE JONES BOX CORP.

Dept. A

Box 5120, Philadelphia 41, Pa.

(Established 1843)

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

By RAY BRADBURY

*It's an old story—the pride of parents
when their boy makes good on his first
job. But this was no ordinary
boy, no ordinary job.*

HE STOPPED the lawn mower in the middle of the yard, because he felt that the sun at just that moment had gone down and the stars come out. The fresh-cut grass that had showered his face and body died softly away. Yes, the stars were there, faint at first, but brightening in the clear desert sky. He heard the porch screen door tap shut and felt his wife watching him as he watched the night.

"Almost time," she said.

He nodded; he did not have to check his watch. In the passing moments he felt very old, then very young, very cold, then very warm, now this, now that. Suddenly he was miles away. He was his own son talking steadily, moving briskly to cover his pounding heart and the resurgent panics as he felt himself slip into fresh uniform, check

food supplies, oxygen flasks, pressure helmet, space suiting, and turn as every man on earth tonight turned, to gaze at the swiftly filling sky.

Then, quickly, he was back, once more the father of the son, hands gripped to the lawn-mower handle. His wife called, "Come sit on the porch."

"I've got to keep busy!"

She came down the steps and across the lawn. "Don't worry about Robert; he'll be all right. I'm certain he will."

"But it's all so new," he heard himself say. "It's never been done before. Think of it—a manned rocket going up tonight to build the first space station. Good lord, it can't be done, it doesn't exist, there's no rocket, no proving ground, no take-off time, no technicians. For that matter, I don't even have a son

named Bob. The whole thing's too much for me!"

"Then what are you doing out here, staring?"

He shook his head. "Well, late this morning, walking to the office, I heard someone laugh out loud. It shocked me, so I froze in the middle of the street. It was *me*, laughing! Why? Because finally I really *knew* what Bob was going to do tonight; at last I *believed* it. Holy is a word I never use, but that's how I felt stranded in all that traffic. Then, middle of the afternoon I caught myself humming. You know the song. 'A wheel in a wheel. Way in the middle of the air.' I laughed again. The space station, of course, I thought. The big wheel with hollow spokes where Bob'll live six or eight months, then get along to the moon. Walking home, I remembered more of the song. 'Little wheel run by faith, Big wheel run by the grace of God.' I wanted to jump, yell, and flame-out myself!"

His wife touched his arm. "If we stay out here, let's at least be comfortable."

They placed two wicker rockers in the center of the lawn and sat quietly as the stars dissolved out of darkness in pale crushings of rock salt strewn from horizon to horizon.

"Why," said his wife, at last, "it's like waiting for the fireworks at Sisley field every year, isn't it?"

"Bigger crowd tonight . . ."

"I keep thinking—a billion people watching the sky right

now, their mouths all open at the same time."

They waited, feeling the earth move under their chairs.

"What time is it now?"

"Eleven minutes to eight."

"You're always right; there must be a clock in your head."

"I can't be wrong, tonight. I'll be able to tell you one second before they blast off. Look! The ten-minute warning!"

On the western sky they saw four crimson flares open out, float shimmering down the wind above the desert, then sink silently to the extinguishing earth.

In the new darkness the husband and wife did not rock in their chairs.

After a while he said, "Eight minutes." A pause. "Seven minutes." What seemed a much longer pause. "Six . . ."

His wife, her head back, studied the stars immediately above her and murmured, "Why?" She closed her eyes. "Why the rockers, why tonight? Why all this? I'd like to know."

He examined her face, pale in the vast powdering light of the Milky Way. He felt the stirring of an answer, but let his wife continue.

"I mean it's not that old thing again, is it, when people asked why men climbed Mt. Everest and they said, 'because it's there?' I never understood. That was no answer to me."

Five minutes, he thought. Time ticking . . . his wrist watch . . . a wheel in a wheel . . . little

wheel run by . . . big wheel run by . . . way in the middle of . . . four minutes! . . . The men snug in the rocket by now, the hive, the control board flickering with light . . .

His lips moved.

"All I know is it's really the end of the beginning. The Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age; from now on we'll lump all those together under one big name for when we walked on Earth and heard the birds at morning and cried with envy. Maybe we'll call it the Earth Age, or maybe the Age of Gravity. Millions of years we fought gravity. When we were amoebas and fish we struggled to get out of the sea without gravity crushing us. Once safe on the shore we fought to stand upright without gravity breaking our new invention, the spine, tried to walk without stumbling, run without falling. A billion years Gravity kept us home, mocked us with wind and clouds, cabbage moths and locusts. That's what's so god-awful big about tonight . . . It's the end of old man Gravity and the age we'll remember him by, for once and all. I don't know where they will divide the ages, at the Persians, who dreamt of flying carpets, or the Chinese, who all unknowing celebrated birthdays and New Years with strung lady-fingers and high skyrockets, or some minute, some incredible second in the next hour. But we are in at the end of a billion years trying, the end of some-

thing long and to us humans, anyway, honorable."

Three minutes . . . two minutes fifty-nine seconds . . . two minutes, fifty-eight seconds . . .

"But," said his wife, "I still don't know why."

Two minutes, he thought. *Ready? Ready? Ready?* The far radio voice calling. *Ready! Ready! Ready!* The quick, faint replies from the humming rocket. *Check! Check! Check!*

Tonight, he thought, even if we fail with this first, we'll send a second and a third ship and move on out to all the planets and later, all the stars. We'll just keep going until the big words like immortal and forever take on meaning. Big words, yes, that's what we want. Continuity. Since our tongues first moved in our mouths we've asked, What does it all mean? No other question made sense, with death breathing down our necks. But just let us settle in on ten thousand worlds spinning around ten thousand alien suns and the question will fade away. Man will be endless and infinite, even as space is endless and infinite. Man will go on, as space goes on, forever. Individuals will die as always, but our history will reach as far as we'll ever need to see into the future, and with the knowledge of our survival for all time to come, we'll know security and thus the answer we've always searched for. Gifted with life, the least we can do is preserve and pass on the gift to in-

finity. That's a goal worth shooting for.

The wicker chairs whispered ever so softly on the grass.

One minute.

"One minute," he said aloud.

"Oh!" His wife moved suddenly to seize his hands. "I hope that Bob . . ."

"He'll be all right!"

"Oh, God, take care . . ."

Thirty seconds.

"Watch now."

Fifteen, ten, five . . .

"Watch!"

Four, three, two, one.

"There! There! Oh, there, there!"

They both cried out. They both stood. The chairs toppled back, fell flat on the lawn. The man and his wife swayed, their hands struggled to find each other, grip, hold. They saw the brightening color in the sky and, ten seconds later, the great uprising comet burn the air, put out the stars, and rush away in fire flight to become another star in the returning profusion of the Milky Way. The man and wife held each other as if they had stumbled on the rim of an incredible cliff that faced an abyss so deep and dark there seemed no end to it. Staring up, they heard themselves sobbing and crying. Only after a long time were they able to speak.

"It got away, it did, *didn't* it?"

"Yes . . ."

"It's all right, isn't it?"

"Yes . . . yes . . ."

"It didn't fall back . . . ?"

"No, no, it's all right, Bob's all right, it's all right."

They stood away from each other at last.

He touched his face with his hand and looked at his wet fingers. "I'll be damned," he said, "I'll be damned."

They waited another five and then ten minutes until the darkness in their heads, the retina, ached with a million specks of fiery salt. Then they had to close their eyes.

"Well," she said, "now let's go in."

He could not move. Only his hand reached a long way out by itself to find the lawn-mower handle. He saw what his hand had done and said, "There's just a little more to do . . ."

"But you can't see."

"Well enough," he said "I must finish this. Then we'll sit on the porch awhile before we go inside."

He helped her put the chairs on the porch and sat her down and then walked back out to put his hands on the guide bar of the lawn mower. The lawn mower. A wheel in a wheel. A simple machine which you held in your hands, which you sent on ahead with a rush and a clatter while you walked behind with your quiet philosophy. Racket, followed by warm silence. Whirling wheel, then soft football of thought.

I'm a billion years old, he told himself; I'm one minute old. I'm one inch, no, then thousand miles, tall. I look down and can't

see my feet, they're so far off and gone away below.

He moved the lawn mower. The grass showering up fell softly around him; he relished and savored it and felt that he was all mankind bathing at last in the fresh waters of the fountain of youth.

Thus bathed, he remembered

the song again about the wheels and the faith and the grace of God being way up there in the middle of the sky where that single star, among a million motionless stars, dared to move and keep on moving.

Then he finished cutting the grass.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

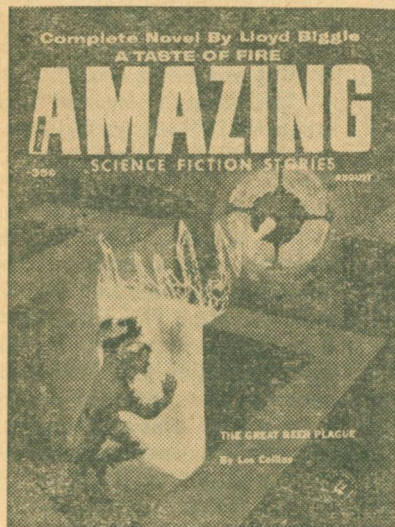
Was he insane? Or was he a vital player in a Game that would decide the fate of the Universe?

In a masterful, vividly-paced full-length novel, *A Taste of Fire*,

Lloyd Biggle highlights next month's AMAZING.

Les Collins provides some cool and sudsy summer reading with a geology story to end all substrata—*The Great Beer Plague*.

And **Henry Slesar** weaves through thousands of years of human history on a psycho-analytic quest in a funny, sad, fascinatingly original story, *The Traveling Couch*. All this, plus a brilliant cover by Summers, several other short stories, and all our regular features.



Be sure to reserve now your copy of the August AMAZING, on sale at your newsdealer on July 9.



THE TRAITOR

By JACK DOUGLAS

WHEN Galactic Councilor Brown finished his speech against the Lukan I quit the war.

The war, the first the Galaxy had fought in 500 years, was ten years old then. We'd lost Sirius in the Third Battle of Sirius, the whole Magellanic Cloud sector in the Lukan Winter Offensive of 3072, and the whole Sun-Alpha Centauri sector was threatened every day by the Lukans still holding out in the Pluto Pocket they'd consolidated in a raid six years before. We were holding the Andromeda front all right, and raiding their home galaxy every week with high casualties and no solid foothold yet.

An all out war. A war of survival. I never knew what that really meant until the Lukans came. Ever since time began on all the planets of all the stars in the Galaxy, intelligent life has

Commander Stone hated being ostracized, yet there was no acceptable place for him in the Galactic civilization. It was too prescribed—too perfect. Then came the devastating war with the Lukans and he found the Galactic way of life was not perfect enough.

been fighting wars of survival. Wars to preserve the tribe, the nation, the way of life. But now, after 500 years of total peace and progress, we are fighting for true survival—the survival of intelligent life as we know it through all the endless light-years of the vast Galaxy spinning in the void of space out of which, suddenly, the Lukans came. They came in one terrifying moment we all had burned into our minds: the Andromeda X Massacre. I saw what was left up there with my own eyes, and I'll never forget it, but there are worse things than a physical horror.

An all out war that exploded on a Galaxy without an army, without any means of defense. A Galaxy where all men prided themselves on having, at last, outgrown the passions that bring

war, and where no living being had shot a weapon in 500 years. Unless he was a member of the Companies like me. That's right, I'm a Companion, in fact I'm a Commander. Commander Stone of the Red Company, Earthmen. I've been in the war from the start. In those early days it was the despised and outlawed mercenaries of the Companies who saved the Galaxy, fought for time on the outer galaxies, and died all across the far reaches of space under those smoking weapons of the Lukans. Ten years I've fought, managed to survive somehow, and picked up just about every medal in the Galaxy including the first Milky Way Cluster ever awarded because I invented the light-screen. Now I'm quitting, I'm through. The hell with survival!

I'll take it a step at a time. It was a routine job, that January 15, 3066, when we first ran into the Lukans. An exploration party to Andromeda, the third outer galaxy the Galactic Council wanted explored for possible colonization or trade. The only job left for the Companies in those days was escorting these expeditions because the Council was smart enough to guess that other Galaxies might not be as peaceful as we were. The only fighting men left were in the Companies, so we got a little respectable again because they needed us, but they made sure we didn't get paid enough to do more than survive. There were

three Companies along on this trip: mine, Mike Colenso's White Wedge Company, Earthmen, and X-Rab's Martian Fourth Company. Colenso, X-Rab and I were scouting with small patrols each when the Lukans hit. I thought then it was all over for me and the Company. I know now that there couldn't have been more than forty of them, but I didn't know it then.

"Can you see them, Red?" Colenso shouted over the noise of our firing.

X-Rab and his Martians were down behind a hill and out of sight, and I couldn't see a damn thing. Nothing! Except a lot of smoke without noise, my men going down like cinders, and some shifting lights all different colors.

"Nothing!" I yelled back, "smoke, lights, nothing!"

"We ain't got a chance!" Colenso shouted.

We were using our new style fusion guns that melted anything they touched. But I could not see anything to shoot at. I was trying to remember a prayer when Colenso turned on his infra-red searchlights to see if they would show up anything.

The Lukans turned all their fire on the lights as if they thought it was a flank attack. Right then I got it. We could see them all right, but all we saw was those moving patterns of colored light. And that was all they could see of us!

"Mike!" I yelled, "Get them under cover!"

We got the men under cover. It didn't work. Somehow they could still see us.

"Lights!" I yelled to Mike, "Get every man to put his infra-red on the ground in front of him pointing up! Fast!"

The firing stopped as if it had been cut with a knife. It was the light-screen. I got the Milky Way Cluster No. 1 for that. It's perfected now, and it's our best weapon. The Lukans don't have it, and don't ask me why. There're an awful lot of things we don't know about the Lukans to this day. In fact, we don't really know anything. Did you ever try to fight an enemy you can't really see, can't hear, can't talk to? That's total war.

That day, when we put up the makeshift screen, the Lukans stopped firing. We could still see them through the infra-red beams. I fired at every patch of light in sight. In five minutes they ran. At least, they vanished. I lost thirty men, Mike lost twenty-two, and X-Rab lost sixty, nearly his whole patrol because he had not thought of the light-screen. One thing X-Rab did prove. The Lukans are as solid as we are. He grappled with one of those shimmering light patterns and it was as solid as an Earth-bear.

"But who they are?" X-Rab wanted to know.

"If they're solid why the hell can't we see them?" Colenso wanted to know.

"The brain," I said. "The light

reflecting from their bodies just doesn't come together into a form in our brains. It's the same for them. They see us, but they don't,"

"They must very much different be," X-Rab said.

"How the hell do we fight a bunch of lights?" Colenso said.

"Maybe we won't have to," I said. But what I was thinking was how *could* we fight without an army, without a militia, without enough weapons to equip anything but the thousand Companies scattered across the Galaxy in outlawed strongholds? One thousand Companies of no more than 500 men each! Five hundred thousand men to fight shimmering lights I didn't for one second think were from Andromeda. We got out of there fast and I reported to the Council myself. I could see that they had the same thing on their minds.

"Andromedans are backward, almost savages," the Chief Councilor said.

The Council Chamber was filled. Every Councilor was there. But no one else. When I had told the Chief Councilor what I had to tell him in private, he called a closed session. The room was packed and hot and scared.

"Perhaps they won't come back," the Chief Councilor said.

"Maybe they will," I said.

"Shifting lights!" one Councilor said.

Then I heard Councilor Brown for the first time. He was a new Councilor, a noted liberal. He

said, "We can't fight, we don't have an army, no weapons! We'll have to talk to them."

"How," I said, "I bet we can't. I didn't hear a sound out there and soldiers talk in a battle, I know. Anyway, I don't think they'd listen. They hit us without warning. I guess they don't believe in free trade."

"This is no place for jokes, Stone!" Brown said.

Then the Chief Councilor said, "It's up to the Companies. We'll have an army in a year."

"The Companies!" Brown cried, "No!"

"Do you have another suggestion?" the Chief Councilor asked.

"A peace mission. One ship to Andromeda," Brown said.

"All right, agreed," the Chief Councilor said, "but we'll take a few precautions, too."

The whole great Galaxy was under the threat of doom that day. I walked out of the Chamber and went to Laura. Since I was a recruit in the Company I had wanted Laura, but she wouldn't come with me to our Titan stronghold, and Companions are forbidden to marry. Heredity you know, they wanted to stamp our breed out. I was thinking about that when I left the Chamber. Outcasts. Vermin. Now they wanted us to save the Galaxy—if we could. Laura, the only thing I wanted in their whole perfect Galaxy and they refused her to me. How many times had she sat there in the dark beside me and said, "I love you, Red, but I want

to be married. I won't live in a stronghold-marriage, not even with you." And how many times had I tried to explain, "I'm a Companion, I can't change that. I don't know, even if I could quit I couldn't live in a city, or on an automatic farm. It chokes me. I know they're all making a perfect civilization, but it just isn't for me. I get restless. I don't care about a perfect civilization." I was thinking about that when I went to Laura that night.

"It's up to the Companies," I said across the small living room of her apartment. The city had forty million people in it then, and all Laura could have was two small rooms in a small, old 200 story apartment house. Good rooms, everything automatic, because with 500 years of peace there had been time to do a lot for living, but small. She had red hair, Laura did, and she was tall. Across the room that night she seemed almost pretty. She was not, but I loved her. I guess I always will even though she'll hate me forever. But then she loved me, and she smiled.

"You can do it." Laura did not scare easily.

"Who knows? How many of them are there? How do they fight? I don't even know if the men'll do it."

"Red!" she cried.

"Why should we," I said bitterly. For five hundred years they had hated us. Obsolete men, throwbacks, fossil remains of long dead passions. Useless idlers, brawlers, space-bums, un-

civilized and anti-social. Tolerated in our distant strongholds because it kept us out of the way of progress, and because ever since old Cannon Connors formed his Purple Gang 500 years ago we had been useful in a negative way. Psychology doesn't change in everyone overnight, not even with the best of intentions, and Connors formed his Gang because there were people to hire him to help them take things from others. Soon other people were hiring Companies to defend them against Connors. That's how the Companies started. The Free-Companions, we fight for anyone who has the money to pay. The Galactic Council labeled us anti-social-types-B-6 and outlawed us. Useless, dangerous, forbidden to marry, banned from all cities in groups of more than two, and the little fingers cut off our left hands so that everyone would know us for what we were. They could have wiped us out, but then they found we were useful after all. We drained off all the antagonisms in the society, and all fighting was done amongst ourselves. Sooner or later we would kill ourselves off and that would suit them fine. Everyone else could go their peaceful way and no one got hurt except us. And then the jobs began to die out until there was nothing left for us to do but escort expeditions beyond the Galaxy. And deep down, I knew, all the Companions knew, that the Galaxy was right and we were wrong. We were obsolete.

We were useless. We fought amongst ourselves and the rest of the Galaxy passed us by.

"I've spent half my life sitting alone in one of those few old bar-rooms we have left, looking out the window at all the people going somewhere, working, always busy and building, and knowing I had no part in it, and knowing I didn't want any part in it. I sit there and just want to sit and then get into my ship and go back to the stronghold. But I watch them and I don't know why I can't be like them. Sometimes I think we all wish we could. It's not pleasant to be useless and sit waiting to die out."

The room was warm and small in the low light of the illuminated ceiling. Laura came and kissed me.

"Now you're really needed," she said.

I had been thinking the same thing. Now we were needed! Maybe this was our chance. Maybe this was our destiny, to fight for the Galaxy, to really belong to the society again. There was a thrill in that thought I've never forgotten. I still feel it sometimes, even now out here 60,000,000 light years away from the Galaxy.

"Maybe we could get married someday after all," Laura said that night. "They'll have to change the law."

"They can't put back my finger," I said. Bitterness is something that leaves slowly even when you're sitting with a real

hope of being a part of the world again.

"It'll be a mark of honor now," Laura said.

I think that thrilled me the most. I could see myself walking with my left hand proudly in sight for the first time in my life, smiling at the passing people because I was with them at last, even if it was with them in a war I knew already would kill billions of us. I was happy then, in a way, but I wasn't fooling myself. This was not going to be a skirmish. Whatever it was going to be it wasn't going to be pretty at all.

It wasn't pretty. It began with the Andromeda X Massacre.

I left Laura that next morning on my way to the stronghold on Saturn's moon Titan. But not until I had watched the Peace Mission go off toward Andromeda. It was Brown's plan, and I agreed it should be done. I didn't want that war, even if it would mean a lot to me. I didn't want to belong that badly. The Peace Mission ship left. It was unarmed and unprotected. It landed on Andromeda X-6. It never came back. X-Rab's Fourth Martian Company, and mine, both at full strength, went up there to find out what had happened. We found them all dead, the ship blasted, and ten thousand of the native creatures burned to cinders. There were no Lukans. They had hit hard and gone. But they had left us a message. Every one of the four

hundred man party was hanging by his heels and drained of blood.

"Like the cows you earth men eat," X-Rab reported to the Council, his face as pale as a red Martian face can get, "Empty, blood none, gone all, through tubes in the throat drunk. We see."

The horror of that stunned the Galaxy. I still feel a little of that cold chill when I think of a people who live on animal blood. I look at Rajay-Ben and I shiver sometimes. But then, after I had seen those four hundred corpses hanging drained of blood in the bleak Andromeda X-6 hills, I had never been so ready to fight in my life. I was mad, and I was scared. There could be no living with the Lukans. And it was not going to be a pleasant war. If we lost, we would cease to exist, all of us from one end of the Galaxy to the other. However different we were in the Galaxy, we were all warm-blooded animals. The Lukans, I know now, are plant-life, and I eat my dinner alone. At the time I got into my ship and spoke over the televiewer to the Company.

"No big payoff," I said. "Council wages, you know what that means. But they'll supply us, they'll start turning out so many fusion bombs those Lukans'll wish they ate bombs before they get anymore of our blood! There will be an army, but for now it's up to us. Okay, anyone who wants to fight step forward one pace." I looked away from the viewer. When I looked back, they

were standing in the same single lines on all ships. "What?!!" I cried, "Not one?! Damn . . ." Poor Johnny Cole, my youngest sub-ensign who was killed at the First Battle of Sirius, said, "Sir, they've all stepped out."

That's how it was with us then. And that's how it was with me. We held the line for a whole year alone. Looking back, I don't know how we did it. There was the light-screen, it helped, and then the Lukans fought in the only way we could have stopped them, in small, quick raids. It was a fast moving, strike here—strike there, type of war, and that saved us. But we lost 300,000 of our 500,000 men before the new volunteers began to come up. X-Rab went in that first bloody battle of Andromeda. I never knew I could like a Martian that much. He took at least 500 of those shimmering lights with him. They got into his Command Ship and he hid in the engine room until they tried to get it started. Then he blew it up. They fought hard, and they fought good, those, shimmering lights. We found their home galaxy the sixth year, after the fighting had gone to far larger forces and they had taken the Magellanic Cloud sector. Our summer offensive took us to the edge of their formless galaxy. My Company had 20,000 men in it by then and I lost half of them up there in Lukania. It was a homogeneous galaxy, not like ours, and all Lukans are the same. We took no prisoners, and

neither did they. Maybe we wouldn't have anyway, but no Lukan ever let himself be taken alive. And none of us ever let ourselves be taken alive. That was the kind of war it was. Our existence against their existence. I fought it for ten years, and now I'm through.

A year ago now we took a prisoner. He was a spy. We caught him without a weapon to use on himself trying to get out of the Central Research Building on Alpha Centauri-4. I was on leave at the time and they called me down. The Lukan just sat there in a cell shimmering like a rainbow. We knew what he ate, at least one thing he ate. The bowl of hot cow-blood seemed to flow up the glass tube into nothing. Just a patch of shimmering colored light. I had never seen one this close. I stood there staring at him. I suppose he was staring at me.

The problem of communication turned out to be simple. We tried a hundred methods, nothing worked. Then someone remembered that long ago, in the early days of intra-Galactic explorations, a Martian had invented a machine that picked up sound waves and converted them into the sound waves of any of the basic languages. We tried it on the Lukan. It did not work. Then an operator of the machine suggested trying it by putting in sound waves and sending out light waves.

The Chief Councilor told the

operator, "Ask him who he is, where he's from."

The shimmering light said nothing.

"Tell him," the Chief Councilor said, "that he's safe."

Nothing.

I was angry. That shimmering thing in there had been killing my men for nearly ten years. The operator tried using every sound wave in our basic languages and got nowhere. Almost every sound wave combination. I lost my head then, I suppose. All I knew was that I was looking at a prisoner who had killed my men, who was one of the unknown creatures who were out to destroy every living thing in our Galaxy. I burst out in the old Earth slang we use in the Companies. We kept that harsh, vulgar old language mostly out of spite, I suppose, we were marked as different so we wanted to sound different.

"Tell the son-of-a-bitch to can the crap or they'll be picking him up with a spoon!" I yelled.

The operator looked at me. "Sir?"

"Go on, tell him!" I said.

"Beg pardon, sir," the operator said. "You're using the Companies' variant of the old Earth dialect No. 8, we don't have the machine coded for . . ."

"So code it!" I roared.

He coded it. It took him about five minutes. Then he beamed it to the Lukan. I watched the shimmering lights suddenly move. The operator yelled:

"I have something!"

"What the hell is it?" I snapped.

The operator frowned. "He says, 'Rajay-Ben, Superior-Leader, 08799931.'"

The Chief Councilor broke in, "Where's he from, what was he after when we caught him, where is his base! Ask him!"

The operator translated, waited, looked up at us. "He says, 'Rajay - Ben, Superior - Leader, 08799931, and . . .'" The operator stopped.

"And what?!" the Chief Councilor said. "Speak up. This is no time to hem and haw!"

The operator took a breath, " 'And you can all go to hell on a mule'. What is a mule, sir?"

I said, "Old Earth animal, used in ancient armies, it's got a metaphoric meaning in the dialect."

The operator nodded, "I see, very interesting." The operator was a specialist, he had the detachment of a specialist and I felt like wringing his neck right then.

"Repeat it," the Chief Councilor said. "Tell him if he wants to live he'll tell us everything, make him understand!"

The operator repeated it. I could see that the strange dialect was beginning to interest him. It was a mark of his upbringing; an expert in languages but not familiar with the common slang of the Companies because that was anti-social, not at all proper. It would have made me madder if I wasn't totally concerned with

that unresponsive patch of colored light. The operator looked up;

"He says, 'Who you kidding, buster, I've had it in spades anyhow, so don't bother me.' What is buster, Commander?"

That did it. I blew up. The operator crawled into a shell and translated without comment from then on, but we got nothing more out of that Lukan. Just, "Rajay - Ben, Superior - Leader, 08799931." Name, rank and serial number. We gave it up. As we left, the operator ventured to say to me:

"Excuse me, Commander, but that dialect fascinates me. I wonder if you could spare a few minutes some time . . ."

"See me after the war," I said.

The operator shrugged. "Sorry. You know, that Lukan isn't really speaking your old Earth dialect, of course, the machine merely finds the closest known language or dialect to catch the . . . the similarity, the . . . flavor, yes, the flavor, the feel of his language."

"I'm aware of that," I said curtly and walked away from the operator.

The flavor of his language. I'm trying to tell this straight, you understand. I don't make excuses, but maybe it'll help if I can make you understand what happened to me. I left the city then and went back to my Company. We were holding an advance sector of the Andromeda front at the time, and getting ready for a spring offensive

straight into Lukania itself again. It was just something inside me then. The flavor of his language. It bothered me. I know now that if you're going to have to fight an all-out war, maybe it's better not to know anything about your enemy.

Fighting a galactic war keeps a man busy, so it wasn't until six months had passed that I heard about the Lukan again. He was still alive and still impossible to break. I think we would have tortured him, we wanted information that badly, but how can you torture something you can't really see, don't know enough about to know what will hurt him? But I heard something else and left the front fast. It was Brown they told me to see.

"He let one hint drop," Brown explained, "about an opposition to the war in Lukania. One of the Councilors leaked it. We arrested him, of course." And Brown looked at me sadly. "What else could we do, the people were angry."

Brown had aged from the young liberal. I suppose we all had. Basically Brown was a good, kind, honest man. He had opposed the war at first, and he had meant it. I knew that. It was what made it worse in the end.

"The people?" I said. "Why?"

"Well, when the word leaked, a few unstabiles, you know the kind, we can't control every hidden impulse . . ." and Brown waved his hand as if he were very weary. "They spoke out against the war, just a few, not

one-millionth of one percent in the Galaxy."

"And?"

"We arrested them, had to protect them. The people on Centauri-4 lynched six of them the first day."

"Lynched," I said, "in the Galaxy?"

"War does some strange things. We're fighting for survival. The people want to survive."

"I know," I said. But a lynching in our Galaxy. It was impossible. Not for 500 years had we had violence like that.

"We hadn't told them about that Lukan," Brown said. "We knew their temper, they'd have lynched him. Now I have to tell them. Tonight." I saw a light in Brown's eyes, a sudden fire, and he sat forward. "I've been picked to speak. I'll tell them about this Lukan, and about what we're fighting for. Life itself. Civilization itself. I'll tell them."

"If they don't know after ten years . . ." I began.

"Of course," Brown broke in. "Survival, but it's more than survival, they know it and we know it now. Much more than survival."

When I left, Brown invited me to sit in the Galactic television room to hear his speech. I got there early. Brown was not there yet, but the room was already filled with the other Councilors, a lot of Company Commanders like myself, and all the new army Generals in the city at the time. I looked at the battery of screens

that showed the great halls of every planet in the Galaxy and could hear the murmuring of the crowded millions in those halls. At last Brown arrived. He seemed nervous, but he smiled at me. When he held up his hand for silence, I leaned forward to listen.

I don't remember that speech now. I listened. I listened carefully. I remember he spoke of working together, fighting together so that someday we would have peace again not only in the Galaxy but in the whole universe. He spoke of the survival of the whole universe, not just us, and of our bringing peace even to Lukania itself. But he said there could be no co-existence with Lukans, they must be wiped out. It was all true, I knew that better than most. The words were true, except . . . well, there was a feel, a flavor as the operator had said that day with the Lukan. I couldn't place it. I was worrying it in my mind when I heard Brown start to talk about the Lukan prisoner. As I said, I don't really remember that speech now because as I sat I heard the word. I missed it in a way. I heard it but it didn't mean anything at first. But I sat up straight and waited. The word came again, there was no mistaking it.

". . . traitor!" Brown had shouted into all the audio-tubes.

That word, even in ancient days, chilled a man. But now, in a war of horror like ours, in a

war of ultimate survival, who could be a traitor? One of us working for the Lukans?! Who? Who was the traitor! I listened but I heard no name that I recognized. The first traitor in the Galaxy. The danger, the horror of it, made me as cold as if I had been on Pluto outside the insulated cities.

"Traitor! Traitor!" roared the billions out there in the halls of the Galaxy. On the screen I could see them all standing, their faces twisted with hate and outrage. I realized that my own face was twisted like that as I waited to hear the name. It is still confused to me, what I felt, but I remember one thing. I prayed it was not a Companion. But who?!

Brown was shouting, his face red with anger now. "... a creature ready to drink our life's blood! He defies us! He says nothing! He will not help us save life itself. He sits there an obscene, filthy shimmer of lights, and will do nothing to save civilization! This vile traitor to all that has meaning in life!"

"Traitor! Traitor!" roared the screens.

I don't know if it showed on my face. I sat there, colder now than any traitor could have made me. Brown shouted on, in a transport of rage and hate for the Lukan back there shimmering in his cell. Brown shouted of saving life itself, of saving civilization. Not *our* life, not *our* civilization! He shouted of that Lukan as a traitor.

"What will we do with all traitors," Brown shouted.

"Kill them! KILL THEM! TRAITORS!" roared the screens.

I sat. I just sat there listening to the screens, watching the flushed faces of the Generals, the eager, open mouths of the Councilors, even the grim faces of the Company Commanders. Then the speech was over. They all crowded around Brown, all the Generals and Councilors and Commanders. The screens still roared and shook to the angry feet of billions of people. I waited. At last Brown came over to me. He was flushed with excitement. The kind, almost sad eyes of the young liberal were hot with anger.

"Well, Stone, that should build a little morale, eh?"

I said very slowly, "That Lukan, Brown, he's a Lukan."

Brown waved a sharp hand like a knife, "The Lukan traitor!"

"He's a spy, a Lukan soldier," I said, and I got mad. "Damn it, Brown, don't you understand?! He's a Lukan! A Lukan!"

Brown just stared at me. "Are you feeling well, Commander?" They were all staring at me in that room. I could feel the screens filled with angry, shouting people. Brown said gently, taking my arm, "Of course he's a Lukan, I told them, Stone, I just told them. Now you just sit down and . . ."

It was his eyes. I saw it there. He did not understand. None of them did. They never would. It

was like the bodies of the Lukans themselves, we could see them but our brains could not understand what it was we saw. Brown was looking at me kindly and yet with that look I knew so well that said he thought I had lost my reason, battle-fatigue no doubt. I tried once more.

"Brown," I said slowly. "You called the Lukan a traitor."

"A traitor to all life, to civilization," Brown said in cold, harsh voice. I saw all the heads in the room nod in angry agreement. I turned and left.

I walked in the streets for a long time that night. Everywhere people were talking of the Lukan traitor. I found my old ancient barroom and sat there drinking. There were two other Companions in the room. Old Companions with their little fingers missing. The Council had rescinded that law as soon as the war started and most Companions were just new-army soldiers now. I looked out into the street and watched the people passing and the old feeling came back, the feeling of not being one of them. I don't think I had any plan at first, but I suddenly heard in my mind, "Rajay - Ben, Superior - Leader, 08799931. And you can all go to hell on a mule!" In my language. I left the barroom and went to the military prison. The flavor of his speech! I could have been wrong, very wrong, but the flavor of the Lukan's speech was the flavor of an old soldier, a man like me. I found the trans-

lating-machine operator. He was surprised, but I told him it was a special interrogation. Since the war began we have rigid discipline in the Galaxy, and my record was well known. No one questioned Commander Stone, the hero of the Initial Contact, the inventor of the light-screen, the veteran of ten years of the war of survival. The operator came.

The Lukan, Rajay-Ben, was lying on his bunk. When we stood before his cell, the shimmering lights moved and came erect.

"Tell him who I am," I told the operator. "Name and Company."

The operator stared at me. It was strictly against all regulations.

"Tell him!" I said.

The operator told him. I could see the shimmering lights move toward the cell door. The operator said:

"He says, sir, 'Well I'll be dipped in mud, I know the Commander's record and his damned Red Company.'"

"Ask him how he knows."

The operator said, "He says captured documents, they've deciphered our written languages, he fought you four years ago off Sirius."

"Tell him I've been a soldier for thirty-one years."

The operator translated. I watched the shimmering light in that cell and I'll swear I saw it stiffen, and then come very close to us.

The operator said, "He says,

'Twenty-eight for me, Fourth Lukan Inter-Galactic Patrol, what's on your mind.' " And the operator said excitedly, "You did it, sir! We've got his unit. We know they have our language..."

"Shut up!" I snapped. I was right. The Lukan had given me the sign I needed, he had told me his unit, he trusted me. I didn't know then that I could trust him, but I didn't give a damn. If I was wrong I didn't care if I lived or not.

"Ask him," I said. "Why he is fighting this war."

The operator translated, listened, and said, "No use, sir, he just says, 'I just work here.'"

I curled my hand around my fusion pistol and said slowly, "Tell him that in our Galaxy they are calling him a traitor. Not a spy, a traitor. Tell him I'm quitting the war."

The operator jumped to his feet. He was staring at me. Before he could move a step I had the fusion pistol aimed at his belly.

"Tell him," I said.

The operator stood there for a second, frozen. I curled my finger around the pistol. The operator bent over his machine. I waited. The shimmering lights were motionless. The operator looked up, there was hate in his eyes, but he said:

"He says, 'How's that again?' "

"Repeat it," I snapped.

The operator repeated it. "He says," the operator said in a flat, empty voice, " 'I read you loud and clear. It's getting that way

back home, that's why I volunteered for this spy bit.' "

There it was. As I stood there wondering why I should bother to go on living, I saw the shimmering light seem to slide between the bars, a small part of it, and felt a hard grip on my shoulder.

The operator bent to his machine. It was the first time the Lukan had spoken first. "He says, 'I know a galaxy a hell of a long way off. They got a nice little war there, they need soldiers, the pay's A-number-one.' "

Well, I'd lived my life as a soldier, an outcast mercenary until the Lukans came to give me back my respectability, and I still liked a glass of whiskey. I held the pistol on the operator.

"Stand clear," I said.

He stared. "Commander! You can't! I..."

"Stand clear," I shouted.

He stood clear. I aimed the pistol and in one quick burst melted the lock. The shimmering lights came out and I felt something like a hand reach and hold mine. I needed the operator and we took him with us, Rajay-Ben and I. My little scout ship was in a field at the far edge of the city. But I had a stop to make first. Laura. It was a mistake, but I'd do it again. There are some things a man has to do.

When you've been a soldier as long as I have you take precautions. I tied the operator in a hall closet and locked Rajay-Ben in with him. Then I went up to

see Laura. She kissed me and I held her very close.

"I'm quitting the war," I said at last.

She said, "What, Red? Are you wounded? What's the matter darling?"

"No, just inside." Then I told her about Brown and his speech. She had heard it.

"But I don't understand," she said. "It was a beautiful speech, should work wonders with morale, Red." It was in her eyes, too. I watched her and she watched me. I saw her face darken. "You mean you're just running out?! You're deserting!"

"Yes! I've got to! That speech, don't you see what's happened in the Galaxy? Everyone! Come with me, Laurie, I can't fight this war anymore. Come with me. We're going to a galaxy so far off they'll never find us and we'll never have to see this place again. Come with me!"

She spat it out then, "You coward! You traitor!"

There was pure hate in her eyes, too, and she ran for the telescreen transmitter. She did not understand either. I left. I ran. She would report me, and by now they might have discovered the escape of the Lukan. I didn't kill her. I should have, of course, but I didn't and I don't regret it. We made my ship with twenty minutes to spare, and once in space there isn't a patrol ship that could catch me. I've been fighting in space too long for that. But Laura had reported

me. In the Galaxy they were up in arms. I was a traitor. Rajay-Ben and I were both traitors now. When I reached the Company it had been blasted. From behind a small asteroid in Andromeda I looked at the smoking ruins of my Company. There was only one thing left, run far and fast, but I needed fuel for a trip Rajay-Ben said would cover 60,000,000 light-years. My only hope was Mike Colenso. When we walked in on Mike's headquarters ship on an outpost near Lukania, Mike spat on the floor and told me:

"You won't get out, Red, you have had it!"

"Sit down, Mike."

"You and your blood-drinking buddy!" Mike said, looking with loathing at Rajay-Ben's shimmering pattern.

"Listen," I said to Mike. I told him the story. I told him about my blasted Company. Twenty thousand innocent men blasted because they wanted me that badly. I think Mike saw it. I know he did. Any old Companion would have seen. A lot of them have and are up here with me and Rajay-Ben. A lot of Galactic Companions and a lot of Rajay-Ben's old soldiers from the Lukanian Patrols. I know Mike saw it because he said:

"Fuel up, Red, and beat it fast."

We were almost too late. Five minutes after we took off for Salaman, the new galaxy, a Lukan fleet attacked Mike's Company. They came in overwhelm-

ing force and blasted Mike in twenty-five minutes. The operator, who was with me in the ship because I still needed him, bent over his machine while Rajay-Ben and I were watching the battle in the rear televiewer.

The operator said, "He says, 'They're after me. I'm getting the signals. Someone reported!'"

They were. The Galactic Forces and the Lukans hunted us for a long time, but they never found us out here. We've got a nice little war out here, nothing big, no survival involved. Just a plain old war for pay. Back in the Galaxy they hunted down every man with a missing little finger on his left hand. If there could be one traitor like me, they were all suspect now. A lot of the old Companions are up here with us. Rajay-Ben is a good soldier. Sometimes I fight with him, sometimes against him, but either way I respect him. They have a powerful whiskey in Lukania, and sometimes when we're sitting around in the evening getting drunk and watching the four suns of our headquarters planet go down in a beautiful purple sky, I drink so much of that Lukanian whiskey I could swear I can really

see Rajay-Ben sitting there across the table. Really see him, a tall, solid thing a little like me but without a head. I'm not sure, but I hope that someday I'll really be able to see him.

The one thing I regret is what happened to the Company. Twenty-thousand men, not counting all Mike's men, blasted because I couldn't shoot Laura. I think I'd have beaten them to the Company otherwise. But I couldn't blast her. Not to save twenty million lives. There are some things a man just doesn't do, some things a man can't do. That's the difference, I suppose, between me and all the rest of them in the Galaxy. They would have blasted her. The way they have become now, they would. They never had a chance to be outside the society in all those 500 years of peace, and when the strain of the war hit they could not help identifying the society with life itself, just couldn't understand how anyone in all the Universe could want or need or have anything but the Galactic way of life. It's too bad, I liked it in the Galaxy. Maybe I'll go back someday, but now there's nothing there worth going back to, nothing in the whole Galaxy worth fighting for.

THE END

**Venus was bad enough, but Hollywood
was worse. Then there was that pesky
kid and his . . .**

ODD BIRD

By
SHELLY LOWENKOPF
and
JERRY J. WILLIAMS

THE whole trouble with that crazy bird would never have happened if I'd just read that letter.

The page caught me with it, just as I was leaving the studio. "Good luck, Lew," he said. "I hear you finally made it. You're going home!"

"Yeah," I said, grinning. "See you on Earth." I had hardly interrupted my stride, and was just pushing the door open when he called me again.

"Hey, wait a minute! I've got a registered letter for you."

I waited for him to catch up with me, pocketed the letter and scribbled my name in his receipt book. It was a letter from the network on Earth. Any other time, I would have read it immediately, but now I was in a hurry. I was going home . . . to Earth.

It was no secret that I'd worked hard on Nick Ehrens' Venus TV circuit to earn an Earth assignment. I had wanted to be successful real bad; bad enough to come to Venus. It couldn't be as rough as they said, I thought. But I was wrong.

Hurrying to my jetcar, I sniffed the air disdainfully. No matter how many pipes they pumped it through, the Venusian atmosphere still smelled like the smog Los Angeles got rid of, when I was a kid. The air was a small thing, by itself; but add the ridiculously cramped quarters, with pop-away furniture, an almost C-ration diet, and changeless brown clouds pressing against a plastic fishbowl of a sky, and you begin to get the idea. For the pioneer, life on Venus was a tribute to the ingenuity of Man; but for me, it

was a tribute to the greater charms of life on Earth.

It emphatically wasn't the sort of world I wanted for Bette, my wife, or our small son, Curt. I had quickly made up my mind to get out of Venus as soon as I possibly could. The only way was through my work.

At first, it seemed hopeless. For a year, I dutifully ground out continuity for WVENUS, working strictly on panel shows and late movies. Gradually, my written patter built that old warhorse of a movie host, Barry Cohn, into a personality. At the end of my second year on Venus, nearly all the Colonies were sitting up for Cohn's Owl Movie.

Then I got my big brainstorm. Why an "Owl" Movie? Why not use native talent? Why not a *Gufuzzl* Movie? Why not? The Venusian Gufuzzl not only looks like an owl—if you don't look too close—it has a hell of a lot more personality. Besides, it could almost sing. And that old anthropological chestnut about the Gufuzzl being related to Man wouldn't hurt the publicity, either.

It started out as a stunt, but it caught on. At first, we just changed the name of the show. Emboldened by favorable comment, we introduced a Gufuzzl perched on a chair and sipping coffee with Cohn, who ostensibly was watching the movie right along with the viewer, in a studied leisurely fashion. The Gufuzzl looked even more leisure-

ly than Cohn and was a lot funnier.

Over a period of time, the Gufuzzl's part was built up. We gave him a cigar to smoke while he was enjoying his coffee. We let him sing snatches of songs, and coached him in dancing bits. When the Gufuzzl began to get too popular, Cohn objected, and the program director was only too happy to oblige. Cohn got back his Owl Movie, and the Gufuzzl got a show of his own.

I was made program director of the Gufuzzl show as a full-time job. It was no small task to build a whole half-hour show around this odd bird, but it was my chance, and I knew it. I racked my brain digging up new situations that would exploit the talents of the hairy little beast. I was aided by the fact that all Gufuzzls are natural mimes; you can't teach them much, but you can learn to utilize what they have. I took to showing the Gufuzzl old movies with popular entertainers of the past. Even I laughed at the result when the bird, dressed in a straw hat, white ducks and a cane, gave his impressions of Maurice Chevalier.

The rating of the Gufuzzl Show jumped so high, I heard from Nick Ehrens himself. An interplanetary telegram is an expensive epistle, and Nick didn't waste words. But it said everything I wanted to hear: *Success Gufuzzl show amazing. Send Lew Earth.*

When I got home, I found

everything packed and ready for the movers, including some things I didn't want to take.

"We can't take that," I objected, pointing to a bulky lampstand.

My wife showed well-rehearsed shock. "But darling, no one at home has one like this. It's made out of genuine Venusian diamondwood. We simply have to take it back with us."

"Look, Bette, doll," I said, "when we get back to Earth, we'll have a house . . . a whole house of our very own. We'll start with everything brand new . . . none of this self-effacing stuff." I gave a chair a contemptuous kick and it collapsed into the wall. "I don't want anything that will remind me of this place."

"Still," Bette argued reasonably, "we spent five years of our lives here, and we should have something to show for them."

I felt a pang of conscience and kissed her. "Okay, you win. We'll take the lamp. The freight will be ten times what the silly thing's worth, but at least it's genuine."

We stood by silently while the men from Venus Van and Storage loaded our belongings into the truck.

"It's been a long time, honey," I said, giving her hand a squeeze. "And I know it hasn't been too pleasant. Wait'll we get back to Earth. I'm going to make it up to you."

She smiled at me, a dreamy look coming into her eyes. "A

house with a lawn, Lew? And real trees? I can see them now."

"Hey!" I looked around. "Where's Curt?"

"He's still brooding because you won't let him take his Gufuzzl along."

"I explained to him that animals aren't allowed on the ship."

"He says you have enough pull to get a permit."

I shrugged irritably. "There's no time to waste. I want to get out of here. It would take weeks . . . especially for a Gufuzzl. There aren't many left, and the authorities aren't anxious to part with them."

"Well, he feels pretty bad about it."

I thought I detected an accusing note in Bette's voice. It was true that I'd given Curt the bird on his third birthday, while I was still in the first glow of enthusiasm for the show. Since then, the two of them had become inseparable—almost literally—because the bird's favorite perch was on Curt's shoulder.

"Curt!" I called. "Curt, it's time to go."

He marched defiantly into the room, the Gufuzzl on his shoulder. They were sharing a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, of which both were inordinately fond.

"I thought I told you to give that bird back to Venus Zoological."

"I decided to keep him, Daddy," he replied without batting

an eyelash. He wiped the peanut butter from his mouth and the bird obediently brushed his beak with his own shaggy counterpart of a hand.

"Well, you can't," I said abruptly, then dropped coaxingly to my knees in front of him. "Listen, when we get back to Earth, I'll give you a nice dog. There's nothing like a nice dog."

"They can't fly," Curt said, disdainfully. "Besides, I hear they have fleas. I don't want one."

I slammed my fist down on the table and it disappeared with a snap into the wall. "You have five minutes," I announced grimly, "to get rid of that bird."

He turned and went out of the room without saying a word. The Gufuzzl, however, glared at me, and emitted a sound suspiciously akin to the old-fashioned razzberry.

The trip back to Earth was made in an incriminating silence. Bette thought I'd been too harsh with Curt; after all, she pointed out, if I hadn't wanted him to keep the bird, why had I given it to him? Curt sat quietly in his seat, turning the pages in a picture book. Bette eyed him consolingly over her *Venusian Digest*, then turned to me with an accusing look.

"See," I said, defensively, "he's forgotten about the bird already."

"That's not true," she objected. "He's just doing a grand job

of not showing how hurt he is. He's trying to lose himself in that book."

"Listen," I said, "when we get back to Earth, I'll get him a dog. Two dogs. Every boy ought to have a dog."

Bette shook her head stubbornly "It's not the same. That bird was his best friend. Besides, he's bound to feel lonely on a new planet. The bird would have helped him a lot until he made some new friends."

I sighed with resignation. I would make it up to Curt later. Right now, I was too preoccupied with the future to be much concerned.

I wondered what Nick Ehrens would be like, and what my assignment would be. I remembered the station manager's parting words. "Ehrens is an exacting man," Burdock had said. "Fair, but exacting. For your sake, I hope you make a good start with him." His smile was edged with contempt. "Since you worked so hard, I'd hate to see you back here."

Burdock was envious of my success, but I knew what he meant. There were two kinds of men in Venus television: those trying to prove themselves, like me; and those who had failed on Earth and retreated, like Burdock. For the latter, there was no second chance. I could understand his feelings about me, although we had never wasted any affection on each other.

Before I knew it, we had shut

off our star drive, and were in Earth's atmosphere. Soon, we were looking into blue water glittering under white clouds, and nostalgia momentarily overrode my anxiety.

I rushed Bette and Curt through the Port Authority, and shamelessly abandoned them as soon as we settled in a Los Angeles hotel. "Look, honey," I said, "this is important. TV on Earth moves fast, and Ehrens moves even faster. He'll want to see me right away." Ignoring her icy reserve, I gave her a fast peck and took the monorail to the studio.

What I said to Bette was true, but most of all, I was curious to see what my new job would be. After working two years with a bird that looked like a bespectacled old man in a racoon coat, I was anxious to move into the big league.

Even in a huge city like Los Angeles, the immense crystal pile of the Ehrens Studios was easily recognized. I felt lost in the huge lobby, but my ego was quickly revived when the smiling receptionist told me Mr. Ehrens was expecting me.

Nick Ehrens was pretty much what I expected, a brisk, friendly man with a no-nonsense attitude. As I entered, he jumped up from behind his desk and came around to meet me. He was a big man, big enough to make his sprawling octagonal office seem crowded.

"Welcome back to Earth," he said, thrusting out a beefy hand

and giving mine a vigorous shake. "By golly, you didn't waste any time in getting here." His eyes shone. "I'd hoped you wouldn't. As a matter of fact," he continued in a more business-like tone, "I've been kind of counting on it." He looked at me in a calculating approval.

I tried to make some sort of response, but it wasn't necessary. He propelled me to a chair, and was back at his desk. "I know you're anxious to see your new show," he chuckled, "and I'm equally anxious to show it to you." He turned toward a panel in his desk. "Charlie," he said briskly, "run the tape on Interplanetary Circus."

I now saw the reason for the shape of the office. What I'd taken to be walls of opaque glass were actually television screens. One of them hummed and lighted, and I was dumbfounded by what I saw.

He had been watching for my reaction, and now he laughed heartily. "By golly, Lew, I hope we make half as big an impression on our audiences when we unwrap this show!"

"I'm to be the director for this . . . this!" I gasped.

"You bet," Ehrens said, with satisfaction. "I wouldn't let anyone else touch it."

What was unreeling before me was the most outlandish assortment of animal acts I had ever seen, or for that matter, that had ever been seen by anybody. Under the direction of a

dozen or so brightly outfitted trainers, pink Lunar penguins croaked in an a capella chorus, two Martian unicorns duelled with French precision, and a Saturnian feathered elk galloped around a ring with five Australian wallabies bouncing on its back. There were lots more that I was too dazzled to remember.

"Not bad, eh?" Ehrens said. "Of course that's just a test tape. We're still working out improvements. That Uranian lizard, for instance—he's already improved his juggling act. He can handle five balls and a live duck at the same time."

"He can?" I said stupidly.

"You bet. Just think of the appeal," Ehrens was breathing enthusiastically in my ear. "Grownups and kids alike will be crazy for this. The ratings will be terrific. And it will cost us a pretty penny, I can tell you . . . getting all those beasts under contract."

"But . . . but why me?" I managed to say.

"That's the beauty of it," Ehrens chuckled, shucking the silver wrapper off a clear Plutonian filler and popping it in his mouth. "Your Gufuzzl has got 'em all beat." He waved the smoke away. "Not one of these animals can touch it for sheer viewer pull."

"My Gufuzzl!"

"Well, naturally. It's the greatest gimmick yet. Your Gufuzzl will be the featured act on the show! Sort of a ring master." He took a deep drag on his

cigar, eyeing me with obvious enjoyment. Noting my hanging jaw, he became concerned. "Nothing wrong, is there? You understood my letter?"

Suddenly I remembered the letter I had thoughtlessly jammed into my pocket back in the Venus studio. "No . . . nothing wrong."

He looked tremendously relieved. "Well. Then you know. Certainly couldn't afford to have anything go wrong on this show. We've put millions into it." His tone became hard and business-like again. "We've got to have this ready in two weeks. The rest of the animals are all set. Think you can have your Gufuzzl ready to work by then?"

I nodded wordlessly, clutching the letter in my pocket.

A smile of satisfaction spread across Ehrens' features. "Good. I knew I could count on you." He aimed his cigar at me. "Be sure to get the bird over here tomorrow. Want to fit him for his costume. Going to dress him up just like a ringmaster. You know, red coat, top hat, bull whip . . ." He chuckled.

Ehrens slapped me on the back, propelling me toward the door. "I know you have a lot of things to do, just being back and all. But see me as soon as you can in the morning."

As soon as I was out of the building, I tore open the letter. It was just as I had feared. The letter was from Ehrens, and contained specific instructions for

me to bring the Gufuzzl with me to Earth. If for any reason I couldn't, I was to cable him immediately, and wait for instructions. I painfully remembered signing a receipt for the letter.

I rushed back to the hotel room, and was relieved to find that Bette and Curt had gone out. After five minutes of bad connections, I got Burdock's fuzzy image on the interplanetary phone. I swallowed my pride and let him know I was in trouble, and needed a Gufuzzl in the worst way.

Burdock took a great pleasure in reminding me it was contrary to regulations to take animals out of Venus; Gufuzzls were scarce, and the authorities were particularly loath to part with them. I knew, and he did too, that he could get one for me if he wanted, and that obviously he didn't want to.

I considered calling Venus Zoological direct, but I knew I didn't have a chance. Had I been there, I could have managed it; but I wasn't, and now I was an outsider. Given enough time, I still might be able to do it, but time was something I didn't have.

I banged the cancel button in vexation, and got a little pleasure out of seeing Burdock's smirking face dissolve in front of me. I wasn't through yet; or so I thought. After twenty minutes of wrangling with state and federal authorities, I got the word: I couldn't get either of

the two Gufuzzls in the United States.

I was getting panicky. I got hold of Interplanetary Transport, and was blithely informed that the next starship to Venus left in two weeks. I was thrown into new depths of despair when I learned positively the astronomical cost of chartering even a slow ship to that planet.

It seemed unreasonable that a Gufuzzl couldn't be had. I pummeled my brain, and figured on placing ads in the international newspapers. That would take a lot of time and money. Already I had spent a small fortune on the interplanetary phone. And my time was running out, too.

A new thought hit me. I was now resigned to the fact that I wasn't going to get a Gufuzzl, not for a while anyway. Since I would sooner or later have to admit this to Nick Ehrens, I might be able to salvage my job if I had an alternative to coat this bitter pill.

I quickly pressed for a new circuit. After some fast talking, I got hold of a taxidermy shop. The ancient face on the view-screen was more than a little confused at the outrages I wanted him to perform on an American owl, but he said he could do them. Cancel, and a new circuit: a prominent actor's agency put me in touch with a well-known puppeteer, who was equally confused. But the name of Nick Ehrens worked wonders. Finally, I pressed the cancel bar with a sigh of relief. With a taxider-

mist and a puppeteer, I figured I could come out with a passable Gufuzzl, if no one looked too closely. But I would have to sell Ehrens on the idea.

I was about to press for Ehrens' office when Bette breezed into the room. I glanced up, annoyed at the interruption, but my glance became one of an approving stare. She pirouetted in front of me. "Like it?" she asked, delightedly showing off her first new Earth dress in years. "You know, you can't go wrong in black?"

I was more than impressed. It was a Bette I hadn't seen in a long, long time. She had always worn her clothes well, and on Venus she managed skillfully with the skimpy stuff that was available. But seeing her now, I felt guilty for depriving her of the beauty that was rightfully hers.

I pulled her to me and kissed her. "You didn't waste any time," I said.

"There was a fashion show, right here in the hotel. Can you imagine it? It was simply wonderful. So many beautiful things." Her eyes danced. "And this dress was one of the most reasonable."

"The hat, too?" I observed.

"Well . . ." she grinned impishly and turned to the window. "It's a wonderful evening," she said, evasively raising the blind. "Oh!" She stepped back.

I went over to the window and saw what had startled her. The

sky was black and clear with brilliant stars. A crisp new moon made the monorail a silent silver line across the grandeur of the city. I felt a lump in my throat. It was a magnificent sight.

"So many parks and trees," she murmured softly. "I feel like I'm alive again. Oh, Lew." She pressed my arm.

"Curt? Where's Curt?" I asked, suddenly aware of his absence. "He should see this."

"He'll be up in a minute. I let him stay to see them unload all our luggage. Anything to take his mind off that bird."

I took a deep, shuddering breath and returned to the screen of the viewer. I pressed for Ehrens' office. He was surprised to see me. "Speak of the devil!" he said with a start. "I was just going to call you, Lew. It's about the Gufuzzl."

"Yes," I said. "About the Gufuzzl, you know only one or two people have seen a Gufuzzl here on Earth." I began in a conciliating tone.

He was smoking another cigar, and he jabbed it in my direction. "Right you are! That's just the problem."

My mouth was open and I shut it. "How do you mean?" I asked weakly.

He frowned. "We have a sponsor all lined up for Interplanetary Circus, but he's a suspicious old cuss. He doesn't believe the Gufuzzl is as versatile as we say. He can't see using the Gufuzzl as the feature attraction. Now he won't put up the money

for the show until he actually sees the bird in action."

"Sees it?" I asked hoarsely. "You mean, actually sees it?"

Ehrens nodded curtly. "Exactly." He shrugged. "It's not so hard to understand. The whole show hangs on the bird. After all we've gathered together a lot of weird beasts, the Gufuzzl is the only one that can imitate Maurice Chevalier."

"Well, yes . . ." I began.

"Ehrens looked at his watch. "Tell you what. We've got all the contracts made up, and we're anxious to close the deal tonight. How would it be if we dropped by to see you? You know, just to show the old man what the Gufuzzl can do. Then I can get him to sign the papers."

"Well, I . . ."

"You don't have any objection, do you? We won't keep you, and we can be there in ten minutes." His smiling countenance faded from the screen with the word "good."

I sighed. "Oh, no," I said with resignation. "No objections."

"What was all that?" Bette asked curiously. "The boss isn't coming here tonight, is he?"

"I'm afraid he is," I murmured, head in my hands.

"Oh, my," she protested. "And I haven't a thing to wear."

"Stop it," I said. "You're killing me."

She began running around the room, gathering up her coat and handbag. "He'll want something to drink. I'll run down to the

liquor shop and get some of that wonderful French brandy."

"Never mind," I said. "We can't afford it."

"Afford it!" She laughed gaily and gave me a peck on the forehead. "How you do talk."

"Ha, ha," I said. I took a deep breath. I was going to have to tell her sometime, and it might as well be now. "Bette . . ." I began, and stopped.

"Yes?" She looked at me inquiringly.

I tried to speak, but couldn't. She was too alive, too happy, too radiant. How can you tell someone who's just been reprieved that it was all a mistake, and now she has to go back to prison for life? I knew she felt about Venus the same way I did, and to liken it to prison was no exaggeration.

There was a knock on the door. "Here we go," I said. "Let's just let matters take their course, and they'll explain themselves, I'm sure," I said glumly and flung the door open with a flourish.

Curt looked up at me. "Oh, I was afraid maybe I had the wrong room. I wasn't sure about the number." His voice trailed off.

I stared at him in disbelief. Clutched in his hand were the remnants of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and on his shoulder . . .

He looked up at me in wide-eyed innocence. "He followed me home, Daddy. Can I keep him?"

the Spectroscope

by S. E. COTTS

VIRGIN PLANET. *By Poul Anderson. 224 pp. Avalon Books. \$2.75.*

Young Davis Bertram set off in his one-man exploration ship only to come across what appeared to be a spaceman's dream—a world of women. Men were simply legends in this female world, Atlantis. The women knew that Men would come some day, but none of them had the faintest idea of what a Man was like. Therefore, they did not recognize Bertram as one, and the story deals with his futile but nonetheless amusing efforts to prove that he is one. In the process, he stirs up not only rivalry over himself, but wars among the various community groups of the planet.

By making his hero a likeable scatterbrain with a taste for adventure, Mr. Anderson has succeeded in lifting his story above the commonplace and has made it sparkle with good humor. If you're looking for a soul-searching treatment of the moral and sociological problems that arise on a planet where there is only one sex, then don't bother with *Virgin Planet*. But for an evening's pleasure and a delightful spoof at both men and women, this book is a joy.

STARSHIP. *By Brian Aldiss. 256 pp. Criterion Books. \$3.50.*

Add another name to the distinguished list of English science fiction writers. We have had hours of pleasure from Arthur Clarke and John Wyndham and, more recently, Edmund Cooper. Now with the American publication of Brian Aldiss' first novel, there is no doubt that he is a welcome addition, also. Some of his short stories have been viewed in our anthologies, but they only gave a hint of the brilliance of his work.

Starship is a book of epic proportions—the story of a tribe which has lost contact with its universe and lives on memories of its teachings. It is a static, hopeless life for most of the people, a life alter-

nating between the inertia of dull hopelessness and occasional feverish bursts of activity in order to survive.

But even in a society as deteriorated as this, there are always those who will not accept the lack of hope and who are driven on to seek, if not improvement, then reasons and answers for the situation. Such a one is Roy Complain, who with a discontented priest leaves all that is known and goes to search out the mystery of his lost tribe.

As he advances on his travels, however, the unknowns become greater instead of less, and what seemed to be a simple adventure story takes on moral and philosophical overtones. From the first page, this combination of exciting conflicts, both physical and mental, provide the reader with a tense and moving experience.

RED ALERT. *By Peter Bryant. 191 pp. Ace Books. Paper: 35¢.*

This is the story of two tense hours in the history of our times, the first two hours of World War III. The Strategic Air Command bombers, always on the alert, have been given the signal to attack the enemy with H-bombs. Asking no questions, they head toward the target.

Mr. Bryant is basically a fine storyteller, and succeeds rather well in impressing an air of authenticity and immediacy on the reader. However, the constant switching of the action between three locales—one of the bombers, a general's office at an Air Force Base in Texas, and the Pentagon—becomes monotonous and mechanical after a while. And more serious still, in spite of his attempt at logical explanation, it is very hard to swallow the gimmick he uses to get the action started and the planes on their way. If you can accept the rationale of Mr. Bryant, then the rest of the story follows inevitably. But for those who cannot, and I suspect they will be in the majority, all the author's skill is in vain. You cannot isolate a story from its foundation.

SPECIAL NOTE FOR SPECTROSCOPE READERS: For those of you who missed first time around, this last month saw the publication of two fine reprints that ought to be in every fan's library.

THE DOOR INTO SUMMER. *By Robert Heinlein. 159 pp. Signet Books. Paper: 35¢.*

THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS. *By John Wyndham. 189 pp. Ballantine Books. 35¢.*



Or so you say

Dear Editor:

Valigursky has surpassed himself on the cover of the April issue of *Amazing Stories*. It tells a story, a dramatic one. To me, it was a mature cover; one worthy of the "new" *Amazing*.

The interior illustrations were top-notch too. Summers and Finlay, neither of whom are new to *Amazing*, and I'm glad to see they're still gracing your pages with excellent illustrations. I'm just sorry to see that all the stories aren't illustrated.

For instance, Mr. Keith Laumer's fine short novel, "Greylorn," should have been illustrated. Not that the story doesn't stand admirably on its own merits; but a good story, plus a good illustration—ah! So, let's recall Mr. Laumer and give him an illo. Laumer and Finlay—an unbeatable combination!

All in all, a fine issue. At this rate, *Amazing* is headed toward the top of the science fiction field.

Bobby Gene Warner
745 Eldridge St.
Orlando, Florida

● *We'll try to marshal all our forces for Laumer's next! Ok?*

Dear Editor:

I have been reading science fiction stories for the past 30 years. I have enjoyed the illustration of the characters in the stories because it stirred the reader's imagination of the fantastic creatures on other planets. Half of the fun of reading science fiction was examining the fantastic creatures of other planets. It is therefore too bad that you see fit to discontinue illustrations in your short stories.

I never did like long serial installment stories. In most cases the serials are not read because a great many would not go out of their way to look for the next installment, so that the serial stories take useless space where other short stories could appear.

I'm for more illustrations and no serials in up and coming issues.

Peter Nicolas

140 Austin St.

Winnipeg 4, Man., Canada

● *We don't like serials either. But when that is the only way to run 90,000 words of E. E. Smith—well, there's hardly any choice, is there?*

Dear Editor:

There have been two *Amazing's* on the stand since the last time I wrote, the March and April issues. You were very much correct about Isaac Asimov. I always enjoy his stories.

At this point I have read the first two installments of Smith's "The Galaxy Primes" and in my opinion this story does not belong in s-f. It should have been in *Fantastic* or perhaps, more appropriately, in some as yet unnamed magazine such as "sex in space."

It may be that the majority of readers want stories with a strong sex punch to them, but personally I think there are enough of that type of magazine on the market without injecting it into *Amazing*.

"Greylorn" by Keith Laumer, in the April issue, rates tops in my estimation.

Chester F. Milbourn

Estancia, New Mexico

● *A dissenter! Are you Smith fans going to let him get away with this?*

Dear Editor:

Your novel, "The Galaxy Primes" is an excellent piece of artistic s-f. I congratulate E. E. Smith on a job well done.

Winston

Box 318, Route #1

Fairmont, W. Va.

● *That's more like it!*

Dear Editor:

I enjoyed reading "The Galaxy Primes" very much. I hope you will have more novels of this length in future issues.

Mrs. Thomas A. Rutledge

3316 Hatcher

Fort Worth 19, Texas

● *So's that—on two counts: Smith and serials.*

Dear Editor:

I waited three months to write you this letter so I could tell you what I thought of E. E. Smith's new serial.

A good many months back when the magazine was under a different editorship, it was announced that there would be no more serials in *Amazing Stories*. At this time I thought it was a very good idea as all of the serials then printed were on the poor side anyway. Then all of a sudden and under a new editor, I find a new serial staring me in the face.

I began reading "The Galaxy Primes" with a skeptical outlook which I soon lost. The first installment was good, the second better, and the third best! If you are going to use this serial for a guiding light for future serials in your magazine, this is one reader from whom you will hear no complaints.

Give Valigursky a pat on the back for me for the very fine cover he did on the May '59 issue of *Amazing*. He is one artist, who, over the past few years has received more than his share of brickbats. For an artist who has painted as many consecutive covers as he has, I think that he is among the best. Don't let him get away!

Harry Thomas
Brookside
Sweetwater, Tenn.

● *We have Valigursky chained in our offices, hanging by his thumbs from the holes in the air-conditioning vent. You understand, of course, he does not use his thumbs when he paints.*

Dear Editor:

I just got the May issue of *Amazing* at the newsstand and it's wonderful. I especially enjoyed the editorial by Isaac Asimov. He expressed his views clearly and precisely. Before I read his fine article I never realized that science fiction helps you adjust to life and makes living more enjoyable. Now I know why a highly developed imagination can hardly help seeing intrigue, beauty and humor in any situation.

Please print more Johnny Mayhem stories and more stories like "Initiative."

Sandra Bauer
1160 Broad Street
Newark 2, N. J.



COMPLETE
SHORT NOVEL

COLLISION COURSE

By
ROBERT
SILVERBERG

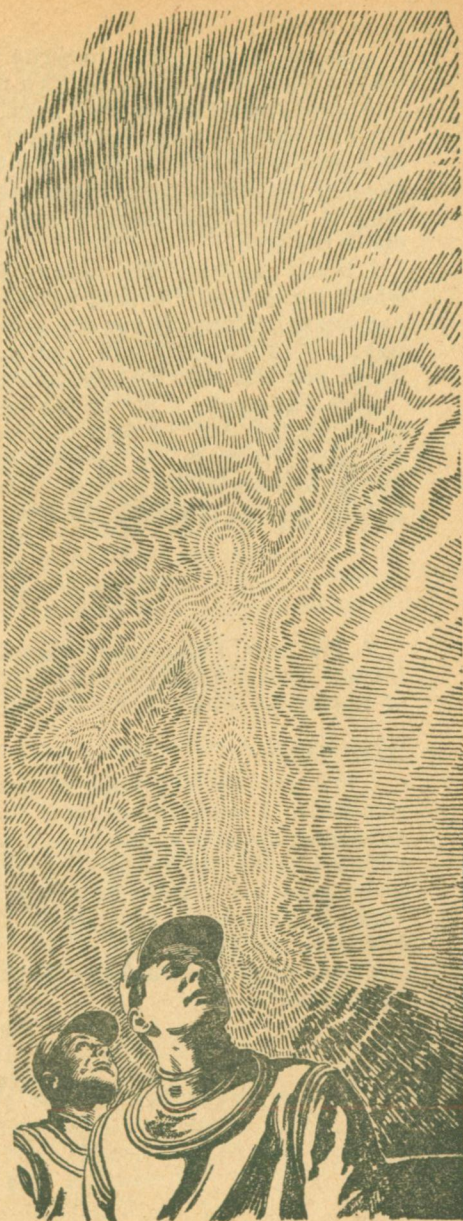
ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

CHAPTER 1

ONLY a month before, the Technarch McKenzie had calmly sent five men to probable death in the name of Terran progress. But now, it seemed, those five men had not died after all, and McKenzie's normally rock-hard face now reflected inner tension.

The message, reaching him in the Archonate Center, had been brief. "*Luna detection center reports return to this system of the XV-ft1. Landing at Central Australia spaceport requested for 1200 hours EST.*"

The Technarch read the message through twice, nodding. So



The Norglans could not control



they were back, were they? After a successful trip? *By the Hammer*, he thought, *we'll see men in the far galaxies yet! And in my Archonate, heaven will-ing!*

His nature was too stern to allow him more than a moment of gloating pride. He had gambled; he had won; and perhaps his name would ring in the galleries of history for millennia. The experimental faster-than-light ship was returning safely.

He depressed a communicator stud. "Set up a transmat connection to Central Australia spaceport right away, Naylor. Immediate departure."

McKenzie stared for a moment at the big, thick fingers of his hands as they lay before him on the desk. Hands like those could never wire a circuit, wield a surgeon's excising vibroknife, or tune the fine controls on a thermonuclear generator. But they were hands that could write, *"If we remain bound forever to the limiting velocity of light, we will be as snails seeking to cross a continent. We must not be lulled into complacency by the slow expansion of our colonial empire. We must surge ever outward; and the faster - than - light spacedrive must be the be-all and end-all of our research effort."*

He had written those words fifteen years earlier, in 2765, and delivered them as his first public address after his accession to the Archonate.

And, fifteen years later, a ship had gone to the stars and returned in less than a month.

Rising, McKenzie traversed the gleaming marble floor of his private chamber and passed through the iris-ing sphincter into his transmat cubicle.

Naylor waited there, an obsequious little man in the stiff black robe of the Technarch's personal staff. "The coordinates are set, Excellency."

McKenzie stepped forward. The lambent green transmat field pulsed up from the floor aperture, forming a curtain dividing the cubicle in two. The hidden power generators of the transmat were linked directly to the main generator that spun endlessly on its poles somewhere beneath the Atlantic.

There was no sensation. The Technarch McKenzie was destroyed, a stream of tagged wavicles was hurled halfway across a world, and the Technarch McKenzie was reconstituted. If the moment of destruction had been longer, the pain would have been unbearable. But the transmat field ripped the Technarch's body molecule from molecule in so tiny a fragment of a microsecond that his neural system could not possibly have relayed the pain; and the restoration to life came with equal speed. Whole and undamaged, McKenzie stepped through the field and out, almost instantly later, in the transmat cubicle at Central Australia spaceport.

It had been shortly before

noon in New York. Here, it was early the following morning. A wallclock read 0213 hours. McKenzie left the transmat cubicle.

They spotted him at once; the Technarch's toweringly commanding figure was a familiar sight here, and they came running to greet him. McKenzie smiled a Technarch's greeting at Daviot and Leeson, who had developed the warp-drive that powered the experimental ship; at Herbig, the spaceport commandant; at Jespersion, the coordinator of faster-than-light research.

McKenzie said, "What's the news from the ship?"

Jespersion grinned boyishly. "They sent the all-okay signal five minutes ago. They're in a deceleration orbit, coming down on rocket drive, and they'll make touchdown at 0233 hours."

"How about their trip?"

Leeson said in his rumbling basso, "It seems they made it out and back."

"We don't know that for sure," Daviot objected.

McKenzie scowled. "Make up your minds."

Daviot said, "All we know is that they quote switched from warp-drive to plasma-drive some time last evening near the orbit of Jupiter, unquote."

The Technarch looked up and out. The clear desert air, utterly transparent, yielded a magnificent view of the heavens. Stars speckled the black sky like jewels.

In twenty minutes—nineteen

—eighteen—the XV-ft1 would be returning.

He looked at the stars. Hundreds, thousands of them. Every star within a radius of four hundred light-years that bore a habitable planet—and that was most of them—had been reached by humanity. For centuries now, ships traveling at nine-tenths of the speed of light had coursed outward to the stars, prisoned by the limiting velocity but still capable of eating up the parsecs, given enough time. It had taken six years to make the first one-way trip to the Centauri system. The return, via transmat, was all but instantaneous.

But you had to reach the stars before you could plant the transmat pickup there, and that was the stumbling-block. Ever outward, by little hops, the empire of Man expanded. But always hampered by the inexorable mathematical limits of the known universe. Once a planet could be reached and linked into the interstellar transmat network, it was as close to Earth as any other point within the network. The transmat gave infinite connectivity—once the link had been established. But until then—

So progress had been slow. After better than four centuries of interstellar travel, mankind had colonized every habitable world within a sphere of four hundred light-years' radius. And no other intelligent life-form had ever been discovered. The

universe belonged to man—but it would be millennia before man could take possession.

That fact had irked McKenzie during his years of training for the Archonate, and when the death of Technarch Bengstrom raised McKenzie to the dais he bent all of Earth's energies to the task of cheating the chains of relativity.

There were failures, expensive ones. Test ships had been sent out and monitored and followed by manned ships, and the manned ships had exploded or never returned. And still there were volunteers for the next ship, and the next, and the one after that.

Until the Daviot-Leeson Drive, with its incredibly slender generator smashing a hole in space-time by controlled thermo-nuclear thrusts — and suddenly the way seemed clear. Space in the region of a star, reasoned Daviot and Leeson, is warped and distorted by the star's mass and heat. If only the same effect could be duplicated in miniature, if only a wedge could be opened in the space-time fabric wide enough for a ship to slip through, travel a predetermined course, and return—then man's dominion would be boundless.

It took six years from the first pilot models to the confidence that allowed McKenzie to send a manned ship to the stars. And now that ship was returning. In thirteen minutes, twelve, eleven. Jespersion, wearing head-

phones, was in contact with the main monitoring station at the far end of the field.

At five minutes before touchdown time Jespersion said, "They've sighted it clear and sharp."

McKenzie moistened his lips, turning away so the others would not see a hint of tension on the Technarch's face. Four minutes. Three. Two.

Jespersion was relaying the final countdown. And then the *XV-ft1* was there, arching down in a golden stream of flame, coming to rest in front of them, lowering its landing-jacks and stabilizers. The decontamination crew was swabbing down the field; the hatch was opening. Men came forth.

Technarch McKenzie counted them. One, two, three, four, five. No casualties, then.

The Technarch said to Jespersion, "Have the men brought up here right away."

"Harkening, Excellency." Jespersion gabbled into a phone. Moments later, the door irised open and the crew of the *XV-ft1* entered.

They looked tired, sallow-faced, sweaty. The beards belonged to Laurance, Peterszoon, and Clive. Nakamura's face was clean-shaven, but his black hair hung dankly over his ears. Only Hernandez looked completely well-groomed. But all five men had the same weary, overstrung look.

McKenzie walked briskly to-

ward them. His big hand seized Laurance's limp, moist one.

"Welcome back, Commander. All of you, welcome."

"Obedience, Excellency. It's—good to be back."

"It was a successful trip?"

An expression of doubt crept into Laurance's bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes. "Successful? Well, I suppose. The drive worked beautifully. We covered ninety-eight hundred light-years in the snap of a finger. But—"

Daviot whooped jubilantly. Leeson slapped Jespersion on the back. McKenzie said crisply, "But *what?*"

Laurance looked around. "It's—it's kind of classified, Technarch McKenzie. Maybe we'd better wait till later—"

"You can speak in the presence of these men."

"All right. We had a smooth trip. We ducked in and out of hyperspace and came out just where we wanted to be, and we got back home the same way. Only we met some aliens out there."

"You met *aliens?*"

"Not really *met*. We *saw* them, and got the deuce away from there before they saw us. They were building a city, Excellency. It looked like—like they were colonizing that planet, just like we would do."

CHAPTER 2

FOUR hours later the entire Archonate convened. The thirteen men who ruled Earth

and her network of dependent worlds foregathered in the Long Room, on the hundred-and-ninth story of the Center building.

They had come from every part of the world, summoned from their individual duties by McKenzie's call, arraying themselves in their traditional places along the rectangular table. In the center sat the Geoarch, old Ronholm, nominal first among the thirteen equals who comprised the Archonate. To Ronholm's right sat the Technarch McKenzie. At the Geoarch's left was Wissiner, Archon of Communications. At Wissiner's side of the table were Nelson, Archon of Education; Heimrich, Archon of Agriculture; Vornik, Archon of Health; Lestrade, Archon of Security; Dawson, Archon of Finance. To the right of McKenzie sat Klaus, Archon of Defense; Chang, Archon of the Colonies; Santelli, Archon of Transportation; Minek, Archon of Housing; Croy, Archon of Power.

As the Archon of technology, science, research, McKenzie was the most important man in the room. But he observed protocol scrupulously. He permitted Geoarch Ronholm the first word.

"We have been called together, the old man quavered, "to hear of matters the Technarch considers of prime importance to the future welfare of our worlds. I relinquish the chair to the Archon of Technological Development."

McKenzie spoke without ris-

ing. "Members of the Archonate, four hours ago a spaceship landed in Australia after completing a journey of nearly ten thousand light-years in less than a month—and of that month, better than three weeks were spent in exploration. The actual interstellar trip was virtually instantaneous. That would normally be occasion for great rejoicing; for now, the stars lie within the reach of us all, within our lifetimes. but there is a complicating factor. I call now on Dr. John Laurance, Commander of the *XV-ft1* which returned a short while ago, to explain the nature of this factor to us all."

McKenzie gestured, and Laurance rose, a thin, tall figure, in the center of the room.

Laurance came forward until he was within twenty feet of the Archons. He was a man of forty, with close-cropped hair just turning a grizzled gray, and a lean, bony face which just now reflected the many tensions of his recent trip.

He said, "Excellencies, I was chosen by you to command the first manned Daviot-Leeson interstellar ship. I left Earth on the First of Fivemonth past, with my crew of four. Travelling at a constant velocity of interplanetary rate, we reached the orbit of Pluto, the assigned safety zone, and converted to the Daviot-Leeson drive there.

"We left the 'normal' universe at a distance of some forty

astronomical units from the Earth and followed our precalculated course for seventeen hours, until reaching our intended position. Making use of the Daviot-Leeson drive once again, we returned to the 'normal' universe and found that we had indeed reached our goal, the star NGCR 185143 at a mean distance of approximately ninety-eight hundred light-years from Earth.

"This star is a G-type main sequence sun with eleven planets. Following our instructions, we made landing on the fourth of these planets, which was Earthtype to six places and thus suitable for colonization. To our great surprise, we found that a city was in the process of construction on this planet."

McKenzie said, "Tell us about the aliens you saw."

"Yes, Excellency. I dispatched my crewmen Hernandez and Clive to reconnoiter. They observed the aliens for several hours."

"What were these aliens like?" asked the Archon of Defense, Klaus, in his thin, testy voice.

"Humanoid, Excellencies. We have photographs of them which would have been available for display had we—had we been given sufficient notice to prepare them. They stand about two meters in height, are two-legged, oxygen-breathing, and in many respects are much like ourselves. Skin pigmentation is green, though some observed

aliens were blue. They appear to have a more complex joint structure than we do; their arms are double-elbowed, permitting motion in all directions, and they seem to have seven or perhaps eight fingers. Opposable thumbs, of course. They wear clothing. In brief, they seem to be an intelligent and energetic race of about the same stage of evolutionary development as ourselves."

The Archon of Security asked quietly, "Are you certain you were not observed?"

"They paid no outward attention to our ship. At all times my men remained hidden while observing them."

"We're *not* alone, then," said Ronholm, half to himself. "Other beings out there, building their colonies too—"

"Yes," interrupted McKenzie crisply. "Building their colonies too. I submit that we've stumbled over the greatest threat to Earth in our entire history."

"Why do you say that?" asked Nelson, the Archon of Education. "Just because another species ten thousand light-years away is settling a few worlds, Technarch, you can't really draw dire conclusions."

"I can, and I am. Today the Terran sphere of worlds and the alien sphere are thousands of light-years apart. But we're expanding constantly, even forgetting the new spacedrive for the moment, and so are they. It's a collision course. Not a collision between spaceships, or planets,

or even suns. It's an inevitable collision between two stellar empires, theirs and ours."

"Have you a proposal?" the Geoarch asked.

"I have," McKenzie said. "We'll have to contact these people at once. Not a hundred years from now, not next year, but next week. We'll have to show them that we're in the universe too—and that some kind of accord is going to have to be reached—*before* the collision comes!"

"How do you know," asked Security Archon Lestrade, "that these—aliens—have any hostile intent at all?"

"Intent of hostility is irrelevant. They exist; we exist. They colonize their area; we, ours. We're headed for a collision."

"Make your recommendation, Technarch McKenzie," the Geoarch said mildly.

McKenzie rose. "I recommend that the newly returned faster-than-light ship be sent out once again, this time carrying a staff of negotiators who will make contact with the aliens. The negotiators will attempt to discover the purposes of these beings and to arrive at a cooperative entente in which certain areas of the galaxy will be reserved for one or the other of the colonizing races."

"Who's going to pilot the ship this time?" asked the Archon of Communication.

McKenzie looked surprised. "Why, we have a trained crew

with us today who have proved their capabilities."

"They've just returned from a month-long expedition," Archon Wissiner protested. "These men have relatives, families. You can't send them out again immediately!"

"Would it be better to risk our one completed faster-than-light ship by putting it in the hands of inexperienced men?" McKenzie asked. "If the Archonate approves, I will present before the end of the day a list of those men I think are suited for treating with the aliens. Once they have been assembled, the ship can leave at once. I leave the matter in your hands."

McKenzie returned to his seat. A brief, spiritless debate followed; although several of the Archons privately resented the sometimes high-handed methods of the Technarch, they rarely dared to block his will when it came to a vote. McKenzie had been proved right too often in the past for anyone to go against him now.

He sat quietly, listening to the discussion and taking part only when it was necessary to defend some point. His features reflected none of the bitterness that had welled up within him since the return of the *XV-ft1*. The homecoming had been ruined for him.

Aliens building colonies, he thought bleakly. The shiny toy that was the universe was thus permanently tarnished in the Technarch's mind. He had

dreamed of a universe of waiting planets, through which mankind could spread like a swiftly-flowing river. But that was not to be. After hundreds of years, another species had been encountered. Equals? It seemed that way—if no worse. Whatever their capabilities, it meant that mankind now was limited, that some or perhaps all of the universe now was barred to them. And in that respect McKenzie himself felt diminished.

There was nothing to do but negotiate, to salvage some portion of infinity for the empire of Earth. McKenzie sighed.

The vote took place. Each Archon operated a concealed switch beneath his section of the table. To the right for support of the measure, to the left for opposition. Above the table, a gleaming globe registered the secret tally. White was the color of acceptance, black that of defeat. McKenzie was the first to throw his switch; a swirl of pure white danced in the mottled gray depths of the globe. An instant later a spear of black lanced through the white—and then another white, another black. Gray predominated, swirling inconclusively. The hue leaned now toward the white, now to the black. Sweat beaded the Technarch's forehead. The color grew light as votes were shifted.

At last the globe displayed the pure white of unanimity. The Geoarch said, "The proposal

is approved. Technarch McKenzie will prepare plans for the negotiating mission and present them to us for our approval. This meeting is adjourned until reconvened by the Technarch."

Rising, McKenzie made his way down from the dais and toward the five spacemen.

"May we go now, Excellency?" Laurance asked, obviously keeping himself under tight leash.

"One moment. I'd like to have a word."

"Of course, Excellency."

"I didn't come over to apologize. But I want to say that I know you boys deserve a vacation, and I'm sorry you can't have one yet. Earth needs you to take that ship out. You're the best we have; that's why you have to go."

He eyed the five of them—Laurance, Peterszoon, Nakamura, Clive, Hernandez. Half-throttled anger smouldered in their eyes. They were defiant; they had every reason to be. But they could see beyond their own momentary rage.

Laurance said, in his slow, deliberate way, "We'll have a day or two, won't we?"

"At least that much," the Technarch said. "But as soon as the negotiators are gathered, you'll have to go. If it's worth anything to you—you'll have a Technarch's gratitude for going." It was as far as McKenzie could lower himself toward being an ordinary human being. The smile slowly left his face, and he nodded a stiff salute and

turned away. Laurance and his men would go. Now to pick the negotiating team.

CHAPTER 3

DR. MARTIN BERNARD was at his ease, that evening, in his South Kensington flat just off the Cromwell Road. Outside his window drifted London's murky Sixmonth fog; but Martin Bernard took no notice of that. His windows were opaqued. Within the flat, all was cozy, warm, snug. As he liked it. Ancient music tinkled softly down from the overhead sonic screen: Bach, it was, a harpsichord piece.

Bernard lay sprawled in his vibrochair, cradling a volume of Yeats on his lap. A flask of rare brandy, twenty years old, imported from one of the Procyon worlds, was within reach. Bernard had his drink, his music, his poetry, his warmth. What better way, he asked himself, to relax after spending two hours trying to pound the essentials of sociometrics into the heads of an obtuse clump of sophomores?

Even as he relaxed, he felt a twinge of guilt at his comfort. Academic people were not generally thought of as sybarites. But he told himself that he *deserved* this comfort. He was the top man in his field. He had, besides, written a successful novel. His poems were highly esteemed and anthologized. He had struggled hard for his present acclaim; now, at forty-three,

with the problem of money solved forever and the problem of his second marriage equally neatly disposed of, there was no reason why he should not spend his evenings in this luxurious solitude.

He leaned back, thumbing through Yeats. A wonderful poet, Bernard thought; perhaps the best of the Late Medievals.

That is no country for old men.

The young

In one another's arms, birds in the trees

—Those dying generations—at their song,

The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas—

The phone chimed, shattering the flow. Bernard scowled and elbowed himself to a sitting position; putting down the book, he crossed to the phone cabinet and thumbed the go-ahead button. The screen brightened; but instead of a face, the image of the Technarch's coat-of-arms appeared.

An impersonal voice said, "Dr. Martin Bernard?"

"That's right."

"Technarch McKenzie wishes to speak to you. Are you alone?"

"Yes. I'm alone."

"Please apply unscrambler."

Bernard lowered the toggle at the side of the phone. A moment later the coat-of-arms gave way to the head and shoulders of the Technarch himself. Bernard stared levelly at the strong, blocky-featured face of McKen-

zie. He inclined his head respectfully and said, "Hearkening, Technarch."

"Good evening, Dr. Bernard. Something unusual has arisen. I think you can help me—help us all."

"If it's possible for me to serve, Technarch—"

"It is. We've sent an experimental faster-than-light ship out, Dr. Bernard. It reached a system ten thousand light-years away. Intelligent colony-building aliens were discovered. We have to negotiate a treaty with them. I want you to head the negotiating team."

The short, punchy sentences left Bernard dizzy. He followed the Technarch from one startling statement to the next; the final sentence landed with the impact of a blow.

"You want—me—to head the negotiating team?"

"You'll be accompanied by three other negotiators and a crew of five. Departure will be immediate. The transit time is negligible. The period of negotiation can be as brief as you can make it. You could be back on Earth in less than a month."

Bernard felt an instant of vertigo. All seemed swallowed up: the book of poetry, the brandy, the warmth, the snugness. Punctured in a moment by this transatlantic call.

He said in a hesitant voice, "Why—why am I picked for this assignment?"

"Because you're the best of your profession," replied the

Technarch simply. "Can you free yourself of commitments for the next several weeks?"

"I—suppose so."

"I have your acceptance, then, Dr. Bernard?"

"I—yes, Excellency. I accept."

"Your service will not go unrewarded. Report to Archonate Center as soon as is convenient, Doctor—and no later than tomorrow evening New York time. You have my deepest gratitude, Dr. Bernard."

The screen went blank.

Bernard gaped at the contracting dot of light that had been the Technarch's face a moment before. He stared down suddenly at the floor, dizzy. *My God*, he thought. *What have I let myself in for? An interstellar expedition!*

Then he smiled ironically. The Technarch had just offered him a chance to be one of the first human beings to meet face-to-face with an intelligent non-terrestrial. And here he was, worrying about a temporary separation from his piddling little comfortable nest. *I ought to be celebrating*, he thought, *not worrying. Brandy and vibro-chairs can wait. This is the most important thing I'll ever do in my life!*

He disconnected the sonic screen; the harpsichord music died away in the middle of a twanging cadence. Yeats returned to the bookshelf. He took a final sip of brandy and replaced the flask in the sideboard.

Packing was a problem; he winnowed out several fat books, packed two slim ones, some clothing, some memodiscs. He found himself unable to sleep, even after taking a relaxotab, and he rose near dawn to pace his flat in tense anticipation. At 1100 hours he decided to transmat across to New York, but his guidebook told him it would still be early in the morning on the other side of the Atlantic. He waited an hour, dialed ahead for courtesy permission to cross, and set his transmat for the Archonate Center.

Not many minutes later, he was in the private chambers of the Technarch McKenzie.

The Technarch was not in his chambers at the moment. But three other men were. One was a tall, dark-faced man with a gloomy scowl, dressed in the somber clothes that indicated his affiliation with the Neopuritan movement. Another was shorter, but still a little over six feet in height, a cheerfully affable-looking man in his early fifties. The third man was short and stocky, with quick, darting black eyes and heavy frown-lines in his forehead.

"Hello," Bernard said. "My name's Martin Bernard—I'm a sociologist. Are you three part of this outfit too?"

The affable-looking man put out his hand. "Roy Stone. Basically a politician, I guess. I'm understudy for the Archon of Colonial Affairs."

"And I'm Norman Dominici,"

the stocky one said. "Biophysicist, when I'm not out on expeditions to greenfaced aliens. Welcome to our little band."

Only the Neopuritan had not offered an introduction. Bernard turned uncertainly toward him. "Hello?"

"He isn't the friendly type," Dominici warned *sotto voce*.

The big man turned slowly. He was, Bernard thought, a hulking giant of a man—six-feet-six, at least, with the aloof, withdrawn look that men sometimes get when they grow to enormous heights at precocious ages.

"The name is Thomas Havig," the lanky Neopuritan said in a surprisingly thin voice. "I don't believe we've met before, Dr. Bernard—but we've shared the pages of several learned periodicals."

Bernard's eyes went wide. "Thomas Havig of *Columbia*?"

"Thomas Havig of Columbia. The Thomas Havig who wrote *Conjectures on Etruscan Morphemes*, Dr. Bernard. An article which you didn't seem to appreciate."

"Why—why, I simply couldn't swallow any of your premises. You flatly contradicted everything we know about the Etruscan personality and culture—"

"And therefore you took it upon yourself to attempt to destroy my reputation?" Havig asked maliciously.

"I merely wrote a dissenting opinion," shot back Bernard.

"The *Journal* saw fit to print it. I—"

"Evidently you gentlemen are old friends, even though you've never met," commented Stone. "Or should I say old enemies?"

"We've had our disagreements professionally," Bernard admitted.

"You aren't going to carry those disagreements along for ten thousand light-years, are you?" Dominici asked.

Bernard smiled. "I suppose we can forget the Etruscans for this trip. Eh, Havig? Our quarrel was pretty small beer, after all."

He extended his hand. After a moment the towering Neopuritan grudgingly took it. The shake was brief; hands dropped quickly back to sides. Bernard moistened his lips. He and Havig had battled viciously over what was, indeed, a minor technical point. It was one of those quarrels that specialists often engage in when their separate specialties meet at a common point of junction.

"Well," said Roy Stone nervously, "we'll be leaving almost any minute now."

"The Technarch said we'd have at least until tonight," Bernard said.

"Yes. But we're all assembled, you see. And the ship and crew are ready as well. So there's no point in delaying any further."

"The Technarch wastes no time," Havig muttered darkly.

"There isn't much time to be wasted," Stone replied. "The

quicker we get out there and deal with those aliens, the more certain we can be of preventing war between the two cultures."

The door irised open suddenly. Technarch McKenzie entered, a bulky, powerful figure in his formal robes. Technarchs were chosen for their size and bearing as well as for their qualities of mind. "Have you four managed to introduce yourselves to each other?" the Technarch asked.

"Yes, Excellency," Stone said.

"You'll be leaving in four hours from Central Australia. We'll use the transmat in the next room. Commander Laurance and his crew are already out there, giving the ship its final checkdown." The Technarch's eyes flicked meaningfully from Bernard to Havig, and back. "I've picked you four for your abilities, understand. I know some of you have had differences professionally. Forget them. Is that understood?"

Bernard nodded. Havig grunted assent.

"Good," the Technarch snapped. "I've appointed Dr. Bernard as nominal leader of the expedition. All that means is that final decisions will rest with him in case of absolute deadlock. If any of you object, speak up right now."

The Technarch looked at Havig. But no one objected.

McKenzie went on, "I don't need to tell you to cooperate with Commander Laurance and his

crew in every way possible. They're fine men, but they've just had one grueling voyage, and now they're going right out again on another one. Don't grate on their nerves. It can cost you all your lives if one of them pushes the wrong button."

The Technarch paused as if expecting final questions. None came. Turning, he led the way to the adjoining transmat cubicle. Stone, Havig, and Dominici followed, with Bernard bringing up the rear.

We're an odd lot to be going starward, Bernard thought. But the Technarch must know what he's doing. At least, I hope he does.

CHAPTER 4

ONE thing mankind had forgotten how to do, in the peaceful years of expansion under the Archonate: it had forgotten how to *wait*. The transmat provided instantaneous transport and communication; from any point within Terra's sphere of dominion, any other point could be reached instantaneously. Such convenience does not breed a culture of patient men. Of all Terra's sons, only a special few knew how to wait. They were the spacemen who piloted the lonely plasma-drive ships, bearing with them the transmat generators that would make their destinations instantaneously accessible to their fellow men.

Someone had to make the trip by slow freight first. Spacemen

knew how to wait out the empty hours, the endless circlings of the clock-hands. Not so others. They fidgeted the hours past.

The *XV-ft1* had left Earth at a three-g acceleration, hurling a fiery jet of stripped nuclei behind it until it had built up to a velocity of three-fourths that of light. The plasma drive was shut down, and the ship coasted onward. And its four passengers fretted in an agony of impatience.

Bernard stared without comprehending at the pages of his book. Havig paced. Dominici ground his teeth together and narrowed his forehead till his frowning brows met. Stone haunted the vision port, peering at the frosty brilliance of the stars. The four men were quartered together, in the rear compartment of the slender ship. Fore, Laurance and his four crewmen were stationed.

The hours dragged mercilessly. Some time later that day, when the four passengers were coming to their breaking-point, the door to their compartment opened and the crewman named Clive entered.

He was a small man, built on a slight scale, with a mocking, youthful face and unruly, strangely graying hair. He smiled and said, "We're passing across the orbit of Pluto. Commander Laurance says for me to tell you that we'll be making the mass-time conversion any minute now."

"Will there be warning?" Dominici asked. "Or will it—just happen?"

"You'll know about it. We'll sound a gong, for one thing. But you can't miss it."

"Thank God we're out of the solar system," Bernard said. "I thought the first leg of the trip would last forever."

Clive chuckled. "You realize you've covered four billion miles in less than a day?"

"It seems like so much longer."

"The medieval spacemen used to be glad if they could make it to Mars in a year," Clive said. "You think this is bad? You ought to see what it's like to make a plasma-drive hop between stars. Like five years in one little ship so you can plant a transmat pickup on Betelgeuse XXIX. *That's* when you learn how to be patient."

"How long will we be in warp-drive?" Stone asked.

"Seventeen hours. Then it'll take a few hours more to decelerate. Call it a day between now and landing." The little spaceman showed yellowed teeth. "Imagine that! A day and a half to cover ten thousand light-years, and you guys are complaining!" He doubled up with laughter, slapping his thigh.

Then Clive was serious again. "Remember—when you hear the gong, we're converting."

"Should we strap down?"

Clive shook his head. "There's no change in velocity. You won't feel any jolt." He walked

out, letting the bulkhead swing shut behind him.

Bernard laughed. "He's right, of course. We're idiots for being so impatient. It's just that we're accustomed to getting places the instant we want to get there. To *them*, this trip must seem ridiculously fast."

"I don't care how fast it seems to them," Dominici said tightly. "Sitting around in a little cabin for hour after hour is hell for me. And for all the rest of us."

The gong sounded suddenly, a deep, full-throated bonging chime that was repeated three times, dying away after the last with a shimmer of harmonics.

"We're making the conversion," Dominici muttered. He swung around to face the wall, and Bernard realized suddenly that the biophysicist was crossing himself.

Although not a religious man himself, Bernard wished he could commend himself in some way to a watchful deity. As it was, he could only trust to good fortune. Havig was moving his lips in silent prayer; Dominici was whispering something in Latin. Stone, evidently like Bernard a man of no church, had lost some of his cheery rudeness of cheek.

They waited—and if the hours since blastoff from Earth had seemed long, the minutes following the gong were eternities. Bernard wondered what was supposed to happen as they made the conversion. He felt a

dull vibration, heard a thrumming sound: the Daviot-Leeson generators building up potential, most likely. In a moment or two, a fist of energy would lash out, sunder the continuum, and create a doorway through which the *XV-ft1* might glide.

Into where?

Bernard could not picture it. All he knew was that it was some adjoining universe where distances were irrational figures, a universe that had been mapped in five years of experimental work and now was being piloted by men who had but the foggiest concept of where they were.

The change came.

The first hint was the flickering of the lights, only momentarily, as the great power surge drained the dynamos. The only other immediate effect was a psychological one: Bernard felt cut loose, severed from all he knew and trusted, cast into a darkness so mighty it was beyond comprehension.

The feeling passed. Bernard took a deep breath.

"Look at the vision port," Stone breathed. "The stars—they aren't there!"

Bernard spun around. It was true. A moment before, the port, a three-by-four television screen that gave direct pickup from the skin of the ship, had been dazzling with the glory of the stars. Unending cascades of brightness had glinted against the airless black.

Now all that was gone. Stars, planets, cascades of bright glory. The screen showed a featureless gray. It was as though the universe had been blotted out.

Once again the bulkhead light flashed. Stone pushed the switch to admit, this time, John Laurance himself.

"We've made the conversion successfully, gentlemen. What you see on the screen is a completely empty universe in which we're the only bit of matter."

Stone said, "In that case, what do you steer by?"

Laurance shrugged. "Rule of thumb. The unmanned ships were sent into nospace, they travelled along certain vectors that we've charted, and they came out someplace else. For lack of landmarks we just follow our noses."

"It doesn't sound like a very efficient way of getting places," Dominici said.

"It isn't," Laurance admitted. "But we don't happen to have any choice."

Laurance paused. "I came in to tell you that all was well, that we'll be eating in half an hour, and that we'll be in Star NGCR 185143's neighborhood in about seventeen hours. Ah—Mister Clive tells me you're all a bit edgy. Been doing some bickering."

Bernard reddened. There was the beginning of contempt in Laurance's eyes.

Stone said, "We've had our little disagreements, yes. Minor differences of opinion—"

"I understand, gentlemen. May I remind you that you're entrusted with great responsibility. I hope you'll have settled your — ah — 'minor differences' before we reach our destination. You'll find relaxotabs in the medical supply cabinet over there, if your 'edginess' continues. I'll expect you in the fore galley in half an hour."

When a half hour had elapsed, the four went up front for the meal. Synthetics, of course; but lovingly prepared by Nakamura and Hernandez. After the meal the passengers returned to their cabin. More than sixteen hours remained to the nospace leg of their journey.

Bernard settled into his acceleration cradle and tried to read. But it was no use; the words danced on the page.

He slept for a while, and was able to read when he woke. Looking around the cabin, he saw Dominici deep in snoreland, Havig thumbing what was probably a prayerbook, Stone peering endlessly out the vision port at nothing whatsoever. The cabin clock told Bernard that four hours remained till transition.

Bernard forced himself to stop thinking about the frictions in the cabin and to ponder the nature of the aliens waiting ahead. He had seen their photos, in tridim and color, but yet he looked forward to the meeting with complete uncertainty. Would contact be possible? And

if it were, would an agreement be forthcoming? Or was the civilization of man doomed to be racked by an interstellar war that would send the centuries-old peace imposed by the Archonate crumbling?

The rise of the oligarchy, Bernard thought, had ended the confusion and doubt of the Nightmare Years. But what if the aliens refused to meet and enter into peaceful treaties? What would the strength of the Archonate be worth then?

He had no answers. He forced himself to concentrate on his reading. The hours marched past, until the gong sounded once again. Transition was made.

The vision screen exploded into brilliant life. New constellations; eye-numbing new clusters of stars, perhaps including among them a dot of light that was Earth's sun.

And, hanging before them like a blazing ball, was a golden-yellow sun darkened by the shadow of planets in transit across its disk.

CHAPTER 5

THE ship swung "downward," cutting across the ecliptic plane to seek out the orbit of the fourth of the golden star's eleven worlds. Assuming an observation orbit five hundred fifty miles above the planet, the *XV-ft1* zipped round four times before spying the alien settlement.

In the rear cabin, Martin Bernard and his fellow negotiators lay strapped in, shielded against the atmospheric buffeting of landing, waiting the minutes out as the *XV-ft1* dropped in ever-narrowing spirals toward the darkness below.

Queasiness of the stomach assailed him. His life, all their lives, lay in the hands of five bloodshot, tired men. A miscalculation in somebody's computations and they might smash into the unnamed planet below at fifty thousand miles a second.

Bernard eyed the planet growing in the viewscreen. They were too close to regard it as a sphere, now; it had flattened tremendously, and nearly a third of its area was outside the screen's subtended angle of vision.

Bernard caught glimpses of great continents lying in a blue-green sea like slabs of meat against a table. Now the bright threads of the bigger rivers could be picked out. One vast waterway seemed to travel diagonally across the biggest continent. Mountain ranges rose like buckled humps in the far west and north. Most of the continent was a verdant green, shading into a darker color toward the north and in the highlands.

Closing his eyes, Bernard choked back his dizziness and waited for the moment of landing.

It came some time later. He sensed a gentle thump. That was all.

It had been a perfect landing.

The voice of Laurance came over the intercabin speaker: "We've made our landing without trouble. Our landing-point is some ten or twelve miles east of the alien settlement. The sun is due to rise here in about an hour. We'll be leaving the ship as soon as routine area decontamination is carried out."

The routine decontamination took only a few minutes. Then, once all radiation products incident to the landing had been sluiced away, the hatch slid open and the air of another world came filtering into the ship.

It was much like Earth's; but there was a fraction more of oxygen in it, not enough of an overplus to jeopardize health but just enough to give the air a rich, heady quality. It was almost like breathing fine white wine.

A fresh morning breeze, slightly chill, swept down across the meadow in which they had landed. The sky was still gray, and a few last stars of morning still glimmered faintly. But pink streaks of dawning were beginning to splash across the sky. The temperature, Bernard estimated, was in the forties or fifties; promise of a warm morning. The air had the transparent freshness one found only on a virgin world.

It might have been Earth on some ninth-century morning, thought Bernard. But there were differences. The blue-green

blades of grass sprouted triple from the stalk, twisting round each other in a complex pattern before springing upward. No grass on Earth had ever grown in such a way.

The trees — looming evergreens two hundred feet high, their boles a dozen feet thick at the base—had cones three feet long dangling from them; the bark was pale yellow, ruffled by horizontal striations; the leaves were broad glossy green knives, a foot long, two inches wide. Crickets chattered underfoot, but when Bernard caught sight of one he saw it was a grotesque creature three or four inches long, green with beady golden eyes and a savage little beak. Great oval toadstools with table-like tops a foot or more in diameter sprouted everywhere in the meadow, bright purple against the blue-green. Domini-ci knelt to touch one and it crumbled like a dream when his finger grazed the fungus' rim.

Laurance said quietly, "We'll proceed to the alien village on foot. There are two landsleds in the ship, but I'm not going to use them. It might look too much like an armed invasion to the aliens if we came rolling up in landsleds."

"How about weapons?" Domini-ci said. "Do you have enough to spare for the four of us?"

Laurance tapped the magnum pistol at his side. "I'm carrying the only weapon we'll need."

"But—"

"If the aliens react to us with

hostility," said Laurance in a dry voice, "you may quite possibly all become martyrs to the cause of Terran diplomacy. I'd rather see us all shot down by alien blasters than to have some jumpy negotiator fly off the handle and pump bullets into them."

He turned, checking his position against a compass embedded in the sleeve of his leather jacket along with several other indicators, and nodded toward the west. Without further ado he began to walk. Nakamura and Peterszoon fell in behind him, Clive and Hernandez back of them. No one looked around to see if the negotiators were following.

Shrugging, Bernard scurried after the five retreating spacemen, Dominici jogging alongside. Stone followed, with gloomy Havig bringing up the rear.

"They don't treat us as if we're very important," Bernard said to Dominici. "They seem to forget that we're the reason they're here."

"They don't forget it," Dominici growled. "They just feel contempt for lazy Earthblubbers like us. 'Transmat people,' they call us, with a sort of sneer in their voice. As if there's something morally wrong with taking the quickest possible route between two points."

"It *does* breed some bad habits," Bernard said. "We lose a sense of appreciation of the uni-

verse. Since the transmat was invented we've forgotten what distance means. We don't think of *time* as a function of distance any more; they do. And to the extent that we can't control our impatience, we're weaklings in a spaceman's eyes."

They fell silent. The path was on a slight upgrade, and despite the tiny extra percentage of oxygen in the air Bernard soon found himself puffing and panting. Anxiety-toxins were flooding his body now, willy-nilly. The poison of fear added to the fatigue of his muscles, slowing him down.

But Laurance and his men, up ahead, never flagged. They strode on, clearing a way through the sometimes impassable brush, detouring to circle a fallen tree whose man-high trunk blocked the path, pausing to estimate the depth of a stream before plunging across.

Bernard had never realized that the abstract term "ten miles" meant quite so many weary steps. His feet felt numb, his calves stiff, his thighs already developing a charley-horse, after only half an hour's march.

But there was no help for it but to plug gamely on.

At the end of the first hour they rested, leaning against the massive stumps of fallen trees that lined their path.

"Tired?" Laurance asked.

Stone nodded; Bernard grunted his assent. A twinkle appeared in Laurance's eyes. "So am

I," he admitted cheerfully. "But we'll keep going."

The sun rose finally a few minutes after they had resumed their trek. It burst into the sky gloriously, a young sun radiant in its youth. The temperature continued to climb; it was above seventy, now. Bernard realized bleakly that it was likely to reach ninety or better by high noon. He remembered that medieval jingle: *Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun*. He smiled at the thought, flicked sweat from his forehead and grimly forced his legs to continue carrying him forward.

CHAPTER 6

IT BECAME purely mechanical after a while, and he stopped feeling sorry for himself and concentrated all his physical and mental energy on dragging one leg after another. And the yards lengthened into miles, and the distance between the spaceship and the alien encampment shrank.

Up ahead, the procession came to a halt. Laurance and his men had stopped at the summit of a gently rising hill. Peterszoon was pointing into the valley, and Laurance was nodding in response.

As Bernard caught up to them, he saw what they were pointing at in the valley. It was the alien settlement.

The colony had been built on the west bank of a fast-flowing

river about a hundred yards wide.

In the colony, furious activity seemed to be the order of business. The aliens scurried like energetic insects.

They had built six rows of domed huts, radiating outward from a larger central building. Work was proceeding—no, boiling ahead—on other huts that would extend the radii of the colony's spokes. In the distance, gouts of dirt sprang high as the aliens, using what seemed to be a hand-gripped excavating device of force-field nature, dug out the foundations for yet more of the six-sided, stiff little huts.

Some thousand yards to the north of the main scene of activity stood a massive blue spaceship—adhering in the main to the cylindrical form, but strangely fluted and scalloped in superficial design to provide an unmistakably alien effect.

After he had taken in the first surprising sight of the furiously energetic colonizers, Bernard turned his attention to the aliens themselves, not without a chill. At this distance, better than five hundred yards, it was hard to see the creatures in great detail. But they bore themselves upright, like human beings, and only their skin coloration and the odd free-swinging motion of their double-elbowed arms bore witness to their un-earthliness.

They came in two sorts: the green ones, which were overwhelmingly in the majority, and

the blue-skinned ones. These seemed to be overseers; color-supremacy, he wondered? It would be interesting sociologically to run into a species that still practiced color-dominance.

The blue aliens were definitely in charge, shouting orders that could just barely be heard on the hillside. And the green ones obeyed. The colony was being assembled in almost obscene haste.

"We're going to march down the hillside and right into that colony," Laurance said quietly.

"The important thing to remember is not to show any sign of fear. Dr. Bernard, you'll march in front with me. Dominici, Nakamura, Peterszoon, follow right behind us. Then Stone, Havig, Clive, Hernandez. It'll be a kind of blunt-tipped triangle. Stay in formation, walk slowly and calmly, and whatever you do don't show any sign of tension or fear." Laurance glanced quickly around the group. "If they look menacing, just smile at them. *Don't* break and bolt unless there's an out-and-out attack on us. Stay calm, level-headed, and remember that you're Earthmen, the first Earthmen ever to walk up to an alien being and say 'hello.' Let's do it the right way. Dr. Bernard, up front with me, please."

For a long moment it seemed as though the aliens would never notice the nine Earthmen filing toward them. The nonterrestrials were so busy with their

construction tasks that they did not look up. Laurance and Bernard advanced at a steady pace, and they had covered perhaps a hundred paces before any of the aliens reacted to their arrival. Then one did.

The first reaction came when a worker stripping felled logs happened to glance up and see the Earthmen. The alien seemed to freeze, peering uncomprehendingly at the advancing group. Then he nudged his fellow-worker in an amusingly human gesture.

"They see us now," Bernard whispered.

Consternation appeared to be spreading among the green-skinned workers. They had virtually halted all construction now to stare at the newcomers. Closer, Bernard could make out their features; their eyes were immense goggling things, which gave them a look of astonishment which perhaps they did not feel inwardly.

The attention of one of the blue-skinned overseers had been attracted. He came over to see why work had stopped; then, spying the Earthmen, he recoiled visibly, double-elbowed arms flapping at his sides in what was probably a genuine reaction of surprise.

He called across the construction area to another blueskin, who came on a jogtrot after hearing the hoarse cry. With cautious tread the two aliens moved toward the Earthmen, taking each step with care and

obviously remaining poised for a quick retreat.

Only a hundred feet separated the two aliens from Bernard and Laurance. The remaining non-terrestrials had ceased work entirely, and were bunching together behind the two blueskins.

The sun was merciless. Bernard's shirt plastered itself to his skin. He murmured to Laurance, "We ought to show some gesture of friendliness. Otherwise they may get scared and gun us down just to be on the safe side."

"All right," Laurance whispered. In a louder voice he said, without turning his head, "Attention, everyone: slowly bring your hands up and hold them forward, palms outward. *Slowly!* That might convince 'em that we're coming with peaceful intentions."

Heart pounding, Bernard slowly lifted his arms and turned his palms forward. Only fifty feet separated him from the aliens, now. They had stopped moving.

He studied the two blueskins. They seemed to be about the average height of a man, possibly a little taller—as much as six-feet-two or three. They wore only a loose, coarsely woven, baggy yellow garment round their waists.

The aliens had no noses as such, merely nostril-slits covered with filter-flaps. Their mouths were lipless; their faces in general had little fat, and it seemed as if their skin were stretched

drum-tight over their bones. When they spoke to each other, Bernard caught glimpses of red teeth and a tongue so purple it was practically black. So they differed from Earthmen in pigmentation and in most of the minor details—but the overall design was roughly the same, as if only one pattern could serve for intelligent life.

The aliens' arms fascinated him. The double elbows seemed to be universal joints that swivelled in any direction, making the aliens capable of doing fantastic and improbable things with their arms.

The greenskins seemed to be very much like their blue overseers, except that they were shorter and thicker of body. It seemed fairly obvious that the greens were designed for working, the blues for directing.

A third blue appeared, crossing diagonally from the side of the settlement to join his two colleagues.

When they were ten feet from the aliens, Laurance halted. "Go ahead," he muttered to Bernard. "Communicate with them. Tell them we want to be friends."

The sociologist took a deep breath. He felt limp. His mind spun. What to say? *We are friends. Take us to your leader. Greetings, men of another world!*

There was no help for it, he thought. The old cliches had become cliches precisely because they *were* so damnably valid; what else were you supposed to

say when making first contact with nonterrestrials?

"We are Earthmen," he said, enunciating each syllable with painstaking crispness. "We come from the sky. We wish to be friends."

He pointed to himself and to the sky. Then, tapping his chest, he said, "I." He pointed to the aliens, slowly, not wanting to alarm them. "You. I—you. I—you—friends."

Bernard waited, and behind him eight other Earthmen waited, sharing his tension. He stared levelly into the bulging eyes of the foremost blueskin. Cautiously he extended his hand. "Friend," he said.

There was a long silence. Then, hesitantly, the blueskin lifted his hand, swivelling it upward in that startlingly fluid motion. The alien stared at his hand as if it were not part of him. Bernard glanced quickly at the hand too: it had seven or eight fingers, with a sharply curved thumb. Each finger sprouted an inch-long blue nail that protruded menacingly.

The alien reached out, and for a fraction of an instant the caloused blue palm touched Bernard's. Then, quickly, the hand dropped away.

The alien made a sound. It might have been a guttural grunt of defiance—but to Bernard it sounded something like "Vvrenndt!" and he took the sound at face value. Smiling, he nodded at the alien and repeat-

ed: "Friend. I—you. You—I. Friend."

The repetition came, and this time it was unmistakable. "Vvrenndt!" The alien seized Bernard's outstretched hand and gripped it tightly. Bernard grinned in triumph and satisfaction.

For better or for worse, the first contact had been made with the aliens.

CHAPTER 7

WITHIN a week, there was communication, of a rough, uncertain sort.

There was never any question of who was to learn whose language. The aliens spoke a vastly inflected tongue that involved variations in pitch, timbre, and intensity. On physiological grounds it was impossible for the Earthmen to learn the alien language. So the aliens would have to learn Terran.

They took to it readily enough. Havig, as the team's linguist, had charge of the project, and for long hours each day the eight other Earthmen acted out charades to demonstrate Terran verbs.

It seemed impossible that a language could be learned this way—but the aliens had retentive memories, and Havig approached the job of teaching them as if it were his sacred duty in the cosmos. By the time the sun began to dip toward the low hills behind the colony, several key concepts had been es-

ablished: *to be, to build, to travel.*

The aliens seemed pleased with their new knowledge. They tapped their bony chests and exclaimed, "I—Norglan. You—Terran."

"I—Terran. We—Terrans."

"Terrans come. Sky. Star."

Night was falling, though; and the day's heat was dwindling rapidly. Evidently this was a zone of dynamic temperature contrasts, with the mercury cycling through a range of fifty or sixty degrees a day.

"Tell them we've got to leave," Laurance said to Havig. "Find out if they have vehicles and can give us a ride back to our ship."

It took Havig fifteen minutes to get the idea across, with the aid of much body - moving and frustrated arm-gesticulation. The blueskins squatted calmly as Havig performed, repeating words now and then as it suited their fancy. Bernard looked forward dismally to another ten-mile jaunt shipward in cold and darkness. But, finally, a spark of understanding glimmered. One of the blueskins rose to his feet in a quick, anatomically improbable motion, and barked stern orders to a waiting greenie. The latter disappeared immediately.

Moments later three small vehicles that looked much like landsleds came trundling forward, each driven by a green-skin. The blueskin whose command of Terran was most

secure pointed to the cars and said, "You. Terrans. Travel."

The cars were driven by some sort of turboelectric generator, and they seemed to have a top speed of about forty miles an hour. The greenskins drove impassively, never saying a word, simply following in the direction Laurance pointed out to them. When they came to streams, they simply rolled on through like miniature tanks. The trip back to the *XV-ft1* took less than an hour, even figuring in detours round impassable wooded areas. When the Earthmen stepped out of the little cars, the greenskins left without a word.

As they clambered into their ship, the Earthmen were equally silent. It had been a long, exhausting day. Bernard had never been wearier.

But even with the fatigue, it was impossible not to feel a deep sense of pride and accomplishment. Earth had met another race today, and there had been communication.

When Bernard woke, Nakamura was standing over his bunk shaking him and grinning. "Time, Dr. Bernard. Commander Laurance says you've done enough sleeping."

Commander Laurance was right; a glance at the clock told Bernard that he had slept twelve hours.

It was an hour past sunrise. The day on this planet was twenty-eight Terran Absolute

Hours and twenty minutes long. Bernard joined the others for breakfast.

When they reached the Norglan settlement, about an hour later, the scene was much as it had been the day before: the builders were at work with the same fierce energy. The three blueskins who were involved in the language lessons came to greet the Earthmen, offering a vocabulary display by way of salutation: "I—you. Travel. Come. Here. We—Norglans. You—Terrans."

During that day, and the next, and the next, Havig labored tirelessly while the other Earthmen sat by, more or less useless except to serve in verb-dramatizing charades. Bernard found the lengthy sessions tremendously draining on his patience. There was little he could do but sit in the broiling sun and watch Havig perform.

And the performance was incredible. On the fifth day, the Norglans were putting together plausible sentences out of a fund of nearly five hundred words. And though they fumbled and forgot and became confused some of the time, it was evident that they were fantastically quick learners. Five words out of six seemed to stick the first time. And, of course, the broader their linguistic base became, the simpler it was to teach them new words.

By the seventh day, enough of a mutual understanding had been reached to begin negotia-

tions in earnest. The first order of business was setting up a place to meet; squatting in the open while colony-building went on all around was not ideal. At Havig's suggestion, the Norglans erected a tent in the middle of the colony area where further discussion could take place.

In the tent, a rough wooden table had been rigged. The aliens sat on their heels at one side; apparently they had no use for chairs. The Earthmen, in the absence of seats, adopted a crosslegged squat.

Havig said, "This Earthman is called Stone. He will talk to you today."

Stone threaded a tortuous verbal path, with much help and correction from Havig. After two hours he had succeeded in establishing several vital points:

That Earth was the nucleus of a colonial empire.

That the Norglan home world, wherever it was, was a similar center of colonial expansion.

That some sort of conflict between the two dynamic planet-systems was inevitable before much time elapsed.

That, therefore, it was vital here and now to decide which parts of the galaxy should be reserved for Norglan and which for Terran expansion.

Zagidh, the biggest of the three Norglans, and his companions wrestled with these four points and appeared to show a complete understanding of what they meant. There was a brief

but fervid discussion between them.

Zagidh grimaced in the now-familiar facial agony that preceded any major statement of his. The alien said slowly, "This is serious matter. I-we do not hold authority. We-you can no further talk. Others-we must come."

The four sentences seemed to exhaust the Norglan. His tongue licked out, dog-like, and he panted. Rising, he and the other blueskins exited without a further word, leaving the startled Earthmen alone.

CHAPTER 8

"**W**HAT do you figure this means?" Stone asked uneasily. It was half an hour since the Norglans had left the tent.

"Obviously Zagidh and his friends realized they'd stumbled into something too big for them to handle," Bernard said. "Suppose *you* were a colonial administrator busy digging wells and building shelters, and some alien beings dropped down out of the sky and told you they wanted to hold a discussion about carving up the universe? Would you sit down and write a treaty on your own hook—or would you pass the buck back to the Archonate as fast as you could?"

There was nothing to do now but wait. Bernard scowled. This entire mission was a first-class education in patience. Laurance and his men sat quietly in the corner, no longer active partici-

pants in the negotiations, simply letting the minutes trickle past. Havig, with his Neopuritan self-control, showed no outward manifestation of impatience.

Now it was three hours since the Norglans had made their abrupt exit. Mid-afternoon had come; a blistering shroud of heat lay over the clearing, but the greenskins toiled on without seeming to mind.

"We'll wait around until sundown," Laurance said. "If they don't come back by then, we'll go back to the ship and try again tomorrow morning."

The tentflap parted and three aliens entered. The first was Zagidh. Behind him came two Norglans of massive stature, their skins a deep, rich bluish-purple. They were clad in elaborate gem-encrusted robes, and their entire bearing was regal. Zagidh sank into the familiar heels-to-thighs squat. The newcomers remained standing.

Grimacing terribly, Zagidh said, "Two — *kharvish* — have come from Norglan. To speak. Time taken—learning the Ter-ran talk. They-we will talk to you."

Still squatting Zagidh duck-waddled out of the tent. The two big Norglans lowered themselves now in one smooth simultaneous motion into the standard squat.

Haltingly, but in a voice whose tone was the mellow boom of a fine 'cello, one of the big

Norglans said, "I am label Skrinri. He is label Vortakel. He—I—we both—label *kharvish*. How you say? One-who-comes-to - talk - to - others - of - other - kind."

"Ambassador," Havig suggested.

Skrinri repeated it. "Am-bas-sa-dor. Yes. Ambassador. From Norglan. From home planet."

Stone asked, "You have come to talk to us?"

"Yes. You are from Earth. Where is Earth?"

"Much distant," Stone said. "How can I convey it to him, Havig? Would he know what a light-year means?"

"Not unless he knows what a year is first," Havig said. "Better let it go by."

"Okay," Stone said. Facing the Norglans he said, "Your world is close?"

"All worlds are close. It takes no time to travel there to here."

Sweltering in his corner of the tent, Bernard followed the evolving chain of reasoning.

Gradually, the similarities between the two empires began to unfold.

The Norglans had the transmat, it seemed: Skrinri and Vortakel had come from the mother world only a few hours ago via some form of instantaneous transportation. The spaceship looming above the settlement was testimony that the Norglans also had some form of conventional space travel, probably a near-light drive but nothing faster-than-light.

Concrete information on distances was a good deal more difficult to elicit. But it was reasonable to guess that the home world of the Norglans was somewhere within three or four hundred light-years of the present planet, maybe less, probably not more. Which meant that the Norglan sphere of colonization was roughly of the same order of magnitude as the Terran.

So much was clear. But yet the real issue had not even been mentioned yet. Stone was working up to it closely, building a dazzling pattern of ideas and communicated information before he got down to actual business.

Outside the tent, night was falling. The temperature drop came swiftly. A cold wind suddenly acrossed the clearing, flicking open the tentflap. Hunger-sounds growled in Bernard's belly. But the Norglans showed no indications of wishing to suspend negotiations for the night.

Stone was sketching diagrams in the packed-down dirt floor of the conference tent. A dot with a circle around it: Earth's sphere of colonization. At a distance of several yards, another dot, another circle: Norgla's sphere.

Beyond those, other dots; no circles. These were the uncolonized stars, the *terrae incognitae* of the galaxy, which neither Earthman nor Norglan had reached at this stage of the galactic expansion.

Stone said gravely, "Earth people spread outward from Earth. We settle on other worlds."

He drew radial spokes projecting from the circle that was the Terran sphere of dominance. The spokes reached into the neutral area.

"Norglan people spread outward too. You build your colonies, we build ours."

Spokes grew from the Norglan sphere as well. Dragging his stick doggedly through the ground, Stone extended the Norglan spokes until some of them all but grazed Terran ones.

"You settle here," Stone said. "We settle *there*. We continue settling new worlds. Soon *this* happens—"

Stone sketched it graphically. Two spokes met, crossed. Others intersected as well.

"We reach the same territory. We fight over this world or that. There would be war between Earthman and Norglan. There would be death. Destruction."

Skrinri and Vortakel stared at the diagram on the ground as if it were the symbology of some complex rite. Their fleshless faces gave no hint of the thoughts passing through their minds.

Vortakel said slowly, "This must not happen. There must be no war between Earthman and Norglan."

Bernard leaned forward, chafing a little at his role as a spectator, but as tense as if he were

conducting the negotiations and not Stone. Despite the chill, despite the hunger, he felt a pounding surge of triumph swelling in his breast. The aliens had understood; there had been two-way communication; the Norglan ambassadors realized the grave dangers of war. The conflict would be averted. The paths of empire would swerve from their collision course.

Stone said, "We must choose the way of peace. Norglan leaders and Terran leaders will meet. We will divide the stars between us." He paused, making sure the ambassadors comprehended the meaning of *divide*. "We will draw a line," Stone went on, emphasizing his words by scratching a boundary between the two spheres of dominion on the ground.

Stone smiled. "All these worlds"—he made a sweeping gesture over the left-hand side of his sketch—"will be Norglan. No Terrans will settle there. And on this side—" he indicated the Terran domain—"no Norglans may come. These worlds will be Terran."

The aliens were silent, peering down at the lines scrawled in the dirt. They appeared to grasp the meaning of the lines.

"We understand," said Skrinri slowly and heavily.

The wind whipped furiously at the tent, whicking the loose flap back and forth. Rising from the squat he had maintained with so little discomfort for so

long, Skrinri stepped forward to tower over Stone's diagram. He stood still only a moment.

Carefully placing one huge bare foot over the lines, the Norglan rubbed out the boundary Stone had drawn to delimit the proposed Norglan and Terran sectors. Then, kneeling, Skrinri obliterated with his fingers every one of the spokes of expansion Stone had depicted as radiating from the Terran sphere.

Skrinri's voice was level, somber, without any hint of malice. He made a broad gesture with both hands, as if to take in the entire universe.

"Norgla builds colonies. We expand. You—Earthmen—have occupied certain worlds. You may keep these worlds. We will not take them away. All other worlds belong to Norgla. We do not have to talk further."

With calm dignity, the two Norglans made their way from the tent. In the shocked silence that followed, the wind rose to a mocking screech.

All other worlds belong to Norgla. Stunned, the nine Earthmen stared white-face at each other. No one had expected *this*.

"It's a bluff!" Dominici whispered harshly. "Limiting us to present holdings? They can't mean it!"

"Perhaps they can," Havig said quietly. "Perhaps this is the end of our fine dream of galactic colonization. And perhaps this is a disguised bless-

ing. Come: we'll accomplish no more here today."

The Earthmen filed out of the tent, into the alien darkness, into the suddenly hostile wind.

CHAPTER 9

MORNING came slowly. The little red moon twirled across the sky and was gone; the unfamiliar constellations passed above and lost themselves beyond the horizon. As the hours of night gave way to the hours of dawn, the men of the *XV-ft1* busied themselves in the routine tasks of daybreak. No one had slept that night aboard the ship.

"We shouldn't have let them march out of there like that," Stone said bitterly. "They stalked out like a couple of princes giving the word to a rabble of commoners. We should have made them stay, let them know that Earth wasn't going to listen to their high-handed nonsense."

"*'You may keep these worlds,'*" Dominici repeated in harshly sardonic tones. "*'All other worlds belong to Norgla.'* As if we were worms!"

"Perhaps it was the will of God that man's expansion through the heavens come to a halt," Havig suggested. "The Norglans have been sent as a reminder that pride is sinful, that there are limits beyond which we dare not go."

"You're making the assumption that the Norglans are a

genuine limit," Bernard said. "I don't think they are. I don't think they've got the technology to keep us penned into our present sphere. They sound like bluffers to me."

"I'll go for that idea," Dominici said. "What I saw of their science didn't impress me. They've got spaceships and transmats, but nothing that's qualitatively advanced over what we've got. In a war we could hold our own with them."

"But why a war?" Havig asked. "Why not accept the decree and keep within our limits?" He answered his own question immediately. "I know. We do not accept limits because we are Earthmen, and in some mysterious way Earthmen have a divine mandate to spread throughout the entire universe." Havig smiled darkly. "None of you pay attention to what I say, of course. You think I'm a religious crank, and in your eyes I suppose I am. But is it so utterly wrongheaded to be humble, gentlemen? To draw back our frontiers and say, Thus far and no further shall we go? When the alternative is bloody warfare, is it cowardly to choose the path of peace?"

Bernard looked up. "I'll grant the strength of what you're saying, Havig. None of us wants war with these people. And maybe it isn't man's destiny to colonize the universe. I can't answer for what is or isn't our destiny. But I know enough

about psychology to figure these people out, alien though they are. Right now they're being tolerant, in a lordly way—they'll let us keep our piddling little empire, provided we leave all the rest for them. But their tolerance won't last forever. If all the rest of the universe becomes Norglan, some day they're going to cast covetous eyes at us and decide to make it a clean sweep. If we give ground now, we're inviting them to come wipe us out later. Dammit, Havig, there's a difference between being humble and being suicidally meek!"

"So you think we should make war on Norgla?"

"I think we should go back to them today and let them know we aren't going to let ourselves be bluffed," Bernard said. "Reject their ultimatum. Maybe that's simply their alien way of negotiating: begin with an absurd demand and work backward to a compromise."

"No," Dominici said. "They want war. They're spoiling for it. Well, we'll give it to 'em! Let's tell Laurance we're heading for home. We'll toss the whole business in the Archonate's lap and wait for the shooting to start. That's the way to handle it."

Stone shook his head mildly. "Bernard's right, Dominici. We have to go back and try again. We can't just go storming off to Earth like hotheads. Or even go meekly crawling away with our tails dragging, as Havig would

like. We'll give it another try today."

The cabin door opened, and Laurance, Clive, and Hernandez entered. They, too, had been up all night, or so it looked from their paleness of face and redness of eye.

Laurance forced a smile. "It's almost morning. I see you haven't done much sleeping."

"We've been trying to figure out whether we ought to try another session with the Norglans," Bernard said.

"Well? What was the decision?"

"We aren't sure. Matter of fact, we seem to be split down the middle on the subject."

"What's the point of disagreement?" Laurance asked.

"I feel it's time for mankind to pull in its horns," Havig said with an apologetic smile. "Our friend Dominici wants to go home too, but for the opposite reason: he doesn't think it's worth talking to the Norglans again."

"Damn right I don't," Dominici snapped. "They've as much as told us they dare us to make war. Now we ought to show them—"

"I'm willing to withdraw my objections to another session," interrupted Havig calmly. "Something in me suggests that going home now would lead only to war. I join forces with Dr. Bernard and Mr. Stone. Let's talk to the Norglans again."

Bereft of his ally, Dominici stared around uncertainly. All

eyes were on him. After a moment he frowned and said grudgingly, "All right. I'll make it unanimous, I suppose. But we aren't going to get anywhere."

They set out an hour after sunrise for the Norglan settlement. The heat was beginning already. Plants whose leaves had rolled tight against the evening frost now uncoiled them, spreading them flat to soak in the sunlight.

When they reached the encampment, the Earthmen strode into the center of the colony together, Bernard, Stone, and Laurance leading the way. Zagidh came forward to meet them.

"You have come back," he said flatly.

"Yes. We wish to talk with Skrinri and Vortakel again," said Stone. "Tell them we are here."

Zagidh swung his swivel-jointed arms loosely. "The *kharvish* are gone."

"Gone?"

"We-they told we-I they did not talk to you-they again," Zagidh said.

Stone frowned, puzzling out the complexities of the blue-skin's version of Terran. "We had not ended talking to the *kharvish*. Get them as you did yesterday."

Zagidh's arms continued to swing. "I can do not. They did not want to talk to you-they again."

From the back of the group came Dominici's bitter voice.

"They've delivered their ultimatum and now they're gone. We're wasting our time jabbering with this blueface. Do we have to have things made any clearer for us?"

Patiently, Stone tried it from several other approaches. But the result was the same. Skrinri and Vortakel were gone, back to the mother world. They had nothing further to say to the Earthmen. And no, Zagidh would not summon them a second time. Why should he? The position was plain enough. Skrinri had ordered the Earthmen not to colonize any more worlds. Did that statement require clarification, Zagidh asked?

"Don't you see this will be war between Norgla and Terra?" Stone demanded, exasperated. "Innocent people will die because of your stubbornness! We *have* to talk to the *kharvish* again."

Zagidh swung his forearms faster, now; it looked like a gesture of growing irritation. "I have said the words they gave me to say. I must build now. You go. The *kharvish* do not come back."

With one final annoyed flap of his arms, Zagidh spun away and instantly began to shout instructions to a group of greenskins struggling across the clearing with a heavy crate of equipment. The Earthmen, ignored, stood by themselves unshaded in the fierce sunlight.

"I think that's about it," Bernard said quietly. "We've

had it. Maybe they're bluffing, but they're bluffing hard."

They returned to the sleds, and drove slowly out of the Norglan encampment. Turning to glance back, Bernard saw that nobody was watching their departure. None of the Norglans cared.

They travelled through the rolling meadows and over the by-now well-worn forest path to the ship. Bernard's heart felt like cold lead behind his ribs. He shuddered at what they would have to tell the Technarch when they returned to Earth, only a few days hence. McKenzie would be furious.

From the front of the sled, Clive chuckled. "You know, we could have gone along for thousands of years without ever running into these Norglans. If we hadn't built the *XV-ft1*, if we hadn't happened to blunder onto a Norglan-settled planet, if the Technarch hadn't decided to negotiate in advance of the conflict—"

"That's a lot of *ifs*," Bernard said.

"But they're valid ones," Clive protested. "If we'd minded our own business and expanded at a normal rate, none of this would have happened."

"That's pretty close to treason your man is talking," Stone said quietly to Laurance.

"Let him talk," the spaceman replied with a shrug. "We've listened to the Archons all along, and where's it getting us? Just

back into the same muck of war that the Archonate was established to abolish, so—"

"*Laurance!*" Bernard snapped.

Laurance smiled. "So I'm talking treason too? All right—hang me on the tree next to Clive. But this will be Technarch McKenzie's war we'll be fighting, by the Hammer! And win or lose, it may bring the Archonate tumbling down."

CHAPTER 10

LAURANCE'S defiant words remained with Bernard as he boarded the ship and made his way to the passenger cabin to await blastoff. It was not often that you heard anyone openly expressing antagonism to the Archonate.

It was strange to think of criticizing the Archonate or a specific Archon. To do so was virtually to demonstrate an atavistic urge to return to the dreadful confusion of pre-Archonate days.

The Archons had ruled Earth since the dim days of the early space age. The First Archonate had risen out of the nightmare anarchy of the twenty-second century; despairing of mankind, thirteen strong men and true had seized the reins of command and set things aright.

And, training and choosing their own successors, the Archonate had endured, a continuing body holding supreme authority, by now almost sacred to Terrans

of whatever planet. The pattern of the past argued that no empire sustained itself indefinitely. In time each made its fatal mistake, and gave way to a successor.

Was the cycle of the Archonate ended now, Bernard asked himself as he waited for blast-off? McKenzie's rash thrust into interstellar space now threatened to bring war down on Terra—war whose outcome might shatter the peace of five centuries and cast the Archonate into limbo with the other discarded rulers of man's eight thousand years.

Nakamura entered the cabin. "Commander Laurance says he's ready to go."

The signal came not much later. With landing jacks and stabilizing fins retracted, the *XV-ft1* sat poised in its meadow, while ten miles away unheeding aliens built their colony. A thunder of ions drove the ship upward.

Acceleration ceased at last. Velocity became constant. They could relax.

Some time later, the warning gong began to sound. Bernard went tense. They were entering the nospace void, which meant that less than a day hence they would be landing on Earth. He found no joy in the thought of homecoming. *In the ancient days, he thought, a messenger who bore bad news was killed on the spot. We won't be as lucky. We'll go on living—known for all time as the men who let*

ourselves be walked over by the Norglans.

The cabin lights flickered and the screen winked into featureless grayness. Conversion had been made.

Now there would be seventeen hours of unending waiting. Bernard found his cabinet and took out a slim book.

*Shall I compare thee to a
Summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more
temperate:
Rough winds do shake
the darling buds of May—*

Bernard sighed in frustration and let the book slip shut. It was no use; no use at all. The face of Skrinri kept getting between him and the page. Concentration was impossible; too many extraneous fears intervened. His hands were cold with tension. He paced the narrow cabin. The viewscreen showed nothing but gray.

The cabin was silent. Havig was sunk in that impenetrable cloak of abstraction of his, communing with his God; no use seeking company there. Domini had gone to sleep. Stone stared at the viewless vision screen, no doubt thinking of his shattered diplomatic career. A man who goes forth to negotiate a treaty and returns with an enemy ultimatum jammed down his gullet does not rise to the Archonate.

Bernard made his way forward into the control cabin at

the nose of the ship. The door was open. Within, he could see all five of them at work, parts of the same organism, extensions of the ship. For minutes, no one took notice of the sociologist as he stood at the entrance to the control cabin. They were immersed in their duties.

Then Laurance saw him. Turning, the Commander's eyes narrowed; his face, Bernard thought, looked strangely rigid, almost tortured. "Sorry, Dr. Bernard. We're very busy. Would you mind remaining in your cabin?"

Rebuked, Bernard returned to the passenger half of the ship. Nothing had changed. The clock showed that nearly fourteen hours of nospace travel remained.

He was growing hungry. But as the clock-hands crawled on, no one appeared from the crew to announce that it was mealtime. Bernard waited.

"Getting hungry?" Stone asked.

"Plenty. But they looked busy up front when I went fore," Bernard said. "Maybe they can't take time out for a meal break yet."

"We'll wait another hour," Stone decided. "Then we eat without them."

The hour went by, and half an hour more. Stone and Bernard went fore. Tiptoeing past the galley, Bernard glanced into the control cabin and saw the five crewmen as frantically busy as

ever. Shrugging, he stole away again, unnoticed.

"They don't look like they plan to eat," he told Stone. "We might as well help ourselves."

He prepared the synthetics with something less than Nakamura's culinary skill, and they ate a silent meal. It was the seventh hour of nospace travel by the time they finished.

Returning to the cabin, Bernard settled himself in his bunk. He lay back, nestling his head on his hands, and dozed for a while. When he woke, six hours remained. He was hungry again.

"You haven't missed a thing," Dominici assured him. "They're awfully busy up front."

"Still?" Bernard asked. He began to feel uneasy.

The hours trickled away. Three hours left, two, one. He counted minutes. The seventeen-hour nospace interim had expired. They ought to be converting back. But no news came from the control cabin.

When they were three hours past the conversion time, Bernard said through lips dry with tension: "Maybe we ought to go up front and find out what's what?"

"Not yet," Stone said. "Let's be patient."

They tried to be patient. Only Havig succeeded, sitting wrapped in his unbreakable calm. Another hour went by, more tortuously than any of the others. Suddenly the gong sounded, three times, reverberating through the entire ship.

"At last," Bernard muttered. "Four hours late."

The lights dimmed; the indefinable sensation of transition came over them, and the view-screen blazed with light. They had returned to the universe!

Then Bernard frowned. The viewscreen—

He was no astronomer, but even so he spied the wrongness. These were not the constellations he knew. The stars did not look this way in the orbit of Pluto. That great blazing blue double, with its attendant circlet of smaller stars—he had never seen that formation before. Panic swirled through him.

Laurance entered the cabin suddenly. His face was paper-white, his lips bloodless.

"What's going on?" Bernard and Dominici demanded in the same instant.

Laurance said quietly, "Commend yourselves to whatever gods you happen to believe in. We went off course the moment we converted yesterday. I don't know where we are—but it's most likely better than a hundred thousand light-years from home."

CHAPTER 11

"YOU mean we're *lost*?" Dominici asked, his voice rising to an incredulous screech.

"I mean just that."

"Why didn't you tell us about this before?" Bernard demanded.

Laurance shrugged. "We were

making course compensations, trying to find our way back to the right path. But it didn't work. There wasn't even a trace of a single one of our course referents. And everything we did only seemed to make things worse." Laurance's shoulders slumped wearily. "We decided to give up trying, a little while ago, and converted back to the normal universe. But there isn't a single familiar landmark. We're as lost as can be."

"How could such a thing happen?" Stone wanted to know. "I thought our course was pre-set—everything calculated automatically in advance—"

"To a certain extent, yes," Laurance agreed. "But there were the minute adjustments, the position feedbacks, and somewhere along there we went astray. Maybe it was a mechanical failure, maybe a human error. We don't know."

"Does it matter *now*?" Bernard said.

"Hardly. A millionth of a second of parallax error—widening into an enormous departure from course almost instantly. And so—here we are."

"Where?" Stone asked.

"The best I can offer you is an educated guess. We think we've emerged from nospace somewhere in the region of the Greater Magellanic Cloud. Hernandez is busy taking observations now. We've spotted one star we're pretty sure is S Doradus, and that would clinch things."

"So we're not too far from home," Dominici said with a harsh chuckle. "Only in the next galaxy, that's all. What's a mere 50,000 parsecs?"

"If we know where we are," said Stone, "shouldn't we be able to find our way back to Earth?"

"Not necessarily," Laurance replied. "Nospace travel doesn't follow any logical pattern. There's no correlation between time and distance. And no way of telling direction. Our only hope for getting home is trial-and-error computation—and it's just as reasonable to assume that on our next jump we'll wind up in Andromeda as back in our own galaxy."

Nakamura entered the cabin suddenly. In a low voice he said to Laurance, "Commander, could you come up front for a moment? There's something we'd like to show you."

The spacemen left. For a long moment there was silence in the cabin after they had gone.

Bernard stared at the vision screen. It was a breathtaking view: a sprawling field of stars, a Milky Way no human eyes had ever seen before. Blazing blue-white giants and dim red stars studded the field of vision. And down in the lower part of the screen hung a dazzling white cloud, a coil with an arm drifting loose at either end. With a jarring sense of shock Bernard realized he was looking at his own galaxy.

Bernard caught his breath. It

was a numbing sight to see the galaxy from a distance of some 50,000 parsecs. It tended to provide a different perspective on things, to demonstrate beyond the power of all words to convey how small was man and all his aspirations, how unintelligibly mighty the universe. At this distance no single star of the home galaxy could be discerned by the unaided eye.

Stone laughed bitterly. "Which is worse?" he asked. "To get lost fifty thousand parsecs from home—or to return to Earth with the Norglan ultimatum? Me, I almost think I'd rather stay lost."

"Not me," Dominici retorted. "I'd survive the Technarch's anger, and maybe even the war with the Norglans. It wouldn't have been so bad with a couple of women on board, but to be stranded this way? Nine Adams and no Eves? Uh-uh. Not for me, friends."

Bernard continued to stare at the alien sky in the vision screen. Ten thousand light-years had seemed so far from home, once. But it wasn't, not really. Earth and Norgla were next-door neighbors, at this distance. *And to think that we were set to divvy up the universe between us! What right do any of us, in our puny little galaxy, have to stake claims out here?*

"I'd like to get back home," he said mildly. "I miss my books, my music, even my classes—"

"No family?" Dominici asked.

"Not really. Two marriages; both dissolved."

"I never married," Stone said, "so in a sense I don't have much to go home to. But I don't want to rot for the rest of my life on some strange planet. To die unmourned, alone, forgotten—"

"It would be the will of God, wouldn't it?" Dominici asked. "Everything's the will of God. Just sit back and let God pour trouble over you, and shrug your shoulders because it's His will and therefore there's no use complaining. Isn't that so, Havig? How come you haven't been spouting your usual stuff to console us. We—*Havig!*"

Sitting by himself, as usual, in his corner bunk, the Neopuritan was very quietly having hysterics. His body was being racked with great whooping sobs, but he was choking them back with almost demonic intensity. His eyes were wet with tears; his jaws were tightly clenched, his white-knuckled hands gripped the edge of the bunk. The sobs rippled up through him, and grimly he forced them back, not letting a sound escape from his mouth. The effect was astonishing.

"Havig!" Dominici snapped curtly. "Havig, what's the matter with you? Are you sick?"

"No—not sick—" Havig gasped.

"What's wrong, then? Is there anything we can get for you?"

In a low, dark, terrible voice Havig muttered, "All my life I

was a good man—kept the ways of God, worked hard, prayed. Worshipped Him as I thought He must be worshipped. And—and—*this*. Lost here, billions of billions of miles from home, church, family. Wife. Children. Gone. Why? Why did He do this to me? *Why? Why?*”

The big man rose and took two tottering steps forward, eyes fixed, jaws flecked with spittle.

“Grab him!” Dominici shouted. “He’s cracking up! Grab him or he’ll run wild!”

They sprang toward him. Bernard and Stone each seized one enormously long, spidery arm; Dominici reached up, practically on tiptoes, to clamp his hands to the linguist’s thin shoulders. Together they forced him down onto his bunk.

“Let go of me! Get your hands away from me!”

“Just lie there until you’re calm,” Bernard told him. “Relax, Havig. Don’t snap now.”

“I have committed some sin,” Havig muttered in a broodingly introspective voice. “Otherwise why would He have forsaken me?”

“You’re not the first to ask that question,” Dominici said. “At least you’re in good company there.”

“Shut up, you idiot,” Bernard whispered. “You want to drive him out of his mind? Get me a sedative.”

“In some way I have offended Him,” Havig went on. “And He has taken His light from me.”

“You’re wrong, Havig,” Bernard said sharply. “This is a trial—a trial of your faith. God is sending tribulations upon you. Remember Job, Havig. *He* never lost faith.”

Havig’s eyes brightened. “Yes. A trial of my faith. Job. Yes. But I can’t stand it! Lost out here—perhaps there is no God out here! And—and—”

Reaching behind him, Bernard took the sonic spraytube from Dominici and jammed it against a vein in Havig’s arm. He flipped the release, injecting the fluid instantly. Havig muttered something unintelligible; his eyes glazed; within moments, he was asleep.

Rising, Bernard mopped sweat from his forehead. “Whew! *That* happened awfully fast!”

“Crazy. Absolutely crazy,” Stone said.

Bernard shook his head. “It’s perfectly understandable. He’s a fanatic who had the rug yanked out from under him. I guess this was one time he couldn’t write every trial and tribulation off to God’s will. So he snapped.”

“Will he be okay when he wakes?” asked Dominici.

“I hope so. I gave him enough of that stuff to keep him out for hours. Maybe he’ll be calmer when the drug wears off.”

“If he goes on ranting like that,” said Stone, “we’ll just have to gag him. Or keep him drugged. He’ll drive us all nuts otherwise.”

The cabin door opened. Lau-

rance entered, followed by Clive and Nakamura.

"What's been going on back here?" Laurance asked. "I heard wild shouting—"

"Havig had a kind of fit of despondency," Bernard explained. The universe suddenly became too much for him all at once, or something. He's conked out under sedatives now."

"It sounded like a riot," Clive said.

"He'll be okay," Bernard repeated. "What's the news? Figure out where we are yet?"

"Greater Magellanic Cloud," said Laurance.

"Is that definite?"

"About as definite as it's going to get. We've found S Doradus, bright as a beacon. And some RR Lyrae variables that we're pretty sure of. The way the stellar population scans out—plenty of Cepheids, lots of O and B stars and K-type supergiants—it fits the Magellanic, all right."

"How about Sol-type suns?" Stone asked anxiously. "Those other kinds aren't any good for landings, are they?"

"I don't think we have to worry much about that," Laurance said with a tight little nervous smile.

"What do you mean?" Dominici asked.

"I mean that matters aren't in our hands any longer."

For the first time, Bernard realized that all five of the crewmen had left the control cabin—Laurance, Clive, and Nakamura

in here, Peterszoon and Hernandez waiting just outside. And if no one were in the control cabin—

"What's happening?" Bernard demanded in sudden panic. "Who's piloting the ship?"

"I wish I knew," Laurance said. He walked to the vision screen. "About half an hour ago some external force seized control of us. We're powerless to move of our own free volition. We're being dragged down as if by an invisible hand—toward a yellow sun."

CHAPTER 12

DOWN, down, down, dropping through the blackness past glittering suns, pulled like a helpless plaything—and there was nothing any of them could do about it.

The controls were jammed. The plasma jets would not fire. The stabilizer rockets were out of commission. The velocity indicators did not register. It was not even possible to switch to the Daviot-Leeson drive and convert into nospace.

Nothing to do but wait.

"Postulate an enormous magnetic field," Dominici suggested. "Something like fifty trillion gauss—a field of an intensity we can't even begin to imagine. The magnetic field of the entire cluster, maybe. And we're caught in it."

"Magnetic fields don't interfere with a spaceship's rocket tubes," Bernard said. "They

don't freeze the controls. Not even a hyper-zillion gauss field of the kind you're trying to postulate. There's intelligence behind this, I say—maybe intelligence as far ahead of ours as your imaginary magnetic field is beyond anything we've ever measured."

The conversation petered out. In the vision screen, the stars rushed blindingly toward them, their disks streaking and changing color, and sped past. Laurance's vectors had been accurate: they were heading toward a yellowish sun that grew by gigantic bounds with each passing instant.

Onward and onward they sped. An hour of this involuntary journey had passed; a second came, went, and a third. Hernandez reported that he estimated their velocity, reckoning by observed doppler shifts, at about nine and six nines out of ten that of light. Which meant that they were travelling at virtually the ultimate speed of the normal universe — with no apparent source of velocity.

It made no sense.

It continued to make no sense three hours later, when Havig awoke. The linguist sensed that something was wrong almost instantly.

"Feeling better, Havig?" Bernard asked.

"What's been going on?"

"Nothing much. You got a little upset; we had to dope you up with an ampoule of quick-sleep. Are you calmer now?"

Havig passed a quivering hand over his forehead. "Yes—yes, I'm perfectly calm. I'm trying to remember—something came over me, a fit of terror—I—I must have lost control of myself. Did I—say anything I should not have said?"

"To tell you the truth," Stone lied, "you were so incoherent we didn't know *what* you were saying. But we figured it was better to send you off to dreamland and let you sleep it off."

"Yes—thank you, thank you so much. But there's something you're keeping from me. I see it in your faces. You all look so pale, so frightened—"

As concisely as he could, Bernard explained the situation. "So we're out of control," he finished. "There's not a damned thing we can do but wait to see what's going to happen to us."

For an hour more the plunge continued, until it seemed as though it might go on forever—or until the ship vanished into the yellow sun that was its destination.

And then the Rosgollan came aboard.

Bernard's first inkling that something strange was about to happen came when he sensed a sudden glow streaming from the rear corner of the cabin, near Dominici's bunk. The strangely luminous golden-brown light filtered through the cabin. Frowning, Bernard turned to see what was causing it.

Bernard's mouth sagged open.

A glowing figure had materialized in the cabin, behind Dominici's bunk. It hovered, some three or four feet off the ground.

It was a being of small stature, perhaps four feet high, poised calmly in the air. Although it wore no clothing, it was impossible to consider it naked. A garment of light unfolded it, softly streaming light that blurred the figure beneath without actually concealing it. The creature radiated not only light but an impression of total serenity, complete confidence, utmost ability.

"What—the deuce—is it?" Stone asked.

"You must not be afraid," said the visitation.

The words were not spoken aloud. They simply seemed to stream from the creature as clearly as its radiance.

Despite the quiet command, Bernard felt a sickly wave of terror sweep over him. His legs began to give way, and he sank down onto his bunk. He felt awe, reverence, and above all else a resonating chord of fear.

"You must not be afraid," the creature repeated. For an instant the light it radiated grew more intense. Bernard felt the fear lifting from him.

"What—are you?" he asked thickly.

"I am of the Rosgollans. I am your guide until we land."

It's all hallucination, Bernard thought grimly. Even in the Greater Magellanic Cloud they

don't have beings who come drifting through the walls of a spaceship and who speak perfect Terran.

He struggled to his feet. "Dominici! Havig! Get off your knees! Can't you see it isn't real? We're having an hallucination, all four of us!"

"Do you really believe that?" the Rosgollan asked gently. There was the hint of an amused laugh. "You pitiful little creatures, so arrogantly deciding what may and may not be called *real!*"

Peals of enormous silent laughter thundered through the cabin. "We were like you, once, Earthmen—hundreds of thousands of your years ago. Eager, questing, brawling, foolish, petty little beings. We survived that stage. Perhaps you shall, too."

Stone said hesitantly, "How did you find us? Was it you that caused us to get lost?"

"No," replied the Rosgollan. "We watched you from afar, but we had no desire for contact with you. Until the moment came when we learned a ship of yours approached our galaxy. We feared, at first, that you had come seeking us—but we saw at once you were lost. I was sent to guide you to safety."

"Where—how—"

"Enough," the Rosgollan said. "The answers will come later. I will return."

The light winked out. The Rosgollan was gone.

The vision screen showed the

yellow sun swelling to cover an entire quadrant of space.

In the cabin, four men stared at each other in confusion and dismay.

Bernard began to laugh. It was a dry, thin laugh that held little mirth; the others frowned at him.

"The joke?" Dominici said.

"The joke's on us. On all of us in this cabin, and on the Norglans, and on the Technarch. Remember what Skrinri and Vortakel told us?"

"Sure," Stone said. "*You may keep these worlds. All other worlds belong to Norgla.*"

"That's right," Bernard said. "In cosmic pride we came to the Norglans, offering to divide the universe equally with them. In even greater pride, they sent us packing. And who were we, anyway, to say, This universe is ours? Insects! Apes!"

"We are men," Havig said stoutly.

Bernard turned on him. "*Men*," he mocked. "You talk about knowing the ways of God, Havig. What do you know? You're a worm in a puddle, and because you're the lord and master of that puddle you think you own the cosmos!"

"Hold on a minute, Bernard," Dominici protested. "Is it *your* turn to go nuts now? What are you trying to tell us, anyway?"

In a quiet voice Bernard said, "I'm not really sure—yet. But I think we're going to be put into our true slot in the order of things. *We're* not lords of crea-

tion; we're hardly even civilized, in the eyes of these people. Did you hear what the Rosgollan said? They were like us, *a few hundred thousand years ago!*"

"All right, so they're greatly advanced—"

"Greatly?" Bernard shrugged. "The difference is inconceivable. It knocks some of the arrogance out of you, doesn't it, to find out that you're not really king of the heap?"

"Earth will be in for some surprises, if we ever get back," Havig remarked.

"Surprises enough to upset the applecart with a crash," Bernard said. "We had it too good too long. It was bad enough finding the Norglans cluttering up our nice universe—but now to run into *these* people—"

"And who knows what others there might be?" Stone said suddenly. "In Andromeda, in the other galaxies? Creatures far beyond even the Rosgollans—"

It was a numbing thought. Bernard looked away, feeling a kind of dizziness at the sudden revelation of the universe's immensity.

They made their way fore. But there was no need to tell Laurance. The crewmen were sitting in their cramped cabin looking dazed and shaken.

"You saw it too?" Dominici asked.

"The Rosgollan?" Laurance said. "Yes. Yes, we saw it too." His voice was utterly flat.

"We can't let this crack us up!" Bernard said.

"Why not?" Laurance asked tonelessly. "It's the end, isn't it? The finish for all our big talk of galactic empires? Now we know just how insignificant we are. Just the mammals who happen to live on a certain little yellow sun in that little galaxy there on the screen."

Bernard did not reply. He stared at the master screen in the control panel. A planet hung large in the visual focus. The *XV-ft1* had drifted into an orbit round it, an ever-narrowing orbit.

"We're landing," Bernard said.

CHAPTER 13

THE scene that lay before the Earthmen, as they left the ship—which had floated down, feather-light, in defiance of all laws of inertia and mass—was one of pastoral serenity.

Gentle green hills rolled out to the horizon. Dotting the green here and there were the pastel tones of small houses that seemed to sprout as organically from the ground as the low, stubby trees. There was no sign of industry, none of transportation.

"Just like fairyland," Domini said softly.

"Or like Paradise," murmured Havig.

Bernard said, "It's the post-technological phase of civilization. Remember the withering-away of the state that the an-

cient Marxists were forever trumpeting about? Well, this is it, I'm sure."

The nine of them stood together not far from the ship, waiting for a Rosgollan to put in an appearance. The air was sharp, with an alien tang to it, but it felt good to the lungs. A coolish breeze blew in from the hills.

Just when they were beginning to grow impatient, a Rosgollan appeared, winking into view out of nowhere between one instant and the next.

It was impossible to tell whether the Rosgollan was the same one that had come to them aboard the ship. This was about of a size with that other, but its features and body were partially concealed by the blur of light that attended these people wherever they went.

"We shall go to the others," said the Rosgollan in its soft unspeaking voice.

The golden glow suddenly enswaddled them all; Bernard felt a moment of womblike warmth, and then the light dropped away, and the ship vanished.

They were inside one of the alien houses. The Rosgollan said, "Be comfortable. The interrogation is about to begin."

"Interrogation?" Laurance asked. "What kind of interrogation?"

"You will come to no harm, Commander Laurance."

Bernard tugged at Laurance's arm. "Better just relax and take things as they come," he whis-

pered. "Arguing with these people won't do a bit of good."

The Earthmen made themselves comfortable. There was no furniture in the room, only soft red cushions, on which they sat.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, there were three more Rosgollans in the room. Looking from one to the next, Bernard could see no discernible difference; they were as identical as though all had been stamped from the same mold.

"The interrogation will now begin," came the serene word from one (or was it all?) of them.

"Don't answer a thing!" Laurance snapped suddenly. "We don't want to give them any vital information. Remember, we're prisoners here, no matter how well they happen to treat us!"

Despite Laurance's outburst, the interrogation began. There was nothing Laurance could do to prevent it. Not a word was spoken, not even in their peculiar mental voice; but, beyond doubt, there was a flow of information.

The interrogation seemed to last only an instant, though Bernard was not sure: perhaps it took hours, but the hours were shrunken to a point in time. He could not tell. But he felt the outflow of information.

The four Rosgollans drew everything from him: his childhood, his disastrous first mar-

riage, his academic career, his interests and crochets, his second marriage, his unlamented divorce. All this they took from him in an instant, examined, discarded as being personal and therefore of only incidental interest.

In the next layer they drew from him the summons from the Technarch, the journey to the Norglan colony, the unsatisfactory meeting with the Norglans, the bungled voyage home. They knew everything to date.

Then it was over. The tendril of thought the Rosgollans had inserted into the brains of the Earthmen snapped back. Bernard blinked, stunned a little by the snapping of the contact. He felt drained, hollow, exhausted. He felt as though his brain had been drawn forth, examined very carefully, and put back into place.

And the Rosgollans were laughing.

There was no sound in the room, and, as ever, the faces of the strange beings were veiled in impenetrable light. But the *impression* of laughter hung in the air. Bernard felt his face grow red, without quite knowing why he felt shame. There had been nothing in his mind of which he was ashamed. He had lived his life, sought the ends he thought desirable, cheated no man, wronged no one intentionally. But the Rosgollans were laughing.

Laughing at me, he wondered? Or at someone else here? Or

at all of us, at all the human race?

The unheard laughter died away.

"You're laughing at us!" Laurance cried belligerently. "Laughing, you damned superior beings!"

The alien reply was gentle. "Yes, we are amused. We ask your forgiveness, Earthmen, but we are amused!"

Bernard realized that these Rosgollans were not quite the noble and mature beings he had been regarding them as. They could laugh at the struggles of a younger race. It was a patronizing laugh.

"We will leave you alone a while," the Rosgollans said. The light vanished.

"So that's what it's like to be interrogated," Dominici said. "I could feel them prowling around in my head—and I couldn't shut them out. Imagine it—fingers stroking your bare brain!" He shuddered at the memory.

"Why are they doing all this?" Hernandez demanded. "Why did they have to drag us down here and toy with us? What's their purpose?"

"More important," said Dominici. "How are we going to get out of here?"

"We aren't," said Bernard in a flat voice. "Not unless the Rosgollans decide to let us go."

"You're turning into a defeatist, Bernard," Dominici said warningly.

"I'm just looking at things

realistically. How are we going to escape? Where's the ship? What did they do with it?"

"Why—uh—" Dominici paused. He walked to the door of the room. The door obediently drew back as he approached, and he stepped out, into the open. The others followed him out.

Green hills rolled to the horizon. Fleecy clouds broke the harsh metallic blueness of the sky.

There was no sign of the ship.

"We might be anywhere on this planet," Bernard said. "Five, ten, fifteen thousand miles from the ship. How are we going to get back? By transmat? Teleportation? On foot? Which direction do we go?"

"So we're prisoners, then," Dominici said bitterly.

"Even if we reached the ship," said Havig, "they would only bring us back, the way they brought us here originally. We are at their mercy."

Bernard knelt in the meadow just outside the building. He snatched up a stalk of grass with a snapping motion of his hand. It was a painful business, this being gently wafted to Rosgolla. It struck at the center of a man's soul to keep him in this sort of smiling bondage.

"Hey!" Dominici exclaimed. "Food!"

Bernard turned. He caught a glimpse of a dying light, and, spread out on the grass in front of the house, he saw trays of food.

"We might as well dig in," he

said. "The worst it can do is kill us."

He picked up a small golden cake and nibbled it experimentally. It literally melted in his mouth, flowing down his gullet like honey. He ate another, then turned his attention to blue gourd-like vegetables, to a crystal pitcher of clear yellow wine, to round translucent white fruits the size of cherries. It was all delicious, and it was impossible to suggest that such delicate foods might be poisonous to a Terran metabolism. He ate his fill.

The sun was dropping in the heavens now. Near the horizon a small moon could be seen, low in the late-afternoon sky, visible as a tiny flat pearl against the darkening blue. It was a scene of simple beauty, as the meal had been simple, as the few Rosgollan buildings he had seen were simple. That simplicity alone argued for the great antiquity of these people. They had gone past the cultural stage of finding virtue in size and complexity, into the serene mature era of clean lines and uncluttered horizons.

He could find pleasure in such a life, he who had enjoyed solitude and quiet, the peace of a fishing preserve on a young colony, the privacy of his own flat in London, the silence of his study-retreat in the Syrtis Major.

"What do they want with us?" Hernandez was asking.

"We amuse them," Laurance said. "Maybe they'll grow tired of us sooner or later, and let us go."

"Let us go where?" Nakamura said quizzically. "We are more than one hundred thousand light-years from home. Or will the Rosgollans show us how to find our way back, when they let us go?"

"If they let us go," Dominici corrected.

"They won't keep us here long," Bernard said, breaking his long silence.

"Oh? How do *you* know?"

"Because we don't fit into the scheme of things here," the sociologist replied. "We're blotches on the landscape. The Rosgollans have their own tranquil lives to lead. Why should they install a bunch of barbarians on their quiet planet to stir things up? No, they'll let us go when they're through with us. They aren't the zookeeper type."

The night was falling rapidly now.

They went inside and some of the men settled themselves on the cushions as if settling down for the night. Bernard walked to the edge of the single room, leaned against the wall, and watched it turn transparent for three feet on either side of him to provide him with a window.

He peered outward, upward. The strange stars blazed down. He sought for Earth's galaxy, but it did not seem to be visible from this part of the planet.

Feeling suddenly stifled by the magnitude of his distance from home, Bernard reeled away from the window and threw himself down on the nearest cushion. He jammed his eyes tightly together. His lips moved as if of their own accord.

He recovered his self-control after an instant and thought in quiet wonder, *I prayed! By the Hammer, I actually prayed to go home!*

The prayer had been like a release. The knot of tension that had been forming for hours within him let go its hold. He cradled his head on his folded arms, kicked off his shoes, and was asleep within seconds.

CHAPTER 14

MORNING came swiftly. Bernard woke, feeling cramped and musty from having slept fully dressed, and rose to a sitting position. The others were strewn around the floor, still asleep, and the room was still dark.

Stepping through the obliging door, Bernard sucked in his breath sharply; the air was marvelously fresh, the distant hills looked new-minted in the transparent morning sky, a silvery sheen of dew glistened over the meadow. For an instant Bernard almost forgot where he was and how he had come to be here.

One by one the others came out, stretching their legs after the short night. Stone joined

them first, then Nakamura with his cheery greeting, then Havig, nodding brusquely, and Laurance, lost in his own private bitterness. After him came Clive and Hernandez, with the taciturn Peterszoon strolling out last and glaring at the group as if each, personally, were responsible for his predicament.

"Any sign of breakfast?" Stone asked.

"Not yet," answered Bernard. "Maybe they were waiting until we were all awake."

"Look there!" Clive cried suddenly. "*Look!*"

Eight heads turned to look.

"No," Bernard gasped. "It isn't so. It's a hoax—an illusion—"

For an instant, a nimbus of radiance had settled lightly to the meadow some fifty yards from the group of Earthmen. The light had glimmered briefly, then flickered out. And in the afterimage of the light, two burly figures could be seen—two massive dark-skinned figures, not precisely human, that staggered uncertainly over the grass, looking all about them in bewilderment and—perhaps—fear.

Skrinri and Vortakel. The *kharvish*. The haughty Norglan diplomats.

"We have brought you companions," said a Rosgollan voice. "The negotiations may now proceed once more."

The big Norglans looked drunk, or else just badly disorientated. But they recovered swiftly; and then all their re-

covery went to nought as they recoiled in astonishment upon catching sight of the Earthmen.

"Are they the same ones as—before?" Dominici asked.

"I'm sure of it. See, the bigger one is Skrinri, the one with the scar on his shoulder is Vortakel."

The Norglans drew near. In a tone that was harsh, guttural, quite unlike his mellow boom of old, Skrinri said, "You—Earthmen? The same Earthmen?"

Bernard answered, "Yes. We have met before with you. You are Skrinri—you, Vortakel."

"Where are we?" Skrinri asked.

"Far from home," Bernard said. He groped for the words; how to explain the concepts "galaxy," "parsec," "universe"? He abandoned the effort. "So far from home," he said after a moment, "that neither your sun nor ours can be seen in the sky."

The Norglans spoke to each other, for a long while, in their own consonant-studded, vastly involuted language.

Bernard pitied them. If anything, the Norglans had a higher opinion of themselves and their relation to the universe at large than any of the Earthmen had; and it had been crushing enough to the Terran ego to discover that such a race as the Rosgollans existed. How much more agonizing it must be, he wondered, for the Norglans to discover that they could be plucked from their planet and hurled incalculable distances across the

sky by strange glowing beings of another galaxy?

He became aware that Rosgollans were returning. Like fireflies they glimmered on the horizon, flickering into existence all about.

A silent Rosgollan voice said, "We have interrogated the Norglans while they journeyed here. We learn from them that they hold it is their manifest destiny to conquer all the universe. While you Earthmen have something of the same belief. Obviously, one side or the other must give ground or there can be no peace between you. You must reach a mutual decision."

Skrinri growled — evidently the Rosgollan's words had been intelligible to the Norglans as well as the Earthmen— "We have been fair to the Terrans. We permit them to keep their own worlds. But the other planets—these must be ours."

"By whose grant?" asked the Rosgollan with a trace of mockery. "At whose behest do you take possession of all the worlds there are?"

"At our own!" rumbled the Norglan, getting some of his self-confidence back. "The worlds are there; we reach them; we take them. What greater authority do we need than our own strength?"

"None," replied the Rosgollan. "But your own strength is insufficient. Weak, arrogant, blustering creatures you are, nothing more. I speak now to

both participants in this dispute."

Skrinri and Vortakel seemed to curdle with rage. "We do not speak more! Return us to our world or we shall take steps! Imperial Norgla does not tolerate this manner of abuse. We—"

Vortakel's voice died away in sudden confusion. He and Skrinri had risen from the ground during their outburst; now they hovered, better than a yard above the grassstops, kicking their feet in rage and frustration.

"Put us down!" Skrinri howled.

"Show us your strength now, men of Imperial Norgla," came the dry murmur of the Rosgollan spokesman. "You do not tolerate levitation? Very well; force us to stop."

Double-elbowed purple arms flailed the air. The Norglans rose, inch by inch; now they were more than their own height above the ground.

"Put — us — *down!*" Skrinri grunted.

"Very well."

The Norglans dropped suddenly, much to their great surprise. They landed in an undignified heap; when they rose, it was slowly, with bowed heads, and they did not look at the Earthmen.

"We have taken you from your home world," the Rosgollans said, "and we have shown you the extent of your strength. And still you claim the universe is yours?"

The Norglans made no reply.

The Rosgollan voice continued, "And there, the Earthmen, creatures less sure of themselves, but equally proud, equally greedy. You would divide the universe with the Norglans, we learn. But does it lie in your hands to make such an apportionment?"

For a long moment no Earthman dared to speak. It was futile to trumpet of strength, in the teeth of beings who held powers beyond comprehension.

But something had to be said. Some justification had to be made.

"We acted in no sense of pride," Bernard said quietly. "We are a growing race; we sought room to expand. The Norglans, like us, must expand. Our hope was to reach an agreement that would prevent a conflict of interests, something that would be of benefit to both races."

"You laid claim to half the universe," the Rosgollan voice said accusingly. "Where is the humility in this?"

"We laid claim to half the universe, yes—thinking the universe held no people but Terran and Norglan. *There* lay our pride, in that blind assumption. We were wrong. There are other races in the universe, and of all the races we are the youngest, and therefore the most foolish. But we still claim the right to expand and colonize worlds which now lay empty."

Bernard felt waves of ironic laughter sweep down from the circling jury of Rosgollans.

"The Earthmen reduce their claim," commented the Rosgollan voice sardonically. "Instead of half the universe, now they simply demand half the uninhabited worlds. It is a major concession, I suppose. What of you, proud men of Imperial Norgla—speak for your people. Will you, too, reduce your claim?"

The Norglans did not hurry to reply. At length Vortakel said, "You have shown us that—perhaps—we are not—the strongest people of the universe. We cannot fight you. Therefore we yield."

For a frozen moment no one moved: the slump-shouldered Norglans standing at each other's side like beleaguered Vikings, the Earthmen huddled in their little group some twenty feet away, the ringing circle of Rosgollans.

"Just one moment!" Laurance cried suddenly. "You've brought us all here, somehow, these Norglans and us, and you're holding a little kangaroo court here. Fine. You have powers we don't have, and you've shown them off beautifully. But what right do you have to meddle inside our galaxy? Who set you up as our judge, in the first place? Is it just the right of might?"

"We are not judging," replied the Rosgollan voice levelly. "We are mediating a dispute between two races. Two *young* races. In order to mediate successfully we

must demonstrate our strength. It is the only way to deal with children."

"With—"

"*Children*, yes. Life has come late to your galaxy. As yet, only two intelligent races have evolved there—energetic, vigorous races. For the first time the paths of these young races have crossed. Your fledgling empires soon would be at war without our mediation. We take it upon ourselves, therefore—acting in the interest of the races of the universe, of which we are neither the oldest nor the most powerful—to prevent this war.

"Therefore limits will be drawn for the empire of Earth, and limits for the empire of Norgla. You shall not exceed these bounds in your search for colonies. And in this way your galaxy shall live in peace."

CHAPTER 15

IT WAS done. And, though the Archonate knew nothing of the treaty, everyone of the nine Earthmen realized that what they had done was irrevocable.

Through some magic of their own, the Rosgollans had conjured up, out there in the meadow, a scale model of the island universe that contained Earth and Norgla. It drifted in midair, a spiral with two curving snake-like arms, composed of millions and millions of glowing points of light.

Suddenly, springing up within the galactic model, a line of

green light picked out a sphere perhaps a foot in diameter.

"This is the Terran sphere of dominion," a Rosgollan voice silently informed.

An instant later a second sphere sprang into glowing life, this one red, of virtually the same size, and located halfway across the model.

"This is the Norglan sphere of dominion," came the Rosgollan admonition.

A searingly bright line of fierce violet zigzagged out across the model, dividing it from rim to core, lancing between the tight-packed stars to partition the galaxy into two roughly equal segments.

Colors began to spread all across the model, the green light filling all the Terran half, the red streaming over all the Norglan suns. The Rosgollan said, "These shall be the everlasting boundaries of your dominions. Crossing them for any reason will bring immediate retribution from beyond your galaxy."

"We have no right to enter into a binding agreement without informing our government," Stone protested stammeringly.

"The arrangement will be binding," replied the Rosgollan. "Formal consent of high officials will not be necessary. This is not a treaty! it is an imposition from without. You will obey the establishment of the boundary line."

The Norglans looked agitated. Skrinri declared, "You—order us to obey?"

"Yes. We order you. These are the boundaries. You will keep within them; and you will cease to threaten each other with war, in the name of galactic harmony. Is that understood?"

Eleven figures stared dumbly at the model and at the eerie creatures that had created it.

"*Is that understood?*" demanded the Rosgollan again, with some acerbity.

Martin Bernard shrugged and said quietly, "Yes. We understand."

"We understand," Skrinri echoed.

"It is done, then." The divided model winked out.

Light swirled about the heavy figures of the Norglans, and immediately they were gone. An instant later, most of the Rosgollans had vanished. The Earthmen felt warm light engulf them—and then they stood just outside their ship once again.

"Enter it," a Rosgollan voice commanded gently. "We will restore you to the galaxy in which you belong."

The Earthmen, silent, shamefaced, clambered into the ship. Peterszoon, the last man aboard, activated the hatch controls, swinging the entry gate shut and dogging it tightly closed.

The ship lifted almost immediately, without any sensation of blasting off. It simply detached itself from the ground and floated spaceward.

"So that's that," Stone muttered bitterly. "We've got quite

a story to tell when we get home! We encountered *two* alien races, and one kicked us around a little harder than the other."

Stone said darkly, "So we set out from Earth as the universe's dominant race, and come back home policed into one corner of our own galaxy. That isn't going to be easy for the Archonate to swallow."

"It won't be easy for anyone to swallow," Bernard replied. "But the truth never is. We *aren't* the universe's dominant race; not yet, anyway. The Rosgollans and maybe some others have an evolutionary head start of maybe half a million years on us. So we've been put in our place—for a while."

"This is the greatest defeat Earth has suffered in her history," Stone persisted.

"Defeat?" Bernard snorted. "Do you call it a defeat if you slam your hand against a metal bulkhead and break your fingers? Sure, the bulkhead defeated your hand. It'll do it every time. It's in the nature of metal bulkheads to be stronger than fingers, and it's ridiculous to moan about the philosophical aspects of the situation. In the same way, it's in the nature of highly advanced races half a million years older than we are to be more powerful than we are. Why get upset about it?"

"Bernard is right," Havig said. "The great wheel of life keeps turning. Some day the Rosgollans will be gone, and we, in the twilight of our days, will

watch other, younger, stronger races come brawling across the skies. And what will we do then? Just what the Rosgollans did to us: confine those races, for the sake of our own peace."

Sinking his head in his hands, Stone muttered, "It all makes perfectly good sense on the abstract, intellectual level. But come down to realities. How do you tell a planet that thought it was the tops that it's very small potatoes indeed?"

"That's the Archonate's problem," Dominici said.

"What does it matter *whose* problem it is?" Stone demanded. "It's a planetary humiliation."

"It's a planetary eye-opening," Bernard snapped. "For the first time we have some other races to measure ourselves against. We know that the Norglans are just about as good as we are, right now—and that the Rosgollans are a whole lot better. So we know we have to progress, to keep abreast of the Norglans, to aim toward the level of the Rosgollans. And we'll get there."

Hernandez entered the cabin. "Commander Laurance sent me back to let you know that the Rosgollans have returned us to the place where we got lost, and we're about to convert into no-space and head for home."

Dominici gasped. "You mean we're back in our own galaxy so fast? But—"

"That's right," Hernandez said quietly. "It's only half an

hour or so since we left Rosgolla. But we've come back. There's no doubt about it."

As the spaceman left, Bernard felt a tremor of awe. They had crossed the galactic gulf in twenty or thirty minutes, thanks to the Rosgollan boost. It was a feat beyond the capacity of the mind to grasp. But, he realized, it was only to be expected of a race as advanced as the Rosgollans. *Where were we half a million years ago?* he wondered. *Pounding our hairy chests, brachiating through the trees, cooking our uncles for dinner, maybe even eating them raw if cooking hadn't been invented yet. And we came from Pithecanthropus to the transmat era in half a million years—picking up speed as we came. Who's to say where we'll be half a million years from now?*

The thought was warm, comforting. For the first time since the journey had begun, back in the wastes of Central Australia, Bernard felt a moment of certainty, of understanding man's relation to the universe about him.

CHAPTER 16

THE private chamber of the Technarch McKenzie had a harsh, almost hieratic simplicity, with its black stone walls and its bright, shimmering marble floor. The windowless chamber had been designed to impress both its occupant and his visitors with the somber impor-

tance of the Technarch's post. Bernard felt a tinge of something quite like awe as he followed McKenzie in.

Dominici, Stone, and Havig waited in the Technarch's antechamber, while Bernard, alone, faced McKenzie.

The Technarch slipped into his seat behind his broad, bare-topped desk and gestured to Bernard to sit facing him. Glad to get off his shaky legs, Bernard took the seat. He stared levelly at the Technarch's face and took a deep breath.

Bernard said, "I'll begin at the beginning, Excellency."

"An excellent idea."

In a calm voice Bernard said, "We had no technical difficulties in reaching the planet of the alien colony. We landed, observed the aliens for a while, and finally made ourselves known to them. They call themselves Norglans. We made it clear to them that we had come to negotiate a treaty, whereupon our Norglan contact left us and returned, some time later, with two of his superiors."

"What did they say?" McKenzie asked.

Bernard leaned forward. "We explained quite clearly to them that it was inevitable that the boundaries of our respective spheres of expansion were bound to overlap and clash, and we showed them that it was Earth's wish to arrive at a peaceful settlement *now*, rather than let matters slide until the actual collision came, and with it war."

"Yes? And how did they react?"

"They listened to what we had to say, and then they presented a counter-proposal: that Earth confine itself to the worlds already colonized, leaving all the rest for Norgla."

"What?" Fury blazed in the Technarch's eyes. "Of all the preposterous nonsense! You mean they simply told you to agree to an end of all Terran expansion? That we abdicate as a galactic power?"

Bernard nodded. "That was precisely the way they put it. The galaxy was theirs; we would be allowed to keep the worlds we had already taken, but no more."

"And you rejected this insanity, of course."

"We didn't get the chance to. The two Norglan ambassadors hurled their ultimatum and walked out—went back to their home planet. We protested to the colony supervisor, but he said he could do nothing. So we blasted off for Earth."

McKenzie goggled incredulously. Spots of color appeared on his cheeks; his nostrils widened in suppressed rage. "You realize what this ultimatum means. We're at war with these creatures after all, despite everything—"

Bernard held up one hand, fighting to keep it steady. "Your pardon, Excellency. I haven't finished."

"There's more?"

"Much more. You see, we be-

came lost trying to return home. Commander Laurance and his men spent hours trying to get us back on course, but there was nothing they could do. We emerged from nospace, finally, in the region of the Greater Magellanic Cloud." Bernard felt a band of tightness in his stomach. The words rolled glibly from his lips, though he knew each one drove a maddening wedge deep into the Technarch's mind. "We were lost, fifty thousand parsecs from Earth, and no way of returning. But suddenly our ship was taken over by an irresistible force. We were drawn down to a planet in the Magellanic Cloud, inhabited by beings that identified themselves as the Rosgollans. Strange beings—with wonderful mental powers. They—read our minds, found out about our mission to the Norglans. And then—then they brought the two Norglan ambassadors across space to meet with us again."

The Technarch's facial expression had been changing all during Bernard's last few sentences. Now McKenzie seemed to be staring silently off into a void, face growing pale, eyes glazed and reflective.

"Go on," the Technarch said in a terribly quiet voice.

"The Rosgollans staged a kind of courtroom scene—and after it was over they divided the galaxy into Terran and Norglan spheres."

"Divided it?"

"Yes. Here—I have the chart

on a flat projection. It's a line that runs right through the heart of our galaxy. Everything on this side is ours; everything on the other side, Norglan. And if either side crosses the boundary line, or if we leave the confines of our galaxy, the Rosgollan scouts will discover it and administer punishment."

The Technarch took the star-chart from Bernard with a leaden hand, looked at it for an instant, shoved it roughly to one side. He seemed to sigh.

"You aren't—making all this up, Bernard?"

"No, Excellency. It's all true. The Rosgollans are out there, half a million years cleverer than we are—and they hinted that there were other races even more powerful, in the distant reaches of the universe."

"And we have to keep in line—like small boys in school—Norglans over here, Terrans over there—while the Rosgollans make sure we don't get out of step. Is that it?" The Technarch's face became a mask of rigid anguish.

Something shattered inside the Technarch. His shoulders seemed to slump; his face sagged, the wide mouth drooped, the massive forearms lost their strength and dangled limply. Bernard stared at the floor. Watching McKenzie break in this instant was like watching a monument tumble to destruction; it was painful to see.

When McKenzie spoke again,

it was in a different voice, with none of the metallic inner strength of his Technarch tone. "I guess this expedition didn't work out so well, then. I sent you out as representatives of the finest race in the galaxy—and you come back defeated—*crushed*—"

"Excellency—"

"So all my dreams are over. I thought in my lifetime I'd see Terrans ranging the farthest reaches of the universe—and instead we're hemmed into half a galaxy, by the mercy of our masters. And that's the end, isn't it, Bernard? Once a limit has been set, once someone puts a fence around us—that ends all our dreams of infinity."

"No, Excellency! That's where you're wrong! I admit we aren't in the same position of supremacy we were in before Laurance discovered the Norglans—but *we never were in that position of supremacy!* We never were the lords of creation. It only *seemed* that way, because we'd never come across any other race.

"We're too young, too new, to have the kind of power we thought we had. There are the Norglans in our own galaxy, just as strong as we are, probably. And outside the galaxy the Rosgollans, and who knows what greater races than those? But now we have something definite to work for. We have finite goals instead of vague, indefinite ones. We know we have to work to evolve past the Norglans, toward the Rosgollans. When we're in

their class, we'll legitimately be able to hold our heads up in pride.

"The Rosgollan boundary will guarantee that we don't bite off more than we can chew, Excellency. But we've got all the future ahead of us. Tomorrow belongs to *us*. We've had a setback, maybe, but it isn't really a setback—just an end to our complacency, a beginning of the realization that we're not the be-all and end-all of creation. That we still have a long way to go. So that's why we can't let this throw us, Technarch McKenzie."

In a muffled, hollow voice, McKenzie said, "Maybe—maybe you're right, Bernard. I wanted to forge Man's empire in the stars. With these hands, I wanted to build it."

"We haven't lost that hope, Excellency."

"No. *We* haven't. But *I* have."

A sob racked the Technarch's body. Bernard looked around helplessly. There was nothing he could say, no word of sympathy, nothing to be done for this man whose dreams of empire-building had tumbled so quickly into the dust. The Technarch's lips moved wordlessly. Finally he said,

"All right, Bernard. Put the report in writing. Don't gloss anything over."

"Yes, Excellency. Is there anything else?"

A pause. Then: "Get out of here. Leave me alone. Tell Naylor I won't be seeing anyone else today. *Get out of here!*" His voice trembled.

A lump of pity clogged Bernard's throat as he bowed to the Technarch, still a formidable figure in his black cloak of office. Then, unable to bear the sight, Bernard turned and rushed away, through the irising sphincter into the antechamber, and to the transmat that sent him home.

Everything was as he had left it. Everything seemed to be waiting for him—the books, the pipe, the music, the brandy—waiting for him to slip back into his life at the point where he had stepped out of it. But it would never be the same again, Bernard thought.

Never the same again for any of us. He walked to the window, looking out past the foggy London night to the faint glimmering stars that managed to make their way through the haze.

THE END



THE UNUSED STARS

By
ISAAC ASIMOV

*Bored with Deneb and Alpha Centauri?
Fed up with Procyon? The sky is load-
ed with perfectly good stars . . . how
come they're not popular?*

A STOCK in trade of the science-fiction writer is (or should be) the names of the various stars. Out there is where the plot action is proceeding much of the time. Yet it strikes me that the clan is not using its opportunities properly.

Of course, every visible star and thousands of invisible stars have names. Many involve Greek letters and the names of the constellation they're in. Alpha Centauri, for instance, simply means "first of the Centaur." There are also Beta Centauri, Gamma Centauri and so on. And when Greek letters run out, astronomers use numbers. Or else they call a star as such-and-such a number in so-and-so's catalog of stars.

However, there are about 250 stars with names all their own; nice mouth-filling names. Of these, perhaps a dozen are met with in s.f., and thereafter writ-

ers start making up names. This seems a waste, since the star-names that remain unused and unsung are in many cases real beauties. Who would invent a name like Ruchbah, for instance, or Benetnasch. Yet those are real names of real stars.

Even the old reliables, the few star-names that are used so often in s.f. as to become clichés (Sirius springs to mind—one of my own overused ones) gain new vitality, however, if we consider what the names mean.

Sirius is in the constellation Canis Major ("Great Dog"—the official names of all the constellations are in Latin) and is sometimes called the "Dog Star" for that reason. Because it is so bright a star, the ancients had the sneaking suspicion that it added significantly to the sun's heat, when it rose with the sun

in midsummer. We still call midsummer, the "dog days," and the name Sirius itself bears this out, since it comes from a Greek word meaning "scorching."

(Incidentally, Sirius being the Dog-Star, its white-dwarf companion has been referred to as "The Pup.")

A bright star to the west of Sirius is in Canis Minor ("Little Dog.") Since it is to the west of Sirius it naturally rises and sets a little earlier than Sirius. This star rising before the Dog Star does is called Procyon, from Greek words meaning "before the dog."

Near the two constellations Ursa Major ("Great Bear") and Ursa Minor ("Little Bear") is the constellation Bootes ("Herdsman"). The ancients pictured the constellation as a man holding two dogs in leash. The dogs were represented by stars in a small constellation between Bootes and Ursa Major, these being Canes Venatici ("Hunting Dogs"). Bootes and the dogs were obviously protecting the rest of the heavens against the ferocious bears. Consequently, the brightest star in Bootes was named Arcturus, from Greek words meaning "guardian of the bears."

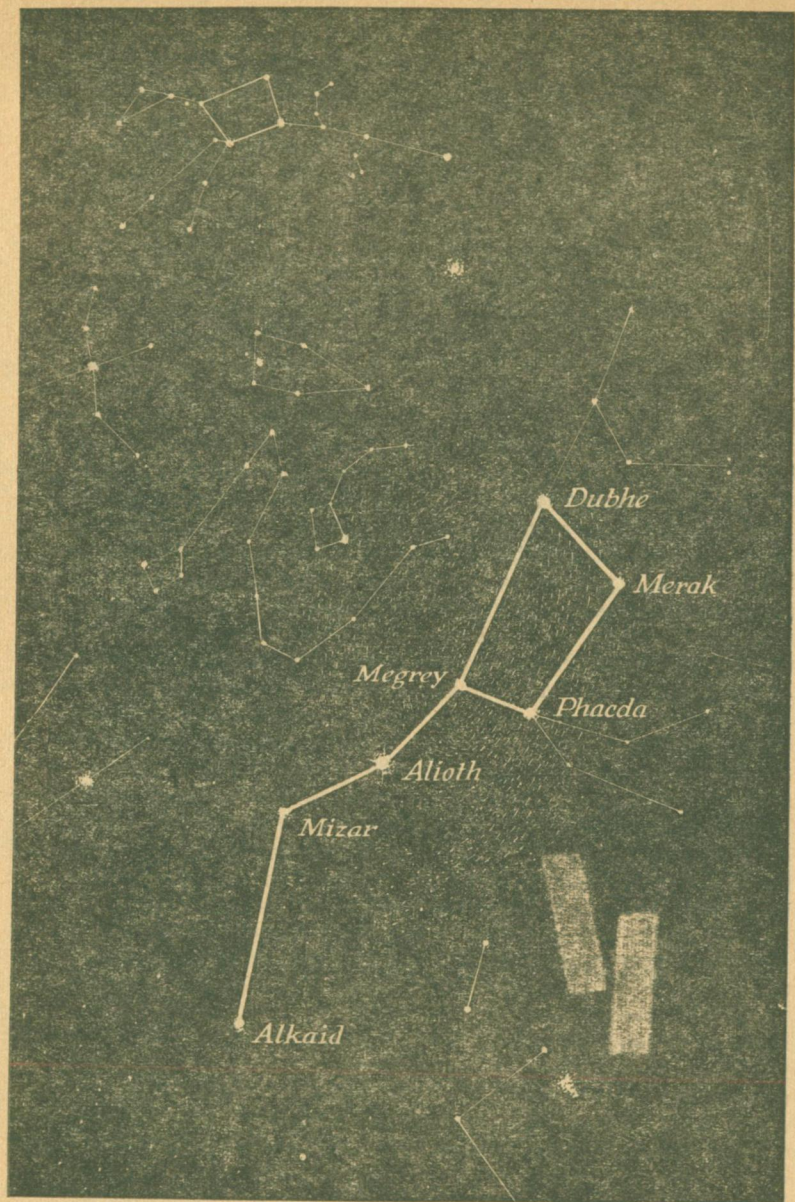
The ancients took the imaginative pictures they drew seriously. For instance the constellation Auriga ("Charioteer") was drawn by them as an old man, holding a bridle in one hand and a goat and her kids in the other.

The stars at the side of the constellation are therefore referred to as The Kids, and the brightest of these (and of the whole constellation) is Capella, from a Latin word meaning "little goat." Capella is often called the Goat Star for this reason.

Again, the constellation Virgo ("Maiden") is pictured as a young woman holding ears of grain in her hand. Presumably, this is because the sun enters Virgo in the early fall when the grain is ripe and ready for harvest. The star in those ears of grain is Spica, the Latin word for "ear of grain."

Sometimes the names are less dependent on the constellation pictures. The constellation of Gemini ("Twins") contains two bright stars closely spaced in the heavens (which probably inspired the name of the constellation). The Romans called them after the most famous twins in their mythology, Castor and Pollux.

Regulus is the brightest star in Leo ("Lion") and comes from the Latin word meaning "little king," which is appropriate for the chief ornament of the king of beasts. More appropriate still is Antares, which means "opposed to [or rivalling] Ares," Ares being the Greek God whom the Romans called Mars. Antares is a red star, rivalling Mars in color. Most appropriately named of all is Polaris, the star marking the North Celestial Pole, which is also called the North Star and the Pole Star.



Some of the unused stars.

Then there are completely inappropriate names. The constellation Orion ("Hunter") is pictured as a giant who is holding up his left hand to ward off the onrushing Taurus ("Bull") while he is ready to strike with the club in his right hand. Bellatrix is the star in his left shoulder and its name is the Latin word for "female warrior," something I imagine Orion would resent.

However, the large majority of the star-names are neither Greek nor Latin but are Arabic. (Hence the number of stars with names beginning with "Al—," the Arabic word for "the.")

For instance, have you ever seen the seven stars of the Big Dipper? Sure, you have. All right, then, what are their names? Of course, most of us have learned to call the two stars that form a line aimed at Polaris, "the pointers," but can you do better than that?

Well, here are the names, starting at the end of the handle of the Dipper and ending with the pointers: Alkaid, Mizar, Alioth, Megrez, Phecda, Merak, and Dubhe. How's that for a resounding series of syllables?

The first star in the list is a word meaning "the leader," for reasons that are obvious.

The second star, Mizar, means "veil." Behind that, lies a story. Near Mizar is a considerably fainter star. If this second star were by itself it could be seen without trouble, but the presence of the nearby brighter star veils

it, you see. In order to distinguish the weaker star, you must have good eyesight, and for centuries this star-pair was an eye-chart in the sky and was used as a test to distinguish good sight from bad. The fainter star is Alcor, from a phrase meaning "the weak one."

The name of the third star in the Big Dipper, Alioth, is an Arabic word for the fat tail of a sheep. If that sounds startling, you'll have to realize that the Greeks pictured the Great Bear in such a way that the four stars forming the bowl of the dipper formed his rear half, while the three stars of the handle of the dipper formed a tail. Now you and I know that bears have no tails to speak of, but the Greeks either didn't know or didn't care. The Arabs must have been bothered, though. The pictured constellation looked like a bear with the tail of a sheep to them.

The fourth star, which begins the bowl of the dipper, is Megrez, meaning "root," presumably because it is the root of the tail.

I have not found out the meaning of Phecda, but as for the pointers, Merak (the further from Polaris) means "loin" since it is located in the loin of the bear, while Dubhe just means "bear."

Similarly, the four stars of the famous "square of Pegasus" (Pegasus is the "Flying Horse") are Alpheratz, Algenib, Markab and Scheat. Alpheratz, in the flank of the horse, means "the mare"; Algenib, higher up, is

"the side"; Markab, still higher up, is "the saddle." Scheat, just above a foreleg, is not as clearly named. It may be derived from the word for "good fortune" but I can't think why.

A number of the more familiar star-names are also of Arabic origin. The second brightest star in Orion, the one in the left leg of the pictured hunter, is Rigel, from the Arabic word for "foot." Betelgeuse, the brightest star in the constellation, is in the up-lifted right arm of the hunter and is a corruption of an Arabic phrase that originally stood for "arm of Orion."

Other stars are as literally derived from the picture of the constellation. Altair, the brightest star in the constellation Aquila ("Eagle"), means "bird." The constellation Pisces ("Fish-es") is pictured as two fish held together by a long cord. In the middle of the cord is the brightest star of the constellation, Al Rischa, meaning "the cord."

The brightest star in the constellation Cygnus ("Swan") is Deneb. It is located in the rear portion of the swan as usually pictured, and comes from an Arabic word meaning "tail." This was a favorite star-name among the Arabs, so that there are a number of Denebs in the sky. The Arabs distinguished among them by adding a second word for the constellation. This persists in some cases. For instance, Deneb Algedi in Capricornus ("Goat") means "tail of

the goat," and Deneb Kaitos in Cetus ("Whale") means "tail of the whale." The second brightest star in Leo is Denebola, the "-ola" suffix being what is left of that portion of the Arab phrase meaning "of the lion."

On the other hand, just to show that the Arabs are not restricted to one end of the creature, the brightest star in Piscis Australis ("Southern Fish") is Fomalhaut, from an Arabic phrase meaning "mouth of the fish." Similarly, the brightest star of Ophiuchus ("Serpent-Holder"), pictured, naturally, as a man holding a serpent, is Rasalhague, meaning "head of the snake-charmer."

Aldebaran, the brightest star in Taurus, is a kind of Procyon in reverse. Aldebaran is a little to the east of the Pleides and consequently follows them both in rising and in setting. The name of the star means "the follower" in Arabic.

Perhaps the most colorful Arabic name for a star is that for the second brightest star in the constellation Perseus. It is one of the few stars in the sky that changes brightness visibly and regularly. This was a startling thing to the ancients, who generally believed that the heavens were perfect and unchangeable. The only solution the Arabs could think of was that this particular star was under the control of a malevolent spirit, and they called it Algol, which means, literally, "the ghoul," though it

is usually translated as "the demon." Algol is consequently known as the "Demon Star."

All this just gives you an idea. Among the two hundred or so names not mentioned are such

succulent samples as: Tarazed, Pherkad, Mesartim, Kochab, Izar, Caph, Dschubba and Azelfafage.

So why make up names, gentlemen?
THE END



SHOPPING GUIDE

Classified

Rate: 25¢ per word including name and address. Minimum 10 words. Send orders and remittance to AMAZING STORIES, One Park Avenue, New York City 16, New York, Attention Martin Lincoln.

BOOKS—MAGAZINES

FANTASY & SF Books and Mags lowest prices, list free. Werewolf Bookshop, 7055L Shannon Road, Verona, Pa.

BOOKS, Pocketbooks, magazines. Tremendous stock, reasonable prices. Lists on request. Science-Fiction and Fantasy Publications. 127-01 116th Ave., S. Ozone Park 20, N. Y.

BOOK Bargains! Send for list. Bookshop, 6494 Aylesworth, Cleveland 30, Ohio.

"MASS Hypnosis: Soviet Secret Weapon" Published in February American Mercury Magazine is an article that vitally concerns you. Don't miss it. Reprints 15¢ I. P. Society, P. O. Box 42187, Los Angeles 42, California.

"CULTS, Sects, philosophical groups in Southern California, their origin, beliefs, practices, publications, locations. More than 25 presented. Request publication A-1. Enclose \$2, cash, check, money order. Arrow Research Institute, P. O. Box 25583, Los Angeles 25, Calif."

INSTRUCTION

FREE Booklet explains sensational courses. Amazing popular piano, modern songwriting, personality courses. Weidner System, 423 E. 7th Street, Boston 27, Mass.

HYPNOTIZE Others in seconds! New Pyramid method eliminates embarrassing failures. Complete guaranteed course \$2.00. Recorded tapes on auto-suggestion—age regression—reincarnation—hypnotism sound tracks available. Mr. Cee, Devonshire S. Bermuda.

HYPNOTIZE Self, others while asleep with amazing hypnotic phonograph records, tapes. Catalog free. Sleep-Learning Research Association, Box 24-FG, Olympia, Washington.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

MAKE \$25-\$50 week, clipping newspaper items for publishers. Some clippings worth \$5.00 each. Particulars free. National, 81-DG, Knickerbocker Station, New York.

EARN Extra money selling advertising book matches. Free samples furnished. Matchcorp, Dept. MD-79, Chicago 32, Illinois.

MEN-Women Agents: sensational new money-makers. Beautifully hand-painted plastic personalized photo enlargements, compacts, rings, bracelets, lockets, etc. Simply take orders, pocket 40% commission—we deliver and collect. Sales outfit free. Novelco, 3341 North Ave., Chicago 47, Ill.

STAMPS

GIGANTIC Collection free! Includes triangles, early United States, animals, commemoratives, British Colonies, high-value pictorials, etc. Complete collection plus big illustrated magazine all free. Send 5¢ for postage. Gray Stamp Company, Dept. 22, Toronto, Canada.

307 WORLDWIDE Different stamps only 25¢. Approvals. Niagastamp, St. Catharines 690, Ontario.

PEN PALS

JAPANESE Pen Pals send 25¢ stamp. Hirayama 3-49, Okusawa, Setagaya, Tokyo, Japan.

LOOKING For pen pals who share your interests? This would be a perfect spot for you to place a classified ad. Only 25¢ per word including name and address. Send orders and remittance to AMAZING, One Park Avenue, New York City 16, New York. Attention Martin Lincoln.

MISCELLANEOUS

WELL-TO-DO widow has money-saving formula. \$1.00 and stamped, self-addressed envelope. Jane Bee, 427 South 31st Avenue, Phoenix, Arizona.

SEND UFO information, pictures to Scott Guthrie, 1009 23rd, Sarasota, Florida.

MARRIAGE Certificate legal form \$1.00. Parker, Box 7072, Miami 55, Florida.

RECEIVE Immediately classified section of Los Angeles Times. California's largest newspaper. Send \$1.00 to: Walter Hickey, 2633 No. Walnut Grove, So. San Gabriel, Calif.

"WINEMAKING," \$1. "Stout, Beer, Ale Brewing," \$1. Illustrated. Eaton Books, Box 1242-VS, Santa Rosa, California.

**Now
on
Sale!**

1959 POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY

COLOR ANNUAL



the year's most outstanding photographic achievement!
Popular Photography's 1959

COLOR ANNUAL

Don't miss the
1959 COLOR ANNUAL!

*Pick up your copy now at your
newsstand or camera store—*

\$1.25 EVERYWHERE

Here's an event you won't want to miss—the publication of the 1959 COLOR ANNUAL! Compiled by the editors of Popular Photography, it's a real gem—over 172 pages—including such diverse and interesting features as:

- A symposium of experts on **WHAT MAKES A GOOD COLOR PICTURE?**
- Ten-page portfolios by two masters: Emil Schulthess and Hy Peskin
- How a pro like Ralph Morse solves problem pictures
- A look at color photography by the inventors of Kodachrome
- A forty-page International Portfolio
- Technical review of the year
- Notes on all pictures—why they were chosen, how they were made

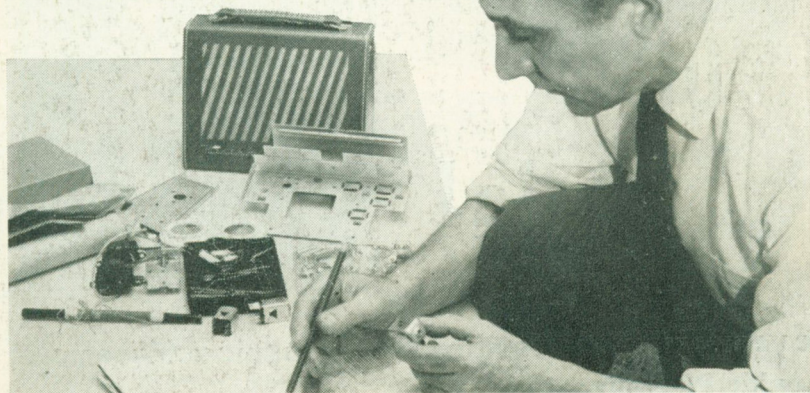
ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

ONE PARK AVENUE, NEW YORK 16, NEW YORK



KIT BUILDERS EVERYWHERE ASKED FOR IT!

*Completely new
edition of*
ELECTRONIC KITS
now on sale!



Because of the wide popularity of its first Annual on kit construction, Ziff-Davis now offers this exciting follow-up—**ELECTRONIC KITS—2nd Edition!** This brand-new sequel will save you money on hi-fi, ham radio, other electronics devices by showing you how to use easy-to-assemble kits! What's more, **ELECTRONIC KITS—2nd Edition** features a big up-to-date directory of available kits, complete with specifications, prices, and manufacturers' names!

over 160 pages—600 illustrations

HOW TO BUILD A KIT—Learn what's involved in building a kit, and pick up tips on good construction practices.

KIT CONSTRUCTION CHECK LIST—Here's a summary of important steps in assembling a kit, enabling you to get it right the first time.

HOW NOT TO MAKE MISTAKES—Pick up tricks to simplify work and reduce the chance of error.

WORKING WITH WIRE—For rapid assembly and reliable operation, you should know how to handle various types of wire. You'll find out here.

FOR YOUR HI-FI—How to construct a Stereo Pre-amplifier, Stereo Adapter, Tape Recorder,

Turntable, AM-FM Tuner, Book Shelf Speaker Enclosure, Integrated Stereo Amplifier, Monaural Amplifier, Record Changer, Tone Arm, Speaker Enclosure.

FOR YOUR SHOP—How to build a Vacuum Tube Volt Meter, Signal Generator, Oscilloscope, Tube Tester, Multitester, Transistor Tester.

FOR YOUR HAM SHACK—Transmitter, Receiver, Grid-Dip Meter, Modulator, Single-side-band Converter, Mobile Transmitter.

FOR YOUR HOME—Table Radio, Transistor Pocket Radio, Junior Electronics Experimenters' Kit, Clock Radio, Radio Control Transmitter.

ELECTRONIC KITS—2nd EDITION IS NOW ON SALE

Be sure to pick up your copy today—only \$1.00 (outside U. S. A., \$1.25)

Ziff-Davis Publishing Company • One Park Avenue • New York 16, New York