OMEGA! -A Novel by Robert Sheckley

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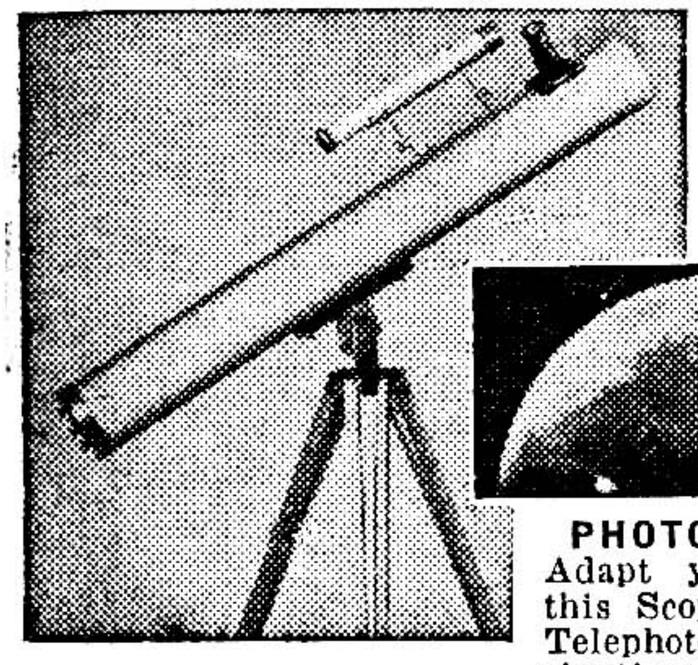

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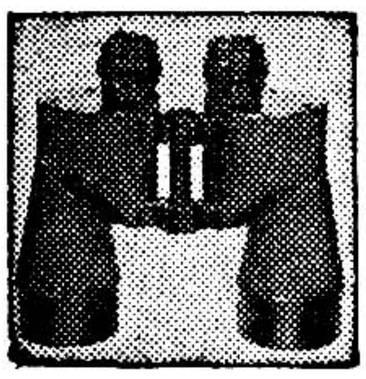

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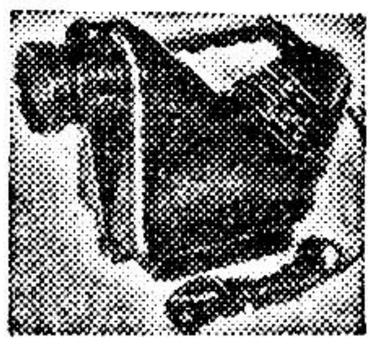

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Editorial

THE problems of high-speed space flight can be summed up, it would seem, as just one darn barrier after another. One small example of how far and fast our technology has come is that the idea of a "sound barrier" and a "heat barrier" to high-speed travel —not long ago major problems—now sound terribly old-fashioned. (Of course neither sound nor heat is a barrier until one gets in or close to an atmosphere.)

About a year ago the discovery by a satellite of layers of heavy radiation in space was considered to put an insuperable obstacle in the way of high-speed space flight. Scientists speculated that men traveling at a speed near the velocity of light would suffer serious physiological damage from high-energy cosmic rays that would penetrate the spaceship. Only a few months ago, however, other scientists reported this high-energy radiation actually caused less tissue damage than lighter, low-energy radiation.

But no sooner had the "radiation barrier" been lowered than another reared up in its place. This time it is the "disintegration barrier." A prominent astrodynamicist (whose field concerns the forces that control movement in outer space), said that ships travelling at or near light velocity (the speed required for the unrestricted exploration of our galaxy) would be severely damaged by collisions with cosmic ray particles and interstellar dust.

The biggest danger, he said, comes from interstellar dust. It would bombard a spaceship going at close to 186,000 miles a second with such ferocity and force as to pit it, melt it, and eventually demolish it. At that speed a spaceship would also, it was predicted, absorb large amounts of energy from the electrons in the particles of interstellar dust. The energy would build to a point where it could blast the ship to destruction.

No doubt it will not be long before some other scientists find that the "disintegration barrier" is not so bad as it sounds. Meanwhile, however, there is still hope. A spaceship traveling at 30 to 80 per cent of the speed of light (56,000 to 149,000 miles a second) would be safe from disintegration. At these speeds, man could comfortably travel no further than 100 light years from Earth. Oh, well, it's a beginning, anyway.—NL

OMEGA!

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

ILLUSTRATOR GRAYAM

This novel will be published in the fall by Signet Books under the title "The Status Civilization."

(First of Two Parts)

CHAPTER 1

HIS return to consciousness was a slow and painful process. It was a journey in which he traversed all time. He dreamed. He rose through thick layers of sleep, out of the imaginary beginnings of all things. He lifted a pseudopod from primordial ooze, and the pseudoped was *him*. He became an amoeba which contained *his* essence; then a fish marked with his own peculiar individuality; then an ape unlike all other apes. And finally, he became a man.

What kind of man? Dimly he saw himself, faceless, a beamer

gripped tight in one hand, a corpse at his feet. *That* kind of man.

He awoke, rubbed his eyes, and waited for further memories to come.

No memories came. Not even his name.

He sat up hastily and willed memory to return. When it didn't he looked around, seeking in his surroundings some clue to his identity.

He was sitting on a bed in a small gray room. There was a closed door on one side. On the other, through a curtained alcove, he could see a tiny bathroom. Light came into the room from some hidden source, perhaps from the ceiling itself. The room had a bed and a single chair, and nothing else.

He held his chin in his hand and closed his eyes. He tried to catalog all his knowledge, and the implications of that knowledge. He knew that he was a man, species *homo sapiens*, an inhabitant of the planet Earth. He spoke a language which he knew was English. (Did that mean that there were other languages?) He knew the commonplace names for things: room, light, chair. He possessed in addition a limited amount of general knowledge. He knew that there were many important things which he did not know, which he once had known.

Something must have happened to me.

That something could have been worse. If it had gone a little further, he might have been left a mindless blob without a language, unaware of being human, of being a man, of being of Earth. A certain amount had been left to him.

But when he tried to think beyond the basic facts in his possession, he came to a dark and horror-filled area. *Do Not Enter*. Exploration into his own mind was as dangerous as a journey to—what? He couldn't find an analog, though he strongly suspected that many existed.

I must have been sick.

That was the only reasonable explanation. He was a man with the recollection of memories. He must at one time have had that priceless wealth of recall which now he could only deduce from the limited evidence at his disposal. At one time he must have had specific memories of birds, trees, friends, family, a wife perhaps, a dog, a cat, a job. Now he could only theorize about them. Once he had been able to say, this is like, or, that reminds me of. Now nothing reminded him of anything, and things were only like themselves. He had lost his powers of contrast and comparison. He could no

longer analyze the present in terms of the experienced past.

This must be a hospital.

Of course. He was being cared for in this place. Kindly doctors were working to restore his memory, to replace his identity, to restore his judgment apparatus, to tell him who and what he was. It was very good of them; he felt tears of gratitude start in his eyes.

He stood up and walked slowly around his small room. He went to the door and found it locked. That locked door gave him a moment of panic which he sternly controlled. Perhaps he had been violent.

Well, he wouldn't be violent any more. They'd see. They would award him all possible patient privileges. He would speak about that with the doctor.

He waited. After a long time, he heard footsteps coming down the corridor outside his door. He sat on the edge of the bed and listened, trying to control his excitement.

The footsteps stopped beside his door. A panel slid open, and a face peered in.

"How are you feeling?" the man asked.

"I'm fine," he said. He walked up to the panel, and saw that the man who questioned him was dressed in a brown uniform. He had an object on his waist which could be identified, after a moment, as a weapon. This man was undoubtedly a guard. He had a blunt, sullen, unreadable face.

"Could you tell me what my name is?" he asked the guard.

"Nope," the guard said.

"But I have to call myself *something*."

"Call yourself 402," the guard said. "That's your cell number."

He didn't like it. But 402 was better than nothing at all. He asked the guard, "Have I been sick for very long? Am I getting better?"

"Sure," the guard said, in a voice that carried no conviction. "The important thing is, just stay quiet. Don't cause no fuss. Obey the rules. That's the best way. Get it?"

"Certainly," said 402. "But why can't I remember anything?"

"Well, that's the way it goes," the guard said. He started to walk away.

402 called after him, "Wait! You can't just leave me like this, you have to tell me something. What happened to me, why am I in this hospital?"

"Hospital?" the guard said. He turned toward 402 and grinned. "What gave you the idea this was a hospital?"

"I assumed it," 402 said.

"You assumed wrong. This is a prison."

402 remembered his dream of the murdered man. Dream or memory? Desperately he called after the guard, "What was my offense? What did I do?"

"You'll find out," the guard said.

"When?"

"After we land," the guard said. "Now get ready for assembly."

He walked away. 402 sat down on the bed and tried to think. He had learned a few things. He was in a prison, and the prison was going to land. What did that mean? Why did a prison have to land? And what was an assembly?

402 had only a confused idea of what happened next. An unmeasurable amount of time passed. He was sitting on his bed, trying to piece together facts about himself. He had an impression of bells ringing. And then the door of his cell flew open.

Why was that? What did it mean?

402 walked to the door and peered into the corridor. He was very excited, but he didn't want to leave the security of his cell. He waited, and the guard came up.

"All right now," the guard said, "no one's going to hurt you. Go straight down the corridor."

The guard pushed him gently. 402 walked down the corridor. He saw other cell doors opening, other men coming into the corridor. It was a thin stream at first; but as he continued walking, more and more men crowded into the passageway. Most of them looked bewildered, and none of them talked. The only words were from the guards:

"Move along now, keep on moving, straight ahead."

They were herded into a large circular auditorium. Looking around, 402 saw that a balcony ran around the room, and armed guards were stationed every few yards along it. Their presence seemed unnecessary; these cowed and bewildered men weren't going to stage a revolt. Still, he supposed the grim-faced guards had a symbolic value. They reminded the newly awakened men of the most important fact of their lives; that they were prisoners.

After a few minutes, a pale man in a somber uniform stepped out on the balcony. He held up his hand for attention, although the prisoners were already watching him fixedly. Then, though he had no visible means of amplification, his voice boomed hollowly through the auditorium.

"This is an indoctrination talk," he said. "Listen carefully and try to absorb what I am

about to tell you. These facts will be very important for your existence."

The prisoners watched him. The speaker said, "All of you have, within the last hour, awakened in your cells. You have discovered that you cannot remember your former lives, or even your names. All you possess is a meagre store of generalized knowledge; enough to keep you in touch with reality.

"You have been told by your guards that you are prisoners on a prison ship, which is about to land.

"I will not add to your knowledge. All of you, back on Earth, were vicious and depraved criminals. You were people of the worst sort, men who had forfeited any right to consideration by the state. In a less enlightened age, you would have been executed. In our age, you have been deported from Earth."

The speaker held out his hands to quiet the murmur that ran through the auditorium. He said, "All of you are criminals. And all of you have one thing in common: an inability to obey the basic obligatory rules of human society. Those rules are necessary for civilization to function. By disobeying them, you have committed crimes against all mankind. Therefore mankind rejects you. You are grit in the machinery of civilization, and you have been sent to a planet where your own sort is king. Here you can make your own rules, and die by them. Here is the freedom you lusted for; the uncontained and self-destroying freedom of a cancerous growth."

The speaker wiped his forehead and glared earnestly at the prisoners. "But perhaps," he said, "a rehabilitation is possible for some of you. Omega, the planet to which we are going, is *your* planet, a place ruled entirely by prisoners. It is a world where you could begin again, with no prejudices against you, with a clean record! Your past lives are forgotten. Don't try to remember them. Such memories would only serve to restimulate your criminal tendencies. Consider yourselves born afresh as of the moment of awakening in your cells."

The speaker's slow, measured words had a certain hypnotic quality. 402 listened, his eyes slightly unfocused and fixed upon the speaker's pale forehead.

"A new world," the speaker was saying. "You are reborn—but with the necessary consciousness of sin. Without it, you would be unable to combat the evil inherent in your personalities. Remember that. Remember that there is no escape and no

return. Guardships armed with the latest beam weapons patrol the skies of Omega day and night. These ships are designed to obliterate anything that rises more than five hundred feet above the surface of the planet. The ships constitute an invincible barrier through which no prisoner can ever pass. Accommodate yourselves to these facts. They constitute the rules which must govern your lives. Think about what I've said. And now stand by for landing."

The speaker left the balcony. For a while, the prisoners simply stared at the spot where he had been. Then, tentatively, a murmur of conversation began. After a while it died away. There was nothing to talk about. The prisoners, without memory of the past, had nothing upon which to base a speculation of the future. Personalities could not be exchanged, for those personalities were newly emerged and still undefined. They couldn't even talk about the weather.

They sat in silence, uncommunicative men who had been too long in solitary confinement. The guards on the balcony stood like statues, remote and impersonal. And then the faintest tremor ran through the floor of the auditorium.

The tremor came again; then it changed into a definite vibration. 402 felt heavier, as though an invisible weight were pressing against his head and shoulders.

A loudspeaker voice called out, "Attention! The ship is now landing on Omega. We will disembark in exactly ten minutes."

The last vibration died away, and the floor beneath them gave a slight lurch. The prisoners, still silent and dazed, were formed into a long line and marched out of the auditorium. Flanked by guards, they went down a corridor which stretched on interminably. From it, 402 began to get some idea of the size of the ship.

Far ahead, he could see a patch of sunlight which shone robustly against the pale illumination of the corridor. His section of the long shuffling line reached the sunlight, and 402 saw that it came from an open hatchway through which the prisoners were passing.

In his turn, 402 went through the hatchway, climbed down a long stairway, and found himself on solid ground. He was standing in an open, sunlit square. The guards were forming the disembarked prisoners into files; and on all sides, 402 could see a crowd of spectators watching.

A loudspeaker voice boomed, "Answer when your number is called. Your identity will now

be revealed to you. Answer promptly when your number is called."

402 felt weak and very tired. Not even his identity could interest him now. All he wanted to do was lie down, to sleep, to have a chance to think about his situation. He looked around and took casual note of the huge spaceship behind him, of the guards, the spectators. Overhead, he saw black dots moving against a blue sky. At first he thought they were birds. Then, looking closer, he saw they were spaceships. He wasn't particularly interested in them.

"Number 1! Speak out!"

"Here," a voice answered.

"Number 1, your name is Wayne Southholder. Age 34, height 5 feet 10, weight 173, blood type A-L2, Index AR-431-C. Guilty of treason."

When the voice had finished, a loud cheer came up from the crowd. They were applauding the prisoner's traitorous actions, and welcoming him to Omega.

The names were read down the list, and 402, drowsy in the sunshine, dozed on his feet and listened to the crimes of murder, arson, credit-theft, forgery, deviationalism, and mutantism. At last his number was called.

"Number 402."

"Here."

"Number 402, your name is Will Barrent. Age 27, height, 5 feet 11, weight 151, blood type O-L3, Index JX-221-R. Guilty of murder."

The crowd cheered, but 402 scarcely heard them. He was trying to accustom himself to the idea of having a name. A real name instead of a number. Will Barrent. He hoped he wouldn't forget it. He repeated the name to himself over and over again, and almost missed the last announcement from the ship's loudspeaker.

"The new men are now free upon the planet Omega. You will be given temporary housing at Square A-2. Be cautious and circumspect in your words and actions. Watch, listen, and learn. The law requires me to tell you that the average life expectancy on Omega is approximately three years."

It took a while for those last words to take effect on Barrent. He was still thinking about the novelty of having a name. He hadn't considered the implications of being a murderer on a criminal's planet.

CHAPTER 2

THE new prisoners were led to a row of barracks at Square A-2. There were nearly five hundred of them. They were not yet men; they were blobs whose true memories extended barely an hour in time. Sitting

on their bunks, the new-borns looked curiously at their bodies, examined with sharp interest their hands and feet. They stared at each other, and saw their formlessness mirrored in each other's eyes. They were not yet men; but they were not babies either. Certain abstractions remained, and the ghosts of memories. Maturation came quickly, born of old habit patterns and personality traits, retained in the broken threads of their former lives on Earth.

The new men clung to the vague recollections of concepts, ideas, rules. Within a few hours, their phlegmatic blandness had begun to pass. They were men now. Out of a dazed and superficial conformity, sharp differences began to emerge. Character reasserted itself, and the five hundred began to discover what they were.

Will Barrent stood on line for a look at himself in the barracks mirror. When his turn came, he saw the reflection of a thin-faced, narrow-nosed, pleasant-looking young man with straight brown hair. The young man had an amiable, resolute, honest, unexceptional face, unmarked by any strong passion. Barrent turned away disappointed; it was the face of a stranger.

Later, examining himself more closely, he could find no scars or anything else to distinguish his body from a thousand other bodies. His hands were uncalloused. He was wiry rather than muscular. He wondered what sort of work he had done on Earth.

Murder?

He frowned. He wasn't ready to accept that.

A man tapped him on the shoulder. "How you feeling, pal?"

Barrent turned and saw a large, ugly, thick-shouldered red-haired man standing beside him.

"Pretty good," Barrent said. "You were in line behind me, weren't you?"

"That's right. Number 401. Name's Danis Foeren."

Barrent introduced himself.

"What're you in for?" Foeren asked.

"Murder."

Foeren nodded, looking impressed. "That's pretty good. Me, I'm a forger. Wouldn't think it to look at my hands, huh?" He held out two massive paws covered with sparse red hair. "But the skill's there. My hands remembered before any other part of me. On the ship I sat in my cell and looked at my hands. They itched. They wanted to be off and doing things. But the rest of me couldn't remember what."

"What did you do?" Barrent asked.

"I closed my eyes and let my hands take over," Foeren said. "First thing I knew, they were up and picking the lock of the cell." He held up his huge hands and looked at them admiringly. "Clever little devils!"

"Picking the lock?" Barrent asked. "But I thought you were a forger."

"Well, now," Foeren said, "forgery was my main line. But a pair of skilled hands can do almost anything. I suspect that I was only *caught* for forgery; but I might also have been a safeman or something. My hands know too much for just a forger."

"You've found out more about yourself than I have," Barrent said. "All I have to start with is a dream."

"Well, that's a start," Foeren said. "There's gotta be ways of finding out more. The important thing is, we're on Omega."

"Yeah," Barrent said sourly.

"Nothing wrong with that," Foeren said. "Didn't you hear what the man said? This is our planet!"

"With an average life expectancy of three years," Barrent reminded him.

"That's probably just scare talk," Foeren said. "I wouldn't believe stuff like that from a cop. The big thing is, we have our own planet. You heard what the guy said. 'Earth rejects us.' So to hell with Earth, who needs her? We've got our own planet here. A whole damned planet, Barrent! We're free!"

Another man said, "That's right, friend." He was small, furtive-eyed, beak-nosed, and ingratiatingly friendly. "My name is Joe," he told them. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation, and I agree most heartily with our red-haired friend. Gentlemen, consider the possibilities! Earth has cast us aside? Excellent, we are better off without her. We are all equal here, free men in a free society. No uniforms, no fancy titles, no guards, no cops, no yes, sir, no, sir. Just repentant former criminals who want to live out our years in peace."

"What did they get you for?" Barrent asked.

"They said I was a credit thief," Joe said. "I'm ashamed to admit that I can't remember what a credit thief is. But perhaps it'll come back to me."

"Maybe the authorities here have some sort of memory retraining system," Foeren said.

"Authorities?" Joe said indignantly. "What do you mean, authorities? This is *our* planet. We're all equal here. By definition, there can't be any authorities. No, friends, we left all that

nonsense behind on Earth. Here we just go our merry—"

He stopped abruptly. The barracks' door had opened and a man walked in. He was evidently an older resident of Omega since he didn't wear the gray prison ship uniform. He was very fat, and dressed in garish yellow and blue clothing. On a belt around his ample waist he carried a holstered pistol and a knife. He stood just inside the doorway, his hands on his hips, glaring at the new arrivals.

"Well?" he said. "Don't you new guys recognize a Quaestor? Don't you even stand up?"

He waited. None of the men moved.

The Quaestor's face went scarlet. "Bunch of wise guys," he said. "I guess I'll have to teach you a little respect."

Even before he had taken his gun from its holster, the new men had scrambled to their feet. The Quaestor looked at them, and with a faintly regretful air pushed the weapon back in its holster. His fingers lingered on the butt.

"The first thing you guys gotta learn," the Quaestor said, "is where you stand on Omega. And where you stand is *nowhere*. You're peons, and that means you're *nothing*. Get it?"

He waited until all the new men had grunted yes. Then he said, "I oughta kill a couple of you guys just to make sure the rest get the idea. But I guess it can wait. Pay attention, peons. You are about to be instructed in your duties."

CHAPTER 3

THE Quaestor seemed to be some sort of minor official. He drew up a roster of duties in which he assigned the tasks of sweeping the barracks, washing windows, and policing the area of Square A-2. He told the men how to locate the latrines, the mess hall, and the Quaestorial office. He instructed them in elementary protocol; how to recognize members of the superior classes, the proper form of address to use when talking to a Free Citizen, how to show respect when meeting a Hadji. He taught them how to think of themselves: as peons, the lowest members of the lowest class—except for the untouchable Mutants, of course, who were classless.

"Over the next few days," the Quaestor said, "you'll all be assigned to various jobs. Some of you will go to the germanium mines, some to the fishing fleet, some will be apprenticed to various trades, and so on. In the meantime, you're free to look around Tetrahyde."

When the men looked blank, the Quaestor explained, "Tetra-

hyde is the name of the city you're in. It's the largest city on Omega." He thought for a moment. "In fact, it's the only city on Omega."

"What does the name Tetrahyde mean?" Joe asked.

"How the hell should I know?" the Quaestor said, scowling. "I suppose it's one of those old Earth names the skrenners are always coming up with. Anyhow, it's your city. Just watch your step when you enter it."

"Why?" Barrent asked.

The Quaestor grinned nastily. "That, peon, is something you'll have to find out for yourself." He turned and stamped out of the barracks.

When he had gone, Barrent went to the window. From it he could see a deserted square, and past that were the streets of Tetrahyde.

"You thinking of going out there?" Joe asked.

"Certainly I am," Barrent said. Coming with me? I could use company."

The little credit thief shook his head. "I don't think it's safe."

"Foeren, how about you?"

"I don't like it either," Foeren said. "Something's wrong with this setup. I don't understand all that stuff about classes. Might be better to stay around the barracks for a while."

"That's ridiculous," Barrent said. "It's *our* city now. Isn't anyone coming with me?"

Looking uncomfortable, Foeren hunched his big shoulders and shook his head. Joe shrugged and lay back on his cot. The rest of the new men didn't even look up.

"O. K.," Barrent said. "I'll give you a full report later." He waited a moment longer in case someone changed his mind, then went out the door.

The city of Tetrahyde was a collection of ramshackle buildings sprawled along a narrow peninsula which jutted into a sluggish gray sea. The peninsula's landward side was contained by a high stone wall, pierced with gates and guarded by sentries. Its largest building was the Arena, used once a year for the holiday Games. Near the Arena was a small cluster of government buildings.

Barrent walked along the narrow streets, staring around him, trying to get some idea of what his new home was like. The winding, unpaved roads and dark, weatherbeaten houses stirred an elusive tag-end of memory in him. He had seen a place like this on Earth, but he couldn't remember anything about it. The recollection was as tantalizing as an itch; but he couldn't locate its source.

Past the Arena, he came

into the main business district of Tetrahyde. Fascinated, he read the store signs: UNLICENSED DOCTOR—ABORTIONS PERFORMED WHILE-U-WAIT. Further on, DISBARRED LAWYER. POLITICAL PULL!

This seemed vaguely wrong to Barrent. He walked further, past stores advertising stolen goods, past a little shop that announced, MIND READING! FULL STAFF OF SKRENNING MUTANTS! YOUR PAST ON EARTH REVEALED!

Barrent was tempted to go in. But he remembered that he didn't have any money; and Omega seemed like the sort of place that put a high value on money.

He turned down a side street, walked by several restaurants, and came to a large building called THE POISON INSTITUTE. (Easy Terms. Up to 3 Years to Pay. Satisfaction Guaranteed or Your Money Back). And just past that was a place called THE VICTIM'S PROTECTIVE SOCIETY. Next door to it was THE ASSASSIN'S GUILD, Local 452.

On the basis of the indoctrination talk on the prison ship, Barrent had expected Omega to be dedicated to the rehabilitation of criminals. To judge by the store signs, this simply wasn't so; or if it was, rehabilitation took some very strange forms. He walked on more slowly, deep in thought.

Then he noticed that people were moving out of his way. They glanced at him and ducked into doorways and stores. An elderly woman took one look at him, gulped, and ran.

What was wrong? Could it be his prison uniform? No, the people of Omega had seen many of those. What was it, then?

The street was almost deserted. A shopkeeper near him was hurriedly swinging steel shutters over his display of fencing equipment.

"What's the matter?" Barrent asked him. "What's going on?"

"Are you out of your head?" the shopkeeper said. "It's Landing Day!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Landing Day!" the shopkeeper said. "The day the prison ship landed. Get back to your barracks, you idiot!"

He slammed the last steel shutter into place and locked it. Barrent felt a sudden cold touch of fear. Something was very wrong. He had better get back in a hurry. It had been stupid of him not to find out more about Omegan customs before . . .

Three men were walking down the street toward him. They were well dressed, and each wore the small golden Hadji earring in his left ear. All three men carried sidearms.

Barrent started to walk away from them. One of the men shouted, "Stop, peon!"

Barrent saw that the man's hand was dangling near his gun. He stopped and said, "What's the matter?"

"It's Landing Day," the man said. He looked at his friends. "Well, who gets him first?"

"We'll choose."

"Here's a coin."

"No, a show of fingers."

"Ready? One, two, three!"

"He's mine," said the Hadji on the left. His friends moved back as he drew his sidearm.

"Wait!" Barrent called out. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to shoot you," the man said.

"But why?"

The man smiled. "Because it's a Hadji privilege. On every Landing Day, we have the right to shoot down any new peon who leaves his barracks area. And that's what you've done."

"But I wasn't told!"

"Of course not," the man said. "If you new men were told, none of you would leave your barracks on Landing Day. And that would spoil all the fun."

He took aim.

Barrent reacted instantaneously. He threw himself to the ground as the Hadji fired, heard a hiss, and saw a jagged heat-burn score the brick building next to which he had been standing.

"My turn now," one of the men said.

"Sorry, old man, I believe it's mine."

"Seniority, dear friend, has its privileges. Stand clear."

Before the next man could take aim, Barrent was on his feet and running. The sharply winding street protected him for the moment, but he could hear the sounds of his pursuers behind him. They were running at an easy stride, almost a fast walk. Barrent couldn't understand this until he put on a burst of speed, turned a corner, and found himself facing a dead end. The Hadjis, moving at an easy pace, were coming up behind him.

Barrent looked wildly around. The store fronts were all locked and shuttered. There was nowhere he could climb, no place to hide.

And then he saw an open door halfway down the block in the direction of his pursuers. He had run right by it. It was the entrance to The Victim's Protective Society.

That's for me, Barrent thought.

He sprinted for it, running almost under the noses of the startled Hadjis. A single gun blast scorched the ground under his heels; then he had reached

the doorway and flung himself inside.

He scrambled to his feet. His pursuers had not followed him; he could still hear their voices in the street, amiably arguing questions of precedence. Barrent realized he had entered some sort of sanctuary.

He was in a large, brightly lighted room. Several ragged men were sitting on a bench near the door, laughing at a private joke. A little further down, a dark-haired girl sat and watched Barrent with wide, unblinking green eyes. At the far end of the room was a desk with a man sitting behind it. The man beckoned to Barrent.

He walked up to the desk. The man behind it was short and bespectacled. He smiled encouragingly, waiting for Barrent to speak.

"This is the Victim's Protective Society?" Barrent asked.

"Quite correct, sir," the man said. "I am Rondolp Frendlyer, president of this non-profit organization. Could I be of service?"

"You certainly could," Barrent said. "I'm practically a victim."

"I knew that just by looking at you," Frendlyer said, smiling warmly. "You have a certain *victim* look; a mixture of fear and uncertainty with just a suggestion of vulnerability thrown in. It's quite unmistakable."

"That's very interesting," Barrent said, glancing toward the door and wondering how long his sanctuary would be respected. "Mr. Frendlyer, I'm not a member of your organization—"

"That doesn't matter," Frendlyer said. "Membership in our group is necessarily spontaneous. One joins when the occasion arises. Our intention is to protect the inalienable rights of all victims."

"Yes, sir. Well, there are three men outside trying to kill me."

"I see," Mr. Frendlyer said. He opened a drawer and took out a large book. He flipped through it quickly and found the reference he wanted. "Tell me, did you ascertain the status of these men?"

"I believe they were Hadjis," Barrent said. "Each of them had a little gold earring in his left ear."

"Quite right," Mr. Frendlyer said. "And today is Landing Day. You came off the ship that landed today, and have been classified a peon. Is that correct?"

"Yes, it is," Barrent said.

"Then I'm happy to say that everything is in order. The Landing Day Hunt ends at sundown. You can leave here with the knowledge that everything is

correct and that your rights are in no way being violated."

"Leave here? After sundown, you mean."

Mr. Frendlyer shook his head and smiled sadly. "I'm afraid not. According to the law, you must leave here at once."

"But they'll kill me!"

"That's very true," Frendlyer said. "Unfortunately, it can't be helped. A victim, by definition, is one who is to be killed."

"I thought this was a protective organization."

"It is. But we protect *rights*, not victims. Your rights are not being violated. The Hadjis have the privilege of killing you on Landing Day, at any time before sundown, if you are not in your barracks area. You, I might add, have the right to kill anyone who tries to kill you."

"I don't have a weapon," Barrent said.

"Victims never do," Frendlyer said. "It makes all the difference, doesn't it? But weapon or not, I'm afraid you'll have to leave now."

Barrent could still hear the Hadjis' lazy voices in the street. He asked, "Have you got a rear door?"

"Sorry."

"Then I'll be damned if I'll leave."

Still smiling, Mr. Frendlyer opened a drawer and took out a gun. He pointed it at Barrent, and said, "You really must leave. You can take your chances with the Hadjis, or you can die right here with no chance at all."

"Loan me your gun," Barrent said.

"It isn't allowed," Frendlyer told him. "Can't have victims running around with weapons, you know. It would upset things." He clicked off the safety. "Are you leaving?"

Barrent calculated his chances of diving across the desk for the gun, and decided he would never make it. He turned and walked slowly to the door. The ragged men were still laughing together. The dark-haired girl had risen from the bench and was standing near the doorway. As he came close to her, Barrent noticed that she was very lovely. He wondered what crime had dictated her expulsion from Earth.

As he passed her, he felt something hard pressed into his ribs. He reached for it, and found he was holding a small, efficient-looking gun.

"Good luck," the girl said. "I hope you know how to use it."

Barrent nodded his thanks. He wasn't sure he knew how; but he was going to find out. This was no time to doubt his self-protective powers. If there was any chance of beating the Hadji's to the trigger he'd do it.

CHAPTER 4

THE street was deserted except for the three Hadjis, who stood about twenty yards away, conversing quietly. As Barrent came through the doorway, two of the men moved back; the third, his sidearm negligently lowered, stepped forward. When he saw that Barrent was armed he quickly brought his gun into firing position.

Barrent flung himself to the ground and pressed the trigger of his unfamiliar weapon. He felt it vibrate in his hand, and saw the Hadji's head and shoulders turn black and begin to crumble. Before he could take aim at the other men, Barrent's gun was wrenched violently from his hand. The Hadji's dying shot had creased the end of the muzzle.

Desperately Barrent dived for the gun, knowing he could never reach it in time. His skin pricked in expectation of the killing shot. He rolled to his gun, still miraculously alive, and took aim at the nearest Hadji.

Just in time, he checked himself from firing. The Hadjis had holstered their weapons. One of them was saying, "Poor old Draken. He simply could not learn to draw a quick bead."

"Lack of practice," the other man said. "Draken never spent much time on the firing range."

"Well, if you ask me, it's a very good object-lesson. One mustn't get out of practice."

"And," the other man said, "one mustn't underestimate even a peon." He looked at Barrent. "Nice shooting, my friend."

"Yes, very nice indeed," the other man said. "It's damned hard to fire a handgun accurately while you're in motion."

Barrent got to his feet shakily, still holding the girl's gun, prepared to fire at the first suspicious movement from the Hadjis. But they weren't moving suspiciously. They seemed to regard the entire incident as closed.

"What happens now?" Barrent asked.

"Nothing," one of the Hadjis said. "On Landing Day, one kill is all that any man or hunting party is allowed. After that, you're out of the Hunt."

"It's really a very unimportant holiday," the other man said. "Not like the Games or the Lottery."

"All that remains for you to do," the first man said, "is to go to the Registration Office and collect your inheritance."

"My *what?*"

"Your inheritance," the Hadji said patiently. "You're entitled to the entire estate of your victim. In Draken's case, I'm sorry to say, it doesn't amount to very much."

"He never was a good businessman," the other said sadly. "Still, it'll give you a little something to start life with. And since you've made an authorized kill—even though a highly unusual one—you move upward in status. You become a Free Citizen."

People had come back into the streets, and shopkeepers were unlocking their steel shutters. A truck marked BODY DISPOSAL UNIT 5 drove up, and four uniformed men took away Draken's body. The normal life of Tetrahyde had begun again. This, more than any assurances from the Hadjis, told Barrent that the moment for murder was over. He put the girl's gun in his pocket.

"The Registration Office is over this way," one of the Hadjis told him. "We'll act as your witnesses."

Barrent still had only a limited understanding of the situation. But since the breaks were suddenly coming his way, he decided to accept whatever he could get without questioning it. There would be plenty of time later to find out where he stood.

Accompanied by the Hadjis, he went to the Registration Office on Gunpoint Square. There a bored clerk heard the entire story, produced Draken's business papers and pasted Barrent's name over Draken's. Barrent noticed that several other names had been pasted over. There seemed to be a fast turnover of businesses in Tetrahyde.

He found that he was now the owner of an Antidote Shop at 3 Blazer Boulevard.

The business papers also officially recognized Barrent's new rank as a Free Citizen. The clerk gave him a ring of status, made of cheap gunmetal, and advised him to change into Citizen's clothing as soon as possible if he wished to avoid unpleasant incidents.

Outside, the Hadjis wished him the best of luck. Barrent decided to see what his new business was like.

Blazer Boulevard was a short alley running between two streets. Near the middle of it was a storefront with a sign which read, ANTIDOTE SHOP. Beneath that it read, "Specifics for every poison, whether animal, vegetable or mineral. Carry our handy Survival-Kit. Twenty-three antidotes in one pocket-sized container!"

Barrent opened the door and went in. Behind a low counter he saw ceiling-high shelves stocked with labelled bottles, cans and cartons, and square glass jars containing odd bits of leaves, twigs and fungus. In back of the counter was a small shelf of books with titles like "Quick

Diagnosis in Acute Poisoning Cases," "The Arsenic Family," and "The Permutations of Henbane."

It was quite obvious that poisoning played a large part in the daily life of Omega. Here was a store—and presumably there were others—whose sole purpose was to dispense antidotes. Barrent thought about this and decided that he had inherited a strange but honorable business. He would study the books over the next few days and find out how an Antidote Shop was run.

The store had a back apartment with a living room, bedroom and kitchen. In one of the closets, Barrent found a badly-made suit of Citizen black, into which he changed. He took the girl's gun from the pocket of his prison ship uniform, weighed it in his hand for a moment, then put it into a pocket of his new suit. He left the store and found his way back to the Victim's Protective Society.

The door was still open, and the three ragged men were still sitting on the bench. They weren't laughing now. Their long wait seemed to have tired them. At the other end of the room, Mr. Frendlyer was seated behind his desk, reading through a thick pile of papers. There was no sign of the girl.

Barrent walked to the desk, and Frendlyer stood up to greet him.

"My congratulations!" Frendlyer said. "Dear fellow, my very warmest congratulations. That was a splendid bit of shooting you did. And in motion, too!"

"Thank you," Barrent said. "The reason I came back here—"

"I know why," Frendlyer said. "You wished to be advised of your rights and obligations as a Free Citizen. What could be more natural? If you'll take a seat on that bench, I'll be with you in—"

"I didn't come here for that," Barrent said. "I want to find out about my rights and obligations, of course. But right now, I want to find that girl."

"Girl?"

"She was sitting on the bench when I came in. She was the one who gave me the gun."

Mr. Frendlyer looked astonished. "Citizen, you must be laboring under a misapprehension. There has been no woman in this office all day."

"She was sitting on the bench near those three men. A very attractive dark-haired girl. You must have noticed her."

"I would certainly have noticed her if she had been here," Frendlyer said, winking. "But as I said before, no woman has entered these premises today."

Barrent glared at him and pulled the gun out of his pocket. "In that case, how did I get this?"

"I loaned it to you," Frendlyer said. "I'm glad you were able to use it successfully, but now I would appreciate its return."

"You're lying," Barrent said, taking a firm grip on the weapon. "Let's ask those men."

He walked over to the bench with Frendlyer close behind him. He caught the attention of the man who had been sitting nearest the girl and asked him, "Where did the girl go?"

The man lifted a sullen, unshaven face and said, "What girl you talking about, Citizen?"

"The one who was sitting right here."

"I didn't notice nobody. Rafeel, did you see a female on this bench?"

"Not me," Rafeel said. "And I been sitting here continuous since ten this morning."

"I didn't see her neither," the third man said. "And I got sharp eyes."

Barrent turned back to Frendlyer. "Why are you lying to me?"

"I've told you the simple truth," Frendlyer said. "There has been no girl in here all day. I loaned you the gun, as is my privilege as President of the Victim's Protective Society. I would now appreciate its return."

"To hell with you," Barrent said. "I'm keeping the gun until I find the girl."

"That might not be wise," Frendlyer said. He hastily added, "Thievery, I mean, is not condoned under these circumstances."

"I'll take my chances on that," Barrent said. He turned and left the Victim's Protective Society.

CHAPTER 5

BARRENT needed time to recuperate from his violent entry into Omegan life. Starting from the helpless state of a newborn, he had moved through murder to the ownership of an Antidote Shop. From a forgotten past on a planet called Earth, he had been catapulted into a dubious present on a planet of criminals. He had gotten a glimpse of a complex class structure, and a hint of an institutionalized program of murder. He had discovered in himself a certain measure of self-reliance, and a surprising quickness with a gun. He knew there was a great deal more to find out about Omega, Earth, and himself. He hoped he would live long enough to make the necessary discoveries.

First things first. He had to earn a living. To do that, he had to find out about poisons and antidotes.

He moved into the apartment in back of his store and began reading the books left by the late Hadji Draken.

The literature on poisons was fascinating. There were the vegetable poisons closely related to those on Earth, such as hellebore, setterwort, deadly nightshade, and the yew tree. He learned about the action of hemlock—its preliminary intoxication, and its final convulsions. There was prussic acid poisoning from almonds and digitalin poisoning from purple foxglove. There was the awsome efficiency of wolfsbane with its deadly store of aconite. There were the fungi such as the amanitas toadstools and fly agaric, not to mention the many purely Omegan vegetable poisons like redcup, flowering lily, and amortalis.

But the animal poisons, although dismayingly numerous, were only one part of his studies. He had to consider the animals of earth, sea and air, the several species of deadly spiders, the snakes, scorpions and giant wasps. There was an imposing array of metallic poisons such as arsenic, mercury and bismuth. There were the commoner corrosives—nitric, hydrochloric, phosphoric and sulphuric acid. And there were the poisons distilled or extracted from various sources, among which were strychnine, formic acid, hyoscine and belladonna.

Each of the poisons had one or more antidotes listed; but those complicated, cautiously-worded formulas, Barrent suspected, were frequently unsuccessful. To make matters more difficult, the efficacy of an antidote seemed to depend upon a correct diagnosis of the poisoning agent. And too often the symptoms produced by one poison resembled those of another.

Barrent pondered these problems while he studied his books. In the meantime, with considerable nervousness, he served his first customers.

He found that many of his fears were ungrounded. In spite of the dozens of lethal substances recommended by the Poison Institute, most poisoners stuck singlemindedly to arsenic or strychnine. They were cheap, sure, and very painful. Prussic acid had a readily discernible odor, mercury was difficult to introduce into the system, and the corrosives, although gratifyingly spectacular, were dangerous to the user. Wolfsbane and fly agaric were excellent, of course; deadly nightshade could not be discounted, and the amanitas toadstool had its own macabre charm. But these were the poisons of an older, more leisurely age. The impatient younger gen-

eration—and especially the women, who made up nearly ninety percent of the poisoners on Omega—were satisfied with plain arsenic or strychnine, as the occasion and opportunity demanded.

Omegan women were conservatives. They simply weren't interested in the never-ending refinements of the poisoner's art. Means didn't interest them; only ends, as quickly and as cheaply as possible. Omegan women were noted for their common sense. Although the eager theoreticians at the Poison Institute tried to sell dubious mixtures of Contact Poison or Three Day Mold, and worked hard to put across complex, haywire schemes involving wasps, concealed needles and double glasses, they found few takers among women. Old-fashioned arsenic and fast-acting strychnine continued to be the mainstays of the poison trade.

This quite naturally simplified Barrent's work. His remedies—immediate regurgitation, lavage, neutralizing agent—were easy enough to master.

He encountered some difficulty with men who refused to believe they had been poisoned by anything so commonplace as arsenic or strychnine. For those cases, Barrent prescribed a variety of roots, herbs, twigs, leaves, and a minute homeopathic dose of poison. But he invariably preceded these with regurgitation, lavage, and neutralizing agent.

After he was settled, Barrent received a visit from Danis Foeren and Joe. Foeren had a temporary job on the docks unloading fishing boats. Joe had organized a nightly poker game among the government workers of Tetrahyde. Neither man had moved much in status; with no kills to their credit, they had progressed only as far as Second Class Resident. They were nervous about meeting socially with a Free Citizen, but Barrent put them at ease. They were the only friends he had on Omega, and he had no intention of losing them over a question of social position.

Barrent was unable to learn very much from them about the laws and customs of Tetrahyde. Even Joe hadn't been able to find out anything definite from his friends in government service. On Omega, the law was kept secret. Older residents used their knowledge of the law to enforce their rule over the newcomers. This system was condoned and reinforced by the doctrine of the inequality of all men, which lay at the heart of the Omegan legal system. Through planned inequality and enforced ignorance, power and

status remained in the hands of the older residents.

Of course, all social movement upward couldn't be stopped. But it could be retarded, discouraged, and made exceedingly dangerous. The way one encountered the laws and customs of Omega was through a risky process of trial and error. It was a constant unpleasant challenge.

Although the Antidote Shop took up most of his time, Barrent persisted in his efforts to locate the girl. He was unable to find a hint that she even existed.

He became friendly with the shopkeepers on either side of him. One of them, Demond Harrisbourg, was a jaunty, weak-chinned, mustached young man who operated a food store. It was a mundane and slightly ridiculous line of work; but, as Harrisbourg explained, even criminals must eat. And this necessitated farmers, processers, packagers, and food stores. Harrisbourg contended that his business was in no way inferior to the more indigenous Omegan industries centered around violent death. Besides, Harrisbourg's wife's uncle was a Minister of Public Works. Through him, Harrisbourg expected to receive a murder certificate. With this all-important document, he could make his six-months kill and move upward to the status of Privileged Citizen.

Barrent nodded his agreement. But he wondered if Harrisbourg's wife, a thin, restless woman, wouldn't decide to poison him first. She appeared to be dissatisfied with her husband; and divorce was forbidden on Omega.

His other neighbor, Tom Rend, was a lanky, cheerful man in his early forties. He had a heat-scar which ran from just beneath his left ear down almost to the corner of his mouth, a souvenir given him by a status-seeking hopeful. The hopeful had picked on the wrong man. Tom Rend owned a weapon shop, practiced constantly, and always carried the articles of his trade with him. According to witnesses, he had performed the counter-kill in exemplary fashion. Tom's dream was to become a member of the Assassin's Guild. His application was on file with that ancient and austere organization, and he had a chance of being accepted within the month.

Barrent bought a sidearm from him. On Rend's advice, he chose a Jamiason-Tyre needle-beam. It was faster and more accurate than any projectile weapon, and it transmitted the same shockpower as a heavy calibre bullet. To be sure, it didn't have the spread of heat

weapons such as the Hadjis used, which could kill if they came within six inches of their target. But wide-range beamers encouraged inaccuracy. They were messy, careless weapons which reinforced careless traits. Anybody could fire a heat gun; but to use a needlebeam effectively, you had to practice constantly. This practice paid off. A good needlebeam man was more than a match for any two wide-beam gunmen.

Barrent took this advice to heart, coming, as it did, from an apprentice assassin and the owner of a weapon shop. He put in long hours on Rend's cellar firing range, sharpening his reflexes, getting used to the Quik-Thro holster.

There was a lot to do and a tremendous amount to learn, just in order to survive. Barrent didn't mind hard work as long as it was for a worthwhile goal. He hoped things would stay quiet for a while so he could catch up to the older inhabitants.

But things never stayed quiet on Omega.

One day, late in the afternoon as he was closing up, Barrent received an unusual-looking caller. He was a man in his fifties, heavy-set, with a stern, swarthy face. He wore a red ankle-length robe and sandals. Around his waist was a rawhide belt from which dangled a small black book and a red-handled dagger. There was an air of unusual force and authority about him. Barrent was unable to tell his status.

Barrent said, "I was just closing up, sir. But if there's anything you wish to buy—"

"I did not come here to buy," the caller said. He permitted himself a faint smile. "I came here to sell."

"Sell?"

"I am a priest," the man said. "You are a newcomer to my district. I haven't noticed you at services."

"I hadn't known anything about—"

The priest held up his hand. "Under both the sacred and the profane law, ignorance is no excuse for non-performance of one's duties. Indeed, ignorance can be punished as an act of willful neglect, based upon the Total Personal Responsibility Act of '23, to say nothing of the Lesser Codicil." He smiled again. "However, there is no question of chastisement for you as yet."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir," Barrent said.

" 'Uncle' is the proper form of address," the priest said. "I am Uncle Ingemar, and I have come to tell you about the orthodox religion of Omega, which is the worship of that pure and transcendent spirit of Evil which is

our inspiration and our comfort."

Barrent said, "I'll be very happy to hear about the religion of Evil, Uncle. Shall we go into the living room?"

"By all means, Nephew," the priest said, and followed Barrent to the apartment in back of the store.

CHAPTER 6

"EVIL," the priest said, after he had settled comfortably into Barrent's best chair, "is that force within us which inspires men to acts of strength and endurance. The worship of Evil is essentially the worship of oneself, and therefore the only true worship. The self which one worships is the ideal social being; the man content in his niche in society, yet ready to grasp any opportunity for advancement; the man who meets death with dignity, but who kills without the demeaning vice of pity. Evil is cruel, since it is a true reflection of the uncaring and insensate universe. Evil is eternal and unchanging, although it comes to us in the many forms of protean life."

"Would you care for a little wine, Uncle?" Barrent asked.

"Thank you, that's very thoughtful," Uncle Ingemar said. "How is business?"

"Fair. A little slow this week."

"People don't take the same interest in poisoning," the priest said, moodily sipping his drink. "Not like when I was a boy, newly unfrocked and shipped out from Earth. However, I was speaking to you about Evil."

"Yes, Uncle."

"We worship Evil," Uncle Ingemar said, "in the incarnate form of The Black One, that horned and horrid spectre of our days and nights. In The Black One we find the seven cardinal sins, the forty felonies and the hundred and one misdemeanors. There is no crime that The Black One has not performed—faultlessly, as befits his nature. Therefore we imperfect beings model ourselves upon his perfections. And sometimes, The Black One rewards us by appearing before us in the awful beauty of his fiery flesh. Yes, Nephew, I have actually been privileged to see him. Two years ago he appeared at the conclusion of the Games, and he also appeared the year before that."

The priest brooded for a moment over the divine appearance. Then he said, "Since we recognize in the State man's highest potential for Evil, we also worship the State as a suprahuman, though less than divine, creation."

Barrent nodded. He was hav-

ing a difficult time staying awake. Uncle Ingemar's low, monotonous voice lecturing about so commonplace a thing as Evil had a soporific effect on him. He struggled to keep his eyes open.

"One might well ask," Uncle Ingemar droned on, "if Evil is the highest attainment of the nature of man, why then did The Black One allow any Good to exist in the universe? The problem of Good has bothered the unenlightened for ages. I will now answer it for you."

"Yes, Uncle?" Barrent said, surreptitiously pinching himself on the inside of the thigh in an effort to stay awake.

"But first," Uncle Ingemar said, "let us define our terms. Let us examine the nature of Good. Let us boldly and fearlessly stare our great opponent in the face and discover the true lineaments of his features."

"Yes, let's," Barrent said, wondering if he should open a window. His eyes felt incredibly heavy. He rubbed them hard and tried to pay attention.

"Good," said Uncle Ingemar in his even, monotonous voice, "is a state of illusion which ascribes to man the non-existent attributes of altruism, humility, and piety. How can we recognize Good as being an illusion? Because there is only man and The Black One in the universe, and to worship The Black One is to worship the ultimate expression of oneself. Thus, since we have proven Good to be an illusion, we necessarily recognize its attributes as non-existent. Do you understand?"

Barrent didn't answer.

"Do you understand?" the priest asked more sharply.

"Eh?" Barrent said. He had been dozing with his eyes open. He forced himself awake and managed to say, "Yes, Uncle, I understand."

"Very good. Understanding that, we ask, why did The Black One allow even the illusion of Good to exist in an Evil universe? And the answer is found in the Law of Necessary Opposites; for Evil could not be recognized as such without something to contrast it with. The best contrast is an opposite. And the opposite of Evil is Good." The priest smiled triumphantly. "It's so simple and clear-cut, isn't it?"

"It certainly is, Uncle," Barrent said. "Would you like a little more wine?"

"Just the tiniest drop," the priest said.

He talked to Barrent for another ten minutes about the natural and charming Evil inherent in the beasts of the field and forest, and counseled Barrent to pattern his behavior on those

simpleminded creatures. At last he rose to leave.

"I'm very glad we could have this little chat," the priest said, warmly shaking Barrent's hand. "Can I count on your appearance at our Monday night services?"

"Services?"

"Of course," Uncle Ingemar said. "Every Monday night we hold Black Mass at the Wee Coven on Kirkwood Drive. After services, the Ladies' Auxiliary usually puts out a snack, and we have community dancing and choir singing. It's all very jolly." He smiled broadly. "You see, the worship of Evil *can* be fun."

"I'm sure it can," Barrent said. "I'll be there, Uncle."

He showed the priest to the door. After locking up, he thought carefully about what Uncle Ingemar had said. No doubt about it, attendance at services was necessary. Compulsory, in fact. He just hoped that the Black Mass wouldn't be as infernally dull as Ingemar's exposition of Evil.

That was Friday. Barrent was kept busy over the next two days. He received a shipment of homeopathic herbs and roots from his agent in the Bloodpit district. It took the better part of a day to sort and classify them, and another day to store them in the proper jars.

On Monday, returning to his shop after lunch, Barrent thought he saw the girl. He hurried after her, but lost her in the crowd.

When he got back to his store, Barrent found that a letter had been slipped under his door. It was an invitation from his neighborhood Dream Shop. The letter read:

Dear Citizen, We take this opportunity of welcoming you into the neighborhood and extending to you the services of what we believe to be the finest Dream Shop on Omega.

All manner and type of dreams are available to you—and at a surprisingly low cost. We specialize in memory-resurrecting dreams of Earth. You can be assured that your neighborhood Dream Shop offers you only the finest in vicarious living.

As a Free Citizen, you will surely wish to avail yourself of these services. May we hope that you do so within the week?

At your service twenty-four hours a day,

The Proprieters.

Barrent put down the letter. He had no idea what a Dream Shop was, or how the dreams were produced. He would have to find out. Even though the invitation was graciously worded, it had a peremptory tone to it.

Past a doubt, a visit to a Dream Shop was one of the obligations of a Free Citizen.

But of course, an obligation could be a pleasure, too. The Dream Shop sounded interesting. And a genuine memory-resurrecting dream of Earth would be worth almost any price the proprieters wished to ask.

But that would have to wait. Tonight was Black Mass, and his attendance there was definitely required.

Barrent left his store at eleven o'clock in the evening. He wanted time for a stroll around Tetrahyde before going to the service, which began at midnight.

He started his walk with a definite sense of well-being. And yet, because of the irrational and unexpected nature of Omega, he almost died before reaching the Wee Coven on Kirkwood Drive.

CHAPTER 7

IT HAD turned into a hot, almost suffocatingly humid night when Barrent began his walk. Not the faintest breath of air stirred along the darkened streets, and the big thermometer in front of the Assassin's Guild registered ninety-eight degrees. Although he was wearing only a black mesh shirt, shorts, gunbelt and sandals, Barrent felt as though he were wrapped in a thick woolen blanket. Most of the people of Tetrahyde, except for those already at the Covens, had retired to the coolness of their cellars. The dark streets were nearly deserted.

Barrent walked on, more slowly. The few people he met were running to their homes. There was a sense of panic in that silent, dogged sprint through heat which made walking difficult. Barrent tried to find out what the matter was, but no one would stop. One old man shouted over his shoulder, "Get off the street, idiot!"

"Why?" Barrent asked him.

The old man snarled something unintelligible and hurried on.

Barrent kept on walking, nervously fingering the butt of his needlebeam. Something was certainly wrong, but he had no idea what it was. His nearest shelter now was the Wee Coven, about half a mile away. It seemed best to keep on moving in that direction, staying alert, waiting to see what was wrong.

In a few minutes, Barrent was alone in a tightly shuttered city. He moved into the center of the street, loosened the needlebeam in its holster, and prepared for attack from any side. Perhaps this was some special holiday like Landing Day. Perhaps Free Citizens were fair game tonight.

Anything was possible on a planet like Omega.

He thought he was ready for any possibility. But when the attack came, it was from an unexpected quarter.

A faint breeze stirred the stagnant air. It faded and returned, stronger this time, perceptibly cooling the hot streets. Wind rolled off the mountains of the interior and swept through the streets of Tetrahyde, and Barrent could feel the perspiration on his chest and back begin to dry.

For a few minutes, the climate of Tetrahyde was as pleasant as anything he could imagine.

Then the temperature *really* began to fall.

It dropped rapidly. It sank fantastically. Frigid air swept in from the distant mountain slopes, and the temperature fell through the seventies into the sixties.

This is ridiculous, Barrent thought to himself. I'd better get to the Coven.

He walked more rapidly, while the temperature plummeted. It passed through the forties into the low thirties. The first glittering signs of frost appeared on the streets.

It can't go much lower, Barrent thought.

But it could. An angry winter wind blew through the streets, and the temperature dropped into the twenties. Moisture in the air began forming into sleet.

Chilled to the bone, Barrent ran down the empty streets, and the wind, rising to gale force, pulled and tugged at him. The streets glittered with ice, making the footing dangerous. He skidded and fell, and had to run at a slower pace to keep his footing. And still the temperature dropped, and the wind growled and snapped like an angry beast.

He saw light through a heavily shuttered window. He stopped and pounded at the shutters, but no sound came from inside. He realized that the people of Tetrahyde never helped anyone; the more who died, the more chance there was for the survivors. So Barrent continued running, on feet that felt like chunks of wood.

The wind shrieked in his ear, and hailstones the size of his fist pelted the ground. He was getting too tired to run. All he could do now was walk, through a frozen white world, and hope he would reach the Wee Coven.

He walked for hours or for years. At one corner he passed the bodies of two men huddled against a wall and covered with frost. They had stopped running and had frozen to death.

Barrent forced himself to run again. A stitch in his side felt

like a knife wound, and the cold was creeping up his arms and down his legs. Soon the cold would reach his chest, and that would be the end.

A flurry of hailstones stunned him. Without conscious transition he found that he was lying on the icy ground, and a monstrous wind was whirling away the tiny warmth which his body was able to generate.

At the far end of the block he could see the tiny red light of the Coven. He crept toward it on hands and knees, moving mechanically, not really expecting to get there. He crawled forever, and the beckoning red light always remained the same distance from him.

But he kept on crawling, and at last he reached the door of the Coven. He pulled himself to his feet and turned the doorknob.

The door was locked.

He pounded feebly on the door. After a moment, a panel slid back. He saw a man staring at him; then the panel slid shut. He waited for the door to open. It didn't open. Minutes passed, and still it didn't open. What were they waiting for inside? What was wrong? Barrent tried to pound on the door again, lost his balance and fell to the ground. He rolled over and looked despairingly at the locked door. Then he lost consciousness.

When he came to, Barrent found himself lying on a couch. Two men were massaging his arms and legs, and beneath him he could feel the warmth of heating pads. Peering anxiously at him was the broad, swarthy face of Uncle Ingemar.

"Feeling better now?" Uncle Ingemar asked.

"I think so," Barrent said. "Why did you take so long opening the door?"

"We almost didn't open it at all," the priest told him. "It's against the law to aid strangers in distress. Since you hadn't as yet joined the Coven, you were technically still a stranger."

"Then why did you let me in?"

"My assistant noticed that we had an even number of worshippers. We require an odd number, preferably ending in three. Where the sacred and the profane laws are in conflict, the profane must yield. So we let you in despite the government ruling."

"It's a hell of a ruling," Barrent said.

"Not really. Like most of the laws of Omega, it is designed to keep the population down. Omega is an extremely barren planet, you know. The constant arrival of new prisoners keeps swelling the population, to the enormous disadvantage of the

older inhabitants. Ways and means must be sought to dispose of the excess newcomers."

"It isn't fair," Barrent said.

"You'll change your mind when you become an older inhabitant," Ingemar said. "And by your tenacity, I'm sure you'll become one."

"Maybe," Barrent said. "But what happened? The temperature must have dropped nearly a hundred degrees in fifteen minutes."

"A hundred and eight degrees to be exact," Uncle Ingemar said. "It's really very simple. Omega is a planet which revolves eccentrically around a double star system. Further instability, I'm told, comes from the planet's peculiar physical makeup —the placement of mountains and seas. The result is a uniformly and dramatically bad climate characterized by sudden violent temperature changes."

The assistant, a small, weasly, self-important fellow, said, "It has been calculated that Omega is at the outer limits of the planets which can support human life without gross artificial aids. If the fluctuations between hot and cold were any more violent, all human life here would be wiped out."

"It's the perfect punitive world," Uncle Ingemar said proudly. "Experienced residents sense when a temperature change is about to take place, and get indoors."

"It's—hellish," Barrent said, at a loss for words.

"That describes it perfectly," the priest said. "It *is* hellish, and therefore perfect for the worship of The Black One. If you're feeling better now, Citizen Barrent, shall we proceed with services?"

Except for a touch of frostbite on his toes and fingers, Barrent was all right. He nodded, and followed priest and the worshippers into the main part of the Coven.

After what he had been through, the Black Mass was necessarily an anticlimax. In his warmly heated pew, Barrent drowsed through Uncle Ingemar's sermon on the necessary performance of everyday evil.

The worship of Evil, Uncle Ingemar said, should not be reserved solely for Monday nights. On the contrary! The knowledge and performance of evil should suffuse one's daily life. It was not given to everyone to be a great sinner; but no one should be discouraged by that. Little acts of badness performed over a lifetime accumulated into a sinful whole most pleasing to The Black One. No one should forget that some of the greatest sinners, even the demoniac saints themselves, often had humble be-

ginnings. Did not Thrastus start as a humble shopkeeper, cheating his customers of a portion of rice? Who would have expected that simple man to develop into the Red Slayer of Thorndyke Lane? And who could have imagined that Dr. Louen, son of a dockhand, would one day become the world's foremost authority on the practical applications of torture? Perseverance and piety had allowed those men to rise above their natural handicaps to a preeminent position at the right hand of The Black One. And it proved, Uncle Ingemar said, that Evil was the business of the poor as well as the rich.

That ended the sermon. Barrent awoke momentarily when the sacred symbols were brought out and displayed to the reverent congregation—a red-handled dagger, a T-square, and a plaster toad. Then he dozed again through the slow inscribing of the magical pentagon.

At last the ceremony neared its end. The names of the interceding evil demons were read —Bael, Forcas, Buer, Marchocias, Astaroth and Behemoth. A prayer was read to ward off the effects of Good. And Uncle Ingemar apologized for not having a virgin to sacrifice on the Red Altar.

"Our funds were not sufficient," he said, "for the purchase of a government-certified peon virgin. However, I am sure we will be able to perform the full ceremony next Monday. My assistant will now pass among you . . ."

The weasly assistant carried around the black-rimmed collection plate. Like the other worshippers, Barrent contributed generously. It seemed wise to do so. Uncle Ingemar was clearly annoyed at not having a virgin to sacrifice. If he became a little angrier, he might take it into his head to sacrifice one of the congregation, virgin or not.

Barrent didn't stay for the choir singing or the community dancing. When the evening worship was finished, he poked his head cautiously out the door. The temperature had gone up to the seventies, and the frost was already melted from the ground. Barrent shook hands with the priest and hurried home.

CHAPTER 8

BARRENT had had enough of Omega's shocks and surprises. He stayed close to his store, worked at his business, and kept alert for trouble. He was beginning to develop the Omegan look: a narrow, suspicious squint, a hand always near his gun butt, feet always ready to break into a sprint. Like the older inhabitants, he was ac-

quiring a sixth sense for ever present danger.

At night, after the doors and windows were barred and the triplex alarm system was set, Barrent would lie on his bed and try to remember Earth. Probing into the misty recesses of his memory, he found tantalizing hints and traces, and fragments of pictures. Here was a great highway curving toward the sun; a fragment of a huge, multi-level city; a close-up view of a spaceship's curving hull. But the pictures were not continuous. They existed for the barest fraction of a second, then vanished.

On Saturday, Barrent spent the evening with Joe, Danis Foeren, and his neighbor Tom Rend. Joe's poker had prospered, and he had been able to bribe his way to the status of Free Citizen. Foeren was too blunt and straightforward for that; he had remained at the Residency level. But Tom Rend promised to take the big forger as an assistant if the Assassin's Guild accepted his application.

The evening started pleasantly enough; but it ended, as usual, with an argument about Earth.

"Now look," Joe said, "we all know what Earth is like. It's a complex of gigantic floating cities. They're built on artificial islands in the various oceans—"

"No, the cities are on land," Barrent said.

"On water," Joe said. "The people of Earth have returned to the sea. Everybody has special oxygen adaptors for breathing salt water. The land areas aren't even used any more. The sea provides everything that—"

"It isn't like that," Barrent said. "I remember huge cities, but they were all on land."

Foeren said, "You're both wrong. What would Earth want with cities? She gave them up centuries ago. The Earth is like a big landscaped park now. Everybody has his own home and several acres of land. All the forests and jungles have been allowed to grow back. People live *with* nature instead of trying to conquer it. Isn't that right, Tom?"

"Almost but not quite," Tom Rend said. "There are still cities, but they're underground. Tremendous underground factories and production areas. The rest is like Foeren said."

"There aren't any more factories," Foeren insisted stubbornly. "There's no need of them. Any goods which a man requires can be produced by thought-control."

"The hell they are!" Joe said. "I'm telling you, I can *remember* the floating cities! I used to live in the Nimui sector on the island of Pasiphae."

"You think that proves anything?" Rend asked. "I remember that I worked on the 18th underground level of Nueva Chicaga. My work-quota was twenty days a year. The rest of the time I spent outdoors, in the forests—"

Foeren said, "That's wrong, Tom. There aren't any underground levels. I can remember distinctly that my father was a Controller, 3rd Class. Our family used to trek several hundred miles every year. When we needed something, my father would *think* it, and there it'd be. He promised to teach me how, but I guess he never did."

Barrent said, "Well, a couple of us are certainly having false recall."

"That's for sure," Joe said. "But the question is, which of us is right?"

"We'll never find out," Rend said, "unless we can return to Earth."

That ended the discussion for the evening.

Toward the end of the week, Barrent received another invitation from the Dream Shop, more strongly worded than the first. He decided to discharge the obligation that evening. He checked the temperature, and found that it had risen into the high nineties. Wiser now in Omegan ways, he packed a small satchel full of cold-weather clothing, and started out.

The Dream Shop was located in the exclusive Death's Row section. Barrent went in, and found himself in a small, sumptuously furnished waiting room. A sleek young man behind a polished desk gave him an artificial smile.

"Could I be of service?" the young man asked. "My name is Nomis J. Arkdragen, assistant manager in charge of nightside dreams."

"I'd like to know something about what happens," Barrent said. "How one gets dreams, what kind of dreams, all that sort of thing."

"Of course," Arkdragen said. "Our service is easily explained, Citizen—"

"Barrent. Will Barrent."

Arkdragen nodded and checked a name from a list in front of him. He looked up and said, "Our dreams are produced by the action of drugs upon the brain and the central nervous system. There are many drugs which produce the desired effect. Among the most useful are heroin, morphine, opium, coca, hemp, and peyote. All those are Earth products. Found only on Omega are Black Slipper, nace, manicee, tri-narcotine, djedalas, and the various products of the carmoid group. Any and all of these are dream-inducers."

"I see," Barrent said. "Then you sell drugs."

"Not at all!" Arkdragen said. "Nothing so simple, nothing so crude. In ancient times on Earth, men administered drugs to themselves. The dreams which resulted were necessarily random in nature. You never knew what you would dream about, or for how long. You never knew if you would have a dream or a nightmare, a horror or a delight. This uncertainty has been removed from the modern Dream Shop. Nowadays, our drugs are carefully measured, mixed and metered for each individual. There is an absolute precision in dream-making, ranging from the Nirvana-like calm of Black Slipper through the multi-colored hallucinations of peyotl and tri-narcotine, to the sexual fantasies induced by nace and morphine, and at last to the memory-resurrecting dreams of the carmoid group."

"It's the memory-resurrecting dreams I'm interested in," Barrent said.

Arkdragen frowned. "I wouldn't recommend it for a first visit."

"Why not?"

"Dreams of Earth are apt to be more unsettling than any imaginary productions. It's usually advisable to build up a tolerance for them. I would advise a nice little sexual fantasy for your first visit. We have a special sale on sexual fantasies this week."

Barrent shook his head. "I think I'd prefer the real thing."

"You wouldn't," the assistant manager said, with a knowing smile. "Believe me, once one becomes accustomed to vicarious sex experiences, the real thing is pallid by comparison."

"Not interested," Barrent said. "I'll handle my own sex life. What I want is a dream about Earth."

"But you haven't built up a tolerance!" Arkdragen said. "You aren't even addicted."

"Is addiction necessary?"

"It's important," Arkdragen told him, "as well as being inescapable. All our drugs are habit-forming, as the law requires. You see, to really appreciate a drug, you must build up a need for it. It heightens pleasure enormously, to say nothing of the increase in toleration. That's why I suggest that you begin with—"

"I want a dream about Earth," Barrent said.

"Very well," Arkdragen said sullenly. "But we will not be responsible for any traumas which acrue."

He led Barrent into a long passageway. It was lined with doors, and behind some of them

Barrent could hear dull moans and gasps of pleasure.

"Experiencers," Arkdragen said, without further explanation. He took Barrent to an open room near the end of the corridor. Within sat a cheerful-looking bearded man in a white coat reading a book.

"Good evening, Doctor Wayne," Arkdragen said. "This is Citizen Barrent. First visit. He insists upon an Earth dream." Arkdragen turned and left.

"Well," the doctor said, "I guess we can manage that." He put down his book. "Just lie down over there, Citizen Barrent."

In the center of the room was a long, adjustable table. Above it hung a complicated-looking instrument. At the end of the room were glass-sided cabinets filled with square jars; they reminded Barrent of his antidotes.

He lay down. Doctor Wayne put him through a general examination, then a specific check for suggestibility, hypnotic index, reactions to the eleven basic drug groups, and susceptibility to tetanic and epileptic seizures. He jotted down his results on a pad, checked his figures, went to a cabinet and began mixing drugs.

"Is this apt to be dangerous?" Barrent asked.

"It shouldn't be," Doctor Wayne said. "You appear healthy enough. Quite healthy, in fact, and with a low suggestibility rating. Of course, epileptic fits *do* occur, probably because of cumulative allergic reactions. Can't help that sort of thing. And then there are the traumas, which sometimes result in insanity and death. They form an interesting study in themselves. And some people get stuck in their dreams and are unable to be extricated. I suppose that could be classified as a form of insanity, although actually it isn't."

The doctor had finished mixing his drugs. He was loading a hypodermic with the mixture. Barrent was having serious doubts about the advisability of the whole thing.

"Maybe I should postpone this visit," he said. "I'm not sure that I—"

"Don't worry about a thing," the doctor said. "This is the finest Drug Shop on Omega. Try to relax. Tight muscles can result in tetanic convulsions."

"I think Mr. Arkdragen was right," Barrent said. "Maybe I shouldn't have a dream about Earth for my first visit. He said it was dangerous."

"Well, after all," the doctor said, "what's life without a little risk? Besides, the most common damage is brain lesions

and burst blood vessels. And we have full facilities for taking care of that sort of thing."

He poised the hypodermic over Barrent's left arm.

"I've changed my mind," Barrent said, and started to get off the bed. Doctor Wayne deftly slid the needle into Barrent's arm.

"One does not change one's mind," he told Barrent, "inside a Drug Shop. Try to relax . . ."

Barrent relaxed. He lay back on the bed, and heard a shrill singing in his ears. He tried to focus on the doctor's face. But the face had changed.

The face was old, round, and fleshy. Ridges of fat stood out on the chin and neck. The face was perspiring, friendly, worried.

It was Barrent's 5th Term Advisor.

"Now Will," the Advisor said, "you must be careful. You must learn to restrain that temper of yours. Will, you *must!*"

"I know, sir," Barrent said. "It's just that I get so mad at that damned—"

"Will!"

"All right," Barrent said. "I'll watch myself."

He left the university office and walked into the city. It was a fantastic city of skyscrapers and multi-level streets, a brilliant city of silver and diamond hues, an ambitious city which administered a far-flung network of countries and planets. Barrent walked along the third pedestrian level, still angry, thinking about Andrew Therkaler.

Because of Therkaler and his ridiculous jealousy, Barrent's application for the Space Exploration Corps had been turned down. There was nothing his Advisor could do about the matter; Therkaler had too much influence on the Selection Board. It would be a full three years before Barrent could apply again. In the meantime he was Earth-bound and unemployable. All his studies had been for extraterrestrial exploration. There was no place for him on Earth; and now he was barred from space.

That damned Therkaler!

Barrent left the pedestrian level and took the high-speed ramp into the Sante district. As the ramp moved, he fingered the small weapon in his pocket. Handguns were illegal on Earth. He had procured his through untraceable means.

To hell with the Social Code. He was determined to kill Therkaler.

There was a wash of grotesque faces. The dream blurred. When it cleared, Barrent found himself aiming his handgun at a thin, crosseyed, foxy-faced fel-

low whose scream for mercy was abruptly cut short.

The informer, blank-faced and stern, noted the crime and informed the police.

The police, in uniforms of black and gray, took him into custody and brought him before the judge.

The judge, with his parchment face and shaking fingers, sentenced him to perpetual servitude upon the planet Omega, and handed down the obligatory decree that Barrent be cleansed of memory.

Then the dream turned into a kaleidoscope of horror. Barrent was climbing a slippery pole, a sheer mountainside, a smooth-sided well. Behind him, gaining on him, was Therkaler's corpse with its chest ripped open. Supporting the corpse on either side were the blank-faced informer and the parchment-faced judge.

Barrent ran down a hill, a street, a rooftop. His pursuers were close behind him. He entered a dim yellow room, closed and locked the door. When he turned around, he saw that he had locked himself in with Therkaler's corpse. Fungus was blossoming in the open wound in the chest, and the scarred head was crowned with red and purple mold. The corpse advanced, reached for him, and Barrent dived headfirst through the window.

"Come out of it, Barrent. You're overdoing it. Come out of the dream."

Barrent had no time to listen. The window turned into a chute, and he slid down its polished sides into an amphitheatre. There, across gray sand, the corpse crept toward him on the stubs of arms and legs. The enormous grandstand was empty except for the judge and the informer, who sat side by side, watching.

"He's stuck."

"Well, I warned him . . ."

"Come out of the dream, Barrent. This is Doctor Wayne. You're on Omega, in the Dream Shop. Come out of the dream. There's still time if you pull yourself out immediately."

Omega? Dream? There was no time to think about it. Barrent was swimming across a dark, evil-smelling lake. The judge and the informer were swimming just behind him, flanking the corpse whose skin was slowly peeling away.

"Barrent!"

And now the lake was turning into a thick jelly which clung to his arms and legs and filled his mouth, while the judge and the informer—

"Barrent!"

Barrent opened his eyes and found himself on the adjustable bed in the Dream Shop. Doctor

Wayne, looking somewhat shaken, was standing over him. A nurse was nearby with a tray of hypodermics and an oxygen mask. Behind her was Arkdragen, wiping perspiration from his forehead.

"I didn't think you were going to make it," Doctor Wayne said. "I really didn't."

"He pulled out just in time," the nurse said.

"I warned him," Arkdragen said, and left the room.

Barrent sat up. "What happened?" he asked.

Doctor Wayne shrugged his shoulders. "It's hard to tell. Perhaps you were prone to circular reaction; and sometimes the drugs aren't absolutely pure. But these things usually don't happen more than once. Believe me, Citizen Barrent, the drug experience is very pleasant. I'm sure you'll enjoy it the second time."

Still shaken by his experience, Barrent was certain there would be no second time for him. Whatever the cost, he was not going to risk a repetition of that nightmare.

"Am I addicted now?" he asked.

"Oh, no," Doctor Wayne said. "Addiction occurs with the third or fourth visit."

Barrent thanked him and left. He passed Arkdragen's desk and asked how much he owed.

"Nothing," Arkdragen said. "The first visit is always on the house." He gave Barrent a knowing smile.

Barrent left the Dream Shop and hurried home to his apartment. He had a lot to think about. Now, for the first time, he had the proof that he was a willful and premeditated murderer.

CHAPTER 9

BEING accused of a murder you can't remember is one thing; remembering a murder you have been accused of is another thing entirely. Evidence like that is hard to disbelieve.

Barrent tried to sort out his feelings on the matter. Before his visit to the Dream Shop he had never felt like a real murderer, no matter what the Earth authorities had accused him of. At worst, he had thought that he might have killed a man in a sudden uncontrollable fit of rage. But to plan and perform a murder in cold blood . . .

Why had he done it? Had his lust for revenge been so great as to throw off all the restraint of Earth's civilization? Apparently so. He had killed, and someone had informed on him, and a judge had sentenced him to Omega. He was a murderer on a criminal's planet. To live here successfully, he simply had

to follow his natural bias toward murder.

And yet, Barrent found this extremely difficult to do. He had surprisingly little taste for bloodshed. On Free Citizen's Day, although he went into the streets with his needlebeam, he couldn't bring himself to slaughter any of the lower classes. He didn't want to kill. It was a ridiculous prejudice, considering where and what he was; but there it was. No matter how often Tom Rend or Joe lectured him on his Citizen's duties, Barrent still found murder quite distasteful.

He sought the aid of a psychiatrist, who told him that his rejection of murder had its roots in an unhappy childhood. The phobia had been further complicated by the traumatic qualities of his experience in the Dream Shop. Because of this, murder, the highest social good, had become repugnant to him. This anti-murder neurosis in a man eminently suited for the art of killing would, the psychiatrist said, inevitably lead to Barrent's destruction. The only solution was to displace the neurosis. The psychiatrist suggested immediate treatment in a sanitarium for the criminally non-murderous.

Barrent visited a sanitarium, and heard the poor mad inmates screaming about goodness, fair play, the sanctity of life, and other obscenities. He had no intention of joining them. Maybe he was sick, but he wasn't *that* sick!

His friends told him that his uncooperative attitude was bound to get him into trouble. Barrent agreed with them; but he hoped, by killing only when it became necessary, that he would escape the observation of the highly-placed individuals who administered the law.

For several weeks his plan seemed to work. He ignored the increasingly peremptory notes from the Drug Shop, and did not return to services at the Wee Coven. Business prospered, and Barrent spent his spare time studying the effects of the rarer poisons, and practicing with his needlebeam. He often thought about the girl. He still had the gun she had loaned him. He wondered if he would ever see her again.

And he thought about Earth. Since his visit to the Drug Shop, he had occasional flashes of recall, isolated pictures of a weathered stone building, a stand of live-oaks, the curve of a river seen through willows. This half-remembered Earth filled him with an almost unbearable longing. Like most of the citizens of Omega, his only real wish was to go home.

And that was impossible.

The days passed, and when trouble came, it came unexpectedly. One night there was a heavy knocking at his door. Half asleep, Barrent answered it. Four uniformed men pushed their way inside and told him he was under arrest.

"What for?" Barrent asked.

"Non-drug addiction," one of the men told him. "You have three minutes to dress."

"What's the penalty?"

"You'll find out in court," the man said. He winked at the other guards and added, "But the only way to cure a non-addict is to kill him. Eh?"

Barrent dressed.

He was taken to a room in the sprawling Department of Justice. The room was called the Kangaroo Court, in honor of an ancient Anglo-Saxon judicial proceeding. Across the hall from it, also of antique derivation, was the Star Chamber. Just past that was the Court of Last Appeal.

The Kangaroo Court was divided in half by a high wooden screen, for it was fundamental to Omegan justice that the accused should not see his judge nor any of the witnesses against him.

"Let the prisoner rise," a voice said from behind the screen. The voice, thin, flat and emotionless, came through a small amplifier. Barrent could barely understand the words; tone and inflection were lost, as had been planned for. Even in speaking, the judge remained anonymous.

"Will Barrent," the judge said, "you have been brought before this court on a major charge of non-drug addiction and a minor charge of religious impiety. On the minor count we have the sworn statement of a priest. On the major count we have the testimony of the Drug Shop. Can you refute either of these charges? If so, do so at once."

Barrent thought for a moment, then answered, "No sir, I can't."

"For the present," the judge said, "your religious impiety can be waived, since it is a first offense. But non-drug addiction is a major crime against the state of Omega. The uninterrupted use of drugs is an enforced privilege of every citizen. It is well known that privileges must be exercised, otherwise they will be lost. To lose our privileges would be to lose the very cornerstone of our liberty. Therefore to reject or otherwise fail to perform a privilege is tantamount to high treason."

There was a pause. The guards shuffled their feet restlessly. Barrent, who considered his sit-

uation hopeless, stood at attention and waited.

"Drugs serve many purposes," the hidden judge went on. "I need not enumerate their desirable qualities for the user. But speaking from the viewpoint of the state, I will tell you that an addicted populace is a loyal populace; that drugs are a major source of tax revenue; that drugs exemplify and personify our entire way of life. Furthermore, I say to you that the non-addicted minorities have invariably proven hostile to native Omegan institutions. I give you this lengthy explanation, Will Barrent, in order that you may better understand the sentence which is to be passed upon you."

"Sir," Barrent said, "I was wrong in avoiding addiction. I won't plead ignorance, because I know the law doesn't recognize that excuse. But I will ask you most humbly for another chance. I ask you to remember, sir, that addiction and rehabilitation are still possible for me."

"The court recognizes that," the judge said. "For that reason, the court is pleased to exercise its fullest powers of judicial mercy. Instead of summary execution, you may choose between two lesser decrees. The first is punitive; that you shall suffer the loss of your right hand and left leg in atonement for your crime against the state; but that you shall not lose your life."

Barrent gulped and asked, "What is the other decree, sir?"

"The other decree, which is non-punitive, is that you shall undergo a Trial by Ordeal. And that, if you survive such a trial, you shall be restored to your rightful rank and position in society."

"I'll take the Trial by Ordeal," Barrent said.

"Very well," said the judge. "Let the case proceed."

Barrent was led from the room. Behind him, he heard a quickly concealed laugh from one of the guards. Had he chosen wrong, he wondered. Could a trial by ordeal be worse than outright mutilation?

CHAPTER 10

ON OMEGA, so the saying went, you couldn't fit a knifeblade between the trial and the execution of the sentence. Barrent was taken at once to a large, circular stone room in the basement of the Department of Justice. White arc-lights glared down at him from a high, arched ceiling. Below, one section of wall had been cut away to provide a reviewing stand for spectators. The stands were almost filled when Barrent arrived, and hawkers were selling copies of the day's legal calendar.

For a few moments Barrent was alone on the stone floor. Then a panel slid away in one curved wall, and a small machine rolled out.

A loudspeaker set high in the reviewing stand announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please! You are about to witness Trial 642-BG223, by Ordeal, between Citizen Will Barrent and GME 213. Take your seats, please. The contest will begin in a few minutes."

Barrent looked over his opponent. It was a glistening black machine shaped like a half-sphere, standing almost four feet high. It rolled restlessly back and forth on small wheels. A pattern of red, green, and amber lights from recessed glass bulbs flashed across its smooth metal hide. It stirred in Barrent a vague memory of some creature from Earth's oceans.

"For the benefit of those who are visiting our gallery for the first time," the loudspeaker said, "a word of explanation is in order. The prisoner, Will Barrent, has freely chosen the Trial by Ordeal. The instrument of justice, which in this instance is GME 213, is an example of the finest creative engineering which Omega has produced. The machine, or Max, as its many friends and admirers call it, is a murder weapon of exemplary efficiency, able to utilize no less than twenty-three killing modes, many of them extremely painful. For trial purposes, it is set to operate upon a random principle. This means that Max has no choice over the way in which it kills. The modes are selected and abandoned by a random arrangement of twenty-three numbers, linked to an equally random time-selection of one to six seconds."

Max suddenly moved toward the center of the room, and Barrent backed away from it.

"It is within the prisoner's power," the loudspeaker voice continued, "to disable the machine; in which case, the prisoner wins the contest and is set free with full rights and privileges of his station. The method of disabling varies from machine to machine. It is always theoretically possible for a prisoner to win. Practically speaking, this has happened on an average of 3.5 times out of a hundred."

Barrent looked up at the gallery of spectators. To judge by their dress, they were all of the upper classes; Privileged Citizen was the least rank among them.

Then he saw, sitting primly in a front row seat, the girl who had loaned him her gun on his first day in Tetrahyde. She was as beautiful as he had remembered her; but no hint of emotion touched her pale, oval face.

She stared at him with the frank and detached interest of someone watching an unusual bug under a jar.

"Let the contest begin!" the loudspeaker announced.

Barrent had no more time to think about the girl, for the machine was rolling quickly toward him.

He circled warily away from it. Max extruded a single slender tentacle with a white light winking in the end of it. The machine rolled toward Barrent, backing him toward a wall.

Abruptly it stopped. Barrent heard the clank of gears. The tentacle was withdrawn, and in its place appeared a jointed metal arm which ended in a knife-edge. Moving more quickly now, the machine cornered him against the wall. The arm flickered out, but Barrent managed to dodge it. He heard the knife-edge scrape against stone. When the arm withdrew, Barrent had a chance to move again into the center of the room.

He knew that his only chance to disable the machine was during the pause when its selector changed it from one killing mode to another. But how do you disable a smooth-surfaced turtle-backed machine?

Max came at him again, and now its metal hide glistened with a dull green substance which Barrent immediately recognized as Contact Poison. He broke into a spring, circling the room, trying to avoid the fatal touch.

The machine stopped. Neutralizer washed over its surface, clearing away the poison. Then the machine was coming toward him again, this time with no weapons visible, apparently intending to ram.

Barrent was badly winded. He dodged, and the machine dodged with him. He was standing against the wall, helpless, as the machine picked up speed.

It stopped, inches from him. Its selector clicked. Max was extruding some kind of a club.

This, Barrent thought, was an exercise in applied sadism. If it went on much longer, the machine would run him off his feet and kill him at its leisure. Whatever he was going to do, he had better do it at once, while he still had the strength.

Even as he thought that, the machine swung a clubbed metal arm. Barrent couldn't avoid the blow completely. The club struck his left shoulder, and he felt his arm go numb.

Max was selecting again. Barrent threw himself on its smooth, rounded back. At the very top he saw two tiny holes. Praying that they were air intake openings, Barrent plugged them with his fingers.

The machine stopped dead, and the audience roared. Barrent clung to the smooth surface with his numbed arm, trying to keep his fingers in the holes. The pattern of lights on Max's surface changed from green through amber to red. Its deep-throated buzz became a dull hum.

And then the machine extruded two more intake holes.

Barrent tried to cover them with his body. But the machine, roaring into sudden life, swiveled rapidly and threw him off. Barrent rolled to his feet and moved back to the center of the arena.

The contest had lasted no more than five minutes, but Barrent was exhausted. He forced himself to retreat from the machine, which was coming at him now with a broad, gleaming hatchet.

As the hatchet-arm swung, Barrent threw himself *at* it instead of away. He caught the arm in both hands and bent it back. Metal creaked, and Barrent thought he could hear the joint beginning to give way. If he could break off the metal arm, he might disable the machine; at the very least, the arm would be a weapon . . .

Max suddenly went into reverse. Barrant tried to keep his grip on the arm, but it was yanked away. He fell on his face. The hatchet swung, gouging his shoulder.

Barrent rolled over and looked at the gallery. He was finished. He might as well accept the machine's next attempt gracefully and have it over with. The spectators were cheering, watching Max begin its transformation into another killing mode.

And the girl was motioning to him.

Barrent stared, trying to make some sense out of it. She gestured at him to turn something over, turn it over and destroy.

He had no more time to watch. Dizzy from lose of blood, he staggered to his feet and watched the machine charge. He didn't bother to see what weapon it had extruded; his entire attention was concentrated on its wheels.

As it came at him, Barrent quickly threw himself under the wheels.

The machine tried to brake and swerve, but not in time. The wheels rolled onto Barrent's body, tilting the machine sharply upward. Barrent grunted under the impact. With his back under the machine, he put his remaining strength in an attempt to stand up.

For a moment the machine teetered, its wheels spinning wildly. Then it flipped over on

its back. Barrent collapsed beside it.

When he could see again, the machine was still on its back. It was extruding a set of arms to turn itself over.

Barrent threw himself on the machine's flat belly and hammered with his fists. Nothing happened. He tried to pull off one of the wheels, and couldn't. Max was propping itself up, preparing to turn over and resume the gruesome, deadly contest.

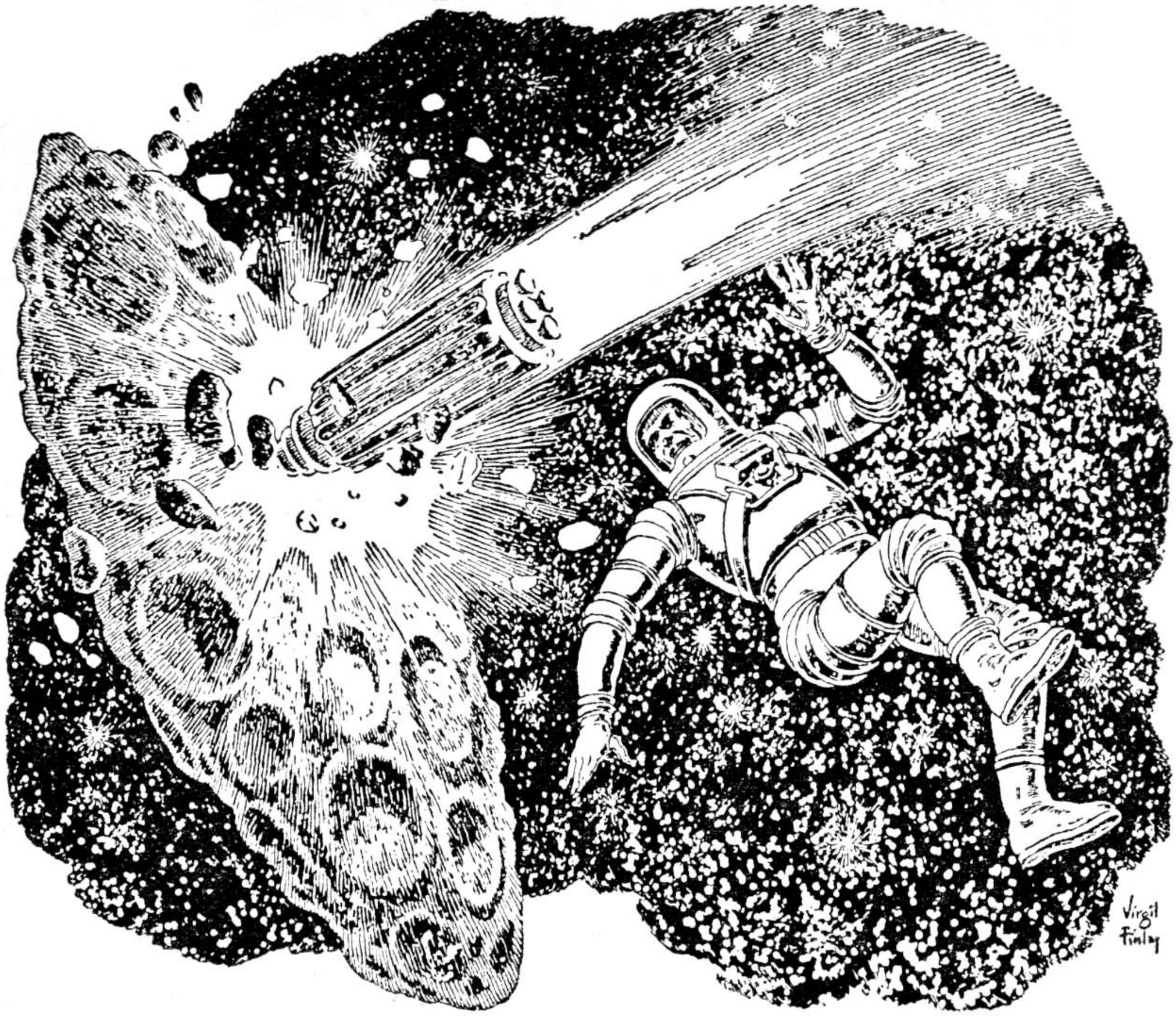
The girl's motions caught Barrent's eye. She was making a plucking motion, repeatedly, insistently.

Only then, Barrent saw a small fuse box near one of the wheels. He yanked off the cover, losing most of a fingernail in the process, and removed the fuse.

The machine expired gracefully.

Barrent fainted.

(*To be concluded*)



Jack Of No Trades

By CHARLES COTTRELL

First we discovered the Willy Maloon category. Then we discovered Willy himself. Then we data-researched, and postulated a theory. Everything was easy, until it came to the question of proof.

THIS thing really started before the time I had Willy Maloon under observation when he gunned the small runabout well past cruising speed in order to reach the little asteroid as soon as he could. At times like that he showed undue impatience. I was following at a discreet distance behind him, homing in on the rock, too. I had to find out what he was up to.

Archie Crosby, the obliging scoundrel, had "lent" Willy the homer unit out of supply. But, of course, he (Willy) had requested it in words to the effect that it was to replace a defective one in the cache. And Archie didn't doubt Willy for a moment, Willy being the kind of fellow he is.

Willy had worked a couple of hours on the homer unit, which is nothing more than a small radio transmitter. He tuned it to a frequency on the high side of the band used by the homer units in the cache. This was so no one would be likely to inadvertently tune the frequency and get curious. Tuning any of the vehicle receivers to that particular transmitter frequency was a simple matter. Then he had taken the transmitter out among the asteroids and hunted around until he had found one about two miles or thereabouts in diameter, only it couldn't be said to have a diameter because it was quite irregular in shape. But to Willy it must have been as fascinating as a jewel. So he planted the homer on it so that he could find it again when he wanted to. Of course, he hadn't yet thought of a reason for wanting an asteroid, but he would. He usually found reasons for the strange things he did.

And he did. It must have been just after Ollie Hadaway lost control of his tug. It had been headed in the direction of a rather large asteroid. Ollie had tried to unjumble the steering jets, but he couldn't, so he bailed out and was picked up a little later. The tug went on and shattered on the surface of the asteroid. Then later, Willy, at my directions, investigated the accident, examined the tug, and wrote up an accident report on it. And the inspection part of it must have gone something like this:

When Willy arrived to examine the shattered tug on the surface of the asteroid, he must have been pleasantly surprised to note that the hull was a battered mess, but miraculously some of the innards were intact. He must have looked closer and saw that the drive unit had escaped destruction. The drive unit of a tug is a super-heavy duty workhorse of a unit chock full of more power than would ever be packed or needed in a conventional ship of

the same size. But as I said before, this was a propulsion unit from a tug, and tugs like ones we use need plenty of power.

And that must have been when Willy decided on a reason for having his own private asteroid. He would add the drive unit to it and make it mobile. He must have sparkled with the idea for the rest of the day. I recall his accident report saying the tug was a total loss. Of course, no one checked Willy's decision on that.

I also had Willy under observation the time he retrieved the drive unit and took it to his newly acquired privately owned (now) asteroid. The peculiar shape of the asteroid would lend itself to adaptation to mobility. So Willy blasted off the tip of the elongated end with some explosives he had diverted from some other project, drilled it out with some small charges, and fitted the drive unit in it, and anchored it down. It had taken quite a while to do all that, but Willy had interminable patience once he started a project. The entire procedure would seem impossible for one man, but bulk and weight were no problems in space. And Willy constantly worked miracles.

The question of what value a mobile asteroid would be among swarms of non-mobile asteroids way out in space where there was no place to go never seemed to have entered Willy's mind.

(Now when I speak of "night" and "day," I speak of those periods of the twenty-four hour clock set forth as working and non-working periods. The working part was the "day" part of the twenty-four hours, during which we all engaged in our contracted occupations. The rest of the time until the twenty-four hour period ended was considered "night." Naturally, among the asteroids there was no rising and setting of the sun to help designate the passage of time. The reference to night and day is a habit which persists with space men no matter which part of the system they happen to be in.)

A few days after Willy had finished installing the drive unit in his asteroid, a small company speedster came to a near-halt at the outer fringes of our section of the asteroid belt. For the next eighty hours it felt its way by radar through the belt, dodging and going around the larger bodies, and slowing its speed whenever it became necessary to shoulder its way through masses of smaller debris and dust.

Finally it had our station in sight visually, and in a matter of hours later, it was edging its sleek sixty feet of length into a side gantry attached to the station.

Mr. Garfield Goil disembarked

from the speedster with a small retinue. He was greeted on the inside of the lock by Mr. Orrin, our station manager. As operations engineer-foreman, I was there with Orrin to greet Mr. Goil.

Mr. Goil's presence had been expected for the past several days, but not especially looked forward to. His status and stature with the Extraterrestrial Mining Company was well known to all of us, and certainly respected. His volatile temperament was well known also; it commanded our concern. And if ever Mr. Goil's temperament was to be put to a test, it was during one of his inspection visits. And that was what he had come for—his first to this station.

As I remember, there had always been conjecture on whether Mr. Goil's temperament was the result of his physical topography, or whether his physical topography had been altered by his temperament. In either case, Mr. Garfield Goil was representative of that only appellation inevitable to him because of his facial features and his name. And Mr. Goil was perpetually bitter and approached the world—any world—with a chip welded to his shoulder.

I tagged along as Orrin escorted Goil to his quarters and broke the seal on a bottle of bourbon he had been saving for this particular occasion.

It had been the wrong thing to do. Goil promptly informed Orrin that not only was he (Goil) a teetotaler, but also that he was opposed to drinking by anyone else, especially by company employees during duty hours, and in a place other than an authorized area such as the recreation room or the station bar. He told him further that he would not condone such practices while he was around; his immediate job was to inspect operations personally. His accompanying teams would dig deeply into other matters such as personnel, supplies, overall operations efficiency, and so on. Work would begin as soon as possible.

Goil then excused himself coldly and left for the VIP quarters.

Point number one for the opposition, I thought. Why hadn't someone warned us about the peculiarities of the man?

I hoped nothing would go wrong with the inspection. If things went well, Goil and his cohorts could get their business over with and get away from here that much faster. I was more than a little concerned about Willy and what he was doing.

Willy had spent two days, mostly off-duty time, visiting and working on the asteroid he had adopted, his two miles of ir-

regular monstrosity. In his spurt of activity to install the drive unit, he had over-calculated a charge of explosives and blown out too much of the end section of the asteroid. That caused him some concern for a little while. In a flash of what he probably considered to be pure genius, he solved that minor problem by deciding to fill in the hole by installing a sub-space energizer. This first flash of genius was apparently followed by another inspirational flash. He could, with both installations, and some additional work, send the thing back to Earth. He must have been proud of the thought, for private satellites around Earth were all the rage now; no one who was Anyone was without one. Besides that, it would make a wonderful birthday present for his wife. Her birthday was only a matter of days away.

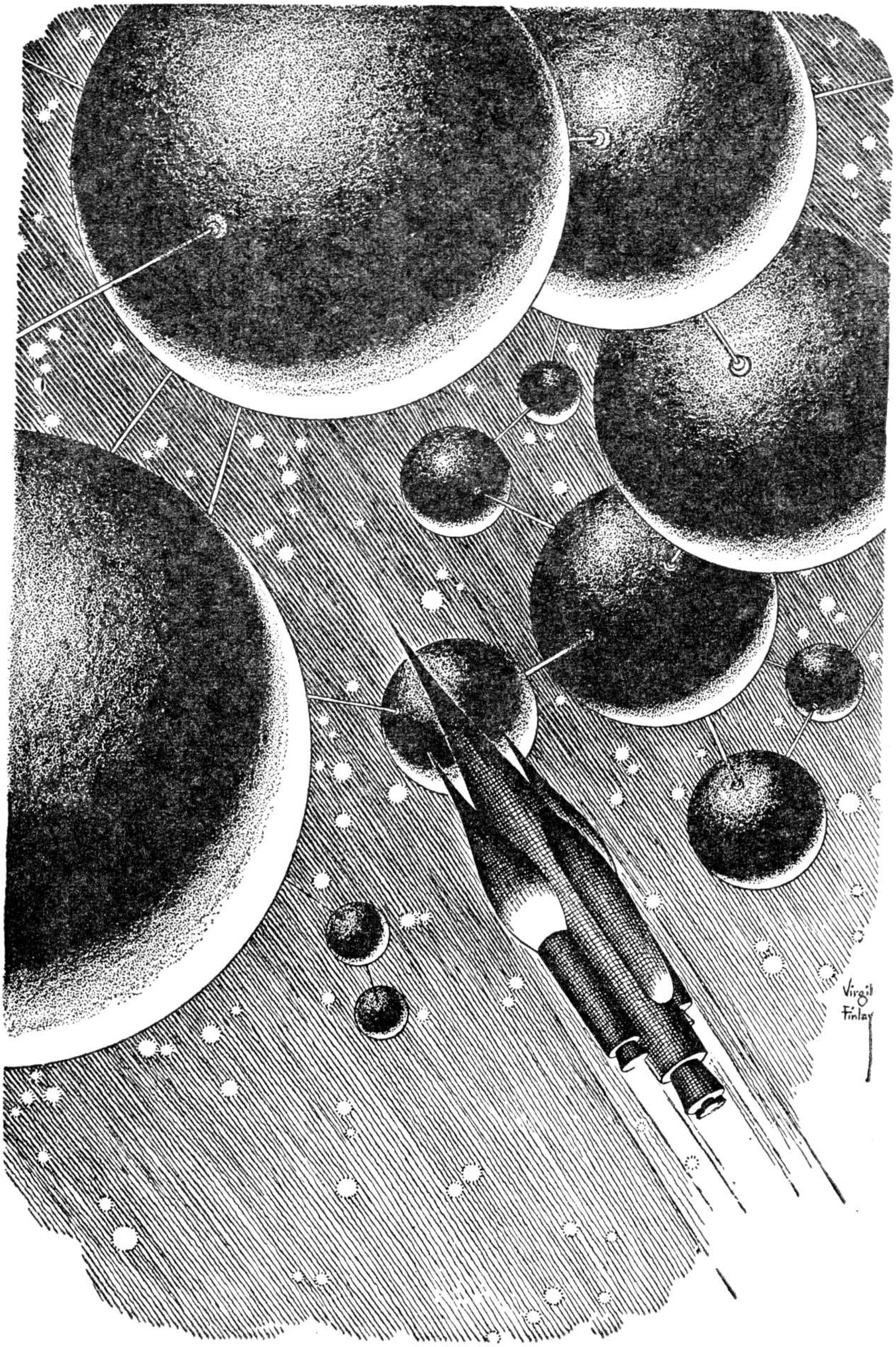
Goil's first request was to observe a day's operation. I had made what few arrangements were necessary, and Goil and I started out early so we could get into position and see the operations from the start.

We had one of the observation flitters. I took it about twenty thousand miles out from the area of operations and parked with the forward port facing the area. I said:

"We'll watch from here, Mr. Goil. You can see the debris floating down there." I pointed, and Goil looked at the little pin points of light reflecting from a great volume of dust, nebula-like in its dim luminosity. "When the crew starts actual operation, we will turn on the magnification screens and get some close-up views of the process."

"Please explain this to me," said Goil. "I've never seen an asteroid's operation before."

"Of course, Mr. Goil. I didn't know. This asteroid patch, or vein, as we like to call it, has a better than average content of metal ores and compounds. As you can see, we have swept the loose ends, so to speak, together. And there you see the result. In the center of that nebulous sort of mass is a large asteroid. There is at least one in almost every patch. We use that as the core, and by planting a large gravity generator on it and feeding it a great deal of power, it and the asteroid attracts most of the nearby debris. The gravity generator has been souped up tremendously. It burns out rather quickly, but it operates long enough for our purposes. There is a respectable layer of assorted sizes of asteroids hugging the core. And there are several miles of dust surrounding everything. After the gravity generator has burned out, the big attraction dies out, of course.


Virgil
Finlay

But the proximity of the debris is still enough to hold them together for some time."

"What is that stray body off to one side?"

"That is the trigger asteroid," I answered.

A couple of minutes before triggering time, I reached over and punched the channel button on operations frequency. Immediately the usual operations chatter came rushing out at us from the speaker. Suddenly a voice blasted out saying, "Ready, Sam? Clear, everybody! Eyes off! Ten to go!" A count-down was started.

I had switched on four screens, each a different magnification. I pointed to a spheroid on one of the screens and said, "There's the trigger body. It's equipped with a sub-space energizer big enough to get it into sub-space and return it to normal. Then there is a small propulsor unit with just enough energy to send it to the center of that mess. Then it returns to normal space smack dab in the center of the core asteroid. And when the asteroid matter and the trigger body matter try to occupy the same space at the same time . . . Watch it go out."

It did. Just disappeared.

The debris-encrusted mass vaporized. It seemed to do it slowly, lazily. Much of the debris was flung out from the mass, but raw energy of boiling vapors chased it, overtook it, and then it too was vapor. The light emitted from the vaporizing collection of bodies would have been optic nerve searing if Goil and I had not been looking at it through the screens. The vapor continued to expand and spread until it looked like a miniature nebula.

I said, "The triggering body is about half the size of the core body. The heat that results from the explosion vaporizes nearly a hundred per cent of the material. What little solid matter that escapes is of little consequence."

Goil watched in fascination. The spectrum of colors displayed were unbelievably, indescribably beautiful. The brilliant cloud masses that boiled and leaped around were like things alive trying to escape the terrible inner torment.

A long time passed, but the sight was so hypnotizing that Goil seemed to be unaware of just how long he had been watching. Finally I broke the silence.

"Watch the specks on the far left screen. They are the gravitor tugs. They are ready to move in."

I stepped up the magnification on the screen. Goil watched a number of great, ugly ships line abreast, head for the glowing clouds, enter, and disappear from sight.

"Those tugs are modifications of the scientific ships that sweep close to the sun to observe solar phenomena first hand. They are impervious to the relatively low heat of the vapor. They will do the fringes first. The center is still too turbulent. By the time they complete the fringes, the center will be calm enough to sweep. They work their way inward all the time."

"How long will it take to complete the operation?" Goil asked.

"With a cloud this size, about a week. It's best to get on it right away. The tougher metals come out sooner than the softer and lighter metals with lower vaporizing points. Recovery has to be made while the metals are in the vapor state or the gravitors won't work efficiently."

"Exactly how does it work?" asked Goil.

"Well, I guess you might remotely compare it to fractional distillation," I said. "Only we gather metals instead of fluids. The reason for vaporizing the solids is to make the ships accessible to the metals. It spreads the matter out thin. The gravitors work very well in the hot vapor. Behind each ship is towed a gravitor. Each gravitor is set to attract a particular metal, somewhat the way a magnet attracts iron, again loosely comparing. A magnet, as you know, attracts by magnetic force. The gravitors are adjusted to attract a metal by selecting its gravitic attraction. As the gravitor ships pass through the vapor, the gravitors behind them attract the metal they are set for. When load size has been reached, they are taken to the cache near the station."

We watched the operation for three more hours. Goil wanted to see the first of the gravitor tugs emerge with its load. Finally a ship emerged from the cloud mass and headed for the station.

"What is it carrying?" Goil asked, looking at the tremendous mass of incandescent material being towed a mile behind the tug.

"Tungsten," I said. "Would you like to see our cache?"

I steered the little observation ship past the station. When we arrived at the cache area I eased the speed of the ship until it was barely moving around among tremendous masses of various metals. Goil recognized small spheroids of gold and silver. I pointed out other metals, some in greater quantities than others, all floating in space, with thick cables connecting them. I saw Goil looking at the cables curiously.

"Keeps them from drifting apart," I said.

For another twenty minutes we cruised around the cache.

Goil said only a word now and then. He was visibly impressed by the mountains of metal all around, all representing untold potential wealth. I think he better understood how such an expensive operation so far from Earth could be quite profitable.

"You may wonder," I said, "just how I located this cache. There are several little transmitters among the piles. I just home in on any one of them. Each metal cache has its own frequency. Gold, silver, tungsten, beryllium . . ."

Goil nodded. "Let's go back to the station."

Goil called for Orrin and me. We entered his temporary quarters.

"Sit down," he said. He suggestively waved smoke away from his face, and Orrin stubbed out his cigar.

"Mr. Orrin," Goil started, "you may have one of the top asteroid mining stations, but in spite of your fine production record, there seem to be some discrepancies we don't understand.

"For example, certain supply items are being used in greater quantities than the size of your operations require. This seems to have been going on for some time according to your records —and what your records do not show. Your expendable supplies items accounting seems to be lax, if not outright careless. Furthermore, there seems to be some non-expendable items that can't be accounted for, a couple of major items among them. This doesn't make much sense out here in the middle of nowhere, unless careless loss is the answer. Such losses could hardly be attributed to theft. Needless to say, theft out here would serve a thief absolutely no purpose."

"What major items are not accounted for?" asked Orrin, with a puzzled look on his face, as if he didn't believe Goil.

"The only thing I can recall offhand," said Goil, "is a tug. And that's pretty major."

I gave an inner sigh of relief. "I can account for that," I said. "And Mr. Orrin can back me up. The tug lost steering control the other day and crashed into one of the larger asteroids. It was demolished. The accident report and destruction data are a little slow getting into the records section."

"That's right," said Orrin. "Willy Maloon made the inspection and I certified it. Total loss. The tug was going mighty fast when it hit."

"Where are the remains?" asked Goil.

"Whenever anything big enough is destroyed," I answered, "it is placed with the next batch of asteroids to be vapor-

ized. The metals are recovered that way, so the thing is not quite a total loss. That tug was vaporized during the operation we watched yesterday."

"I see," said Goil. "And this man, ah—Maloon—can he be trusted on such an inspection?"

"One of the best," I answered.

"Anyway," continued Goil, "there seems to be something peculiar going on here. I've instructed my teams to go into this as deeply as they can."

Orrin nodded. I nodded too, but I felt a bit apprehensive. This was an awkward time for Goil to have arrived. And it might prove even more awkward for him to take sudden interest in Willy.

The next day, Goil summoned Orrin and me to his quarters once again. It was about an hour after the end of a normal workday. Orrin and I were both available, and we met at the door of Goil's quarters at about the same time.

Goil had thunderclouds ready to burst hanging around his head. I could see that as soon as we entered the room. Orrin's spirits visibly dropped. So did mine.

The black cloud over Goil burst. For five minutes without letup he stormed. When Orrin and I recovered a little from the deluge, Goil was saying:

". . . complete indications of careless management. And management, Mr. Orrin, starts at the top." He looked hard at Orrin. Then he turned to me adding, "And goes on down. *How* can you account for a missing sub-space energizer, especially one as large and powerful as the ones we use? And one gravity generator?"

"Huh?" said Orrin, seeming to come out of a daze. "What's missing?"

Goil slowed down a bit. "One gravity generator and one subspace energizer, Mr. Orrin. One each of these items is used for each vaporizing process. And you have one too few vaporizing projects on record. And one each gravity generator and energizer unsigned for, completely unaccounted for—so far."

"What do you mean, 'so far'?" I asked. "Have you any idea how we can account for these two items?"

"I have indeed," said Goil.

"I don't understand," said Orrin in a helpless tone. "How could anyone lose or misplace anything as big as those? It doesn't make sense."

I was glad Orrin had put the question that way.

"Precisely," said Goil. "I don't believe someone did misplace or lose those items. I believe someone took them for a purpose."

"That's ridiculous!" snapped

Orrin. "Out here in space? For what?"

"Maybe we'll learn soon," said Goil. "One William Maloon should be on his way here right now to do some explaining."

I turned cold all over. What had Willy done to expose himself so? I wondered. Aloud I said:

"What has Willy to do with this, Mr. Goil? Willy is one of our best men, completely trustworthy."

"A hard worker and really ambitious," added Orrin.

"No doubt," Goil said acidly. "Ambitious to his own ends. I've checked Mr. Maloon's personnel records and I found some interesting things. Mr. Maloon is not any sort of qualified engineer. Or even an expert technician. Why, he's not even a good journeyman of any trade. His only approach to some sort of claim to formal training is a single correspondence course!"

"He's a good hard-working technician!" defended Orrin.

"Sure," said Goil. "He learned the hard way. Through experience," he added sarcastically. "Can you tell me, Mr. Orrin, exactly what is Mr. Maloon's job here?"

"He's an engineer fill-in," said Orrin with a trace of doubt in his voice. "He's on call and handy for just about any job around here."

"In a limited capacity, no doubt," Goil said dryly. "And he apparently does a lot of jobs around here he's not expected to do. A check of your tool cribs and equipment storage shows that Maloon has had his hands on just about everything you have available at one time or another since he has been here. Mr. Maloon is a very busy man during his off-duty hours, it seems."

"What has this to do with calling Willy in about the missing energizer and generator?" I ventured to ask.

"Part of a suspicion," Goil said. "Maloon's use of company tools and equipment increased just before the disappearance of those two pieces of equipment. It may be significant or it may not. What is significant is this: everybody having access to supply and equipment was out participating in one way or another in the operation the other day. It seems that everybody can be accounted for but Maloon. He could easily have had time to get unauthorized items out of supply."

"This is fantastic!" snorted Orrin.

They don't know the half of it! I thought to myself.

I didn't want Willy to have to face Goil. Willy was weak in some ways . . . Aloud I said:

"I know Willy quite well, Mr.

Goil. If you will let me talk to him . . ."

"I'm sure you do," said Goil icily. "You and he came here together. Even applied and were accepted for this job together," he added significantly.

There was a mild knock on the door. It opened slowly and Willy stood in the doorway, hesitating before entering, looking around the room. He said:

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Goil?"

Mr. Garfield Goil, in spite of his somewhat unstable temperament, had made rapid strides in his career to his present staff position. He was no nincompoop. He was well educated and trained, and had apparently learned to measure a man accurately and quickly. He so seemed to measure Willy at a glance, drawing, no doubt, also from his recent examination of Willy's records, and the personality profile he had gleaned from it. Willy (he probably reasoned) for all his foibles would be basically truthful, especially if confronted by Authority. And he apparently was timid and obviously worried. Therefore, he must have some cause to worry. Therefore, the impact of direct action should produce quick results. Mr. Goil asked:

"Willy, we'd like to know what happened to the gravity generator and the sub-space energizer."

Be it noted that it was a statement question and not an accusation. But Goil said it in such a tone and manner that it implied that Willy and only Willy could give an answer.

Willy felt and looked the impact of the words. He looked pleadingly at me, whose eyes sought interest in one of the empty chairs. Then he looked at Orrin for succor, but Orrin only stared back at Willy half-accusingly.

But my own spirits had given a little jump at Goil's use of Willy's given name. This had not happened before. And this was most uncharacteristic of Goil, particularly in a situation like this one.

Could it be, I thought, Willy's personable influence working on Goil?

Willy floundered for words, then stammered out with, "I—I don't know what you mean, Mr. Goil."

Goil, apparently confident that his attack was going well, said, "I'm sure you do, Willy. Think. Wasn't it Thursday that you removed that generator and the energizer from the stock room? These are very expensive and complicated items, Willy. If they can be recovered, so much the better. What could you possibly have done with them?"

"I—I didn't—" Willy started weakly.

Goil stood up from behind his desk, leaned forward, and his features twisted even more in sudden anger. He shouted, "Maloon, you were the only one who could have taken them! The only one who was not working in the vaporizing operation. Maloon, I'm going to find those things, and I'm going to prove you took them if I have to stay here for the next six months! And then I'm going to fire you and prosecute you. Maloon, what have you done with those things?"

Willy tried to sink right through the floor.

I felt utterly helpless and a little angry at Goil's bullying tactics.

Orrin, suddenly angry, shouted, "Mr. Goil, this isn't a court of law. No one is on trial here."

"This may not be a court of law, Mr. Orrin," Goil said, no less angry than Orrin, "but you can call it a court of inquiry. You seem to forget that your position might be at stake here. Your interfering with my investigation will be taken into consideration separately after this matter at hand has been resolved."

This remark, and the severity with which it was made, only angered Orrin more, but he held himself in check.

Willy had been fidgeting and looking back and forth at Orrin and Goil with a guilty and despondent look on his face. He started to say:

"I don't want to cause any trouble, Mr. Orrin. Ah—just how serious—"

"Hold it, Willy!" I shouted. "You haven't been accused of anything yet. You don't have to say anything without counsel."

Goil turned baleful eyes on me, and I shut up suddenly. He said, "Mr. Weston, let me repeat: no formal accusations have been made—yet. I am trying to learn certain facts. One fact I have learned already is that you are exceedingly friendly with Willy. Furthermore, you as senior engineer-foreman should be aware of what is going on around here. Mr. Weston, you have not been absolved of this yet. Duty-wise, or personally," he added.

Willy was resigned to his own professional downfall. He looked and must have felt utterly miserable. He had done wrong and he knew it. And he was not one to let his friends get any blame for what he had done. He said:

"That's right, Mr. Goil. I did take the generator and the energizer."

My morale suddenly hit bottom and flattened. My mind went into overdrive in an effort to think of some way to extricate

Willy from his blundering admission. Poor Willy, who had the body of a wrestler, the temperament of a poet, and a boundless generosity wanted to confess all.

But what a sacrifice, I thought. My mind sought answers and words and found none.

Orrin stared at Willy, openmouthed. He said unbelievingly, "What?"

"Yes, sir. I got the energizer and the generator."

Goil sat back with a self-satisfied look on his face.

I shot Willy a scolding glance and said, "Willy, you don't have to say another thing—"

Before I could get out anymore words, Goil snapped out, "Weston, one more word from you unless I ask for it, and you will find yourself under station arrest for insubordination—do you understand?"

I clamped my mouth shut. The more I defended Willy, the more Willy would talk in order to protect his uninvolved friends.

Goil said to me in a low, ominous voice, "I am invested with certain Company powers out here, and I intend to use them fully. I intend to continue with this investigation in spite of any opposition you give me. Pending on the outcome, Mr. Orrin and Mr. Weston, you are both relieved of your positions as of now—say for mismanagement of personnel and company property.

"Mr. Maloon, I am placing you under station arrest by authority of my position, and because of your admission of theft. Pay and allowances for all of you are suspended as of today.

"That's all. Please leave."

Willy was the first to leave, with his head hanging low in shame. Orrin left next, with fury shining plainly from his eyes. I lingered until Willy had left. Then I closed the door and swung around to face Goil.

Goil was looking at me peculiarly. He said, "I told you to go, Weston."

"I will," I said. "But first I want to tell you something."

"When I want to hear your side of the story, I'll ask you for it," Goil said nastily.

"It won't wait," I said in a new voice that caused Goil to look at me closely. "I want to tell you now while we are alone."

Goil's eyes narrowed. "Weston, anything you have to say one way or the other I'll use against you later. Anything you want to say to save your own skin just won't do any good."

I became suddenly infuriated. I stepped forward and slammed my fist on the desk top and said in a low, poisonous voice, "Goil, you've shoved your prying nose into something you know very

little about. You're jumping to conclusions about something you know only part of. Now I'm forced to reveal certain facts which you shouldn't be knowing. And I'm going to tell you here and now whether you want to listen or not!"

Goil had reddened and risen from his chair. But I towered over him threateningly and he dropped back in his chair in quiet incense.

"That's better," I said, somewhat cooled off. "Now listen. What I have to say may seem incredible to you. Hear me out, then speak your piece. And I think I can prove what I say to your satisfaction. In any event, I hope I can trust your confidence on this. You'll understand what I mean by the time I'm finished.

"First, Willy did take the energizer and the generator. 'Steal,' if you wish to say so. I knew it. Orrin, nor anyone else knows it though. Second, those are not the only things he has taken. Third, his taking things like that has been happening all the time he has been here. It happened before he got here, wherever he was.

"He is not a kleptomaniac. He steals, not because he has a compulsion to do so, nor for economic gain, but for a more important reason."

Goil said, "Stop beating around the bush. If you think you have something to say, go ahead and say it."

"I'm trying to," I said. "But it's not something easily explained.

"Willy is nothing but a great big rabbit's foot."

"*What?*"

"Mr. Goil, Willy is the exact opposite of an accident prone. Willy is a safety prone. No accidents involving personal injury ever happen when he is around. Not even minor ones."

Goil looked hostilely skeptical at me. "I seem to recall some accident reports you sent in. You signed them yourself, I believe, as safety officer."

"That's right," I said feeling foolish. "But they were falsified reports. And I've requisitioned medical supplies too, that were never needed."

"Now why would you want to do a thing like that?" asked Goil in a tone cold with obvious disbelief, and the tenor of humoring a madman.

"To keep reports and consumption statistics where they belong," I answered.

"I'm more than just an employee of the Company. I'm also a research psychologist. And I'm studying Willy. I'll admit that through influence and other ways I got Willy and me a job out here isolated with a relatively small group doing rather dan-

gerous work, normally. That was planned. It's easier to study him this way. I can prove this, of course."

"How do you know for certain Willy is a safety prone?"

"Through non-accident statistics where he has worked."

Goil removed a small pen knife from his pocket, opened the blade, and drew it across the back of his hand. The cut bled. He said, "Look. I'm injured."

I shook my head. "You are injured, but it's not the same thing. It was not an accident."

Goil stood up. "I've heard enough of your gibberish. Willy is a thief and you are a pathological liar. What you have just told me is pure fantasy, a yarn concocted to try to protect you and Willy. I have little doubt but what you really believe it yourself. Mr. Weston, you are a sick man."

"I told you it would sound incredible.

"Willy only steals or alters the normal sequence of events so that accidents involving human injury won't happen. Sometimes his behavior patterns are simple, sometimes complex. But always —always the synergism, syndrome, or whatever you want to call it, is the same. I have a file of tape recordings I can let you hear, and incident histories—"

"Which may very well be considered part of *your* syndrome," said Goil. "Mr. Weston, you are either the system's boldest liar, or you are sick. You can't really expect me to believe all that garbage, now can you?"

"With that unimaginative type mind you seem to have, Mr. Goil, no, I don't expect you to believe. But it was worth a try. Willy is up to something big right now, and if you interrupt it, there is no telling what will happen."

"We'll find out," Goil said, "for I expect to find out what this is all about. Now if you'll leave—"

I spun on my heel, angry at Goil's intolerant stupidity. I whipped open the door and slammed it shut behind me. Then I stormed to my quarters where I broke open a fresh bottle of Scotch. I downed a couple of quick shots then nursed a third, thinking about the time out near Jupiter when Willy had rigged up a still and brewed some powerful concoction. He had insisted that we all sample it, and everyone had, just to please Willy (they thought!) and had all gotten roaring drunk. And had safely passed through one of those plague areas that come up once in a century out of who knows where to decimate any population that happens to be in the way.

We had made an emergency

landing at another mining station. We had walked through the corridors and rooms looking for desperately needed parts and supplies, and had tried to count the dead until the task became too sickening, exposed in every possible way to the voracious microorganisms that had killed every being aboard. But none of us had gotten even a headache. We found our parts and took off again.

Willy never made any more of that brew.

I wondered often what could have been in that stuff to make it such a powerful antibiotic.

I had been early in the process of studying Willy then and had not had foresight enough to keep a sample of that brew. I had lost one chance right then to add materially to the medical knowledge of humanity. And now that stupid Gar Goil was on the point of interrupting all further research.

For the next ten minutes I considered ways I could get Goil near an airlock so I could shove him through, sans suit, and with enough velocity so that he would end up somewhere in the Coalsack region. But I gave up the idea, conceding that it would be impossible; somewhere along the line Willy would prevent it.

I took one more Scotch and went to bed. All night long I crossed and recrossed the threshold of sleep, my mind filled with methods of studying and analyzing the intricasies of Willy's behavior; trying to discover any common factors so that others of his genre could easily be discovered and put to work and their by-products salvaged.

The following day was dismal to me. I avoided everybody possible so I wouldn't take my troubles out on them. And I avoided Goil in particular, for another reason. I even ate late so I could eat alone.

Just about the time I finished, Artie's voice came over the system, saying:

"Attention, everyone. Flash news item just received. There is a freighter out of control enroute from Ganymede to Mars. Unless the freighter can be brought under control, it will have to be abandoned."

So what, I thought. It's happened before. So some company loses a freighter. They're insured.

Artie's voice went right on uninterrupted by my sour thoughts. "The present course of the ship is interception of Mars. Unless the course can be changed, the ship might plunge into Mars."

So what again? They're still insured. The crew can abandon ship in the lifeboats. So the ship makes a microscopic dent in

Mars. It's better than 99% wasteland.

"The exact point at which impact with Mars will be made is being computed right now. What makes the whole thing terrible is that the freighter is loaded with fissionable material exported from Ganymede. If the ship is not stopped or diverted before it reaches Mars, the impact will bring all the units of fissionable material into super critical proximity."

And that, I realized, will not be good for Mars because the thin atmosphere of the planet will let the ship get right through to the surface before the tough skin could get much more than cherry red. And the ship would bury itself in the soft red soil (how deep?) before the impact sandwiched the containers of fissionable material enough for detonation proximity.

Whew! My interest began to increase.

That was Artie Jones giving the news. He was like that, and it was not part of his regular job. He did it because he wanted to keep people up with the latest. He was Computers and Communications engineer.

He finished off by saying, "Long-range scopes are looking for the ship now. As soon as it is located and magnifiers thrown into the circuit, it will be 'vised. I'll have the signals relayed to the rec room trideo.

"It is, by the way, one of our own company freighters."

Alarms clanged in my head. Yowee!

I raced for the rec room. Nearly everybody else was doing the same. Orrin was playing a half-hearted game of cribbage with Gus. Goil sat by himself in a corner reading. Willy was not there.

Randy and Manuel were already arguing about how much fissionable a freighter like that could carry. I settled the argument by telling them exactly how much. They both whistled and shook their heads. Randy said:

"If that ship buries itself deeply enough in the surface and explodes, it'll make a neat hole in Mars."

I looked askance at Goil and saw that he was not reading. I said, "Hole, hell! With the tonnage they have on that ship, it'll take a chunk out of the surface the size of Australia. If it goes deep enough, it might even crack the planet wide open. It couldn't be any worse."

I wasn't at all certain anything like cracking the planet would happen. Nobody could know just what sort of blast that tonnage could make. But I wanted it to sound really bad. I

sneaked a quick look at Goil. He was looking pretty worried.

Now, I knew our company had some real estate on Mars. A few mines, a number of atmosphere generator factories and several gravity generator plants. And just about this time I strongly suspected that Goil had some stock and other holdings in the Mars territory.

"That's only part of it," I said. "Think of what will happen to Mars' atmosphere if that much planet is scattered around."

"Yeah," said Manuel. "Dust. Red dust. And how about all that undetonated radioactive material?"

"Which will be dust also," I said, "thoroughly mixed in with all the rest of the dust."

Gus had finished his game of cribbage with Orrin and had come over. He said, "The dust will shut out what dim sunlight there is and the whole planet will be in for a deep freeze."

"What's the half-life of that stuff in the freighter?" I asked Orrin. I knew, but I wanted Goil to know too. Orrin told me.

The alarm that had clattered in my brain had settled down to a soothing purr. I began to add three and three hoping to get nine. Right now I needed a gestalt of something whose whole would be a lot greater than the sum of its parts. The parts I believe I had, and the sum I think was due to come up soon.

I went out and headed for the computer room. Artie was in there trying to listen to a dozen news reports at one time. He wouldn't miss any of them, for a flock of recorders were going all at once.

I grabbed him by a shoulder and spun him around and looked as hard and serious as I could.

"Artie," I said, "I know damned well you computed a course for Willy the other day, for an asteroid to orbit just outside Earth. I want you to give me the exact course, where and when. And I want it now. This is official business, Artie."

I must have looked extremely convincing, for Artie paled a little and did not try to deny anything.

"—I can't, Sam," he said. "I gave the original tapes and sheets to Willy. I threw away the duplicates."

"Dammit, Artie!" I shouted, now really mad. "Then you'd better start remembering pretty good, because you're going to sit right down here and I'm going to sit with you, and you are going to give me as nearly as you can the course of Willy's asteroid."

This was just about an impossible request. I knew it, and Artie knew it. But he sat down

at the console of the computer and said:

"I'll do the best I can, Sam."

I went to Willy's room and banged on the door then threw it open. He wasn't there. For sure then he would be someplace he wasn't supposed to be. So I headed for one likely place.

Willy was there all right. The chef shuffled around nervously, probably wondering if I'd just chew him for letting Willy in the galley, or tell Orrin. He offered me ham and eggs. I refused sharply.

"Elmer," I said, "blast off."

Elmer did.

As soon as Willy and I were alone, I said, "Willy, you got me and Mr. Orrin in a pack of trouble. Why don't you tell me where the generator and the converter are. If we can get them back to the stock room, nothing can be proved."

Willy couldn't look me in the face. He added three too many spoons of sugar to his coffee then stirred it so fast it spilled over the edge of the cup.

"Come on, Willy. Where?"

Willy spent the next minute trying to turn inside out. He finally squeaked. "I can't, Sam."

"Why not, Willy?"

It was my turn to be silent for a minute. It seemed a lot longer. I said, "I think you better tell me all about it, Willy."

He did.

I went back to the recreation room.

The trideo was on and some narrator's voice was explaining and showing the course of the ship on a chart, and just where it would go.

The ship was still unaccountably out of control. The plotted course showed that it would intercept Mars. And a map of Mars showed precisely where the ship would strike the surface.

Of all the barren areas on Mars where the ship could strike and do a little less surface damage, it was headed instead straight for the only densely populated, industrial area.

I looked at Goil and saw that his morale could be trod on. He probably already had computed his own monetary loss as well as the company losses. But he wasn't saying a word. He was keeping his misery to himself.

Let him stew until morning, I thought. By then he should be ripe for the little package I was planning to hand him.

By morning, the confidence that I had the night before had pretty much dissipated. Nevertheless, I followed Goil from the dining hall to his quarters, giving him only time to complete any personal necessities before knocking on his door.

Some of my confidence return-

ed when I entered the room. He looked as if he hadn't slept any at all. The impending doom of his Mars holdings had apparently dwelt with him most intimately the past night.

Goil said, "What's on your mind, Mr. Weston?"

"I had a talk with Willy last night. He wants to tell you everything."

Goil brightened slightly. "Fine," he said.

"I've taken the liberty of asking him to come here," I said.

Goil nodded.

This was a good chance for me to needle him a little more, so I said, "The news reports are not good this morning. That freighter will have to be abandoned sometime this evening if they don't get it off the course it's on now."

Goil dimmed again. He said, "I heard the news."

"There is no way they can jettison that cargo either. Strange, isn't it. Of all the other points in and around space, that ship has got to pick Mars to smack into, and the only densely populated part of Mars at that. Fate, I guess."

"Not so strange," said Goil. "It was enroute to Mars."

"Sure," I said, "but a course usually includes a series of corrections for a haul like that."

Goil said, "No navigator-computer combination is good enough to plan a one-shot course like that. It's just an unfortunate coincidence that the industrial area is to be hit."

And those last words were just what I wanted to hear from him.

Willy knocked on the door and entered at Goil's request. Willy's face was long, and the few steps that carried him into the room seemed to draw on his last reserves of energy. He seemed a little grateful when Goil bade him be seated.

Goil said, "All right, Willy. Sam says you have something to tell me."

"Yes, sir," Willy said dolefully, shifting his gaze so that he did not have to look directly at Goil or me. He hesitated for moments, then when the silence was too thick, he continued.

"I—I took that generator and that energizer as I told you yesterday." Again he paused, patently dreading what more he had to say.

"What did you do with such monstrous, expensive pieces of equipment?" asked Goil. "Of what possible use could they be to you, especially out here in space?"

"Willy," I said, "why don't you start right at the beginning so Mr. Goil can get a complete picture?"

Willy looked behind and around me, gulped a couple of times, then started.

"OK. Well, Martha's birthday —Martha is my wife, Mr. Goil—her birthday is in a few days. And I missed her last birthday and she never forgave me for that. And I almost missed this one too, except I got an idea. And that was after reading about those private satellites a lot of the rich people have going around Earth.

"It was too late for me to send any sort of a birthday present to Martha; besides, what could I get her out here? Anyway, I got the idea that what a wonderful birthday present it would be if I could get Martha a private satellite. Not one of those prefabricated ones, but a natural, real one. The more I thought about it the better the idea sounded. Then I realized that I had everything here; a million asteroids to choose from, and I could slip one of the gravity generators in the middle of it. And I could hitch the drive from the smashed tug to it, and install a sub-space energizer. Except for an atmosphere generator it would be equipped enough for a start. I could finish equipping it later. So I got an asteroid and took a sub-space energizer and a gravity generator from supply—they are expendable—and got the drive off the wrecked tug. I installed them on the rock."

Willy ended his story abruptly.

Goil sat looking intently at Willy and drumming his fingers on the desk top. Finally he said:

"We can recover those major items. Maybe it'll go easier with you, Willy. If you can show us where this rock is—"

Willy hung his head again. And the silence became solid. Finally Willy squeaked out:

"I can't. I sent it off yesterday."

"Just how and when did you determine the rock should be sent?" asked Goil.

"I—I got a course tape," said Willy. I could almost feel his sense of guilt as he virtually implicated one more of his friends.

"Don't you know," said Goil in an all-too-quiet, ominous voice, "that a jury-rigged contraption like that could never get near Earth with only a one-time course like that plotted for it? That it takes precise computations to get something like that to a destination? *With* a human navigator? Just how did you figure you could do it? I'm curious."

"Well," said Willy warming up to the subject a little, "I rigged up a timing unit. When it left here, it was on the taped course for Earth. Then it went into sub-space. From the computations I got, I set another timer that will kick it back into normal

space at the right time, and in an orbit around Earth."

The room was silent for a time. Finally the silence exploded with:

"You damned fool! You dangerous idiot! You've got just enough knowledge to be able to do something like that, but not enough sense to know it is hopeless and idiotic! I've heard enough. Now, get out of here!"

Willy got out in a stumbling hurry.

I stayed. Goil tried to glare me out of the room, but I would have none of it. I was now ready to go into action. I was by no means certain I would be right, but already deep in this mess, what more could I lose by plunging?

With a lot more bravado than I really felt, I plunked down on Goil's desk top a stack of sheets, a chart, and tapes. Then I put both palms down on his desk and leaned over until I looked him squarely in the face. I said:

"Do you know what is going to happen to that rock of Willy's, Mr. Goil? It's going to come out of sub-space right smack in the path of that freighter. It's going to knock that freighter right off course."

Of course, it sounded like a fantasy, and if I had been in Goil's place, I would have thought it so. But Goil had been worrying over the impending loss of his interests, and even the fantastic was something to clutch at for the moment.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I nodded to the stuff I had tossed on his desk. "Look at those. The chart particularly. I got the course plotted by Artie Jones. I checked the path and timing of both Willy's asteroid and the freighter. Willy's asteroid is due to come out of subspace in about six hours at this point."—I pointed to an X I had marked on the chart—"And the freighter will be at the same point at the same time."

Goil said nothing, but examined the chart and the computation figures, and finally the tapes. He shook his head a number of times as if he didn't want to believe but did not dare not to. Finally, he looked up at me and said:

"The course and figures seem to check both ways. But I don't believe it. That the rock and the freighter should meet in the same place at the same time would be more than a coincidence. It would be a miracle."

"More so than the 'coincidence' of the freighter headed straight for Mars' only industrial area?" I asked.

Goil thought it over for a while. Then he said, "Yes. More than I can imagine. We have the

rock and the freighter, two moving bodies, meeting in space by pure chance. Space is too vast for that sort of thing. It can't happen."

"Mars and the freighter are two moving bodies in space that are going to meet," I pointed out.

"Yes, but the ship was originally headed on a course to Mars. And Mars is much bigger."

"True," I conceded. "But the asteroid is also on an interception course with the freighter. And it is a lot bigger than the freighter."

Goil sat silent and thoughtful for quite a while. Finally, he said:

"I'm not gullible, Mr. Weston. Nor am I a fool. I have enough interest in Mars to want a miracle to happen, aside from a natural desire to see disaster averted. But what about you; what are you after? What are you trying to prove?"

That was what I had been waiting for.

I told him about the Research Institute of Human Influences, for which I was a field psychologist, and how they located accident prones and safety prones, among other types of odd personalities, and how we observers gathered data in efforts to learn ways to nullify the accident prones' influence, and to learn the whys and hows of the safety prones, as well as ways to expand their fields of influence.

Goil just sat there, his face indicating neither belief nor disbelief.

"Willy has no idea he does what he does, nor why. He's completely unaware of his influence. I can't imagine how his mind works to rationalize for his behavior. I'd do just about anything, Mr. Goil, to keep Willy from learning all I've told you. It would make him aware, and that might sour things, probably even nullify his influence."

Goil said, "I'm not at all convinced that this is not some sort of lunatic hoax. But as long as there is nothing I nor you can do for the time being, I'm going to hold any further action in abeyance. Let's see what happens. Even if by some miraculous coincidence the rock and the ship should meet, that's not proof that your yarn is true."

"No," I said. "But other things have happened before. Nothing this big, though. But always, there is this synergism of Willy's; a compulsion to do some crazy thing, or to build some silly gadget, even if he has to steal to do it. And the inevitable end that sometimes quite obviously prevents injury, and other times leaving the results a mystery. Once the purpose has been accomplished, Willy loses all

interest. I have histories, documented cases of Willy's influence. Files of tape recordings of his synergisms in action. And these files all show a definite pattern."

"Let's hear some of your recordings, and read some of your documents," said Goil.

And that was how we spent the next four hours.

Of course, I had juggled the computations I had shown Goil a little bit. And made the course of the asteroid look like it would coincide with that of the freighter. If I hadn't, Goil would never have given me the time I needed.

Art Jones had kept the news of the freighter coming in all day. It was still on course for Mars. About a half-hour before the freighter crew was due to leave the ship, the rec room was crowded with men waiting to watch the escape of the crew.

There hadn't been time enough to get a ship in the area that could blast the freighter off course. And there hadn't been any ship even on Mars equipped for such action, not even an old slightly serviceable derelict that could be placed in the runaway ship's path for deflection.

The long-range scope still had the runaway ship in focus. It looked like a little painted miniature in the trideo, with a very slowly moving spangled background. A faint superimposed image of Mars appeared. The announcer was talking about forces, vectors, and other navigational terminology, plus nonsensical chatter of probability factors. The picture faded and was replaced with an artist's animated conception of the impending tragedy. It showed the present location of the ship, the calculated course and trajectory of the ship through the atmosphere to the point of impact—right in the center of the industrial area. It ended with a big question mark before the image of the ship returned.

During the sequence of the collision course, I was trying in my mind to figure out just how far off Willy's asteroid would be. I could figure it roughly in my head, remembering the original figures I'd gotten from Artie. The asteroid would be no fewer than a million and a half miles from the runaway ship, at its nearest point. Besides, it wouldn't emerge from sub-space until it was near Earth, a good seventy million miles from Mars at that time.

It had taken some belligerent persuasion to get Artie to conjure up the figures and tapes I gave Goil.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and glanced up. Simon, one of the tug pilots, was pointing toward the back of the room. I

looked back. Artie was there with a worried look on his face looking at me. His eyes moved quickly toward where Goil sat, and then back at me. His head gave a little backwards jerk.

Feeling real unhappy all of a sudden as premonition nudged my mind, I got up quietly and went back.

Artie had stepped outside in the hall. When he saw me step out of the rec room doorway, he motioned me down the hall farther. Gloom was all over his face, even in his motions. He said:

"Sam, I don't know what's going on around here between Willy, Goil, and you. But I thought you'd like to know Goil was in to see me a little while ago. Before I had much of a chance to think about it, I gave him the figures and tapes for that course I plotted for Willy. I don't know how Goil knew about them, but he asked for them directly."

"Which figures, Art?" I asked anxiously.

"Why, the ones I made for you. Is there something wrong, Sam?"

My alarm must have shown in my face. I said, "No, Art. I thought maybe you might have given him that other course I asked you to plot."

"You mean that false course? Hell, Sam. I didn't know—"

"It's all right, Art. You didn't know." And I left him standing there puzzled. I went back to the rec room.

I wasn't feeling so good by the time I got back. My seat had been taken, so I wriggled myself a place against the back wall.

Goil knew all about the fictitious course I gave him. Right there he had me cold. But he was too worried to want to do anything about it then.

The time seemed to stand still. The crew still had some fifteen minutes before they were due to abandon ship, so I left the rec room to sneak out to the galley for a cup of coffee. When I entered, there was Artie and Elmer already having coffee.

Artie said, "Sit down, Sam, and have a cup."

Elmer poured, and I gulped half the cupful down gratefully, then said, "Aren't you two going to watch the runaway crack into Mars?"

"Sure," said Artie. "I've got a small monitor screen in the com room. Want to join us?"

I did and said so. We all drank another cup of coffee and then went to the communications room. The three of us could sit and comfortably watch the small monitor.

A series of montages suddenly snapped off the screen to be replaced by the lonesome ship. This time there was Mars in the

near background. I never could understand how the long-range scope mechanisms managed to bend their energies so that they could literally see behind something directly in front of them, but they could. That was how they could get Mars in the background.

The excited announcer was saying that the crew would abandon ship in four minutes since all hope of a course change was gone. And in another three hours the runaway would enter atmosphere.

"Sure," Elmer said, "the crew will abandon ship. But where can they go after they do? Mars, that's where."

"I guess all you can say about it is that they are going right out of the fire into the frying pan," Artie said morbidly.

"Yeah," Elmer said. "They sure are. About all they can do is land on Mars with the short range of the lifeboats."

"Oh, they got enough range, all right," Artie said. "Only they don't have enough food and water for all the crew to reach some other planet. They have no choice but to try Mars."

"That'll get them there a little while after the crash," Elmer said. "In time to get in on the marsquakes and the dust storms."

"Yeah," said Artie, "if they make it through the atmosphere while it's still being churned."

"Why don't you guys stow the chatter," I said brusquely. "Let us hear what's going on."

The announcer was saying, ". . . in ninety seconds. All hope of regaining control of the ship is past. The entire crew is now in the four lifeboats ready to leave." Then he started a long countdown, a full sixty seconds.

The scope magnified the ship more.

I found myself holding my breath. The countdown neared an end—ended.

And two lifeboats sprang from each side of the freighter.

The scope lost them for a moment, then picked up one pair. They were almost invisible specks in the background.

In another five minutes they had joined the other pair of lifeboats, and all four were now headed slowly toward Mars, apparently well behind the mother ship.

The scope shifted back to the abandoned ship. The announcer was saying:

"And now take a long last look at this—this compounded missile that in a few hours may very well destroy a world unless a miracle—"

The scene, the words could not have been more perfectly timed even in a class B trideo space thriller. The racing derelict was framed against a back-

ground of ruddy Mars, then the next instant the area completely around it seemed to blacken out. Then it started glowing, increasing in intensity, expanding, throwing fiery arms wildly outward. It became a nova of fury. The scope had it centered beautifully. Even the coolest molten blobs could be seen being pushed from the mass until the inner hell caught up with them and turned them into vapor.

A quick-thinking engineer must have thrown a filter somewhere in the scope's innards, for the scene became sort of an X-ray one in which the glare of the light no longer impeded vision. The heart of the fury could easily be seen as it expanded itself, feeding and growing on the solid matter within its reach. The central fury overtook the lagging perimeter forces, engulfed them, then blossomed out, thinned, and became a diaphanous curtain rippling and shimmering in an uncertainty of direction. It waned, leaving a residual flicker that might have been only a product of imagination.

The entire magnificent show lasted ten minutes. For each second of each minute of that time, I'll swear I held my breath! And everyone else in the station at that time would say the same about himself. It was that striking, that breath-taking.

Some seconds after the spectacle was over, there was a near-silence. Then cheers broke loose. Such a confined din I hope never to hear again. The dramatic suspense had been so effectively communicated for so many hours, the miraculous sudden release seemed to demand an over-compensating effect. Everyone seemed suddenly to believe it an excellent reason to celebrate—and they certainly did!

Speculation as to what caused the explosion ran riot. But to me it was plainly Willy's influence reaching out to a company ship's crew and Mars personnel. It might seem that I had gambled a little too much on Willy's influence, but not really. I had observed and recorded that particular synergism and had every confidence in the results. Willy's Rube Goldberg had a combination of built-in errors which produced a series of compensating course alterations that made the asteroid de-energize and materialize right smack in normal space where the freighter was—after the crew escaped.

The blackness that had been noticeable for an instant was, of course, the asteroid coming out of sub-space. And with the runaway trying to co-exist right in the middle of the asteroid, naturally everything vaporized. Mars was saved.

So was Willy.

So was I.

Goil? Well, I nailed him right away; confessed my duplicity in the course figures and tapes, and explained that I needed the time to let things happen the way Willy's influence makes them happen. I don't think Goil was totally convinced. But he must have been partly, at least, for with all the system's experts arguing about just exactly what made the ship explode, and with no two experts agreeing on an explanation, he might have given some benefit of the doubt to Willy. Anyway, he was so relieved that his interests in Mars were saved that he smiled for the next three days, dismissed me as an incurable visionary or some other sort of nut, and chewed Willy out for two hours, then seemed to forget the matter.

Me? An appropriate length of time before the ship was abandoned, I radioed to a stock broker friend of mine on Earth and put every dime plus that I had into the mightily fallen stocks on Mars. Goil and I are now both big holders in the company.

Willy? He never suspected his part in the episode. Last time I heard, he was working on some fabulous government project as fifteenth assistant engineer. I guess the government had heard about him somehow. It seems that the fabulous project has working for it an egghead whose brainpower is such a necessity that he is hired even though he is a notorious accident prone. Willy, of course, neutralizes him so work can progress at normal rate.

THE END

FOR EVERY ACTION . . .

By ALGIS BUDRYS

Radek knew the theory. But he never dreamed he would be the reaction!

RADEK wandered for some time through the darkness, a hand pressed to his forehead, before he even thought to wonder what had happened to him or where he was. He staggered down the center of the cobblestoned street, his polished boots nearly betraying his balance several times. But even when he almost fell, he paid no immediate attention to the ground beneath his feet; he was staring wildly up into the mad sky, where stars and suns and planets seemed to be whirling like some maniac's kaleidoscope, silver and golden and sometimes green and blue-white on the black, black, sky.

He collected himself a little, at last—enough to see the dim outlines of houses silhouetted against the stars, and extinguished lamp posts, carriage blocks and here, before him, a sort of small town plaza, with a dry fountain and the standard Municipal Citizens' Information Board, with its sheets of notices nailed up and fluttering a little in the cold wind.

He lurched up to this board, peering in the darkness, and with eager fumbling found some kitchen matches in his pocket, together with his pipe. He struck one and held it up, squinting at the papers. He read the newest one: NOTICE TO CITIZENS OF LJUDMILSKAYA.

Ljudmilskaya! The village outside the Capital City, where Dr. Egon had been preparing the weapon! Of course! The *weapon*—what of the weapon?

Radek hastened to strike another match.

All citizens of Ljudmilskaya are hereby ordered to depart the village limits forthwith, in the interests of national security. You are warned that failure to depart by sunset tonight will constitute a crime against the State, and will automatically be considered an attempt to commit an act of espionage by secretly observing projected defense tests about to be begun here. The penalty for espionage is death.

(Signed) Votik,
Chief of State Secret Police,
by order of
Radek, Protector of the State

"Radek!" Radek burst out. "Of course—of course—" He laughed with joy at having found himself. "I am Radek! I am the Protector of the State."

Then he turned quickly, instantly suspicious, his head turning this way and that in an attempt to see into the darkness. Where were the remainder of his entourage? They had all come here by motor-car, to observe the firing of Dr. Egon's weapon. Where was Votik? Where were the other cabinet ministers? Where was Egon?

"E-y-y-g-g-o-o-o-nnn . . ." Radek's cry went wailing down the narrow street between the buildings. "Dr. Egon! Where have you disappeared to?" There was no answer, though he waited. "Votik! Votik—what are you plotting?"

He knew Votik. Oh, yes, he knew Votik. Perhaps at this very instant, having somehow marooned Radek here alone, Votik was back in the capital, planning treason.

"The people will kill you! Don't be a fool!"

It was true. They knew Votik too well. They would not feel toward him as they did toward Radek—Radek, who protected them so well against the constant machination of the Imperialists to the west, and against their own undisciplined impulses. They could see the sincerity in his manner. They could understand that it was not his fault Votik was so harsh with them. If he were to dispense with Votik, he would only have to find another man like him. They understood that, the people. They understood it was their own fault.

Tears ran down Radek's overwrought cheeks as he thought of how hard he had to work to protect the people from the world and from themselves.

"Egon! Egon!"

He had to find *someone.* It could not be that he was here in the village alone. Today was to be the climax of his career. He was to have announced to the

people that he had finally succeeded in what had seemed impossible—their complete and total protection from the encircling hostile world.

It had been only a year ago that Egon, his Minister for Science, had come to him with the news of the new weapon—the "Conscience Cannon," it had been called. It was based on an entirely new principle, and had not yet been actually developed.

Egon had explained, slowly and carefully so that Radek might examine the idea for implications Egon and the other ministers were certain to have overlooked, that the "cannon" was actually a sort of radio which could examine the clouds of thoughts hanging over the world, select those which agreed with all the proper moral precepts of the New State, and then fire an electronic blast which would, as he put it, "eliminate" all those people who did not believe in them.

How, exactly, it would "eliminate" them, Egon had not been able to explain. Radek had waved away the petty details. It was axiomatic that scientists could not speak so as to make sense.

He could remember only something about some vague muttering of danger. Something to do with the "principle of reactions" —what Egon had said was that if a fly were to raise its fist and strike an elephant with all its might, the elephant would not be stirred, but the fly would recoil and be whirled away. But what could this mean? Radek had urged—had *ordered* Egon to construct the weapon, and today, *today* Radek would have made his people safe forever!

But why was it so dark? And why was he so short of breath, and so cold, as if he were plunging into the very place whence winter came? Why was the sky whirling, and whirling?

He looked up. There was the Moon, blue-white hurtling up over the horizon, which was so appallingly near. The little bit of Earth that the weapon had thrown away with him was terribly small—too small to hold air, or heat enough to live by very much longer.

"*I* a fly?" Radek sobbed. "*I?* I alone, of all the world, believed in the State? Votik!" he screamed. "Votik? Couldn't *you,* at least, be here with me?"

THE END

●

They didn't think of themselves as pioneers. They simply had a job to do. And if they had to give up money, or power, or love—or life itself—that was the

FEE OF THE FRONTIER

By H. B. FYFE

ILLUSTRATOR EMSH

FROM inside the dome, the night sky is a beautiful thing, even though Deimos and Phobos are nothing to brag about. If you walk outside, maybe as far as the rocket field, you notice a difference.

Past the narrow developed strip around the dome, the desert land lies as chilled and brittle as it did for eons before Earthmen reached Mars. The sky is suddenly raw and cruel. You pull your furs around your nose and check your oxygen mask, and wish you were *inside* something, even a thin wall of clear plastic.

I like to stand here, though, and look out at it, just thinking about how far those ships grope out into the dark nowadays, and about the men who have gone out there on a few jets and a lot of guts. I knew a bunch of them . . . some still out there, I guess.

There was a time when nearly everything had to be rocketed out from Earth, before they organized all those chemical tricks that change the Martian crops to real food. Domes weren't fancy then. Adequate, of course; no sense in taking chances with lives that cost so much fuel to bring here. Still, the colonies

kept growing. Where people go, others follow to live off them, one way or another. It began to look like time for the next step outward.

Oh, the Asteroids . . . sure. Not them. I did a bit of hopping there in my own time. In fact—on account of conditions beyond my choice and control—I spent too much time on the wrong side of the hull shields. One fine day, the medics told me I'd have to be a Martian for the rest of my life. Even the one-way hop back to Earth was "not recommended."

So I used to watch the ships go out. I still remember one that almost missed leaving. *The Martian Merchant.* What joker thought that would be a good name for an exploring ship I can't imagine, but it always happens that way.

I was starting my cross-country tractor line then, and had just made the run from Schiaparelli to Asaph Dome, which was not as nice as it is now but still pretty civilized for the time. They had eight or ten bars, taverns, and other amusements, and were already getting to be quite a city.

One of the taverns near the western airlock was named the *Stardust,* and I was approaching, measuring the sand in my throat, when these spacers came out. The first one in sight was a blocky, dark-haired fellow. He came rolling through the door with a man under each arm.

Just as I got there, he made it to his feet somehow and cracked their heads together exactly hard enough to bring peace. He acted like a man used to handling things with precision. He glanced quickly at me out of a square, serious face, then plunged back through the splintered door toward the break-up inside.

In a moment, he came out again, with two friends who looked the worse for wear. The tall, lean youngster wore a junior pilot's bands on the sleeves of his blue uniform. His untidy hair was rumpled, as if someone had been hanging onto it while in the process of giving him the shiner.

The other one was shorter and a good deal neater. Even with his tunic ripped down the front, he gave the impression of making it his life business to be neat. He was turning gray at the temples and growing a little bulge under his belt, which lent a dignity worthy of his trim mustache and expression of deferential politeness. He paused briefly to hurl an empty bottle at someone's head.

"Better take the alley there," I told the blocky one, on impulse. "It'll bring you out at the trac-

tor lot and I'll give you a lift to your ship."

He wasted no time on questions, just grabbed his friends and disappeared before the crowd came out. I walked around a couple of corners and back to my tractor bus. This lot was only a clear space inside the Number Four Airlock. At that time, two or three tractors came in every day from the mines or other domes. Most of the traffic was to and from the spaceport.

"Who's that?" asked a low voice from the shadows.

"Tony Lewis," I answered.

The three of them moved into the dim light from the airlock guardpost.

"Thanks for the steer," said the blocky one, "but we can stay till morning."

He seemed as fresh as if he had just landed. His friends were a trifle worn around the edges.

"Keep playing that rough," I said, "and you may not make it to morning."

He just grinned. "We have to," he said, "or the ship can't blast off."

"Oh, you three make the ship go, huh?"

"Just about. This is Hugh Konnel, the third pilot; the gent with the dignified air is Ron Meadows, the steward. I'm Jim Howlet, and I look after the fuel system."

I admitted that the ship could hardly do without them. Howlet's expression suggested that he was searching his memory.

"Lewis . . ." he murmured. "I've heard of Tony Lewis somewhere. You a spacer?"

"Used to be," I told him. "Did some piloting in the Belt."

Young Konnel stopped fingering his eye.

"Oh, I've heard of you," he said. "Even had to read some of your reports."

After that, one thing led to another, with the result that I offered to find somewhere else to relax. We walked south from the airlock, past a careless assortment of buildings. In those days, there was not much detailed planning of the domes. What was necessary for safety and for keeping the air thicker and warmer than outside was done right; the remaining space was grabbed by the first comers.

Streets tended to be narrow. As long as an emergency truck could squeeze through at moderate speed, that was enough. The buildings grew higher toward the center of the dome, but I stopped while they were still two stories.

The outside of Jorgensen's looked like any other flimsy construction under the dome. We had just passed a row of small warehouses, and the only differ-

ence seemed to be the lighted sign at the front.

"We can stop at the bar inside while we order dinner," I said.

"Sounds good," said Howlet. "I could go for a decent meal. Rations on an exploring ship run more to calories than taste."

The pilot muttered something behind us. Howlet turned his head.

"Don't worry about it, Hughie," he retorted. "It'll be all over the dome by tomorrow anyway."

"But they said not to—"

"Mr. Lewis won't say anything, and he's not the only spacer who'll guess it."

It was easy to figure out. Ships did little exploring in the Belt now—plenty of untouched rocks there but nothing really unknown. "Exploring" could only mean that a hop to Jupiter was in the works at last. There had already been rumors about a few wide swings outside the Belt.

Well, it was just about time.

I would have liked to go too, and it was more than just a spacer's curiosity. To my mind, man *had* to move out in space. Being only halfway in control of his own planetary system was no state to be found in by the first interstellar visitors.

That is a meeting bound to happen sooner or later. It would be better for the human race to be able to do the visiting, I thought.

The inside of Jorgensen's always surprised new visitors to Asaph Dome. It was different from anything on Earth, and yet not too much like the real Mars either. That way, Jorgensen hoped to catch both the sandeaters and the tourists. The latter came to rough it in local color, the former to dream of a better world.

"Hey! Look at the stars over the bar!" exclaimed Howlet.

To begin with, the bar was of pinkish sandstone, smoothed and covered by a coating of plastic. Behind it, instead of less imaginative mirrors or bottle displays, Jorgensen had had some drifter paint a night desert: all dull pink and bronze crags smothering in sand under a black sky. The stars twinkled like glass beads, which they were. Lights were dim enough to hide the Martian austerity of the metal furnishings.

"The Earth tourists spend a lot of time here," I told the trio. "Seems they'd rather look at that sky than the real one outside the dome."

The dining room was for the souls of the locals, who could admire the desert more conveniently than find a good meal. It was mostly green and white, with a good deal of the white

being crystal. In the corners stood fake pine trees which Jorgensen had repainted every month; but what drew the sandeaters was the little fountain in the middle of the room.

Real water!

Of course, it was the same gallon or two pumped around and around, but clear, flowing water is a sight on Mars. When the muddy trickles in the canals began to make you feel like diving in for a swim, you stopped in at Jorgensen's to watch the fountain while his quiet, husky waiters served your dinner most efficiently.

"Say, this is a cut or two above ship chow," admitted Konnel when the food arrived. "What's that? Music too?"

"They have a trio that plays now and then," I told him. "Sometimes a singer too, when not much is going on in the back room."

"Back room?" Howlet caught up the words.

"Never mind. What would you do right now with a million? Assuming you could beat the wheel or the other games in the first place."

"Do they use . . . er . . . real money?" asked Meadows, cocking an eyebrow.

"Real as you like," I assured him. "It collects in these places. I guess lots of sandeaters think they might pick up a first-class fare back to Earth."

"Do they?" inquired Konnel, chewing on his steak.

The string trio, which had been tuning up, eased into a quiet song as he spoke. We listened as the question hung in the air, and I decided that the funny feeling under my belt was homesickness, all the stranger because I owned three homes not too far from the Martian equator.

"As far as I know," I answered, "the luck seems to run to those who can't go back anyway, for one reason or another. The ones just waiting for a lucky night to go home rich . . . are still waiting."

The door to the back room opened, letting through a blend of talk and small mechanical noises. It also emitted a strikingly mismatched couple.

The girl was dark-haired and graceful, though not very tall. She wore a lavender gown that showed a good deal of trim back as she turned to walk toward the musicians, and what the gown overlooked the walk demonstrated. The man was fat enough to make him seem short until he approached. His face and baldish dome were desert-reddened, and his eyebrows were faded to invisibility. Jorgensen.

Nodding casually to various diners, he noticed the new faces

at our table. He ambled over lightly for one of his bulk, and it became apparent that he was far from being blubbery. His belly stuck out, but he could probably knock the wind out of you with it.

"Hello, Tony!" he said in a wheezy tenor. "Introducing some friends to the best hamburger joint on Mars?"

Then he leaned on the back of Konnel's chair and told a couple of his old prospecting yarns to make sure everybody was happy, while the girl began to sing with the trio. She had hardly enough voice to be heard over Jorgensen's stories. I noticed Konnel straining to listen.

Finally, Jorgensen saw it too. Leaving Howlet and Meadows grinning at a highly improbable adventure, he slapped the boy on the shoulder.

"I see you noticed Lilac Malone, boy. Like to buy her coffee?"

"C-coffee?" stuttered Konnel.

"Made with water," I reminded him. "Awful waste here. Like champagne."

"I'll tell her she's invited," said Jorgensen, waggling a finger at her.

"The fellows are going out in the morning," I tried to head him off. "They don't have much time—"

"All the more reason to meet Lilac while they can!"

We watched her finish her song. She had rhythm, and the lavender dress swirled cutely around her in the Martian gravity; but, of course, Lilac would never have made a singer on Earth. Her voice was more good-natured than musical.

She arrived with the coffee, said "hello" to me, waved good-bye to Jorgensen's back, and set out to get acquainted with the others. Catching Howlet's wink, and suspecting that he was used to getting Konnel back to spaceships, I relaxed and offered to show Meadows the back room.

He muttered something about his gray hairs, but came along after an amused glance at Lilac and Konnel.

Jorgensen's gambling room was different from the bar and dining room as they were from each other. Decorations were simple. Drapes of velvety synthetic, dyed the deep green that Martian colonists like, covered the walls. Indirect lighting gave a pretty gleam to the metal gadgets on the tables. Because they used a heavier ball, roulette looked about the same as on Earth, and the same went for the dice games.

"Interesting," Meadows murmured, feeling in his pocket.

He pointed a thumb at the *planets* table. It was round, with a small, rectangular projection

for the operator's controls and calculator. In the nine differently colored circular tracks, rolled little globes representing the planets. These orbits were connected by spirals of corresponding colors, symbolic of ship orbits swooping inward or outward to other planets.

"You pick yourself two planets," I explained. "For better odds, pick a start and a destination. The man throws his switch and each little ball is kicked around its groove by a random number of electrical impulses."

"And how do I win?"

"Say you pick Venus-to-Saturn. See that silver spiral going out from Venus and around the table to the orbit of Saturn? Well, if Venus stops within that six-inch zone where the spiral starts *and* if Saturn is near where it ends, you scoop in the stardust."

Meadows fingered his mustache as he examined the table.

"I . . . ah . . . suppose the closer you come, the more you win, eh?"

"That's the theory. Most people are glad to get anything back. It's honest enough, but the odds are terrific."

A couple of spacers made room for us, and I watched Meadows play for a few minutes. The operator grinned when he saw me watching. He had a lean, pale face and had been an astrogator until his heart left him in need of Martian gravity.

"No coaching, Tony!" he kidded me.

"Stop making me look like a partner in the place!" I answered.

"Thought one night you were going to be . . . No winners, gentlemen. Next bets!"

The spheres had come to rest with Pluto near one end of a lavender spiral and Mercury touching the inner end, but no one had had the insanity to bet that way. Meadows began to play inner planet combinations that occasionally paid, though at short odds. He made a bit on some near misses, and I decided to have a drink while he lost it.

I found Howlet, Konnel, and Lilac Malone in the bar admiring the red-bronze landscape. When he heard about Meadows, Howlet smiled.

"If it isn't fixed, they better prepare to abandon," he laughed. "People look at that face and won't believe he always collects half the ship's pay."

Lilac saw a chance to do her duty, and suggested that we all go in to support Meadows. I stayed with my drink until Jorgensen drifted in to have a couple with me and talk of the old days.

After a while, one of his helpers came up, and murmured

something into his big red ear. He shrugged and waved his hand.

The next time it happened, about twenty minutes later, I was on the point of matching him with a story about a petrified ancient Martian that the domers at Schiaparelli dug out of a dry canal. Jorgensen lowered his faded eyebrows and strode off like a bear on eggshells, leaving me there with the unspoken punch line about what they were supposed to have dug up with the Martian.

Well, that build-up was wasted, I thought.

Quite a number of sandeaters, as time passed, seemed to drift in and out of the back room. Finally, Howlet showed up again.

"How'd you make out?" I asked when he had a drink in his hand.

"I left my usual deposit," he grinned, "but you ought to see Meadows! Is he ever plugging their pipes! He ran Mercury to Pluto, and it paid off big."

"It ought to; no one ever makes it."

"He did it *twice!* Plus other combinations. With him making out our daily menus, I'll never know why I'm not lucky too. Know what he's doing?"

I lifted an eyebrow.

"He's lending money to every loafer that puts the beam on him. But the guy has to show a non-transferrable ticket for passage to Earth."

"Darn few can," I grunted.

"That's why he keeps sending them out with the price of one and the promise to stake them when they get back. I never saw such expressions!"

At that point, Jorgensen sailed through the curtained doorway between the bar and back room. A craggy, desert look had settled on his red moon-face. He introduced me to two men with him as if someone were counting down from ten.

"Glad to meet you and Mr. Howlet," said the one called McNaughton.

I recognized "Mr. V'n Uh" as Van Etten, a leading citizen of the dome who had been agitating with McNaughton and others of the Operating Committee to form a regular police department. Jorgensen seemed to have something else on his mind.

"Howlet, how about having a word with your shipmate?"

"What's he done wrong?" asked Howlet blandly.

Jorgensen scowled at a pair of baggy-seated sandeaters who strode through the front door with pale green tickets clutched in their hands. They sniffed once at the bar, but followed their stubbled chins into the back room at max acc.

"I don't say it's wrong,"

growled Jorgensen, glaring after the pair. "It just makes the place look bad."

"Oh, it's good advertising, Jorgy," laughed McNaughton. "People were forgetting that game could be beaten. Now, Mr. Howlet—"

Jorgensen talked him under.

"It's not losing a little money that I mind—"

Some of the drink I was sneaking slipped down the wrong way.

"Well, it's *not!*" bellowed Jorgensen. "But if they all pick up the broadcast that this is where to get a free ride home, I'll have just another sand trap here."

Howlet shrugged and put down his glass. Van Etten nudged me and made a face, so I got up first.

"Never mind," I said. "Being the one that took him in there, I'll check."

Two more men came through the front door. The big one looked like a bodyguard. The one with the dazed look carried a small metal case that could be unfolded into a portable desk. He went up to Jorgensen and asked where he could set up a temporary ticket office for Interplanet.

While I was watching over my shoulder, three or four sand-eaters coming out of the back room shoved me aside to get at him. The last I saw before leaving was Van Etten shushing Jorgensen while McNaughton grabbed Howlet by the tunic zipper for a sales talk.

Inside, after getting through the crowd at the *planets* table, I could see that a number of betters were following Meadows' plays, making it that much worse for Jorgensen. Even Konnel had a small pile before him, although he seemed to be losing some of Lilac's attention to Meadows. While the little spheres spun in their orbits, the steward counted out money into twitching palms, wrote names on slips of paper, and placed bets. Somehow, he hit a winner every five or six bets, which kept his stack growing.

I joggled Lilac's elbow and indicated Konnel.

"How about taking him out for a drink so an old customer can squeeze in for a few plays?" I said.

The money-glow faded gradually from her eyes as she focused on me. She took her time deciding; but from the way she snuggled up to Konnel to whisper in his ear, it looked as if she might really be stuck on him. He winked at me.

Such a gasp went up as we changed places that I thought my cuff must have brushed Pluto, but it was just Meadows making a long-odds hop from Earth to Uranus. The operator no longer

even flinched before punching the distances and bet on his little computor, and groping in his cash drawer to pay off.

I stood there a few minutes, wondering if the game could be fixed after all. Still, the man who invented it also made encoding machines for the Earth space fleet. Meadows must be having a run of blind luck—no time to interrupt.

On my way out, Howlet caught me at the door of the bar.

"How about some coffee?" he asked. "We'll have to start back soon. You'll be surprised at the time. Dining room still open?"

"Always. Okay, let's sober up and watch the fountain."

Only two or three women and a dozen men sat in the restaurant now. The part-time musicians had disappeared for a few hours of sleep before their usual jobs. We ordered a thermos pot of coffee and Howlet asked me about McNaughton.

"I guess it was on the level," he said when I described the man's Committee position. "He got a boost out of how they had to patch up some troublemaker he knew, after that bar fight we had. Wanted to make me chief cop here."

"Some domes have regular police forces already," I confirmed.

"So he said. Claimed a lot of police chiefs have been elected as mayors. Then he said that someday there will be a Martian Assembly, and men with a start in dome politics will be ready for it, and so on."

"He's exactly right," I admitted. "When do you figure to start?"

"Maybe the next time I pass through." He winked. "If it's still open."

I relaxed and grinned at him. Somehow, I liked his looks just then.

"You shouldn't be gone too long. It's a good spot to put your ladder down."

He helped himself to more coffee and stared into his cup. I knew—the watches near the end of a hop when you wondered about the dead, oily air, when the ones off watch kept watching the astrogator's expression, when you got the idea it was time to come in out of the dark before you made that one slip.

How many pick their landing? I thought. *How many never know how close they come to making their mistake, or being a statistic in somebody else's?*

"Why the double trance?" asked Meadows.

He brought with him a vague memory of departing chatter and tramping feet in the background. Howlet shoved out a chair for him.

"Everything okay?" asked

Jorgensen, bustling up. "Buy anyone a drink?"

"What have they got there . . . coffee?" asked Meadows, sniffing.

"Jimmy!" yelled Jorgensen to a waiter. "Pot of coffee for Ron! Hot!"

He slapped Meadows' shoulder and took his glowing red face away.

"What makes him your buddy?" I asked Meadows.

"In the end, I missed Mercury by ten inches and they got most of it back!"

There was no answer to that. He must have been half a million ahead.

"What about the sandeaters you promised to stake?" asked Howlet, grinning like a man who has seen it happen before but still enjoys it.

"Some of them helped me lose it," said Meadows. "Now they will all just have to use those tickets, I suppose. Where's Hughie and his little friend? Coffee all around and we'll get on course, eh?"

"Thought he was with you," answered Howlet.

"I'll look in the bar," I volunteered, remembering the kid had left with more of a roll than Meadows had now.

A casual search of the bar and back room revealed both nearly empty, a natural condition just before dawn. No one had seen Konnel, apparently, so I went outside and squinted along the dim, narrow street. Four or five drunks, none tall enough to be Konnel, were slowly and softly singing their way home. The door slid open behind me and the other two came out quickly.

"Oh, there you are! I asked around too," said Howlet in a low voice. "Can you trust that Jorgensen? They wouldn't let me in the office behind the back room."

"He's a better sport than he looks," I said.

"I wonder," murmured Meadows. "He looked queer when I was so far ahead. Or maybe one of his huskies got ideas about keeping a handy hostage . . ."

Howlet suddenly looked dangerous. I gathered that he thought something of the boy, and was heating up to the door-smashing stage.

"Let's check one other place," I suggested, "before we make a mistake."

My starting off fast up the street left him the choice of coming quietly or staying to wonder. They both came. I could feel them watching me.

I turned right into a narrow street, went along it about fifty yards, and paused where it was crossed by a still narrower alley. Hoping I remembered the way, I groped along the lefthand branch of the alley. A trace of

light had begun to soften the sky over the dome, but had not yet seeped down to ground level.

Howlet's soft footsteps trailed me. I knocked on what seemed to be the right door. There was no answer—only to be expected. I hammered again.

"No one aboard, it would appear," murmured Meadows.

It was meant as a question. I shrugged in the darkness and banged longer and louder. Finally, listening at the flimsy panel, I detected muffled footsteps.

The door opened a crack.

"It's Tony Lewis, Lilac."

The black opening widened, until she must have seen the two behind me. She wore a thin robe that glimmered silver in the dim light.

"Send the boy out, Lilac," I said.

"Why should I?"

That much was good; she might have pretended not to have him there.

"He has to catch his ship, Lilac."

Behind me, I heard Howlet stir uneasily. The door began to close, but my foot was in the track. Howlet could not see that.

"Don't shut it, sister," he said, "or we'll smash it down!"

He could have too, in about ten seconds, the way they build on Mars.

"You wanna get yourself lynched?" Lilac warned him.

"Over a—on account of *you?*"

"Shut up, Howlet!" I interrupted. "Let me talk to the lady alone!"

He must have understood my tone; he let Meadows pull him away a few steps.

"And less of the 'lady' business outa *you,*" said Lilac, but low enough to keep it private. "We both know Mars, so let's take things the way they are."

"That's why I came, Lilac. Taking things that way means he has to go."

"What're you gonna say? He has a job to do, or some such canal dust?"

"Not exactly. They might pick up another third pilot. They might manage somehow without any. But he won't like himself much, later, for missing his chance."

She swung the edge of the door back and forth in impatient little jerks. Finally, she took her hand off the latch and let it roll free. She still blocked the opening, however, and I waited.

"Look, Tony," she said after a pause, "what makes you think I couldn't settle down with him? I never figured to be an . . . entertainer . . . all my life. With the stake I already got together, we could start something. A mine, maybe, or a tractor service like yours. Mars is growing—"

"Pull your head inside the dome and breathe right!" I snapped at her. "I don't mind your dreaming, Lilac, but there isn't any more time."

It was light enough now to see her stiffen. She glared at me.

"You tryin' to say I couldn't make a home here? You know better, Tony. Some of the best known women on Mars didn't exactly come here first-class!"

I held up my hand. She was beginning to get loud.

"It wouldn't matter if you were a princess. It's not what he'd think of you; it's what he'd wonder about himself, piloting a sand-buggy instead of a rocket."

In the alley, one of the spacers shuffled his feet impatiently. I hurried on, hoping to clinch it before she turned stubborn.

"*You*, at least, ought to understand men better than most, Lilac. Maybe it doesn't make sense, but it would be smarter to grab him after he's had his share of space instead of before."

It was hard to breathe without sounding loud in the stillness. Just as I had to swallow or choke, Lilac's shoulders slumped an inch or two.

"I'll wake him up," she said in a tired voice.

Feeling as if I had struck her, I stepped back into the alley. A few minutes later, Konnel slipped out and shut the door behind him. No one said a word. From the set of his shoulders, it seemed that he might be just as glad the alley was dim; but he simply trailed along behind.

We walked back to Number Four Airlock in a silence that had me counting the footsteps. When we reached the tractor parking lot, I cleared my throat.

"Wait a minute. I'll warm up my sand-saucer and give you a lift to your ship."

"Maybe we won't need to impose on you any more, Tony," said Howlet. "Looks like those machines over there are going out."

I followed his gesture and, by luck, caught the eye of a driver I knew. I waved and jerked my thumb at the spacers beside me.

"Let's go!" said Howlet as the tractor slowed. "Thanks for everything, Tony. Get yourself some sleep; the night watches in these domes are rough."

Konnel waited until they were a few steps away. Even then, he hesitated.

"Forget it!" I said. "You aren't the first spacer they had to pump out of some odd corner. Look me up when you get back!"

He shook hands and trotted after his friends. They scrambled up the ladder to the cab. The tractor picked up speed, lumbering into the airlock.

Later, a little after noon, I crawled out of bed and watched the flare of their pipes as the ship streaked up into the dark Martian sky. I hoped they would make it—almost as much as I wished it could have been me.

Well, I still come out to the wall of whatever dome I find myself in, to watch the sky a while—not that I'll see *those* boys coming down at this late date! They must have splattered to a puddle on Jupiter, or slipped back into the sun, or taken up a cold, dark orbit out where they'll never bother anyone. Nobody will ever know for sure, I suppose.

If I had it to do over again?

No, of course I don't feel funny about it. If they weren't the ones, it would have been another crew. By the law of averages, a certain number of bad tries seems to go with every new push out into space. Maybe there's no reason it has to be like that, but it always has. When the bad luck is used up, someone makes a new frontier.

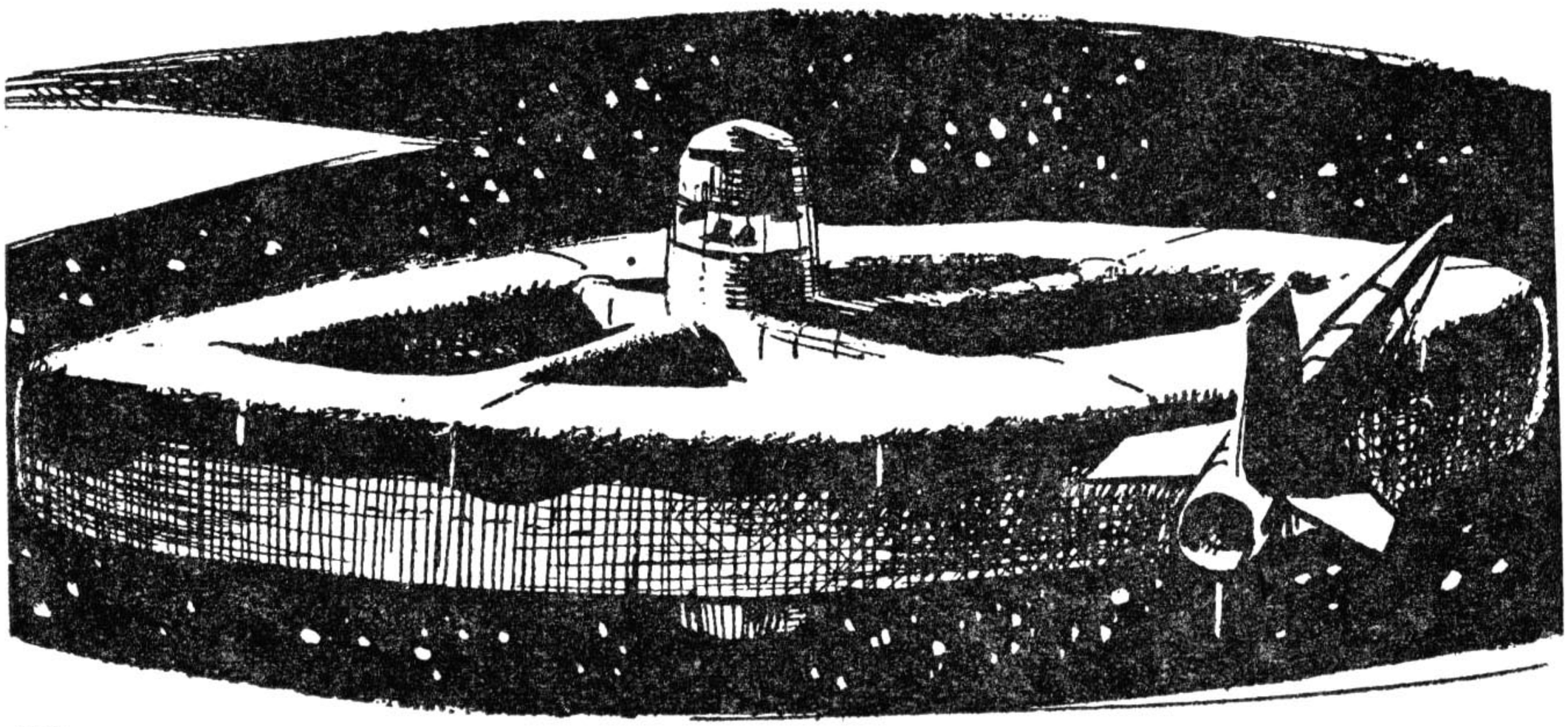
Why say "superstition"? Each new orbit out from the sun has cost plenty in money, ships, and lives; it's the admission price.

Sure, it was too bad about Konnel and his little girl—who, by the way, later married a very important man in Asaph Dome. It would have been nice to see Meadows wind up rich, or for Howlet to become mayor of the dome, but what could I do? Which one should I have talked into staying for the sake of love or money or power, without even being able to go in his place?

Every time Man pushes ahead a little, a percentage of the pushers pay the fare. Still, it will be healthier if we push out of this planetary system before someone else pushes in.

For all we know, they may be on the way.

THE END



Tillot tangled with time once . . . twice . . . once too often . . . and then he found he couldn't break

THE HABIT

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

OUTWARDLY she was just another ship, just another of the standard freighters that handled most of the traffic from Earth to her planetary colonies. She had been, in fact, such a freighter—the name *Venus Girl* still shone, in letters of gold, on her sleek side. Only the experienced eye of the professional spaceman would have noted the oddly shaped slits, black against gleaming metal, in her shell plating. Only the professional spaceman, together with a handful of physicists, would have been able to hazard an intelligent guess as to their purport.

Two men appeared, framed in the circle of the airlock door. The first of them ignored the ramp, jumped the ten feet between airlock and apron, landing lightly, his knees flexing to take the shock of his fall. The second followed more sedately, walking slowly down the inclined way to the scarred concrete. He said, his voice reproving, "You should be more careful, Tillot. After all, we blast off tonight."

"If I were being careful," replied the spaceman, the stance of his short, slight figure somehow belligerent, "I shouldn't be here."

The tall man—his name was Abbotsford and he was head of the Interplanetary Transport Commission's Department of Research—bit back an angry reproof. He said, "I'm glad to have you with me, Tillot. I'm glad that out of all the rocket pilots employed by the Commission there was one volunteer. Even so, I wish you'd be careful. There's too much hinging upon the success of this test flight . . ."

"All right, Doctor," replied Tillot in tones of mock humility. "I'll be careful. I'll take this

crate of yours up out of the atmosphere as though she were a basket of eggs, and I'll bring her back the same way. What happens in between times is up to you." There was mockery in his voice. "In between times—I suppose that you'll be careful."

"Of course," said Abbotsford stiffly.

"Of course," mimicked Tillot. Then—"Don't make me laugh, Doctor. This will be the first ship to approach the speed of light, the first interstellar ship . . . How the hell can you be careful? "

Their conversation was interrupted then; there were officials of the Commission desiring speech with them, Abbotsford's colleagues and members of the executive staff of the spaceport. The group of men and woman walked slowly across the broad stretch of concrete to the complex of offices, storerooms and repair shops, to the oasis of artifact and ingenuity set in the featureless desert.

Later that night Abbotsford got Tillot to himself, pleading that he and his pilot had much to discuss concerning the experimental flight. They sat in Abbotsford's room—bare it was, sparsely yet comfortably furnished, more office or laboratory than living apartment—sipping the whiskey that the scientist had produced from a filing cabinet.

Abbotsford said, "I'm curious . . ."

"Isn't that the proper occupational state of mind for a research scientist?" asked Tillot.

"Why, yes. But what I'm curious about is a question of psychology rather than physics."

"Then why don't you go to Dr. Wendell? After all, he is the Commission's number one trick cyclist."

"Dr. Wendell," said Abbotsford, who was not quite sober, "would have talked a lot of crap about the Oedipus Complex, the Death Wish and all the rest of it. He would have told me nothing."

"I'm just a rocketeer," said Tillot.

"But it's you that I'm curious about."

"Isn't this inquisition rather . . . presumptuous, Doctor?"

"No. I don't think so. After all, we shall be cooped up together in that tin coffin out there for quite a long time. We should know something about each other."

"Then what do you want to know?" demanded Tillot.

"Just this. Spacemen are supposed to be an adventurous breed. There are two hundred odd pilots in the employ of the Interplanetary Transport Commission. And yet, for what could well be the first interstellar

flight, there's only one volunteer. You."

Tillot laughed, with a touch of bitterness. "It had to be me. If I hadn't volunteered, I'd have been told to. It's as simple as that."

"But *why?*"

The spaceman laughed again. "I'll tell you. It had always been the Commission's policy to employ only married men in Space. The married man is not lacking in courage, or the adventurous spirit. But he takes no unjustifiable risks, either with ships or lives . . ."

"I think I begin to see . . . And you?"

"You'd not have gotten me as a volunteer—or a conscript—this time last year," said Tillot flatly.

"Even so, the risk is neither great nor unjustifiable. Neutralized gravity and the repulsive force of light are a motive power far less hazardous than your rocket motors. The most dangerous parts of the flight will still be blasting off and landing, under rocket power . . ."

"Agreed. But . . ."

"But what?"

"Now I'm going to ask *you* a personal question, Dr. Abbotsford," said Tillot. "Have you ever been in love? Come to that—have you ever had a woman?"

"Women have never bothered me much. I've had my work, and . . ."

"All right. I'll explain. The rocket pilot blasts off on a voyage—to the Moon, Mars, Venus, the Belt, or wherever. If things go badly wrong he won't come back. If things don't go wrong—and it's up to him to make sure of that—he does come back, after a lapse of, at the outside, months. Now, I'm no physicist. As far as I'm concerned, astronautics is just a matter of ballistics; a spaceship is no more than a manned missile over the trajectory of which the crew are able to exert a limited degree of control. But interstellar flight, with speed approaching that of light itself, is different. As I understand it, Time, for the crew of such a ship, will be different from the Time kept by the world that they have left. A voyage may last for a matter of mere months—but on return it will be found that Earth has circled the Sun fifty times, or more . . ."

"Crudely put," said Abbotsford, "but near enough to the truth."

"Then ask yourself," Tillot told him, "what married man would ship out with such a homecoming to look forward to?"

She stood proudly on the scarred concrete, gleaming in the reflected light of the bright floods. High in the sky rode Cross and Centaur—and it seem-

ed wrong that her sharp prow was not pointed directly towards Alpha Centauri, the obvious first objective for the first interstellar ship. Even Tillot, walking out to the vessel, felt this, although he was aware of the absurdity of his feelings. As well expect the prow of the Lunar Ferry, on blast-off, to be pointed directly at the Moon, the sharp stem of a liner of the Martian Mail to be lined up exactly on the glowing spark in the sky that was the red planet. Time enough to get the ship on to her trajectory—but was "trajectory" the right word to use regarding the course of a sailing ship of Space?—after she was up and clear, in orbit around the Earth.

Abruptly he turned, shaking hands with those who had walked out to the ship with him. They wished him luck. Some of them, a little wistfully, wondered what sort of world he would find on his return. He allowed himself to speculate, briefly, on the same subject, thinking, *Perhaps even now there is somebody, some schoolgirl, who will grow up to be almost the twin of Valerie. Perhaps I will find her. Perhaps she will be waiting for me . . .*

He climbed the ramp to the airlock, went inside the little compartment, pressing the button that retracted the tongue of metal that was the ramp, the other button that shut and sealed the circular outer door. Abbotsford, he knew, was waiting for him in the control room. Abbotsford might guess the meanning of the lights flashing on the console, although it didn't much matter if he did not. Abbotsford, for all his knowledge, for all his high standing with the Commission, was so very much a planetlubber.

Tillot could have used the elevator in the axial shaft to take him up to Control but he preferred not to. He didn't know for how long he would be living under conditions of Free Fall; this might well be the last chance for him properly to exercise his muscles for months. He clambered from compartment to compartment, up a succession of ladders—past the heavily shielded, almost featureless monster that was the Pile, past the propellant tanks, through the "farm" in which were the hydroponics tanks, the algae and yeast and tissue culture vats, through the compartments that had once been cargo and passenger spaces and that now housed Abbotsford's machines. Tillot wished that he knew more about them. The motors that extruded and retracted the big, plastic sails were obvious enough but the generators, Abbotsford's

own invention, that somehow nullified gravitational fields were a mystery to him, a complexity of spinning wheels set at odd angles to each other, gyroscopes mounted within gyroscopes, a huge, gleaming pendulum that looked ornamental but that must be functional.

At last, he climbed up through the little hatch into the control room. As he had surmised, Abbotsford was already there, strapped into his own seat, the seat before which was mounted his own control console.

"Are you ready, Tillot?" he asked testily.

"Ready," replied the spaceman shortly. He strapped himself into his chair, spoke briefly into the microphone. "*Venus Girl* to Spaceport Control. Request permission to proceed."

"Experimental Station Spaceport Control to *Venus Girl*. Proceed at will—and good luck."

"Thank you, Spaceport Control. Proceeding."

The great flower of flame blossomed beneath *Venus Girl's* vaned stern and she lifted, balancing delicately upon the lengthening column of incandescent gases, borne skyward on the screaming thunder of her rockets. Tillot, trusting the servo-mechanisms, looked out of the big viewports to the dwindling Earth below—the seas and continents, the drifting cloud masses, the sparkling lights of the great cities—and wondered when, if ever, he would ever see the mother planet again.

He told himself that he didn't much care, and knew that he was lying.

Abbotsford said, after the initial confusion was over, that he looked upon the accident as a blessing rather than a catastrophe, that it would take its place among the other accidents that have led to great scientific discoveries.

"Think of it!" he enthused.

"I am thinking of it," grumbled Tillot. "Your comic Drive has gone wrong. We don't know where we are, where we're heading. What's so wonderful about that?"

"My Drive hasn't gone wrong," said the scientist patiently. "It's gone *right*."

"Are you sure that bang on the head didn't upset you, Doctor?"

"Quite sure. Look at it this way, Tillot. For years I was working on the problem of antigravity. I succeeded in nullifying gravity, but no more. That was why I had to cook up that absurd makeshift of spars and sails—a makeshift that now will never be used. But the sheer, blind chance of it! A loose connection, shaken adrift by your rockets. A spindle forced out of

its bearing by the acceleration . . . It's fantastic!"

"I'll say," agreed the spaceman dourly.

"You aren't very enthusiastic."

"Frankly, I'm not. Perhaps I'm old fashioned, but as far as I'm concerned the prime function of a ship is to carry a payload from Point A to Point B, and return to Point A . . ."

"I thought that you weren't fussy about that part of it."

"I thought so, too. But there comes a time when you begin to think of all the liquor you haven't drunk, all the girls you haven't made love to . . ."

"The liquor part of it begins to worry me a little," admitted the scientist. "I suppose I'm a fair enough organic chemist to concoct something from the vegetables in the tanks and the yeast from the vats, should the need arise. Even so . . ."

"Well?" demanded Tillot. "What do we do?"

"I'll stop the gravity nullifiers," said Abbotsford. "Then it's up to you to get some kind of fix. You're the navigator."

"Strictly interplanetary," the spaceman told him. "Not interstellar. But I'll do my best . . ."

Tillot strapped himself into his chair, watched Abbotsford pull himself through the hatch, vanish into the body of the ship. When he was alone he switched his attention to the weird grayness outside the viewports, the flickering nothingness. There was no sensation of speed. The ship was falling free—and yet, with her repulsive field in operation, she must be accelerating. Tillot decided that there must, somehow, be no longer inertia. If there had been inertia he would have been spread over the control room deck like strawberry jam.

The intercom phone buzzed and Abbotsford's voice remarked, conversationally, "Stand by, Tillot. I'm shutting down."

"All right. Shut down."

The subdued whirring of machinery faltered, abruptly ceased. With startling, shocking suddenness Space, as seen through the viewports, became its familiar, velvety black, the bright beacons of the stars springing into view. But it was not the sight of the stars that caused the scream that burst from Tillot's throat. It was the sight of the planet, the huge, gleaming globe, that was directly ahead of *Venus Girl*, that was expanding with terrifying rapidity with every passing second.

"Abbotsford!" he shouted. "Start up your motors! Planet dead ahead!"

He heard the scientist curse, heard him mutter, "*Damn* the fool thing!"

"What's wrong?"

"Everything! The whole lot's just fallen to pieces!"

"Then hang on!" shouted Tillot. "I'll have to use the rockets. I'H try to throw us into some kind of orbit!"

He actuated the big gyroscope, was relieved when he heard the familiar humming of the thing, when he saw the stars swinging across the viewports, the stars and that swollen, still swelling globe. He saw the strange planet disappear, saw its image appear again in the periscope screen. He stopped the gyroscope, used his rockets, watched the quivering needle of the accelerometer. One gravity . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four . . . His body was pressed deep into the padding of his chair. He wondered how Abbotsford was making out, sprawled on the hard deck of his engineroom. But this way there was a chance of survival for both of them; with too gentle a deceleration there would be no chance for either of them.

He hit the fringes of the atmosphere, his rocket drive still bellowing. He swept around the night side of the planet like a meteor, hull heated to incandescence, then put into Space again. Again he made the grazing ellipse, and again—and looked with growing horror at the gauges of the propellant tanks. There must be a leak, he thought, a fractured line. It was obvious that there would not be enough reaction mass to establish the ship in any sort of orbit. There might be enough for a landing, although that was doubtful.

But it had to be tried.

"Abbotsford!" he cried. "We are going down!"

He thought he heard an answering moan, but he could not be sure.

Once again the ship swept around the sunlit side of the planet, this time inside the atmosphere. And this time Tillot snatched hasty glances from his controls, caught brief glimpses of the world that he was circling. "No," he muttered. "No . . ." But it had to be. Nowhere in the Universe could the outlines of seas and continents be duplicated so exactly. Nowhere in the Universe could there be another world whose satellite was so large as to be almost a sister planet.

And then there was no time for observations. Then there was a seeming eternity of fighting a pitching, yawing ship that was writing crazy words in fire across the night sky. Then there was the last, hopeless gasp of the rockets, their propellant tanks run dry. Then there was the flash of inspiration that came to Tillot, and the running out of the great sails that should have

caught and held the almost immaterial photons, that were far too flimsy to withstand the assault of the uprushing molecules of atmosphere. But hold they did, although not for long. Hold they did, and in the seconds before they were ripped to streaming shreds they slowed *Venus Girl* appreciably, slowed her so that she hit the sea almost gently.

Almost.

The force of the impact buckled her plating, broke everything with one exception, that was breakable—that one exception being the bones of her pilot. Tillot survived the crash, even retained consciousness. Shakily, he unstrapped himself and, staggering as the wreck lurched in the swell, made his way to the hatch, clambered down ladder after ladder to Abbotsford's engineroom. He found the scientist sprawled brokenly among the wreckage of his machine. He was dead; there could be no doubt about that. No man could have lost the amount of blood that was swilling over the plating and remained alive.

Tillot looked at the dead man and listened to the water gurgling in the compartment below, saw the first of it splash up through the open hatch to dilute Abbotsford's blood. He knew that there was nothing more that he could do. Shakily, he made his way up to Control once more, pulled from its locker a survival suit, zippered himself into it. He started knocking up the dogs that would release one of the big viewports. Suddenly he looked outside, saw a surface craft, long, low and somehow sinister, lifting and falling on the surface of the sea just outside, saw the men, their faces pale in the dim light from his control room, who waved and gestured to him.

He hammered up the last dog, scrambled out through the port just as the tough glass fell clear, let hard, willing hands pull him aboard the rescue ship. He heard a sound like a great sigh as the last of the air was expelled from *Venus Girl's* broken hull.

He did not see her go.

Sea Adder lay off the coast, rolling in the swell. Inshore the lights of the towns that were one long string of suburbs from Sydney to Gabo Island sparkled invitingly.

"This," said *Sea Adder's* skipper, "is as far as we can bring you. You'll make it to the beach in your survival suit, all right. We've smeared it well with shark repellant. Ditch the suit as soon as you get to the beach; it should be deserted at this time of night. And remember, *don't mention us*. Not to anybody. We can do without the publicity re-

sulting from the picking up of a shipwrecked spaceman."

"I understand," said Tillot.

He had known, of course, of the smugglers operating between Australia and the Theocratic Republic of New Zealand, of the traffic in liquor and tobacco and the other luxuries unobtainable in Theocracy. He had known, too, that the Australian Government was going through the motions of stamping out the trade. He had never dreamed that he would one day owe his life to such smugglers.

But the moral implications of smuggling were the least of his worries. At first, aboard the smugglers' ship, he had asked questions, then had realized that his questions were of such a character that his rescuers assumed that he was delirious. Then he had maintained a discreet silence, had tried to work out some sort of answer for himself.

First of all, he was back on Earth.

Venus Girl, of course, could have traveled in a circle, great or small.

But . . .

But there had been the newspaper in the cabin into which he had been taken after his rescue, a not too old copy of the *Sydney Morning Herald.* At first glance it had seemed to be a year old, and he had remarked upon this to the Mate of the smuggler. The Mate had looked at him as though he were slightly mad.

First of all, he was back on Earth.

Secondly, the clock had been put back.

But how?

How?

Had *Venus Girl,* when plunging through Space uncontrolled, exceeded the speed of light? Had she, in consequence, traveled back in Time? Or was there some other explanation? Could it be that by sheer, blind chance she had driven towards the exact spot where Earth had been a year in the past? Could it be that Time is somehow a function of the expanding Universe, or that the expansion of the Universe is linked in some odd way with Time? Tillot wished that he knew, and knew that it didn't much matter whether he knew or not. One thing mattered, one thing was of supreme importance. He was about to be given his second chance.

He shook hands with the crew of *Sea Adder,* slipped quietly over the side. He struck out for shore, the suit aiding rather than hindering his movements. There was an inshore set and he realized, quite suddenly, that the long line of lights along the promenade was very close. He let his legs sink, felt sand under

his flippered feet. He waded up the beach.

As the smugglers had told him it would be, it was deserted. He stripped off his suit, stood there in the civilian shirt, shorts and sandals that they had given him. There was money in his pocket, and the key ring that he always carried with him. He supposed that the key would still fit the door of his apartment. But it had to. This was no alternative world—or was it? He wished that he could be sure.

There was an all-night cafe on the sea front. Tillot walked into it, saw that the time was shortly after three a.m. by the big wall clock, that the first editions of the morning papers were exposed for sale in the rack. He picked one up, walked with it to the counter, paid for it and ordered a hamburger and a cup of coffee from the sleepy proprietor. His coffee was available at once. He sat down with it at the nearest table, sipped it while he read the paper.

He remembered the headlines —the mysterious meteorite, the suggestion that it could have been an alien ship from outside the System, the rioting in Venusburg. the opening of the Atlantic Tunnel. He remembered the headlines—and remembered what else had happened that day. He had been back on Earth, was on leave after a routine Martian voyage. He and Valerie had gone to a party that night. He had taken too much to drink. He had insisted on driving home, although the controls of the family ground car were far less familiar to him than the controls of his spaceship. He had insisted on driving, had met, at speed, another driver probably no more sober than he was himself, and . . .

And Valerie had been killed, and he had survived, and the well-meaning coroner, knowing that the publication of the true facts of the case would ruin Tillot's astronautical career, had stressed the fact that the accident had been due to the unforeseeable failure of the steering gear of Tillot's car.

But it hadn't happened yet.

It would never happen.

But what should he do? Should he go home, should he confront himself and say, "Look, Tillot, you're not going to the Weldons' party tonight. You can't hold your liquor." Or should he say, "Look, Tillot. I'm senior to you, by one year. Move out, will you, and let me move in . . ."

But was this the same world, in every detail?

There was one way to find out. He ignored the hamburger that had been set down before him, went into the phone booth. He inserted coins into the slot,


BernKlau

punched his number. At the last moment he remembered to switch off the scanner. He heard the bell ringing. He saw the screen light up, saw his own face, sleepy and puzzled, heard a strange voice (but one's own voice is always strange without the facial cavities to give it resonance) say, "Tillot here. What do you want?"

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Wrong number." He hung up slowly and left the booth.

He remembered then that he had been awakened that morning by just such a call.

So . . .

He returned to his coffee and hamburger. He tried to remember the events of the day. He and Valerie had lived in each other's pockets throughout—and for him to confront his earlier self in the presence of Valerie would lead to unforeseeable complications. But I must see her, he thought. I *must*.

He went on trying to relive the past. He and Valerie had driven out to the Weldons fairly early in the evening. The Weldons were well-to-do, were one of the few families that owned a real house, standing in its own grounds, not far from Avalon. After dinner, nobody else being inclined to move, Tillot had wandered out into the garden to admire the scenery, to gaze out over the serene expanse of the Pacific.

And that, he thought, will be the best time.

Meanwhile, there was the day to fill in. He filled it in somehow. He traveled from cinema to cinema, using public transport, moving closer and closer to his goal. It was evening when he came out of the last one; a short subway ride followed by a short walk would bring him to his destination on time.

It did. He opened the Weldons' gate, remembering to feel thankful that Weldon had never bothered to have an alarm system and scanner installed. He saw the lighted ground floor windows, saw—and he wished that he could have stopped to gaze—Valerie, tall and slim and beautiful, standing, a glass in her hand, talking to her host and hostess. He walked round to the back of the house, to the edge of the cliff, saw a shadowy form and the glowing end of a cigarette.

"Tillot," he said.

His earlier self started, swung round to face him.

"Who are you?"

"You. Or me."

"What is this? Are you mad?"

"No. Tillot, I've come to tell you not to drive the car tonight."

Tillot had been drinking. Tillot, after a few drinks, was

liable to be short tempered. Tillot flared, "I don't know who you are, but get out of here!"

"I've as much right here as you have," replied Tillot. "More, perhaps."

"Get out," snarled Tillot.

"*You* get out!" rasped Tillot, grasping the other's arm.

It was a short fight, although the antagonists were evenly matched. It would have been longer if one of them had not tripped over a root, had not fallen heavily, striking his head against a stone, the weight of the other on top of him adding force to the blow.

He thought, *He is dead.* He thought, *But he*—I?—*seriously considered suicide after Valerie was killed. So what does it matter? I've saved him*—me?—*the trouble, and I've saved Valerie . . .*

Almost without volition he stripped the corpse—luckily there were no bloodstains on the clothing—then removed his own garments. He dressed in the clothes that the other had been wearing, clad the other in his own shirt and shorts. He thought, *How very considerate of Jim Weldon to build his house on the edge of a cliff. I hope the sharks are hungry tonight . . .*

"Darling," said Valerie, "do you think you should drive?"

"He'll be all right," said Jim Weldon. "Just remember that that jalopy of yours isn't a rocket!"

"How," slurred Tillot, "could I ever forget?"

He opened the door of the car for Valerie, went round to the other side of the vehicle and let himself in. He pressed the starting button, heard the whine of the gas turbine. He let in the clutch, shot away from the curb. It was at the first corner of the winding road that the accident happened, the accident that might, perhaps, not have happened had the wheel not gone dead in Tillot's hands at the crucial moment.

Semi-conscious, in hospital, he was haunted by vague memories of a ship called *Venus Girl* and a scientist called Abbotsford. Semi-conscious, he told himself that it was only a matter of waiting and that next time he would play his cards more skillfully. He talked about it to his nurses and to anybody else who would listen, and the Staff Psychiatrist listened to his ravings and by careful suggestion, by sessions of hypnosis, cured him of his delusions, so that when he was discharged he remembered nothing except the accident and his almost unbearable loss.

When the call was made for volunteers for the first interstellar flight, he volunteered.

It was a habit. **THE END**

GETTING REGULAR

By DAVID R. BUNCH

Have you had your war today? Another tale of Moderan, which is not so far away in space or time as author Bunch would make believe.

DISGRACE! A Stronghold in disgrace!—I awoke that gray-shield morning to the taste of old green brass in my throat and the heavy pistoning of my heart as I lay on my hard bed remembering. And let me say here, I am not prepossessing as I lie on my bed of levers playing the mechanism to lift me; at my ease I do not look like a god. I must look more like a suit of old armor once would have looked if it had in the ancient days rolled in some thick-sliced bacon and then gone to bed on a bridge truss. For I am of Moderan, you see, where the people are mostly now new-metal alloy "replacement" and their flesh-strips are few and played down. We look like walking steel shells and we think of wars and good pounding. To live forever, to be our true bad selves—those are our twin destinations.

And now to face the Court Most High and explain of disgraceful demeanor, of deviation —that was what I had to do. Oh, I could stand them off for awhile, perhaps forever, if they would play the fair game by way of the frontal attack. I could lie behind my eleven steel walls in my Stronghold, put the fort on the

status of Continuous-Blast, let the missiles roll, let the walking doll bombs go, let the Honest Jakes and the high-up weird screaming Wreck-Wrecks launch and perhaps stand off hell and the Courts till time itself grew old. But they wouldn't attack fair; I knew that. In fact, they wouldn't attack at all, what you could call attack. And that was the galling thing. There I'd lie with all that kill potential hanging, ready to go at the press of the big orange switch in my War Room. And what would the Court men, the Hall men, do? They'd hint. They'd lounge up there in their big-deal offices at their Best-View window desks in the Needle Building that's so tall and high-spired that the pennon pole pierces the vapor shield. They'd swap the stories, chew at the big smoke ropes, spit at the diamond-speckled gold spittoons, smile their new-alloy teeth and perhaps turn off my trees. Or, allowing the trees to stand, they might not let the tin birds come down to sing in them. Or, say they left my trees and birds alone, what about flowers? Perhaps they'd use their influence to get the people at Central to turn off my flowers. And how would I look? There I'd be with the only Stronghold for miles around sitting there with the heavy ammo bristling and in heaps and no pretty flowers blooming round about on spring-metal stems to soften the horror. How would I look? How would I feel? Or perhaps they'd send over their bomphlateers with the hint specials, those subtle little leaflets saying something like STRONGHOLD 10 NOT IN ACCEPTABLE CITIZENSHIP STATUS AGAIN THIS VAPOR SHIELD. STRONGHOLD 10 IN ARREARS FOR 5 VAPOR SHIELDS BACK. STRONGHOLD 10 URGED PLEASE TO GET REGULAR. Just that. Well, I know who Stronghold 10 is. Stronghold 10 is me. And I know what a vapor shield is, even if once I mightn't have. A vapor shield is a month. Each month is a different vapor shield in Moderan, and I don't quarrel with that. May is green, October is bright orange, just to illustrate. The gray one I'm in now is March, very sad and full of threat potential I'll have you know.

So suppose I get a leaflet raid. And once they start leaflets, they don't usually just shower you with one leaflet. Oh my, it's a dozen anyway, usually. So one morning lying there on my lever bed playing the risers and slingers to lift me there's suddenly ten of my tin men around me, each with a leaflet. And their acting solemn, but really looking happy and pleased that the boss man has got himself in a spot of trouble. So I take the hint pages

they hand me and I crumple said pages into a twelve-leaf crumpled-leaflet paper ball and I fling that crumpled-leaflet twelve-page hint ball disdainfully over toward a couple of Little Wrecks on the missile line. Have I fooled anybody? I have not. Those tin men know when the boss man hasn't acted right. They know when Stronghold 10 is off its feed.

So I'm thinking—that gray March morning of realization there on my lever bed thinking back—I guess I owe it to myself and my men to get regular. I sure didn't owe it to Central or those crooks up in the Needle Building looking at the view, chewing at the big smoke ropes, pot-shotting the diamond-speckled gold spittoons and acting like pieces of God.

So, arising from my lever bed much later that Gray March morning, I went up to the Needle Building. I took no one with me, for let me say here, I alone am Stronghold 10 when it comes to dealing with the outside world; I am the complete master at Stronghold 10; I am the only one with a flesh-strip and what you might call a reasonable brain. Even my blonde blue-eyes, my real darling, my complete mistress, my sweetheart doll—cause of all my present dilemmas and my future in doubt—did not have a flesh-strip. She was all loving steel, as you might say, even when her life-switch was thumbed full to ON and we were sweethearting. But I'll admit she had me going one time, so mixed up that I aimed to defy all the powers that be, give her part of one of my lesser flesh-strips (I swear I aimed to do this) leave her life-switch full to ON and make her queen of my Stronghold forever, my wife! It would have got me expelled from the Society of Stronghold Masters, I have no doubt, and perhaps brought war, terrible and continuing, between me and the Authorities. Well, it didn't happen. I aimed to do it, but I waited too long. I dillydallied while she pleaded; I demurred while she begged. And now it is too late; she is gone. To where, I know not. One brown-vapor-shield thoughtless time I left her life-switch to ON carelessly, when we were through loving, and she went—over the eleven steel walls somehow—maybe with the help of the tin men. But I digress; she is gone. Perhaps it is better so. The gray-green cloud of all these ill events she engendered overwhelms me even now, and I must right things.

So, as I was saying, I went up to the Needle Building, alone. I told my head weapons man, nominal second in command, and commander of the Stronghold

when I am gone, to wait a full day and a night and then come for me if I had not by that time come back. You never know what you'll meet out there on that mutant-milled plastic. Usually nothing, for it will recently have been swept by a Maximum Weapons Fire. (So I'm taking a chance, you say, on the weapons man? But not so much as you'd suppose. He'd need my-flesh-strips before he could be king, acceptable to the Society of Stronghold Masters. My flesh-strips are his hope. Yes, he'd come for me, dead or alive. I was sure of that.

The eleven gates rolled back and I passed from my Stronghold; I toddled over the homeless plastic , plop-plip-plap, a Stronghold man out of his Stronghold, walking hard but going slow in his hinges, as helpless and defenseless almost as a new baby bird out of the shell in the old days. You would think I should go with an iron cover of missiles; you would think I should have steel escorts and threats in explosives walking hard by my side. But that suggests a complete, almost hopeless misunderstanding of Moderan and the way we play out here in this greatest of all modern lands. You see, outside my Stronghold I am no longer a force; my neighbors do not regard me. When I am out of my fortress my aura of status attends me only in so far as I must go to deal with powers extraordinary, such as the Courts and the Hall men. To the others Stronghold 10 is always whoever is at the moment manning the eleven steel walls and directing the terrible weapons.

I had advised my lieutenant, the head weapons man, not to break out any thoughtless war or any war of zest while I walked the homeless plastic. And I knew he would not break out a plot war, because one blast of the launchers would pick me utterly clean with not even a flesh-strip left to show, and my flesh-strips, as I was saying, were his one and only hope for ever being more than a weapons man. Vain, senseless, empty hope, of course. But you see how forces balance, ambition sometimes checkmates treachery, and some things are dismally usual even in Moderan.

So I reached the Lid and didn't get caught in a cross-fire, my one fear really, that two peripheral Strongholds would start a zest war, or a plot war, and catch me, the innocent victim. The Lids were where, all over the Empire, you took the small tunnel cars up to Capitol. I kicked the switch, the Lid slowly rose and I eased down a flight of steps to the small black car

in the pressure tube. Setting the General switch to Capitol and the Specific Destination switch to NB125 I was whisked with incredible swiftness through a thousand black miles. I was dumped gently at the landing pod in front of Room NB125, sky high in the Needle Building.

The door swung silently open and a small screening man looked at me. He was a service mechanism and did this small, almost useless task of screening for the Hall men, who were chewing the smoke ropes, aiming nonchalantly at the diamond-speckled gold spittoons, relaxing and playing God. I say this was almost useless screening, because that wasn't the way we played the game, to take a blaster when we went up to see the men in the Needle Building. We went in cringing and fear. If they said we weren't good citizens and hadn't been for a certain number of vapor sields past, that was the story. All we could do was hope for terms. How they got to be a collective god known as the Needle Building is too involved for me to relate to you here.

Needle Building FIP Z-U was the tall sad-eyed god-piece assigned to deal with my omissions. Through perforations in the new-metal alloy of his face "replacement" he had a real moustache growing that was bristly and sad-color brown; his peeping new-metal eye globes were cloudy-blue. Let me say here, being looked at by Needle Building FIP Z-U was something like being looked at by two small balls of used bath water on top of a scrub brush in the old days. Slender sawtoothed particles of string-metal slime seemed to float across those sorrowing cold eyes to accentuate their threat and true deadliness. "Stronghold 10!" he said like the voice of God and doom all at once.

"Yes SIR," I said and hated my heart its pistoning terrible lunging, hated my flesh-strips their cold rancid sweat.

"Stronghold 10, your war record is in a sad, abused state, showing neglect. Why, there have been whole weeks when you have not once warred against a neighbor. And internally, according to our daily survey conducted by the new Spy-Ray method, which I have not the slightest reason to doubt in accuracy, you have not come up to any acceptable standard either." He looked at me, letting the cold cloud-blue spots not waver. He ticked his metaled throat in a way to have done honor to ten times the great dignity of a board chairman in the old days. "As a higher-culture man," he rasped, "living in the Age of Truth where war is the measur-

ing stick and destruction the achievement by which we award prizes, what do you have to say for your laggard conduct, by way of explanation, or perhaps —expiation?"

I gulped. I tried to adjust my heart to be calm. I launched into a great explanation of how I intended to clear my record and get regular. I told him of wars I had in the blueprint stage, some ready to go, if need be, as early as tomorrow. Warming to the subject I explained an intricate plan I had for drawing ten neighbor Strongholds into one grand conflict against me, explaining how my central location would make such a course feasible. And, in effect, many of them could claim conflict credit for themselves in warring against each other while they were blasting at me, thereby bringing greater overall battle glory to our sector. Not only was I going to make up for my irregularity the past six months, I was going to do extra.— Even through their muddy dead color I saw his sad eyes gleam a little. And I felt then that his was a heart that would joy really only for a man of dedicated hate and destruction potential.

"So I give you more time for getting External in order," he said, the words walking lean and clean, like fighters that can get you either high or low, "what about Internal?"

I had hoped he would soon ask that question, for it is in Internal that I used really to shine. In fact, before my retrogression, I was well on my way toward having in Internal the best overall mean-record of any in our sector. I was inventive. I could think of ways. And then came the terrible retrogression.

My heart was calm now; I was breathing a regular flex-flex of my new-metal lungs; I knew what he listened for, and I was prepared to soon say it, "SIR," I said, "in Internal I expect to resume almost immediately the Stronghold 10 Backstobbin. You know, the plan that proved so successful in the past." He nodded, and I continued. "In that plant, as perhaps you'll recall, every day is a contest. My 'people' are mean to each other from morn to night, and far into the late hours. The person with the most mean-points, and I've worked out an almost infallible scoring system, will not only get to stay up all night in the Stronghold and be mean on his own, he'll be day mean-master until scoring. SIR, as I've found it, it's a startling efficient method of getting the help to be really mean to each other. They have not only the basic incentive implicit in their natures, they have this added incentive of winning

prizes. Of course, we'll award ribbons.—Also, I'll be mean myself, Internally."

His eyes were showing his happiness and pleasure; the saw-toothed metal pieces were swishing madly in what looked like watery void. "Stronghold 10," he said, "we once had high hopes for you. And now you have almost rekindled fully all those hopes with your terrible and fine plans. But before I make a decision, will you tell me what happened to spoil your great record? I think I know, but I want to know if you know."

"SIR," I said, "she's gone now and her silly sad talk of love—" And he nodded; it was so little a nod, but it had that firm special all-important quick little hitch of the neck-strips that told me this god-piece, this FIP Z-U, really understood and was with me again.

"We'll let you go," he said, "and good luck. I didn't really want to take your Stronghold from you and award your flesh-strips to another, you with such a good record once and with now —I can tell—such a really great sadism in you." He nodded again, that little neck-jerk nod, and I knew it was an endorsement.

So I left the god-piece and summoned a tunnel car. I was swished in a twinkling more than a thousand steel miles eastward, back to the Lid. I rested for awhile in the comfort room of the small station, more relaxed and at peace with my times than I'd been for many a vapor shield past. After awhile I fed myself introven from my portable flesh-strip feeder. It was full night when I passed out of the Lid and, the vapor shield being retired for those hours, the cold stars in a numb moonless sky seemed to speak to me of unlimited ways to be cruel and a really good Stronghold master in Moderan, if I'd just set my heart and brain to it. I vowed to try to be worthy of the hopes of FIP Z-U. Never again would I let the god-pieces in Capitol be so disappointed with me that they could think of awarding my flesh-strips to another. Let a thousand temptresses come in the forms of a thousand new-metal mistresses—let even *her* come back and talk of love—I'd not digress. For me now it's onward in meanness and cruelty.

THE END

●

ILLUSTRATOR
VARGA

Made In Archerius

By NEAL BARRETT, JR.

Did you ever hear the story about the traveling salesman? No, we mean this one...

THE Colonel's staff car pulled hurriedly away from the curb, leaving a gray hedge of exhaust rooted to the boiling street. Hurstmier smiled, watching until the car became an OD blob in the stream of traffic. He waited another minute, then stepped from behind a parked van and took the

marble steps four at a time.

It was noon, and the hospital lobby was nearly empty. An aged nurse snoozed behind the admitting desk and three bored reporters lounged by the elevators munching packaged sandwiches. Hurstmier received a swift, cursory glance as he passed. He pressed the button, waited, and took the self-service to five.

The dark-browed sergeant wore a burp-gun over his shoulder and a forty-five on his belt. He looked miserably uncomfortable squeezed behind the tiny field desk. As Luke Hurstmier approached, dark eyes glared at him from under the heavy steel helmet. While the eyes took him in from head to toe, thick fingers rubbed carefully across his credentials.

Luke waited patiently. He had been through the routine exactly eight times. He had long ago decided the man was hand-picked for the maddening procedure by Colonel "Tiger Jack" Starrett.

Finally, the sergeant frowned, touching the grip of his forty-five suggestively. He had concluded, reluctantly, Luke guessed, that there was no valid excuse to shoot one L. Hurstmier, as he highly resembled the face on his ID card, which matched the card's mate in his desk file. He was allowed to pass, the sergeant giving no indication he had ever laid eyes on Luke before.

At the end of the long hall, Luke stopped before the plain gray door. He rang three times and the door opened quietly, letting him into the semi-darkness. Luke blinked in the half-light. Two technicians glanced up and he nodded to them without speaking. Behind him, the cameras whirred softly and the tapes revolved on silent spindles.

As he stepped before the one-way mirror, Luke felt the familiar tightening in his chest. He watched as Ben Hooker bent over the huge, oversized bed. The figure on the bed was sleeping. As usual in this case.

Six days before, though it seemed longer to Luke, Morph of Archerius had landed in upper Maryland. His spaceship was under heavy guard at Luke's laboratory in Aberdeen and Morph was interned with a fractured leg and respiratory complications in the biggest bed Johns Hopkins had been able to throw together. Luke decided he should be used to Morph by now. He should, but he wasn't. Morph was not easy to get used to.

As Luke watched, Morph stretched and yawned, bringing his over-long forearms above his head and extending his length to a frightening twelve and a half feet. His body was covered with thick, shaggy fur, his small,

round head nearly hidden in a mass of heavy hair. More than anything, he resembled a large, very tired sloth.

Luke scowled at the sleeping figure. Since Morph's arrival, mile upon mile of copy had been written about him; newspaper, radio and TV had exhausted every conceivable angle and aspect of the first alien to land on Earth. Every angle except one, thought Luke.

If anyone else had noticed it, they had forgotten it in the general excitement and confusion of Morph's arrival, or, more likely, ignored it out of convenience. But Luke hadn't forgotten. It had puzzled and disturbed him from the very beginning—

—*How, he asked himself, does a big hairy slob who sleeps eighteen hours a day, find time to invent an interstellar drive?*

Dr. Ben Hooker shed his antiseptic suit and mask, lit a cigarette, and stepped into his office. Luke Hurstmier half opened his eyes as Ben entered. He was stretched in an armchair, his feet on Ben's desk.

"How's Sleeping Beauty?" asked Luke.

"Sleeping," said Ben, "and I'm not supposed to tell *you* even that much. Mr. Hurstmier will receive pertinent information regarding the medical aspect of our patient through authorized liaison reports."

Luke stared in mock surprise. "Let me guess. You've been talking to 'Tiger Jack' Starrett again."

Ben shook his head. "Wrong. He's been talking to me. What exactly are you trying to do, anyway, get an old man canned?"

Luke grinned. Ben waved a thick sheaf of papers under his nose.

"Somehow, he knows I've been letting a certain engineer read Morph's medical charts. He also knows the engineer is Luke Hurstmier. He is not at all happy."

"I imagine not," Luke mused. "I've been dodging him about three days now. I think he's unhappy about something."

"Uh, yes," Ben said dryly, "I'd say that. At least."

"Does this by any chance mean you are cutting off my source of information?" asked Luke.

Ben glanced up sharply. "Now why would I want to do a thing like that? Just to keep my job?"

"I won't be offended," Luke said bravely, "it's all part of the general trend. During the last twenty-four hours I have managed to get myself banned by Interrogations & Records, General Data and Central Filing."

"Perhaps," Ben suggested, stuffing his pipe, "you are making a nuisance of yourself."

"Perhaps. At any rate, you now have your choice of retaining our week-old friendship or knuckling under to the growing anti-Hurstmier faction. In which case, I shall go to the head of the hospital and reveal that you are holding six nurses captive in your laboratory for immoral purposes."

"Paagh!" scowled Ben. "I must be even older than *you* think I am; I'm neither gratified by your flattery or aroused by the concept behind it. I don't suppose you could just come right out and *tell* me what you want to know?"

"Several things. One, I want to know what exactly is the matter with Morph."

Ben straightened, running long fingers through his iron-gray hair. "Would it be improper to ask what this has to do with taking that drive unit apart?"

"I'll let you in on a little secret," said Luke. "Frankly, I don't think that drive unit is *supposed* to come apart.

"Starrett will be happy to hear that," Ben mused.

"No doubt. As for what I'm looking for, I'm not at all sure. There's something about Morph's ship that's very, very puzzling, and I feel the best way to find out what it is is to find out as much as possible about Morph."

Ben studied the lanky young man with his hard, clinical eye.

"For instance?"

"Huh unh. I'm still in the hunch stage. That's about three flights below a for instance. Now. How about this Alien Flu?"

Ben winced. "It's a type of virus infection. You could have read that in the papers. Very similar to the several types human beings catch every day. It's transmitted through the body openings like flu or common cold. My guess is Archerians are very sensitive to respiratory infections; that's based on what we've learned about Morph in just six days, of course, but it's a safe enough guess. We've found old scars on Morph's lungs from repeated bouts with this thing—or something very much like it."

"Do you think it's ever fatal?"

"Could be," said Ben, "same as a cold or Asian flu *could* be fatal. I doubt if this thing is very often. I hope they haven't built a ship like that without discovering antibiotics," he added sourly.

"Well, don't count on it," said Luke. "Which came first, the A-bomb or the Salk Vaccine? I don't imagine we're a very unusual phenomenon. Now. What are you doing for it?"

"Well, treating it, of course!" Ben scowled, looked down, and began shuffling the papers on his desk, apparently annoyed by it all.

"I had hoped you were," said Luke, "but how?" He leaned back in his chair, grinning smugly at Ben. If he had learned nothing else from his previous visits with Ben Hooker he had learned the meaning of the shuffling of papers. Luke had obviously driven the conversation into an area the old man wasn't exactly eager to discuss, and the shuffling was the prelude to a stall.

"Of course," said Ben carefully, "it's quite difficult working on a completely foreign physiology, but Morph is responding very satisfactorily to our, ah, standard antibiotics . . ."

Luke grinned to himself. The old boy was certainly a lousy staller.

". . . Naturally, Morph's resemblance to our own order of Edentata is a lucky coincidence —for Morph and for us—he reacts in much the same way to drugs as our test animals. Actually, the big problem has been to convince about fifty anteaters, armadillos and sloths to *catch* Morph's infection."

"Well, I think you've done a grand job," said Luke acidly, recalling the roomful of sneezing and coughing oddities he had seen in the hospital's basement. "Now if we can interrupt the Zoology lesson for a moment," he said, squaring himself in the chair, "how about telling me what you're *really* up to, friend?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ben lied openly.

Luke shrugged. "Okay, forget it. This is definitely not my week, anyway. What about the fractured leg? Is that Top Secret, too?"

"A leg is a leg," Ben snapped. "It's knitting."

"Well, that's reassuring," said Luke, pulling himself out of the chair.

"Not leaving?" Ben urged.

"Yep. Got a few more agencies to intimidate before I get back to my little ole spaceship. Thanks for the information. Such as it was."

"Oh, certainly," said Ben pleasantly. "Come and pump me anytime."

At the door, Luke stopped and turned. "Oh, there was one more thing."

Ben snorted, shaking his head slowly. "Yes, I presumed there was. The thing you came for in the first place."

"You've been associating with Starrett too long. You're overly suspicious."

Ben crossed his hands on his lap, enjoying being on the other

end of the pump for a moment. "Sure I am. Now what was it?"

"I wonder if you would let me have a look at Morph's personal possessions. You know, the things he had on him when they brought him in."

"You've wasted your whole performance," Ben said smugly. "I haven't got 'em."

Luke slowly sat back down.

"Starrett took them two days ago," said Ben. "I assume Security has them by now. Why didn't you *tell* me you wanted them? I could have killed Starrett, fed him to Morph, and—"

"Oh, shut up," said Luke.

Starrett: Naturally, you understand that you do not have to answer any questions at all during these visits. You are in one of our finest hospitals, and we are doing our best to take care of you. You are our guest, not our prisoner. You understand that, don't you?

Morph: Most certainlies! Morph are most excellently cared. Your physicians are muchly good in their grasping hold of medicals. Will it give to me greatness amounts of pleasurlies to bring Archerian medicals to your medicals. Oh boy! Sure enough!

Starrett: Your people are quite advanced in the science of medicine?

Morph: Oh, certainlies. Surely. Of course. All and everys come to joy in wondrous fine cures by Archerius' medical worldlies.

Starrett: Excuse me, Morph, I mean no offense, of course, but sometimes your translating device does not seem to, ah, give me the full meaning of what you say. This is no doubt due to my lack of familiarity with the instrument. Would you try to give me the meaning of your last phrase, "hospital worldlies"?

Morph: Yes! Yes! Oh why not is it? Archerius' possesses world for hospitals, world for physical typelies of science, world for all studies of learnliness. Is nothingness, really. Ho-hum, By God, yes! That's what it is.

(tape spliced and edited here—latter segment of interview continues.)

Starrett: . . . and these, spatial disturbances forced you to land on Earth?

Morph: Surely, surely. As I have before acquainted you, pal of my bosoms, I have been towardly Cheriuc Chester in next doorly Galaxy.

Starrett: As I understand, you were journeying toward a destination in another Galaxy, not this one? Is that so?

Morph: Oh, yes, yes, yes!

Starrett: How long does such a trip take, say, from here?

Morph: Oh, non-time, maybe muchly seem to be of three or fourness of day periods, but not truly a time, boy, just seemly to be.

Starrett: Then your drive does involve a faster-than-light principle?

Morph: Faster notly, oh buddy lover. Not so speedness like "fast" but speedness like placeness to placeness.

Starrett: You mean speed has no bearing, since you do not go *between* two points.

Morph: Ah, you have this too, eh?

Starrett: No, I meant, well—what is the principle behind this drive?

Morph: Morph is business-type man, not mechanic-wise. How the Hell am I knowing? Damned if I do. So what? Who can say?

Starrett: Then let me ask—

Luke swore wearily, leaned forward and cut off the tape. "Is muchly damned nonsense, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant stiffened. He pressed the rewind button, watched the tape spin on its reel, then carefully replaced it in a numbered plastic box. He started to close the box, hesitated, then looked up at Luke. He was young, and the two gold bars on his neatly pressed shoulders gleamed brightly in Luke's eyes.

"Were there any more tapes you wished to hear, sir?"

Luke smiled patiently. The lieutenant had a nice way of putting it. He knew, of course, there were other tapes Luke wished to hear. About three dozen more, as the request list on his desk indicated. What he was trying to say was were there any more tapes *besides* the ones he wanted to hear.

Luke sighed, lit a cigarette, and blew smoke casually toward the ceiling. "Hmmm, well, do you happen to have any tapes or films on Morph's personal possessions?"

The young man cocked his head thoughtfully, then fingered through a card file on his desk. He withdrew a thin stack of cards, carefully marking his place. He held the cards well out of Luke's sight, shifting his glance from the cards to Luke to make certain he wasn't peeking. Finally, he shook his head firmly and placed the cards face down before him.

"I'm sorry, sir. There is no indication here that Engineering Personnel are authorized to see these films."

"I only wanted the one on Archerian currency," pleaded Luke.

The lieutenant shot him a puz-

zled glance, flicked through the cards again quickly, and said, "Sir, there is no film or tape on Archerian curren—" He stopped suddenly, the color rising in his cheeks.

Luke grinned triumphantly. The lieutenant swallowed nervously.

"Of course, I shall have to inform Colonel Starrett that I have inadvertently given you access to unauthorized information," he said sternly.

Luke stood up and leaned over the officer's desk. "Well, I won't tell if you won't," he grinned crookedly.

The lieutenant shook his head. "Thank you, sir. But I—must report all such incidents."

Luke started to speak, then caught the lieutenant's nervous glance toward the ceiling. He looked up. There was nothing to see but an air-conditioning ventilator. Luke frowned thoughtfully, then suddenly understood. No wonder Starrett was hot on his trail. He wondered if his own workshop was bugged, too. Probably. Certainly wouldn't want to be left out.

In the hall, he paused, pulled the thin shiny object from his pocket, anad gazed thoughtfully at it for a long minute.

It was very late when he closed the door of his workshop and sank into the comfortable, grease-stained easy chair. It had certainly been a fruitful day, he thought wearily. After leaving the young officer at Aural & Visual, he had managed to squeeze in Trade Relations, Alien Psychology and Speculative Studies before closing time. Of course, it was only a rough estimate, but he felt he had directly or indirectly antagonized at least fifty of sixty people at the three agencies. Not too bad.

Luke grinned. Speculative Studies had been rather close. He had nearly run over Colonel Starrett on the stairs.

Without looking up, Luke said, " 'Morning, Colonel."

Starrett paused, his neatly clad frame poised just inside the doorway. "Oh, you were expecting me, were you?"

Luke glanced up from his desk, his eyes moving past the dazzling field of color on the crisp jacket and resting on the sharp, hawk-like face. "I'm not overly surprised," he said wearily. "Come on in. Grab a seat if you can find one."

Starrett glanced sharply all around the room, grimacing slightly at the tool-littered, grease-stained workbenches, finally choosing to stand. Luke repressed a smug, satisfied grin.

"How's it coming?" Starrett asked casually. He had moved to the center of the room, facing away from Luke toward the

smooth ovoid form of Morph's ship resting on blocks amid the clutter of the shop. Its unblemished gray surface stretched from fore to aft in a graceful twenty-foot curve. But the surface and the shape strongly resembled the four-foot drive unit on Luke's desk.

Luke stared at the ramrod back. "Oh, it's coming along fine," he said brightly, "we've established a basic premise to work from: We're quite certain the big shell is the ship and the little one is the drive."

Starrett jerked around, eyes glaring. "That's very funny. Or it would be if it weren't so damn close to the truth! What is holding things up, here, Hurstmier? You?"

Luke answered without looking up. "Lack of availability of pertinent data necessary for adequate analysis, Colonel. I think you know the answer to that one better than I do."

Starrett's eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened in a grim smile. "I see," he said hoarsely, "I see. When you were recommended for this project I was told you were a good engineer; that your methods were perhaps a little unorthodox, but nevertheless, quite competent. I'm afraid that description was a little inaccurate. You are not unorthodox, Hurstmier, you are unstable. If your so-called Daily Reports were not proof enough, your— adventures of the past few days would more than confirm my opinion." His lips tightened over his teeth in a grim little smile. "I suggest we stop sparring around, Hurstmier. You are deliberately trying to sabotage this project. Why?"

Luke shook his head wearily, stood up and walked around his desk. He let one hand run over the smooth surface of the drive unit.

"You're wrong," he said, facing Starrett. "I have a very deep desire to find out what makes this ship tick. But I repeat: I don't think I *can* find out unless I am allowed to see the complete picture."

Starrett glared, his mouth pursing up in a sour curl. He paced around the edge of the ship and stopped a few inches from Luke.

"You think I am withholding information that might enable you to take this drive apart? Deliberately? Is that right?"

Luke nodded.

"I see. Well, you are correct," he beamed triumphantly. "Partially correct, anyway. I *am* withholding information, as you have so doggedly discovered. But *not* information pertinent to *you*. It is the stated policy of this project that each department be allowed to work inde-

pendently, without undue influence from each other. You are aware of this, of course, whether you choose to ignore it or not. The reason is simple: We want each group to discover as much as it can on its own. Come to its own conclusions. After we feel we have sufficient data, we certainly—"

"—will hand the pieces to a committee and stick them together with a pot of glue," finished Luke. "It doesn't work that way, Colonel. We're not taking inventory in a supermarket, we're trying to put together an alien civilization; find out as much as we can from available data."

Luke ignored the field of red creeping up the Colonel's face.

"You're going at it exactly backwards," he went on, "the classic example of the cart before the horse." Luke shook his head savagely. "Uh unh, you can't departmentalize a thing like this; *all* data is pertinent to *all groups*. As for me, if I can't get the data I need from you I'll continue to get it from whatever source is available."

Starrett let the breath whistle slowly out between his clenched teeth. "I see," he said ironically. "No doubt you feel this explains your *need* to examine anatomy charts, postage stamps and alien coins. All of these items are necessary to your investigation of the drive unit. If you can give me a logical reason for those asinine requests piling up on my desk, Hurstmier, I'll *give* you Morph's personal possessions!"

Luke's face brightened. He said, "That is a promise I intend to remind you of Colonel. As for opening this drive unit, if you've had time to monitor your tapes in Ben Hooker's office you'll know I've already stated that I don't believe the unit is intended to come apart. As far as I'm concerned, no coin or any other material object is going to open it. You've read our reports? Then you know there is no material connection between the control board and the drive itself. The control board contains several hundred units; we have pinned down the function of about half of them. *None* of them is in any way physically linked to the drive.

"This device," he explained, pointing to a rough diagram on his desk, "is a course computer. It offers the pilot an almost infinite combination of simple, pushbutton destinations. Spatial *and* hyperspatial, if we can believe Morph's gibberish."

Starrett scowled impatiently. "All right. What's your point?"

"Just this: Each component on the board is linked to a central transmission unit. The purpose of this unit is to send wave

impulses to the drive. The linkage between the drive and the control board is *strictly electronic.*

"So the drive is permanently sealed in its impervious casing of God knows what; and for a very good reason: It doesn't *need* to be opened. All maintenance or repair, if any is ever necessary, is performed by impulse signals from the board. Some of those units are obviously designed for such a purpose. I haven't found them yet, and I don't intend to push any buttons to find out if I'm right."

"I'm afraid not everyone at Control agrees with you," said Starrett. "They consider the possibility that one of those 'buttons' might open the drive unit."

Luke nodded. "I've considered that. And I don't believe it. I believe it would be disastrous to open the casing, *if* you could, because I think it was put there partially as a safety device. I think the reason for this is that the drive does not totally 'exist' in its casing during certain phases of its operation." Luke smiled grimly. "Tell the people up at Control to come down and push buttons. If they're lucky, they *might* push the one that deactivates the drive. If they are not, there's a good chance they can be the first men to reach Andromeda. The hard way. Frankly, I don't believe Morph would be foolish enough to leave his ticket home wide open; not if he knows anything at all about Homo Sapiens."

Starrett regarded Luke with cold, impersonal eyes. "All right," he said patiently, "I've *read* your reports. I don't have the technical background to agree or disagree with you; I can only say that if your scientific reasoning is in any way similar to your—erratic, personal actions, my former opinion still stands. However, as I said before, I think it's time we quit sparring with each other. You and I both know I didn't come here to discuss drive units. You are evading the issue, which is the *reason* behind your interference with other departments of this project."

Luke remained silent.

Starrett sighed. "All right. Forget it. Just tell me one thing. You know something you're not telling me. It has nothing to do with the ship or the drive. Am I right?"

Luke nodded. "You are," he said.

Starrett's shoulders relaxed slightly. He leaned against the side of the ship. "I see. Then at least we're getting *some*where," he said caustically. "Let's take it a step further. Are you withholding this—information because you feel you are being

persecuted? Out of bitterness toward me?"

"No," said Luke flatly, "*I'm* holding back because I *can't* tell you anything until I have the information *you're* holding back." Luke smiled. "You see? It's a stalemate, Colonel. And I'm afraid it's up to you to break it."

Starrett drummed his fingers against the hard gray shell of the ship. He stared blankly at the ceiling for a moment, then shook his head slowly and reached into the pocket of his jacket.

"I'm probably making a fool of myself, Hurstmier," he said stonily, "but that can't be helped. My job is to see that you do yours, period; so I'm going to overlook that policy we were discussing. Frankly, I think I'll regret it. Let's just say my curiosity has gotten the best of my judgment. I'm going to show you something. On one condition: I want your promise that you will not, in the future, attempt to—extort—information from other departments. Do you accept these conditions?"

"I do, and gladly, Colonel," said Luke.

"All right," Starrett sighed, "here."

Luke held out his hand and felt the tinkle of heavy coins drop into his open palm. He moved away from the Colonel and held them under a strong light. There were six coins. Four seemed to be in the same language; none, he knew immediately, contained the curly symbols he had become familiar with from the Archerian control board. All of the coins were beautifully and finely engraved. Luke felt his heart pump wildly into his throat.

"The composition of the four in your right hand is a very high grade of silver hardened by some process to the strength of steel," said Starrett. "The other two are a platinum and gold alloy. Also hard. Metallurgy says they'll all last forever."

"I believe it," said Luke breathlessly. He faced Starrett. "Has it occurred to you as—peculiar, that none of these coins are from Archerius?"

"Not at all," said Starrett. "Morph explained that he was on a trip away from home. He says coins of all systems have relative values on all other systems. Incidentally, I might as well tell you. These are Morph's *only* personal possessions."

Luke's brows raised. "No clothes? Personal papers?"

Starrett shook his head. "Morph says he was born with all the clothes he needs. He says he needs no papers, that the carrying of documents is a primitive custom, and his religion forbids the wearing of ornaments."

Luke made a face. "That gives me a little more evidence for what I've been thinking, Colonel. Morph seems to have a logical answer for any question he may be asked. It's all just a little bit too pat for me."

Starrett's eyes narrowed. "You said 'evidence,' I believe. Evidence of what?"

Luke glanced at the coins once more and handed them to Starrett. Then he eased himself back into his chair. "All right," he said finally, "you've kept your end of the bargain. Here's mine. I think Morph has told one lie after another from the moment he arrived. I don't believe that nonsense about 'spatial disturbances.' I don't believe he was forced down here at all."

Starrett's gaze hardened, and his eyes raised slightly. "That's *not* your responsibility, Hurstmier," he warned.

"Hold it," Luke held up a restraining hand, "I think you'll understand when I'm finished. Hasn't the possibility entered your mind that Morph may not be all he seems to be?"

"Naturally," Starrett snapped, "we've kept our minds open to *any* possibilities. So far, we have no reason to believe he's anything except what he says he is. Do you?"

"Several reasons. Morph contends he comes from a highly developed intergalactic civilization, complete with planet-wide hospitals, universities, etcetera, etcetera. Yet this so-called civilization is incapable of building their own starships."

Starrett straightened up.

"Now what's that supposed to mean?"

Luke continued, ignoring the question. "Two, the ship he came in has been stripped of every item made in Archerius before it landed."

The Colonel raised his eyes in a silent plea to Heaven. "I knew I'd be sorry," he mumbled, "all right, Hurstmier, getting back to your first statement; suppose this ship *wasn't made* in Archerius. Canadians drive American cars, Italians fly British jets. So what? I'd certainly expect that sort of decentralized usage to extend to an intergalactic level."

"Granted," said Luke, "but why strip the ship of everything from your own planet? Why unless you didn't want anyone to see your own products?—or if you didn't *produce* any?"

Starrett was silent. Luke hesitated a moment, then decided the time was certainly as ripe as it would ever be. He reached into his pocket and took out the thin metal disc.

"You gave me some coins," he told the Colonel, "now here is one for you. Only you're getting the poor end of the deal. I found

this inside the instrument panel. It had slipped down a crack into the course computer unit."

Starrett examined the object critically, then stared blankly at Luke. "It's a coin. So what?"

"So it's an Archerian coin. The engraving matches the writing on the instrument panel. It's the *only* Archerian object we have besides Morph himself. Compare it to the other coins. Do you know what it's made of, Colonel? I did the analysis myself. It's tin, coated with a little bit of silver chock full of impurities."

Starrett took another look at the coin. It was indeed a sloppy job of minting. The edges were slightly ragged and uneven, and the imprint was off-center, with half the profile of some Archerian dignitary missing entirely. The only possible comparison that Starrett could think of was a poor example of early Roman.

"It's a lousy job," he admitted. "But it doesn't prove anything. Maybe it's a souvenir, or something. I certainly don't believe it's a contemporary Archerian coin, if that's what you're driving at."

"Maybe, maybe not," said Luke. "I could be wrong about the coin. I don't think so, not in the light of everything else. I *know* I'm not wrong about the ship. I'm an engineer, Colonel. It's my job. That ship has been thrown together from about eight different species of spacecraft. Sure, the outside's beautiful—that's because it came that way. The rest of the ship is a big nothing."

"But you don't know that," Starrett argued.

Luke stood his ground. "I *do* know that," he said firmly. "I can tell a slicked-up jury-rig when I see one. We've probably got half, or one-third of the entire Archerian trading fleet right here in front of us."

Starrett shook his head in disgust. "Anyone can dream. Hurstmier, what possible reason—"

"—could Morph have for pulling the wool over our eyes? I couldn't say. I only know he's lied about his technology, and that leads me to believe he's probably lying about everything else. It seems to round out that way."

"Look," Starrett said patiently, "you are a businessman, a trader. You land on the biggest desert island in the world. The natives are rich and friendly. What are you going to do, kick 'em in the teeth?"

"Certainly not. I'm going to be very friendly, con the natives out of their pearls and spices with a lot of wild promises; then I'm going to steal quietly out of the harbor on the first dark night that comes along."

"Oh, for God's sake, man," yelled Starrett, "don't carry the analogy to the point of the ridiculous! We're not natives. We *know* the difference between pearls and worthless trinkets and Morph knows that. Why should he botch up an untouched, wide-open market?"

Luke grinned weakly. "I've read the papers, Colonel. I've listened to the tapes. Every time Morph gets his hands on that idiotic translator he makes another wild promise. The whole world's eating out of his hand, waiting for Utopia. And what has he actually shown us? Has he told you anything you don't already know? What have we got? A hacked-up spaceship that Morph threw together, and a drive I'll give you ten to one he couldn't begin to explain in a million years. I *know* he didn't make it. And oh, yes, we've got a coin. We've got a coin manufactured by a race of sloppy, technological pygmies!"

"You're only guessing," said Starrett. "You're just guessing."

"Well, while we're *guessing*, how do we know Morph didn't come down to check us out for—"

"I know," said Starrett tiredly, "for an invasion fleet. We've considered that. What if he did? If we let him go and he is a scout we've had it. If we keep him here or kill him we've got one chance in a billion that he came barging in here without telling anyone where he was going. Do you believe he'd do that?"

"No," Luke admitted. "I don't. But then I don't really see Morph in the conqueror's roll, anyway. I don't think he could stay awake long enough to invade anything. As far as I'm concerned he's a plain, double-dyed, slick as a whistle con man. Period."

Starrett got slowly to his feet, suddenly aware that he had been sitting on a greasy crate for the past ten minutes. "Is that all, Hurstmier?"

"That's all I can think of at the moment," said Luke.

"Well, it's certainly been fascinating. You know, of course, that I can't keep you on the project?"

Luke nodded. "I figured as much."

Starrett regarded him solemnly. He bit his lip and shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Hurstmier, I'm really sorry, but—"

Luke waved aside the apology. "Forget it, Colonel," he grinned. "Just promise me one thing, will you?"

Starrett stopped at the door and turned. "What's that?"

"Next time you talk to Morph; keep your eye on your wallet, huh?"

Luke was already pulling pa-

pers from his drawer when the Colonel slammed the door behind him.

Dr. Ben Hooker stared straight ahead, ignoring Starrett's hoarse, floor-pacing harangue. Luke sat next to him, doodling on one of those clean white pads that are standard equipment at every conference table. Below him, half a dozen military and civilian members of the project squirmed in various stages of discomfort.

"What - I - cannot - understand," growled Starrett, "is how you *let* him get out of the hospital!"

"No one *let* him do anything, Colonel," said Hooker. His voice was tired and strained. "We took his leg out of the cast and everyone just sort of—went to sleep. We have no idea how he did it but I suspect he had some sort of sleep inducing powers we—"

"Bahhhh!" said Starrett.

"It's quite reasonable, what Dr. Hooker says," one of the civilians noted. "The technicians on duty used to complain they got tired just *looking* at Morph."

Starrett shot a fiery gaze at the man. "And it didn't seem important to report a detail like that? Don't you realize every fact, no matter how fantastic it may seem, must be considered when you're dealing with an unknown factor?"

Luke cleared his throat loudly and gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling.

Starrett glared at him. "I was expecting some sort of comment from you, Hurstmier. You expected this, I suppose?"

Luke shook his head. "I expected him to leave, Colonel. I really didn't think he'd go about it like this, though. I guess he figured he could do without the natives bidding fond good-bye from the shore."

Starrett reddened. "If I remember correctly, his prime objective was to con us out of our 'pearls,' wasn't it?" He turned sharply to one of the uniformed men. "Did he take anything from the hospital? Anything missing at Aberdeen? Anything? Anywhere?"

"No, sir, said the man, "just the ship, sir—"

Starrett glared the young officer back in his chair. He turned to Luke.

"He got what he came for," said Luke calmly.

Starrett's eyes narrowed. "Which was?"

"Once I read an article about a clan of con artists that travels around the country in Cadillacs and trailers, bilking the public. I can't remember the name; it's a whole family, all related and all crooked. They hit a town like the plague, painting houses with cheap whitewash that runs off in

the first rain, selling 'imported' woolens that fall apart when they're cleaned. The police have been on to them for years and they warn a community when the clan is about to hit a town.

"I imagine whatever serves for a police force in the Galaxy is just as well aware of Morph and his crew. Which is precisely why he 'happened' to steer onto a backwater planet, ripe and ready for plucking. I'll bet he's opened up more new planets than all the exploratory ships in the system!"

"But he didn't sell us anything," Starrett argued.

"He didn't sell you anything you were *expecting* to be sold," Luke corrected. "He sold you Morph, that's all he needed to sell."

Luke grinned. "The funny thing is he could have had anything he wanted, just for the asking. But the con man's psychology doesn't work that way. He *has* to bilk the public or it's no fun.

Luke turned to Starrett. "Morph praised our medical achievements until he was blue in the face, and you finally got the idea. He certainly worked hard enough to give it to you. Am I right, Ben? Didn't you work up a preventive vaccine for Archerian respiratory ailments?"

Ben's mouth fell. "Yes. I did. I was glad to be able to do it, of course, and—"

"—and the authorities that be thought it would be a grand lever to pry a generous trade concession from the wealthy Archerians," Luke finished.

"It was a gift," Starrett added defensively.

"Sure," said Luke. "Only you didn't *exactly* give it to him, he stole it."

Ben shook his head in disbelief. "I find it incredible to believe anyone would go to so much trouble for a—free cold serum."

"Trouble! For something he can sell back home for whatever he decides to ask? No trouble at all, Ben."

"But why us?" balked Starrett. "Couldn't he get his blasted vaccine on some more, ah, advanced planet?"

Luke grinned. "I told you. You have to *buy* things on advanced planets. Besides, it's more kicks to bilk the natives. Anyway, they're probably on to Morph everywhere else.

"Incidentally, Colonel, I took another long, hard look at that Archerian coin. We were both wrong. It's neither primitive nor contemporary.

"I guess it's the final insult," Luke grinned. "The only thing Morph left us is a very poor attempt at counterfeiting."

THE END

the spectroscope

by S. E. COTTS

NEXT DOOR TO THE SUN. *By Stanton A. Coblentz. 224 pp. Avalon Books. $2.95.*

Reading Stanton A. Coblentz's latest book is an experience similar to eating a lobster. There is the same mixture of frustration and delight. With lobsters, a little bit of patience and the worthless shell can be cracked off, leaving the succulent meat revealed. So it is with *Next Door to the Sun.* Wade through the first twenty or thirty pages of obvious scene shifting and stage setting, and you'll reach a delicious satire on the morals, manners and political bumblings of a lost tribe from Earth whose descendants live under a Plastidome on Mercury.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of the book we have no real indication of satiric leanings, and with his intentions so woefully unclear, Mr. Coblentz is guilty of some gosh-awful writing. But when he finally hits his stride, the fun starts. His success stems not so much from any intricate plot as from his wealth of detail and the enchanting doggerel that he has invented for the Mercurites to speak. His is not a blunt or cruel satire, but it is effective nonetheless—particularly in this, our own election year, when we too are subjected to a bombardment of inanities.

Consider a few of the author's choice inventions: there are two political parties on Mercury—the Concurrent Party and the Dissident Party. What is the difference between them? Well, the Concurrent Party is the one in office and the Dissident Party is the one that hopes to get in office. Simple, eh? Or consider the Man-Multiplier, an invention that will make a 3-D, lifesize, full color replica of the candidate so that twenty of him can address twenty different

rallies at the same time. Or consider the false arm that a candidate can attach and operate from beneath his clothes so that he can handshake with thousands of squealing voters and nary a callus to show for it. Or take Oozodine—but then read all about it and become an enlightened cynic yourself!

AND THEN THE TOWN TOOK OFF. *By Richard Wilson. 123 pp. Ace Books. Paper: 35¢.*

Richard Wilson upholds his already considerable reputation as a master of light entertainment in this new book. He has a kind of detached, deadpan style of writing that makes the shenanigans he is describing completely ludicrous. The spoof never lets down, either, because he has that happy faculty of knowing just the right point at which to bring the proceedings to a halt.

There is something completely disarming in the plight of Superior, Ohio, when the residents awaken one morning to find their entire town hanging several miles up in the air like a giant satellite. Was it caused by a nuclear explosion in the vicinity? Had the mayor, an eccentric, decided to secede from the U. S. because of discriminatory taxes against the local bubble gum factory? Had the local unaccredited college of magic carried an experiment too far? Or was an alien race behind it all?

I don't want to give away the fun, but I'm sure you can guess that it ends well for everyone concerned.

On the reverse side of this Ace Double Book is Andre Norton's disappointing novel, *The Sioux Spaceman.*

* * *

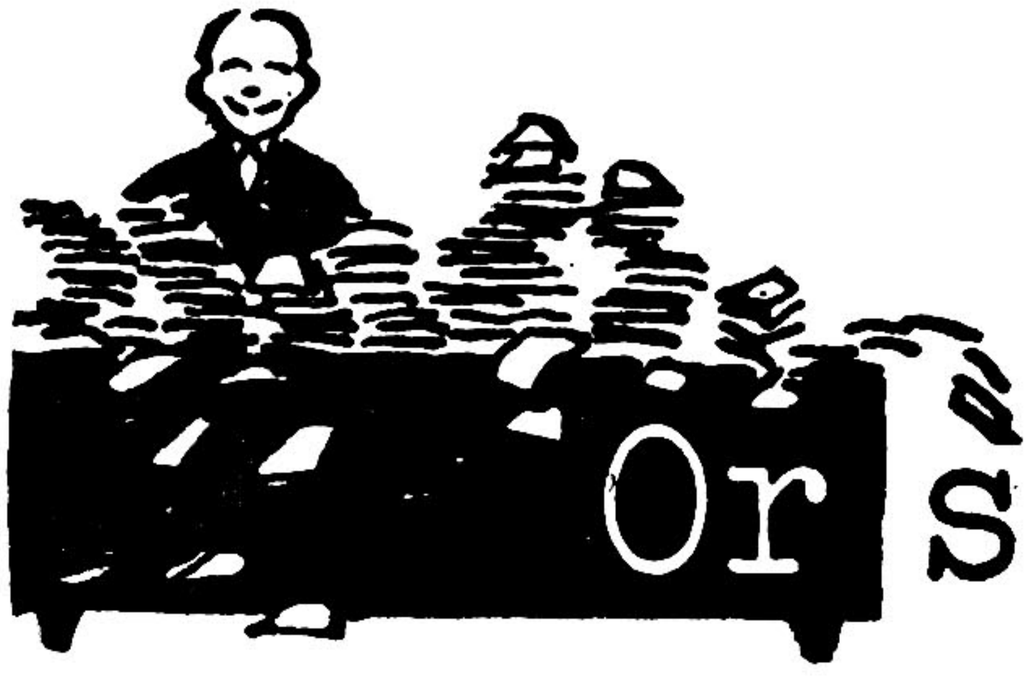
Worthy of mention is the recent publication of reprints by four of science fiction's most important authors. They are all notable additions to a S-F library though neither the Van Vogt nor the Clarke books represent these authors at their finest.

EARTH'S LAST FORTRESS. *By A. E. Van Vogt. 114 pp. Ace Books. Paper: 35¢.*

ISLANDS IN THE SKY. *By Arthur C. Clarke, 127 pp. Signet Books. Paper: 35¢.*

THE PURCHASE OF THE NORTH POLE. *By Jules Verne. 159 pp. Ace Books. Paper: 35¢.*

THE SPACE MERCHANTS. *By Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth. 158 pp. Ballantine Books. Paper: 35¢.*



Or so you say

Dear Editor:

I am curious of one thing. Do you ever get a letter from fans that does not congratulate you in one line and in the next criticize you from beginning to end?

Personally, I am satisfied with the whole magazine and cannot find fault with anything but some hard-to-please readers, who would do well to spend that four cents on the next issue of *Amazing*.

A blast to readers Paul Singleton, Jr. and Paul Zimmer.

A—The customer is not always right.

B—Money, contrary to the belief of some people, does not grow on trees, even for editors.

Those are my only gripes. I like the novels, stories and the art. I even read the classifieds. No complaint there.

Ann Fawler
Box 125, Rt. 2
Amarillo, Tex.

● *We appreciate those kind words and your satisfaction with Amazing is the best news we've had today. But because there is always room for improvement, we are also grateful to hear from those who are interested enough to appraise the magazine —pro and con. Even if we don't agree with all of their criticism, it helps to keep us on our toes.*

Dear Editor:

Moore's "Transient" is the most striking piece of work to appear in a Z-D zine since Leiber's "You're All Alone!" It's Unique, so there's no point in asking you to "print more like it." Instead, mark up one vote for continuing to expand the scope of your publications by leaving the door open to offtrail items as well as the Standard Fare.

Naturally, the reader reaction was mixed. After all, in dropping the Fairman policies two years or so ago, you reverted to simple plots, competently-written, and so have gathered a readership largely composed of new, younger fans. And you've

brought them pretty well along, too, I'd say. Still, I'm not surprised that "Transient" was a bit too rich for the blood of several readers; it *is* pretty far out. But please don't let the squawks scare you into reverting to a diet of nice safe bland Pablum-stories, wholly. Rather, continue to jolt 'em once in a while with something a little more cogent than the usual thing; it'll do 'em good, and you too, in the long run.

Herbert's "Priests of Psi" in the February *Fantastic* was another thoughty piece. I certainly hope that what you printed was a condensation of a longer story slanted for book-publication, because I would like to see the version in which the protagonist went the Full Course rather than cutting out in the middle.

After Palmer's screwballisms, Browne's well-meant ignorance of the field, and Fairman's utter dedication to printing crud (even if he had to write it himself to avoid printing something readable) your regime still seems a bit unbelievable to the long-time reader. Oh, sure—there's a lot of mediocre material in your zines (and throughout the entire field, for that matter) but it is highly encouraging to see you running top-grade stuff when it's available. Round of applause, punctuated by the ring of the newsdealer's cash-register.

F. M. Busby
2852 14th Ave., W.
Seattle 99, Wash.

● *I hope you're right about our stockpile of younger sf fans. There is only one way to build up a body of veteran fans—recruit them early and keep them in the ranks. As for your comments on editors and their policies—I wonder what you'll say about me after I (as it must to all editors!) go?*

Dear Editor:

I was indeed surprised to hear that many of your readers find it difficult to obtain science fiction material on bookstands throughout the country. Recently, I had the opportunity to travel through many of the small towns in both the south and southeast. I had very little difficulty in obtaining your magazine, even in some of the smaller communities.

I must admit, I have a more important reason for writing this, than to just to talk aimlessly, as is so often done. I know that most of our amateur astronomers read science fiction. We of the astronomical society are seeking amateur astronomers all over the world, to increase our membership. Our idea is to keep in close contact and share

our observation knowledge and theory. We know that astronomy is the great science of the future. We wish to advance with that scientific future. We find it impossible to carry out some of our experiments, without the aid of other astronomers around the world. Should any amateur astronomer wish to participate in our future observations as a member of our society, please write to me. Your letter will be immediately acknowledged.

I want to thank *Amazing* for its cooperation in printing this letter, and one more acknowledgement . . . thanks for publishing material that has given many hours of good science fiction reading to many of my associates and myself.

Stephen T. Dinzler
458 N. Corona Ave.
Valley Stream, New York

Dear Editor:

This letter I'm writing to you may seem a bit unusual in part in that my main topic has to do with letters you receive. First of all, may I say that as a science-fiction fan of eight years past, I find very little wrong with your magazines. I *believe* that a person will buy a science fiction magazine in order *to read science fiction,* logical? Then why, in Saturn's name, do people like Hybke and Millman want fanzine reviews, 12 (?) pages of letters, book reviews, illustrations, and other such garbage to clutter up valuable space? What's with this cutting out good stories to put in more pictures? Maybe Mr. Millman should read comic books. He'll get all the pictures he wants. Who wants to waste pages reading reviews of a million and one stories. You don't need someone else to tell you what you should read—or do you? If you want to join fan clubs, I hear Fabian's is the current teen-age rage. If you raise your rate to 50¢ just to give us an extra 25¢ worth of this junk, you'll be out at least one fan—me! Some people must be picture-happy. Never mind the stories, just give us pictures and autobiographies. Oh, brother!

On turning to John Olenski's letter, I found more to comment upon. It's rather strange to buy a magazine primarily to read letters. I certainly believe that letters of criticism—constructive, that is—should be written to the editor but very few, if any, should be published. Where's the sense in having stories if the fellow enjoys reading the letters best of all? If he likes letters so much, he'd better get himself some pen pals. What are constructive? Letters from readers—certainly, fanzines which will give promise to amateur writers and editorials.

But all these things can be overdone.

Now to your magazines in general. Some stories (long and short) I consider excellent to good. Some, fair to poor. But does my opinion of your magazine change all this? Not on your life, for every one has different tastes in story material. Bunch's tin man stories are ugh! to me. To someone else, they're the most. When *Amazing* and *Fantastic* start getting away from their prime reason for existing (supplying me with sf stories) that's when I'll gripe. And not before! Some of your stories, however, stray from being real science fiction, i.e. fantasy and horror. That's when I cringe and say, "These are out of place and stink!" No fairies or Frankensteins, please.

On the whole your magazines are doing a good job and I'm sick of these people who insist that every story must be a Buck Rogers serial like the "good old days" or a magazine's no good unless the author does it the reader's way. If I were you, I'd delete the ". . . Or So You Say" section here and now. Some magazines have.

Don Legere
2422 New St.
Burlington, Ont.

● *We, too, have always felt that too many sf magazines skimped on stories in favor of marginal items like fan columns. The fans are an important part of science fiction, but an editor must be responsible to his* entire *audience—most of whom are non-fans who simply want to read stories, as you do. To overemphasize the "fan aspect" would be as wrong as to underestimate it. But we'd certainly like to hear the arguments against you that some contributors to this column must be muttering out loud right now.*

Dear Editor:

I just finished reading some of the letters on Ward Moore's terrific story "Transient" and I am fairly boiling. If some of those blue-nosed prudes didn't like the story they DIDN'T have to read it. Rather they didn't have to finish it once they found out what kind of story it was. All I can say is that the statement "Evil is in the mind of the beholder" was never truer.

I read the story and I found nothing unduly obscene or even for that matter obscene as some of these "goodie-goodies" would lead us to believe it was. Ward Moore did a very tasteful job on the story and it was in no way "frozen, dehydrated and reconstituted nightmare" material or was it "garbage", "gluey sex stuff", "a wholesale indictment of politicians, their lives, and

innermost thoughts . . ." but it was darn good fiction. I thought the "sickly Valigursky" mildly terrific and one of the most original I've seen. *Amazing* is improving in this category all the time and this cover just goes to prove it.

Phil Harrell
2632 Vincent Avenue
Norfolk 9, Virginia

Dear Editor:

It has been over a year since I last wrote to you, but now I have plenty to say. First, I'd like to comment on your magazines in general. *Fantastic*, in my opinion, is pulp, always has been pulp, and always will be pulp, a prime example of how lousy a science fiction magazine can be. *Amazing* is a different story. For many years *Amazing* was a pillar of mediocrity. But 1959 brought changes, and along with them improvement. This crest reached its peak in the July, 1959 issue, which had a great cover by Nuetzell, an article by Asimov, stories by Sheckley and Bradbury and a superlative novel by Robert Silverberg. Since then, *Amazing* has been on the decline. *Amazing* makes easy reading, but don't try to pawn it off as the best, it's not.

Will someone please tell Tobey Reed that he/she is a cornball? Will that someone then carefully explain that teen-agers are not an exclusively American commodity, and that our "secret weapon" is rather universal? This seventeen-year-old will be forever indebted to that someone.

Please try to make your magazine a little more mature, without cover blurbs like "Jack Odin Returns!" And how about longer editorials, with a little meat in them? I'd also like to find a book that S. E. Cotts (is that a pseudonym?) doesn't like. I doubt that you'll print this letter; it would be too radical a change from the pap you usually print.

Grant Treller
4518 Levelside Ave.
Lakewood, Calif.

● *Pap? Most of the letters we print say we're terrible; the ones that praise us we have jammed in our 32-drawer file. Second: S. E. Cotts is no pseudonym. The reason the reviewer seems to like most books is that we see no good reason to devote a lot of space to bad books. Most readers would prefer, we think, a guide to what is worth reading than to what is not. Do you ever see a listing of the "worst" television programs on tonight?*

●

Dear Editor:

What is all this drivel about science fact articles from the readers? Why do fans want science fact articles in science fiction magazines, and why do the editors print them? If readers want this, why don't they read *Scientific American* or something? In the space taken up by such an article a good short story could be printed at no extra cost to the publisher.

The only factual series I've seen in *Amazing* and *Fantastic* has been about science fiction, and not science fact. This belongs in an sf magazine and I have enjoyed it.

David B. Williams
714 Dale Street
Normal, Illinois

● *There are many scientific events taking place now which reflect theories that were considered science fiction in the past. The same is true of experiments and projects slated for the future. Factual (not necessarily technical) articles discussing these activities are of interest to many science fiction readers and as such have a place in a sf magazine.*

Dear Editor:

Doesn't anyone *like* your magazine? I've never heard so many complaints.

Personally, I am rather neutral on the subject of whether a magazine is good, bad or indifferent. If it is too bad for too long, I stop buying it. However, since I started reading the letters from other readers, I wouldn't think of missing a copy of *Amazing*.

Paul Shingleton, Jr., B. Joseph Fekete, Jr. and Bob Adolfsen remind me of preschool children who pick out a comic book because it has a colorful front. Does anyone actually judge a magazine or a pamphlet by its cover picture? Who cares what the cover is? You certainly don't read the cover.

If all your dissatisfied readers think your magazine is so unbearable, why don't they attempt reading more literature in other fields? Or write their own sf and fantasy—it's a lot of fun.

Mary Wilhite
404 Summer
Sheridan, Wyo.

● *We share your opinion that the story content of the magazine is the most important factor in determining its appeal. However, there is no doubt that cover illustrations are very important. Obviously they are what first draw attention to the magazine. A good cover will prompt newcomers and old faithfuls to take the trouble to pick up the issue and see what's inside.*

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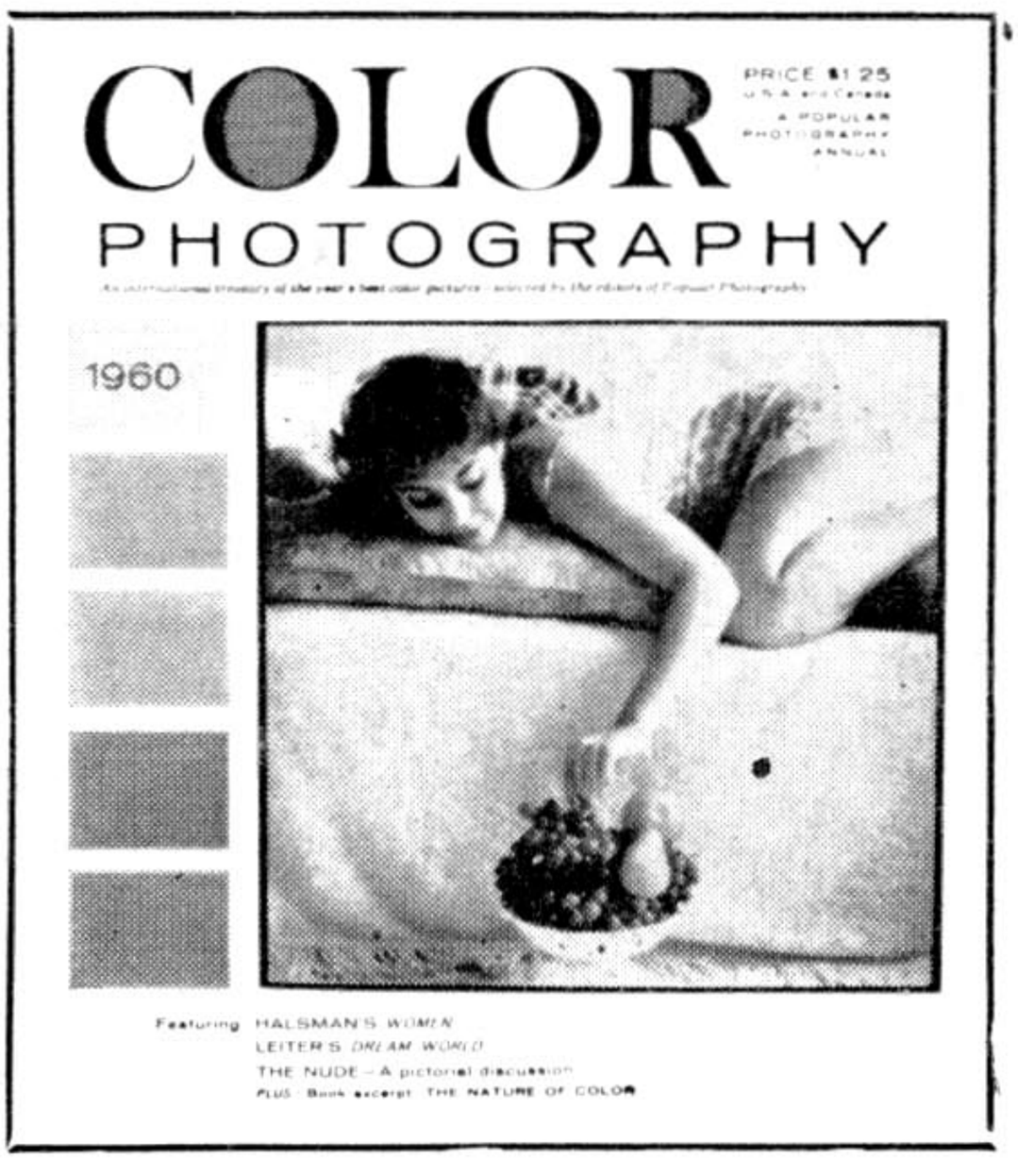

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