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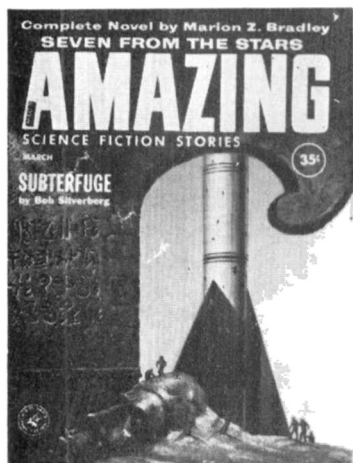
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fantastic

Science Fiction Stories

MARCH

1960

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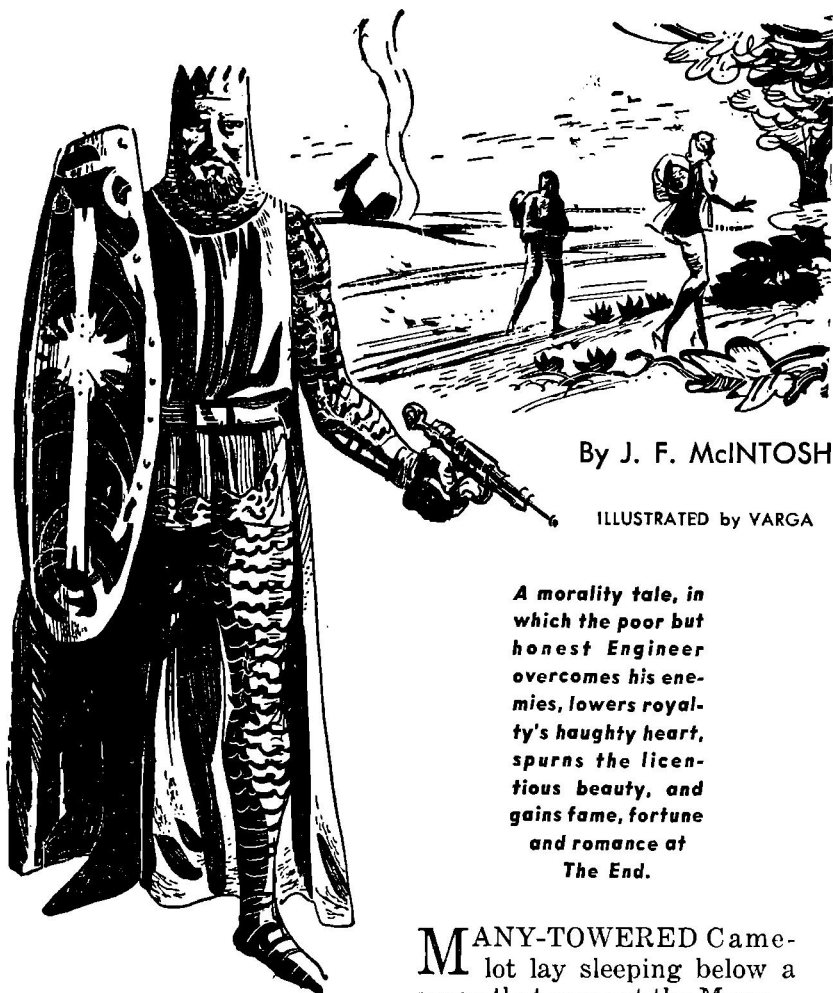


IN THE year 1908 there was a big explosion in the Tungus region of Russia. The few people living in this far northern area told scientists they saw a huge fireball fall from the sky. And indubitably there was a blast wave, a great "cloud" that rose to the stratosphere, and a searing of about 800 square miles of forestland. But the "Tungus wonder" was, of course, written off as a huge meteorite.

Yet scientists who visited the region later were puzzled by several things. For one, there was no hole in the ground, no crater. There were a lot of small craters, and many metallic bits fused into the rock. Well, said the conformists, probably the explosion was caused by the impact of a lot of small meteorites.

But a recent Soviet expedition has come up with a new fact that cannot so conveniently be explained away. The fact: plants at the site of the explosion center are radioactive—up to 100 per cent more so than plants on the rim. Rock and earth are similarly radioactive. At what would have been ground zero, trees are standing, but completely nude of bark. Elsewhere, they are unanimously toppled outward—an indication that the explosion occurred above ground.

Upshot: some scientists think the 1908 explosion was an atomic blast. Whose bomb? Anybody's guess.—NL



By J. F. McINTOSH

ILLUSTRATED by VARGA

A morality tale, in which the poor but honest Engineer overcomes his enemies, lowers royalty's haughty heart, spurns the licentious beauty, and gains fame, fortune and romance at The End.

MERLIN

MANY-TOWERED Camelot lay sleeping below a moon that was not the Moon.

Camelot was both town and world. Where else could King Arthur hold his court but at Camelot?

There was a river and a sea. In the sea was an island, and on the island was a castle, and



in the castle King Arthur lived and ruled. Here fact departed from ancient legend, in only one of many ways. This Camelot had been named by a humorist merely because it happened to be many-towered.

Camelot slept in the day as well as the night. One day soon it would be rudely awakened, when the great bustling galaxy discovered its existence. But meantime Camelot slept in an era of patient barter, slow travel and ancient, leisured fashions.

A few thousand million miles away, the first lady of Camelot said, "Very interesting," and turned her lovely head away to hide a yawn.

The Lady of Shalott dropped lower. Unless the golden ship entered the atmosphere of each of the Arthurian worlds, the inspection was void. Sir Modred, the pilot,

had his tongue hanging out in concentration. It's no easy job to pilot a spaceship by rote.

(New Venus: approach on co-ordinates LV613:7762 PL-441:3401, velocity 33 vps . . .)

"Are we going to land this time?" the Princess asked hopefully, brightening at the prospect of breathing really fresh air for the first time in the five weeks the inspection had lasted so far.

"We never land, Princess," said the Captain gently. He was old Sir Bedivere, the first of the knights, and he was so old that his father (as a boy, of course) had actually seen and spoken to the fabulous Earthmen who had presented the golden ship and many other things to the King of Camelot. It hadn't been Camelot then—that was what the Earthmen had called it.

"Oh," said Guinevere. She yawned again as discreetly as before. She was a very dutiful Princess, and knew that the more bored she was, the more carefully she had to conceal it. That was the first duty of royalty.

Before the trip started she had been quite excited at the prospect of visiting the seventeen planetary dominions of her father, King Arthur. The King was too old to go jaunting around space any more.

Nevertheless, the five-yearly inspection of the Arthurian worlds still had to be carried out, and the only suitable alternative to going himself was sending his daughter, Princess Guinevere.

The excitement and adventure which the romantic young Princess had expected hadn't materialized. *The Lady of Shalott*, so graceful and beautiful seen from the ground, turned out to be inconvenient, cramped and uncomfortable in space. Although it was almost sacrilege to suggest that anything the godlike Earthmen had made would ever wear out, the golden ship was over a hundred years old now and was beginning to show her age. The lights often flickered, the water sometimes ran brown, and the doors were warped and had a habit of flying open at the most awkward moments, or jamming ditto.

Naturally, neither the Princess nor anybody else was worried about the far more serious consequence of *The Lady's* age, not knowing anything about them. Most of the wonderful things the Earthmen had brought were still working—the bicycles, the clocks, the musical boxes, the cameras, the clockwork toys, the phonographs, the potato peelers, the sewing machines.

All they needed was an occasional replacement from the rapidly dwindling stock of spare parts the Earthmen had thoughtfully provided. Why should anybody worry about the golden ship, which the Earthmen had solemnly assured them would *never* wear out?

Before every trip the fuel tanks were carefully filled with the very best water, and oil was poured in where it said OIL, and fuses which had blown were replaced, and the wiring that showed was checked, and the ship was as good as new.

No, nothing but the inconvenience and discomfort of *The Lady of Shalott* worried the Princess. She was more concerned over the fact that Sir Bedivere was old and bald; that the pilot, Sir Modred, was old and bald and fat; that the First Officer, Sir Geraint, was old and bald and bad-tempered; and that the engineer, Merlin, who wasn't old or bald or fat, was altogether too inferior a creature to figure in Guinevere's scheme of things at all, not even being a knight.

If it hadn't been for lady Vivien, Guinevere wouldn't have had anyone to talk to. And the Princess and Lady Vivien hadn't exactly been

bosom friends since Sir Lancelot, whom Vivien would have liked to know much, much better, publicly declared that after looking at Guinevere he couldn't regard any other girl in Camelot as being even passably pretty.

"How many worlds are there after this one?" the Princess asked.

"Eleven, your Highness."

The Princess sighed. "And we're not going to land on any of them?"

Sir Bedivere smiled benignly. He looked more like an archbishop than a Knight of the Round Table in his belted smock of white satin.

"One day we'll have settlements on all these worlds, Princess, when the Earthmen come back and help us set them up. We can't do it without their help."

"Then what's the good of all these worlds? What's the point in having them?"

"They are a symbol of your noble sire's might."

"How do we know the Earthmen had any right to give us them, anyway?" Guinevere asked rebelliously.

Sir Bedivere's smile died. "Guinevere," he said in gentle reproof, "forgive me if I speak bluntly, but the Earthmen were as far above us as . . . as you are above Merlin. They

were great and kind and of infinite wisdom. And remember, they said they would return. We want to be worthy of them when they come again."

Although left with a strong conviction that her question had been left unanswered, Guinevere didn't pursue the matter.

Down in the engineroom, Merlin moved reverently in a fairy world of pretty dials and colored lights. He had a soft cloth in his hand, and every now and then he would find something which hadn't been polished for hours.

Merlin was a large young man with two ambitions. One was to become a real engineer, like an Earthman. The other was a very natural one for any young man on the same ship as Princess Guinevere.

The sheer beauty of the engineroom made him crave another kind of beauty, and since the Princess was in the controlroom and he was in the engineroom, he drew a glossy picture from his pocket and looked at it reverently.

It wasn't a picture of the Princess. It was a picture of an Earth princess, a Movie Star. She was a breathtakingly lovely blonde, and her attractiveness was not lessened

by the fact that she wore only the briefest of white shorts and a minute garment for which Merlin had no word, but which looked as if it should have a plural name. If any girl in Camelot had worn such an outfit it would have been considered indecency, but since this was a Terran girl it must be all right.

Beside the blonde's lovely legs was the name LOLA MELITA. Although Merlin couldn't read Terran script, he knew how to pronounce that beautiful name. He said it over a few times.

Princess Guinevere wasn't really like this exotic beauty, but she was certainly much more like her than any other girl Merlin had ever seen. In the absence of Lola Melita (who must, unfortunately, have died of old age scores of years ago) the Princess would do.

Merlin replaced the pin-up carefully in his pocket, polished a stanchion which to his critical eye was not as bright as it could be, and jumped as a light behind him went out.

Now this was something he could fix. Conscious as he was of his own inadequacies as an engineer, Merlin regarded himself as hot stuff on wiring.

He tried the globe and the

fitting. Nothing wrong there. It was the wiring, then, as usual. Merlin swelled with pride. Something had gone wrong, and he could fix it.

When the Earthmen had graciously presented the golden ship and a small space lifeboat to the King of Camelot, they had also, to do them justice, given a corps of Camelot engineers a grounding in maintenance technique. But that had been more than a century ago, and the principles which the first generation of so-called engineers had very nearly understood naturally became magic to the second generation and religion to the third and fourth. Young Merlin had been trained to make passes at machinery with spanners and gauges as the Earthmen had done—without removing panels or casings, of course, since by this time it was close to sacrilege to tamper with the creations of the divine Earthmen. Not surprisingly, few Camelot engineers were successful in making dead mechanical things live again. And since it was a matter of record that Terran engineers invariably made dead mechanical things live again, and that the first generation of Camelot engineers usually did, the present incumbents were obviously stu-

pid, unworthy and in every way inferior.

Realizing cunningly that becoming an engineer was no way to win friends and influence people, the nobility had pulled out of the profession fifty years ago. So it was left to unfortunate no-account youngsters like Merlin to be given an impossible task and cursed for failing when he couldn't do the job.

But when a light went out Merlin was in his element. First he switched on the P.A. unit and announced: "Merlin, engineer, reporting. Fault in Green circuit. Repeat, fault in Green circuit. Request permission to switch off Green circuit and repair fault. Over."

"Captain here," came Sir Bedivere's gentle voice. "Permission granted. Carry on, Engineer."

Merlin switched off the Green circuit and began tracing the faulty connection. Outside the engineroom, he touched the metal plate set in the corridor wall as he passed. It read:

SAN FAIRY ANN
Detroit, 2317

Scout and Ferry Vessel,
393rd Terran Trading Mis-
sion (license no. 393/TN/-
7164).

MERLIN

But Merlin didn't know that, and none of this would have meant anything to him even if the words had been translated into his own language. He touched the plate merely because it was part of his duty to do so. The Terran engineers had always touched things. Legend had it that they'd always had oily rags and spanners in their hands, and never passed any metal object without giving it a rub for luck.

Merlin was happy. For the moment he was a real engineer.

The wire he was tracing ran through Lady Vivien's cabin. He didn't know whether she was there or not. He hesitated, then tapped firmly on the door.

"Who's there?" Lady Vivien called.

"Merlin, tracing a fault."

"Come in, Merlin." The voice was faintly amused.

Merlin opened the door and stopped on the threshold. The cabin was in darkness, Lady Vivien's lights being on the Green circuit.

"I could come back . . ." he said hesitantly.

"Oh, go ahead."

He lit his lamp—an oil lamp. Camelot had never had dry batteries for electric

torches. As the warm glow flickered and steadied, Merlin saw Lady Vivien and nearly dropped the lamp.

She was lying on her bunk gazing mockingly at him. The mocking gaze was nothing new. Lady Vivien, six years older than the Princess, had long since decided that if one didn't laugh at life one would have to cry.

What startled Merlin was that she was wearing a filmy nightgown and had still let him come in. He averted his gaze quickly.

Her low laugh made his cheeks burn. He knelt by the wall and started to unscrew the panels. This he was allowed to do. There was no machinery behind these panels.

"Why don't you look at me?" Vivien challenged. "Am I hideous? Do I horrify you?"

He glanced up and saw she was leaning on one elbow. Her breasts were almost uncovered, and though her nightgown reached to her ankles it was translucent. Naked, she would have been less provocative.

"No," he said hoarsely, and concentrated once more on his job.

Vivien sighed. "How old are you, Merlin?" she asked.

"Twenty," he muttered.

"Apart from you, Sir Mordred's youngest," she mused, "and he must be forty-five. And it's five weeks since we left Camelot."

If she had been a woman of his own class, Merlin might have understood her. From Lady Vivien the hint wasn't broad enough.

The Princess hadn't said a word to him the whole trip. If she wanted some menial task performed, she told Sir Bedivere and he told Merlin to do it. Naturally. Merlin expected nothing else.

Lady Vivien, from the beginning, had been surprisingly equalitarian. He liked her, he admired her, he wished more fine ladies were like her. But she wasn't Lola Melita, and she wasn't Guinevere. And Merlin had a two-track mind. He wanted to be an engineer, and he wanted Guinevere.

Neither desire was remotely likely to be fulfilled. He found the break and repaired it. His work meant so much to him that he forgot Lady Vivien completely and started to whistle softly.

She reminded him of her existence rather tartly. "What have you got in your veins, anyway—oil?"

Merlin was replacing the

panelling. He was careful not to look at Lady Vivien again.

"If you mean I'm a poor engineer, I know it," he said humbly. "I can't help it. I'm not an Earthman."

Lady Vivien raised her eyes to heaven. "Give me strength," she begged. "Merlin, if you read all the accounts of what the Earthmen said and did while they were among us, you'd find a faint but inescapable odor of irony. All this Round Table stuff and Arthur and Guinevere and Camelot and Sir Garovin and all the rest of it—they were ribbing us, Merlin. When they found our revered grandparents bowing down and kissing the floor and imitating even the way they blew on their soup, no wonder they decided to pull our legs. Hence this golden ship and the empire of barren, empty, useless planets they magnanimously 'gave' to King Arthur's royal grandpappy."

Now Merlin was horrified. He cared nothing for royalty and the Round Table—Lady Vivien could say what she liked about them. But the Earthmen were sacred.

Vivien sensed the effect her words had had on him, shrugged and swung her legs to the floor. "I'm going to get dress-

ed," she said, and released her nightdress to fall to the floor.

No harm was done, for Merlin had the presence of mind to extinguish the lamp instantly.

"Yes, that's what it is," said Vivien bitterly in the darkness. "Oil."

"What's that over there?" the Princess asked.

She had sharper eyes than Sir Bedivere, Sir Modred or Sir Geraint. It took them a long time to make out the fat spark she indicated.

"That's another planet of this system, Princess," said Sir Geraint at last. He was breathing heavily at her shoulder, and his best friends should have told him.

The Princess stepped away. "Let's go there," she said.

"It isn't one of the Arthurian worlds," said Sir Bedivere. "I think it's Sahara, one of the Earthmen's worlds."

"Then let's go and visit them."

"You don't understand, Princess. The Earthmen don't live in this part of the galaxy, but far, far away. They told us you can hardly see the light of their star from here. When they visited this sector of space, they claimed some worlds for themselves, for future development, and gave

others to us. Sahara is one of the planets they kept. But there aren't any Earthmen there just now."

"How do you know?"

"If they had ever returned, they would have visited Camelot again."

The Princess was a very biddable girl, and nearly always did as she was told. But on this boring trip she'd had just about enough of it. At the palace there were people to order around, thousands of them. Here in space there was nobody to order about except Merlin, and he wasn't respectable enough to talk to.

"Either they're there," she said firmly, "and we can visit them, or they're not, and have no right to stop us going there. Anyway, I want to land on that world."

Sir Bedivere was agitated. "It's never been done, Princess," he said.

"Then it's high time it was."

Lady Vivien swept in, magnificent in a blue and gold gown flounced out by a dozen petticoats. Merlin trailed behind her like a coaster behind a yacht.

Guinevere turned sharply to Vivien. "Lady Vivien," she said, "who gives the orders—Sir Bedivere or me?"

Vivien raised her eyebrows. "What, asserting yourself at last, darling? What do you want to give orders about?"

Guinevere pointed. "That planet—Sahara—I want to go there."

"There may not be enough fuel," Sir Bedivere objected weakly.

"There's enough for six months, and we're only supposed to be in space for three."

"But why . . . what possible reason can there be for going there, Princess?" Sir Bedivere said helplessly.

"We won't know," said Guinevere, "until we get there."

"You heard the Princess," said Vivien, amused. "We won't know until we get there. Let's go."

The Captain capitulated. It was true that he had to do as the Princess commanded. But until Lady Vivien threw her weight on Guinevere's side he had thought the Princess would give in, as she usually did.

Merlin was looking at Guinevere with surprise and adoration. He'd never seen her animated before. She was wonderful. Almost like Lola Melita.

The Princess caught his eye and for the first time spoke

directly to him. "Don't look at me like that, creature," she said sharply.

Merlin flushed. Lady Vivien's mocking smile didn't help, either.

The Lady of Shalott dropped lower, lower. Sahara filled all the ports.

"Princess," Sir Bedivere begged, "please give up all idea of landing. We never land on any world but Camelot."

"If there are Earthmen here," said the Princess, "I want to see them."

Having had a few days of despotism, she was a little drunk with power. She had discovered rather to her amazement that when she gave a command and stuck to it, it had to be obeyed. There might be argument, but if she remained firm her will was done in the end.

She had always been aware theoretically that she possessed power limited only by that of her father. This was the first time, however, that she had put it to the test. She didn't know it, but the heady feeling of power was eating into her and would spoil her beyond repair if she wasn't curbed soon.

Lady Vivien knew it, but it amused her to stand by and

watch. Vivien hadn't forgotten Sir Lancelot. Also, there was the matter of Merlin. Lady Vivien, no fool, knew that the reason why Merlin was doing his best not to notice her existence was his hopeless passion for the Princess.

"We know how to land on Camelot," Sir Bedivere wailed, "but we know nothing of other worlds. There are calculations to be done, tests to be made—"

"Then stop here and do them."

"We could go into orbit, Princess, but we can't just stop."

"I said stop. I don't know what going into orbit means, but don't do it. Stop here. Do as I say!"

Sir Bedivere turned a pleading gaze on Lady Vivien. She took the hint. The Princess in her new despotic mood would kill them all if she wasn't properly handled.

"That's a matter of ship handling, darling," Vivien said soothingly. "He's the Captain. You can tell him what to do, but it's up to him how he does it."

"Oh." For a moment Guinevere was very young and uncertain again. She rallied. "All right," she said to the Captain. "Make this orbit

thing if you must. Go inside an orbit."

With a sigh of relief the Captain nodded to Sir Modred, who was at the controls.

For a hundred years a succession of navigators and pilots had handled *The Lady* much as a driver who knows nothing of mechanical matters can drive a car. They didn't know, in effect, that when they pressed the left foot two plates normally held in close contact were separated, and that while the pedal was depressed there was no connection between the engine and rear wheels. They didn't know that when they approached Camelot at a certain angle and at a certain speed, they were entering a braking orbit precisely calculated against the mass of the ship, the mass of Camelot, the depth of the atmosphere, its rotation with that of the planet's surface, and the power of the ship's engines and gyros. They had done it often enough to know how to do it, to know how it worked, even to approach closely the other seventeen worlds which the golden ship regularly visited.

They didn't know, this succession of by-rrote pilots and navigators, all the reasons for the long-established landing

technique which they knew so well.

Sahara had a more tenuous atmosphere than Camelot, slightly less mass, and Sir Modred as he tried to set the ship in orbit didn't even know where the poles of the planet were, far less the direction and speed of revolution. If *The Lady of Shalott* hadn't had atomic engines and gyros of practically limitless power, he'd have lost control completely.

As it was, the golden ship swung giddily for a moment or two, the artificial gravity went off for long enough to fling everybody but Sir Modred off his or her feet and then came on again to slam everybody back on the deck, and it was only by supreme good luck that the pilot did the right thing and forced *The Lady* into an eccentric orbit.

Everybody was dazed and bruised except the Princess. Merlin had seized her arm and a stanchion and held her safe.

When the ship rode evenly again, the Princess, frightened by the gyrations, vented her fear in anger. "He touched me!" she screamed.

Shaking themselves, they looked at Merlin. Unconsciously they turned their at-

tention on the minor episode to hide their own fear and discomfiture. It was easier and more convenient to blame Merlin for the whole thing than Sir Modred.

"I only did it to save her," Merlin protested.

The Knights didn't have the mental flexibility to realize that circumstances altered cases. Merlin had handled the Princess roughly. "Beat him," said Sir Geraint.

"Oh, I didn't mean . . ." the Princess said.

"Beat him," said Sir Modred.

"I don't know . . ." said the gentle Sir Bedivere.

Lady Vivien said nothing.

And Merlin, who might have got away with it, said rashly: "I was only thinking of the Princess' safety. Next time she can crack her head open for all I care."

"Beat him!" shrieked Guinevere.

They beat him. Sir Geraint took the Captain's cane and they beat Merlin until blood stained the homespun shirt all down his back.

Of course, it solved nothing. The Princess still wanted to land on this world called Sahara. The other four (Merlin didn't count), chastened by their first experience of

handling the golden ship within the gravitational sphere of influence of an unfamiliar world, wanted no more accidents.

The beating of Merlin, like the other things which had been happening in the last few days, had had a coarsening effect on Princess Guinevere. At first her heart had not been in it. At the first few blows she had felt sick and nearly was. But then she thought: I can do this whenever I like, to whomever I like. I can have anybody I don't like beaten. I can have Sir Bedivere beaten, Sir Modred, even Lady Vivien . . .

King Arthur had made a big mistake sending his beautiful compliant daughter on a mission where she could wield absolute power.

"We land," said the Princess with finality.

The three knights did their best. They were all good, practical pilots and navigators. Unfortunately none of them knew any math or how to apply it if they did.

Merlin stood silent, his back and his self-esteem throbbing. Vivien sidled over to him. "Do you still love her?" she whispered.

Merlin stared at her as if she were mad. "I hate her," he hissed.

"Good," said Lady Vivien. "She isn't the only woman on the ship, you know."

The three knights did their best . . . but it wasn't nearly good enough. *The Lady of Shalott* came down so fast that the air around her boiled. The bright yellow surface of Sahara and the deep blue sky whirled so fast that both colors disappeared and became gray. Sir Modred fought madly with these forces he didn't understand. The artificial gravity held gamely, though the ship creaked and squealed and groaned.

For a moment, five hundred feet above the rolling sand dunes of Sahara, the ship stabilized herself and hung motionless. In that moment Merlin, dazed and bruised, saw a thick patch of dark green far away across the desert.

Then the ship plunged into the sand and half buried herself in it.

Sir Modred was killed at the moment of impact, which was very smart of him. The pilot would have been blamed for everything, however unfair it might be. By dying he saved himself a lot of trouble.

Merlin, the strongest of them all, regained consciousness first. He staggered to his feet. The Princess, an aston-

ishingly tiny bundle, lay in a corner with her fair hair over her face. Sir Modred was in the cage round the controls. The cage was broken, and so was Sir Modred. The Captain was lying on top of Lady Vivien—fine for the Captain. Sir Geraint was sprawled under the chart table.

As Merlin stood swaying over the Princess, she moaned, shook her hair out of her eyes and turned her head. "Help me up," she said.

"Like hell I will," Merlin retorted. "If you've forgotten what happened last time, I haven't."

Lady Vivien pried herself from under Sir Bedivere. "That was a great idea of yours, Princess," she gasped.

One by one they rose. Apart from Sir Modred, there were no bones broken.

One thing was established, anyway. The air of Sahara was breathable. The ship was split open in a dozen places. It was obvious she would never fly again.

Nothing was said about Sir Modred. They took him out and buried him in the sand, wilting in the blast of heat that met them whenever they emerged from the broken golden ship.

The Lady of Shalott was dead. The engines remained

silent. The lights wouldn't go on. There was light only in the controlroom, the blazing sunlight reflected by the yellow sand outside.

As a matter of routine, Merlin was told to repair the ship. He found his oil lamp and spent a couple of hours tentatively touching things with spanners, rubbing metal-work clean and checking wiring—the last being the only item in his repertoire which occasionally did some good.

He managed to get the lights going again, to everybody's surprise, including his own. It was a piece of good luck for him. If he had failed utterly the others would have blamed the disaster on him, Sir Modred having reneged. As it was, the minor triumph of fixing the lights, more than anybody expected, convinced everybody that Merlin was a pretty good engineer and that if he couldn't repair the golden ship, nobody could—except possibly an Earthman.

While he was working alone, Merlin had time to think. Despite his two unrealistic ambitions in life, Merlin was a realist, far more so than anyone else on the ship. And he saw quite clearly, first with wonder and then with mounting exultation, that the

crash was going to make a big difference to his position in the party.

The others didn't see it as quickly as he did.

"We'll have to wait here for rescue," said Sir Bedivere. "Sir Lancelot will come for us in the lifeboat."

"Of course," said the Princess, relieved. "It won't be very comfortable, but it can't be helped."

"We'll be stuck here for a long time," Lady Vivien mused, her eyes resting speculatively on Merlin.

Merlin took a deep breath. "We're not going to be rescued," he said. "Ever."

They stared at him in shock, the shock produced more by his temerity in daring to state an opinion unconnected with his job than by what he said.

"We have food for three months," said Merlin. "Say five months, on short rations. There isn't one chance in a million of the lifeboat finding us in five months."

The Princess stamped her foot. "Beat him!" she cried.

Nobody moved.

"Explain yourself," said Sir Geraint sharply.

"They don't expect us back in Camelot for another seven weeks. It'll be two months before they begin to get worried

—three before the lifeboat sets out to look for us. She'll visit the seventeen Arthurian worlds first, to see if we're in orbit round one of them. After that she'll try to land on each of them, to look for signs of *The Lady*. She'll never come to Sahara, where we weren't supposed to go."

There was silence.

"The Princess is with us," Sir Bedivere protested at last. "The search will never be abandoned. Every world in this sector will be searched. Sahara eventually."

"Perhaps," Merlin admitted. "Say a year for the lifeboat to visit the Arthurian worlds—she's much slower than *The Lady*, you know. Another five years to search the worlds. In ten years' time the lifeboat might come here. Only if she does, she won't find us. Look at that." He waved his arm at the port, which showed burning yellow sand rolling into the distance.

The Lady of Shalott was a golden speck on a vast golden ocean.

The rest of that day passed tranquilly, and Merlin let it. The exultation was still in him. Being cast ashore on a desert planet wasn't the grim tragedy to him that it was to the other four. He had less to

lose, and much more to gain.

There wasn't much to find out about Sahara, at least the tiny part of it they could see. It was hot, very hot. The air was clean and pure. The sand seemed limitless.

Next to Merlin, Lady Vivien was the most realistic member of the party, and it didn't take her long to realize that if the five of them were to be stuck on Sahara for ten years at least and possibly for the rest of their lives, neither of the two old knights and neither of the two women was likely to be the most important member of the group.

She found Merlin sitting outside in the black shade of the ship, twisting wire into various peculiar shapes.

"Heavens, it's hot," she gasped.

"Not as hot here as it is inside."

"Maybe not, but I'm cooked."

He glanced up. "Have you still got a dozen petticoats on?"

"No, only one." She hadn't lost her mocking laugh. "The Princess refuses to succumb. She's not going to let the heat interfere with propriety. She's still dressed like a lady—in fourteen petticoats."

Merlin said nothing.

"Look, Merlin," said Viv-

ien. "I'll put my cards on the table. You're more practical than any of us. If you've got any ideas, I'll back you. Sir Bedivere has none."

Merlin nodded, unsurprised. "Over there," he said, pointing, "I saw a patch of green. That means water. We're going there."

"What—on foot? Leaving the ship?"

He shrugged. "We can wait here till we starve or die of thirst. Or we can go looking for food while we still have some left."

She stood erect and looked out over the burning sand. "You saw this while we were still in the air? How do you know you've got the right direction? It's the same all round us."

"The shadow of the ship was directly between us and the green region. I noted the direction whenever we regained consciousness."

"But we'd only have to go a mile and we'd lose all sense of direction. You can't go by the sun. It moves."

"Compasses work. We want to go north-west. The green country is big. Unless the magnetic pole is very near here, we can't miss it."

She threw herself on the sand behind him. "I was right," she said. "You're

more practical than any of us."

"I know it."

His assurance and his lack of interest in her piqued her. She raised one knee, letting her full skirt slide up her legs. He looked at her, then quickly back at his work.

"Merlin," she said softly. "I'm not out of your reach any more."

"No," he said. "Neither is the Princess."

She jumped up angrily. "You're crazy."

"All I need is patience."

"You fool, she won't even speak to you."

"She will."

Merlin waited two days. Nothing happened, nothing was going to happen. He was still ordered about, the Princess still asked Sir Bedivere if she wanted Merlin to fetch something. Lady Vivien watched Merlin broodingly. She had told the others what Merlin had said, but Sir Bedivere wouldn't hear of leaving the ship. They were safe where they were—besides, how could Sir Lancelot ever find them if they left the ship? Anyway, it was unthinkable to ask the Princess to trudge across that burning desert.

One reason why Merlin

waited, a reason he didn't confess even to Lady Vivien, was that he had to give himself time to break the mental habits of a lifetime. He knew that in the circumstances Sir Bedivere wasn't the natural leader of the group and that he was. He knew that the Princess was no longer worth more than the rest of the party put together, more than life. He knew that he'd have to demonstrate to them all that she was merely a spoiled teenager who had got them into this mess through stupidity, ignorance and selfishness.

But he couldn't bring himself to start demonstrating.

On the evening of the third day he forced himself to act. They were outside in the shadow of the ship, the coolest place to be. The ventilation system had packed up with everything else.

"We're leaving," Merlin said abruptly.

"Nobody asked your opinion," said Sir Geraint coldly.

"I didn't give an opinion. I said we're leaving."

Lady Vivien stretched herself. "He's right. If there's a green land to the north-west, we've got to go there."

"Not yet," said Sir Bedivere weakly.

"If there are Earthmen

here," said Merlin, "they're not in the desert."

"That's true," Sir Bedivere admitted. "But the Princess can't possibly—"

"We travel by night, when it's cool. Tonight."

The Princess stood up and faced him. For only the third time she spoke to him directly. "You seem to have forgotten who you are—and who I am. *I* give the orders."

"Not any more," said Merlin, knowing that if he drew back now it would be twice as difficult to establish himself later. "Wasn't the last one enough? You killed Sir Modred. If the rest of us die, you killed us."

Her head jerked incredulously.

"You can't walk across the desert like that," Merlin went on. He moved towards her.

"Don't touch me!" Guinevere screamed. "Vivien! Sir Bedivere!"

Lady Vivien didn't move. She watched with interest. She had been waiting for Merlin to force the issue.

The Princess refused to consider running until it was too late. Merlin caught her shoulder firmly and tore the skirt of her dress. A backhander sent Sir Geraint flying. Cloth ripped. Guinevere shrieked. A gentle push was

enough for Sir Bedivere. Torn silk petticoats littered the sand all round Merlin and Guinevere.

Sir Geraint was game. He barged at Merlin again. Merlin let him run into his fist, and Geraint collapsed gasping. The top of Guinevere's gown came away. She fought like a tiger which had never learned how to fight.

"There," said Merlin breathlessly, releasing her. "A sunhat and I think you'll do."

The Princess choked with tears, rage and shame. She was left in a thin white bodice and white trunks, and looked like a particularly attractive overgrown school-girl.

She bent and snatched at the torn garments on the sand.

"No you don't," said Merlin, fending her off. "I need these."

He sat down beside Lady Vivien and started to fit pieces of white silk over the wire frameworks he had been making. They were crude sun-helmets.

"Do I have to do the same for you?" he asked Lady Vivien. "Or will you co-operate?"

"I'll co-operate," she said, getting up. "Glad to. In this heat the price of modesty is

too high." She went into the ship.

The Princess was crying now. The two knights were rubbing their bruises and gazing warily at Merlin.

"Shorts," he said. "Shorts, shirts and strong shoes. The strongest you can find."

"You attacked the Princess," Sir Bedivere whispered.

"She isn't hurt."

"I feel as if I'd been raped," Guinevere wailed.

"No," said Merlin. "That comes later."

She stopped crying abruptly and stared at him in horror as she realized she had nothing to cry about—yet.

They tried to kill him. But Vivien had warned Merlin, and he kicked the knife from Sir Geraint's hand. It was fortunate, for the moment, that the only weapons on the ship were knives. Later it might not be so fortunate.

"Understand this," said Merlin grimly. "Without me, you're lost. Suppose there are wild animals on this world? Can you fight a tiger, Guinevere?"

"Can you?" Vivien asked wryly.

"I'd have the best chance of all of us. Remember that."

They were impressed de-

spite themselves by the way he ignored and seemed to forget what had been a determined attempt to murder him.

Night on Sahara was cool. The days were short, the nights long — comparatively, that was. The full cycle took only about nineteen hours, an eight-hour day and an eleven-hour night.

They made good progress, even burdened by the packs which Merlin had prepared for all of them, including the Princess. They were grateful for the slighter gravity of Sahara.

Sir Bedivere went first with one compass, then Lady Vivien, Sir Geraint, Guinevere and finally Merlin with another compass. As they trudged silently through the luminous darkness, each had to admit to himself or herself that Merlin was in the right.

Once the decision was taken, it was clear that they'd had to leave the ship and make for what must be friendlier country. And remembering what the desert was like in the boiling heat of midday, they all had to agree that night was the time to travel.

The Princess, though she came nowhere near forgiving

Merlin for what he had done to her, found as the hours passed that the sky didn't fall because she was half naked. She was far more comfortable than she'd been so far on Sahara, and she was secretly glad that she hadn't had to trudge through the sand dressed as a princess ought to be dressed. Indeed, she almost envied the brazenness of Lady Vivien, who wore a thin slip and visibly nothing else.

Hour after hour they went on. Nobody wanted to be the first to falter. Besides, everybody except Lady Vivien was a little scared of Merlin and didn't want to cross him.

Merlin called a halt when they reached a cluster of huge boulders. "We can't be sure of finding a better place to shelter," he said.

Gratefully they threw themselves down on the sand. But Merlin didn't let them rest for long. There was food to be prepared, and as Lady Vivien started to unpack provisions, Merlin said: "Guinevere will help you."

The Princess drew a sharp breath.

"If Lady Vivien needs any assistance," Sir Bedivere said quietly, "I'll help her."

Merlin looked at him thoughtfully. The old knight had kept his place at the head

of the party all through the march without faltering, without the encouragement and support of someone ahead which all the others had had. He had picked the easiest way, detouring when he had to and returning to Merlin's compass bearing when he could. Now he was gray with fatigue.

"Rest, old man," Merlin said roughly. "You've done enough."

"If the Princess has to work—"

"I'll do it," said Sir Geraint ungraciously.

"I want you with me. We'll have to find a place to shelter through tomorrow's heat. Guinevere?"

Lady Vivien opened her mouth to say she'd get on a lot better without the Princess' help, and closed it again without speaking. She realized this was another minor crisis—and on the whole she was on Merlin's side where these decisions were concerned.

Surprisingly, the Princess said: "I'll help you to look for a place to shelter."

"All right," said Merlin mildly. Only then did the Princess, who had volunteered merely because finding shelter seemed less menial than preparing food, realize that she had offered to leave the pro-

tection of the others and be alone with Merlin.

"Come," he said, before she could speak, and she squared her shoulders and went with him.

They clambered over and among the rocks. Although the two moons lit the desert brightly, all shadows were black as pitch and they had to be very careful.

Merlin found a crevice in the rocks. "This looks promising," he said. He measured the sand level with his eye, trying to figure how deep the cavity was. "Ten feet, perhaps," he said. "Give me your hands and I'll lower you down."

Guinevere shivered. "Suppose it's more than ten feet?"

"Then I'll pull you up again."

"But . . ." She was terrified—of breaking a leg, of falling down a deep hole and never being able to get out, of being followed by Merlin into a cavern where her screams would never be heard . . .

"Scared?" he asked.

The age-old taunt had the age-old effect. She held out her hands to him.

He lowered her carefully, her face only inches from his. She was reassured and terrified by his strength.

"A little more," she gasped. "I felt something with my toe. There—I'm on soft sand."

"Then I'm coming down," he said, and lowered himself after her. She cowered away from him, knowing what was coming.

He felt about in the blackness. Three huge rocks had tumbled together, forming a fair-sized cavern with only a small crack open to the sky. The sand inside was level and soft. They could hardly have found a better place to spend the rest of the night and the heat of the next day.

Ignoring the pale blur that was Guinevere, he caught the edge of the crack above and pulled himself out.

"Don't leave me!" the Princess exclaimed.

He stretched down his arms for her and pulled her up easily. "Let's tell the others," he said.

As they clambered back over the boulders she was relieved, hurt and resentful all at once. Relief was uppermost—yet she was woman enough to be hurt by the fact that he'd treated her as a boy all the time they were away from the others.

They didn't rest up all day. Late the next morning Merlin climbed the highest

rock to spy out the land ahead, and to his astonishment saw a broad river crossing their path, only a mile or two ahead.

He was less astonished when he had examined the terrain. They were almost at the edge of the desert. The country ahead was rough and rocky, and the river flowed through a hard sandstone plain.

If they had to cross the river, doing so at night was out of the question. They wanted to see what they were doing.

In the late afternoon they came to the riverside and looked at the broad, slow-moving water.

"We must go along it," said Sir Bedivere.

"We cross," said Merlin. "It runs straight across our path. If we're to reach the green country, we'll have to swim."

"Impossible!" said Sir Geraint. "The Princess—"

"I can't swim," said Sir Bedivere apologetically.

"I think I could make it," said Lady Vivien.

"Vivien," Merlin directed, "you go with Sir Geraint. I'll take Bedivere and come back for the Princess. Then you and I will find some way of carrying this stuff over. We

can empty the water cans and lash them together to make—”

“It’s no good,” said the Princess. “I can’t do it.”

“You can’t swim?”

She had hoped it would be decided that they couldn’t cross and she wouldn’t have to admit she was terrified of water. “I can’t . . . I couldn’t do it,” she said.

“You’ll have to,” said Merlin brutally. “Look, I’ll take you first. Then it’ll be over.”

“It’s no use,” Guinevere insisted. “I can’t possibly . . .”

Merlin picked her up. She struggled and screamed. Sir Geraint tensed himself to leap at Merlin.

“Don’t do it,” said Vivien. “He’s right. We’ve got to cross.”

“But the Princess . . .”

Merlin set Guinevere down. “I can’t do it if you struggle like that,” he said.

“It’s impossible,” she gasped. “I could never—”

He hit her once and she collapsed like an empty sack. Ignoring the shocked exclamations of Bedivere and Geraint, he picked her up and waded into the water.

With the Princess unconscious the crossing was easy. She began to struggle again before they had reached the other side, but by that time

they could touch bottom. Even so she fought wildly, terror-stricken.

“I could hit you again, you know,” Merlin said, and her struggles ceased.

They drew themselves out of the water and rested for a moment. A shout of relief floated from the other side as Bedivere saw that the Princess was safely across.

Suddenly Merlin remembered his picture of Lola Melita and whipped it out. It was unharmed—its wrappings had saved it. He put it under a stone so that it would be safe.

His eyes were drawn to Guinevere. Her soaked clothes clung to her like the skin of an apple. She had small, virginal breasts. He forced himself to look away for the moment.

The others made the crossing without difficulty. Bedivere, unlike most non-swimmers, was docile and easy to handle in the water. Knowing how terrified he must be, Merlin felt his unwilling respect for the old night growing.

“Thank you,” Bedivere gasped in heartfelt relief as they reached the other side.

“You made it very easy,” Merlin told him.

Since the water was fresh

there was no harm in emptying the water casks temporarily. In small bundles the stores they had brought with them were borne across, dry. Although Merlin did most of the work, Lady Vivien's help was useful.

The useful and useless elements in the group were beginning to be sifted out. So far Guinevere and Geraint had made no contribution. Merlin, Bedivere and Vivien had done everything.

The crossing of the river established Merlin's leadership as nothing else had done. Every member of the party, Guinevere in particular, was forced to realize that similar situations might be common in the days and weeks ahead. They did need Merlin.

Two more nights they travelled, and with dawn the next day they saw they had almost reached the green country. Although they had had little sleep, they decided to go on at once.

There had been hardly any talk among them of Earthmen on this world since *The Lady* crashed on it. Nobody really believed Sahara could be inhabited by Earthmen or anybody else. The desert was dry, sterile wasteland.

As they saw the green oasis in front of them, however, stretching to the horizon in both directions, they began to wonder again. This was life; the desert was death. Or rather, since death presupposed life, the desert was lifeless.

They moved on, unconsciously accelerating as they neared the oasis. First there were scrawny bushes in the rocky soil. Then parched but determined grass. And suddenly they were in jungle.

Although no species of tree, bush or plant was familiar, nothing was very unfamiliar either. The trees had trunks, branches and leaves. The bushes were small trees. The plants had flowers, even if they were flowers of an unknown species.

And there was no sign of animal life. No insects. No reptiles. That meant no meat. It also meant no danger.

Progress was slow, for every few yards they had to cut vines from their path, even though they were following the path of least resistance.

They had hardly forced their way a mile through the jungle when suddenly Lady Vivien pointed ahead and shouted: "Look—there are Earthmen here!"

Through the greenery they saw a thin metal mast, ob-

viously manmade. For a moment they stared at it in wonder. Then Sir Geraint plunged madly ahead through the thick undergrowth, tearing his face, his hands, his clothes.

"Wait!" said Merlin sharply. "We're going together."

The bushes hid their view of what was ahead until they were almost on it. They had further to go than they had thought. The spire, which had looked comparatively close, turned out to be quite distant, very long and very high. As they lost it and caught sight of it again it climbed higher and higher until at last they caught sight of what was underneath it—a building of some sort.

"Before we go any further," said Sir Geraint, "we'd better have one thing clearly understood. Sir Bedivere is the leader of this party."

"I guess he is," said Lady Vivien ironically, "now that we don't need Merlin any more."

The Princess shook herself as if to clear away an unpleasant dream. "Of course," she said.

Sir Bedivere looked uncomfortably at Merlin to see how he was taking it. The old knight remembered all too clearly how Merlin had drag-

ged him, helpless, across the river. There hadn't been much doubt who was the leader of the party then.

Merlin said nothing, though his feelings were bitter.

"Is that all?" Vivien asked. "Now that we expect the Earthmen to help us and look after us, Merlin becomes dirt again? You know that if Sir Bedivere had been our leader we'd still have been back in the desert waiting for rescue—or death. You know that if Sir Bedivere had been giving the orders we'd have followed that river back to its source or to a sea somewhere—and starved to death on the way."

"We're grateful to Merlin," said Sir Bedivere quietly. "We'll always be grateful. The Princess and I, at least, owe our lives to him."

Guinevere's head came up sharply. "Nonsense," she said. "He's behaved like the brute he is, and threatened me, and hit me, and—"

"Oh, shut up," said Vivien rudely.

They cut their way nearer to the mast. The Princess cried out as a sinewy branch, severed by Merlin, whipped back sharply, lashed her in the midriff and ripped her clothes.

"You did that on purpose, creature!" she screamed. "Beat him, Sir Bedivere!"

Bedivere pretended not to hear.

Presently they found themselves practically at the building on top of which the metal mast towered to the sky. They still hadn't reached a clearing.

Lady Vivien began to laugh. They stared at her wonderingly, but she said nothing, and they cut their way through the last few yards of undergrowth and stared at a blank concrete wall.

Vivien was still laughing. "You should have kept your mouth shut, Sir Geraint," she said. "The jungle has grown up since the Earthmen were here. Look how old that wall is. The Earthmen built this and went away. There aren't any Earthmen here. There haven't been for a hundred years. All right, Sir Bedivere, give your orders."

Bitterly disappointed, they forced their way along the walls of the building. It was a square concrete block ten feet high and perhaps twenty yards long.

"Probably a monument," said Vivien. "This may be just a foundation for the mast. Go on, Sir Bedivere. Give your orders. What do we do now?"

Sir Bedivere, too, was wish-

ing Sir Geraint had kept his mouth shut. Merlin hadn't said a word. He just tagged along.

If they were transported back to Camelot, Merlin would become again the nobody he had always been. But here on Sahara Sir Bedivere hadn't the faintest idea what to do and Merlin usually did.

They had forced their way round three sides of the concrete block and found nothing but blank wall. They turned the third corner.

"A ship!" exclaimed the Princess joyfully. "We can go back to Camelot!"

"Maybe," said Vivien skeptically. "Just for a start, how are we going to get in?"

She was a large ship, bigger than *The Lady of Shalott*. There seemed no reason to doubt that this was the ship in which the Earthmen had left Camelot a century before, although she seemed to have lain derelict for much more than a hundred years. Trees had grown up over her, and her metal hull was pitted, scored and rusted by rain, vegetable sap and time.

Lady Vivien had a point. The airlock was closed, and spaceships aren't easy to break into. They wouldn't be much good as spaceships if they were.

Besides, *The Lady of Shalott*, broken and buried in sand, had looked more alive than this ship. *The Lady* was no younger, but she had been kept in a huge hangar and carefully maintained. As they looked at the pitted and discolored hull, hopes that this vessel would take them back to Camelot faded.

"Where's Merlin?" asked Vivien abruptly.

They found him examining a door in the fourth wall of the Terran blockhouse. It was a huge wooden door, hardly less solid than the concrete walls.

"They came here to die!" Guinevere exclaimed.

Nobody had any difficulty in following her train of thought. Vivien had already suggested that the building and spire were some kind of monument. It was impossible to escape the conclusion that the Earthmen had come to the blockhouse a century ago—and were still there.

The Princess shuddered. "Don't let's try to open it," she said.

They waited uncertainly for Sir Bedivere to say something or for Merlin to take command again. Sir Bedivere waited for Merlin.

At last, when Merlin said

nothing, Sir Bedivere cleared his throat and said: "There's nobody here. We haven't seen any animals or any fruit. When we've eaten the food we brought with us, we'll die. There's nothing for it but to go back to *The Lady of Shalott*."

"You can go back," said Merlin. "I'm staying here."

"I'm staying too," said Vivien instantly. "You three go back."

It was just possible that with Vivien's aid the other three might have recrossed the river. Without Merlin and without Vivien it was completely out of the question.

Even Sir Geraint was wishing now that he hadn't disturbed the *status quo*.

"Goodby," said Merlin, and turned back to his examination of the door.

"You know we can't cross the river," said Sir Geraint angrily. "Doesn't your duty to the Princess mean anything to you?"

"She's not a Princess here," said Merlin, not looking round. "She's just a girl."

Nobody had anything to say.

Merlin spun round and faced them at last. "Half an hour ago you thought you didn't need me any more. It's always going to be like that.

The moment you see a chance of getting back to Camelot I become what I was on the ship. Vivien was the only one who stood by me."

Bedivere flushed. "I said we were grateful to you."

"I'm grateful that you're grateful."

"That's enough, Merlin," said Vivien. "They're sorry. They're very sorry indeed. Now tell them what to do."

Merlin hesitated. His eyes wandered to the Princess. Her bare legs and arms were already tanned brown, but white skin showed where her bodice was torn across her midriff. She was harder and slimmer than she had been before, her breasts higher and her stomach muscles taut. She was twenty times as desirable as she had ever been on board *The Lady*.

Guinevere felt his gaze on her, flushed and pulled her torn bodice together. When she let it go, it fell back exactly as it had been before.

Merlin was still angry, and but for one thing he'd have taken them all back to the river, ferried them across it and returned to the block-house with Vivien. The one thing was that he didn't want Vivien, he wanted Guinevere.

"I don't want to be the

boss," he said. "You can all die for all I care. Me, I'm going to live."

Again there was silence.

"All right," he said. "If we want to live we've got to find something we can eat. None of the fruits we know grow here, but I saw berries and nuts and round green fruits and red grapes. Bedivere, go and collect some of each kind. We'll take it in turns to try them out and see if we die."

He grinned grimly at the Princess, and she knew that she wasn't going to escape the dangers of these experiments.

"Geraint, we'll need a water supply," Merlin went on. "Look around for a stream near here. Vivien, I want to get inside that building and we've got nothing to break the door open. Knives would take weeks. We'll have to burn it down. Collect anything that'll burn."

They didn't argue.

Vivien didn't miss the fact that Merlin's dispositions left Guinevere alone with him, but she shrugged philosophically. You could lead a horse to water, but you couldn't make him drink—and Vivien had led Merlin to water while he was still so insignificant a member of the group that it was very condescending of her even to talk to him. If he

didn't drink then, he would hardly drink now—especially if he thought he could get wine.

"I want to settle one thing," said Merlin. He caught Guinevere by the shoulders, and ignoring her indrawn breath, pulled her to him and crushed her against him. His arm slipped down her back and found the hollow of her waist.

She didn't struggle, nor did she respond. He held her hopefully for a long time, and at long last let her go.

"Now," he said, "are you going back to the ship with Bedivere and Geraint?"

"How can I?"

"Suppose I took you back across the river?"

"We'd die. You know that."

"So you're staying because I'm not worse than death?"

"I don't believe that even you would . . . would . . ."

"You know I will. I'm a creature, a brute. And you're not a Princess any more."

She shivered, although it seemed hotter in the jungle than it had been in the desert, being more humid.

He left her and began to pile dead roots against the wooden door. Presently Lady Vivien brought more wood. She glanced from Merlin to Guinevere, who was still

standing where he had left her, but said nothing.

Rather to their surprise, the sticks blazed easily. Merlin made a mental note to be very careful about making fires. It looked as if a jungle fire could be started very easily.

The door, too, caught fire easily. In ten minutes or so Merlin could have broken through. He was concentrating his attention, however, on stamping out sparks. The tough grass, he noted with relief, didn't burn. It was too moist.

Bedivere and Geraint returned as the last flame died. Geraint had found a pool only a hundred yards away. The pool was muddy and slimy, but a stream which fed it was clean and fresh. Bedivere had a miscellaneous collection of fruits, none of which looked particularly appetizing.

"We'll draw lots to decide who tries what," Merlin said. "Meantime . . ."

He kicked the smouldering remains of the door out of the frame, still being careful to stamp out any sparks which glowed.

Inside was another door, but it was no more than a screen and Merlin shouldered it open without difficulty.

He checked abruptly and

Vivien, at his shoulder, gasped as a light clicked on. After a hundred years, that still worked automatically.

The interior of the concrete blockhouse was a single room, bare and clearly not intended as living quarters. There was no furniture of any kind, nothing but machinery and two cubicles, the door of one open and showing nothing whatever inside.

Merlin looked at the apparatus in wonder and delight. He realized with humility that although he was called an engineer, he had never seen an engine. He had never been allowed to remove a casing.

There wasn't a speck of dust anywhere—the interior of the blockhouse had evidently been sealed and then sterilized.

"Don't touch anything!" he shouted as Bedivere reached out a hand.

The old knight drew back, looking hurt.

"Don't you realize what this is?" Merlin demanded excitedly. "The Earthmen came in here—and *they never went out!*"

"But where are their bodies?" Bedivere asked.

"A long way from here. Don't you understand? The Earthmen left us their ships, because they didn't need them.

They left that ship to rot, because they couldn't take it with them."

"You mean," said Vivien incredulously, "they just came in here, went into one of those cubicles, and . . . went somewhere? That's crazy. They're in here."

She threw open the second cubicle. It was as empty as the first.

"They had a thing called radio," Merlin said. "Sending sounds without wires. They needed a mast, but nothing like this one. This must be meant for something more than just sounds."

He could see they all thought he was mad. He didn't care. Impatient to be left alone in the radio station, he cast around for something to occupy them.

"Clear the space round the station," he said. "Cut away the bushes. Don't try to burn it. Leave me here. Hurry up, get moving."

Conscious of his own ignorance, Merlin thought he'd have a better chance of operating the machinery in the blockhouse than anyone else.

The only things which gave him any reason to hope it would still work were the fact that everything looked as good as new and the lights burning

brightly in the roof. There was still power, plenty of it as a matter of fact.

The Earthmen had said that they had come from Earth in their ships and that it had taken them years. Yet when they left they had taken only the big ship. And there she was outside. Obviously there was another way to go back to Earth, other than by ship.

Yes, but if that was so, why use ships at all? Why take years doing a journey by ship when you could do it presumably much quicker by another species of Terran magic?

Well, that wasn't too difficult. Before you could use this way you had to set up a station. So you had to make the journey once.

There were dials on some of the cases, dials not unlike those in *The Lady*. Merlin couldn't speak Terran and he certainly couldn't read it, but some things were familiar. Such as dials reading 0 to 10. Such as knobs and switches.

Such as a master-switch like the one in *The Lady of Shalott*.

Merlin pondered. If he was right, the Terrans had returned to Earth by means of these machines. But how had they *all* gone? Did the machine switch itself off afterwards? Going by the position

of the master-switch, everything was off now.

If that was so, if nobody was left behind, the machine would be dead and useless, with nobody to switch it on again. It couldn't be used again. If all the Earthmen had gone, they couldn't have meant to return—ever.

Well, they hadn't returned, had they? Maybe they had never meant to return. But Merlin didn't believe it. This station had been set up for a purpose.

There were two cubicles—for coming and going? No one had ever come—perhaps because there was no one to switch on the machines?

That was it. He began to search feverishly for a key which would fit the locks of the ship outside. There must be one. You didn't run the risk of locking yourself out of a fortress as impenetrable as a spaceship. You left spare keys around.

He found one hanging on a hook and went outside, pulling the inner door of the block-house shut behind him. The others looked up as he emerged. Ignoring them, he went to the nearest airlock of the ship and in a few seconds it was open.

There were excited cries

from the others. They thought he'd worked a miracle to open the door.

Merlin staggered back as the stale air from the ship hit him—air undisturbed for a hundred years. And that was only the air in the airlock.

After giving the airlock a few seconds to clear, he stepped inside and opened the inner door. Again the air that met him was foul and he stepped back.

The air in the blockhouse had been sterilized and the air in the ship wasn't. It all added up. Inside the ship would be at least one dead Earthman, probably dead by accident.

Only two explanations made sense. One was that all the Earthmen were in the spaceship, killed by some accident at the moment when she had been about to blast off for Earth. But in that case, what was the station for? The other was that most of the Earthmen had gone into the blockhouse and hadn't come out, and that the rest, perhaps only one, had sealed the station and gone to live in the ship. That was reasonable—the blockhouse wasn't meant for living in and the ship was. Something had happened, however, and the people left

to look after the station hadn't done so.

"Can we go back to Camelot?" the Princess asked eagerly.

He looked at her blankly for a moment, having forgotten all about getting back to Camelot. "I don't know," he said. "Perhaps. Does that make Sir Bedivere the boss again?"

With a flash of bitterness he saw that she was seriously considering the question.

For the first time he seriously asked himself if he could be in love with Guinevere. Of course he wanted her and meant to take her—but could he love a girl who had so little gratitude and loyalty?

In a few minutes they all knew that they weren't going anywhere in that ship. There was no power.

Merlin hadn't brought his oil lamp along, and could find no hand lamps in the station. He considered running a wire to the ship from the station, which seemed to have plenty of power, but abandoned the idea. For one thing, there wasn't enough wire, short of taking it from the installations and splicing it together. For another, he didn't know where the station got its power, and it might be very limited indeed.

He made a quick tour of the ship using thin sticks for light, kindling each from the last. Nobody expressed any wish to come with him.

She was a huge ship, a wonderful ship—but very dead. He kept trying switches without result. Finding himself in an engineroom so vast that it made that of *The Lady of Shalott* look like a cupboard, he even switched on the drive to see if anything happened. Nothing did.

He found three heaps of decayed matter which had once been men. Decomposed as they were, their attitudes showed they had died in convulsions. Merlin decided to be very careful in trying out the local fruits. It looked very much as if the Earthmen hadn't been careful enough.

When he emerged into the blinding daylight again, blinking after the gloom of the ship, he was besieged with questions.

"Dead men inside," he said briefly, knowing that that would discourage them from wishing to enter. Merlin wanted to keep both the ship and the station to himself.

"Will it take us to Camelot?" the Princess asked.

"No," he said laconically, and went back to the station.

Well, he was right. There

had been more than three Earthmen, many more. True, he hadn't examined the ship exhaustively, and there might be far more than three bodies.

But it looked as if the others had left by means of the station.

Taking a deep breath, he closed the master-switch.

A few lights came on. There was a faint hum. Apart from that nothing very much happened. Dials swung, but that meant very little to Merlin.

Now he was disappointed. Switching off again, he opened the doors of the two cubicles, and since he didn't know which was which, placed a stick in each. After closing the doors, he switched on again hoping something would happen.

He waited two or three minutes, switched off and looked in the two cubicles. The two sticks were still there.

It was another disappointment. Yet how could he have expected anything else? After all, nobody had been here for a hundred years. The spaceship outside was no longer operable. And even if the installation round him still worked, probably it had to be set and adjusted by an expert before it did.

Still, it had seemed reasonable to assume that it had

been left tuned as it should be tuned.

After thinking for a while Merlin brightened. Obviously two stations were needed—this one and one on Earth. Perhaps if he left the apparatus running, someone on Earth would switch on another station, and something would happen.

At the thought, he looked around and found paper and a pencil. He couldn't speak Terran or write it, but his own script would indicate an intelligent race at this end. He wrote his name, quoted a verse and then took the picture of Lola Melita from his pocket. Carefully he copied the Terran script—LOLA MELITA.

Well, in the unlikely event of any Terran seeing that, he'd certainly be interested. Merlin copied what he had written on another sheet of paper, put the two sheets in the two cubicles, switched on and waited for a while.

When nothing happened, he went out and shut the door behind him, leaving the switch on.

Merlin had made up his mind that he and Guinevere were going to be busy that night. There was no point in waiting any longer. She

wasn't going to fall in love with him, won over by his self-control. At least there was a possibility that she'd be won over by his virility.

The Princess saved her virtue by drastic means. She happened to be the one who ate the fruit that had killed the Earthmen.

It was the most attractive-looking of the fruits Bedivere had gathered, a rose-pink pulpy globe about the size of a clenched fist which Guinevere said was delicious. She wanted to eat more than the small piece Merlin gave her, and was angry when he dashed the rest of the fruit from her hand.

That was in the early afternoon, and when nobody was suffering any ill-effects three hours later it looked as if Merlin's care had been unnecessary. He had tried one of the nuts, Vivien the red grapes, Geraint a piece of the round green fruit and Bedivere nothing at all, as a control.

In the evening they had a sparse meal prepared from the slender remaining resources brought from *The Lady*, and all the others complained when Merlin wouldn't let them eat any of the plentiful fruit.

Nobody suggested sleeping in the ship. The lock was still

open to disperse the stale air inside, but it was clear that with the ventilation system not working it wouldn't be pleasant trying to sleep inside. It had been taken for granted that they would sleep in the station. Merlin, who didn't want anybody touching the apparatus inside and perhaps putting it out of phase was for the first time diplomatic instead of dictatorial. He pointed out that the station had a concrete floor and that they wouldn't be comfortable on that. Besides, they were used to sleeping in the open now.

"There might be animals," Guinevere objected.

"We haven't seen any yet."

"I got about two hours' sleep last night," Vivien said, yawning. "I could sleep on top of that steel mast."

Merlin, who had glanced into the cubicles several times during the day, and found no change, had one last look before working out how to detach Guinevere from the rest of the party. The two pieces of paper were still there. The lights still glowed; the hum was still audible.

He decided simply to tell the Princess to come with him, and deal with the situation as it developed. But when he got outside Guinevere was

writhing in agony on the ground with the three others hovering over her ineffectually, wondering what to do.

Merlin didn't know either. An emetic would probably help, if he knew what would be an emetic. He was astonished to see the expression of relief which came over Guinevere's agonized face when he appeared. Apparently she believed he could do something.

"Water," he snapped. "Give her lots of water." He didn't know whether that would help, but it was the only thing he could think of.

Guinevere couldn't speak; her eyes followed Merlin about, as if she sensed that only he could save her. Her confidence was singularly misplaced. Merlin knew nothing about poisons. On the other hand he knew that something, probably this, had killed three Earthmen who knew a great deal about everything. He could only hope that the Earthmen had eaten a good deal more than the small piece of fruit Guinevere had had.

Before Bedivere returned with the water Merlin had changed his mind. Guinevere's convulsions were spasms of the throat, torso and stomach, and Merlin dredged from somewhere a vague recollec-

tion that when people died from convulsive poisoning they died from suffocation or exhaustion. So to keep Guinevere alive they should keep her breathing.

Pushing Vivien aside, he turned the Princess on her stomach and knelt beside her, pressing her shoulderblades rhythmically. If Guinevere's agony seemed to increase, she at least kept breathing.

It was a long time before Guinevere appeared to be out of immediate danger, and even then she was left very weak, very pale and very sore.

When she could speak she croaked: "You tried to stop me."

Merlin thought at first she was complaining about his rough treatment. Then he realized she meant he had stopped her eating more of the fruit, and that for the first time she felt stirrings of gratitude towards him. The fact that she said "tried to stop me" made him wonder if she had eaten more of the fruit later, out of his sight. Probably not, or she would have died like the three Earthmen.

It was a long time before anybody slept that night.

In the morning when Merlin awoke—the first to do so—Vivien, who had been supposed to be watching over the

Princess, was asleep, and so was Guinevere. The Princess was pale as death, but breathing steadily. Merlin left them both as they were and went into the station.

Both papers were in the left-hand cubicle.

Merlin looked in the right-hand cubicle, saw nothing there, and flushed angrily. Bedivere or Geraint had sneaked in and . . .

Then he saw that only one of the papers was his. The other was blue. His was white.

He leaned forward to snatch at the blue paper, stopped himself and switched off first.

The blue paper, in Terran script, read:

For Pete's sake, what are you trying to pull? Who's LOLA MELITA? That script of yours looks like Chinese crossed with Russian crossed with somebody being sick over the paper. Where are you, anyway? Power coefficient suggests light-years—and you know as well as I do that emtee doesn't give a clue about direction. Or do you? If you're ribbing me, give yourself full marks and let it go at that. You've won, only tell me who or what you are, and where. Otherwise—there can't be another race with emtee, can there? Or can there?

Forgive incoherence. I'm excited.

Jack Helmsdale.

Merlin was excited too, though none of this meant anything to him except the two words *Lola Melita*, and even they were different, somehow.

He wrote his name again across the top of the blue paper, copied the name *Jack Helmsdale*, turned the paper over and furrowed his brows in thought. What could he do to explain the situation, since he couldn't understand *Jack Helmsdale's* writing and vice versa? Pictures. But what could he draw that would make sense?

After deep thought he drew a small world in one corner of the paper. He was going to put *Camelot* on it, but that would mean nothing so he wrote his own name on it. Then he drew a small spaceship travelling between *Camelot* and another world which he drew in the opposite corner of the paper. He put in a dotted line to show that he meant that the ship had gone from one world to another. On the second world he drew a crude blockhouse with an enormous mast sticking out of it.

Anybody as smart as an

Earthman ought to be able to figure that out. He put the blue paper on the floor of the right-hand cubicle and switched on again.

Nothing happened immediately, which was no surprise. He went out again.

They were all awake now except the Princess, who was in a sleep of sheer exhaustion. It was almost laughable how they turned to him for guidance, after some of the things which had been said and done so recently.

"Should we wake her?" *Bedivere* asked.

"No. Not unless she seems to have any trouble with her breathing."

He wondered whether to say anything about the miracle that had happened, and decided against it. None of them would believe him. Even if he'd kept the note from *Jack Helmsdale*—if that was his name — they wouldn't have believed him. Let them wait.

He looked down at the sleeping Princess with sympathy but no great feeling otherwise. *Guinevere* no longer mattered—at least, not at this moment.

He was going to become an engineer, like a *Terran*.

Jack Helmsdale would get the idea and draw pictures

too. And sooner or later one of them would go into a cubicle and . . .

Vivien screamed. Merlin spun round.

In the doorway of the station stood Jack Helmsdale.

It wasn't that he was hideous. On the contrary he was normal, young, pleasant-looking. Apart from his spacesuit, that was.

He had already taken off the helmet, having established that the air of this world was breathable.

"Good Lord," he said, looking round.

Merlin went to him and offered his hand, as Earthmen did.

"Wait till I get this off," said Jack. "You should have warned me, Buster, I didn't know this was a tropical world. Gee, you're big, aren't you?"

The words meant nothing to them, but the tone was friendly.

"I'll help you off with your spacesuit," said Merlin, to show that his language meant as little to the Earthman as Jack's did to him.

Helmsdale was looking at the station, the ship, the jungle and the five Camelotans and trying to work it all out. The station and the ship were

obviously Terran, dating from 'way back. Having seen the matter-transmission installation he was surprised and relieved to have arrived in one piece, and implacably determined not to trust himself to that crazy setup again until he had overhauled it with the aid of the kit he had thoughtfully brought along. Frances, at the other end, could be trusted not to do anything rash. All the same, he'd better drop her a note pretty quick.

The five people were clearly human to the last decimal place, but not Terran and not, from what he could make out, native to this planet. He took no credit for the final deduction, having seen Merlin's cartoon. Had they come from their own planet in that ship? He had a closer look at it. They had not. Then had they developed space-travel on their own? Their clothes didn't look like it. And yet, if you trekked across a tropical planet you were liable to get like that.

He stopped asking himself questions to which there were no answers, looked down at Guinevere and whistled. This was a very sick girl.

"Merlin," said Merlin. "Vivien. Bedivere. Geraint. Guinevere."

"Jack," sighed Jack. "You would think after Millennia of civilization we'd be able to manage something better than pointing at ourselves and . . . *what* did you say?"

"Merlin. Vivien. Bedivere. Geraint. Guinevere."

The words weren't pronounced quite as Jack would have pronounced them, but he was able to identify them. "Where's King Arthur?" he asked dazedly.

Merlin pointed at the sky. "Camelot," he said.

"Good Lord," said Jack again. He had another look at Vivien and whistled. It was a different whistle this time. Vivien was more to his taste than Guinevere. "'A robe that more exprest than hid her, clung about her lissome limbs'," he muttered.

"Eh?" said Merlin.

"Tennyson," said Jack kindly. "Idylls of the King."

It was obvious that if progress was to be made, an exchange of language was of immediate importance. With the self-confidence of most Earthmen, Jack decided it would be a lot quicker if he learned theirs instead of the other way round.

They were so delighted to see him, they must be in some kind of fix and expected him to help them. Which was all

very well, but Jack was primarily a business man and had to see some percentage.

He pointed at them and at the sky and said, "Camelot?"

Merlin nodded.

"How many on Camelot? What's your population?"

It took some time to get the idea across. When he had it, Merlin pulled him into the station, shutting the door behind the two of them. He examined the meters and found what he was looking for—a set of six dials representing powers of ten. He pointed.

"One seventy million?" said Jack, impressed. "Brother, I'm with you. A population of 170,000,000 new faces . . . Merlin, I love you."

A thought occurred to him. "Lola Melita?" he inquired.

Merlin took out a photograph and handed it to him. Jack grinned. Pin-up, vintage 2325, judging by the hairstyle.

The situation was clarifying rapidly. A hundred years before, a Terran free-lance trading mission had found a planet which some humorist among them elected to call Camelot. They had pitched the usual spiel, laid the usual foundations and retired from Camelot, leaving a . . . lifeboat? Camelot would have

been ripe for plucking about eighty years ago, but hadn't been plucked.

Why?

It wasn't too difficult to guess. Jack didn't pursue his speculations, for exactly what had happened didn't matter at the moment. What did matter was that not far away was a world of 170,000,000 humans, all in Jack Helmsdale's pocket.

Jack dropped a note to Frances asking her to send food, some more tools and a few hand lanterns. Whatever else he did, he'd have to get that ship outside into operation. They came through all right, which just went to show. Some emtee engineers a century ago had known what they were doing.

Instead of getting to work right away, he spent the morning systematically tiring out every member of the Camelot party pumping him or her for information and words.

Traders had to be good at picking up languages. Sometimes nothing more than a thorough knowledge of the local currency and numbering system was necessary. This time Jack wanted the whole language, history, science, culture, everything. It was

worth it with a virgin world of 170,000,000 people waiting to be exploited.

"I don't think our grandpappies overrated the Earthmen after all," Vivien told Merlin dazedly after a high-power session with Jack. "Such energy. Such enthusiasm. He was learning our language and history and making love to me all at once."

"Making love to you?" Merlin exclaimed.

"He thinks I'm terrific, hadn't you noticed? He's already arranged to take me for a stroll in the moonlight. I told him there were two moons, one for each of us, and he asked if we kissed on Camelot. So we had to try it to see if there were any differences in technique . . ."

Guinevere was still very pale, weak and sore. But Jack talked even with her, and some of his dynamic energy seemed to flow into her. Merlin felt a twinge of bitter jealousy when he saw that the Princess, so snooty with him, was prepared to be very friendly indeed towards the Earthman. But it was cheering to note that Jack didn't appear to be swayed from his preference for Lady Vivien.

By the time they lunched on food from Earth and

Camelot and Sahara—cautiously, for what had happened to Guinevere was a warning to everybody—Jack could make himself understood on any but the most abstract subjects.

After lunch he took Merlin with him into the ship. He knew by this time that Merlin wanted more than anything else to be an engineer, like an Earthman.

“Okay, Merlin,” he said in a fluent mixture of their two languages, “you can start by holding this lamp.”

Merlin didn't mind. Jack hadn't taken long to assess the five Camelotans and pick Merlin as his assistant, cheerfully reinforcing Merlin's precautions to keep Vivien, Bedivere and Geraint out of the station and the ship. It wasn't necessary to bother about the Princess. She wasn't going to be doing any moving around for a while.

The first thing Jack did was to shovel the three bodies unceremoniously into a waste disposal chute. Then he located the batteries and with Merlin's help tipped them outside and buried them. The spare set, uncharged, were still usable. He and Merlin carted them into the station and charged them there.

“Power?” asked Merlin,

pointing to the spare batteries.

“Yes, power. You're a smart lad, Merlin. Oh, you mean where am I getting the power? Sun power, Merlin. These outland stations often have to be set up where there's no local electricity. So the mast picks up solar power all the time.”

“Why not use the same system in ships?”

“Well, ships are usually in space, where there isn't a high concentration of solar power. But there's a drive working, so power can easily be generated. It's just a matter of the most convenient way to do things.”

Although only about one word in three was in Merlin's language, he seemed to understand most things Jack said, or asked questions until he did understand. Quite probably, Jack reflected, Merlin could be an engineer, whatever he meant by that—electrician, mechanic, physicist, chemist? But Jack had other plans for him.

In the ship again they found a plate similar to the one in *The Lady of Shalott*. It read:

KING ARTHUR

Detroit, 2318

Deep-space cargo vessel,
393rd Terran Trading Mission
(license no 393/TN/7164).

"That explains it," said Jack. "The Arthur business, I mean. Did you know Merlin was a wizard, Merlin?"

"Wizard?"

"A magician."

"Yes. An engineer."

Jack grinned. "Have it your way. And Vivien was a harlot."

"Harlot?"

"You know. Like Vivien. My type, Merlin. I like girls who like men."

In a day or two Jack spoke their language better than they did. Too well, perhaps.

"When he talks to me," Vivien confided in Merlin. "I get the idea he's sorry for us."

"Because we're so backward compared with Earth."

"Maybe. I think it's more than that. Because of what's going to happen to us."

"And what's going to happen to us?"

"I don't know. But Jack does—and he's sorry for us."

The Princess, still pale and thin, was on her feet by this time, and rather piqued to find that Jack was too occupied with Vivien to be more than casually polite to her, and that Merlin was too busy helping Jack to be even polite. The Princess hadn't changed her opinion concerning her own importance, but the fact

that when an Earthman magically joined the group he instantly decided that Merlin was the only possible assistant for him made her reassess Merlin. Besides, she had been genuinely grateful to him for saving her life, knowing that if it hadn't been for him she'd have eaten the whole of that fruit and died.

Merlin, who was trusted to solder connections, clean jet linings, replace whole circuits and even check Jack's mathematical calculations, had temporarily forgotten the existence of the female sex. Jack hadn't. Guinevere was horrified at what went on between him and Vivien—and, being a woman as well as a Princess, jealous at the same time because she was missing something.

Jack made no secret of the fact that he found the two old knights merely a couple of civilized morons, and regarded Merlin as a bright boy.

One of Jack's notes to Frances read:

Honey, the sooner you can get things organized at that end and come through, the better. I know I'm taking a chance, but I think Merlin's our man to handle the Camelot side of things—with you to keep an eye on him, of course.

Re your suggestion that we should tie up with the nobility—not a chance. Like all caste systems, this one's reactionary. If the two old guys and the Princess knew what was cooking, I'd get a knife in my ribs.

By the way, when you come, remember this world is hot. It wouldn't do any harm to wear some of your Miami outfits.

When the *King Arthur* was ready to make the flight to Camelot, and Jack trusted the emtee installation enough to use it for something more than cans of food, he took Merlin aside and said: "You and I understand each other, Merlin. I think we're going to be partners."

"I can be an engineer?"

"Hell, no. That's a long business. And there's no money in it. Tinker in your spare time if you like. But I have better things in mind."

"But . . . partners . . . aren't you an engineer?"

"On the side. Not any more, though. I'm in big business. I've got a world of my own now. Camelot."

Vaguely uneasy, Merlin remembered what Vivien had said. Jack knew what was going to happen to Camelot—and was sorry for them.

"What's going to happen to

us?" he asked bluntly. "Why are you sorry for us?"

"Does it show? Merlin, do you have the battery system for poultry? No? Well, you take a lot of little birds and make them into an animal factory. They spend their lives working for you. Camelot's going to do just that—work for me."

"Is it?" said Merlin thoughtfully. He had never thought he'd feel any loyalty to Camelot before Earth, but if what Jack said was true it might be a good thing to knock him silly and destroy the emtee station . . .

"Now wait a minute," said Jack hastily. "Listen to me for a while. A hundred years ago, the 393rd Terran Trading Mission took a chance on this sector, invested millions of dollars and a lot of years of men's lives, and found Camelot—or whatever your world was called then. Trading missions are freelance, Merlin. Private enterprise.

"I've had Frances check, and the 393rd TTM is as dead as the dodo. She was able to buy all rights, concessions, equipment for the sum of one dollar. We own a goldmine, Merlin."

"We?"

"You and Frances and I."

"Who's Frances?"

Ignoring that, Jack mused: "There's no way of finding out exactly what happened to the 393rd TTM. There *could* have been an emtee hitch, but I won't buy that. I guess they got back all right and then found the emtee contact was dead. I bet there was some cursing and swearing then.

"They wouldn't tell anybody about Camelot, not if they had any sense. Somebody would have beaten them to it. They must have organized another spaceship trip. Only something happened to them and they never arrived."

"Why," said Merlin pointedly, "is Camelot so valuable?"

"It's a new market, Merlin. There's nothing so valuable in the universe. A century ago the advance force left you spaceships, clocks, gadgets of all kinds, to create a demand. Ten years would have been enough. In fact, ten years would have been better than a hundred, but there's no harm done. And the seventeen worlds they gave you—that was a touch of genius. Seventeen worlds to be developed—you'll need billions of dollars' worth of stuff—"

"To be paid for with what?"

"I said you were a smart lad, Merlin. To be paid with

anything Camelot's got that we can use. Raw materials, chiefly—Earth ran out of most things centuries ago. Steel, oil, copper, platinum, uranium. Trading missions get fifty years' exclusive trading rights when they find an inhabited planet—a new market. If they didn't, nobody would bother looking. Of course, we'll be controlled and inspected and will only get the legal margin of profit. But that's enough. We're going to *own* Camelot, you and Frances and I."

Merlin had relaxed long since. He had no objection to owning half of Camelot. He saw how Jack had been sorry for Camelot, as one is sorry for any sucker before taking his roll from him. But Camelot wasn't really going to suffer. Camelot was going to climb nearer the status of the godlike Earthmen. Everything would be all right.

Through the trees Merlin saw the Princess' slim white figure. He watched her thoughtfully.

Jack followed the direction of his gaze and shook his head. "You can forget her. She'll never marry you."

Disappointment tugged at Merlin's heart. "Why not?"

"I know how these things

work out. In a contest with trade, the nobility loses out. But the poorer they get, the prouder they get. She'll never marry you, Merlin. May as well resign yourself."

Merlin was suddenly unreasonably angry. "If I hadn't switched on that machine, I'd have had her."

"Sure. But look . . . come into the station."

They made their way along the side of the blockhouse and went inside. Jack looked at his watch.

"Couple of minutes yet. Like I said, Merlin, the most valuable thing in the galaxy is a new market. That's why it's being opened up so fast. That's why it was worth spending millions on the chance that there might be an inhabited planet out here. When I got your note I—well, I know now there really is a Santa Claus."

He switched on.

Sixty seconds later, the cubicle opened and a girl emerged, a girl in white shorts and a casually-tied colored scarf.

"Lola Melita!" Merlin shouted.

"No," said Jack. "Meet my sister Frances. Frances, Merlin."

The girl walked across easily, straight-legged, her knees dimpling. Her naked brown midriff was slim as a wand, but her white-clad hips swelled out generously.

"He might have been worse," Frances said in English.

"But she is Lola Melita!" Merlin exclaimed.

Jack shook his head. "We have the same difficulty with Chinamen," he said. "They all look alike to us."

"All Earth girls are like Frances?"

"No. She's cute, so they tell me." In English he said: "Do you think it'll work, sis?"

"Hell, I've only just seen the guy," Frances protested.

"My guess is it's worth quite a few billion dollars if you can work with him."

"It'll work," said Frances. "I like him better already."

"Let's go out," said Jack, "and meet the suckers."

THE END



It was under the bed with Blonde Blue-Eyes Miss Statue-Woman . . . it was something new, something inviolable, something frightening even to new-metal . . . it was a . . .

STRANGE SHAPE IN THE STRONGHOLD

By DAVID R. BUNCH

IT was to be a usual busy-busy day in the Stronghold, I thought, as I seated myself at the switch panel and glanced at the first part of my day-circle graphed and racing on the wall. I had sent some of the "boys" down to Lower Quarters to hack away at Special Worries, others were due for "replacements" and must be scheduled to Operations for the sawing out of the flesh and the fusing in of the "replacement" new-metal alloy, and still others, who had completed their "replacement" course and had hacked away at Special Worries for enough time to be thinking clean, must pack little Go-Now bags for departure into Middle Moderan.

Out of no sense of duty, and for the amusement of it all—

in case you're wondering—I'm using my Stronghold now as a training and "replacement" depot for lucky refugees from the Old Life in Far Wide. When they flee the Moral Know and blast in all flesh-blood-eagerness for their Joy and the forever-life of Automatics I set up their program straight away; standing no nonsense I let them know right off that they will be "replaced" with new-metal alloy right down to a minimum of flesh-strip holding them in shape. (The whole idea of our behavior and endurance in Moderan, it seems to me, is workable only through our great "replacement" program. I can think of no other way.) Should they show a conscience trend or come complete with moral-sense mental block

trailing them like a black anchor dragging sand from the Old Life, I arrange for a Special Worries and a Slogans Course to set them thinking clean. In other words, I change these flesh-humpy, moral-quibbler slobs from Far Wide into lean clean citizens who can pack a Go-Now bag and slip into Middle Moderan to be part of the Program.

Mid-morning I lounged at the panel, very relaxed, and watched my day-circle still racing its schedule on the wall. I pulled a bit of air into my flexy new-metal lungs and heaved a little gasp of utter satisfaction. Hard work, I thought, this changing slobs into lean clean citizens for the Program, but worth it. What a Joy to be in Moderan away from the mental clutter of the Moral Know and the heavy sand-drag anchor of conscience. And what an added Joy to be able to contribute to the Program and send my lean disciples into the middle of Joy Land, knowing that they, conscience-freed and moral-cleared, can blast a Wall down or hammer a neighbor's head flat with the best of them.

But it must not be all work for the master. No! He must have his Joy too each day,

or he cannot stay properly moral-cleared for his conscience cutting and the block blasting. When the thin wedge of my day-circle colored up RllaxTime Special-Joys Period, I swiftly ran a mental thumb through my range of choices. Among other things, I could match-fight the new-metal kitten and the diamond-tooth tiger cub again for my Rllax-Time amusement. What a contest that usually made! I could destroy a piece of a new neighbor's Wall, perhaps, and desk fight him till all the "limited" destruction buttons of my Stronghold were thumbed to ON and all the air was filled with ugly shrieking havoc and the walking missiles were racing for his moat. What Joy! Or I might take the Statue Woman out from under the bed—the blonde and blue-eyed Miss Statue Woman out from under the bed!!!

Just as I had about settled on the latter as the top choice for my Joys, and the pale green blood in my flesh-strips was just starting to thicken and sing, as it always does when I think closely of the curves and hinges of the blue-eyed blonde Miss Statue Woman, who is my new-metal mistress, I, with the instinctive caution of the successful long-term refugee from de-

struction, turned to my Viewer. Because once I am with my blue-stared lady and have thumbed her life switch to ON there is no turning back for me. Not even to save my Stronghold am I sure I could stop once my pale green blood has thickened and she is looking at me—blue eyes!! dear blue metal eyes!!!

But blast; Oh, ultimate Big Wreck irritating Joy-killer blast! A last sweep of the Viewer before I could turn to Joys caught an Approach. The plains of Far Wide were dormant and safe, oh true; all White Witch Valley lay quietly sleeping with no movement at all breaking the patterns of sparkles emptying constantly skyward from that iron and plastic place. But the corridors of Folly Man! from there was bloomed a shape! It came on as I put the Miss Statue Woman completely out of my mind and settled to the grim business of survival. I thumbed all my weapons to Alert-Ready, put my weapons men on Stand-By. And I stood there trembling; in the middle of my eleven walls I died the little fright-deaths, as I always do when something is coming in to get me.

It was a vague shape. It walked upon the screen; it danced upon the screen. It

struggled at times, it seemed, to be a shape at all. I worked with the tuner; I tried to sharpen him in; I tried to get dimensions. He came on, dancing, disappearing, appearing, but ever nearing in down the tight corridor between White Witch Valley and the blue-mist plains of Far Wide. My flesh-strips were raining cold sweat, my Warner was on and off, my weapons men were vibrating where they stood in doubt and I was clanking and tinkling against everything that I touched. My blood was so thin and watery now with apprehension, and I was so bent on saving myself at all costs, that I'm sure if the Miss Blue-Eyes could somehow have risen out from under the bed and turned her life switch to ON and kissed me I would have remained as cold as old graves. But my Stronghold stood, all eleven Walls of it, high and adamant-thick, like a great iron-stone arsenal in the midst of threats wavering in.

I lost him completely. I swept the perimeter; I tuned again and again through the full range; I sent my Ultimate Contingency antennas high-skyward on their balloons. I tried everything; he was not there. And finally I did all that I knew to do. My "boys"

were out there, some of them, with their little Go-Now bags, headed for their place in Middle Moderan. I knew that. But finally I did all that I knew to do. And when I am my real true self, normal and thinking clean, I would do this thing to forestall danger to me even if my blonde blue-eyed Miss Statue Darling were out there, all her charms flash-dazzling, her life switch full to ON, in front of my first blasting gun. With me it's survival first, then Joys.

I rushed to that little room of thick-wall steel and lead, and there amid the rubber pads and the walls lined with cork-and-velvet puffs I handed the big orange switch to ON. It was, of course, the end for everything—my "boys" out there, birds, vegetation, stray mutants wandering the homeless plastic, spring-metal "wild" flowers bloomed by Season Control to soften the barren truce land—everything within an hundred miles and more swept clean, destroyed, unless behind the defenses of a Stronghold or in White Witch Valley. When I arose from the cork-and-velvet couch, where I had flung myself face-downward with steel fingers in my ears to lessen the shock from the weapons, and came out into the living

space, I felt a great exhilaration. I always feel toned up after a Maximum Fire. It seems to me the ultimate great accomplishment of man, this release of great forces he has learned to control for his protection, to safekeep himself from his enemies, all other men. What else has man—?

And then I saw him! Standing over by the control bank of one of my Little Wrecks, a light missile of limited range, but almost ultimate destruction, I use in war games with my toughest neighbors, he was not looking at any of the dials. He was looking at—well,—have you ever gone down a long tight corridor of mirrors in the Old Life after a big night of Special Bad? If you have, you will know. He was looking at me! Strange-eye-balled, evaluating, staring, he seemed to accuse. I was looking back, straight into his look, and suddenly knew, like knowing the signs of a flesh-strip dying, that nothing would do any good. I thought of Big Din, when I press buttons and a hell of noise breaks out all over my Stronghold; I thought of Sweet Sing, when I flip switches and for awhile it seems that one time there must really have been the angels and this is their sweet

captured speech; I thought of Last-Go, when I'll say the secret word to the concealed holes in the ceiling, the floor and the sides of the inmost room of my Stronghold and that will signal the demolition box in the mountain of the Last Hope Stand and my Stronghold will BLOW!!! I rejected all these ideas.

"Hello!?"

He didn't say anything. He came on closer, still looking, staring.

"You're that little wavering thing," I shrieked, for suddenly I knew. "You're out of the corridor of Folly Man!"

I thought he smiled a little. He didn't say anything, I was sure of that. But he moved, came nearer, until he almost touched me.

"How did you get in through all that firing? Through the Walls? My guards and devices?" By now I was not only yelling, scared to death, I was curious as I could be. I thought I heard a tinkly bubbling laugh. Or perhaps it was but the clanking of my metal in great fear. "WHO ARE YOU?" I cried.

When he gave only a smile for reply and stared at me with his hard no-quarter eyes, I suddenly trembled so with my flesh-strips that I lost con-

trol of my brain and fell down. I saw he was sitting atop my chest bouncing up and down to the piston blasts of my heart when I regained some control of my mind and looked out. And I seemed to hear several voices chirping like tiny new-metal beetles sound from far, and then nearer, "I'm your conscience, Your Conscience, YOUR CONSCIENCE. You left me, thought you left me in Folly Man, ON THE ROAD TO MODERAN." Voices like that scared me so much that I leaped to my feet and sent the vague blurred shape tumbling toward a Wall. He landed right-side-up and stared at me straight-on. He kept staring . . .

"Listen," I said, because my brain ached around its flesh-strips so much that I knew I couldn't go on like this, "I'll make a deal. You say you're my conscience. O.K. I don't more than half believe you here in Modern at this late year. But O.K. And I KNOW I can kill anything I don't like. I KNOW—" He stood there grinning. "O.K." I hastened to say, "I'll let you stay if you'll promise to let me tie you up and put you under the bed. I'll use you then, whenever I need to. Like I do the Miss Statue Woman. —And I won't need you," I muttered under

my breath. "I won't, I won't."

I thought he agreed. I remember trussing something up with chains and a big wire. And then I must have collapsed and lay there several days while the Stronghold ran on Automatic, the way it does when I sleep . . .

Sometimes, thinking it all over, I could almost decide that nothing had happened at all.

At other times I'd feel sure Someone was there, watching me, evaluating me. And then I'd have that weird crazy feeling, like I didn't even want to go blast down one of my neighbor's Walls or enjoy the discomforts of the new-metal kitten and the diamond-tooth tiger child. And ever since I'd made that agreement about putting him under the bed, I had left the Miss Blue-Eyes alone, though I had wanted her madly. But the plain truth was we were not wed.

Then came the day I shut my eyes and was thinking clean and I "knew" it had all been a strange dream. He couldn't have got through that Max Fire, and past all my guards and devices. With the relief of knowing again that the ways of Moderan were safe and right I felt my blood lose its thinness and I thought

again of my work—and my Joys! I raced to the bed under which lay my darling one and I unfolded down on my hinges, and the eagerness flooding my flesh-strips made me tinkle in all my metal parts. But as I was pulling her toward me, breathing hard and fumbling for her life switch madly, something hit me, hit me with hard baffling fact. My Miss Statue Woman, my Blonde Blue-Eyes, my Darling One, somehow had got herself trussed up . . . with chains and a big wire . . . And between me and a couple of Little Wrecks something wavered and smiled and started up talking, like new-metal beetles, like voices from far . . . "I'm your conscience, YOUR CONSCIENCE . . ."

Well, it's Last-Go, I may as well tell you, Ultimate Contingency and Final Fire. Something strange is in this Stronghold and I can't go on with it thus. Before I'll live with conscience I'll say the secret word! I'll signal the demolition box in the mountain of the Last Hope Stand. I'll blow my Stronghold, me, him, Everything, into the uncountable skies, into all the eternities—I who had hoped to live forever with my Stronghold and my Joys.

THE END

PURDY'S CIRCUS

By FRANKLIN GREGORY

*It's a lot of fun to go to a circus.
It isn't always so amusing when
the circus comes to you.*

WE tell you without malarkey that Morton Purdy, on that April afternoon in the big camera store across from Grand Central, met up with the Devil. It could have been no one else. Only the Devil would pull such a nasty trick.

Mr. Purdy, after foregoing Heaven only knows how many beers, had saved enough to buy a really superior lens for his enlarger. With the pleasant anticipation of a child in Disneyland, he peered at the gleaming optical display in the brightly-lighted show case.

"Coated?" the salesman inquired politely. "It's remarkable how a coated lens increases the brilliance of the image."

"What I'd like to afford," Mr. Purdy confided shyly, "is an apochromatic."

"I know just how you feel," the salesman agreed. "Superb definition."

Mr. Purdy regarded the salesman. It was nice for once to find, instead of the usual rude and hard-sell whipper-snapper, someone who took a courteous interest. The man's eyes were dark, and also impish as if they knew a capital off-color joke. But they were urbane and wise and they smiled at Mr. Purdy as if they knew a good deal about him. Mr. Purdy had the unreasonable idea they knew about Agnes, too. It made him feel slightly uncomfortable.

Agnes was Mr. Purdy's cross, and it was she who had prompted his interest in photography.

"Morton," she had told him, "don't you think that if you

had a hobby you wouldn't drink so much?"

Mr. Purdy hadn't felt he drank too much. It was simply that all of his life he had been lonely and had come to find a certain solace in the neighborhood taprooms. And all of his twenty years of marriage, Agnes Purdy had found fault with it. She was a persistent, forceful nag, and it was not the first time she had suggested a hobby. There was that birthday, for example, when she had given him a set of golf clubs and a club membership—only to learn too late about the 19th Hole.

But when Agnes gave him the enlarger for Christmas, she had scored. Mr. Purdy found immense satisfaction in making big pictures out of little ones. For one thing, the evenings he spent with the developing fluids under the yellow safe-light in the blacked-out kitchen were just so many evenings he could escape Mrs. Purdy's company. For another, when now he disappeared for a Saturday or Sunday, he could always explain he'd been out with his camera.

Whether the salesman knew about Agnes, he had reached a decision about Mr. Purdy.

"Tell you what," he said, glancing around to see if any-

one was looking. "The store wouldn't like this, but you've got two hundred dollars and—"

Mr. Purdy was jolted. It was the exact amount in his wallet. The salesman smiled blandly.

"X-ray vision."

"Of course," agreed Mr. Purdy, blinking mildly behind his spectacles. "Superman."

"Better than that," the salesman grinned. "But even Superman can't live without the evil needful, y'know, and since I'm frightfully underpaid by these Scrooges . . . What I'm saying is, all these lenses are very nice, but—look here."

From his pocket he produced a small chamois sack and removed a shining metal cylinder about an inch long.

Mr. Purdy held it gingerly to the light—and caught his breath. Deep-set within the cylinder shone the loveliest lens imaginable.

"What—make is it?"

"Called a Spectre."

"German?"

"Ha. Even Zeiss, even Leitz can't make a lens like this. No, they're off the market a good many years. Fellow in Bohemia . . . lens-grinder . . . little family business, y'know—invented a secret abrasive. Secret died with him."

Mr. Purdy disliked under-the-counter schemes. He shifted his stance restlessly.

"Oh it's out of this world," the salesman pressed. "I tell you, it'll make your enlargements big as life and twice as real."

His eyes seemed even more impish.

Standing in the spring rain waiting for the Lexington Avenue bus, Mr. Purdy had a moment of doubt. He had no receipt, he'd paid no sales tax. What if he'd been swindled? But when he boarded the bus and re-examined the lens, he was reassured. And by the time he reached 67th and was walking east toward his apartment, he was feeling so pleased that he thought one little highball would do no harm to celebrate. It was so very seldom Mr. Purdy was really happy.

He was glowing pleasantly over his third in Joe's Bar & Grill when the inspiration struck him. He wondered he hadn't thought of it before. Why not, he considered, combine the pleasure of wetting his whistle with the other pleasure of making big ones out of little ones? He did not consider that this would defeat Mrs. Purdy's purpose. He only remembered that she

never disturbed him when he was in his kitchen-dark room.

Arriving home with the bottle of rye concealed in his topcoat and feeling like a naughty schoolboy, Mr. Purdy was in luck. Mrs. Purdy's brief note advised him that she would be late and there was cold lamb in the frig.

If his hands trembled in hanging the blackout curtain over the window and in pouring the solutions into the trays, Mr. Purdy was not aware of it. Setting the enlarger on the kitchen table, he unscrewed the stock lens from the lens board and, with utmost care, inserted the new prize.

"Spectre," he mused. "What an unusual name."

A week earlier, on its last appearance at Madison Square Garden, Mr. Purdy had visited the circus and shot, and later developed, a couple of rolls of film. All his life the circus had thrilled him, and he was eager now to see how the pictures blew up. Sorting the negatives, he found the shot of "the incomparable, the irresistible, the one and only Lola Lark, aerialist supreme."

"And a dainty dish, too," Mr. Purdy smiled as he held the negative up. He had caught her with the telephoto lens just as she sat swinging,

slim ankles crossed, on the high trapeze; a sprite in pink tights, brief ballet skirt and daring bodice.

It was a pity Agnes didn't have such a figure.

Wistfully recalling the lost opportunities of his lost youth, Mr. Purdy mixed another drink. Then he inserted the negative dull-side down in the negative carrier, slid the carrier into the enlarger, closed the lamp house, switched on the dim yellow safe-light and switched off the room light. Setting the lens at its largest opening, he turned on the enlarger lamp and began the precision focusing by lowering and raising the bellows.

For Mr. Purdy, like many another aficionado, this was always a breathless moment. Slowly the fuzzy blur of light and shadow on the white baseboard resolved into a large, clean image.

Mr. Purdy whistled softly. Lola's physical construction was even more sensational than the small negative had suggested.

"Big as life and twice as real, the man said," Mr. Purdy recalled as he examined the life-like definition produced by his new jewel. And he was just about to reach for his highball when the image appeared to stir. Ah-ah, he

warned himself; must have jarred the table. But the image moved again, and now it seemed to grow. And this time Mr. Purdy did reach for his drink, gulped and shook his head with vigor.

"Haven't had that much."

And still the image grew . . . and grew, and moved, and grew some more; until, sitting pertly on the edge of the table, her lovely ankles still crossed and all of her near-nakedness illumined by only the faint glow of the safe-light, was the diminutive aerialist herself.

"Hi!" she said brightly.

"Uh," said Mr. Purdy as if he'd been socked in the stomach.

She glanced slowly around.

"Cozy," she said. "But d'ya always keep the kitchen this dark?"

Mr. Purdy tried to clear his head again by shaking it.

"No," he said, "I mean—"

He turned on the room light, thinking she might dissolve. But she was still there—more so, in fact. For now he saw what, from the distance between them at the circus he had been unable to define before: the saucy nose, the naughty eyes and the sheen of flaxen hair. Reaching out, he touched her to see if she were real.

"Hey mister, don't go gettin' fresh."

Mr. Purdy quickly drew back, but his eyes remained feasting on the suggestive hollow of her bodiced breasts.

"And quit starin' like a yokel," she commanded.

Her choice of words and gutter accent shocked Mr. Purdy.

"I'm sorry," he stammered. "It's only that I've never seen such—"

"Skip it," said Lola, pleased. Sliding off her perch, she prowled the kitchen.

"What's all this junk?"

"Photographic enlarging equipment," Mr. Purdy said.

She squinted at him.

"So you're one of these hypo hounds, huh? Ever try drinkin' the stuff? Hey! Don't tell me you got some real jig water there!" She smacked her lips. "Now we're gettin' somewhere. Be a sport, pal, and pour little Lola a quencher. Gawd, I feel like I been through a wringer."

"As a matter of fact," Mr. Purdy started to say. He mixed her a drink, and one for himself, then sagged into a kitchen chair. Lola Lark, the irresistible, drank long and noisily.

"Ahh, that's more like it!" she exclaimed when she'd

emptied the glass. "But if I'm gonna stay in this pad, you'll have to lay in some Scotch."

She wiggled enticingly toward him, and it was all Mr. Purdy could bear.

"Y'know," she smiled, "you ain't such a bad sort. Have ya had that cute bald spot long?"

Mr. Purdy fidgeted. She sauntered to the window and pulled the blackout curtain aside.

"Say, kid, this looks like New York!"

"It is," said Mr. Purdy. "Sixty-seventh near Third."

She stared at him.

"Holy cow! I thought I was in Boston."

"You're supposed to be," Mr. Purdy said. "That's where the circus is."

"What happened? Did I miss the train?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Then how the devil did I get here with you?"

"Through that," Mr. Purdy sighed, nodding toward the enlarger. "And I do wish you would get back in it. My wife's coming home any moment and I don't know what she'll say if she finds you here and, uh, dressed like this."

Lola giggled. She was feeling the drink. She closed one eye and examined the enlarger.

"Y'mean I came through

that li'l ol' thing? Ah honey, you are a card!"

With that, she sat down on Mr. Purdy's lap, wrapped a white arm around his neck and planted a spectacular kiss on his bald spot.

If Mr. Purdy's conscience stirred uneasily, he himself did not. Her bottom was warm and exciting; not even from the time of courting Mrs. Purdy could he recall such a pleasant sensation. Nor did he move when Lola asked:

"How's it work?"

"The enlarger? Oh, you press the lever." Lola reached out and pressed the lever. "And you take out that little pan." The negative was still in the carrier and she held it up to the light.

"Oh!" she cried with delight. "It's a picture of li'l ol' me! It's awf'ly good."

Mr. Purdy beamed. Lola noticed the other negatives and picked one up at random.

"Why it's Susie the Snake Charmer!" She picked up another. "And here's the Bo-Bo clowns!" She picked up a third. "And my gawd, if it ain't Stevie and his tiger—" She looked at Mr. Purdy wide-eyed. "Honey, can you bring *them* through, too?"

"We-ll," Mr. Purdy began. And at that inconvenient moment, the kitchen door swung

open and the formidable Mrs. Purdy—big as life and just as real with no aid from the optical science—stood in the doorway. For a long moment there was a most embarrassing silence. Then Mr. Purdy pushed Lola off his lap and got up.

"I didn't hear you come in, dear."

Mrs. Purdy sniffed grimly.

"I should rather think not. And what, please, is this hussy doing in my kitchen?"

"Well," Mr. Purdy gulped, "it's like this—"

"And dressed like that!" Mrs. Purdy blazed.

"You see—" Mr. Purdy tried again.

"And drinking!" Mrs. Purdy accused. And then Mr. Purdy witnessed a sight he'd never dreamed could happen. Agnes Purdy's fleshy lower lip trembled, her large eyes filled with tears, and she burst out sobbing.

"Oh Morton! To think I've lived with you all these years and trusted you so and stood by you in trouble—" Mr. Purdy could not recall ever being in serious trouble, unless it was Mrs. Purdy. "And all this time—" Mrs. Purdy wailed.

Her woeful look made Mr. Purdy wince. Then, her box-car frame still shaking with

sobs, she turned and staggered tragically across the living room, through the hall and into her bedroom where she closed the door.

Lola whistled.

"What an act!"

Mr. Purdy was dazed.

For some minutes they could hear Mrs. P. banging and slamming about. Once Mr. P. set down his glass, got up and went to the bedroom door. When he returned, he whispered in awe:

"I think . . . she's packing."

"Have a drink," said Lola.

"Maybe I ought to comfort her," Mr. Purdy said after a while. He started up, but Lola's cool hand detained him.

"Don't be a dope, Morty. You jus' think it's your duty. Ya ask me, you're one of these Caspar Milquetoasts an' you'd be better off rid of her."

"But what would I do?"

Lola flashed a blinding smile.

"Ya got me, ain'tcha?" And while Mr. Purdy was digesting that, Mrs. Purdy emerged from the hall, flounced through the living room and loomed up at the kitchen door. She carried two suitcases and she appeared her old indomitable self.

"You miserable worm! All those week-ends you said you were taking pictures, ha! At

your age a Lothario! You don't kid me, Mr. Morton Purdy. I'm going home to Mother."

As the outer door slammed behind her, Lola exploded with giggles.

"Can you tie that? An old battle wagon like her goin' home to Mama! That tops 'em all!"

And because it was really so utterly absurd, and perhaps too because of the sociable warmth inside and out, Mr. Purdy exploded with laughter, too.

It is pertinent, but not very chivalrous, to report on the naughty, affectionate night which Mr. Purdy spent in the arms of the one and only Lola. And when in the morning she whipped up the fluffiest batch of waffles ever to tempt his tongue, Mr. Purdy considered himself a fortunate man. Never had Mrs. P. been famous for her cookery.

"Of course," he suggested, eyeing Lola's scanty attire, "I'd better get you some clothes. You can hardly appear in the street like that."

Lola smiled lazily.

"Anything wrong with staying right here, lover boy?" she teased.

"I only meant—"

Lola wrote down her sizes.

"And, oh cert. Almost forgot. Size five pantie."

Mr. Purdy was still blushing when he went out. But when he reached the street and the reality of taxi horns and stinking garbage trucks and bawling children assailed him, he stood for several minutes in doubt. There had been the lens and the strange man who sold it to him. And of course as a kid he'd read "Through the Looking Glass" and somewhere he'd heard of magic mirrors and that Catherine de Medici had one in which she saw everything that happened in France. But it was all nonsense, really.

He had a slight headache and stopped in at Joe's Bar & Grill for a beer. Well then, if it was nonsense, what did it leave? Nightmare? Delirium tremens? Reaching for his change, he found the note. "Size 9 dress, size 34 bra." That was real enough.

He went to the phone, dropped a dime in the coin box and dialed his number, half-hoping, half-fearing to hear Agnes' voice. It was Lola who answered. With a pleasant sigh, he went about the business of shopping.

Fingering with the usual masculine embarrassment the nylon dainties, Mr. Purdy began to realize how horridly

humdrum his marriage had been. A man deserved better than that out of life. He was whistling softly a half hour later when he stopped at the liquor store. There was every prospect for a most delicious repetition of last night and he was still whistling when, arms laden with packages, he stepped into the elevator.

"Got visitors, Mr. Purdy?" asked the operator.

"Uh—yes, matter of fact."

"Got a nice voice, that'n," the operator grinned. "Thanked me real pretty through the door, she did, when I brung up the mail."

"My wife's niece," Mr. Purdy said stiffly and without much originality.

"Yeah?" The lad was leering. "And when's *she* comin' back?"

Mr. Purdy was still thinking about reporting the insolent fellow to the super when he inserted his key in the lock. But as the door swung in, all thought of reporting anything to anybody vanished. In the center of the living room, its huge handsome head cradled in its great striped forepaws, sprawled the biggest tiger, Mr. P. would swear, ever to leave its native home in Bengal.

Mr. Purdy congealed. The

tiger lifted its head and stared at him with large, curious eyes. Mr. Purdy held his breath. The tiger began a yawn, baring long red tongue and sharp, white incisors. Mr. Purdy continued to hold his breath. The yawn grew larger. Then Lola came out of the kitchen.

"Oh, back already? Good. I'll take the things. Get the Scotch? Fine. Want a drink?"

"I think," said Mr. Purdy, not taking his eyes from the tiger, "I do." He nodded toward the animal: "Tell me, it isn't real, is it?"

A man's bass voice called from the direction of the bathroom and Mr. Purdy jumped nervously.

"Ho, Lola! Is that him? Tell him we need twenty pounds of horsemeat."

Lola smiled her sweetest.

"We got guests," she said innocently.

Because there was no other support, Mr. Purdy sank into a chair, careful to select the one farthest from the tiger.

"So I gather," he said numbly. "Lola," he accused, "have you been monkeying with the enlarger?"

Before she could reply, the owner of the male voice appeared. He was tall, lithe, handsome, and because he was stripped to the waist Mr.

Purdy could see his bulging biceps and powerful chest. He had a clipped, jaunty mustache; half his face was lathered with Mr. Purdy's shaving cream, and in one hand he wielded Mr. Purdy's razor.

"And listen, Mac," he said to Mr. Purdy. "U.S. inspected. Sonny's got a weak stomach."

Of the numerous turbulent emotions seething in Mr. Purdy's bosom—shock, fear, confusion—it was his sense of outrage that emerged dominant. He did not at all crave strange men and strange tigers barging into the privacy of his home; especially they did not appeal to him when he had planned a Sybaritic weekend with a luscious and curvaceous blonde. With the greatest distaste, Mr. Purdy stared at the intruder.

"The name," he said frigidly, "is Morton . . . Mr. Morton Purdy."

"Okay, Mac. Mortie it is. I'm Steve."

"Captain Stephen Stevens," Lola put in, proudly accenting the title. "The famous wild animal trainer." She went back to the kitchen.

Mr. Purdy nodded toward the tiger.

"Is that . . . uh, is that beast tame?"

"Who, Sonny? Well now, it

all depends what you call tame," the captain answered heartily, slashing off a hunk of beard. "When he's well fed, he's gentle as a lamb. So if you don't mind pushing off for that horesmeat . . ."

Mr. Purdy's annoyance increased. Not even by Agnes had he liked being shoved around.

"But my heavens, man," he said, asserting himself, "where does one get horsemeat?"

"Why," said the captain, "every supermarket carries it in one-pound packages. Thirty-two cents a pound. Frozen, y'know, old bean. So if you'd just pop off and get it. Takes time for it to unfreeze, y'know, and we wouldn't want Sonny to miss his mealtime, would we?"

"What would happen if he did?" Mr. Purdy asked.

"What would happen? Why, sir, first Sonny would begin to pace. And then he'd begin to growl, quiet like. And after that, he'd start roaring you could hear him a mile."

This appalling prospect left Mr. Purdy in deep thought. Too well did he know the hardheartedness of apartment house superintendents; too well he knew how scarce apartments were.

"And while you're at it,

Mac, you better get forty pounds. Tomorrow's Sunday, y'know, and the stores are closed."

"You can't mean to keep that beast here that long?" Mr. P. cried in agonizing alarm.

"Where else would I keep him?" asked Captain Stevens logically. "You wouldn't want to park Sonny in a dirty old zoo, would you? And anyway, how'd you get him out of here without the super knowing?"

For a long moment, Mr. Purdy was silent.

"Why can't *you* get the meat?" he asked at last.

"In this rig?" Captain Stevens glanced down at his gaudy red pants, striped with a wide gold braid. "Besides," he added, closing the subject, "I don't have any money with me."

Mr. Purdy mentally calculated that forty pounds of horsemeat at 32 cents per pound came to \$12.80. With an audible sigh, he got up and reached for his hat. Captain Stevens called to Lola in the kitchen:

"Ho, Lola! Has Ella come through yet?" And almost immediately from the kitchen a new voice sounded:

"My land! Is that you,

Lola? I thought I never would make it."

Peeking into the kitchen, Mr. Purdy beheld the fattest woman imaginable. And because she was dressed in a short, frilly school-girlish dress, the rolls of pink flesh overlaying her cheeks and jowls and arms and bosom and calves seemed utterly obscene. She sat on a chair, panting laboriously. In the other chair sat Lola, adjusting another negative into the enlarger.

"No!" shouted the horrified Mr. Purdy. "No, Lola! You just can't do this to me! This is no boarding house!"

Lola pouted.

"You wouldn't want your li'l Lola lonesome, would you? And when I was so nice to you last night?"

Mr. Purdy hesitated. Hesitating, he was lost.

"I didn't figure on any more than just us two," he said forlornly.

Lola reached up and pinched his cheek.

"Don't you worry," she assured him. "We'll fix that—tonight. Now be a nice Morty and go get the horsemeat."

The horsemeat was heavy and so were Mr. Purdy's spirits.

"Whatcha feedin', a me-

nagerie?" the supermarket checker grinned.

Mr. Purdy tried to smile. He'd have to make another trip for the groceries, and Heaven only knew how much that fat woman would eat. And Heaven only knew, too, what to expect when he reached home again.

At first, as he re-entered the apartment, things seemed the same. And then he saw Lola kneeling on the living room floor—and he dropped the sacks. The packaged meat spilled out and at once Sonny trotted up and began sniffing. Captain Stevens followed.

"Good lad, you got it. But I say, don't give it to Sonny all at once. He'll get indigestion."

Mr. Purdy was not listening. Instead, his eyes were still riveted on Lola. She had removed the enlarger from the kitchen and plugged it into a living room socket, and now—surrounded by an assortment of negatives—she was inserting the pan in the carrier.

"No more, no more!" Mr. Purdy screamed, running toward her. "My God, woman, no more!"

He was too late. An explosion, a puff of smoke—and a tiny coupe stood in the center of the room, its motor still racing and its exhaust back-firing. The door opened and

out stepped the world-famous clown, Bo-Bo. And after him stepped another clown; and then another—

And as each painted buffoon materialized, Lola called:

“Hi, Bob, Hi, Diz. Hi, Norbert, the drinks are right over there. Hi, Perce, glad ya could make it. Hi, Clarence—”

There were thirteen of them finally, not counting the midget who popped out at the last minute when it seemed the little car couldn't possibly hold another person. Mr. Purdy remembered how the crowd at the Garden had roared with glee. He saw, definitely, nothing amusing now.

In the ensuing uproarious reunion, nobody—excepting Sonny—paid any attention as he gathered up the enlarger and scattered negatives. Sonny, a package of the frozen meat clamped in his jaws, trotted after him, leaped on the bed and began chewing the wrapper. Mr. Purdy was too dazed to give more than passing notice; he could simply be thankful he had taken no pictures of the elephants.

Placing the enlarger on a glass-topped table, he rummaged in a drawer. Only Agnes Purdy, he acknowledged with a sense of abject defeat, could cope with this ridiculous situation. And some-

where he had a very good shot of her . . .

Mrs. Purdy, standing in her characteristic arms-akimbo pose like a general commanding his troops, did not seem at all astonished to find herself in her husband's bedroom. She was only mildly surprised to confront Sonny.

“Morton Purdy!” she exclaimed. “What's that beast doing here? Scat!”

Sonny, having never encountered anyone as formidable as Mrs. Purdy, stopped chewing the wrapper, raised his head, then quickly jumped from the bed and slunk into the hall. Mrs. Purdy followed with purposeful step. A moment later she was back.

“Morton!” she demanded ominously. “Who are all those people? And what, please, have you been up to?”

With relief and chagrin, Mr. Purdy explained.

“Hmph!” said Mrs. Purdy when she'd sized up the how's and wherefore's. “Any fool can plainly see what to do. Reverse it!”

“What?” said Mr. Purdy.

“Reverse it, you idiot, lens and negative, the whole kit and kaboodle.”

Mr. Purdy sat down and reversed the lens. Removing the negative of Mrs. Purdy

and absently putting it in his pocket, he inserted with considerable satisfaction, its dull side up, the negative of the detestable Captain Stevens and Sonny. He switched on the enlarger light, stepped into the hall, and peered into the living room uproar. Nothing had happened. Captain Stevens and his beast were still among the roistering present.

Mrs. Purdy's eyes narrowed. "I think this calls for more drastic medicine." She went into the kitchen and returned with a box of matches.

The stuff from which modern photographic negatives are manufactured does not burn easily. But burn it certainly does when a flame is pressed against it. Mrs. Purdy placed the negative of the Captain and Sonny on the glass table top and watched it slowly curl to a bubbly crisp.

One by one Mrs. Purdy relentlessly destroyed the negatives. And when they were all burned, and the house was quiet, and Mr. Purdy was feeling queasy, she turned on her spouse.

"Now you," she barked, "get out of here while I clean up this mess."

"But where should I go?"

"Go down and get yourself a drink," she said. "Get two drinks. Get loaded. But," and

she glared at the enlarger, "don't you ever come near this thing again!"

Mr. Purdy was lifting his third beer at Joe's when the televised ball game was suddenly interrupted with a special announcement.

"Boston!" cried the announcer. "Seventeen circus performers were burned to death this afternoon when fire flashed through their dressing rooms. The dead included the world-famous aerialist, Lola Lark. The flames spread to the menagerie and at least one tiger was—"

Mr. Purdy stood paralyzed. As the full import sank in, sweat oozed from his forehead. His eyes glazed. His mouth opened and closed and opened again.

"Joe," he managed weakly. "Joe, I think I need something a little stronger."

"Coming up," said Joe.

Mr. Purdy reached into his pocket for the money. His fingers touched something slick. Fishing it out, he found with fascinated horror that it was the negative of Agnes Purdy. For a long and terribly uncertain moment, Mr. Purdy studied her granite features

"And Joe," he said at last with calm decision, "let's have a match."

THE END

FANTASTIC

WHEN HE AWAKENS

By STEVEN S. GRAY

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

*An unusual story about an unusual hero
—and an even more unusual villain.*

THE four eggs disappeared first, yolks unbroken. Then the eight slices of prime bacon. The hot steaming mush, covered with brown sugar, went next. On top of this, a gigantic wedge of crumbly cornbread adorned with nobs of salty butter. Lubrication for the process came by way of a huge mug of bitter coffee that was as equally black as the hand that lifted it. Carver Jefferson ate big like he was and was proud like he ate. Big!

Carver, thirty-one generations removed from the jungles of Africa, pushed himself away from the table and wiped his ample lips on his blue denim sleeve. He glanced, half-smiling, at the empty dishes before him. He never ceased to marvel at Becca's

cooking, even after seventeen years of marriage.

"Mighty fine, Becca, mighty fine," he said. His deep voice filled the prefab like a tuba's roar. He rose and stretched, wringing the dregs of sleep from his body. The powerful muscles of his arms and back knotted and rippled beneath his shirt. He was a man devoted to the soil and the growing of things, a farmer, and he had work to do. Even if the soil was alien to his birthplace.

After all, he had buried his only child in it.

Carver watched Becca working over the stove. He felt a surge of desire course from the pit of his stomach and squelched it. During all the seventeen years, her sturdy arms and curving

loins had never lost their attraction for him. Daytime was meant for a man's work, he reminded himself. Pleasure, to heighten the day's end. It was good that they pleased each other for there would be no more babies. The loss of Thad saddened him and made him hate the creature that had caused his death. The Spindly.

He walked slowly to the box by the stove and stared at its occupant. The tiny pig stared beadily back at him for a second and then leaped at the side of its box. He knelt and scooped it into his arms. He held it to his cheek and cooed meaningless phrases to comfort it.

Becca half-turned from her work and watched him. Her dusky beauty seemed out of place in the prefab. The corners of her well-shaped mouth turned upward as Carver replaced the pig in its box. It was not the first time he had made a pet of a little runt. It was Carver's nature to pity helpless creatures.

"That little pig is about the proper size for roasting," she remarked casually. Becca, a graduate sociologist, was proud of her egotistical, uneducated, man. Primarily because he was able to make her feel like a woman.

"You hush that kinda talk, woman." Carver moved protectively in front of the wriggling little pig. This sort of banter helped them both forget Thad's death. "Me and little pig here are disgusted by your mean nature."

Becca turned back to her stove, still smiling. "When that pig is full grown, he'll weigh at least five-hundred pounds," she said. "I will not have a five-hundred-pound pig living in my kitchen."

"Aw Becca, I only keeping this pig in here till he's strong enough to get his share of the slops." Carver walked to the stove and embraced Becca from behind. She snuggled against him for a second and then dug her elbow into his ribs.

"Fine farmer you are. Work to be done and you prefer to spend your time getting in my way." She placed her small hand against his chest and propelled him toward the door.

Carver pulled open the door and inhaled deeply. In the five years since they had come to Delta IV, he had learned to relish its tangy atmosphere. It was different from that of Earth, but the difference was enjoyable. He admired the solid acre of purple Samash



Carver stalked his prey unaware of the danger about to befall him.

stalks that were the reason he had been sent here. There had been less than forty of the plants when, by request of the Federation Science Council, he arrived five years ago. Now there were thousands.

Carver knew why the Samash fruit were important to every human in the galaxy—they prolonged life as much as two hundred years—but he did not comprehend the fact that, in a refined state, the fruit acted on the body at a cellular level and prevented age from destroying a cell's ability to reproduce. Of course death remained the inevitable reward of the living, but it came much later and without the internal and external withering.

Carver started out the door and stopped suddenly. He searched intently for the flash of green he thought he had seen among the stalks on the far left edge of the acre. His gaze traversed the prefab's front yard, ignored the livestock's quarters thirty yards to the right, traveled along the rutted dirt road that bordered the acre of Samash stalks, and flickered among the most distant ones. There it is again, he thought. The Spindly is at the stalks again!

Carver bolted back inside the prefab, his face an angry

mask. "Where's my shotgun?" he bellowed. He bounded to the table, knocking over a chair in his haste. "Gonna put up some pegs for that blasted gun," he mumbled. He spotted it leaning in the corner by the pig's box and rushed to it. Pausing for a second by the desk, which he never used, he rummaged in its top drawer for some shells. He shoved a handful in his pants pocket and sprinted out the door. "Spindly's at the stalks again," he yelled back to Becca. She shook her head slowly, the smile gone from her intelligent brown eyes.

Becca walked slowly to the window that looked out toward the acre. She watched as Carver's big figure grew smaller in the distance, all hunched over like a preying cat. She sighed deeply and sat down at the table to wait for the sound of the gun.

To Becca and Carver Jefferson, the Spindly represented the biggest problem they had encountered on Delta IV. They had never been close enough to it to see any more than its slim green outline. It showed few signs of intelligence. It seemed only to be interested in the purple Samash stalks. It was a biped creature that stood about four

feet tall. And it was existing on a planet where, according to the survey crews, there *was* no such animal.

At least once a week, Carver would find several stalks uprooted and missing. He sometimes surprised the Spindly in the act. There was always much bellowing and, if he had his shotgun, much ineffective volleying. It had been sort of a half-hearted affair until the Spindly had killed Carver's only child, Thad.

The boy had been big for fifteen. He already had his father's powerful body and his mother's fine features. He had supplemented his lack of companions with a great love of hunting. Becca had often watched father and son tramp away to spend the day in search of excitement. And soon Thad started to go alone.

One day, just seven months ago, after a sortie by the Spindly into the stalks, Thad had announced he would hunt the pest down. He had taken his father's high-powered rifle and a lunch Becca prepared for him and marched, boyishly important, down the road. Neither Carver nor Becca had ever seen him alive again.

Carver had found his bad-

ly crushed corpse at the base of one of the granite cliffs. Somehow Thad had managed to lever a huge boulder off the lower part of his body, but he had been long in dying. Carver had later spoken proudly of how his son had even splinted both his legs before he died. But Becca, who loved Carver, had seen the heart-break in his soft brown eyes.

Each Sunday, as the two of them stood over the simple grave, Becca saw a little more of the goodness die in Carver, only to be replaced by increased hatred. He was a simple man, an extremely proud man, and the hate was killing him. He even kept the smashed rifle, with its blood-stained stock, in their bedroom. "A memory piece," he called it.

The distant boom of the shotgun startled Becca. She rested her head in her arms and cried softly. As Carver's footsteps approached the door, she dried her eyes on her apron and hurried to the sinkfull of dirty dishes.

Carver was smiling as he entered and replaced the shotgun by the pig's box. He dropped the shells into the desk drawer and stopped by the doorway. "I think I hit it that time," he announced.

"You think?"

Carver frowned at Becca's trim backside. "I was close enough to see it got a face. I come through the stalks just as it was pulling up one and I saw it got two eyes, one nose, and a mouth. I give it both barrels and it jump up in the air, and come down running." Carver smiled as he thought of how the Spindly had limped. "It was limping too," he added.

Becca suddenly whirled from the sink and Carver never remembered seeing her so angry. "So you hurt it," she snapped. "Is that going to make me forget Thad? Is it worth three or four stalks to me to take a chance on losing you too?"

"But it's a varmint."

"You say it's a varmint."

"It root up my stalks don't it?"

"Your stalks." Becca's voice held a note of surprise. "Nobody knows whose stalks they are. They didn't grow on this planet naturally." Becca was gesturing at the wall in the general direction of the acre. "Suppose those stalks belong to the Spindly? That makes you the varmint."

Carver Jefferson loved his wife devotedly, but he was a proud man and master in his house. "Enough talk, wom-

an," he said coldly. "Seven years ago a survey ship found these here stalks. The brains mess around with em and find out they can't grow em no place *but* here. So what do those brains do? You're right. They hire the best damn farmer they can find, me. They tell me to grow these stalks. They take some stalks and soil of their own and they leave this place and they ain't coming back for maybe ten years. They're gonna mess till they find a way to grow stalks everywhere. But they trust Carver Jefferson to keep these stalks growing."

Carver started out the door and then swung back in. "And no skinny little green beast gonna eat what I work hard to grow. Especially when it kill my boy. One of these days I'm gonna eat *it* for supper!" Carver slammed the door loudly to emphasize his point.

It was early afternoon before Carver finished replanting the stalks torn up by the Spindly. He wiped his glistening forehead on his sleeve and sat down on the outermost of the furrows. The stalks would root again unless the green biped returned. And Carver knew it would. He made up his mind to think of a way to kill it. He decided he'd sit

right where he was until he did. He was a long time sitting.

He had tried waiting for the Spindly before. He remembered the three days, just after he'd buried Thad, he'd spent concealed in a hole. The Spindly had stayed away, but the first night he slept in his own bed, seven stalks had been uprooted. Carver had then tried scattering poisoned bits of meat. The meat laid on the ground till it rotted.

Carver wondered if the Spindly could possibly be lazy. He decided it was worth a try. He uprooted four of the stalks he had just replaced and laid them by the outside furrow. He hurried home-ward after his shovel.

He dug the pit narrow but deep. The canvas tarp covered it neatly and with a thin blanket of soil on top of the tarp, the job was almost complete. It was nearly invisible in the sunlight and at night it would be. Carver laid the four stalks gently on the thin layer of dirt. If the Spindly was lazy he would prefer the loose stalks to those not yet uprooted. Carver shouldered his shovel and took a last look at his handiwork. The little green beast could jump itself silly, he decided. It would never get out.

The following morning, Carver rose with the sun. When Becca entered the kitchen, she found him pacing nervously. The coffee was simmering over a low fire and Carver carried his huge mug as he paced. She poured herself a cup and, seated at the table, she watched him curiously.

"What in the world is wrong, Carver?" She glanced at the shotgun leaning by the door.

"Maybe I got a surprise for you."

"Surprise?"

"I set me a trap, Becca. Dug a big hole and hid it so the Spindly would fall in it." Carver felt his excitement growing strong in his stomach. He glanced out the window and decided they needn't wait any longer. "Come on. You and me gonna see what we caught." He almost forgot to take along his shotgun and had to go back inside to get it.

The four stalks he'd placed so carefully were gone. Three more had been torn from the outside furrow. Carver's cheeks puffed with exasperation. The tarp was gone too. He examined the edges of the pit and discovered the exact spot where the Spindly had lain on its belly to snatch first

the stalks and then the tarp from the hole that was going to have it jumping itself silly. "I'll think of something better," Carver mumbled testily.

"What?"

"I said I'll think of something better."

Becca was silent for a moment, staring into Carver's eyes. Then she grabbed his arm tightly. "Forget the Spindly, please Carver?"

"Are you crazy, woman?"

"Not crazy, just frightened."

"First that green varmint kill my boy and now it got my wife scared." Anger and hatred spread over Carver's blunt negroid features. Ignoring his wife, he turned toward the nearby foothills, his great fists clenched. "You listen, Spindly," he yelled hoarsely, remembering his son's crushed body. "I'm gonna kill you." His challenge, carried by the gentle wind, reverberated among the hills and, muted somewhat by their growth of small trees, echoed back.

Becca's features were set in hard lines as she stared up at her husband's stormy eyes. Carver glanced down and fumbled for her hand. She jerked away from him. "You pay no attention to what I want," she accused.

"Aw, now Becca." Carver tried to encircle Becca's waist with one brawny arm. She slapped it away. Carver was surprised to find himself standing alone beside the pit. Becca had bolted from his side. She was stumbling away from him, down the dirt road, toward the house. He knew she was crying. He glanced quickly at the empty hole in the rich black earth and felt the angry hatred well within him once again—*Strong*.

"Hey! Wait up, Becca," Carver yelled. He broke into a loping run. His gigantic strides quickly closed the distance between them. He caught Becca's arm and pulled her up short. "I'm gonna think of something better to catch the Spindly." Carver read the fear on Becca's face.

Becca shook her head wildly for a second. "Suppose the Spindly thinks of something first?" She struggled to free herself. "You don't consider that," she sobbed.

For the first time in his life, Carver lost all patience with Becca. As her struggles became increasingly stronger, his anger grew. Suddenly he could endure her sobbing no longer. He shoved her violently and she tumbled to the ground. He stepped over her

and strode toward the distant prefab. He paused as he reached the front door and glanced back down the road. Becca still lay huddled where she had fallen. Carver felt a momentary stab of remorse and shrugged it off. A woman shouldn't tell her husband what to do, he told himself. She could apologize to him, he decided. He went inside to think. Gradually he formulated another plan.

Becca maintained an icy silence during their evening meal. The silence and the fact that the meal, itself, was not well prepared only served to heighten Carver's determination. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, glared at her, and clumped out the door. He headed straight for the small room, off the livestock quarters, which housed his forge and anvil.

The forge room had been included in the outbuildings only because Carver had insisted on it. The powers-that-be had finally agreed that a man should be allowed to pursue his hobby. And the forging of metal gave Carver pleasure. He enjoyed seeing his great strength transmitted into tangible form as he listened to the ring of his hammer on steel. Only now he

was creating in the image of his hatred for the Spindly.

Carver heated, hammered, and quenched the leaves of spring-steel. The cart would ride rougher on its depleted suspension, but he needed *good* steel. Carver preferred to work using only the light thrown off by the forge. Its fiery glow bathed his perspiring face and faded before it reached the walls of the room. It caressed his muscular torso and highlighted his hatred. He punctuated his angry monologue with the clang of his hammer.

"Woman don't get her way, fix everything a man don't like for supper." He quenched the piece of metal he was working on and dropped it into a pile of other finished pieces. He began work on another. "The brains tell Carver Jefferson he don't need traps for varmints 'cause there ain't no varmints where he's going. Soon as he gets there a green one starts pulling up his crops." Carver quenched the final piece and placed them all on his workbench. "Gonna build some traps," he mumbled to himself. "And build a cage so's the brains can see for themselves." He began fitting the pieces together.

The next morning, Carver

set his four simple under-spring traps in a perimeter guarding the corner of the acre the Spindly seemed to favor. He concealed them beneath scattered leaves and dirt. Then he returned home to construct the cage.

On the morning of the following day, he found them undisturbed. He maintained his usual work routine and made an effort to apologize to Becca. She ignored him and he retreated to the forge room to brood.

With dawn of the third day, Carver stepped out the door of the prefab and put his left foot into the jaws of one of his own traps! Only his heavy boot saved him from a broken ankle. As the first wave of pain struck, he yelled for Becca.

With Carver seated in a kitchen chair and the boot cut off his foot, they stared at his swollen ankle. "Wiggle your toes," Becca ordered.

Carver complied and said, "They wiggle okay." He flexed his ankle and tried to rise.

Becca pushed him gently back into the chair. "That ankle is in no condition to walk on."

"It gotta be," Carver said. He brushed her hand gently aside and rose. He limped painfully around the kitchen,

putting more weight on the ankle with each step. "Don't you see, Becca?" he asked through clenched teeth. "The Spindly is smarter than I thought. It find that trap and set it for me. Coulda been you that got caught."

Carver limped into the bedroom and returned with a fresh pair of stockings and some low-topped shoes. "Maybe it even hid the other traps around here." Carver pulled off his right boot and stocking. He winced as he eased the fresh sock over his swollen ankle and then, very gingerly, he laced up the low-top. Yanking on the other stocking, he continued to explain. "Spindly live somewhere near the place I found Thad. There's lots of caves up there and it probably living in one."

Carver rose and retrieved his shotgun from the corner. Stuffing a fistfull of shells in his pocket, he started for the door and then stopped suddenly. "If something happens and I don't come back tonight, don't go looking for me. If I'm not back by tomorrow night, you know how to turn on the emergency beacon. Ship'll come in three or four days."

"Carver, please?"

"Probably be back tonight." Carver left before she could begin to plead with him. He felt she would be safe in the prefab until he returned.

Carver struck off through the calf-high grass after first checking on the other three traps. They were undisturbed.

Beyond the acre, the planet was unchanged from its original state. Carver's pace was rapid through the grass which covered the ground until it began to rise into rolling foothills. Insects buzzed away from his feet in clouds, their bodies producing a riot of color. His ankle, which had been painful at first, was much less so now.

Carver loaded the shotgun when he reached the beginnings of the stunted forest that covered the foothills. He became more cautious the closer he came to the spot where he had found Thad's body. The boy had been lying at the base of the first of the granite cliffs. The cliffs rose dully from the heavily vegetated foothills, like eroded church spires. They were surrounded by jagged stone slabs that had crashed down their sides. The place reminded Carver of a graveyard. He felt a shiver run up the back of his neck as he stared at the

boulder that had crushed his son. His son had died right where he now stood. And the Spindly had killed him.

The rock struck Carver a glancing blow on the shoulder. He looked upward at the towering cliff and then threw himself toward its base. The gravel came first like a pelting hailstorm. The sound grew to an unbearable thunder as huge chunks of granite, multi-sized stones, and tons of choking dust poured down. The seconds passed like so many hours for Carver as he huddled beneath a small outcropping of rock, expecting any minute to be crushed. For the first time in days, no thought of the Spindly crossed his mind. He was far too frightened.

Carver waited until the dust settled before he left the shelter of the outcropping. Then he left at a limping sprint. When he felt he was safe from another avalanche, he stopped and searched the cliff for the Spindly. Then with a start he remembered the shotgun. He tried to remember where and when he had dropped it. When the first rock had hit him, or perhaps while he crouched by the cliff? No memory of losing it came to him. He considered exposing himself to another ava-

lanche and decided against it. He picked up two good-sized throwing stones and started deeper into the maze of gullies and cliffs. He was careful to keep to the center of the gullies. An hour later, he found the first of the discarded Samash stalks.

Becca stared at Carver's filthy clothes and dusty face for a full minute before she spoke. "I was afraid you'd been killed." She was sitting at the kitchen table and Carver could smell food. His stomach tightened into a knot reminding him he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He closed the door against the chill night air.

"You been cooking?" he asked.

"Sit down. I'll fix you a plate," Becca said.

Between huge mouthfulls of beef stew, his favorite, Carver explained how the avalanche had almost buried him and had caused him to lose the shotgun. He told her about continuing into the cliffs and discovering the withered stalks which had obviously been dropped by the Spindly. At first, he said, he had suspected a trap. The fact that the stalks were in differing stages of decay and none too numerous had caused him to rule out the trap angle.

He waited until he finished eating before mentioning the cave.

He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and pushed his chair back from the table. "I found where it live, Becca," he announced proudly. "It living in a cave by the chimney-rock where we dug the stone for the fireplace. The fireplace had been a family project. Becca, Thad, and Carver had spent three days loading rainbow colored chunks of rock on the cart and hauling them home. They had spent many a wintry evening sharing the warmth of their labor. Carver knew Becca remembered the chimney-rock.

"Where from the chimney-rock?" she asked.

"About fifty yards up the ravine. You remember where those four trees are, don't you?"

"Yes."

"To the left of the trees. I snuk up and listened at the mouth of the cave. I could hear it moving around and breathing. I didn't want to take any chances so I piled a bunch of rocks in front of the cave and sealed it up. Gonna take me some dynamite sticks tomorrow and blow that Spindly to bits."

"Suppose its able to dig its

way out and is waiting for you?"

"Those rocks too big for it," Carver said, shaking his head. "Almost too big for me to move." He rose from the table and caught Becca's arm. "You coming to bed with me, woman?"

"Oh, yes, Carver." Becca flung herself at him and buried her head against his chest. "I was so frightened," she said. "If anything happened to you I wouldn't want to live. I'd kill myself, Carver."

Arm in arm, they started for the bedroom. Carver thought of something he had omitted. "One funny thing, Becca," he said. "The Spindly been trying to grow stalks. It had a bunch of them planted in front of the cave, but they was all dried up and dead." Carver failed to notice that Becca's eyes widened and then narrowed in a puzzled frown. He was too excited about tomorrow's plan.

Becca was gone when Carver awoke the next morning. At first he lay in bed listening for the familiar sounds of breakfast being prepared. The absolute silence sent him into the kitchen with her name on his lips. Not finding her there, he ran out the door

into the yard in his underwear. She was gone!

Carver stood shivering in the morning stillness. He glanced wildly about and then hurried into the house. He found the note as he was sitting at the table tying his shoes. It was in Becca's handwriting.

Dear Carver:

No unintelligent creature would attempt to cultivate. We are dealing with something man has never encountered before. If, along with its desire to grow things, it wishes to kill, then I would rather it kill me. You made me very happy last night, Carver.

*I love you,
Becca*

Carver crumpled the paper in his fist and threw it against the wall. It had been a long time since Carver Jefferson prayed, but his lips moved silently as he sprinted out the door. God forbid that Becca would find a way to remove the barricade from the front of the cave.

When Carver reached chimney-rock, he could see that the cave's mouth was clear. His breath was coming in great sobs, burning into his lungs like fire. He shouted Becca's name and the gully echoed

with the sound of his voice. He stumbled and almost fell. With another bellow of rage, he breasted the four trees and disappeared into the inky black hole.

The eerie purplish glow stopped Carver short. He heard only his own labored breathing. He turned to see what had brushed against his face as he entered and found that a heavy black curtain had been hung across the opening. The glow seemed to come from every square inch of the cave at once. At first, he could make out very little.

"Becca." His voice was little more than a dry croak. He peered about and then what he was seeing began to register. On his left was a mound of plastic crates and boxes. Some were open. Many more were not. At the rear of the cave stood a small couch. Carver couldn't help thinking that it was just the size for a Spindly. But it was *machine* made. He pressed his hand into its soft padding. It was, he decided, very much like the acceleration couches on shipboard.

Carver retreated slowly to the curtained opening. His jaw fell as he noticed the tiers of books. Higher than his head, they stretched across the right wall. And there

were strange pieces of machinery on the floor, with tendrils of insulated wire protruding aimlessly from their backs. The Spindly *was* intelligent. Carver's mind accepted the fact. And now it had Becca.

Carver emerged from the cave into the bright sunlight. Blinking against the unaccustomed glare, he tried to imagine where the Spindly would take Becca. It wouldn't, he decided, move deeper into the cliff area without its belongings. If it had weapons, it would have used them long ago. Carver ruled out the factor of it attempting personal combat. An avalanche yes, but it was far too small to rely on physical strength. Where would it go? The answer hit him like a giant fist, right in the pit of the stomach. The Spindly would head for the prefab!

Carver erupted into motion. The gully echoed with the clatter of loose stones. Carver cursed himself as he ran. Of course the Spindly would try for the prefab. Once there it would take what it wanted, kill Becca, and destroy what was left. In doing so it would even the odds a great deal. Carver offered his silent prayer again as he

passed the spot where Thad had been killed. In the middle of it, one of Becca's sayings came into his mind. "If you don't pray while its sunny, why pray when it rains?"

Carver felt relief spread through his tired body as he emerged from the stunted forest into the grass. The acre of Samash was swaying in the soft breeze and at this distance he could see no signs of damage to the prefab. He put his head down and tried to force every last bit of speed from his knotted muscles. If something happened to Becca, he knew he could never forgive himself. She had begged him to stay away from the Spindly.

The grass seemed to clutch at his legs as he ran. He was able to increase his speed the instant he reached the road. The closer he came to the prefab, the more blurred his vision became. Perspiration was streaming into his eyes. His legs threatened to cramp into unyielding knots with each step. He tried to ignore the flashes of pain that ran across his hips down into his calves. He stumbled across the yard and threw himself at the closed door. It opened instantly beneath his weight, sending him sprawling into the kitchen.

Carver's momentum carried him almost to the kitchen table. He swallowed the sour fluid that was bubbling convulsively in the back of his throat and tried to gather his legs beneath him. His groping hands caught the edge of the table. He pulled himself erect and found himself staring into Becca's face. She was seated across the table from him.

"You all right?" he croaked.

"Tired, but all right."

"The Spindly . . . I thought it . . .?"

"He, Carver."

"What?"

"The Spindly is a he."

"Spindly a he?" Carver shook his head groggily. Then he remembered the strange machines in the cave. "Set the beacon. I saw the inside of the cave. We got to kill it. Ship'll bring guns."

"His name is Istal, Carver. I dressed his foot where you shot him."

Carver eased his tired body into a chair and tried to make sense of what Becca was saying. Everything was becoming so complicated.

"Istal is only a child, Carver. He has a mechanical translator that allowed us to communicate. His parents were killed when their starship crashed and burned in the middle of what is now your

acre. He . . . he thought I was going to kill him." Becca stretched her hands across the table and grasped Carver's arm. He could feel her trembling.

Then Carver realized she was pleading with him to let the Spindly live. "He killed my boy, Becca. The rest I could forget, but not my boy." Noticing the open door was a knife in the heart for Carver. The door was open. The door they pretended did not exist, the door they had not mentioned since Thad's death, was open. Carver rose cautiously. "You opened Thad's door?"

"Carver, listen to me. The Samash and the elements which make it grow were the cargo Istal's parents carried. He needed it to live. He's even younger than Thad was, but he tried to grow his own."

"He killed my boy," Carver muttered.

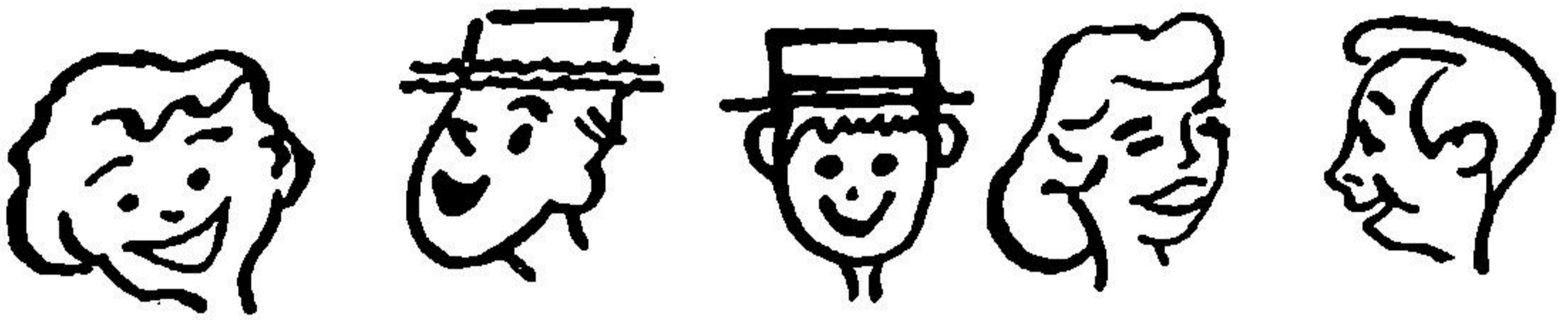
"Do you think a fifteen-year-old boy could move a ton of rock off his legs when they were crushed?" Becca asked. "And if he did, is it possible that he could splint his leg? Don't you see, Carver? Istal did all that." Becca's words rebounded inside Carver's skull. "He was with Thad when he died, Carver. Thad told him things about us he

would only tell a friend. Our boy was not alone when he died." Becca hesitated for a moment. "I want you to let Istal take Thad's place in our house."

Carver faced the bedroom door squarely. He pushed it open and stepped inside. His fists, clenched into tight balls, slowly relaxed. The sunlight fell in a golden shaft across the bed. Its occupant seemed even smaller to Carver at this distance. A miniature green face, features finely cut, nestled against the white sheets. One small hand hung over the edge of the bed. As Carver watched, the Spindly, Istal, rolled on his stomach and with a contented sigh burrowed deeper beneath the covers.

Carver swallowed the uncomfortable lump in his throat and backed out, closing the door gently behind him. He saw the two huge tears standing on Becca's cheeks and the lump returned. With a great deal of effort, he forced the gruffness back into his voice. "Gonna be pretty hard," he rasped. "But I guess a big black man like me can get used to a little green boy like that."

It was not the first time Carver Jefferson had made a pet of a little runt. **THE END**



According to you...

Dear Editor:

Today I bought and read the new issue, January 1960, of *Fantastic*. Now this is the first fan letter I've ever written to a magazine, but I believe that you really deserve it.

I liked all your stories as usual but I found two that were better than I thought any others. One was "The Funnel of God" by Bob Bloch. The other one, which I thought was the best one that you have printed for many months was "Days of Darkness" by Evelyn Goldstein. It is one of the best stories ever read from your magazine.

This is not just my opinion either as we are having a little get-together at my house this afternoon and there are about fifteen or twenty people here already and everyone of them without exception agree with me. Also we think you should include more, many more of her stories in future issues. How about publishing a one-woman issue featuring Evelyn. We think it is a terrific idea.

We say that we would buy the whole magazine when you include stories by her, even if you had just empty pages for the rest of the book. So let's see some more stories by Evelyn.

Jerry Kimball
15 Fairview Avenue
Peabody, Mass.

- *Was Evelyn at your house for the party?*

Dear Editor:

I thought the last issue of *Fantastic Science Fiction Stories* was one of the very best recent issues that you ever put out. I guess you might call it a special Christmas issue with such a fine short novel like Keith Laumer's "Diplomat-At-Arms" and the short by Irving Cox.

As long as I have been reading both *Fantastic* and *Amazing* I have not noticed one thing: and that is a Santa Claus on the front cover.

James W. Ayers
609 First Street
Attalla, Alabama

• *And by God you never will!*

Dear Editor:

The January issue of *Fantastic* was great; "Diplomat-At-Arms," by Keith Laumer was very, very good. It rates A-1 in my book. "In The Circle of Nowhere," "The Complete Father," and "Days of Darkness" were very good also.

I am a steady reader of *Fantastic* and it is an example of true, excellent, science fiction. Please keep up the good work.

David E. Mann
4529 Rhode Island Street
San Diego 16, California

Dear Editor:

There has been a deal of criticism in regard to the addition of the words "Science Fiction Stories" to your previously naked title *Fantastic*. Let me say that I am happy and pleased to see you do it! I've always thought that the title s-f should be the prominent part of any magazine's cover name, and it satisfies me to see your two publications unashamed to display it.

Take the case of two of your generally accepted overlords: (Ed. Note:?) *Galaxy* and *Astounding*. The former has removed the classification—science fiction—from its title because, so the editor claims, ". . . it frightens people away." Now I like *Galaxy*, but I can't see its worth in this field if the editor feels the only way he can increase sales is to "con" prospective readers into purchasing his product. Next thing we know the very title will be removed because of the ulterior connotations there present.

Astounding, so they say, is changing titles. This magazine has always been afraid of a decent s-f cover, having to resort to camouflaged rockets and strange shadowy beasts that one

can hardly see. Well—good luck *Analog*; here's hoping some fiction is thrown in with the fact we're going to get.

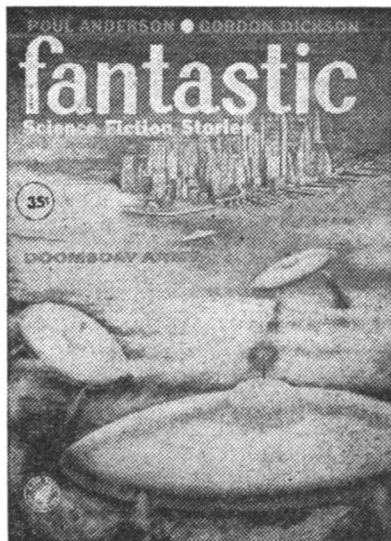
So you have my strongest congratulations. Science Fiction is no field where, because of a hazy definition of terms, stories of fantasy, supernatural, psi, and whatever else have you cannot be included in this type magazine. I hope the SFS part of your title is there forever.

John Pesta
619 Greenleaf St.
Allentown, Penna.

• *Our theory is, if you're publishing a science-fiction magazine, say so. Of course, if you're publishing a gimmick, or a pseudo-technical trade journal. . . .*

COMING NEXT MONTH

A real wild issue—that's the word about the April **FANTASTIC**.



For example, our cover story, *Doomsday Army*, is about a reserve officer who never had so many troubles as when Earth was invaded—and who ultimately never had it so good. Author **Jack Sharkey** has gone off the deep end on this one.

Backing this up is a novelet by **Poul Anderson**, *Eve X Four*, in which a Casanova-ish young spaceship navigator plans to open his own harem on an abandoned planet—and does! Not to be outdone by his sometime-collaborator, **Gordon Dickson** provides us with a haunting story of a boy and his dreams, and how *The Summer Visitors* fulfilled them.

A handful of other stories, plus the regular features, flesh out a first-rate issue. Reserve your copy of the April **FANTASTIC**, on sale February 18, at your newsdealer's. Look for the big white flying saucers on the cover!

Even from 1,000 feet the town looked frightened. It lay tense under the shimmering heat—and under the frightful vengeance of . . .

THE BOTTICELLI HORROR

By LLOYD BIGGLE, Jr.

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

JOHN ALLEN had seen many such towns, hidden away in remote valleys or rising up unexpectedly amidst rolling farm lands, like this town of Gwinn Center, Kansas. He'd found them all vaguely alike, so much so that even their differences seemed similar.

Gwinn Center had other differences to single it out from the others.

The streets were deserted. The clumsy ground vehicles that crept along the twisting black ribbon of roadway miles beyond the town were all of them headed south, running away. Stretched across the rich green of the cultivated fields was a wavering line of dots. The dots enlarged, as Allen slanted his plane downwards, and became men, edg-

ing forward doggedly, holding weapons at the ready.

But the town was not completely abandoned. As Allen circled to pick out a landing place he saw a man dart from one of the commercial buildings, run at top speed along the center of a street, and with a final furtive glance over his shoulder, disappear into a house.

None of this surprised Allen. The message that had been plunked on his desk at Terran Customs an hour and a half before was explanation enough. The lurking atmosphere of terror, the fleeing townspeople, the grim line of armed men—Allen had half-expected these.

It was the tents that puzzled him.

They formed a square in



The soldier found that even his gun was useless against the deadly Night Cloaks.

a meadow near the edge of town, a miniature village of flapping brown and green canvass, surrounding a clutter of amazing and wierdly-shaped contraptions of uncertain function and unknown purpose.

Allen's message didn't account for the tents.

He circled again, spotted the white numbers of a police plane that was parked on one of the town's wider streets. A small group of men stood nearby, in the shadow of a building. Allen completed his turn, and headed towards them.

Doctor Ralph Hilks lifted his nose from the scientific journal that had claimed his entire attention from the moment of their takeoff, and peered down curiously. "Is this the place? Where is everyone?"

"Hiding, probably," Allen said. "Those that haven't already left."

"What are the tents?"

"I haven't any idea," Allen said. He looked again and declined to speculate, even to himself.

Hilks grunted. "Looks as if we've been handed a hot one," he said, and went back to his reading.

Allen concentrated on the

landing. They floated straight down, and came to rest beside the police plane with no more than a gentle nudge from the ground.

Hilks closed his journal a second time. "Nice," he said.

"Thanks," Allen said dryly, as he cut his motor. "It has the new-type shocks."

"That's what I figured. I didn't think you'd improved that much."

They climbed out. The little group of men—there were four of them—moved out from the building and stood watching them. Allen went to meet them, not caring to waste time on the usual formalities.

"Allen is my name," he said. "Chief Customs Investigator. And this—" He paused until the pudgy, slow-moving scientist had caught up with him. "—This is Doctor Hilks, our scientific consultant."

The men squared away for introductions. The tall one was Fred Corning, State Commissioner of Police. The young man in uniform was Sergeant Darrow. A sturdy, deeply tanned individual with alert eyes and slow speech was Sheriff Townsend. The fourth man, old, wispy, with startlingly white, unruly hair and eyeglasses that looked to be lifted from some museum, was Doc-

tor Anderson, a medical doctor.

Allen studied the men carefully during the introductions. They were grim, and the horror that gripped the town had not left them unmarked, but at least they were not frightened.

"You didn't waste any time getting here," the commissioner said. "We're glad of that."

"No," Allen said. "Let's not waste time now."

"I suppose you want to see the—ah—remains?"

"That's as good a place to start as any."

"This way," the commissioner said.

They turned, and moved off down the center of the street.

The house was one of a row of houses at the edge of town. It was small and tidy-looking—white, with red shutters and window boxes full of flowers. The splashes of color should have given it a cheerful appearance, but somehow they did not. Nothing appeared cheerful in that town on that day.

The yard at the rear of the house was enclosed by a shoulder-high picket fence. They followed a walk that circled the house, and paused while the commissioner fussed

with the fastener on a gate. Doctor Hilks stood gaping at the row of houses, and as the gate swung open the commissioner looked at him, and asked, "See anything?"

"Chimneys!" Hilks said. "Every one of these dratted buildings has its own chimney. Think of it—a couple of hundred heating plants where one would do an efficient job for a town this small. Why, the waste must be . . ."

The others moved on through the gate and left him talking to himself. He broke off, and hurried after them.

A sheet lay on the ground, thrown loosely over some unnatural contours.

"We took photographs, of course," the commissioner said. "But it's so incredible—we wanted you to see—"

The four men each took a corner, raised the sheet carefully, and moved it away. Allen caught his breath, and took a step backwards.

"We left—things—just as they were," the commissioner said. "Except for the child that survived, of course. He was rushed . . ."

At Allen's feet lay a child's head, a blond little girl with blue eyes and tousled hair. She was no more than six, a young beauty who doubtless had already caused romantic

palpitations in the hearts of her male playmates.

But no longer. The head was severed cleanly, just below the chin. The eyes were wide open, and on the face was a haunting expression of indescribable terror. A few scraps of clothing lay where her body should have been. Nothing more.

A short distance away were other scraps of clothing, and two shoes. Allen winced as he saw that one shoe contained a foot. The other was empty.

He circled around to the other side, where two more shoes lay. Both were empty. He turned to Hilks, who was kneeling by the pathetic little head.

"No bleeding?" Hilks asked.

"No bleeding," Doctor Anderson said hoarsely. "If there had been, the other child—the one that survived—would have died. But the wounds were—cauterized, you might say, though I doubt that it's the right word. Anyway, there wasn't any bleeding."

Doctor Hilks scratched his head. "You mean heat was applied . . ."

"I didn't say heat," Doctor Anderson said testily.

"We figure it happened like this," the commissioner said.

"The three children were playing here in the back yard. They were Sharon Brown, the eldest, and her little sister Ruth, who was maybe three, and Johnnie Larkins, from next door, about five. The mothers were in the house, and no one would have thought anything could possibly happen to the kids."

"The mothers didn't hear anything?" Allen asked.

The commissioner shook his head.

"Strange they wouldn't have yelled, or screamed, or something."

"Perhaps they did. But the carnival was making a powerful lot of noise, so the mothers didn't hear anything."

"Carnival?"

The commissioner nodded at the tents.

"Oh," Allen said, noticing them for the first time since he'd entered the yard. "So that's what it is."

"The kids were probably standing right together, playing something or maybe looking at something, and they didn't see the—see it—coming. When they did see it they tried to scatter, but it was too late. It was on them, and it pinned them down. Sharon was completely covered, except for her head. Ruth was covered, except for one foot.

And Johnnie, maybe because he was the most active, or maybe because he was standing apart a little, almost got away. He got clear, except for his legs. He was covered to just above his knees. And then—the THING ate them.”

Allen shuddered in spite of himself. “Ate them? Bones and all?”

“Perhaps that is the wrong word,” Doctor Anderson said. “I should say *absorbed* them.”

“Most of their clothing,” too,” Allen said. “And Sharon’s shoes.”

The commissioner shook his head. “No. No shoes. Sharon wasn’t wearing any, and it left the others. Well, this is what the mothers found when they came out. They’re both of them in bad shape, and I doubt that Mrs. Brown will ever be the same again. We don’t really know if Johnnie Larkins is going to live, either. We don’t know what the after-effects might be when something like that eats part of you. But all that is none of my business. My business is to keep it from happening again.”

“Any ideas?” Allen asked Hilks.

“I’d like to know a little more about this THING. Did anyone catch a glimpse of it?”

“Probably a couple of thou-

sand people around here have seen it,” the commissioner said. “Now we’ll go talk to Bronsky.”

“Who’s Bronsky?” Allen asked.

“He’s the guy that owned it.”

They left Doctor Anderson to gather up the pathetic remains. Commissioner Corning led the way through a gate at the rear, and across the meadow to the tents. They circled, and came to an entrance.

JOLLY BROTHERS SHOWS, a fluttering streamer said.

They entered, Hilks perspiring under the hot sun and mopping his face with a handkerchief, Allen looking about alertly, and the others walking ahead in silence.

Allen turned his attention first to the strange apparatus that jammed the broad avenue between the tents. He saw miniature rocket ships, miniature planes, miniature ground cars, and many devices too devious in appearance to identify, but he quickly puzzled out the meaning. A carnival was a kind of traveling amusement park.

But where was the connection between a traveling amusement park and a monster from outer space?

Hilks paused to look at a poster featuring a row of scantily-clad young ladies. "They look cool," he murmured, mopping his face again.

Allen took his arm, and pulled him along. "Yeah," he said. "And they are unmistakably of terrestrial origin."

"This place is something right out of the twentieth century," Hilks said. "If not the nineteenth. Did you ever see one before?"

"No," Allen said. "But I've seen stuff like this in amusement parks. I guess a carnival just moves it around."

Sheriff Townsend spoke over his shoulder. "This carnival has been coming here every year for as long as I can remember."

They passed a tent that bore the flaming title, EXOTIC WONDERS OF THE UNIVERSE. There were lavishly-colored illustrations. A gigantic flower that Allen recognized as vaguely resembling a Venusian Meat-Eater was holding a struggling rodent in its fangs. A vine, also from Venus, was in hot pursuit of a frantic young lady who was presumably surprised in the act of dressing, since she wore only her undergarments. There were others, all from

Venus, Allen thought, though the poster mentioned lichens from Mars, and a Luna Vacuum Flower.

"That isn't the place," the commissioner said. "There isn't anything in there but plants and rocks."

"I'd like to take a look," Allen said. He raised the tent flap. In the dim light he could see long rows of plastic display cases. Each case had, as far as he could see, the bright yellow import permit of Ter-ran Customs.

"Things seem to be in proper order," he said. "But I'll be back to take another look later."

They moved on, and stopped in front of the most startling picture Allen had ever seen. A girl arose genie-like from the yawning opening of an enormous shell. Her shapely body was human—perhaps. Tentacles intertwined nervously where her hair should have been. Her hands were webbed claws, her facial expression was the rigid, staring look of a lunatic, and her torso tapered away into the sinister darkness of the shell's interior.

"This is it," the commissioner said.

"This?" Allen echoed doubtfully.

"That's one of the things it

did in the act," the commissioner said.

Hilks had been staring intently at the poster. Suddenly he giggled. "Know what that looks like? There was an old painting by—was it Da Vinci? One of those early Italians. Botticelli—that's it. It was called *The Birth of Venus*, and it had had a dame standing on a shell in just about that posture. Except that the dame was human, and not bad looking. I wonder what happened to that painting. Maybe it went up with the old Louvre. Anyway, I've seen reproductions of it. I think I have one at home, in a book."

"I doubt that it has much bearing on our present problem," the commissioner said dryly.

Hilks slapped his thigh. "Allen! Some dratted artist has a fiendish sense of humor. I'll give you odds this THING comes from Venus. It'll have to. And the painting was called, *The Birth of Venus*. From heavenly beauty to earthly horror. Pretty good, eh?"

"If you don't mind . . ." the commissioner said, and continued to lead them inside.

They followed him into the tent. Allen caught a passing glimpse of a sign that read,

"Elmer, the Giant Snail. The World's Greatest Mimic . . ."

There was more, but he didn't bother to read it. He figured he was too late for the show.

Bronsky was a heavy-set man of medium height, with a high forehead that merged with the gleaming dome of his bald head. His eyes were piercing, angry. At the same time he seemed frightened of something.

"Elmer didn't do it!" he shouted.

"So you say," the commissioner said. "This is Chief-Investigator Allen. And Doctor Hilks. Tell them about it."

Bronsky swallowed, and said nothing.

"Do you have a photograph of Elmer?" Allen asked.

Bronsky nodded, and disappeared through a curtain at the rear of the tent. Allen nudged Hilks, and they walked together towards the curtain. Behind it was a roped-off platform, six feet high. On the platform was a shallow metal tank. The tank was empty.

"Where Elmer performed, no doubt," Allen said.

"Sorry I missed him," Hilks said. "I use the masculine gender only as a courtesy due the name. We humans tend to take sex for granted, even in

lower life forms, and we shouldn't."

Bronsky returned, handed Allen an envelope. "I just had these done," he said. "I think I'll make a nice profit selling them after the act."

"If I were you," Allen said, "I'd go slow stocking up."

"Aw—Elmer wouldn't hurt nobody. I've had him nearly three years. If he was going to eat somebody, he'd start on me, wouldn't he? Anyway, he won't even eat meat unless it's ground up pretty fine, and he don't care much for it then. He's mostly a vegetarian."

Allen took out the glossy prints, and passed the top one to Hilks.

"Looks a little like a Giant Conch Shell," Hilks said. "Only much larger, of course. What did he weigh?"

"Three fifty," Bronsky said.

"I would have thought more than that. Has he grown any since you got him?"

Bronsky shook his head. "I figured he was full grown."

"He came from Venus?"

Bronsky nodded.

"I don't recall any customs listing of a creature like this."

Allen was studying the second print. It resembled—vaguely—the painting they had seen outside. The shell was there, as in the first

photo, and protruding out of it was the caricature of a shapely Venus. The outline was hazy, but recognizable.

The other photos showed other caricatures—an old bearded man with a pipe, an elephant's head, an entwining winged snake, a miniature rocket ship—all looming up out of the cavernous opening of the mammoth shell.

"How do you do it?" Hilks asked.

"I don't do it," Bronsky said. "Elmer does it."

"Do you mean to say your act is genuine? That the snail actually forms these figures?"

"Sure. Elmer loves to do it. He's just a big ham. Show him something, or someone, and first thing you know he's looking just like that. If you were to walk up to him, he'd think it over for a few seconds, and then he'd come out looking pretty much like you. It's kind of like looking into a blurred mirror. I use that to close my act—I get some guy up on the stage, and Elmer makes a pretty good resemblance of him. The audience loves it."

Hilks tapped the photo of the distorted Venus. "You didn't find a live model for that."

"Oh, no," Bronsky said. "Not for any of my regular

acts. I got a young artist fellow to make some animated film strips for me. I got a projector, and there's a screen up over the stage. The audience can't see it, but Elmer can. As soon as I put something on the screen, he goes to work. That one there is a pretty good one. That snake hair twists all around, and the hands make clawing motions at the audience. It goes over big."

"I'll bet," Hilks said. "What does Elmer use for eyes?"

"I don't know. I wondered about that myself. He's got no eyes, but he can see better than I can."

"Did Elmer live in the water?"

"It didn't seem to make much difference to him," Bronsky said. "So I didn't keep him in water. It's hard to tote a big tank of water around. He drank a lot, though."

Hilks nodded, and called the commissioner over. "Here is how I see it," he said. "Superficially, Elmer resembles some of the terrestrial univalve marine shells. That's undoubtedly deceptive. Life developed along different lines on Venus, and there's certainly no real similarity. On the other hand, we might get a clue from our own marine shells. Some of the carnivores

produce an acid which they use to capture their prey. Mostly they use it to etch holes in other shells, but the fact is worth considering. Then there's the common star fish, which paralyzes its victim with acid, and then extrudes its stomach outside its body, wraps it around the victim, and digests it. Something like that must have happened to the kids. An acid is the only explanation for the effect of cauterization, and the way their bodies were—absorbed, the doctor said, a very good word—means that the corrosive agent had a terrifying potency. It had to happen so quickly, and it doesn't seem possible. I don't see how this creature could move fast enough, either, to get clear of this tent and over to that house and surprise three agile children. Probably we could understand better if we once saw Elmer in action. But it happened, and it isn't a pleasant thing to think about."

"How did Elmer get away?" Allen asked Bronsky.

"I don't know. We'd just finished a show, and I closed the curtains and saw the people out of the tent, and then I went back to the stage—I always wait about ten minutes before I start drum-

ming up a crowd for a new show—and Elmer was gone. I don't know how he got away. I didn't know he could move around. He never tried before."

"No one saw him after that?" Allen asked the commissioner.

The commissioner shook his head.

"May I see Elmer's license?" Allen asked Bronsky.

Bronsky stared at him blankly. "Elmer's got no license."

Allen said wearily, "Section seven, paragraph nine of the Terran Customs Code, now ratified by most world governments—including this one. Any extra-terrestrial life form brought to this planet must be examined by Terran Customs, certified harmless, and licensed. Terran Customs may, at its discretion, place any restrictions it may deem necessary upon the custody or use of such life. Did Elmer pass Terran Customs?"

Bronsky brightened. "Oh. Sure. This guy I bought Elmer from, he said all that stuff was taken care of, and I wouldn't have any trouble."

"Who was he?"

"Fellow named Smith. I ran into him in a bar in San Diego. Told him I was in show

business, and he said he had the best show on Earth in his warehouse, and he took me to see Elmer. I walk into this room, and there's nothing there but a big shell, and the next thing I know I'm looking at myself. I knew it was a natural. He wanted twenty-five grand, and I didn't even try to talk him down. It was all the money I had, but I wrote him out a check right on the spot, and two days later Elmer and I were in business. We did well right from the start, and as soon as I got enough money together to have the film strips made we did even better. I got a receipt from this guy Smith. It's in a deposit box in Pheonix—I can probably get ahold of it if you want to see it."

"But Smith didn't give you a Terran Customs license for Elmer?"

Bronsky shook his head.

Allen turned away. "Place this man under arrest, Commissioner."

Bronsky yelped. "Hey—I haven't done anything. Neither has Elmer. You find Elmer and bring him back to me. That's your job."

"My job is to protect the human race from fools like you."

"I haven't done . . ."

"Look," Allen said. "Ten,

twelve years ago there was a serious famine in Eastern Asia. Remember? All the food reserves of the rest of the world were hardly enough to stop it. There was no harvest of cereal crops for two years, and it all happened because a young space cadet brought home a Venusian flower for his girl. It was only a potted plant—nothing worth bothering customs about, he thought. But on that plant were lice—Venusian lice. Not many Venusian insects would thrive in Earth's atmosphere, but these did, and they had the food supply of Japan and China ruined before we knew they were around. By the time we stopped them they were working into India and up into the Democratic Soviet. We spent a hundred million dollars, and finally we had to import a parasite from Venus to help us. That parasite could eventually do us as much harm as the lice. It'll be decades before the whole mess is cleared up.

"We have dozens of incidents like this every year, and each one is potentially disastrous. Even if Elmer didn't kill those kids, he could be carrying bacteria capable of decimating the human race. This is something for you to think about in the years ahead. The minimum prison

term for having unlicensed alien life in your possession is ten years."

Bronsky, stricken silent, was led away by Sergeant Darrow.

"But if he can prove that Smith story, they'll probably let him off easy," Allen said.

"Do you suppose there really was a Smith?" the commissioner asked.

"It's likely. There've been a lot of Smiths lately. It was a mistake for the government to dump those surplus space ships on the open market. A lot of retired spacers picked them up, expecting to make a fortune freighting ore. And when they found they couldn't make expenses that way, they took to smuggling in anything they could pick up, figuring that souvenirs from outer space would bring them nice profits. Unfortunately, they were right. Who's this?"

A dignified, scholarly-looking man entered the tent, and stood waiting by the entrance.

"Did you want something?" the commissioner asked.

"I'm Professor Dubois," the man said. "You probably don't remember me, but a short time ago you were asking if anyone had seen that perfidious snail. I haven't seen it, but I can tell you one of the

places it went. It went into my tent, and broke open one of my display cases, and ate an exhibit."

"Ah!" Allen said. "You'll be from the Exotic Wonders of the Universe. And the snail ate one of the 'Wonders'?"

"I don't know who else would have wanted it."

"What was it?"

"Venusian moss."

"Interesting. It's been on Earth nearly three years, and it probably missed its natural diet. Let's go take a look."

A plastic display case at the rear of the tent had been ripped open. Inside lay a bare slab of mottled green rock—Venusian rock.

"When did it happen?" Allen asked.

"I couldn't say. Sometime when the tent was empty, I suppose."

"None of your customers mentioned it?"

"No. But they wouldn't, anyway. And it's at the back, here, kind of out-of-the-way. I wouldn't have kept it, except some of the older folks like this sort of thing. It had an interesting color scheme—yellows and reds and blacks, with a kind of sheen to it."

"And so friend Elmer likes moss. That's an interesting point, since Bronsky claims

that he was by preference a vegetarian. Thank you for letting us know. If you don't mind, we'll take charge of this display case. We might be able to let you have it back later."

"It's ruined now, anyway. You're welcome to it."

"Would you look after it, Commissioner," Allen said. "Just see that no one touches it until our equipment arrives. I want to take a close look at some of these wonders."

The commissioner sighed. "If you say so. But I can't help thinking you two aren't acting overly concerned about this thing. You've been here the best part of two hours, and all you've done is walk around and look at things and ask questions. I've got three hundred men out there in the fields, and what we're mostly worried about is how we're supposed to handle this snail if we happen to catch him."

"Sorry," Allen said. "I should have told you. I have five divisions of army troops being flown in. They're on their way now. The corps commander will place this entire county under martial law as soon as he touches down. Another five divisions are under standby orders, for use when and if the general thinks he needs them. We

have a complete scientific laboratory ordered, and the best scientists we can lay our hands on, and we're reserving one of the Venus frequencies for our own use in case we need information from the scientific stations there. Alien life is unpredictable, and we've had some bitter experience with it. And—yes, you might say we're concerned about it."

From somewhere off in the darkness came the snap of a rifle, and then another, and another, and finally a rattling hum as the weapon was switched to full automatic.

"I didn't expect that," Allen said.

"Why not?" Hilks asked.

"These are regular troops. They shouldn't be shooting at shadows."

"Maybe word got around about what happened to the kids."

"Maybe." Allen went to the door of their tent. Corps Headquarters was a blaze of light; the rest of the encampment was dark, but stirring ominously as men began to call to one another, asking about the shooting. The full moon lay low on the horizon, silhouetting the orderly rows of tents.

"What were you muttering

about just now?" Allen asked.

"I'm still trying to figure out how Elmer got his six-foot shell from one tent to another, and smashed that display, and ate the moss, and got himself across fifty yards of open ground and over a fence into that yard, and grabbed off the kids before they saw him coming, and got clean away. It's enough to make a man mutter."

"It was a better trick than that," Allen said. "He also did it without leaving any marks. No footprints, so-to-speak. Now you'd think an object that large and that heavy would crush a blade of grass now and then, but Elmer didn't. I spent an hour trying to find one. Which really leaves only one explanation."

"The dammed thing can fly."

"Right," Allen said.

"How?"

"It's the world's greatest mimic. Bronsky says so. When it feels like it, it can make like a bird."

Hilks rejected the suggestion profanely. "It must be jet-propelled," he said. "Our own squids can do it in water. No reason why a creature couldn't do it in air. But in order to raise that much weight, it'd have to pump . . . let's see, cubic capacity, air

pressure . . . what are you doing?"

"Going back to bed. I'd like to get some sleep, but between your muttering and your snoring it's a lost cause. Did you get a message off to Venus?"

"Yes," Hilks said. "I asked for Elmer's pedigree."

"I'll give you two-to-one Venus has never heard of him."

Hilks reflected. "I think fifty-to-one would be proper odds."

Allen closed his eyes. Hilks continued to mutter. Allen knew he would not be able to sleep until he had reduced the jet-propelled Elmer to a satisfactory mathematical basis. Allen considered it a waste of time. He had no faith in Earth mathematics when applied to alien life forms.

Hilks stopped muttering, and turned on a light. A moment later his portable computer hummed to life, and the muttering started again. Allen turned over, and kicked his blanket aside. The night was distressingly warm.

Footsteps crunched outside their tent. A tense voice snapped, "Allen? Hilks?"

"Come in," Allen said. Hilks continued to mutter, and punch buttons on his computer.

The tent flap zipped open, and a very young major stood blinking in at them. "General Fontaine would like to see you."

"Should we get dressed?" Allen asked. "Or is the general in a hurry?"

"I'd say he's in a powerful hurry."

Allen pulled on his dressing gown, and slipped on a pair of shoes. Hilks was out of the tent ahead of him, shuffling along in his pajamas. The camp seemed wide awake, now, voices coming from every tent. They moved quickly, with Hilks trotting to keep up with the major's long strides, and Allen following closely behind him.

They found General Fontaine in an operations tent, pacing up and down in front of a map board. An overlay of colored scribbles identified troop positions. The general had aged more than a few hours since Allen had seen him that afternoon. Obviously he had not been to bed, and he had the weary, frustrated look of a man who has just realized that he might not get to bed.

Allen felt sympathetic. The general was young, for a general, but he seemed competent, and doubtlessly he had

mastered command functions and the campaigns of ancient wars and was ready to fight a war of his own, in spite of the fact that land warfare had gone the way of the internal combustion engine and the electric light.

And now he had an opportunity, perhaps the only one that would come his way in his military career, and he found himself maintaining "defense" lines against one oversized alien mollusk. It was enough to make a military man weep, and General Fontaine looked as if he would do just that, when he found time.

"I've lost a man," he announced to Allen.

"How?" Allen asked.

"He's disappeared."

"Without a trace?"

"Not exactly," the general said. "There is one vestige. He left his shoes."

Despite strict orders that all sentries were to stand duty in pairs, the missing man, Private George Agazzi, had been posted alone on the edge of a small wood. Sentries nearby heard him shout, and then open fire. None of the others had seen anything suspicious. They could not leave their posts to investigate, but Agazzi's sergeant was on the

spot in something under five minutes.

By that time Agazzi had disappeared. A patrol was quickly organized. It searched the wood, found nothing. Reinforcements were called out. The area was searched in all directions, and then, an hour and a half later, a staff officer had found Agazzi's rifle, sundry items of equipment, and his shoes, not six feet from his sentry post. None of the searchers had seen them.

"Want to take a look?" the general asked.

Hilks shook his head. "In the morning, perhaps. We've already seen something similar, and I doubt if there's anything to be learned from it. Maybe you'd better put three men on a post."

"You think the snail got Agazzi?"

"I'm sure of it."

"He wasn't the best-disciplined soldier in my corps, but he was tough, and he knew how to handle himself. He fired a full clip of atomic pellets, and that would make mincemeat out of any snail. It doesn't make sense. I'd be inclined to think he just had an impulse to go A.W.O.L., if it weren't for . . ."

"Right," Hilks said. "He wouldn't have left his shoes."

They returned to their tent.

The camp seemed fully awake, now—uneasily awake. Men were being called out for patrol duty. Talk drifted down on them from all directions, subdued, almost sullen, with an occasional remark that was sharp enough to be understood.

“How often does this Thing get hungry?” one soldier wanted to know.

“Good question,” Hilks said, getting back to work on his computer.

Allen lay awake, sifting through the few facts he had collected. He could not make them fit together. He shuffled them about and worked them over, thinking his way laboriously around each one, testing it, pushing it aside, trying it again. Either he desperately needed more facts, or—could it be that he already had too many? He lay awake until dawn, wearily projecting his thoughts against the rumble of Hilks’ snoring and the restless stirring of the camp. Dawn came, and the crunch of passing feet as soldiers hurried off to breakfast. Allen had worn his facts threadbare, and learned nothing.

He could find only one avenue of exploration still open to him. He would have to interview young Johnnie Larkins, who had, through chance

or agility, lost only his legs to the Thing from Venus—and who had, Allen hoped, lived to tell about it.

General Fontaine had established a “Contaminated Zone,” centering around the town of Gwinn Center. The first problem, as he saw it, was to contain the Thing within this zone. The second problem would be to enter the zone and destroy it.

He had ringed the zone with armed men, and attempted to move all civilians out. Some of the carnival people and a few other crotchety individuals refused to go, one of them being Doctor Anderson. Allen advised against the use of force, so the general contented himself with gloomily forecasting their probable fate, and allowed them to stay.

Allen found Doctor Anderson in his home, which was also his office. The front room was tidily outfitted as a kind of waiting room, circled with antique-looking chairs. On the door to the inner office a small sign read, “Doctor is in. Please be seated.” Allen grinned, and then knocked on the door.

Doctor Anderson came bounding out with alacrity, perhaps expecting a patient,

for he scowled when he saw Allen.

"Oh," he said. "It's you. What do you want?"

Allen told him. The doctor's scowl deepened, and he said, "Office hours. I couldn't leave before noon, and I would have to be back . . ."

"I rather doubt that you will be having many patients this morning, Doctor," Allen said.

"Matter of principle," the doctor said.

"In fact, you aren't likely to be having any patients at all until this mess is cleared up. Perhaps the boy can help us."

Doctor Anderson stroked one withered cheek, and continued to scowl. Finally, with an abrupt motion, he turned to the sign on the door and reversed it. "Doctor is out," it read.

"I'll get my hat," he said.

They walked out to the street together, and Allen handed the doctor into his plane. He turned for a last look about the abandoned town, and felt a twinge of alarm as somewhere far down the street a door banged. "There should be troops stationed in town," he told himself. "I'll speak to the general about it."

They flew south. The doctor

continued to grumble until Allen patiently explained a second time that the boy would feel more comfortable answering questions with a familiar face present, and then the doctor sulkily settled down to watch the scenery.

Langsford was a modern city, with tall apartment buildings rising from its park-like residential section. The hospital lay nearby, a low, web-like building with narrow, sprawling wings and every room at ground level opening into a plastic-domed park.

They found the boy sitting in a powered chair outside his room, laughing gaily as a squirrel perched on each arm of his chair and a flock of brightly-colored birds fluttered around him. The birds flew into a nearby tree when they approached. The squirrels remained motionless.

"Hello, Johnnie," Doctor Anderson said.

The boy turned large, brown eyes on them, smiled at the doctor, and eyed Allen curiously.

"Found yourself a couple of pets, I see," the doctor said.

"They're my friends," the boy said. He ceremoniously offered each squirrel a nut.

"Mr. Allen wants to ask

you some questions about your —accident. Do you feel like talking about it?"

"I don't know much about it," the boy said.

"Can you tell me what happened, Johnnie?" Allen asked.

The boy shook his head. "We were playing. Sharon and Ruthie and me. Then it grabbed me. I couldn't get away. It hurt."

"What did it look like?"

"A rug," the boy said.

"A—rug? What sort of rug?"

"A real pretty rug. It was sailing through the air, and it landed on us."

"What color was it?"

The boy shrugged. "Lots of colors."

Allen scratched his head, and tried to visualize a sailing, multi-colored rug. "A big rug?" he asked.

"Real big."

"As big as a blanket?"

A frown. "Not a real big blanket, I guess."

Doctor Anderson said, in a low voice, "You can just about pinpoint the size by the area it covered."

"Yes," Allen agreed. "But I don't see—how high did it fly, Johnnie?"

"Don't know," the boy said.

"Was it attached to something?"

The boy looked puzzled.

"I mean, was it fastened onto something?"

"Don't know."

"Okay, Johnnie. We want to try and catch that rug before it hurts someone else. You've been a help. And if you should remember anything else about it, you tell your doctor here, and he'll see that I'm told. Keep that in mind."

They walked away, and left the boy with the motionless squirrels.

"Dratted waste of time," Doctor Anderson said.

"Perhaps. There's the matter of colors to consider. Could Elmer make himself different colors? The photos I saw were black and white."

"He could," the doctor said.

"You're sure about that?"

"I was one of the people he did an imitation of. This fellow Bronsky called me up on that platform. Just went out of curiosity. Then the dratted snail did an imitation of me. Made me feel like a blamed fool. But I was wearing a black suit and a red necktie, and it didn't have any trouble with those colors. Showed me wearing a black suit and a red necktie."

"Then that part is all right," Allen said. "But the part about flying through the air—I wonder if it could come

out of its shell and fly around.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“If it could, that might explain things.”

“Don’t see what there is to be explained. Catch the thing, and do away with it before it eats someone else. Explain about it afterwards, if you think you have to.”

The doctor had nothing more to say, not even when Allen landed him back in Gwinn Center. He shrugged off Allen’s thanks, and marched resolutely up to his front door. Through the window, Allen saw him reverse the sign so that it read, “Doctor is in. Please be seated.” And disappear into the inner office.

The laboratory plane, a gigantic old converted transport, had arrived when Allen got back to base camp. The scientists Hilks had requisitioned had also reported, though many of them would have little to do until someone brought in Elmer, dead or alive, for them to work on.

Hilks had set up an office for himself in what had been the navigation room, and he looked thoroughly at home, waving a cigar with one hand and a piece of paper covered with alarmingly-shaped symbols with the other. Two of the newly-arrived scientists

were listening and doing some symbol waving of their own.

“The trouble is,” Hilks announced to Allen, “all the experts we need are on Venus, because if they stayed here on Earth they’d have so little Venusian life to study that they wouldn’t be experts. And if we asked them to dash back here to help us cope with one so-called snail, they’d laugh us right out of the solar system. Did you get anything?”

“Maybe,” Allen said, dumping some books onto the floor so he could have a chair. “Elmer is talented. He decks himself out in technicolor. The doctor saw him on display, and verifies that. The boy says Elmer looked like a pretty rug flying through the air.”

“We figured he had to fly,” Hilks said.

“Yeah. But that little fellow is no dunce, and if he saw a big shell come whizzing through the air, I don’t think he’d call it a rug.”

“What do you want us to do?”

“The first thing is to come up with something that will help Fontaine capture it. And keep it captured.”

“Un huh,” Hilks said. “I’ve been studying the report on this Private Agazzi. He did empty a full clip at whatever

it was he saw, and his officer thinks he was a good enough shot to hit what he aimed at. And then this morning, while you were gone, a patrol spotted Elmer skimming across a field. They called it skimming. He vanished into some trees, and I do mean vanished. The general had a regiment standing by for just that contingency, and he dropped them around the place in nothing flat. That was two hours ago, and they still haven't found anything."

"No more men missing?"

"Not yet. Maybe Elmer hasn't had time to get hungry again. But we've come up with a thought that isn't exactly pleasant. Elmer might be able to reproduce all by himself, and if he likes it here enough to start populating the planet with baby snails, this continent could become a mighty unpleasant place to live."

"Have you come up with anything at all?"

"Sure. One of the boys is working on a nifty steel net to be dropped out of a plane—if Elmer is ever spotted from a plane. We're also working on some traps, but it's a little hard to decide what to use for bait, since the only thing Elmer seems to like to eat is people. We might ask for volunteers, and put cages inside

the traps to protect them. Touchy proposition, since we don't know what sort of a cage would keep Elmer out, just as we also don't know what sort of cage would keep him in."

"Did you do anything with that plastic display case Elmer broke into?" Allen asked.

"No," Hilks said. "I had it brought over here, but I forgot all about it. Let's go look at it now. Meyers, find someone who knows something about moss and fungus and related subjects."

"Never mind," Allen said. "Not now. We're slipping on this thing, Hilks. That exhibit was licensed, so Terran Customs will have a complete file. I'll get the number, and it shouldn't take me more than twenty minutes to get a report. Do you have a communications setup here?"

"Meyers will show you," Hilks said.

Allen copied down the number, and Meyers took him up front to the communications room. He called his office, using his own emergency channel. Ten minutes later he bounded back wildly to see Hilks.

"What's the matter?" Hilks asked.

"Everything. Better get

this Professor Dubois over here, and fast. That exhibit was never registered. The license is a forgery."

Professor Dubois waved his arms. "I never dreamed!" he exclaimed. "I have been extremely careful with all of my exhibits. It does not pay not to be careful. But you must admit that the license looks genuine."

Allen nodded. "You say you bought this one on the west coast. Tell us about it. Who sold it to you?"

"Let's see—it was two, three years ago. I was showing in upstate California. Fellow came in one day and said he was breaking up his own exhibit, and had a few things left to sell. He made them sound good, and I went all the way to San Diego to see what he had. It wasn't bad stuff—it would have been a good basic collection for someone starting out, but there wasn't anything there that would have helped my collection. But I hated to waste a trip, and he gave me a good price, so I took that one. It was a pretty thing."

"Could you describe this man?"

"I doubt it. It's been a long time. His name? Oh—that I remember. It was Smith."

"And you say it was Venusian Moss?"

"That's what he told me."

"Describe it again, please."

"Well, like I said, it was pretty stuff. Vivid colors, red and black and yellow and white, without any special pattern. It had a nice sheen to it. It looked like a hunk of thick blanket."

"Or rug?" Allen suggested.

"Well, yes. I suppose you could say rug."

Allen backed up, and sat down heavily. "Hilks, take a look at that case. Take a good look. I want to know if it was smashed by something breaking into it, or by something breaking out of it."

Hilks bent over the case. "It bulges," he announced. "If the snail could apply suction, it might have opened it this way."

Allen went over to take a look. "The sides bulge, too," he said. "It looks as if something inside was applying force in all directions, and the top gave first."

"Yes." Hilks peered inside, and nodded. "Yes, it looks that way. Without a demonstration to the contrary by the snail, I'd say something broke out of here."

Allen went back and sat down. For twenty years he had been studying Venus and

all things Venusian, assimilating every scrap of information and every voluminous report that came his way. Now he could rearrange his facts again, and this time he could make them fit.

"Ever hear of a Venusian Night Cloak?" he asked.

They shook their heads.

"You have now. Tell General Fontaine to call off his snail hunt. This problem may be worse than we thought."

They sat around a table in the large upper room of the lab plane—Allen, Hilks, General Fontaine, and Professor Dubois. As many scientists as could push their way into the room stood waiting.

Allen started the projector. The screen erupted a Venusian jungle, its blanched vegetation having a revolting, curdled appearance through the steaming mist. The camera shifted upwards, taking in a square of greenish sky. In the distance, just above the seething tree tops, appeared a blob of color. It enlarged slowly as it sailed towards them, a multicolored flat surface that rippled and twisted and curled in flight.

"That's it!" the professor exclaimed.

It came on until it filled the screen. Suddenly it plummeted

away, and the camera followed it as it disappeared into the jungle.

Allen switched off the projector. "Officially that's the closest anyone has gotten to one," he said. "Now we know otherwise. My feeling is that a number of scientists missing and presumed dead in the Great Doleman Swamp got rather too close to a Night Cloak."

The professor looked stricken. "This—my Moss—killed those innocent children?"

"None of our facts fit the snail. All of them fit the Night Cloak."

"Why do they call it a Night Cloak?" the general asked.

"It was first observed at night, and it seems most active then. It grows to an enormous size, and as far as anyone on Venus knows—and don't forget there's a lot of the planet to be explored yet—it is found only in the Great Doleman Swamp. That's the reason so little is known about it. A jungle growing in a swamp isn't the easiest place for field work, and a Venusian jungle is impossible. Stations on the edge of the swamp occasionally observed the Night Cloaks, always at a distance. They seemed to be an unique life form. The scientists were

naturally curious, and twice expeditions were sent out to capture a specimen. Both parties disappeared without a trace, but no one thought to blame the Night Cloaks. There are enough other things in that swamp that can do away with a man, especially some of the giant Amphibians.

"This is all the files have for us. The film strip was shot by a lucky pilot that happened to be hanging motionless over the swamp. A Night Cloak will not approach a moving plane. The scientific reports contain little but speculation. Frankly, gentlemen, we already know more about the Night Cloak than Venus does, and we're going to have to learn in a hurry something they haven't discovered in a hundred years of field work: How to catch one."

"This fellow Smith caught one," Professor Dubois said.

"It was obviously a young one," Allen said. "And it may be that they have periods of dormancy, when one could be picked up easily—fortunately for Smith. Being transported, and then being placed on Earth atmosphere probably helped to keep it dormant. It's our misfortune that it didn't die. But it lived, and eventually it was bound to wake up."

General Fontaine drummed on the table with his fingers. "You say we know more about the Night Cloak than Venus does?"

"We know, for example, that you can't shoot one. Venus never tried. Private Agazzi emptied a clip at one, with unfortunate results. He probably punched a lot of holes in it, but what good would that do? Where would the vital organs be in a creature thirty feet square and an inch thick? We know that it has strength. It broke that plastic display case apart. We know a few unpleasant things about its diet, and how it ingests food. Not much, but we're ahead of Venus. We even know that its victims are likely to leave their shoes behind, which may or may not be a vital bit of information. And we know that our contaminated zone isn't worth a damn because a Night Cloak can fly right over the ground troops, and maybe already has."

"I'll have to call up all the planes I can get ahold of," the general said. "I'll have to reorganize the ground troops so I can rush them in when the Thing is sighted."

"Excuse me, sir," said a young scientist named Meyers. "What was that you

said a moment ago about shoes?"

"Just a little peculiarity of our Night Cloak," Allen said. "It will totally consume a human body, and it doesn't mind clothing, but shoes absolutely do not appeal to it. It eats the feet and stockings right out of them, but it always leaves the shoes. It's one positive thing we do know."

"Just a moment," Meyers said. He pushed his way out of the room, and ran noisily down the stairway. He returned waving a newspaper. "I picked this up when I came through Langford this morning," he said.

He passed the paper to Allen, who glanced at the headline and shrugged. "MONSTER STILL AT LARGE," he read.

"That isn't exactly news to us," General Fontaine said.

"It's down at the bottom of the page," Meyers said. "This woman—she went out for a walk last night, and hasn't been seen since. They found her handbag in a park on the edge of Langford, and a short distance away they found her shoes."

Silence descended on the room. The general sucked in his breath sharply, and reached for the paper. Hilks leaned

back, folded his hands behind his head, and looked at the ceiling.

"Langsford," Allen said slowly. "Forty miles. But it also got Private Agazzi last night."

General Fontaine shook his head. "If we make this public, it'll start a panic. We'll have to evacuate the eastern half of the state. And if we don't make it public . . ."

"We'll have to make it public," Allen said.

The general sighed. "I'd better call in those reserve divisions. We'll need them for police work, and we'll need their transport to get the people out. And God knows how far that Thing may have gone by now."

There was an interruption. "Message from Venus," a voice called.

It was handed to Hilks, who read it, banged it down on the table, and looked about wildly. "I asked Venus about the mollusk," he said. "They've checked all their records, and as far as they know Elmer the snail has no Venusian relatives. They ask, please, if we will kindly send it along to them when we're through with it, preferably alive. They'd like to study it."

General Fontaine threw up his hands. "Shall I take care

of the news release," he said to Allen, "or do you want to handle it?"

"I'll handle it," Allen said, and reached for a piece of paper.

He studied a map for a moment, and wrote, "Notice to the populations of Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, and Colorado . . ."

For five days Allen sat at a desk in the lab plane, answering inquiries, sifting through reports and rumors, searching vainly for a fact, an idea, that he could convert into a weapon. The lab's location was changed five times, and he was hardly aware of the moves.

The list of victims grew with horrifying rapidity. A farmer at work in his fields, a housewife hurrying along a quiet street to visit a friend, a sheriff's deputy investigating a report of looting in an abandoned town, an off-duty soldier who left his bivouac area for reasons best known to himself—the list grew, and grew, and Hilks, feeling progressively worse, added the shoes to his collection.

"And this may not be the half of it," Allen said. "With so many people on the move, it'll be weeks before we get

reports on everyone who's missing."

General Fontaine's Contaminated Area doubled, and tripled, and tripled again. On the third day the Night Cloak was sighted near the Missouri-Kansas border, and the populations of four states were in motion, north, south, east and west, running away.

That same night old Doctor Anderson got a call through to Allen from Gwinn Center. "That dratted thing is fussing around my window," he said.

"Can't be," Allen said. "It was sighted two hundred miles from there this afternoon."

"I'm watching it while I talk to you," the doctor said.

"I'll send someone right away."

They found Doctor Anderson's shoes near a broken window, under the sign that read, "Doctor is in."

The next morning an air patrol sighted an abandoned ground car just across the Missouri border. It landed to investigate, and found mute evidence of high tragedy. A family of nine had been fleeing eastward. The car had broken down, and the driver had gotten out to make repairs. At that moment the horror had struck. In and around the car were nine pairs of shoes.

"I can't figure it," Hilks said. He was losing weight, and he had lost much of his good-natured nonchalance. "The Thing shouldn't be able to travel that fast, but it does. Unless that car had been sitting there a couple of days."

"It hadn't," Allen said. "Fontaine traced it. The family left home yesterday afternoon, and they'd have reached the place the car was found about ten o'clock."

"That's when the doctor called."

"Right," Allen said.

Lieutenant Gus Smallet was one small cog in the enormous observation grid General Fontaine hung over Eastern Kansas and Western Missouri. His plane was a veteran road-hopper, a civilian model pressed into service when the general received emergency authority to grab anything that could fly, and did. It was armed only with a camera, which Smallet had supplied himself.

Smallet flew slowly in a straight line, his plane being one of many keeping prescribed distances and flying prescribed courses. It was his third day on the search, his third day of taking off into the pre-dawn darkness and flying until daylight faded, and he was bored and tired. His head

ached. Other portions of his anatomy also ached, especially that which had been crushed against an uncomfortable seat for more hours than Smallet cared to remember. His movements had become mechanical, his thoughts had long since taken flight to other, more pleasant things than a Venusian Night Cloak, and he had even lost interest to the extent that he had stopped asking himself if he would recognize the damned thing if he happened to see it.

Suddenly, against the dark green of a cluster of trees, he glimpsed a fleck of color. He slipped into a shallow dive, gazing hypnotically as the indistinct blur grew larger and took on shape.

A bellow from his radio jolted him back to reality. His sharp-eyed commanding officer, whose plane was no more than a speck somewhere on the horizon, was telling him to stop horsing around and keep his altitude.

"I see the damned thing!" Smallet shouted. "I see . . ."

Then, as he blinked, and blinked again, what he did see so startled him that he babbled incoherently and did not realize until afterwards that he had instinctively flipped the switch on his camera.

It was well that he had done

so. His story was received with derision, and his commanding officer sniffed his breath suspiciously and muttered words that sounded direly like "Courts-Martial."

Then the developed film was brought in, and what Smallet had seen was there for all to gape at.

Not one Night Cloak, but five.

It was dark by the time the transports started pouring ground troops into the area. They lost seven men during the night, and saw nothing at all.

Solly Hertz was an ordinance sergeant with ability, imagination, and a commanding officer who sought to hide him under the proverbial bushel. Good ordinance men, as the old saying went, did not come off assembly lines.

So when Hertz told his captain that he had an idea about these Night Cloak things, and he wanted to go up to division ordinance to talk it over with someone, the captain paled at the thought of losing the one man who could keep his electronic equipment operating. He confined Hertz to the company area, and mopped his brow over his narrow escape.

Hertz went A.W.O.L., by-

passed division and corps and army, and invaded the sanctuary of the supreme air commander. That much-harassed general would never have heard of Hertz had he not chanced to see a squad of military police leading him away. Fortunately the general had enough residual curiosity first to inquire about the offence, and second to ask Hertz what he wanted.

"One of your guys sees one of these Night Cloaks," Hertz said. "What's he supposed to do about it?"

"Blast it," the general said promptly.

"Won't do any good," Hertz said. "Slugs and shrapnel just punch holes in it, and that don't bother it none. And a contact fuse wouldn't even go off when it hit. Like shooting at tissue paper."

"You think you can do something about that?" the general asked.

"I got an atomic rocket with a proximity fuse. It'll trigger just before it hits the thing. It'll *really* blast it."

"You're sure it won't go off at the wrong time, and cost me a pilot?"

"Not the way I got it fixed."

"How many have you got?"

"One," Hertz said. "How many do you want?"

"Just for a starter, about

five thousand. Tell me what you need, and get to work on it.”

Captain Joe Carr took off the next morning equipped with two of Hertz's rockets. Before he entered his plane he crossed fingers on both hands and spat over his left shoulder. And once inside the plane he went through a brisk ceremony of clicking certain switches on and off with certain predetermined fingers. Having thus dutifully sacrificed to the goddess of luck, he was not at all surprised an hour later when he sighted a Night Cloak.

It was a big one. It was enormous, and Carr glowed with satisfaction as he made a perfect approach, fired one rocket, and circled to see if another was needed.

It was not. The enormous, rippling surface was suddenly seared into nothingness—almost. Carr hit it dead center, and when he completed his turn he saw the Night Cloak looking, as he said later, like the rind off a piece of bologna.

But even as he yelped news of the triumph into his radio, the rind collapsed crazily, and parted, and four small, misshapen Night Cloaks flew gently downwards to disappear into the trees.

Private George Walker was thinking about shoes. Night Cloaks never ate shoes. Flesh and bones, and clothing, and maybe even metal sometimes, but not shoes. That was official.

“All right,” Walker told himself grimly. “If one of the Things comes around here, I'll kick the hell out of it.”

He delivered a vicious practice kick, and felt very little the better for it. And the truth was that Private George Walker had good reason for uneasiness.

His regiment was deployed around a small grove of trees. Two Night Cloaks had been sighted entering the trees. The place had been kept under observation, and as far as anyone knew they were still there. But the planes hovering overhead, and the cautious patrols of lift-equipped soldiers that looped skitishly over the grove, from one side to the other, had caught no further glimpse of them.

Walker had put in an hour of lift-patroling himself, and hadn't liked it. He had the uncomfortable feeling, as he floated over the trees and squinted down into the shadows, that someone was using him for bait. This was maybe excusable if it promised to accomplish anything, but so far

as anyone knew these Cloaks had a pernicious habit of making off with all the bait offered them, and never getting caught. The casualty list was growing with rocket speed, the Cloaks were getting fat—or at least getting bigger—and not one of them had been destroyed.

But some brass hat had decided that this nonsense had gone far enough. It was time to make a stand, and this insignificant grove of trees would serve as well as any place for the Armageddon of the human race.

Walker's captain had been precise about it. "If these things go on multiplying, it means the end of humanity. We've got to stop them, and this is the place and we're the guys to do it."

The men looked at each other, and a sergeant was bold enough to voice the thought all of them had. "Just how are we going to knock them off?"

"They're working out something now," the captain said. "I'll let you know as soon as I get the Word."

That had been early morning. Now it was noon, and they were still waiting for the Word. Walker kicked again, looking down at his indestructible shoe leather. "I'll kick

the hell out of them," he muttered.

"Walker!" his sergeant belted. "You going off your nut? Sit down and relax."

Walker walked towards the sergeant. "Hey, sarge. It's true, isn't it? That business about the Cloaks not eating shoes?"

Sergeant Altman took a cautious glance at his own shoes, and nodded.

"Shoes are made out of leather," Walker said. "Why don't we make us some suits out of leather? And gloves, too?"

The sergeant scratched his head, looking at his own shoes and then at Walker's. "Let's talk to the captain," he said finally.

They talked to the captain. The captain rushed the two of them off to see a colonel, and in no time at all they were in the hallowed presence of a general, a big, intense man whose glance chilled Walker to the soles of his feet, and who paced irritably back and forth while Walker stammered out what he had to say.

He finished. The general stopped pacing. "Congratulations, Private Walker," he said. "Someone should have thought of this three weeks ago, but no one did. It is men

like you who make our army great. I'll see that you get a medal for this, and I'll also see that you get all the leather you want."

They saluted, and turned away. They were not quite out of hearing when the general said to his aide, "Darned fool idea. Do you think it'd work?"

Dusk was dropping down on them when the "leather" arrived. Walker slipped on a leather jacket and boots that reached his knees. He wrapped pieces of leather around his upper legs and tied them on with strips of leather. He fashioned a rough leather skirt for himself, ignoring the snickers of those watching. Five others did the same—three privates, the sergeant and the captain. The captain tossed leather hats to them, and gloves, and Walker carefully worked the sleeves of his jacket down into the gloves.

"All right," the captain said. "This will have to do. If it works, they'll be making one-piece leather suits with something to protect the face, but we'll have to show them that it works. Let's get in there before it gets completely dark."

The grove was already ringed with lights, which pro-

duced freakish shadows in the half-darkness. The captain arranged them in a tight formation, himself in the lead and the sergeant bringing up the rear. A quick glance to see that all was ready, a nod, and they worked their way forward.

After an advance of ten yards the captain held up his hand. They stopped, and Walker, in his position on the right flank, looked about uneasily—up, down, sideways. A light breeze stirred the tree tops high over head. From the sky came the hollow buzz of a multitude of planes. The noise had a remote, unreal quality.

The captain signaled, and they moved on. Someone whispered something, there was a chuckle, and the captain hissed, "Silence!"

They reached the far side of the grove and turned back, walking faster. Walker realized quite suddenly that he was perspiring under the leather garments, that his inner clothing was sopped with sweat.

"I could do with a bath," he muttered, and the captain silenced him with a wave of his hand.

At the center of the grove they wheeled off at an angle. Walker became momentarily

separated from the others when he detoured around a dense clump of bushes. There was a warning shout, and as he whirled the Night Cloak was upon him.

He shielded his face with one arm, and swung a clenched fist. He withdrew his hand from a gaping hole and swung again. There was almost no resistance to his blows, and he riddled the pulsating, multicolored substance that draped over him. He had a momentary feeling of exultation. The leather worked. It was protecting him, and he would fix this Thing but good. He punched and clawed and tore, and huge pieces—of something—came away in his grasp. Someone was beside him, helping him. He had a glimpse of another furious battle taking place off among the trees with the other Night Cloak.

Then he was enveloped, and he screamed with agony as a searing, excruciating pain encircled one knee, and then the other. There were many hands fumbling around him, now, pulling shreds of Night Cloak from his struggling body. He raised both arms to protect himself, and became aware for the first time of a vile odor. Then the Thing flowed, slithered around

his arms and found his face, and he lost consciousness.

He awoke gazing at the restful pale gray ceiling of a hospital.

Someone in the next bed chuckled. "Came around, did you? It's about time."

He turned. Sergeant Altman sat on the edge of the bed, grinning broadly. Both of his wrists were bandaged. Otherwise he seemed unhurt.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Walker felt the bandage that covered most of his face. "It hurts like the devil," he said.

"Sure. You got a good stiff dose of it, too. Around your knees, and on your face. But the doc says you'll be as good as new after some skin grafts, and you're a hell of a lot better off than Lyle. It didn't get your eyes."

"What happened?" Walker asked.

"Well, the leather works good. None of us got hurt except where we weren't protected, or where the Things could get underneath the leather. So now they'll be making one-piece leather suits, with something to protect the face. Maybe a thick plastic. All of us are heroes, especially you."

"What happened to the Cloaks?"

"Oh, we tore them into about a hundred pieces."

Walker nodded his satisfaction.

"And then," Altman went on, "the pieces flew away."

Hilks had a scientific headquarters set up near what had been a sleepy little town north of Memphis. It was a deserted town, now, in a deserted countryside where no living thing moved, and the bustling activity around the lab plane seemed strangely inappropriate, like a frolic at a funeral.

John Allen dropped his plane neatly into a vacant spot among the two dozen planes that were parked near the lab plane. He looked at it for a long time before he walked towards it, and when he did move it was with the uncertain step of the outsider who expected at any moment to be ordered away.

For now the Night Cloaks were, as a general had put it that very morning, none of his business.

Two weeks before his assignment had been cancelled and his authority transferred to the military high command. It was not to be considered a demotion or

reprimand, his superiors told him. On the contrary, he would receive a citation for his work. His competence, and his years of devotion to duty, had enabled him to immediately recognize the menace for what it was, and take the best action possible. It had enabled him to quickly detect the presence of the Night Cloak on the scantiest of evidence. He had, in fact, done everything that it was possible to do, and this was one situation where no one could suggest anything that he should have done and didn't, so he would receive a citation.

But the control of the investigation was passed to the military because the Night Cloaks had assumed the dimensions of a national catastrophe that threatened to become international, and of course the nation's top military men could not be placed under the control of a civilian employee of an extra-national organization.

"Can I continue the investigation on my own?" Allen demanded.

His chief twiddled his thumbs impatiently. "I'd suggest that you take a vacation," he said.

So Allen had taken vacation leave, and immediately returned to the zone of action.

But he was temperamentally unsuited to the role of an observer. He made suggestions, and he criticized, and he attempted to prod the authorities into some kind of action, and that morning a general had ordered him out of the Contaminated Zone and threatened to have him shot if he returned.

The lab plane was inside the Contaminated Zone, but word of Allen's banishment seemed not to have reached it. A few scientists recognized him, and nodded. Allen went directly to Hilks' office, where he found Hilks sitting moodily at his desk, gazing fixedly at a bottle that stood in front of him.

Allen looked, stared, exclaimed, "Where did you get it?"

At the bottom of the bottle lay a jagged fragment of splotched red and yellow and black, that twisted and curled and uncurled. A fragment of a Night Cloak.

"Didn't you hear about the great leather battle?" Hilks asked.

"I heard," Allen said.

"Great fight, while it lasted," Hilks said. "Six infantrymen managed to convert two Cloaks into ninety or a hundred and twenty-five depend-

ing on whose estimate you accept. And this thing—" He nodded at the bottle. "—got left behind. It was only an inch long and a quarter of an inch wide, and it was too small to fly. I think one of the men must have stepped on the edge of a Cloak, and pinched it off. Anyway, it was found afterwards, so we've been working on it. I fed it a baby mouse, which it ate a little at a time, and now it's grown big enough to fly, so I'm not feeding it any longer."

"But this is just what you needed!" Allen exclaimed. "We should be able to wipe the Things out, now."

"Yeah? How? We tried every poison we could think of, not to mention a nitric acid solution that Ferguson dreamed up. It seems to like the stuff. We tried poison gasses, including some hush-hush things the military flew in. You can see how healthy it looks. Now I have my entire staff trying to think up experiments, and I'm just sitting here hating the Thing. A lot of good that does!"

"Anything new from Venus?"

"Yeah. They found a cousin of Elmer the snail. And since they now have one of their own to study, they tell us we

can keep ours. Good joke, eh?"

"Nothing about the Night Cloaks?"

"Well, they're very interested in what we've been able to tell them, and they thank us for the information. They're going to keep all their research teams out of the Great Doleman Swamp until we can tell them how to cope with the things. Other than that, nothing. So much for Venus."

"Too bad. I'd hoped they'd come up with something."

"It's worse than you realize. They've been so damned smug about the whole thing that there's a movement afoot to ban any travel to Venus. The other planets could be next, and then perhaps even the moon. After triumphantly moving out across the solar system and hopefully planning to conquer the stars, mankind crawls ignominiously back into his shell. Some of the pessimists think it may take us generations to handle the Cloaks, and in the meantime the Mississippi basin will become uninhabitable as far north as Iowa, and perhaps above the Canadian border in the summer. Whatever happens, I'm betting that the well-dressed man is going to be wearing a lot of leather. The well-dress-

ed woman, too. Do you have any bright ideas for us to work on?"

"I ran out of ideas on the third day," Allen said.

"While you haven't got anything else on your mind, you might work on this: Where are all the Night Cloaks?"

"The military seems to be keeping good track of them. That's one thing they do well."

"We have a rough tabulation of the minimum number that should be around, and we have a record of all the sightings. As far as we can tell, about ninety per cent have disappeared."

"We figured that they had periods of dormancy."

"Sure. But if they're going dormant on us, why hasn't someone found a dormant Night Cloak somewhere?"

Allen shook his head. "Mind if I stay around for the time being? The last friend I had on the general staff just had me thrown out of the Contaminated Zone. But he probably won't come here looking for me."

Hilks grinned. "What have you been up to?"

"I keep giving advice, even when I'm not supposed to. I told the general there wasn't much sense in picking Night

Cloaks apart just to make more, and smaller, Night Cloaks. And then they were designing some kind of face piece to be used in Cloak hunting, and I suggested that he spray it with tannic acid, or whatever that stuff is they use to make leather, because if the Cloaks don't like leather they might not like that. That was when he threw me out. He said he had ten thousand scientists telling him what to do, and he had to put up with them, but he didn't have to put up with me. So—what's the matter?"

"Tannic acid?" Hilks said.

"Isn't that the stuff? Not that it matters. Probably would have dried up anyway, on plastic."

But Hilks was already on his way to the door. "Meyers!" he shouted. "Get your crew in here. We have work to do."

By a coincidence, Allen entered the room first. The general, looking up sharply from his desk, flushed an unhealthy crimson, and leaped to his feet.

"You!" he shouted. "I told you . . ."

Hilks stepped around Allen. "Meet my assistant," he said. "Name of Allen."

The general sat down

again. "All right. I have my orders. Hilks and three assistants. I have the protective clothing ready for you, and I have a place picked out for you and a patrol to take you there."

"Good," Hilks said. "Let's get going."

"My orders also say that I'm not to let you get close to the Cloaks until I've satisfied myself that whatever it is you're going to do won't split them up into a couple of hundred new Cloaks."

Allen chuckled, and the general glared at him.

"We've developed a spray we'd like to try out on them," Hilks said.

"What'll it do to them?"

"You knew we had a specimen to work on? The spray seemed to anesthetize it. Of course there's a difference between spraying a Cloak sliver in a bottle, and a full-sized Cloak in the open air. We want to see what it'll do to them."

"You really don't know, then."

"If you want a written guarantee that this stuff won't make a Cloak split up, I can't give it to you. I don't think it's likely but we still know very little about these things. If we wait until we know all about them before

we take any action, there may not be enough humans left to make it worth the trouble."

"They multiply fast enough by themselves, without a bunch of hair-brained scientists helping them out. I can't let you go."

"All right," Hilks said. "We'll take it up with the Scientific Advisory Council. I'll ask them to send a general down here that doesn't use orders to think with."

"Now see here . . ." the general roared. But they ignored him, and walked out."

Meyers and a young scientist named Wilcox were waiting for them at their plane.

"What'd you get?" Hilks asked.

"Enough," Meyers said. "I bought a drink for a captain, over at the canteen. They've located four Cloaks in a swamp, about fifty miles south of here. He even showed me on a map."

"Let's go," Hilks said, "before the general decides to arrest us."

Allen took the controls, and they lifted, and headed west until they were well away from the general's command post. Then they turned south.

"Have they tested their suits yet?" Hilks asked.

"I don't think so," Meyers said. "The captain didn't

know, but it's obvious that they're just keeping the Cloaks under observation as much as they can until someone tells them what to do next. Do you think they'll try to stop us?"

"How about it?" Hilks asked Allen.

"I'll come in low," Allen said. "They won't know we're there until we're past them, and I doubt that they'll follow us in."

But there was no solid ring of troops around the area. The one observation post they passed seemed to take no interest in them. Evidently they had numerous air patrols overhead. Allen dropped the plane into a small clearing, and looked about.

"Thought you said it was a swamp," he said.

"That's what the captain called it," Meyers said. "Maybe it gets swampy further south. There's a stream that cuts through there."

Allen and Hilks slipped into the leather clothing, and strapped spray tanks onto their backs. Meyers watched them uneasily. "Sure you don't want us to come along with you?"

"Just stay here and record," Hilks said. "We'll tell you everything that happens.

If we don't come back, you'll know what went wrong."

Meyers nodded unhappily. They fastened their plastic face pieces, picked up the spray guns, and waved a cheerful farewell.

"No undergrowth," Hilks said, as they entered the trees.

"Cooperative forest," Allen said.

"That means we're trespassing."

"So are the Night Cloaks."

They walked briskly for a couple of miles, turned, and started to circle back. "Better check in with Meyers," Allen said. "He'll be having a fit."

Hilks switched on his radio. "Haven't seen a thing yet," he announced.

"Man, you must be blind," Meyers blurted at them. "There was one right overhead when you started out. It followed you."

They turned quickly, stared upwards. For a moment they saw only the cloudless sky through the treetops, and then a blur of color flashed past.

"Okay," Hilks said. "It's flying above the trees. Waiting for reinforcements, maybe. We'll wait here, and see what happens."

"Keep your radios on," Meyers said.

"Right," Hilks said. "We'll

get set with a couple of nice big trees at our backs, and they won't be able to get at us from behind."

Allen looked about, picked out a suitable tree, and sat down beside it. Hilks settled himself by the next tree, which was smaller. "We'll need to stay close together," he said. "And this isn't fair. I'm bigger around than the tree."

They waited, looking upwards.

"Two of them now," Hilks announced.

"I didn't see anything."

"I can see a lot of sky from here. They're circling. Look like small ones."

"I'd just as soon start with small ones," Allen said.

"Three small ones. No, four. There's nothing wrong with the army observers. Get ready, they're coming down."

They dropped through the trees with amazing speed. They plummeted, and Allen had no time for more than the split-second observation that they were small, one being no more than a yard across. All four of them curved towards him. He gave the first one the spray at six feet, moved the nozzle slightly, and then cut it off. The Cloaks were gone.

Hilks was chuckling as he

talked to Meyers. "They got one whiff of the stuff, and beat it."

"Now we won't know what happens to them," Allen said.

Hilks swore. "I didn't think about that. The most we can say now is that they don't particularly like it."

"Don't be too sure," Allen said. "Here they come again."

They were wary, now. They dipped down slowly, circled, sailed in-and-out among the trees. Only the small one ventured close, and it shot upwards when Allen gave it a blast of spray.

"For what it's worth," Allen said, "the small ones are hungrier than the big ones."

"It figures," Hilks said.

Meyers, sitting far away in the plane, made unintelligible noises.

The Cloaks did not return immediately. Allen craned his neck to look for them, saw Hilks doing the same, and asked, "What do we do now?"

Hilks got up wearily. "I suppose it wasn't a total loss. The stuff drives them off. That's something. We can develop pressurized containers for self-defense, and maybe we can isolate a chemical that will be more potent. Shall we start back?"

"Not yet," Allen said. "Here they come again."

They came, and they continued to come. They seemed not to have noticed Hilks until he moved away from his tree, and after that they divided their attention and swooped down in twos, again and again. They were coming closer before they turned upwards, flying through the clouds of spray. Once the small one brushed against Allen.

"They can't be *that* hungry," Hilks said.

"Angry," Allen muttered. "They're infuriated. That's what the spray does to them. It maddens them."

"We'd better get out of here. The spray won't last forever. Let's leapfrog. I'll cover you, and then you cover me."

Meyers cut in. "If you can find a clearing, I'll pick you up."

"We'll let you know," Hilks said. He let go a blast of spray as the Cloaks swooped down again. "Otherwise, keep your eye on the edge of the forest. With them on our backs, we might miss your clearing. Give us twenty minutes before you start."

"Right," Meyers said.

Allen made a short dash, placed a tree at his back, and turned to cover Hilks. The

sudden movement seemed to further infuriate the Cloaks. All four shot after Allen. Three of them turned away as he pointed the spray upwards. The small Cloak hovered over him for a moment, taking the full, drenching force. Then the pressure faded, the spray gun sputtered and shut off, and the Cloak fell upon Allen.

Allen thrust it away, and it encircled and clung to his arm. Hilks raced towards him, drenching both Allen and the Cloak with spray. An agony of pain stabbed at Allen's arm. He staggered backwards and fell. He must have blacked out, for he did not know when the Cloak released him. He came to with Hilks standing over him, turning aside the Cloaks with blasts of spray. He pushed himself to a sitting position, and stared down at the throbbing numbness of his arm.

"Are you all right?" Hilks asked. "Can you walk?"

"I—think so." Allen got up unsteadily. "My spray is gone."

"I know. You started before I did, but I can't have much left."

Allen was examining his arm.

"Bad?" Hilks asked.

"Clear to the bone in one place," Allen said. "Fortunately, it's not bleeding."

"So we've learned another thing," Hilks said. "Even leather won't stop them when they're riled up. Or hungry enough."

Meyers cut in. "Can we do anything?"

"Just watch for us. We'll have to make a run for it. We'll start after their next rush. Ready?"

"Ready," Allen said.

"Now!" Hilks said. They darted off through the trees.

But the Cloaks were after them in a fluttering rush. Hilks turned, warded them off, and they ran again.

"It's no good," Hilks panted. "My spray is about gone. Not much pressure left. Any ideas?"

Allen did not answer. Hilks sprayed again, turned for another dash, and fell headlong over the protruding edge of a large rock. He scrambled to his feet, and both of them stood staring, not at the circling Cloaks, but at the rock, which inexplicably humped up out of the ground and seemed to float away. After a dozen feet it stopped and bumped to the ground. Encrusted dirt fell away.

"The devil!" Allen exclaimed. "It's the snail. Bronsky's

snail—I'd forgotten all about it. And look at the size of it!"

"Forget it again," Hilks said. "Here come the Cloaks."

He aimed his spray gun.

But he did not use it. As the Cloaks dropped down through the trees a tongue-like ribbon of flesh shot out from the enormous shell, broadened, folded back, and dropped to the ground with a convulsive shudder of satisfaction. And the Cloaks were gone.

They watched in fascination as the flesh heaved and twisted and finally subsided and began slowly to withdraw.

Meyers, screaming wildly into the radio, aroused them. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Hilks said. "We're all right. Everything is all right, now."

"What about the Cloaks?"

"They've just been eaten."

"What did you say? Beaten?"

"Eaten," Hilks said. "I get the whole picture now. What about you?"

Allen nodded. "The snail is the Cloak's natural enemy. Or the Cloak is its favorite food. This one was more or less happy with Bronsky until one day it smelled a Cloak, and it took off to catch it. It probably would have eliminated the

menace in short order if we hadn't put an army to beating the woods and shooting at it. But as soon as we stopped bothering it, it started eating Cloaks, and it's been eating them ever since. That's where your Cloaks have gone. They aren't hibernating, they're in the snail. Most of them, certainly. Look how it's grown! How big did Bronsky say it was?"

"About six feet, I think," Hilks said.

"It's ten feet now. At least. There's the answer to our Cloak problem. Forget your spray and your leather clothing. Clear everyone out, and leave it to Elmer. Have Venus ship us the snail they have, and as many more as they can find. Are you recording, Meyers?"

"Recording," Meyers said happily. "I got the whole thing. Just as the Cloaks were about to finish you off, that snail came galloping up and ate them."

"Not exactly," Allen said. "But it'll do. What's Elmer doing now?"

"It sees us," Hilks said.

They watched. The pinkish flesh flowed out slowly, thickened, stood upright. Then, before their amazed eyes, it suddenly took shape and color,

(Continued on page 130.)



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THE BOTTICELLI HORROR

(Continued from page 128)

and became the snakey caricature of a once-lovely Venus.

"Allen!" Hilks hissed. "Do you realize what that creature is up to? That thing has a memory! It has the proportions wrong, but not so much that you can't recognize what it's trying to do. It's mimicking us just like those other guys said."

"It thinks we're an audience," Allen said. "So it's performing. Bronsky said it was just a big Ham." He walked towards it.

"Watch yourself!" Hilks said sharply. "Don't get so near it—can't tell what might happen to you. C'mon play it safe, will you?"

Allen ignored him. He approached the snail, stood close to it, looked up at the writhing head of Venus.

The Venus had collapsed abruptly. The flesh quivered, thrust up again, and Allen stood looking at a hazy, misshapen caricature of himself, with face mask, wounded arm, dangling spraygun. Somewhere behind him, he heard Hilks choking with laughter. Allen ignored him. He extended his sound arm, and solemnly shook hands with himself.

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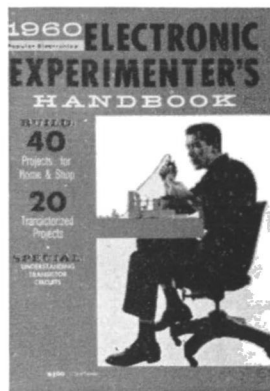
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