NIGHT CALLER by Jack Sharkey

FANTASTIC

MARCH

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

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a planet dies, and a strange secret is bared:

THE BIG BLOW-UP

by Daniel F. Galouye

A ZIFF DAVIS PUBLICATION

ALEX SCHOMBURG

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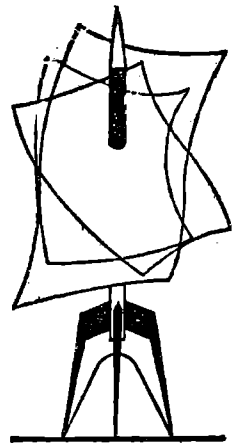

EDITORIAL

A RECURRENT theme that runs like a minor chord through our fan mail these days goes something like this: "Why don't you ever print stories about. . . ." and then you can fill in the blanks from this multiple choice collection: werewolves, ghouls, vampires, beings from the underworld, robots, intelligent spaceships. Then there is another strain of letters that goes something like this: "Why don't you ever print stories by . . ." and you can now pick a name from among Bester, Knight, Heinlein, Farmer, etc., etc., etc.

There are two answers to this kind of gentle needling. One we have often mentioned in these pages before. It is that many of the better s-f writers are sharply reducing their magazine output and working either on books, movies, or television projects. The other answer comes into sharper focus after reading a quote from a recent article on trends in science fiction. The article, called "Science-Fiction, Censorship and Pie-in-the-Sky," was written by L. W. Michaelson, a Colorado State University English professor, and appeared in the Western Humanities Review. Says the writer:

> Actually there is no reliable way to judge the true reading desires and tastes of the science-fiction fan. Madison Avenue sweats blood and hires high-price social psychologists to find methods and techniques for testing reader reaction to advertisements. Science fiction editors or publishers seemingly don't bother. Like old mail plane pilots, they fly from the "seat of their pants"; i.e., they trust to "editorial intuition" about reader tastes.

This, of course, is not entirely true. Fan mail is a weathervane. So is the sale of an issue. One sometimes can tell from sales figures whether a certain artist or cover, a certain writer or story or type of story, has outstanding appeal—or lack thereof. But these are uncertain guideposts at best.

"Editorial intuition" sounds to many people like a dirty word. Still, it is interesting to note that magazines (or other projects) which allow themselves to be guided by the mumbo-jumbo artists of motivation do not hit the popular mark any more often than the "seat of the pants" guys. *(continued on page 129)*

The BIG BLOW-UP

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

Illustrator FINLAY

Blasts of hellfire exploded outward from a sun in agony, a sun going nova. On the dying planet, the earth scientists teetered on the edge of panic. But the natives waited calmly for He Who Wanders Among the Stars.

WEARILY, Powderkeg struggled to lift itself over the distant range of icy peaks. It finally cleared the obstruction and hung exhaustedly above the saddleback—a flickering, mottled disc of full orange color.

I watched Munrov, the solar-dynamist in charge of Project Flash, as he dominated the plain beyond the ship. Dumpy and with a mat of dense white hair, he was like an excited dwarf racing about among the battery of sun-


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scopes and shouting instructions in his thin, coarse voice.

At the other end of the plateau, an occasional native stirred within his lean-to and wrapped animal hides about his shivering body.

It was a typical morning on Powderkeg II. Except for the primitives, it was just as every other morning had been for the past two weeks—ever since the expedition had made planet.

The natives were something else. They had shown up three days after our arrival, despite assurances from Pre-expedition Survey that there was no advanced life on this world.

My attention was drawn to the suddenly brightening morning sky. The sun was acting up again. It had hurled out another major prominence that outshone even the full disc of the dying star.

Powderkeg was behaving just about as expected. It would go through its mortal agony over the next eighteen days. Then, on the nineteenth day . . . Well, I like to think of it euphemistically:

Perhaps two million years from now some astronomer in Andromeda would watch a pinpoint of light in the vast Milky Way flare up brilliantly, bedimming the billions of stars in its own galaxy.

Walter London stood in the hatch distastefully surveying the dismal landscape. He buttoned his jacket tightly about his neck and came down the ramp into the weak sunlight.

"How's it acting this morning, Banks?" he asked, nodding skyward.

"According to schedule, I suppose."

"Any chance of it going off *before* the nineteen days are up?"

London was a huge, friendly person with a blunt chin and thick brows that gave his face a primitive cast. We got along well together, since this wasn't the first time he had served as pilot and I as security officer on one of Munrov's solar cycle expeditions.

"If it does," I said, smiling, "I wouldn't want to be anywhere around."

He laughed at that. But, apprehensively, he kept Powderkeg in the corner of his eye. "Tell Munrov Group B just reported securing for the night. They'll begin transmitting data in about an hour."

Group B was the second half of Munrov's party. It had been dropped off on the other side of the planet by the auxiliary ship, which had long since returned to Fenlow V.

I had to stand around almost a half hour, watching Munrov flit from one long-snouted instru-

ment to another. He was an eternally preoccupied little man whose greeting was always edged with a certain amount of indifference, if not outright disdain.

"All right, Banks," he said finally. "What is it?"

I relayed London's message.

"Very well. Put the data on triple tape when it comes through. And don't disturb us any more than you have to. Anything else?"

I hesitated. "About the natives—"

"Damn it! You're not going to start *that* all over again? There isn't *anything* we can do."

"Then you're going to let them stay here?"

He shrugged. "I know it sounds damned harsh. But that's the way it's got to be."

"You could send London back for a rescue fleet. It's nineteen days to nova—seven to Fenlow, one to muster the fleet, seven back. That leaves a safety margin of four days."

Munrov bristled. "Almost every man in London's crew doubles as a technician in Project Flash. Sending that ship back would mean missing half of the data we came here for!"

"Is that more important than an intelligent race?"

"You can scarcely call them intelligent. They are hardly gregarious and have no means of communicating among themselves—not even a sign language. Anyway, how could we muster them?"

I gestured toward the forest. "The whole surviving population must be concentrated on this little peninsula. It's the only land that hasn't been iced over for the past several thousand years."

The solardynamist was shaking his head obstinately. "We couldn't get them aboard ships without giving them a language impress and explaining what's happening. And, unless they have a basic language of their own to start out with, an impress treatment would only drive them mad."

"Let's get the ships here first and *then* decide how to get them aboard."

"There'll be no rescue fleet," Munrov reiterated unbudgingly. "For years science has hoped it might stumble on a prenova. By sheer luck, here we are—only fifty million miles from one that's due in nineteen days. I'll not have one minute of one man's time wasted!"

With that, the expedition chief stormed away and I stood there cursing a whole range of things—that the auxiliary ship had to leave *before* we found out there were natives; that man had never solved the riddle of faster-than-light communications, even though he had learned to travel at hyperspeeds; that the demands

of science had to take priority over simple mercy.

THROUGHOUT the day Powderkeg flaunted its awesome threat of soon-to-be-unleashed solar ferocity. Great rifts appeared again and again in the pallid orange disc, exposing its raging inner regions. It was as though the curtains of hell itself were being drawn open.

As I started out on my security check just before sunset, I imagined it would be a miracle if our hemisphere didn't rotate into the full fury of a fiery nova the next morning.

Halfway to the native encampment, I was overtaken by London. "Mind if I come along?"

"I can't promise any lift out here—unless you enjoy consorting with the doomed."

Of course, he knew I was being facetious. And, as for his real purpose in wanting to come along—he opened his jacket and indicated the inner pouches filled with space ration chocolate.

"Munrov said it would be all right to pass out a few bars, since the metabolism test showed it wouldn't do any harm."

I laughed rudely. "He must have dug damned deep to come up with those sentiments."

London munched on one of the bars. "Oh, he's human—I suppose. After all, he *does* have his orders."

"Which say nothing about sacrificing a whole race."

"Maybe not. But with novas as scarce as they are, chances are it'll be another two thousand years before we run across anything like Powderkeg."

Continuing toward the village, we detoured around a large, rugged outcropping and quite suddenly came upon one of the natives. He was pensively watching the sun ease into the dark silver sea.

He was a tall, white-skinned creature with smoothly etched features that bore a certain mark of nobility rather than the savagery his living conditions suggested. His head was hairless and his brow and skull almost of ponderous proportions. His nose was quite small and his chin negligible. Folded in his lap were hands which possessed only three fingers and a thumb.

Respectfully, he rose and regarded us. Then a subtle, dignified smile formed on his lips.

London made an exemplary gesture of taking a bite out of his chocolate bar. Then he unwrapped another and handed it over to the man.

I wondered for a moment over the lack of hesitancy, the complete absence of suspicion as the native took the offering, returned to the slab and resumed his contemplation on the setting sun.

We went on to the encamp-

ment and approached the main communal fire where most of the others were collected in their eternal silence.

Three children came forward, hands extended, and eagerly explored the bulging contours of the pilot's jacket.

London frowned. "How do you suppose they *know* I brought something for them?"

I stared back uncertainly at the outcropping. The solitary native had not come into sight. Nor had we been visible to the others when we gave him the chocolate bar.

"Don't you see?" I explained. "They *must* have some means of communicating!"

Munrov was tied up with data sampling when we returned to the ship. He had already had supper sent in and had posted notice on the hatch of the correlator compartment that he wasn't to be disturbed. I waited outside.

It was well after midnight when he finally stepped into the corridor, bent with fatigue.

"I'm in no condition to listen to any more appeals for the natives," he gruffed at me.

"All I want is permission to try a language impress on one of them."

"Why?"

"Because our test was wrong. They *do* communicate."

"They can't. They have absolutely no ability for matching concept with symbol."

He started to move off but I caught his arm. I told him about the native hidden behind the outcropping and how the other primitives seemed to know instinctively that we had brought candy for them too.

"They must use some form of supersonic contact," I concluded.

"Impossible. That hidden native simply stepped into view and signaled."

"I'm sure he didn't. But even if he did, he *had* to use predetermined symbols. Which proves they *do* communicate and *can* tolerate a language impress."

He looked away wearily. "And so you want to try a semantics transfer?"

I nodded.

"Suppose the concept behind vocal communication is too much for their primitive minds? They'd go off the deep end and we'd have a bunch of otherwise docile natives running amuck on us."

"I'd try it on only one of them and it wouldn't be an oral transfer," I went on eagerly. "There's a dactylology bank in the impress rectifier. We could select a simple eight-finger sign language. I'd take the treatment first."

"Go ahead then," he submitted with a defenseless sigh. "But I

don't know what you're trying to prove."

"There's only three days left to send London for a rescue fleet," I explained confidently. "In that time I'm going to convince you those primitives are worth saving."

IT was almost noon the next day when I unbuckled the semantics transfer helmet. The light coming in through the sick bay port blazed into my suddenly unshielded eyes and I realized Powderkeg was putting on another fearsome display.

London relieved me of the headpiece. "How did it come through?"

"Pretty clear," I answered uncertainly, trying to review in an instant my new vocabulary of hand gestures.

He turned off the rectifier. "So much for the easy part. Now's when the fun begins—trying to get one of those natives in here without touching off a first-rate riot. And we don't even have a Morpheus beam to use."

"That one we found by himself yesterday—he might not kick up too much of a fuss. You're still with us, aren't you?"

"Sure. Wouldn't miss out on the rhubarb for anything. But, like Munrov, I'd like to know what it's going to get you."

We started down the corridor. "I'll let you in on something. Munrov has overlooked an obscure section of contact law. It says all possible assistance *has* to be extended wherever and whenever requested by any group in peril."

Climbing down the ramp, I was almost certain the big blow-up had come. Entire sections of Powderkeg's lambent hydrogen surface were convulsing violently and sending out huge arching plumes of incandescent brilliance. They gave the dying star the appearance of a blazing pinwheel.

I cast a desperate glance at the solar survey crew. None of them seemed particularly concerned. So I decided that this, after all, wasn't *it*.

As we continued on toward the native encampment, London asked worrisomely, "What's that escape factor again?"

"A little over eight minutes." That was our safety margin to get back into the ship, clear the surface and slip into subspace. It was all the time we could expect between visual sighting of the blow-up and arrival of the blanket of searing gases.

I began considering plans to lure the native back to the ship without arousing his suspicion or getting his friends hopping mad.

But suddenly a single, fur-wrapped figure was coming across the plain toward us. When

he drew closer we saw it was the primitive I had hoped to find.

He stopped a few feet away and flashed a smile of recognition.

Hopefully, London extended a bar of chocolate but withdrew the candy as the native reached for it. When we backed off toward the ship he followed.

I was even more surprised at the docile manner in which he went with us up the ramp, through the hatch and down the passageway into sick bay.

He was sitting on the bunk nibbling his bar of candy when London sneaked up from behind and hit him in the neck with a syringe full of sodium pentothal.

Just as in any kind of learning, the secret of success in semantics transfer is time—time and subliminal repetition. With any race that has a fairly well evolved language pattern of its own, you can pull off an impress treatment in three or four hours. With Pensive One though (that was the name we had decided upon for our contact candidate), I didn't want to take any chances. We set the rectifier for minimum transfer speed and waited out the full twelve hours.

So it wasn't until after midnight that I removed the impress helmet and sat on the side of the bunk searching the native's face for signs of awakening.

London paced in the small compartment. "I don't like it."

"What?" I watched the primitive's eyelids quiver under the impact of our voices.

"These natives—there's something damned unusual about them."

"That's what I've been trying to tell Munrov."

"I don't like their complete lack of suspicion—the way they're taking us in stride."

"Like accepting that candy without any misgivings, gulping it down without even sniffing it," I proposed.

"Or the way Pensive One followed us into the ship without showing any fear at all."

The primitive opened his eyes and looked slowly around the compartment before sitting up.

"For my money," I said finally, "these boys deserve to be studied as much as that nova out there. The important thing now, if the language transfer worked, is to see that this fellow makes a direct plea for rescue."

I gave him the sign language symbol for myself—rigid index finger elevated.

He hesitated, but only briefly, then alertly came up with his own designation—finger tips pressed against his temples.

I cast a hopeful glance at London. Then I made stiff steeples of all my fingers before sending the right index in a swooping motion

to touch the clenched fist of my left hand.

Pensive One responded with a series of gestures that was almost the reverse of what I had done, adding several flourishes of his own.

"What does he say?" London asked impatiently.

"I told him we had come from the sky to visit his people and he answered that they're glad we're here. From what he says, I gather some of them were watching from the forest when our two ships first landed."

Pensive One had a few normal questions to ask—such as who we were, where we had come from and how we had gotten there. The basic answers were, of course, inherent in the wealth of data that had been transferred during the impress treatment. Concrete replies, however, served to elevate the information to his conscious plane.

Then I got down to cases with a critical question. "How many are your people?"

If he could answer that one, it would mean his primitive mind had the basic ability to understand the mathematics to which it had been exposed during semantics transfer.

"In Pensive One's tribe?" he answered.

"How many tribes are there?"

"Three."

"And how many people altogether?"

His hands hung there a moment, then he flashed the reply. "About twelve hundred."

I turned aside and busied myself with mental calculations. In order to avoid any possible conflict with established mathematical concepts, it was a thumb rule of semantics transfer that all primitive races be impressed with numerical systems to match their digital characteristics. Since Pensive One had eight fingers, we had selected a sign language with an octaval system, as contrasted to our own decimal system. So, any figure he came up with above the number seven would have to be transposed mathematically.

But suddenly he moved in front of me, his hands flitting in communicative gestures. "That would be about nine hundred and sixty of your numbers."

I drew back in stark surprise.

London seized my arm. "What's he say? What's the matter?"

"He can transform figures! He probably knows as much arithmetic as we do!"

I continued even more directly with the native. "A great disaster awaits your people," I told him in the stilted phrases of the sign language, repeating the words orally for London's benefit.

"Yes, we know." Pensive One's fingers moved sluggishly, as though expressing hallowed thoughts. "Our sun nears its death."

I straightened, numbly translating the native's expressions.

The pilot's sudden laughter snapped me out of my amazement. "What's so funny?" I asked.

"It took us hundreds of years with all kinds of gimmicks to learn how to tell when there's going to be a big blow-up. And these backwood Joes know it *instinctively!*"

"How do you know death awaits your sun?" I asked the primitive.

"We just know it."

I glanced away for an indecisive moment. "Your people can be saved if you do what we tell you. You must come and ask our Superior One for help. I will act as your interpreter."

He placed his hands calmly over mine to stop their motion. Then he went on with his own signals:

"There is no need for that. He Who Wanders Among the Stars will save us."

I drew back exasperatedly. This was no time for blind superstition and false hope. "You *must* do what I tell you!"

Calmly, he repeated his refusal.

"What's he say?" London demanded. "What's going on?"

I brought him up to date.

And, while I did, Pensive One strode serenely from the compartment and out of the ship.

I OVERTOOK the expedition director on his way to the cluster of instruments that morning.

"Really, Banks," he protested resentfully, "this is going to be our busiest day."

"We tried language impress on one of the natives last night. It took."

"Well, good for you," he said cynically. "Now suppose you take your primitive friend aside and have a nice little chat with him—say for a couple of days. That way everybody will stay out of everybody else's hair."

"If the native we tried is average, then this could be the most intelligent primitive race ever discovered. They even know mathematics."

Annoyed, Munrov hooked his thumbs under his holster belt. He and I were the only ones who were armed.

"How could they accumulate and pass on knowledge," he asked skeptically, "without a language?"

"I don't know what the explanation is. But I do know we can't sacrifice this race. You've got until day after tomorrow to send London for a rescue fleet."

"Rundmire, our thermopathologist," he began patiently, "only

yesterday formed a theory for possible control of a nova through hyperfrequency bombardment from subspace. With more observation here, he may get a clue as to how to apply his theory. Do you want me to take him from his work?"

There was no denying the logic of his argument. But still I couldn't quite balance *possible* danger to some world in the distant future against *imminent* peril to these helpless natives.

"If that bunch out there could offer some noteworthy contribution to galactic culture," Munrov went on, "I might consider sacrificing our work to save them. But it would have to be a damned significant contribution."

"They *know* about the nova!" I blurted hopefully. "The native we communicated with—I told him there was a disaster coming and he said yes, we know our sun is near death! Doesn't *that* suggest they might have something to offer?"

Munrov laughed stiffly. "It suggests that when you mentioned disaster, your native put two and two together. After all, we've been pointing twenty-three tubes at this star twelve hours a day for over two weeks. He probably thinks we're 'killing' it."

London was busy most of the day running his forth-eight-hour readiness check on the ship's powerplant and control system. So I didn't get a chance to see him until late that afternoon.

Security being only a token assignment on this expedition, I spent part of the day looking unsuccessfully for Pensive One and the rest soaking up what little warmth Powderkeg was still managing to put out.

Lying on a stone slab a few feet from the ship, I dozed off and was immediately swept up in a terrifying nightmare.

Blow-up came—fiercely, devastatingly. For a few horrifying seconds I watched the sun disintegrate, sending out searing blasts of hellfire in slow-motion agony. But my feet were paralyzed and I couldn't join the rush for the ship. Then suddenly my legs were pumping frantically but not carrying me anywhere.

Meanwhile, Munrov, London and the others were packed tightly on the ramp trying to get into the ship. Only, the hatch was stuck.

Then came the natives, wave after wave of them, trampling over me in their savage dash for the ship. No longer speechless, every last one of them was frenziedly shouting in pure Galactic English, "Save me! Save me!"

Jolting awake, I wiped perspiration from my face and saw that the dream had probably been stimulated by another outburst of raw energy from Powderkeg.

For a moment, as I tried to bring my eyes to focus, it seemed that the setting sun had actually split in half. But it was only an illusion caused by two tremendously bright prominences that appeared as twin tongues of fire jutting out into space.

London was standing there. "Easy on the panic button, it isn't Judgment Day yet."

He motioned toward the battery of instruments where the operators were going unconcernedly about their tasks.

But I was staring across the plain at the makeshift native village. There were twice as many lean-tos, double the former number of communal fires.

"They've been streaming in for the past hour," London explained.

"Let's go take a look," I proposed. "I want to have a talk with Pensive One anyway."

SURPRISINGLY, the natives did not run forward into the twilight begging for candy. And I wondered how they knew we hadn't brought any along.

As we pressed forward, they made room for us around the central fire. I searched the scores of expressionless faces but failed to find Pensive One.

"Either he's at one of the other fires or he's out there among the rocks," I suggested. "Let's split up and find him."

"I'll scout around the camp," London volunteered.

As I had more than half expected, the native was seated in solitude on his lonely slab, watching the planet's single moon lift itself out of the sea. He rose and offered the simple greeting of his newly acquired sign language.

"Where are all these people coming from?" I worked my hands slowly so he could understand the gestures despite the scant light.

"They are the second tribe," he said proudly. "The third will be here tomorrow."

"Why are they coming?"

"To wait for Him Who Wanders Among the Stars."

I felt a deep compassion for this simple primitive and his people whose abiding faith would collapse so bitterly at that last moment of doom.

After letting my hands rest idly by my side for a moment, I asked, "How do you know the third tribe will be here tomorrow?"

But it was obvious his attention had been captured by something other than the question. He drew up tensely and signaled, "Why do you not go help your friend?"

"What makes you think he needs help?"

"He has hurt himself, hasn't he? I do not understand. Why

did he not avoid the injury?"

Before I could answer his puzzling questions, London's voice, crying out my name, came weakly on the night air. It was tinged with pain.

I stood there confounded for a moment, then raced off across the plain with Pensive One following close behind.

We found London not too far from one of the fires. He was sitting on the rock-strewn ground and gripping his foot. Several natives were crowded curiously around him.

"I think I fixed up the ankle," he explained with an apologetic half grin.

"Serious?"

"I don't believe so. Nothing that a couple of hours under the lesion negator won't erase. But I'm afraid you'll have to get me back to sick bay."

Relieved that it was nothing critical, I turned anxiously toward Pensive One. "How did you know this had happened?"

He signaled back casually, "I watched it through the eyes of those who were nearby."

"You mean you got it *directly from their minds?*" My fingers were tripping over themselves with excitement.

His hands produced an affirmative gesture.

"Cut out the finger talk," the pilot remonstrated, "and help me get to the ship."

"London!" I exclaimed triumphantly. "Munrov *has to* save these people! They're all *pure telepaths*!"

At sick bay I helped London get his foot propped up under the lesion negator. Then I hurried over to the wardroom to look for Munrov. He had finished his supper, however, and was already locked away with the correlator Banks.

I banged on the hatch.

"Go away." His voice came weakly through the metal panel.

Cupping my mouth against the door, I shouted, "You said these natives didn't have anything to contribute. Well, they have!"

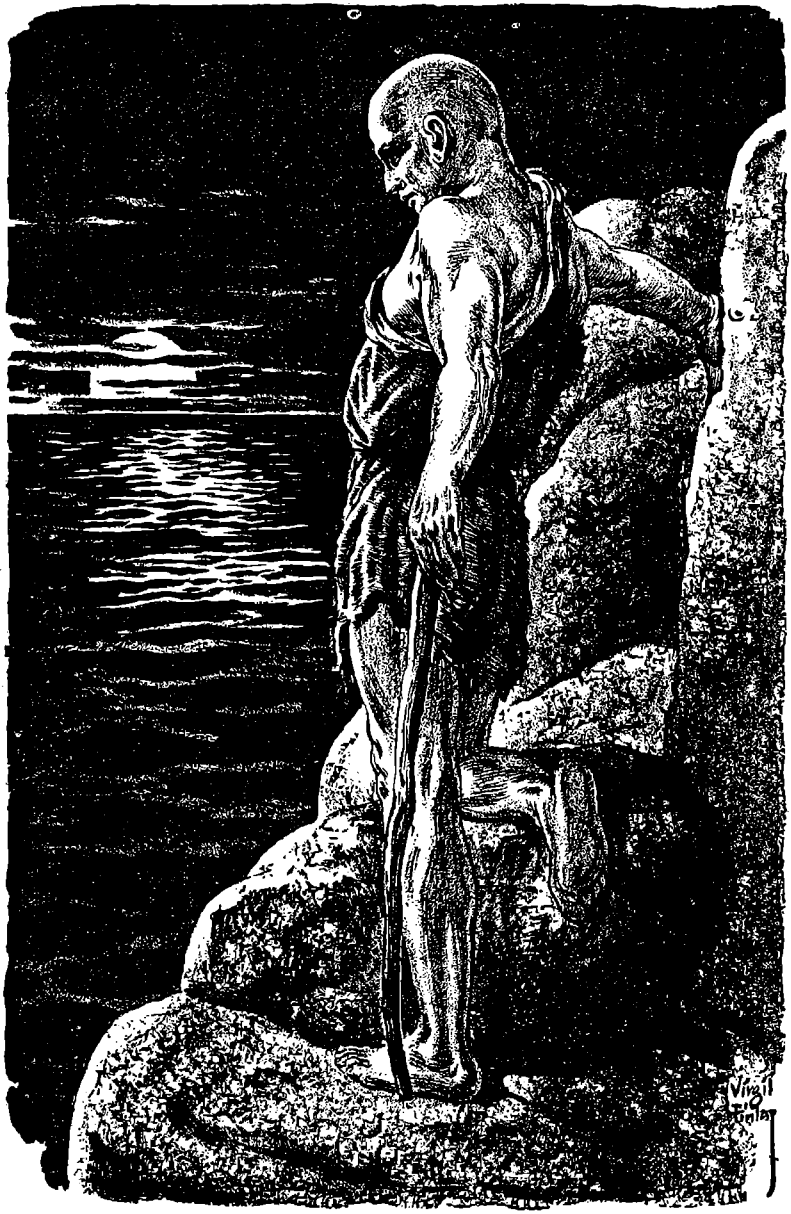
I banged again and he finally opened the hatch. His stare conveyed severe annoyance. "What's this all about?"

"You were right. They *don't* use language symbols. They don't need them. They communicate by direct thought transferrence!"

He went back into the compartment and I followed, trying to give a rational account of what had happened at the native encampment.

"Don't you see what this means?" I asked finally. "These few hundred natives, given the right environment, could multiply into thousands, millions! They—"

"That would logically seem to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follow," he cut me short indifferently.

"But a telepathic race!" I emphasized. "Think of the instances of *accidental* telepathy on record. They prove direct transfer of thought is instantaneous over *any* distance!"

He looked up patronizingly and I pressed my argument: "There isn't a planet or a ship in the federation that hasn't suffered from total lack of communications. All we have is a packet system on an interstellar plane, no better than the days of sailing ships on Earth. But even a child could see what it would mean if a *naturally* telepathic race was integrated into galactic society—with representatives at every world capital, aboard every ship!"

Munrov lowered himself listlessly into a chair. "I figured they might have extrasensory talents. I hoped not though—for my own peace of mind."

"You mean you actually *suspected* they were telepathic?"

"Not until you told me how the others seemed to know instinctively that you'd given chocolate to the one by the rocks."

"Then you *will* send London to get a rescue fleet?" I asked, relieved. "Day after tomorrow is the last day he can leave and still make it to Fenlow and back before the blow-up. But I don't think we should lose any—"

Munrov, however, was shaking his head. "We won't send London anywhere."

I exploded. "Well, why in hell not?"

"Four days ago Kaufmann, our hydrogenologist, found out Powderkeg's taking a short cut through the final phase. The big blow-up won't come *seventeen days* from now. It's due *day after tomorrow*. Powderkeg would have novaed even before London could have gotten to Fenlow, much less returned with a mercy party."

For almost a minute I stood staring grimly at him. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I know my crew. I knew that as the blow-up neared they'd become tenser, less efficient. I wanted to avoid that. If it's going to be impossible to do anything for the natives, then the least we can salvage is a successful expedition."

He rose and walked sluggishly over to the desk, fidgeted with a tape container. "If only those natives had showed themselves *before* the auxiliary ship left! Then there would have been enough time to get a rescue fleet here, even taking the premature eruption into account."

"Can't we bring *any* of them back?" I pleaded.

"We can and we will. By abandoning as much equipment as possible and by bumping our heads against the load factor

ceiling, we may be able to save perhaps twenty of them."

He sensed my disappointment and spread his hands helplessly. "That's the best we can do."

Then he paused uncertainly. "No—not quite the best. A couple of children could fit in under my weight allotment, I suppose."

"You mean you'd *stay here?*"

"Why not?" He offered a spiritless smile. "I'll be the first human ever to see a nova close enough to touch it."

FOR that matter, my weight allotment could accommodate another pair of children, bringing to twenty-four the total number of natives who could be saved.

That was the horribly fascinating thought that stuck with me throughout the night as I tossed sleeplessly on my bunk. A thousand times I reached a decision and lay peacefully back on the pad. But each time my resolve was shattered by the thought of standing on the naked planet, helpless before the fiery wrath of a raw nova.

It wasn't until I went outside and watched Powderkeg rise above the frigid peaks that I finally distilled the true values. I was one among billions whose loss would never be noticed. On the other hand, the worth of any one of these natives to galactic culture and progress was incalculable.

And some day, when vital messages were spanning the farthest reaches of the galaxy with the speed of thought, they might name a system after me—if I didn't change my decision again during the thirty hours that remained before blow-up.

Surprisingly, the sun seemed exceptionally subdued on Doomsday Eve. Its disc was an even blend of pastel orange with only a few negligible splotches of dark brown. Only minor prominences were visible.

Munrov and Kaufmann broke the news of tomorrow's nova to the others at breakfast. They took it calmly enough. There was a tense stare here and there, punctuated by the sound of a fork clattering on the floor.

Then the expedition director filled us in on the details—blow-up at ten the next morning, plus or minus one hour. Finally he released his double-duty technicians back to their responsibilities as ship's crew members so London could lift off at noon and retrieve Group B from the other side of the planet.

I watched blastoff, then gave a hand with dismantling the various solarscopes and collecting their permanent data cartridges. Several hours later, after seeing what must have been the third tribe arriving to join the native encampment, I trudged off across the plain. I wanted to find Pen-

sive One and make sure he'd be among those saved.

Munrov overtook me halfway there and laid a friendly hand on my shoulder.

"You don't have to do it, you know," he said smiling.

"Do what?"

"Sacrifice yourself to save a couple of backplanet Joes."

"How did you know I had that in mind?"

"It's written pretty plainly on your face. Look, Banks—I'm almost twice your age. With me it doesn't make any difference. Of course, you can do what you want. But it would be my guess that you'd serve a better purpose by going back with those twenty-eight natives and looking out for their interest."

I glanced up sharply. "Twenty-*eight?*"

"Kaufmann, Prescott and Windmire also decided they're too attached to this place to leave."

I felt a sudden swell of pride for these eminent scientists in Munrov's crew—pride for them and the whole of humanity which they represented.

"Make it thirty natives," I said determinedly. "I like it here too."

And I suspected that by blast-off time we might have trouble getting enough crewmen aboard to take the ship back.

The deafening roar of rockets suddenly shook the plain and we watched London returning with the second half of the expedition.

With his customary precision, he lowered the ship delicately toward the surface. It touched down, then heaved violently. Fire belched from its side as landing struts crunched with a sickening sound. When the dust cleared the craft was tilted at a precarious angle, its main tube ruptured in a great mass of twisted, jagged metal.

Dismally, Munrov said, "It looks as though we've *all* become attached to this place—permanently."

Powderkeg was a magnificently frightening spectacle as it rose in perverted majesty the next morning and sent its now weak, now fierce rays down on our group, huddled about the useless ship.

Its entire surface boiled and heaved vehemently, spattering the darkened space around it with great splashes of liquid radiance that fell back down ever so slowly. It was like watching thick bubbles bursting in the mouth of an angry caldron.

Blow-up was less than four hours off. London and some of his crew, exhausted from a frantic night of work, were asleep on the cold, rocky plain. Refusing to accept doom, they had labored from twilight until dawn, trying to squeeze a thirty-day repair job

into a few hours. They didn't give up, however, until their hopeless effort to right the ship with a pair of tractor beams backfired and sent the huge craft crashing down on its side.

Watching the sun climb torturously into the sky, I tried to shake off my desperation with the fascinating realization that, for billions of years, this same sun had risen dutifully every day —on schedule. But now it was all over. For, before it could reach the zenith on this, its last cycle, it would disintegrate in a tremendous stellar explosion that would reduce every body in its system to molten rock and swirling gas.

I rose, thrust my hands in my pockets and walked away from Munrov and his grimly silent group. Out on the plain, I paused and stared at the native village.

All the communal fires were out and the lean-tos had been leveled. The primitives, in several scraggly lines, were streaming out onto the plain.

Puzzlement broke through the pall of horror that lay over my senses and, for a brief, impersonal moment, I wondered what they were doing. Then I remembered Pensive One's blinding faith—his belief that their god would pluck them from the maw of death.

There was a violent paroxysm of light and I hit the ground,

rolled over and tried to wedge myself under a boulder. Terrified, I glanced skyward. The sun was still there. Only, its entire surface seemed to have leaped outward several million miles. But now it was falling back in on itself. There was no doubt that Powderkeg was in its final convulsions.

I rose, not bothering to brush myself off, and stood there trembling. The natives, however, had continued their trek out upon the plain, unconcerned. And now they were collecting into five groups.

There was a tapping on my shoulder and I must have jumped eight feet. I whirled and saw London standing there. Normally, he would have been guffawing at my reaction. Now, he had only the look of pallid death on his face.

He glanced at his variable watch, synchronized with the day-night cycle of the planet. "Two hours left."

"Plus or minus one," I reminded.

"All right then," he conceded dully. "One to three hours. How do you feel?"

"Just great," I answered, poker-faced.

"We'll never know what hit us."

"Doomsday wouldn't be so bad," I said, "if we were on a bustling world with tall buildings and the press of people all around us."

"I know what you mean. Out here it's so—desolate. I wonder how they're taking it." He motioned toward the primitives.

"They won't regret a thing," I promised. "They're so sure of salvation they're not even worried."

"Here comes one of them now."

The native trotting across the field toward us was our Pensive One.

He pulled up sharply and I signaled, half facetiously, "Where's the Star Wanderer?"

He smiled as he worked his fingers. "Do not worry. He will come in time."

London was staring trancelike at the ground, uninterested in the primitive.

Pensive One nodded toward the pilot and asked. "The Big One—why did he not save the ship?"

"It was an accident."

"But he should have avoided it."

When I didn't answer, he went on with his sign language. "It makes no difference. He Who Wanders Among the Stars will see to it that the sun destroys none of us."

I drew back and surveyed him warily. It might be possible for them to know something was going to happen to their sun and to guess approximately *when* it

would happen. But how could they hit the nail on the head with the knowledge that their "destruction" was involved?

POWDERKEG flared suddenly in a tremendous display of vivid brilliance that lit up the sky with the ferocity of a lightning bolt. I cringed and threw my hands protectively over my head. London only sat there, hunched in a tense, quivering bundle.

Pensive One was in front of me again, his hands flitting in communicative gestures. "The time is not yet."

The words had been spoken with such conviction that I squinted at the fur-wrapped figure. There was *so much* we didn't know about the natives—so much we'd never learn.

For instance: It was understandable that somewhere way back in their evolution Nature had linked their minds together in emphatic union. Since we were not part of that unity, it was impossible for them to tune in on our thinking. Still, how did Pensive One know *London* was piloting the ship when it cracked up?

And he had asked why the pilot hadn't "saved" the craft. It was as though he expected that London could easily have averted the accident.

Nor had that been the first time something like that had happened. After London had sprained his ankle, the native had asked why the pilot hadn't "avoided" the injury—as though some form of control over fate was everyone's prerogative.

And there was the too coincidental manner in which the primitive had come across the plain to meet us—at the exact moment we were seeking him for the language impress treatment.

The whole picture was deeply intriguing and I wondered whether the natives' total lack of suspicion, their unusual degree of self-assurance didn't also fit somewhere into the general outline.

Pensive One was signaling with his hands again.

"What's he say?" London asked with only superficial interest.

"He wants to know: 'Why is the Lean One going to kill himself?' "

"What's he getting at?"

"I don't know."

It wasn't until a moment later that the significance of the native's question suggested itself. I lunged up and stared back at Munrov and the others. The "Lean One" would be Spectrologist Badington, who eminently fit that description. But Badington, who was lying face down on the ground when I had left the group a half hour earlier, hadn't moved.

Puzzled, I turned back to Pensive One and began signaling,

"Why do you say the Lean One —"

London seized my shoulder and wheeled me around. "Look, Banks!" He pointed.

Badington and Munrov were grappling on the ground. They rolled over twice and the spectrologist's hand came away from Munrov's holster with the latter's gun.

He broke free from the expedition leader's grip and backed away from the others, holding them off with the weapon. There was an insane desperation on his face as he raised the muzzle to his head and fired.

Munrov went calmly over, took the weapon from the dead man's hand and emptied its charge into the air.

"Good God!" London whispered. "This native *knew* it was going to happen!"

"Of course he did!" I agreed, with a sudden and excited comprehension. "Just like he and the others *knew* the candy was harmless; just like they *know* their sun's going to blow up. And we didn't trick Pensive One into that language impress. He came because he knew we would need him! He came willingly because he also knew we wouldn't hurt him!"

"What are they—*crystal gazers?*"

"Practically. They're *precognizant.* They can see into the future and avoid the pitfalls! It's so natural with them that they take it for granted we have the same talent. Pensive One couldn't understand why you didn't avoid that sprained ankle or why you didn't foresee that tube blowout yesterday."

"I'll be damned!" The pilot shook his head in wonder. "Their telepathic ability in itself would have been a pretty good thing for the rest of the civilized galaxy. But think what this new stuff would have meant!"

Powderkeg was in solar agonies once more. Like an ancient steam engine, it was discharging puffs of hellfire that spread out like expanding halos before breaking up and falling inward again. Each collapse seemed only to touch off a greater, more violent expulsion of blazing gases.

I glanced at my watch. The end would be only minutes away now. But still there was a more important consideration welling in the back of my mind.

"London!" I shouted. "This native may be right when he says we're all going to be saved by the Star Wanderer!"

The pilot frowned incredulously.

I signaled frantically to the primitive, "He Who Wanders Among the Stars—where is he now? What is he doing? Is he on a—ship?"

Pensive One gestured affirmatively. "He is on the ship that left here twenty days ago (he meant sixteen in our numbers system). It will be back soon."

"With other ships?" I demanded.

He said, "Yes, with five others."

I grabbed him around the shoulder and danced him across the plain and back again.

"What is it?" London pleaded.

I seized a handful of his hair and twisted his head skyward so he could see what I had just that moment sighted—six interstellar ships plunging through the atmosphere.

"He Who Wanders was a stowaway!" I shouted. "The natives *knew* their sun was going to blow up. They also saw that planting a stowaway aboard the returning auxiliary ship would be a satisfactory solution to their dilemma and to ours too!"

Munrov and the others danced and cheered hoarsely as they watched the fleet descend. The natives, however, were taking it phlegmatically, as though it were all something they had experienced before.

"They were never in doubt about the outcome," I went on, "because they *knew* things would work out all right for the stowaway—that he would get an impress treatment—that he would convince headquarters that if they sent a rescue fleet out immediately it would get here just in time!"

London was grinning too now. "And all the while they were in telepathic contact with Star Wanderer. They *saw* that everything was working out like they knew it would in the first place. But why such a high-sounding name for a common stowaway?" He was shouting to make himself heard above the roar of the landing ships.

"It figures. They're communally telepathic. They converse in pure concepts and images. They probably identify themselves and one another by the overall quality of each individual's thought pattern. They don't need names."

"I get it." London nodded comprehendingly. "When Pensive One had to identify another native for your benefit, he had to invent an appropriate *descriptive* name. After all, didn't *you* have to give *him* a descriptive designation?"

Just then the big blow-up came.

But the natives had already filed aboard their respective ships and there was plenty of time for us to reach the waiting auxiliary craft.

As a matter of fact, we slipped into subspace a full two minutes before the nova front reached the planet.

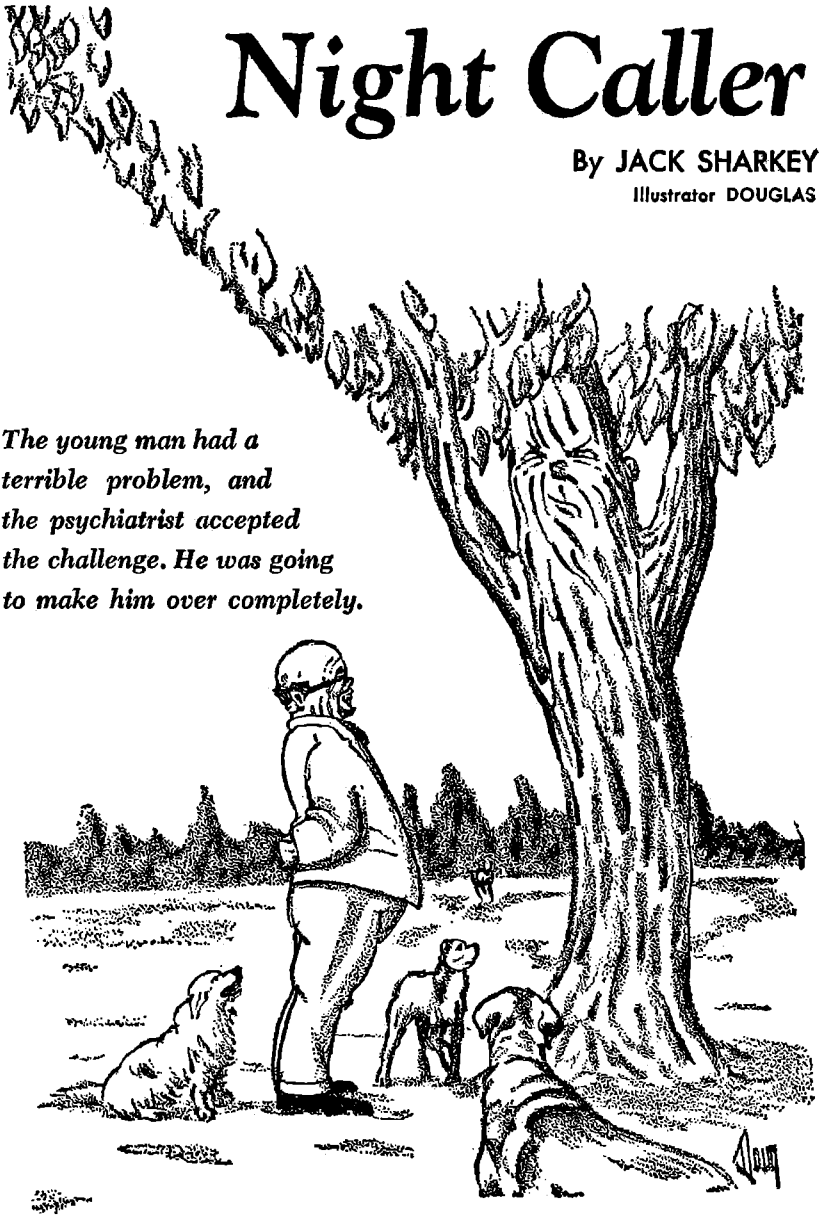
THE END

Night Caller

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator DOUGLAS

The young man had a terrible problem, and the psychiatrist accepted the challenge. He was going to make him over completely.



GOOD heavens!" cried the psychiatrist, backing away from his own front door as the young man entered. "What is this, a robbery? Or are you simply a psychotic killer, choosing me haphazardly as the next victim of his lust for blood?"

The young man smiled wanly over the glinting barrel of the automatic pistol he carried pointed at the bridge of the older man's nose. "Neither, doctor," he sighed. "I am—or hope to be—a patient of yours."

"I have office hours in the daytime," protested the psychiatrist. "I can see you at ten-thirty tomorrow for half an hour—No, that's Mrs. Simpson and her morbid fear of tigers— One o'clock tomorrow afternoon, then?"

"Impossible," scoffed the young man, hanging his hat neatly on the rack in the dark hallway. "I have to see you at night, doctor. I don't go out in daylight."

"Aha!" said the doctor, snapping his fingers. "The vampire-delusion. You feel that the sunlight will destroy you, and you dread the dawn, when—"

"Please, doctor, I'm getting nervous holding this gun. May I be treated, here and now?"

"Well—, Well, of course, I hadn't planned on— But if you insist, I suppose I must. Follow me." The old man, shaking his head in annoyance, led the way through green velvet portieres into a warm, comfortable parlor, at the rear of which a lively red fire burned in the grate of an enormous fireplace, and a hot toddy and a hardcover book lay upon an endtable beside an armchair.

"Thursday, servants night out," said the doctor, with a little chuckle of embarrassment. "That's why I answered the door myself." As he spoke, he lifted the book deftly and tucked it behind a throw-cushion on the sofa, then straightened up quickly and twiddled his thumbs in an agony of mortification and suspense.

The young man kindly pretended he had not seen the garish cover of the book, nor the title, "The Man Who Brained B-Girls".

"Where shall I sit?" he asked softly.

"Oh, anywhere— No, not there on the sofa. This, uh, this chair is much more comfortable. That's it, you sit there, and I'll sit here . . . There, now!"

The young man looked from the doctor to the gun, made a decision, and pocketed the weapon. He made no move to doff his heavy brown tweed overcoat.

"How do we begin?" he asked, after a moment.

"Well— I could ask questions, or you could just ramble on. Either one."

"What are your rates?" asked the young man.

"Er . . . Fifty dollars an hour . . ." said the doctor, with a tiny flush appearing on his gray-browed forehead.

The young man nodded, then: "I can't afford to ramble, I fear. You had better question me."

"Oh— Very well, very well!" the doctor said pettishly. "Perhaps I had better get my notebook," he said.

"No," said the young man. "I would prefer your having no accurate record of my visit. I just want help." He flicked a frown at his watch, then took a deep breath and leaned back in the armchair. "Time."

The doctor nodded briskly, and assumed his best professional smile, a blend of immense knowledge and affectionate warmth, calculated—and practiced before his bathroom mirror—to dissolve the worries and suspicions of all but the most berserk.

"Your name?" he said.

"It doesn't matter," said the young man.

"Let me be the judge of that."

"It does . . . not . . . matter," the young man insisted.

"On the contrary," said the psychiatrist smoothly. "I had a patient once named Percival Fauntleroy Feather-Foot. He wanted to be a prizefighter. Every manager he approached laughed at him. He grew withdrawn, introverted, and afraid. I solved his problems by assisting him in a legal maneuver which changed his name to Killer McKnuckles. He is now happy, outgoing, and battered beyond recognition, but that's beside the point. So, then, don't tell me names don't matter. Now, what's yours?"

"Oh . . . If you must know it. It's Allen Carter."

"And what do *you* want to be?"

"Normal!" groaned the young man, hiding his face.

"Well, your name's normal enough," said the doctor. "Sometimes that's half the battle. I remember another case where—"

"Please, doctor, this is *my* fifty dollars!"

"Very well, very well," the doctor said, deflated. "So— Your name is Allen Carter, and you have a problem. What is it?"

"I'm . . ." The young man hesitated and bit his lip.

"Don't *do* that," said the doctor, averting his gaze. "I'm getting sympathetic pains."

"Sorry," mumbled young Allen Carter. "Bad habit . . . It's —It's the awful embarrassment . . ."

"There is no shame in seeking psychiatric aid," said the doctor, staunchly. "Or is that what you were embarrassed about?"

"No, it's my . . . trouble." Once again Allen Carter hid his

face, his words coming to the doctor muffled and low with horror. "It's ghastly . . . I'm all right by night, but when daylight catches me—" He gave a violent shudder and could not go on.

The doctor paused thoughtfully, then. "You say *when* daylight catches you, not *if*. Is that correct, Mr. Carter?"

"That is correct, yes."

"Then doesn't that rather invalidate your worry that you might be a vampire? A vampire perishes in daylight."

Allen Carter gave the doctor a glare of disgust. "I never said I was a vampire; that was *your* worry, not mine."

The doctor, a bit nettled by the young man's snappishness, had to exercise some control before he could reply in his gentlest office-hours voice, "Suppose you tell me just what it is that you dread?"

"The *change!*" shrieked Allen Carter, leaping to his feet. "The monstrous change that comes over me when the first rays of the sun fall upon me. That is why I spend the daylight hours sequestered in my apartment, with the blinds drawn shut, and the windows painted black."

His violent soliloquy completed, he slumped back into the armchair and tried to wipe the streaming tears from his eyes with the back of his wrist.

"Dear me, this is most distressing," said the doctor. "Just what sort of change *is* it? Do you become a sun-engendered werewolf, perhaps, the antithesis of the normal ones who react only to moonlight?"

"No," moaned Allen Carter, shaking his head and gazing in numb despair at the carpetting beneath his feet. "It is worse, much worse."

"Hmmm," the doctor said thoughtfully. "Perhaps you turn into some kind of serpent, or a bird of prey, or even some member of the insect family?"

"Would that it were so simple," cried Allen Carter. "No, mine is not a fate so benign."

"How many guesses do I get?" said the doctor.

"Oh, I suppose I may as well tell you," said Allen. "I had thought to save money by refraining from rambling, but your queries all fall short of the mark."

"Does your affliction have a name, then?"

"None of which I know," Allen Carter admitted. "I will describe the change for you, if you so desire."

"Please do," said the doctor, sitting forward on the sofa in eager expectation.

"When the sunlight first falls upon my face, a taut, binding lethargy shoots through my limbs, and I cannot move."

"Yes, yes?" urged the doctor.

"Then," said the young man, "I can sense myself being stiffened, and ugly ridges rising all along my frame. My shoes and other clothing fade into a sort of mist, and then my legs begin to sink into the earth, all the while my torso stretches higher and higher."

"Good grief," murmured the doctor. "Go on; please don't stop *now* . . ."

"I turn dark brown, my fingers become brilliant green, and I can feel my toes, calves and thighs elongating into a tangled network that shoots off every which way, and—"

"A *tree!*" gasped the doctor, smacking fist into palm. "You turn into a *tree!*"

Allen Carter nodded. "A terrible fate for one so young as I. I can't endure another such transformation. I should go mad."

"I must admit I am fascinated," said the doctor. "But there is a phase of your trouble I do not comprehend: What, precisely, causes your antipathy to the change?"

"Ye gods, doctor!" cried the young man. "Would *you* like to turn into a tree every day?"

"I don't know," said the doctor truthfully. "But it seems to me you are overlooking the advantages of such a so-called affliction."

"Which are?" said Allen Carter, suddenly alert and hopeful. "Name them, if you will . . ."

"First," said the doctor, beginning to tick off the items upon his fingers, "in your tree-state, you need no food: You draw nourishment from air, sunlight, and water and minerals in the soil."

"That is true," Allen admitted.

"Secondly, you need never to pay rent. I have no doubts you can sleep quite comfortably as a tree, for the entire daylight period. Or can you?"

"Why, yes I can," said Allen. "In fact, I have little choice in the matter. The sunlight, the quiet, the breeze through my leaves— It rather lulls me."

"Excellent," said the doctor. "And thirdly, you have no clothing bills, since a tree can go unclothed without arousing comment."

"Quite true," Allen admitted, nodding. "And when the sun sets, my clothes reappear upon me, looking clean and pressed, and quite like new. I only have to buy a new suit every five years or so, really."

"Well, then," said the doctor, "I feel I have duly earned my fee, Mr. Carter. I have assauged all your anxieties about your fate, and you can now go out into the world cured." He retrieved his book from behind the cushion.

"You mean—" gasped Allen, "I will no longer become a tree?" There was hope and yearning in his earnest gaze.

The doctor looked hurt. "Of course you will. For heaven's sake, young man, a psychiatrist does not necessarily remove a person's problems; he sometimes shows the person how to be happy *with* them. I remember in particular a patient of mine who felt constant guilt about his inclinations to lie and steal from people. I soon cured him of this guilt-feeling, and now he is the president of a large advertising concern . . ."

"But doctor," said Allen, desperately, "I do not think you understand: I want my affliction *removed.*"

"But the advantages—" argued the doctor.

"You overlooked completely the obvious disadvantages," said Allen. "What about *them?*"

The doctor scowled, and replaced his book with a resigned shrug. "Very well. What are they?"

"In the first place, it is very well and good for me to be free of a need to get money for rent, food and clothing. But what about the woman I love?"

"You plan to be married?" said the doctor.

"As soon as I am cured," said Allen. "But I cannot expect my wife to work to support herself, and only see me in the nighttime. I wish to support her, but if I am only free to work by night, I cannot even spend my days with her, unless she cares to be seen embracing a tree, which she probably does not."

"You said disadvantages, plural," said the doctor. "What others are there?"

"Only one other, the worst of all, the one that sent me hurrying to see you as soon as night fell. Dogs."

"Oh dear," said the doctor. "Yes . . . Yes, that *is* a dreadful thought."

"You don't know what it's like, standing there, while they come trotting up to me and—" The young man hid his face in his hands again.

"That does it," said the doctor, standing up. "I see now that you *must* be cured. No man should have to endure such treatment at the hands of dumb animals."

"You *can* cure me, then?" choked out Allen.

"Certainly. But not by psychiatry. Simple medicine," said the doctor, beckoning to the young man. "Come with me to my laboratory."

INSIDE the laboratory, at the doctor's bidding, Allen removed his overcoat and shirt and tie and lay back upon a white-sheeted table. "Will it hurt?" he said, eyeing with apprehension

the racks of knives, needles and test tubes along the wall of the lab.

"Not too much," mumbled the doctor, engrossed in gathering up a trayful of various glittering instruments. "A few pinpricks, some throbbing, possible nausea. That is all."

"Then go ahead," said Allen. "I am ready."

Hours later, after X-rayings and thumpings and blood-testing and tissue samplings, the doctor, a weary smile on his face, jotted a final note down on paper and stood up from his worktable. "I have it," he said.

"What?" asked Allen. "The cure?"

"Yes. Young man, you brought this affliction upon yourself. Do you know that your bloodstream is, not a healthy red, but a dark green?"

Allen nodded. "Yes. What does it mean?"

"It means," said the doctor sternly, "that you must change your dietary habits. Look here at this list of your favorite foods which you told me about: What do you see?"

Allen took the list and read off dutifully, "Spinach, lettuce, cabbage, stringbeans, watercress, peas, parsley, celery, artichokes and okra. What's wrong with that?"

"They are all *green*, that's what!" snapped the doctor. "At this moment, you are about seventy percent chlorophyll! It's no wonder sunlight activates you."

"But what can I do?" pleaded Allen. "I like those foods . . . Must I give them up?"

"At first," said the doctor. "You must get yourself freed of their grip, first, by eating food high in iron. And don't say 'spinach'. It has iron, but not nearly so much as, say, strawberries or raisins. I will give you iron-concentrate pills to speed things up. Eat a high iron diet for a week, then take your time about eating those favorites of yours again. Let them be a part of your diet, but not all of it. Understand?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" exulted Allen. "Give me the pills, now, please."

The doctor handed over the pills, gave Allen a list of all the foods he should eat to remove the scourge of over-chlorophyllation, then started totalling up his fee while the young man dressed. When he presented it to Allen, the young man turned quite pale.

"All this?" he choked.

"You had an hour of analysis, followed by six hours of intensive research and lab work, not to mention the fact that I removed all your green blood and replaced it with healthy blood from my refrigerator over there. That kind of service does not come cheap."

"Ah— Well . . . It is worth

it," said Allen, and made out a check. "Are you sure," he said as he handed it over to the doctor, "that I am now cured?"

"You can find out soon enough. It is nearly sunup," said the doctor. "But do not fear. However, as a precaution, you might take some of those pills before departing."

"I will," said Allen. "And . . . thank you. You are a great man."

"Shucks," said the doctor.

After letting Allen out of the house, in the first grey light of dawn, the doctor went back into his parlor and finished his flat drink. The book he reserved for his next evening's relaxation.

He looked at his watch, decided against going to bed, and instead made himself a pot of coffee, then shaved and got ready to go down to his office.

Outside the house, as he neared his car at the curb, he was halted by a uniformed policeman.

"That your car, Mac?" asked the guardian of law and order.

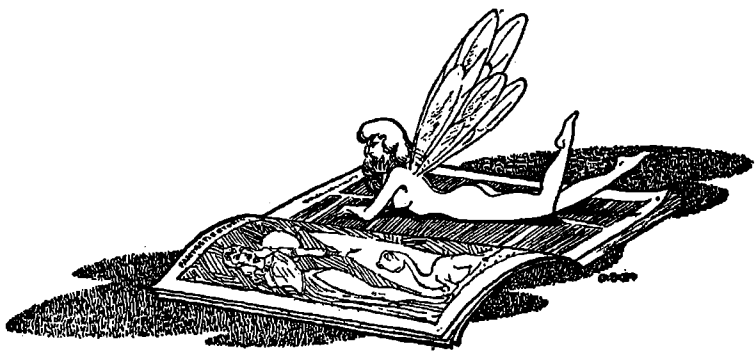
"Yes it is, why?" said the doctor, producing a license.

"Here is a parking ticket," said the policeman. "You should know better, being an educated man, doc."

He went away, and the doctor looked dumbfounded at the ticket. It was for parking in front of a hydrant. Baffled, the doctor looked along the curb. There, a nice shiny red, stood a hydrant, all right.

"Strange," said the doctor. "It was never there before, unless my memory is beginning to slip." Then he got into his car and drove off to work to help more people with their problems, narrowly avoiding running over the first of a happy pack of leaping, barking, hurrying dogs.

THE END



Random Choice

By RANDALL GARRETT

Illustrator BARR

The plot against the Terran spaceship was getting thicker every minute. But Capt. Orselli remembered an old proverb: "If you have two enemies and one puts a bomb in your house, you don't have to decide which of them planted it—just figure out the mechanism and disable it!"

THE interstellar ship *Vesuvio* was a passenger liner, not a warship. Moreover, as a vessel of the powerful, but still neutral, Terran Confederate Empire, it would seem foolhardy for either side in the Viran-Plochef War to show any hostility toward the *Vesuvio*. But nations at war often do foolish things—sometimes by accident, and sometimes by design. When that happens, it takes a very wise decision to counteract the foolish one.

Baron Weissmann, of the Jovian Satellite League, was a round, pleasant-looking, balding man who had spent far too much time under low-gravity conditions to glide around the ballroom of the *Vesuvio*, even under the one-half Standard Gee conditions that prevailed aboard the vessel. His muscles were too flabby for that kind of exercise. Instead, he sat at a table with his equally round wife and watched the harder-muscled Earthmen and Odinians and others who were used to the gravities of full-sized planets show off their prowess.

There was no envy in him. Let them live out their lives under those strenuous conditions; let them subject themselves to a gee-pull that made their insides

sag and their blood as heavy as mercury, that gave them varicose veins and broken capillaries. What were strong muscles against such things as those?

No, thanks, he thought, he would not trade his extra life expectancy for strength.

The chair beside him moved, and he turned his head from the brightly-dressed figures on the floor to see who was sitting down.

"Mind if I sit down, Baron? Frankly, I feel a little giddy." The squat, broad man with the bulging muscles didn't bother to wait for the baron's reply; he was already in his seat.

"Not at all, Dr. Martin," said Baron Wiessmann pleasantly. "Though I hope it's nothing serious."

The squat man squinted one eye closed and looked at the baron with a grin. "If that was meant to be a pun, Baron, may I say you're looking pretty jovial tonight yourself?"

"Pun?" The baron blinked. "Oh! *Sirius.*" He chuckled. "No, no; I'm afraid I'm not much of a punster, Doctor. But you said you felt giddy, and I hoped—" He stopped in confusion as he saw that Dr. Martin was still grinning. From that face, with its thick, knotted muscles, the grin looked almost threatening. "I mean to say," he went on hurriedly, "I wasn't trying to make a joke on your home planet."

"'S all right." The Sirian physician waved a thick-fingered hand in the air. "But I *am* giddy. When you're used to a gravity pull that's twice Earth Standard, this half-gee stuff makes you feel lightheaded."

"I can quite understand," the baron said. "I have the same trouble myself, only the other way round, if you see what I mean."

The Sirian nodded. "Tough to move around, I suppose, when you're used to low-gee. Still, I've seen some of your asteroid men who can do pretty well, even on Sirius IV. Exercise does it, I guess; those asteroid miners have to shove a lot of mass around, and that can build muscles as well as fighting a high gee-pull."

The baron paused, wondering whether the remark had been intended personally or the doctor was just being outspoken.

Before he could say anything, his wife squeezed his arm and said: "There he is, dear."

The baron looked around in confusion. "Who?"

"Captain Orselli," the baroness said in her soft voice. "I notice he's wearing a white uniform this evening. He's quite handsome, in a lean sort of way."

"Mmph," said the baron, purs-

ing his mouth. "I don't care for his manner, frankly. Too oily, if you ask me. And too much of a fop. I'll wager he spends an hour a day curling and oiling that beard." It did not occur to the baron that some might think that the time he spent keeping his own skin smooth and baby-pink belonged in the same class of foppery.

Dr. Martin did, for instance. But, outspoken though he was, he didn't mention anything about skin-care to the baron. After all, he thought to himself, a physician is supposed to have some sort of tact.

As a matter of fact, Captain Orselli had impressed him as a bit of a dandy, too—altogether too much of a ladies' man. He was lean and flat of abdomen, and he carried himself with an erectness that had none of the stiffness of the military. It was more like that of a superbly trained ballet dancer. But the captain had a little too much of the quick-smiling, overly courtly manner about him to suit Martin's taste. Still—

"He must have something on the ball," Dr. Martin said aloud, "or he wouldn't be captain of an interstellar liner."

"You don't know these Earthmen," the baron said. After all, he thought to himself, Dr. Martin came from a star system nine light-years from Sol, while he, Baron Weissmann, lived practically next door to Earth. "I'm not much of a traveler, you understand, but, from what I gather, the captain of a liner like this isn't really anything but a figurehead. He takes care of all the social contacts and the Executive Officer runs the ship."

"Influence of the Imperium, I suppose," said Dr. Martin. "We seem to like to have a lot of noble figureheads around for pomp and ceremony."

Baron Weissmann didn't quite know how to take *that* remark, either.

Neither the baron and his wife nor the Sirian doctor noticed the bronze-skinned young officer sitting behind them who had overheard the last part of their conversation. With an amused smile, Third Officer Cavendish leaned over and whispered to the blonde girl sitting at the table with him:

"Orselli a figurehead! I wonder what he'd say to *that?*"

CAPTAIN Gaetano Orselli couldn't have cared less. He was fully conscious of his own abilities, duties, and efficiency, and he bore their burdens and privileges with equal aplomb. He knew perfectly well that the moment he had stepped into the music-and-voice-filled ballroom everyone had become aware of

his presence. He knew it and accepted it in the same way he accepted the existence of the Universe.

Orselli's personal pride was not of the Pooh-Bah kind; it was a conscious knowledge of his own ability and of his own relationship to the rest of mankind. His was not just the pride that marks the Earthman, since it went even deeper than that. He was aware that, genetically, his line went back through centuries of careful breeding. Although only in the last two centuries had there been anything scientific in that breeding, his forebears, long before that, had instinctively picked mates that would improve the line.

Even the name was old. Many centuries before, a Gaetano Orselli had been a shining example of Renaissance Man, a man whose ability with both sword and pen were equally renowned in his native Florence.

Five centuries later, another Gaetano Orselli had fought gallantly as a naval officer in the Great War of 1914 and had finally been murdered, just before the second Great War, because of his underground fight against the *Facisti.*

And those weren't even all the Gaetano's, much less all the Orselli's. It was an often brilliant and always capable line.

Captain Gaetano Orselli was so aware of all these things that he rarely thought of them; they were simply a part of him, like his face or his heart or his brain, and were infinitely more durable.

It did not displease him to act the part of the perfect host aboard his own ship; it was one of the enjoyable parts of a many-faceted life. He had dressed with care, wearing his uniform with just the proper shade of jauntiness. Other officers who took such care about their dress tended to look a little stiff; Orselli merely managed to look perfect.

"You look wonderful, as usual, Captain Orselli," said Lady Susan Feng. There was a hint of amusement in her almond-shaped eyes as she looked up at him from a height scarcely two inches below his own six feet. "Tell me: how do you always manage to look so beautiful?"

Orselli smiled. "I think beautiful thoughts, Lady Susan; I've always heard that thinking beautiful thoughts will make the exterior beautiful as well."

"Beautiful thoughts? Such as . . . ?"

"Thoughts about beautiful ladies, such as yourself."

The gaunt-faced man standing next to Lady Susan chuckled.

"Neatly turned, Captain. But I'm afraid your philosophy falls through. I often think about Lady Susan, but I'm afraid it

doesn't make me beautiful; it doesn't show on the outside."

Lady Susan turned to him. "Oh, but it does, Jerrol; your face betrays the fact that your thoughts *about* me are far from beautiful."

Jerrol's smile faded by the barest trifle. "I dare say the captain entertains the same thoughts."

"He may contemplate the same actions," Lady Susan said, "but his motivations are those of a poet in love, while yours are those of a bull ape in rut."

"Come, come, Lady Susan," Orselli interjected smoothly. "I assure you that you're far too complimentary to me. I may give the impression of being a deep thinker, but, way down inside, I'm quite shallow."

Jerrol regained his smile and his chuckle blended with the tinkling laughter of Lady Susan Feng.

Captain Orselli touched his right eyebrow in a casual salute. "And now, if you'll excuse me, having already spoken to the most beautiful woman here, I must continue with what must now be a boring job—tending to the rest of my guests." He moved away gracefully.

He had no intention of getting involved in any argument between Lady Susan Feng and Jerrol Vane-Seljak. Jerrol had

been pursuing Lady Susan for some time now—he had even made two trips on the *Vesuvio* with her, under conditions that the Feng heiress had made sure were well-chaperoned. But, even though she quite obviously detested him, the political situation on Odin was such that she couldn't flatly turn him down any more than he could afford to be too forward in his attentions. Jerrol had evidently allowed himself to think that the girl's actions were merely a case of "Methinks the lady doth protest too much," that she was concealing a deep affection beneath a thin guise of loathing. And Lady Susan was content to let him think so.

The two were at cross purposes, and Captain Orselli had no intention of becoming the hypotenuse to *that* triangle.

"Ah, Gaetano, old friend. Are you as distracted as all that?"

Orselli smiled at the tall, graying man in the scarlet jacket and midnight blue trousers. "Sorry, Esteban; my mind *was* a bit preoccupied, but don't think I'd have ignored an old friend."

"I know, I know," said Cardinal Esteban, dismissing the whole thing with a slight wave of his left hand. "Captain Orselli, I'd like to introduce my secretarial assistant, Father Ferml, and his wife."

The priest was almost as tall as the Cardinal, and dressed similarly, although his jacket was the same midnight blue as his trousers, with only a tab of scarlet on his left shoulder to show that he was a Cardinal's secretary. He was younger and rather better looking than the older prelate, but there was a similarity of expression around the eyes—a serenity of expression that even the shy and pretty Mrs. Ferml seemed to share. But there was a toughness there, too, the hardness of unshakable faith and determination.

At least, Orselli thought, Father Ferml wasn't one of these wishy-washy, holier-than-thou, small-minded, fussy men who were too often found in the Church these days.

Orselli was not a particularly religious man, but he felt that, no matter what a man professed, he should at least do his job well. Still, there were always slackers in any outfit; one had to take them into account in any organization.

Briefly—as he always did when he talked with Cardinal Esteban—Orselli wished faintly that he had lived in the Second Age of Faith, during and immediately after the Great Communist Persecutions, when the Christian Church had been driven underground and only those who still held to the Faith remained loyal to the Church,

when all differences in dogma and ceremony and ritual had dissolved, when the Second Reformation had fused Catholic and Protestant and Orthodox together again. The Church had emerged, cleansed by fire and sword, as a unified body which would probably have appeared heretical to any one of the Christian sects that had existed before that time. A hierarchy that combined the best elements of the Roman Communion with those of the Salvation Army would have shocked both groups before the Persecutions.

But the Second Age of Faith had passed, and now there were signs of another breakup. Rome had been rebuilt over the slag of the old city, and now there were those who insisted that the bishop of that city should be Heavenly Vicar, regardless of who had been elected by the Episcopate.

Another hundred years, and who knew what might happen?

"What *is* bothering you, Gaetano?" Cardinal Esteban's voice was soft in his ear.

Orselli knew that no one else had heard.

He gave Esteban a quick, noncommittal smile. Mrs. Ferml was speaking:

"Isn't it terrible about the war, Captain? So many people losing their lives."

Orselli nodded automatically. "Terrible, indeed, Mrs. Ferml," he said, wondering why the woman had brought the subject up. It wasn't considered a fit topic of conversation among genteel people of the Empire, although it was certainly lurking in the back of every mind.

"Do you think we shall be involved, Captain?" she asked, her pretty eyes looking at him with a touch of worry behind their innocence.

Before Orselli could answer, Father Ferml said: "My dear, how could anyone—even the astute Captain Orselli—know the answer to that?"

"Oh!" She suddenly seemed to realize that she'd committed a slight *faux pas*. "I'm sorry."

"Will you excuse me, Captain?" the priest asked; "I promised my wife I'd dance one *darusha* with her, and it looks as though this is our chance."

Orselli touched his right eyebrow again, and the couple moved out to the floor.

Odd, Orselli thought. *Does she have that touch of prescience, too?*

For he suddenly knew what it had been that had been distracting him for the past several minutes. Every time something dangerous approached, his mind reacted quickly—unless it was something that still had time to build.

He looked around—wondering.

"Trouble again," said Cardinal Esteban.

Orselli gave him a knowing smile. "I can't fool you, can I? Yes, old friend; trouble." Not close, nor near—not yet. Not something that would happen within seconds, no—but within minutes, yes—within the hour, certainly.

It was something that was building within him—building, building, building. And when it had finished building, when the fine structure was done, he would be ready for it.

Now the distraction was gone; the early warning signal had made itself known, and now he was alert and alive, watching, feeling, hearing, knowing, waiting.

It was as if the whole ballroom had taken on new color and new life.

"That smile of yours," said Cardinal Esteban, "always gives me the feeling that you should be carrying a rapier at your side. What is it this time, do you know? The war, perhaps?"

"Let me ask you a question, Esteban," Orselli said quietly. "Your secretary's wife—is she a Sensitive?"

"Hilda Ferml?" The Cardinal frowned. "She has done some work for the Church, yes," he said cautiously. "Tests fairly high, I understand."

Orselli nodded. "In that case, my dear Cardinal, it almost certainly has something to do with the Viran-Plochef war. I hope you'll keep that under that scarlet *zucchetto* of yours."

"Of course, Gaetano."

The tiny communicator in Captain Orselli's ear suddenly came to life, and a voice inaudible to all but him said: "Captain, there's a ship on our tail. Came within detection range thirty-five seconds ago and is approaching."

"Excuse me, Esteban," Orselli said smoothly, "but there are things to be attended to." The look that passed between them obviated any further words.

THE TRIP to Command and Control took another thirty-five seconds through the lift chute. Orselli stepped through the door of C&C and snapped: "Any communication from her?"

First Officer Waldemar, a fleshy, rather red-faced man, was scowling at a pip on the screen before him. "Not a word, sir," he said without turning.

Orselli went over and stood beside Waldemar. He stroked his beard thoughtfully as he looked at the pip, then glanced at the integrator figures that changed rapidly along the sides of the screen.

"Coming in fast," Waldemar said. "Only a battle cruiser

would be that big and have that much oomph behind her."

If anything ever kept Waldemar from commanding his own ship, Orselli thought, it would be his propensity for verbalizing the obvious.

Orselli began to speak, calmly but rapidly. "Prepare a message torpedo; put a switch on her to give her full overload. Jury-rig it in, and do it fast. I want it fired out within three minutes. Thirty seconds after that, we're stopping."

First Officer Waldemar didn't bother asking questions or giving orders. There wasn't another man aboard who could do that kind of work as rapidly as he could. The message torpedo was fired off fifteen seconds before the three minutes were up. The pursuing warship still wasn't close enough to be identified, nor had they signalled the *Vesuvio* in any way.

"Full deceleration!" Orselli snapped. "Get us below light velocity! Dead stop!"

"Dead stop" simply meant any velocity less than a quarter-light with reference to the nearest star.

As the *Vesuvio* slowed, the warship ballooned nearer in the screen.

"We're not in a war zone," Waldemar said, scowling with his whole beefy face. "What right have they to come—"

The speaker of the communicator came on as a message was received: "Battle cruiser *Yormath* to *Vesuvio!* Stand by to receive official party! Request you come to dead stop!"

"Inform the *Yormath,*" Orselli said sweetly, "that we have already begun deceleration."

While the Communications Officer relayed the message, Orselli glanced at Waldemar. The shorter man's beefy face looked as though he were utterly confused and wanted to punch someone's nose to relieve his feelings.

"It is always better to anticipate the inevitable, Waldemar," Orselli said. "That not only confuses your opponent, but gets him to wondering just how many jumps ahead of him you're thinking."

"How many jumps ahead are you?" Waldemar asked.

"Right now, none," Orselli admitted candidly. "From here on in, we play it by ear. We have already fired our big gun, so to speak; now we'll have to wait and see if we can hit anything with it."

"What shall I tell the passengers?"

"Nothing, just yet. Most of them won't even know we're slowing. Oh, *some* of them will, of course; anyone who's done any traveling will recognize the effects of the pseudo-Coriolis

forces if they're moving around, but it takes a lot of experience to know how much and in which direction the ship's accelerating."

Their eyes were still on the screen, watching. The warship, too, was slowing, somewhat erratically as it tried to match velocity with the *Vesuvio* and catch up to it at the same time.

"I wonder," said Orselli quietly, "just what the Republic of Viran has in mind? If it *is* the Viranese."

"The *Yormath's* a Viranese ship," Waldemar pointed out unnecessarily.

"True," said Orselli, in an oddly noncommittal voice.

IN the ballroom, Dr. Judd Martin was holding forth to Baroness Weissmann. The Baron had excused himself a minute or so before and had gone plodding away in a manner that the doctor privately thought highly ludicrous under half-gee conditions, but the baroness had asked a question of the doctor.

"There are some worlds, Baroness, that will remain frontier worlds for a long time to come. Sirius IV is just such a world. Even though I was born and raised under a steady pull of one point nine eight Standard Gees, I am not and can never be really acclimated to it. I don't have the genetic inheritance. Now, under those conditions—"

"Excuse me." The baron was back, and he looked definitely green about the gills. He held on to the back of the chair as though he were afraid to sit down.

Dr. Martin peered up at him. "What's the matter? Gravity too much for you?"

The baron started to shake his head, winced, and stopped. "No," he said in a strained voice, "no, it's not the gravity. That only makes me feel tired. But now, every time I move, I feel nauseous."

"Sort of seasick, you mean?"

"I wouldn't know," Baron Weissmann said solemnly, "I've never been on a seagoing vessel. It's something like the way I feel when the ship's accelerating or decelerating, but much worse."

"The Baron is *so* susceptible to these things," said the baroness, looking sympathetically at her husband. "That's why he hates to travel in ultralight ships."

"But this is worse," said the baron. "Doctor! Don't *do* that! You're turning my stomach!"

Dr. Martin, who had been rocking gently back and forth in his chair with his eyes closed, opened his eyes and stopped rocking.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to upset you. Just checking." His bright blue eyes peered all around the

ballroom. "Have you noticed? There's not a ship's officer in the place."

"What's that got to do with my nausea?" the Baron wanted to know. There was self-pity in his weakened voice.

"Oh, the ship is definitely slowing down," said the Sirian. "Full deceleration, I'd say. Something's up, and I wish I knew what it was."

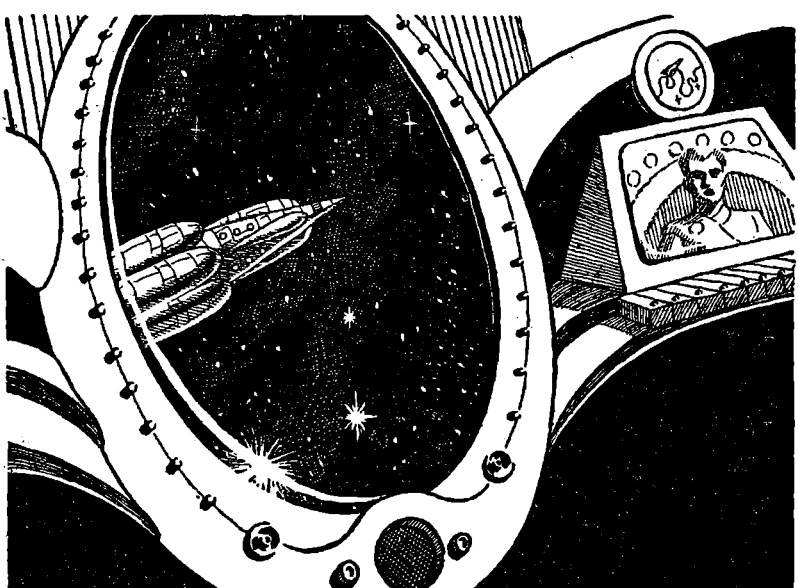
Within minutes, the question was all over the room.

THE HUGE warship hung in space half a million miles from the *Vesuvio,* but in the screen it looked as though it were no more than a few hundred meters distant. It looked beautiful and ugly at the same time, like a desirable woman holding a loaded gun, Orselli thought. And the gun was pointed right at his midsection.

To the right of the big screen, a smaller communicator screen glowed with the image of a man wearing the uniform of the Viranese Spatial Navy. Orselli looked at him, his face blandly expressionless.

"May I ask the meaning of this?" he asked in a conversational tone. "It happens to be a violation of interstellar law to threaten an unarmed non-belligerent."

The officer, who had intro-



duced himself as Commander Thorne, raised his eyebrows in mild astonishment. "I wasn't aware that we had threatened you, Captain Orselli. We merely requested that you receive an official party. No reprisals were threatened if you did not."

"Suppose we had chosen to ignore you, Commander?" Orselli asked. His tone of voice implied that it was merely a friendly question, nothing more.

Thorne smiled. "Since that did not occur, Captain, I see no need in discussing hypothetical worlds of if."

Orselli sighed. "Very well. Now, to get back to my original question: What is the meaning of this unlawful act?"

Thorne's smile remained, but his eyes grew colder. "I have already said that there is nothing illegal—"

Orselli's voice, still smoothly conversational, cut across the other's words. "Very well, then, I'll put it this way: What the hell do you want?"

Thorne blinked, then said: "We're sending over a flitterboat with two officers and a civilian aboard—all unarmed, I assure you. They will explain everything when they get there."

"No explanations from you?"

Commander Thorne shook his head. "I'm sorry. I'm not at liberty to discuss it with you over a communicator."

"I see. Very well, then; I'll wait for your flitterboat."

"Uh . . . Captain Orselli . . .?" Thorne looked as though he were unsure of himself for the first time.

"Yes?" Orselli kept his voice even.

"Captain, what was that ultralight blip we picked up just as we came within range?"

Orselli's beard-wreathed smile showed bright white teeth. "What did it appear to be?"

"Frankly, it looked as though you'd tried to send a message torpedo, but it had blown all its power in one jump."

Orselli's smile became broader. "Excellent, Commander! That's just exactly what it was!"

Thorne was still looking doubtful when Orselli cut him off.

Waldemar's broad, beefy face was redder than usual; it had a faint wine tinge.

"Don't strangle yourself, Waldemar," Orselli said. "What's the trouble?"

The First Officer swallowed forcefully, but his color did not abate. "Captain," he said in a somewhat forced voice, "I do not understand you at all. I thought you had something up your sleeve when you sent that torp, but now you've given the whole thing away. I don't get it at all, now."

That's because you work by the book, from the memory, and not from the imagination, Orselli thought a little sadly.

Aloud, he said: "Wally, what happened when all the power went through that torp's circuits?"

"Why . . . why, it tried to accelerate at an infinite acceleration. It couldn't, so it was merely dissipated as ultralight energy."

"Exactly. Could that happen accidentally?"

"Not likely." The First Officer's face had come almost back to its normal redness. "I had to jerk out three safety devices and put in an extra relay to do the job."

"If it couldn't happen by accident, then it must have been done on purpose, right? And why would anyone want to do that on purpose?"

"I—I don't know," Waldemar admitted. "But I figured you had a reason."

"Very good. Now, attend: That cruiser was just within detector range when we fired the torpedo. They were too far away to be sure of exactly what did happen. They can't figure out a reason for what I did, any more than you could, but, like you, they figure I must have had a reason. So they asked, you see. And I gave them an answer that doesn't make sense—*to them.*"

A smile came over the First Officer's face for the first time. "I see. You did it just to confuse them."

"Partly. But I've got a hunch it may be more useful than that. We'll have to wait and see what this boarding party wants."

The Communications Officer's voice in his ear said: "One of the passengers wants to talk to you, sir."

For an instant, Orselli wanted to blast the Comm Officer verbally for even thinking that he'd want to talk to a passenger at a time like this, then he realized that the man wasn't as incompetent as that.

"It's Cardinal Esteban, sir," the voice went on.

"I'll take the call here," Orselli said, reaching for a phone. "Yes, Esteban?"

"Gaetano," came the old prelate's voice, "I think you'd better know that there are all sorts of nasty rumors going on all over the ship."

"Oh? I'd rather suspected there would be rumors, but why do you say 'nasty'?"

"The rumor is that we have come to dead stop—"

"True," admitted Orselli.

"—And that we are being covered by a Viranese warship."

For a moment, Orselli was stunned into silence. *Someone had talked!* But who?

"Have you any idea who started such a rumor?" he asked cautiously.

"No. I haven't attempted to trace it. The thing is, Father Ferml's wife insists that it's true. She hasn't spoken to anyone but me and her husband, however. I can assure you that she is *not* the one who started the rumor."

After a moment, Orselli said: "I believe you, Esteban." He tugged thoughtfully at his oiled and perfumed beard; then a wolfish grin came to his lips. "Where are you now, Esteban?"

"In my suite. So are Father Ferml and his wife. I thought it would be best to get away from the rest of the passengers."

"Wait there," Orselli said. "I'll be right with you."

As he put down the phone, First Officer Waldemar said: "How long will you be gone?"

"As long as it takes to do what has to be done."

"But—what shall I tell the boarding party when they come, if you're not here?"

"Tell them you can't do a thing till I get back. Make them comfortable, let them wait, and don't bother me except to notify me when they arrive."

"But—"

"Don't turn purple on me again, Waldemar. Let them stew for a while. It won't hurt them any."

"It might hurt *us!*" said Waldemar.

"That's the chance we have to take, my friend. But I don't think there's much risk."

THE SITUATION is beginning to make sense, you see," said Captain Orselli, settling himself comfortably in a chair. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Go right ahead," said Cardinal Esteban. Father Ferml and his wife, seated on the couch near the Cardinal's chair, gave their unspoken permission.

Orselli took a long, thin cigar from a pocket case, clipped the end with fine white teeth, and puffed it alight before he went on. "Someone is being subtle. The trouble is, we have no way of penetrating the depths of their subtlety."

They looked at him, patient but uncomprehending.

"I'll be frank with you," he went on, "I wouldn't burden the three of you with this information except that I have known Cardinal Esteban for many years, and I also may have need of Mrs. Ferml as a Sensitive. In order for her mind to properly form an intuition, she should have as much information as possible. Unless—" He looked directly at her. "—you would rather not attempt it."

"I'll do what I can, Captain," she said calmly.

"Good. Let's take a look at the situation, then.

"There is a warship out there —" He pointed with the cigar, a gesture that indicated the vast emptiness beyond the outer hull of the ship. "—a warship that claims to be the *Yormath,* of the Spatial Navy of the Republic of Viran. Now, no one knew that except myself and my officers. I *know* none of them has mentioned it—and yet all the passengers know it. How?" He looked at Mrs. Ferml again.

"Couldn't there be another Sensitive aboard?" Father Ferml asked defensively.

"Please, Father," Orselli said. "That's not the question I'm asking. Mrs. Ferml, you knew there was a ship out there, threatening us. *Did you know the nationality of that ship?*"

She shook her head, quickly. "No. No."

"Do you think any other Sensitive could?"

"No. They've screened against that, whoever they are. They have their own Sensitives aboard."

Orselli nodded in satisfaction and blew out a cloud of blue-gray smoke. "Precisely. Every military warship carries Sensitives for just that purpose—to shield the interior of the ship from outsiders. Therefore, the rumor that is going around this ship was not started by a Sensitive, *but by someone who knew in advance that we would be met by that ship!*"

Father Ferml looked pleased for a moment, then puzzled. "But why would he spread the rumor around?"

"Ah, that's where we get into the subtlety, Father. They—whoever 'they' are—*want* the passengers to know that the ship is Viranese. Yes, Esteban?"

The old prelate looked grim. "It's so simple, isn't it, Gaetano? The Republic of Viran and the Commune of Plochef have been at war for three years now. We have managed to stay neutral. If the Terran Empire comes into the war, whichever group we side with will win. Both sides have been trying to get us involved; all that's needed is an 'incident', one that will sway our sympathies in one direction or another."

"And this is the 'incident'," said Father Ferml.

"In that case," Orselli said with deceptive quietness, "to whom does that ship really belong?"

"Obviously it's Plochevian," said Father Ferml. "By claiming that they're Viranese, and by pulling this illegal act, they intend to inflame Terran sentiment against the Viranese so that we'll come into the war on the Plochevian side."

Orselli smiled, looked directly

into the priest's eyes, and said: "Obviously."

Cardinal Esteban chuckled. "Yes, Father—a little *too* obviously. It would be too easy that way. We would all see through that trick, just as you have. The Viranese want us to come in with them against Plochef so badly that they would never pull a foolish maneuver like this. Therefore it is obvious that it must be a Plochevian trick, eh? So obvious, in fact, that one might be led to suspect that it really is the Viranese."

Father Ferml frowned. "Yes, but if you can reason that far, then it becomes obvious that—" He stopped.

"Exactly," Orselli said. "You can carry that line of reasoning on until Doomsday and arrive at nothing. It's an ancient puzzle that has no ending."

"Then what's the point of the whole thing?" asked Father Ferml. "If it can't be figured out—"

"I didn't say it couldn't be," Orselli said. "But I do say that we haven't enough information to solve it—at least not yet.

"This little game isn't just being played for us, Father; it's being played for the whole civilized Galaxy. This is merely the focal point—or it may not even be that. We don't know what's going on elsewhere; we have no idea what other 'proofs' are being concocted to put the blame for this on one side or the other. But you can rest assured that it is certainly being done. Long before we reach our destination—if we do—the rest of the Galaxy will be absolutely certain where the guilt lies.

"The point I'm trying to make is that *we* don't know. We don't know what they intend to do, and we don't know who they are.

"But there is one thing we *do* know."

Cardinal Esteban smiled a little. "And what's that, Gateano?"

"That they have an agent aboard this ship."

"Certainly," agreed the Cardinal. "What do you propose to do? Find him—or her—and find out who is behind this plot that way?"

Orselli shook his head. "Even if he'd talk—even if he told what he believed to be the truth—we still couldn't rely on his information.

"No, the point is that we have an enemy—an *unknown* enemy aboard this ship. I don't object to enemies; they make life interesting. But I do object to an enemy masquerading as a friend or as a neutral without my knowing it.

"And that's what I want you to find out for me, Mrs. Ferml."

The priest's wife looked worried and uncertain. "Among all

those people? It would take days."

"Agreed. And we don't have more than an hour. But I think we can narrow the list down. After all, you can't book passage aboard an interstellar liner without a passport—which means that I do know something about these people.

"I know, for instance, that none of them is either a Viranese or a Plochevian; they're all Imperial citizens. And that means that we're looking for a sympathizer or else someone who would benefit by having the Terran Confederate Empire enter the war." He held up his hand and displayed three fingers. "To begin with, Mrs. Ferml, you can check these three.

"One: The Lady Susan Feng. Her family owns large holdings in Viran; if the Plochevians win, she'll lose them all.

"Two: Jerrol Vane-Seljak. Not only does he have connections in Plochef, but he would like to see Lady Susan lose her Viranese holdings—both for political and personal reasons.

"I know both of those people, but not well. Lady Susan can be charming, but she's like a cat—the claws are sharp when she wants to use them. Jerrol is brilliant, but petty; not a bad sort, really, but touchy about this so-called pride."

Mrs. Ferml nodded. "And the third?"

"I've never seen him before this trip, although I've heard of him. Baron Weissmann, of the Jovian Satellite League.

"He stands to make a great deal of money if the Empire goes to war. Since it's a war that we stand a very small chance of losing, he just might be greedy enough to get us into it. The Jovian League owns and operates the Great Planets Atmospheric Mining Corporations, the Solar System's main source of ammonia, methane, and hydrogen—in other words, they control the synthetic food market. They could make a lot of money out of a war."

He paused for a moment, thinking. Then he went on: "Of course, these are the obvious ones—to me, at least. It could be anyone. But—as Cardinal Esteban will tell you—I'm somewhat of a Sensitive, myself.

"Will you see what you can find out, Mrs. Ferml?"

"I'll do what I can, Captain."

"Fine. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll have to go back to Command and Control. I have visitors waiting."

WHEN he stepped into C & C, he saw immediately that Waldemar was worried. When the First Officer was merely puzzled, he seemed to fidget, but real

worry, real concern, simply hardened that beefy face into granite. The worse things got, the more resolute he became.

And thank God for that, Orselli thought fervently.

"They're in the officers' lounge," Waldemar said flatly, jerking a thumb in the direction of the closed door.

"Have they made any fuss because I wasn't here as they came aboard?"

"No. Calm as oysters, and just as close-mouthed. Whatever they want, they're in no hurry to get it."

Orselli grinned. "Of course not. They want everything set up very nicely, and they're going to take the time to see that it's done properly."

Waldemar grunted. "And there isn't a damned thing we can do with those guns trained on us."

"Don't be too sure of that, my friend," said Orselli. "Until the *Yormath* actually fires those guns, they haven't committed themselves. Which means we still have a chance to do some fancy talking."

The First Officer merely looked grimmer and more determined. "You don't even know what they're up to, and you're going to try to talk them out of it. More power to you."

"Thanks; I'll need it. Let's go in and see what they want."

There were three of them in the officers' lounge—two dressed on Viranese uniforms and the third dressed in civilian clothing of unmistakably Viranese cut. They all rose politely as Orselli entered.

"Pardon the delay, gentlemen," Orselli said, with equal politeness. "I had to quiet my passengers. I am Captain Gaetano Orselli, commanding the *Vesuvio*, at your service."

The older of the two officers, a gray-haired man with a sharp chin and a long, pointed nose, said: "I am Commander Fell, Viranese Naval Intelligence. This is Lieutenant Bonnick, also of the Intelligence Corps. And Mr. Harl Lovrin, of the Bureau of Counterespionage."

All very formal. Very genteel. Very polite.

Very.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

Commander Fell came right to the point. "Do you have a passenger aboard named Martin—Dr. Rufus Martin?"

Orselli thought of the squat, thick-muscled Sirian. "I'm not acquainted with every passenger aboard," he said carefully. "I'd have to check the passenger list. Why?"

"Mr. Lovrin wants to talk to him," the commander said.

Mr. Harl Lovrin nodded in silent agreement.

Orselli took the half-smoked cigar out of his mouth and raised an eyebrow. "You stopped us just to talk to a passenger?"

"This is very much more important than a mere conversation, Captain," said Commander Fell.

"We have reason to believe," Lovrin chimed in, "that this man is an agent of the Plochevian government. An *agent provocateur* who is attempting to drag the Terran Confederate Empire into an alliance with Plochef."

"I see. And you want to talk to him, eh?"

"That's right," said the commander. "Mr. Lovrin can make positive identification."

"I see," Orselli repeated. He looked the men over. *Viranese—or Plochevian? Which?* Their speech certainly bore every mark of the Viranese dialects. The uniforms were correct in every detail. Naturally they would be; things like that would never be sloppily done. Even if one of them were to use a typically Plochevian gesture or idiom, it would mean nothing; these men were supposed to be counterintelligence agents, and would naturally know things like that.

"Would you mind bringing him up here?" Mr. Lorvin asked.

Orselli smiled apologetically. "Now, gentlemen—really. If you don't have positive identification, how can I ask one of my passengers to come up here to answer questions? Especially since he probably wouldn't answer them, anyway."

There was a tenseness in the room.

"However," he went on with hardly a break, "I see no reason why you couldn't come down to the ballroom—where I am quite certain he will be at the moment—and speak to him there."

The tension broke. None of the three men quite smiled, but it was apparent from their manner that such a course of action was even better than what they had planned.

"Well, Captain," said the commander, "if you think that would be better—"

"Come along, then," said Captain Orselli.

THE BALLROOM was not as crowded as it had been. The music was still going, but no one was dancing; the passengers were sitting at the tables, talking in low voices. Many of them were trying to see if a few drinks would either dispel their worry or tell them what was going on, neither of which powers were inherent in the alcohol.

There was a sudden silence as Captain Orselli entered the room followed by the two men in Viranese uniforms and the civilian.

Then the silence was filled again as everyone tried to pretend that there was nothing unusual going on.

Orselli looked around, but he couldn't see the squat, muscular figure of Dr. Rufus Martin anywhere. He had noticed the Sirian earlier, sitting with Baron and Baroness Weissmann, who were still at their table. He led his "guests" toward the Weissmanns.

Waldemar's voice whispered in his ear: "Cardinal Esteban wants to talk to you. What shall I tell him?"

Orselli's voice was the barest of sibilances, and his lips moved not at all, but the personal microphone picked it up and dehashed it perfectly: "Tell him to come to the ballroom as soon as Mrs. Ferml has any information."

"He says she already has it. Vane-Seljak."

"Good." He whispered further orders. The faint whisper of his voice went unheard in the noise of the room.

Baron Weissmann and his wife were watching the four men approach with curious eyes.

"Your pardon, Baron," Orselli said with a slight bow, "but have you seen Dr. Martin?"

"Not for several minutes," said the baron. "I think I saw him leaving with your Third Officer."

Orselli winced inwardly. He had hoped the baron hadn't noticed that. Still, it wasn't a fatal slip, by a long shot.

Orselli turned to Commander Fell, smiling. "My Third Officer is off duty just now; he's probably having a drink with Dr. Martin. Sit down, and I'll get him." He looked down at the baron. "Do you mind, Baron?"

"Not at all," said the somewhat flustered Jovian, not knowing what else to say.

Commander Fell started to say something, thought better of it, and sat down in silence.

At that moment, Second Officer Gisser came in—with Jerrol Vane-Seljak.

Orselli thought: *Waldemar worked faster than I wanted. Oh well, nothing's perfect.* Aloud, he said: "Ah, there they are. Is that your man, Mr. Lovrin?"

"Of course not!" Lovrin snapped. "That's—that's someone else."

So they knew Vane-Seljak. That practically clinched it.

Jerrol had spotted the group from across the room. He stopped, then turned away as if he hadn't noticed a thing.

"What kind of runaround is this, Captain Orselli?" Commander Fell whispered tightly. "We demand to see Rufus Martin!"

Every eye in the ballroom was on the group at Baron Weissmann's table, shifting away now and then only for the sake of appearing uninterested.

"Sure you wouldn't care for a drink?" Orselli asked innocently.

Fell moved his lips, but no words came.

Waldemar's voice whispered in Orselli's ear: "Cardinal Esteban says that Mrs. Ferml gives Martin a clean slate."

Orselli breathed a deep sigh of relief. He saw the whole trap now. He could almost predict the answer to his next question.

"Would you like to sit here and wait, gentlemen? I'm sure Dr. Martin will be along in a few minutes."

Fell's voice was low and harsh. "Captain Orselli, we have come to arrest a man for espionage, not dilly dally around. I suggest you hand him over to us immediately."

Orselli's face hardened. I don't like your attitude, Fell. Now do you want to make a fool of yourself here, or shall we go back to the officers' lounge, where we can haggle in private? It's your move."

Fell's blood pressure seemed to rise another ten points. "You have an almighty gall to—" He braked himself to a halt. "All right! We'll discuss this in private!"

DR. RUFUS MARTIN, a puzzled look on his blocky face, was waiting for them in the officers' lounge.

"Well," said Fell under his breath, "This is more like it."

"Is this your man?" Orselli asked.

"Are you Dr. Rufus Martin, of Sirius IV?" asked the civilian, Lovrin.

Martin nodded, still puzzled. 'I am. What about it?"

"You're under arrest. The charge—"

"Now, wait just one moment!" Orselli turned to face the three. "Just what right have you to arrest anyone aboard this ship?" Before the surprised Lovrin could answer, Orselli swung around again to Dr. Martin.

"Dr. Martin, these men accuse you of being an agent of the Plochevian Government. Are you?"

"Of course not!" Martin said angrily. "That's ridiculous!"

Orselli walked over to a chair and sat down. "There you are, gentlemen. You say he is; he says he isn't. How am I to judge?"

"I'm arresting him!" Lovrin said in a hard voice.

"You have no legal authority to do so," Orselli said. "I'm the only one who can arrest anyone aboard this ship."

"You can arrest him, then,"

Lovrin said harshly, "and turn him over to us."

"I have no reason to arrest him. I've seen no evidence that he's anything but what he says he is."

"Do I understand," said Commander Fell coldly, "that you refuse to hand this man over to us?"

"You understand very well," said Orselli.

Fell smiled grimly. "Isn't that rather foolish, considering the fact that your ship, at this moment, happens to be under the guns of the *Yormath?*"

"No. You won't shoot."

Fell's smile didn't change. "You think you can keep us prisoners here, and by doing so keep the *Yormath* from firing?"

"It won't work," said Lovrin. "The *Yormath* will simply smash your engines. Then an armed party of Space Marines will come aboard and . . ."

"Oh, no," Orselli said. He took another cigar from his case, lit it. "You gentlemen are free to take your flitterboat back to the *Yormath* any time you want to. As soon as you leave, I'm going to get underway again, and many thanks to you."

"We'll blow you out of the ether!" Fell snapped.

"No, Commander Fell. No, you won't." Orselli's voice was cold, hard, and controlled, but a smile still played around his lips. "You forget what repercussions such an act would have. The message I sent would tie you up in knots if you did that."

"Message? You mean that malfunctioning torpedo?" Fell snorted.

"You'd better recheck your instrument readings," Orselli said mildly. "That torpedo is somewhat of an improvement over the old-fashioned kind. It's for emergencies. Ultrafast communication."

"And this is an emergency? You sent a message before you even knew what we wanted? That's hard to believe." Fell looked skeptical.

"Certainly." Orselli blew out a plume of smoke. "I sent the torpedo to Kandoris, our destination. I simply said that our engines were malfunctioning, and we had to stop.

"But I added that a Viranese warship was within subradio range, and had offered to help us. And that's what I shall tell our passengers, too.

"As I said, gentlemen, it was very kind of you to lend us some of your engineering staff for the short time required to repair our engines. Now we'll excuse you and go on our way."

Fell said nothing for a long minute. When he did speak, it was to say: "Thank you for your hospitality, Captain."

CAPTAIN ORSELLI poured two glasses of the pale violet Odinian wine and handed one to Cardinal Esteban. "I'm afraid," he said, easing himself into a chair, "that I have committed the sin of lying."

"In a good cause, I think," said the prelate, smiling. "I doubt that the sin was mortal. The question that arises in my mind is: Why did they believe you at all?"

Orselli glanced around the Cardinal's room as if to make sure that there were no spies hidden in the walls. "Now that we are alone, Esteban," he said in a mock-conspiratorial voice, "I shall confess all."

The Cardinal chuckled. "*Te absolvo.* Go ahead."

"Well, in reference to the torpedo," Orselli said, "it wasn't a matter of whether they believed me or not. It was simply that they couldn't afford to act on any other assumption. They couldn't be absolutely sure that I hadn't sent off some new kind of message torp, and, in this business, they needed near-absolute certainty."

"Mmmmm. And the same thing applies to the message you allegedly sent."

"Certainly. They were probably almost certain that I was bluffing. But *almost* wasn't good enough."

Cardinal Esteban took a sip of his wine. "What's your opinion, Gaetano? Were they Viranese or Plochevian?"

"I suspect they were Plochevian, but it doesn't matter. We'll know as soon as we get to Kandoris. Then we can see what the rest of the story is, what other incidents took place to tie in with this one.

"One of these days, someone will figure out a method of contacting an interstellar ship, but as things stand now, a subradio tight beam can't be aimed at anything smaller than a planet, so we're effectively isolated out here. We can't carry enough power to send a beam more than a light-year or so, and a planet can't even find us, except by accident."

The Cardinal frowned a little. "I still don't quite see how you could be sure they'd react that way—especially since you didn't know which side they were in and didn't know what their plot was. It seems to me it was a random choice. What did you do? Flip a coin?"

Orselli shook his head. "Not at all, my dear Esteban. I didn't need to know which side they were on at all.

"Consider: What was their plot—as much as we could see of it?

"They were going to stop us—illegally, I might add—and then

try to arrest Dr. Martin. Which was even more blatantly illegal. If that had succeeded, if I had allowed them to take Martin, under threat of their guns, there would have been one hell of a fuss, if you'll pardon the expression.

"In all likelihood, Martin is innocent, but even if he's as guilty as sin it doesn't matter. The crime would be in taking him.

"If that didn't work, in the off chance that I would be so stupid as to refuse, they would cripple the *Vesuvio* and send a boarding party to take Martin, which would make the crime even worse.

"Suppose, as is most likely, they were Plochevian. This incident, plus whatever others have been engineered to tie in with it, would make the Viranese out to be villains, and the Empire would have to fight on the side of Plochef.

"On the other hand, if they really were Viranese, the other incidents will be so arranged that it looks as though Plochef were trying to frame Viran. Clear?"

"Clear."

"But, in either case, the whole plot depended on making the Viranese warship *Yormath* look villainous! That ship *had* to look bad."

"Ummhmm. I see. So when you told them you'd sent a message that made them look good, you scrambled the whole plot."

"Exactly."

"But wait a minute!" the Cardinal said suddenly. "Suppose you *had* sent such a message. Why couldn't they have fired on us anyway? Wouldn't that make them all the *more* villainous? To offer help to a ship in distress and then fire on it would be the height of villainy, it seems to me."

"And the height of stupidity, my most reverend friend," Orselli said gently. *"Why should they fire on a helpless ship?* They'd have a hard time explaining why they hadn't just sent over their Space Marines while we were disabled, made the arrest, and then sent us on our way.

"No. Firing on us when we were disabled would be *too* villainous. It would still disrupt their carefully thought out plans. It wouldn't fit in with the rest of their pattern. It would backfire."

"And now, of course," said Cardinal Esteban, "their plot has a missing piece. A hole in it."

"Of course. But it's a hole they don't dare fill. They're very likely hightailing it to their nearest base right now to see if they can't stop the rest of the operation from going into play. Maybe

they can; I don't know. In any case, the whole project has failed."

"What are you going to do about Jerrol Vane-Seljak?" the prelate asked.

"Include him in my report when we get to Kandoris. He'll be watched very carefully from now on. He has evidently been able to block detection by Sensitives up to now, but he was a little too tense to hide from your estimable Mrs. Ferml. And now that we have him spotted, official Sensitives will be able to keep an eye on him—if 'eye' is the proper word."

"It probably isn't," Cardinal Esteban said. He took the last swallow from his wineglass and held it out for more. "At least I'm glad to hear that you didn't just guess at which side had instigated this incident."

Gaetano refilled the glasses. "Esteban, if you have two enemies and one of them plants a bomb in your house, you don't have to decide which of them put it there—all you have to do is figure out how the bomb works and disable it."

THE END

TEMPTATION

By IDA HELMER

We were sitting there talking,
that Man who makes everything and I,
and He was considering the kind of
people to put on this Earth.

"THERE are only two kinds of people," I said. "Good and Evil."

He drew himself up and in that voice, once heard you never forget, he said: "I'll have no evil people on my earth!"

I shrugged, or should I say I shriveled down into a smaller bit that I already was, but to my own horror, I heard myself say: "Good and Evil."

Oh, he went away all right, but for millions and millions of years He made animals and plants. He made big animals and small animals. He made fish and birds, and he even made bumble bees. And then, he made trees, ferns and plants. He even made grass and some vines. He made bananas and nuts. Then he combined them and made corn. He made little berries and he made big flowers. And then he made the flowers into berries and the berries into flowers. He even put flowers on some trees and thorns on some of the flowers. He finally arranged things to reproduce themselves, and it was when he did this, I said as loud as I could: "Tiresome making the same things over and over, isn't it?"

Right then and there, I became nothing . . . less than nothing, because I was nothing. This was an advantage though, because it gave me more time to think.

One day He made an ape and put it up into a tree.

"People?" I asked.

"No." He said.

"Wouldn't it be nice if you made them to look like you, and

then perhaps they would turn out like you!" I said it brightly, as only nothing can say anything.

"If I make people, they will be good because they want to be good, not because they are made after my image. They will know that they are beloved and they will be perfect. There will be no mistakes in my people."

"Oh," I said, "a share the wealth, or should I say, a share the power deal. Count me in. I want to be first."

Now you know and I know that as soon as I had said it, I had that old feeling that when nothing opens its big mouth and says something it shouldn't, it becomes something that wishes it was nothing.

There was a long and terrible silence. It was cold, cold like the ice that swept over the earth. It was bleak like the destruction of all that had been made. It was so cold, so long, that I, who was nothing, began to feel like something, and gradually, I noticed that I really was something. I, the thinker, thought I was a "people". Delightedly, I pulled myself up to my full height and I said: "Look at me! I am a perfect people! I am all good and no evil and I shall make this a perfect earth!"

Well, you can guess what happened. I was used to thinking and to being nothing, so when he sent Eve along, I was not only pleased but flattered. Here was a soul I could talk to without being afraid of saying the wrong thing. Somehow, she always treated me as if I were different, but that didn't bother me. Everything was new. I used to lean against the old apple tree, roll my eyes at her, and we would talk. As we talked, I often munched an apple. One day, as a matter of conversation, I asked her why she didn't eat apples.

"That is forbidden. The apple tree and its fruit is Knowledge and we are not allowed to eat of it."

"We?" I asked. "Who is we?"

"My man and I," she answered.

This started me to thinking again. I knew Eve was a person; I could tell that just by looking at her. But never having seen myself, I had assumed that I looked like Him. According to Eve, however, there was quite a difference between her man and me. This meant that I didn't look the way I thought I did. It also meant that I probably wasn't a person, perfect or otherwise. I felt like something. Now, what could I be?

As I sat in the tree, eating the apples and thinking, I just couldn't figure it out. The apples had been denied to people, but not to me. Why? Finally, I thought that perhaps if Eve or her man ate an apple, they would learn

enough to tell me what the score was. It sounded like a first-rate idea, and so I arranged it.

Well, I was nothing again. His wrath was something to see. Adam and Eve learned everything the hard way and all the beautiful people who followed them were forced to think for themselves. This broke up the world into two sections: Good and Evil. For some reason that I never did figure out, the Evil began to inhabit this earth.

I was worried. I was nothing and I was worried. Imagine if you were something what a state you would be in. So, I mustered up all the strength and courage nothing can have and I said: "Let's wash away these bad ones and start over."

Right then and there, it started to rain. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights. The only thing moving on the whole earth was a little misshapen structure, stuffed with all kinds of animals, birds, insects and plants. There were even a couple of people on it. It really didn't move, it just sort of bobbed and floated along on top of the water. He hadn't spoken to me since I had made that worst faux pas of creation and offered to be his first perfect people, but at least He, Himself, had thought it was time to straighten out some of the kinks in his original group.

This should have been a comfort to me, and I guess it was. But being the thinker I had been for so many millions of years, I even thought maybe a little clue should be given to the new people so that they wouldn't make the same mistake over again. Not much of a hint, mind you, but a little something that would point the way. Insurance, you might say. So with nothing to lose, as I still remained nothing, I whispered this little gem: "Tell them, so they'll know what you want them to do."

The thunder banged and the lightning flashed. "Oh boy," I thought, "I've done it again!"

But there, right on top of a mountain, a little old man gathered stones. Clutching them to him, he trudged slowly and carefully down to the valley where the rest of the new people were, and then he told them what the stones said. There were only ten stones. You would think that even people could remember ten rules, now wouldn't you?

It has been quite a while since then, but I was around on this earth when His son died. I am still around. Oh, you can't see me or touch me, but I'm right here, always beside you. I no longer think and I have nothing to say.

"You're Nothing!" you say.

Well, perhaps, but at least now I know what I am. Do you?

THE END

WORLDS of the IMPERIUM

(Second of Three Parts)

By KEITH LAUMER

Illustrator ADKINS

SYNOPSIS

Brion Bayard, an American diplomat, finds himself followed through the streets of the medieval section of Stockholm. Cornered, Bayard tries to fight; he is gassed and bundled into the back of a huge van.

Bayard awakens to find himself on a cot in what appears to be an ordinary office except for a humming sound in the air and a feeling of motion. A man in a dapper uniform tells Bayard in oddly accented British that he is Chief Captain Winter of Imperial Intelligence. Refusing to answer Bayard's demands for release, Winter begins an interrogation, as two guards stand by. Bayard controls his anger, plays along in hope of a chance to make a break.

To Bayard's astonishment, Winter proceeds with detailed questioning—about non-existent places and events. Winter, in turn, seems amazed at Bayard's replies.

By luck, Bayard plucks a pistol from Winter's desk, and forces an explanation.

Winter tells him that they are aboard a trans-net scout car, which travels, not through space —or even time—but across the alternative lines which constitute all simultaneous reality, powered by a force acting perpendicular to normal entropy.

Proudly, Winter tells Bayard

that he serves the Imperium, a power native to an alternate continuum in which the discovery of the Maxoni-Cocini drive principle in 1893 gave man freedom to move across the universe of Alternate Worlds. It was soon discovered that the Imperium's World-Line is surrounded by a vast blighted area of dead worlds —the result of unsuccessful experimentation with the field. They are now crossing the Blight, Winter tells Bayard; to stop is impossible.

Only two undevastated A-lines are known within the general Blight area, Winter continues. These are known as Blight-Insular Two and Three, the latter being Bayard's home line. They alone bear a close relationship to the World of the Imperium, having "Common History" dates only a few decades in the past.

Winter then shows Bayard moving pictures taken in the Blight by Automatic cameras; against his judgement, Bayard becomes less skeptical. Convinced the vehicle cannot be stopped safely, he asks what is in store for him when the scout reaches its Imperial base, the zero-zero line. Winter assures him of honorable treatment.

They arrive, emerge into a scene which would have appeared quite normal—except for the gaudy uniforms, the color and pageantry. Bayard is driven in a huge car reminiscent of a WW I Rolls-Royce across the city to a massive granite building, guarded by sentries in cherry colored tunics and black steel helmets with plumes, armed with nickle-plated machine guns. This is the HQ of Imperial Intelligence.

Taken to a sumptuous office, Bayard is confronted by an astonishing group of Imperial officials. They are introduced as General Bernadotte, the Friherr von Richthofen, and Mr. Goering. Also present is Chief-Inspector Bale, a thin, broad-shouldered man with a small bald head and an expression of disapproval. It requires only a moment for Bayard to realize that Mr. Goering is the double of the infamous Hermann Goering of Nazi Germany—not the same man, but an analog. He realizes now that Winter had not lied . . .

Bernadotte tells Bayard that, using the Maxoni-Cocini field wisely, the Imperium has explored the net and has established friendly relations and mutually beneficial commerce with other A-lines, based on honorably negotiated treaties. Now, he says, the Imperium faces a crisis. Thus Bernadotte seeks to arouse Bayard's sympathy. Bayard is not overly impressed by Bernadotte's reassurances, but is much intrigued; he listens.

Bernadotte explains that with the discovery of B-I Two in 1947, the Imperium held hopes of an alliance with the closely-related world-line—hopes which were blasted when Embassies sent to B-I Two were tortured and killed. Imperial Espionage agents soon learned that the world of B-I Two was a war-devasted waste-land under the control of a ruthless dictator, an ex-soldier with headquarters in North Africa, head of a government known as the National People's State. The agents of the Imperium were withdrawn, and the world of B-I Two was left in isolation.

Then, a year ago, from an unknown quarter of the Net, murderous raids were launched against the Imperium. At last, from a lone prisoner, Imperial Intelligence learned the origin of the raiders; the Imperium's sister world—Blight Insular Two.

How these war-devastated people had managed to harness the Maxoni principle without catastrophe was unknown, but it was clear that they had not had it long. They also possessed a weapon of great power. Bernadotte describes an explosion which had been detonated near Berlin Zero-Zero by a raider; it is apparent to Bayard that it was an atomic bomb.

Then a new factor was introduced. In the heart of the Blight, close to B-I Two and between it and the Zero-Zero A-line of the Imperium, a second surviving line was discovered—Bayard's home world, called B-I Three.

This new A-line was quickly scouted. Its Common History date was set at 1911. At emergency meetings of the General Staff and the Imperial Emergency Cabinet plans were discussed. The result was—all agents in B-I Three were alerted to drop all other lines of inquiry and concentrate on picking up a trace of one man: Brion Bayard.

Bayard conceals his complete bewilderment and waits for an explanation. He senses that Bale, the Secret Service Chief, dislikes him; the others treat him with a friendly courtesy—and a tinge of wary respect. Bernadotte apologizes for the kidnapping. As the others look on silently, he hands Bayard what he says is an official portrait of the Dictator of the world of B-I Two. It is a crude lithograph, in color, showing a man in uniform, his chest covered with medals. Beneath the portrait is the legend:

HIS MARTIAL EXCELLENCY, THE DUKE OF ALGIERS WARLORD OF THE COMBINED FORCES, MARSHALL GENERAL OF THE STATE, BRION THE FIRST BAYARD, DICTATOR.

The picture is of Bayard.

Now it is explained to Bayard

that he has been kidnapped with the intention of sending him into B-I Two as an Imperial agent, with the assigned mission of assassinating the Dictator and taking his place. In this way the threat to the Imperium can be met with a minimum of bloodshed. Under the benign control of the Imperium, the world of B-I Two can be rehabilitated. An ideal solution—provided Bayard agrees.

Bernadotte asks for Bayard's cooperation. While for security reasons he can never be returned to his home line, Bernadotte says, his services will be amply rewarded. As a start, an Imperial commission as Major General . . .

Bayard has taken a liking to Bernadotte, but as a professional diplomat he regards the Imperial version of affairs with a healthy cynicism. Nevertheless, the situation appeals to an adventurous streak in his nature. On impulse, he agrees to think it over.

That night, Bayard, in a cheerful mood after a sumptuous dinner with Goering and Richthofen at the latter's villa, attends a gala party at the Summer Palace. He meets Barbro, a beautiful redhead; they are dancing when the side of the ballroom is blasted in—an attack by the raiders of B-I Two. After bloody fighting, the raiders are overcome by the dress sabres of the Imperial officers. Winter is killed; and an unarmed atomic bomb is abandoned in the garden. Bayard realizes the Imperium is in mortal danger...

Chief Inspector Bale, who was not at the party, now appears. Angered by Bale's patronizing air, Bayard gives him a tongue-lashing, and walks out. Goering who has been very friendly to Bayard, is deeply concerned. He warns Bayard that Bale will challenge him.

VI

THERE was the sound of a car and Manfred rose with a word, went out of the room.

"Doubtless Bale's seconds arrive," Goering said. "I may speak for you?"

"Sure," I said, "but . . . Yes, thanks, Hermann." Bale hadn't wasted any time.

I heard voices and Manfred came into the room with two strangers. Two blood-spattered officers, fresh from the battle of the ballroom wearing the Grey uniforms of the Imperial Intelligence strolled casually up to us, one young, the other elderly, both slender and tough-looking, both calmly courteous.

"Ah, there you are, Goering," said the older man. He was limping slightly from a wound in the thigh. "You know von Rentz, I

believe?" He indicated the younger man.

Goering rose and bowed stiffly from the waist. "I do, your excellency," he said. He turned to me. "Brion, I have the honor to present Count Hallendorf; Captain von Rentz. Gentlemen, Colonel Bayard."

Both officers clicked heels with stiff bows.

"Colonel Bayard," said the count.

"Hiya, boys," I said carelessly. "Bale send you out to do his arguing for him?"

Hermann stepped forward quickly. "Colonel Bayard has done me the honor of permitting me, together with the Friherr von Richthofen, to speak for him, gentlemen," he said smoothly. He took their arms and led them away, talking earnestly. Richthofen came over to me.

"Brion," he said, shaking his head. "I seem to sense that in your country the ritual of the affair of honor is not practiced."

"That's right, Baron," I said. "We insult each other all the time. The guy who can get the other fellow maddest without getting mad himself wins."

"That is not the custom here," Richthofen said. "One substantiates one's opinion with action. This is a most awkward piece of business; we have quite enough to fight in the enemy, I think. But Inspector Bale seems to feel otherwise; the personal affront takes precedence." He stepped over and examined my gouged neck.

"Brion, go and sit down; lie down if you can. You are too important to the Imperium and to us, your friends, to be subjected to this ordeal, but there is nothing for it but to see it through. I'll join you later." He turned away, then back. "What is your choice of weapons, Brion?"

"Water pistols at twenty paces," I said. What with the liquor, the carnage, and the pain in my head, neck, back and assorted other places, I was feeling pretty sardonic.

Richthofen shook his head resignedly and hurried off. There was blood on his boots.

I was cold, chilled to the bone. I was still half asleep, and I carried my head tilted forward and a little to the side in a hopeless attempt to minimize the vast throbbing ache from the furrow across the back of my neck.

Richthofen, Goering and I stood together under spreading linden trees at the lower end of the Royal Game Park. It was a few minutes before dawn. I was taking the 'affair of honor' a little more seriously now. I was wondering how a slug in the knee-cap would feel.

There was the faint sound of

an engine approaching, and a long car loomed up in the gloom on the road above, lights gleaming through morning mist.

The sound of doors opening and slamming was muffled and indistinct. Three figures were dimly visible, approaching down the gentle slope. My seconds moved away to meet them. One of the three detached itself from the group and stood alone, as I did. That would be Bale.

Another car pulled in behind the first. The doctor, I thought. In the dim glow from the second car's small square cowl lights I saw another figure emerge. I watched; it looked like a woman, wrapped in a cloak. The lights went off, and I looked back to the group of seconds.

I heard the murmur of voices, a low chuckle. They were very pally, I thought. Everything on a very high plane.

I thought over what Goering had told me on the way to the field of honor, as he called it.

Bale had offered his challenge under the Toth convention. This meant that the duellists would not try to kill each other; the object of the game was to inflict painful wounds, to humiliate one's opponent.

This could be a pretty tricky business. In the excitement of the fight, it wasn't easy to inflict wounds that were thoroughly humiliating but definitely not fatal. It was almost as much of a disgrace to kill one's opponent as to fail to meet him, I was told. The latter form of disgrace, however, was not unknown, while the former was unheard of.

I wondered what Bale would try for; possibly he had in mind something more painful even than smashed joints. I didn't know; this was a new sport to me, but Bale was an old-timer. I'd find out in a few minutes, I thought.

It had been explained to me that the most daring choice of weapons was the pistol; one not only ran the risk of inflicting a fatal wound, but one also exposed oneself to greater risk of death. It was commoner to use sabre or epee; first blood was usually satisfaction enough. However, since I was unfamiliar with the latter weapons, Goering and Richthofen had agreed that the pistol was the better choice. Well, I couldn't argue with that; I had carried a .45 for a year or so in Europe during the war, and fired it frequently on the range, as well as at a few moving targets in combat.

I had had about two hours sleep. My seconds had let me go to my suite finally after completing the arrangements, and I had dropped into a coma at once. They had a tough time getting me on my feet again, at five A. M. My morale was always lowest at

this hour, even without a slashed neck and the prospect of painful and humiliating wounds.

Richthofen had lent me a pair of black trousers and a white shirt for the performance, and a light overcoat against the predawn chill. I wished it had been a heavy one. The only warm part of me was my neck, swathed in bandages.

The little group broke up now. My two backers approached, smiled encouragingly, and in low voices invited me to come along. Goering took my coat. I missed it.

BALE and his men were walking toward a spot in the clear, where the early light was slightly better. We moved up to join them.

"I think we have light enough now, eh Baron?" said Hallendorf.

Richthofen glanced around. "I think perhaps a five minutes more," he said, "for the sake of accuracy."

Goering and von Rentz were discussing the position of the starting line. The doctor stood by silently, bag in hand. Bale stood in the background.

Goering came over to me, muttered a few words of instruction. Bale came forward. Von Rentz handed him something; the seconds stood back. Bale walked over to me, and with a contemptuous gesture tossed a white leather military glove at my feet. I stared at Bale for a moment before stooping over to pick it up and hand it negligently to Goering. I had been briefed on the formal challenge.

Richthofen and Hallendorf were making a little ceremony of opening the heavy box von Renzt had supplied, and looking over the two long-barrelled Mausers nestling inside. I thought of the 31 people killed in the attack at the palace and the dozens more badly wounded. I would have thought they'd have had their fill of guns for one night.

I could see better now; the light was increasing rapidly. Long pink streamers flew in the east; the trees were still dark silhouettes.

Hallendorf stepped up to me, and offered the box. I picked up one of the pistols, without looking at it. Bale took the other, methodically worked the action, snapped the trigger, examined the rifling. Richthofen handed each of us a magazine.

"Five rounds," he said. I had no comment.

Bale stepped over to the place indicated by Hallendorf and turned his back. I could see the cars outlined against the sky now. The big one looked like a '30 Packard, I thought. At Goering's gesture, I took my post, back to Bale.

"At the signal, gentlemen," Hallendorf said, "step forward ten paces and pause; at the command, turn and fire. Gentlemen, in the name of the Emperor and of honor!"

The white handkerchief in his hand fluttered to the ground. I started walking. One, two, three . . .

There was someone standing by the smaller car. I wondered who it was. . . . eight, nine, ten. I stopped, waiting. Hallendorf's voice was calm. "Turn and fire."

I turned, holding the pistol at my side. Bale pumped a cartridge into the chamber, set his feet apart, body sideways to me, left arm behind his back, and raised his pistol. We were a hundred feet apart across the wet field.

I started walking toward him. Nobody had said I had to stay in one spot. Bale lowered the pistol slightly, and I saw his pale face, eyes staring. The pistol came up again, and almost instantly jumped as a flat crack rang out. The spent cartridge popped up over Bale's head and dropped on the wet grass, catching the light. A miss.

I walked on. I had no intention of standing in the half dark, firing wildly at a half-seen target. I didn't intend to be forced into killing a man by accident, even if it was his idea. And I didn't intend to be pushed into solemnly playing Bale's game with him.

Bale held the automatic at arm's length, following me as I approached. He could have killed me easily, but that was against the code. The weapon wavered; he couldn't decide on a target. My moving was bothering him.

The pistol steadied and jumped again, the shot sounding faint on the foggy air. I realized he was trying for the legs; I was close enough now to see the depressed angle of the barrel.

He stepped back a pace, set himself again, and raised the Mauser higher. He was going to try to break a rib, I guessed. A tricky shot, easy to miss—either way. My stomach muscles tensed with anticipation.

I didn't hear the next one; the sensation was exactly like a baseball bat slammed against my side. I felt that I was stumbling, air knocked from my lungs, but I kept my feet. A great warm ache spread from just above the hip. Only twenty feet away now. I fought to draw a breath.

Bale's expression was visible, a stiff shocked look, mouth squeezed shut. He aimed at my feet and fired twice in rapid succession; I think by error. One shot went through my boot between the toes of my right foot, the other into the dirt. I walked up to him. I sucked in air painfully. I wanted to say something,

but couldn't. It was all I could do to keep from gasping. Abruptly, Bale backed a step, aimed the pistol at my chest and pulled the trigger; it clicked. He looked down at the gun.

I dropped the Mauser at his feet, doubled my fist, and hit him hard on the jaw. He reeled back as I turned away.

I walked over to Goering and Richthofen as the doctor hurried up. They came forward to meet me.

"Lieber Gott," Hermann breathed as he seized my hand and pumped it. "This story they will never believe."

"If your object was to make a fool of Inspector Bale," Richthofen said with a gleam in his eye, "you have scored an unqualified success. I think you have taught him respect."

The doctor pressed forward. "Gentlemen, I must take a look at the wound." A stool was produced, and I gratefully sank down on it.

I stuck my foot out. "Better take a look at this too," I said; "it feels a little tender."

The doctor muttered and exclaimed as he began snipping at cloth and leather. He was enjoying every minute of it. The doc, I saw, was a romantic.

A thought was trying to form itself in my mind. I opened my eyes. Barbro was coming toward me across the grass, dawn light gleaming in her red hair. I realized what it was I had to say.

"Hermann," I said; "Manfred; I need a long nap, but before I start I think I ought to tell you: I've had so much fun tonight that I've decided to take the job."

"Easy, Brion," Manfred said. "There's no need to think of it now."

"No trouble at all," I said.

Barbro bent over. "Brion," she said. "You are not badly hurt?" She looked worried.

I smiled at her and reached for her hand. "I'll bet you think I'm accident prone; but actually I sometimes go for days at a time without so much as a bad fall."

She took my hand in both of hers as she knelt down. "You must be suffering great pain, Brion, to talk so foolishly," she said. "I thought he would lose his head and kill you." She turned to the doctor; "Help him, Dr. Blum".

"You are fortunate, Colonel," the doctor said, sticking a finger into the furrow on my side. "The rib is not fractured. In a few days you will have only a little scar and a big bruise to remind you."

I squeezed Barbro's hand. "Help me up, Barbro," I said.

Goering gave me his shoulder to lean on. "For you now, a long nap," he said. I was ready for it.

I TRIED to relax in my chair in the cramped shuttle. Just in front of me the operator sat tensed over a tiny illuminated board, peering at instrument faces and tapping the keys of what looked like a miniature calculating machine. A soundless hum filled the air, penetrating my bones.

I twisted, seeking a more comfortable position. My half-healed neck and side were stiffening up again. Bits of fragments of the last ten day's incessant briefing ran through my mind. Imperial Intelligence hadn't been able to gather as much material as they wanted on Marshall of the State Bayard, but it was more than I was able to assimilate consciously. I hoped the hypnotic sessions I had had every night for a week in place of real sleep had taken, at a level where the data would pop up when I needed it.

Bayard was a man of mystery, even to his own people. He was rarely seen, except via what the puzzled intelligence men said 'seemed to be a sort of electric picture apparatus.' I had tried to explain that TV was commonplace in my world, but they never really understood it.

They had given me a good night's sleep the last three nights, and a tough hour of cleverly planned calisthenics every day. My wounds had healed well, so that now I was physically ready for the adventure; mentally, however, I was fagged. The result was an eagerness to get on with the thing, find out the worst of what I was faced with. I had enough of words; now I wanted the relief of action.

I checked over my equipment. I wore a military tunic duplicating that shown in the official portrait of Bayard. Since there was no information on what he wore below the chest, I had suggested olive drab trousers, matching what I recognized as the French regulation jacket.

At my advice, we'd skipped the ribbons and orders shown in the photo; I didn't think he would wear them around his private apartment in an informal situation. For the same reason, my collar was unbuttoned and my tie loosened.

They had kept me on a diet of lean beefsteak, to try to thin my face a bit. A hair specialist had given me vigorous scalp massages every morning and evening, and insisted that I not wash my head; this was intended to stimulate rapid growth and achieve the unclipped continental look of the dictator's picture.

Snapped to my belt was a small web pouch containing my communication transmitter. We had decided to let it show rather than seek with doubtful success

to conceal it. The microphone was woven into the heavy braid on my lapels. I had a thick stack of NPS currency in my wallet.

I moved my right hand carefully, feeling for the pressure of the release spring that would throw the palm-sized slug-gun into my hand with the proper flexing of the wrist.

The little weapon was a marvel of compact deadliness. In shape it resembled a water-washed stone, grey and smooth. It could lie unnoticed on the ground, a feature which might be of great importance to me in an emergency.

Inside the gun a hair-sized channel spiralled down into the grip. A compressed gas, filling the tiny hole, served as both propellant and projectile. At a pressure on the right spot, unmarked, a minute globule of the liquified gas was fired with tremendous velocity. Once free of the confining walls of the tough alloy barrel, the bead expanded explosively to a volume of a cubic foot. The result was an almost soundless blow, capable of shattering ¼" armor, instantly fatal within a range of ten feet.

It was the kind of weapon I needed; inconspicuous, quiet, and deadly at short range. The spring arrangement made it almost a part of the hand, if the hand were expert.

I had practiced the motion for hours, while listening to lectures, eating, even lying in bed. I was very conscientious about that piece of training; it was my insurance. I tried not to think about my other insurance, set in the hollowed-out bridge replacing a back tooth.

Each evening, after the day's hard routine, I had relaxed with new friends, exploring the Imperial Ballet, theatres, opera and a lively variety show. With Barbro, I had dined sumptuously at half a dozen fabulous restaurants and afterwards we had walked in moonlit gardens sipped coffee as the sun rose, and talked. When the day came to leave, I had more than a casual desire to return. The sooner I got started, the quicker I would get back.

The first step on my route was the trip to North Africa, so that my shuttle could drop me directly into the palace at Algiers. We had spent a lot of time on pinpointing the exact position of the Dictator's apartment.

Goering and a group of intelligence men had seen me off as I boarded a huge bi-plane with five exposed engines, which looked a little like a Gotha or Handley-Page of World War I. I had made my way up the sloping aisle, and gone to sleep in the wicker seat almost before the plane started moving.

I AWOKE at dusk as we circled Algiers, and stared down out of the round window at the airport which lay to the east of the old city rather than in its accustomed position. We landed and a small reception committee rushed me along at once to another meeting, for final additions to my instructions.

Afterwards I had a restless night after sleeping all day on the plane and had only started yawning as I sat in the car on the way to the stately manorial house which the Dictator Bayard had enlarged as his personal fortress in the world of B-I Two.

We rode an elevator to the top floor, and climbed a narrow twisting stair to emerge through a door onto the wind-swept roof. I was cold and fuzzy-eyed. I looked up without enthusiasm at the steel scaffold which loomed from the tarred surface of the roof, reaching to the exact height of the floor of the Dictator's apartment—we hoped. I had to climb it to the platform at the top where a miniature version of the M-C scout lay, looking barely big enough for one. I wondered where the Operator would fit.

There was nothing left to say, no reason to wait. The intelligence men shook hands in a brisk no-nonsense way, and I started up. The iron rungs were cold to the touch, and slippery with moisture. Suppose I fell now? Where would the project be then? But one of the things that I admired about these Imperials was that they weren't too damned careful, not so hell-bent for womb-to-tomb security as the scared people at home.

Now, cramped in my seat in the shuttle, waiting for the hours to pass before I should be deposited in the dictator's suite, forty feet above the old roof level, I thought of the Imperial officers and their ladies standing up to the guns barehanded. I thought of the dead, lying in their riddle finery on the polished ballroom floor. I remembered the bearded raider, fighting to withdraw the length of the sabre from his chest, and wondered how many times he had gambled his life, before death called his bet.

He had worn part of an American uniform; perhaps he had been an American, a broken survivor of some hell-bomb war in which another America had not been the victor. I pictured him buying the jacket ten or fifteen years earlier, in some bright American PX, proud of the new gold bar on the shoulder, with his sweetheart at his side. Why wasn't my sympathy with him, and with the desperate courage of his ragged crew? I didn't know; there was a difference. The Imperials had died with

their pride intact. The others had been too much like my own memory of war, vicious and bitter.

I thought of Winter, dying in my place. I had liked Winter. He had been no fanatic, eager to make the grand gesture—but he hadn't hesitated.

Maybe, I said to myself, if a man wants to have something to live for, he's got to have something he'll die for.

The Operator turned. "Colonel," he said, "brace yourself, sir. There's something here I don't understand."

I tensed, but said nothing. I figured he would tell me more as soon as he knew more. I moved my hand tentatively against the slug-gun release. I already had the habit.

"I've detected a moving body in the Net," he said. "It seems to be trying to match our course. My spatial fix on it indicates it's very near."

The Imperium was decades behind my world in nuclear physics, television, aerodynamics, etc., but when it came to the instrumentation of these Maxoni devices, they were fantastic. After all, they had devoted their best scientific efforts to the task for almost sixty years.

Now the Operator hovered over his panel controls like a nervous organist.

"I get a mass of about fifteen hundred kilos," he said. "That's about right for a light scout, but it can't be one of ours . . ."

There was a tense silence for several minutes.

"He's pacing us, Colonel," the operator said. "Either they've got better instrumentation than we thought, or this chap has had a stroke of blind luck. He was lying in wait. . . ."

Both of us were assuming the stranger could be nothing but a B-I Two vessel.

"Perhaps they've set up a DEW line to pick up anyone coming in," I said. The Dictator's men were geared to modern war; they wouldn't be likely to ignore such measures. The Imperium didn't yet know the fanatic war-skill of Atomic Man . . . Still, it was strange . . .

"This won't do," the Operator said. "I can't drop out of the Net at our destination with this chap on my back. Not only would there be the devil to pay with this fellow identifying with an occupied space, but there'd be precious little secrecy left about the operation."

"Can't you lose him?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I can't possibly change my course here in the Blight. Correction requires a momentary identification. And, of course, our maximum progression rate is constant, just as his is; he can't help

clinging like a leech once he's got us.

I didn't like this at all. The only thing we could do was keep going until we crossed the Blight, then try to shake him off. I didn't want to have this turn into a dry run.

"Can we fire a shot at him?" I asked.

"As soon as the projectile left the M-C field, it would drop into identity," the Operator said. "But, of course, the same thing keeps him from shooting at us."

The Operator tensed up suddenly, hands frozen. "He's coming in on us, Colonel," he said. "He's going to ram. We'll blow sky-high if he crosses our fix."

My thoughts ran like lightning over my slug-gun, the hollow tooth; I wondered what would happen when he hit. Somehow, I hadn't expected it to end here.

The impossible tension lasted only a few seconds; the Operator relaxed.

"Missed," he said. "Apparently his spatial maneuvering isn't as good as his Net mobility. But he'll be back; he's after blood."

I had a thought. "Our maximum rate is controlled by the energy of normal entropy, isn't it?" I asked.

He nodded.

"What about going slower," I said. "Maybe he'll overshoot."

I could see the sweat start on the back of his neck from there.

"A bit risky in the Blight, sir," he said, "but we'll have a go at it."

I knew how hard that was for an Operator to say. This young fellow had had six years of intensive training, and not a day of it had passed without a warning against any unnecessary control changes in the Blight.

The sound of the generators changed, the pitch of the whine descending into the audible range, dropping lower.

"He's still with us, Colonel," the Operator said.

The pitch fell, lower, lower. I didn't know when the critical point would be reached when we would lose our artificial orientation and rotate into normal entropy. We sat, rigid, waiting. The sound dropped down, almost baritone now. The Operator tapped again and again at a key, glancing at a dial.

The drive hum was a harsh droning now; we couldn't expect to go much further without disaster. But then neither could the enemy . . .

"He's right with us, Colonel, only. . . ." Suddenly the Operator shouted.

"We lost him, Colonel! His controls aren't as good as ours in that line, anyway; he dropped into identity."

I sank back, as the whine of

our M-C generator built up again. My palms were wet. I wondered into which of the hells of the Blight they had gone. But I had another problem to face in a few minutes. This was not the time for shaken nerves.

"Good work, Operator," I said at last. "How much longer?"

"About—Good God—ten minutes, sir," he answered. "That little business took longer than I thought."

I STARTED a last minute check. My mouth was dry. Everything seemed to be in place. I pressed the button on my communicator.

"Hello, Talisman," I said, "here is Wolfhound Red. How do you hear me? Over."

"Wolfhound Red, Talisman here, you're coming in right and bright, over." The tiny voice spoke almost in my ear from the speaker in a button on my shoulder strap.

I liked the instant response; I felt a little less lonesome.

I looked at the trip mechanism for the escape door. I was to wait for the Operator to say, "Crash out," and hit the lever. I had exactly two seconds then to pull my arm back and kick the slug-gun into my palm before the seat would automatically dump me, standing, out the exit. The shuttle would be gone before my feet hit the floor.

I had been so wrapped up in the business at hand for the past ten days that I had not really thought about the moment of my arrival in the B-I Two world. The smoothly professional handling of my hasty training had given the job an air of practicality and realism. Now, about to be propelled into the innermost midst of the enemy, I began to realize the suicidal aspects of the mission. But it was too late now for second thoughts—and in a way I was glad. I was involved now in this world of the Imperium; it was a part of my life worth risking something for.

I was a card the Imperium held, and it was may turn to be played. I was a valuable property, but that value could only be realized by putting me into the scene in just this way; and the sooner the better. I had no assurance that the Dictator was in residence at the palace now; I might find myself hiding in his quarters awaiting his return, for God knows how long—and maybe lucky at that, to get that far. I hoped our placement of the suite was correct, based on information gotten from the captive taken at the ballroom, under deep narco-hypnosis. Otherwise, I might find myself treading air, 150 feet up. . . .

There was a slamming of switches, and the Operator twisted in his chair.

"Crash out, Wolfhound," he cried, "and good hunting."

Reach out and slam the lever; arm at the side, snap the gun into place in my hand; with a metallic whack and a rush of air the exit popped and a giant hand palmed me out into dimness. One awful instant of vertigo, of a step missed in the dark, and then my feet slammed against carpeted floor. Air whipped about my face, and the echoes of the departing boom of the shuttle still hung in the corridor.

I remembered my instructions; I stood still, turning casually to check behind me. There was no one in sight. The hall was dark except for the faint light from a ceiling fixture at the next intersection. I had arrived OK.

I slipped the gun back into its latch under my cuff. No point in standing here; I started off at a leisurely pace toward the light. The doors lining the hall were identical, unmarked. I paused and tried one. Locked. So was the next. The third opened, and I looked cautiously into a sitting room. I went on. What I wanted was the sleeping room of the Dictator, if possible. If he were in, I knew what to do; if not, presumably he would return if I waited long enough. Meanwhile, I wanted very much not to meet anyone.

There was the sound of an elevator door opening, just around the corner ahead. I stopped; better get out of sight fast. I eased back to the last door I had checked, opened it and stepped inside, closing it almost all the way behind me. My heart was thudding painfully. I didn't feel daring; I felt like a sneak thief. Faintly, I heard steps coming my way. I silently closed the door, taking care not to let the latch click. I stood behind it for a moment before deciding it would be better to conceal myself, just in case. I glanced around, moving into the center of the room. I could barely make out outlines in the gloom. There was a tall shape against the wall; a wardrobe, I thought. I hurried across to it, opened the door, and stepped in among hanging clothes.

I stood for a moment, feeling foolish, then froze as the door to the hall opened and closed again softly. There were footsteps, and then a light went on. My closet door was open just enough to catch a glimpse of a man's back as he turned away from the lamp. I heard the soft sound of a chair being pulled out, and then the tiny jingle of keys. There were faint metallic sounds, a pause, more faint metallic sounds. The man was apparently trying keys in the lock of a table or desk.

I stood absolutely rigid. I

breathed shallowly, tried not to think about a sudden itch on my cheek. I could see the shoulder of the coat hanging to my left. I turned my eyes to it. It was almost identical with the one I was wearing. The lapels were adorned with heavy braid. I had a small moment of relief; I had found the right apartment, at least. But my victim must be the man in the room; and I had never felt less like killing anyone in my life.

The little sounds went on. I could hear the man's heavy breathing. All at once I wondered what he would look like, this double of mine. Would he really resemble me, or more to the point, did I look enough like him to take his place?

I wondered why he took so long finding the right key; then another thought struck me. Didn't this sound a little more like someone trying to open someone else's desk? I moved my head a fraction of an inch. The clothes, moved silently, and I edged a little farther. Now I could see him. He sat hunched in the chair, working impatiently at the lock. He was short and had thin hair, and resembled me not in the least. It was not the Dictator.

This was a new factor for me to think over, and in a hurry. The Dictator was obviously not around, or this fellow would not be here attempting to rifle his desk. And the Dictator had people around him who were not above prying. That fact might be useful to me.

It took him five minutes to find a key that fit. I stood with muscles aching from the awkward pose, trying not to think of the lint that might cause a sneeze. I could hear the shuffling of papers, faint muttering as the man looked over his finds. At length there was the sound of the drawer closing, the snick of the lock. Now the man was on his feet, the chair pushed back, and then silence for a few moments. Steps came toward me. I froze, my wrist twitching, ready to cover him and fire if necessary the instant he pulled the door open. I wasn't ready to start my imposture just yet, skulking in a closet.

I let out a soundless sigh as he passed the opening and disappeared. More sounds as he ran through the drawers of a bureau or chest.

Suddenly the hall door opened again, and another set of steps entered the room. I heard my man freeze. Then he spoke, in guttural French.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Maurice . . ."

There was a pause. Maurice's tone was insinuating.

"Yes, I thought I saw a light in the chief's study. I thought

that was a bit odd, what with him away tonight."

The first man sauntered back toward the center of the room. "I just thought I'd have a look to see that everything was OK here."

Maurice tittered. "Don't try to rob a thief; I know why you came here—for the same reason as I."

The first man snarled. "You're a fool, Maurice. Come on, let's get out of this."

Maurice didn't sound like a titterer now. "Not so fast and smooth Flic. Something's coming up and I want in."

"Don't call me Flic," the first man said. "You're crazy."

"You didn't mind being a flic when you threw the weight of the badge around in Marseilles in the Old Days; see, I know all about you." he laughed, an ugly sound.

"What are you up to," the first man hissed. "What do you want?"

"Sit down, Flic; oh, don't get excited; they all call you that." Maurice was enjoying himself. I listened carefully for half an hour while he goaded and cajoled, and pressured the other. The first man, I learned, was Georges Pinay, the chief of the dictator's security force. The other was a civilian military adviser to the Bureau of Propaganda and Education. Pinay, it seemed had been less clever than he thought in planning a coup that was to unseat Bayard. Maurice knew all about it, and had bided his time; now he was taking over. Pinay didn't like it, but he accepted it after Maurice mentioned a few things nobody was supposed to know about a hidden airplane and a deposit of gold coins buried a few miles outside the city.

I listened carefully, without moving, and after a while even the itch went away. Pinay had been looking for lists of names, he admitted; he planned to enlist a few more supporters by showing them their names in the Dictator's own hand on the purge schedule. He hadn't planned to mention that he himself had nominated them for the list.

I made the mistake of overconfidence; I was just waiting for them to finish up when a sudden silence fell. I didn't know what I had done wrong, but I knew at once what was coming. The steps were very quiet and there was just a moment's pause before the door was flung open. I hoped my make-up was on straight.

I stepped out, casting a cool glance at Pinay.

"Well, Georges," I said, "It's nice to know you keep yourself occupied when I'm away." I used the same French dialect they had

used, and my wrist was against the little lever.

"The Devil," Maurice burst out. He stared at me with wide eyes. For a moment I thought I was going to get away with it. Then Pinay lunged at me. I whirled, side-stepped; and the slug-gun slapped my palm.

"Hold it," I barked.

Pinay ignored the order and charged again. I squeezed the tiny weapon, bracing myself against the recoil. There was a solid thump and Pinay bounced aside, landed on his back, loose limbed, and lay still. Then Maurice hit me from the side. I stumbled across the room, tripped and fell, and he was on top of me. I still had my gun, and tried to bring it into play, but I was dazed, and Maurice was fast and strong as a bull. He flipped me and held me in a one-handed judo hold that pinned both arms behind me. He was astride me, breathing heavily.

"Who are you?" he hissed.

"I thought you'd know me, Maurice," I said. With infinite care I groped, tucked the slug-gun into my cuff. I heard it click home and I relaxed.

"So you thought that, eh?" Maurice laughed. His face was pink and moist. He pulled a heavy blackjack from his pocket as he slid off me.

"Get up," he said. He looked me over.

"My God," he said. "Fantastic. Who sent you?"

I didn't answer. It seemed I wasn't fooling him for a minute. I wondered what was so wrong. Still, he seemed to find my appearance interesting. He stepped forward and slammed the sap against my neck, with a controlled motion. He could have broken my neck with it, but what he did was more painful. I felt the blood start from my half healed neck wound. He saw it, and looked puzzled for a moment. Then his face cleared.

"Excuse me," he said, grinning. "I'll try for a fresh spot next time. And answer when spoken to." There was a viciousness in his voice that reminded me of the attack at the palace. These men had seen hell on earth and they were no longer fully human.

He looked at me appraisingly, slapping his palm with the blackjack. "I think we'll have a little talk downstairs," he said. "Keep the hands in sight." His eyes darted about, apparently looking for my gun. He was very sure of himself; he didn't let it worry him when he didn't see it. He didn't want to take his eyes off me long enough to really make a search.

"Stay close, Baby," he said. "Just like that, come along now, nice and easy."

I KEPT my hands away from my sides, and followed him over to the phone. He wasn't as good as he thought; I could have taken him anytime. I had a hunch, though, that it might be better to string along a little, try to find out something more.

Maurice picked up the phone, spoke softly into it and dropped it back in the cradle. His eyes stayed on me.

"How long before they get here?" I asked.

Maurice narrowed his eyes, not answering.

"Maybe we have just time enough to make a deal," I said.

His mouth curved in what might have been a smile. "We'll make a deal all right, Baby," he said. "You sing loud and clear, and maybe I'll tell the boys to make it a fast finish."

"You've got an ace up your sleeve here, Maurice," I urged. "Don't let that rabble in on it."

He slapped his palm again. "What have you got in mind, Baby?"

"I'm on my own," I said. I was thinking fast. "I'll bet you never knew Brion had a twin brother. He cut me out, though, so I thought I'd cut myself in."

Maurice was interested. "The devil," he said. "You haven't seen your loving twin in a long time, I see." He grinned. I wondered what the joke was.

"Let's get out of here," I said. "Let's keep it between us two."

Maurice glanced at Pinay.

"Forget him," I said. "He's dead."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Baby," Maurice said. "Just the two of us, and maybe then a chance to narrow it back down to one." His sardonic expression turned suddenly to a snarl, with nostrils flaring. "By God," he said, "you, you'd plan to kill me, you little man of straw . . ." He was leaning toward me now, arm loosening for a swing. I realized he was insane, ready to kill in an instantaneous fury.

"You'll see who is the killer between us," he said. His eyes gleamed as he swung the blackjack loosely in his hand.

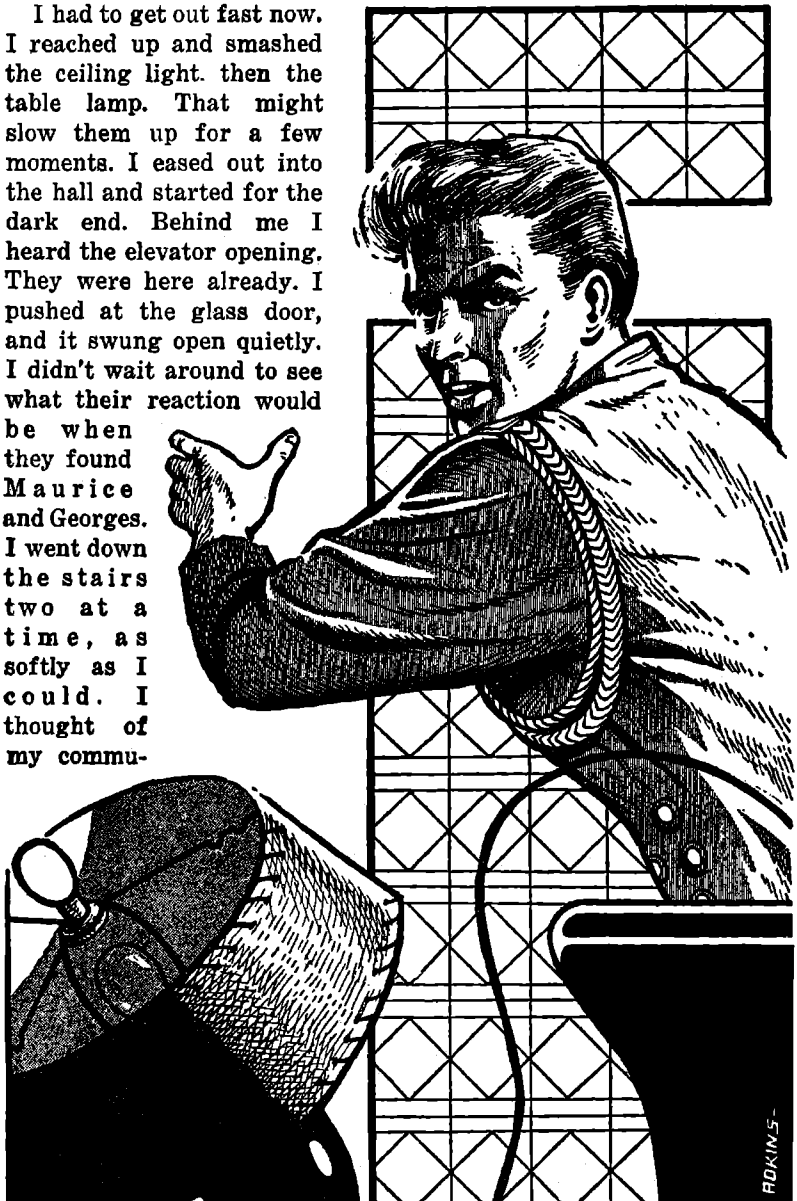
I couldn't wait any longer. The gun popped into my hand, aimed at Maurice. I felt myself beginning to respond to his murder-lust. I hated everything he stood for.

"You're stupid, Maurice," I said. "Stupid and slow, and in just a minute, dead. But first you're going to tell me how you knew I wasn't Bayard."

It was a nice try, but wasted.

Maurice leaped and the slug-gun slapped him aside. He hit and lay limp. My arm ached from the recoil. Handling the tiny weapon was tricky. It was good for about fifty shots on a charge; at this rate it wouldn't last a day.

I had to get out fast now. I reached up and smashed the ceiling light. then the table lamp. That might slow them up for a few moments. I eased out into the hall and started for the dark end. Behind me I heard the elevator opening. They were here already. I pushed at the glass door, and it swung open quietly. I didn't wait around to see what their reaction would be when they found Maurice and Georges. I went down the stairs two at a time, as softly as I could. I thought of my commu-



nicator and decided against it. I didn't have anything good to report.

I passed three landings before I emerged into a hall. This would be the old roof level. I tried to remember where the stair had come out in the analogous spot back at Zero Zero. I spotted a small door in an alcove; it seemed to be in about the right place.

A man came out of a room across the hall and glanced toward me. I rubbed my mouth thoughtfully, while heading for the little door. The resemblance was more of a hindrance than a help now. He went on, and I tried the door. It was locked, but it didn't look very strong. I put my hip against it and pushed. It gave way with no more than a mild splintering sound. The stairs were there, and I headed down.

I had no plan, other than to get in the clear. It was obvious that the impersonation was a complete flop. All I could do was to get to a safe place and ask for further instructions. I had gone down two flights when I heard the alarm bells start.

I stopped dead. I had to get rid of the fancy uniform. I pulled off the jacket, then settled for tearing the braid off the wrists, and removing the shoulder tabs. I couldn't ditch the lapel braid; my microphone was woven into it. I couldn't do much else about my appearance.

This unused stair was probably as good a way out as any. I kept going. I checked the door at each floor. They were all locked. That was a good sign, I thought. The stair ended in a damp cul-de-sac filled with barrels and mildewed paper cartons. I went back up to the next landing and listened. Beyond the door there were loud voices and the clatter of feet. I remembered that the entry to the stair was near the main entrance to the old mansion. It looked like I was trapped.

I went down again, pulled one of the barrels aside. By the light of a match I peered behind it at the wall. The edge of a door frame was visible. I maneuvered another barrel out of place and found the knob. It was frozen. I wondered how much noise I could make without being heard; not much, I decided.

I needed something to pry with. The paper cartons looked like a possibility; I tore the flaps loose on one and looked in. It was filled with musty ledger books; no help.

The next was better. Old silverware, pots and pans. I dug out a heavy cleaver and slipped it into the crack. The thing was as solid as a bank vault. I tried again; it couldn't be that strong, but it didn't budge.

I stepped back. Maybe the only thing to do was forget caution and chop through the middle. I leaned over to pick the best spot to swing at—then jumped back flat against the wall, slug-gun in my hand. The door knob was turning.

VII

I WAS close to panic; being cornered had that effect on me. I didn't know what to do. I had plenty of instructions on how to handle the job of taking over after I had succeeded in killing the Dictator, but none to cover retreat after failure.

There was a creak, and dust sifted down from the top of the door. I stood as far back as I could get, waiting. I had an impulse to start shooting, but restrained it. Wait and see.

The door edged open a crack. I really didn't like this; I was being looked over, and could see nothing myself. At least I had the appearance of being unarmed; the tiny gun was concealed in my hand. Or was that an advantage? I couldn't decide.

I didn't like the suspense. "All right," I said. "You're making a draft; in or out." I spoke in the gutter Parisian I had heard upstairs.

The door opened farther, and a grimy-faced fellow was visible beyond it. He blinked in the dim light, peered up the stairs. He gestured.

"This way, come on," he said in a hoarse whisper. I didn't see any reason to refuse under the circumstances. I stepped past the barrels and ducked through the low doorway. As the man closed the door, I slipped the gun back into its clip. I was standing in a damp stone-lined tunnel, lit by an electric lantern sitting on the floor. I stood with my back to it. I didn't want him to see my face yet, not in a good light.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The fellow pushed past me and picked up his lantern. He hardly glanced at me.

"I'm just a dumb guy," he said. "I don't ask no questions, I don't answer none. Come on."

I couldn't afford to argue the point; I followed him. We made our way along the hand-hewn corridor, then down a twisting flight of steps, to emerge into a dark windowless chamber. Two men and a dark haired girl sat around a battered table where a candle sputtered.

"Call them in, Miche," my guide said. "Here's the pigeon."

Miche lolled back in his chair and motioned me toward him and picked up what looked like a letter-knife from the table and probed between two back teeth while he squinted at me. I made it a point not to get too close.

"One of the kennel dogs, by the uniform," he said. "What's the matter, you bite the hand that fed you?" He laughed, not very humorously.

I said nothing. I thought I'd give him a chance to tell me something first if he felt like it.

"A ranker, too, by the braid," he said. "Well, they'll wonder where you got to." His tone changed. "Let's have the story," he said. "Why are you on the run?"

Don't let the suit bother you," I said. "I borrowed it. But it seemed like the people up there disliked me on sight."

"Come on over here," the other man said. "Into the light."

I couldn't put it off forever. I moved forward, right up to the table. Just to be sure they got the idea, I picked up the candle and held it by my face.

Miche froze, knife point in his teeth. The girl started violently and crossed herself. The other man stared, fascinated. I'd gone over pretty big. I put the candle back on the table and sat down casually in the empty chair.

"Maybe you can tell me," I said, "why they didn't buy it."

The second man spoke. "You just walked in like that, sprung it on them?"

I nodded.

He and Miche looked at each other.

"You got a very valuable prop-

erty here, my friend," the man said. "But you need a little help. Chica, bring wine for our new friend here."

The girl, still wide-eyed, scuttled to a dingy cupboard and fumbled for a bottle, looking at me over her shoulder.

"Look at him sitting there, Gros," Miche said. "Now that's something."

"You're right that's something," Gros said. "If it isn't already loused up." He leaned across the table. "Now just what happened upstairs," he said. "How long have you been in the palace; how many have seen you?"

I gave them a brief outline, leaving out my mode of arrival. They seemed satisfied.

"Only two seen his face, Gros," Miche said, "and they're out of the picture." He turned to me. "That was a nice bit of work, Mister, knocking off Souvet; and nobody ain't going to miss Pinay neither. By the way, where's the gun? Better let me have it." He held out his hand.

"I had to leave it," I said. "Tripped and dropped it in the dark."

Miche grunted.

"The Boss will be interested in this," Gros said. "He'll want to see him."

Someone else panted up the stairs into the room. "Say, Chief," he began, "we make it trouble in the tower . . ." He stopped dead as he caught sight of me, and dropped into a crouch, utter startlement on his face. His hand clawed for a gun at his hip, found none, as his eyes darted from face to face. "What—what . . ."

Gros and Miche burst into raucous laughter, slapping the table and howling. "At ease, Spider," Miche managed. "Bayard's throwed in with us." At this even Chica snickered.

Spider still crouched. "OK, what's the deal," he gasped. "I don't get it." He glared around the room, face white. He was scared stiff. Miche wiped his face, whooped a last time, hawked and spat on the floor.

"OK, Spider, as you were," he said. "This here's a ringer. Now you better go bring in the boys. Beat it."

Spider scuttled away. I was puzzled; why did some of them take one startled look and relax, while this fellow was apparently completely taken in? I had to find out. There was something I was doing wrong.

"Do you mind telling me," I said. "What's wrong with the get-up?" Miche and Gros exchanged glances again.

"Well, my friend," Gros said, "it's nothing we can't take care of. Just take it easy, and we'll set you right. You wanted to step

in and take out the Old Man, and sit in for him, right? Well, with the Organization behind you you're as good as in."

"What's the Organization?" I asked.

Miche broke in, "For now we'll ask the questions," he said. "What's your name? What's your play here?"

I looked from Miche to Gros. I wondered which one was the boss. "My name's Bayard," I said.

Miche narrowed his eyes as he rose and walked around the table. He was a big fellow with small eyes.

"I asked you what's your name, Mister," he said. "I don't usually ask twice."

"Hold it, Miche," Gros said. "He's right. He's got to stay in this part, if he's going to be good; and he better be plenty good. Let's leave it at that; he's Bayard."

Miche looked at me. "Yeah," he said, "you got a point." I had a feeling Miche and I weren't going to get along.

"Who's backing you, uh, Bayard?" Gros said.

"I play a lone hand," I said. "Up to now, anyway. But it seems I missed something. If your Organization can get me in, I'll go along."

"We'll get you in, all right," Miche said.

I didn't like the looks of this pair of hoodlums, but I could hardly expect high-toned company here. As far as I could guess, the Organization was an under-ground anti-Bayard party. The room seemed to be hollowed out of the walls of the palace. Apparently they ran a spying operation all through the building, using hidden passages.

More men entered the room now, some via the stair, others through a door in the far corner. Apparently the word had gone out. They gathered around, staring curiously, commenting to each other, but not surprised.

"These are the boys," Gros said, looking around at them. "The rats in the walls."

I looked them over, about a dozen piratical-looking toughs; Gros had described them well. I looked back at him. "All right," I said. "When do we start." These weren't the kind of companions I would have chosen, but if they could fill in the gaps in my disguise for me, and help me take over in Bayard's place, I could only be grateful for my good luck.

"Not so fast," Miche said. "This thing is going to take time. We got to get you to a layout we got out of town. We got a lot of work ahead of us."

"I'm here now," I said. "Why not go ahead today; why leave here?"

"We got a little work to do on your disguise," Gros said, "and there's plans to make. How do we get the most out of this break and how do we make sure there's no wires on this?"

"And no double-cross," Miche added.

A hairy lout listening in the crowd spoke up.

"I don't like the looks of this stool, Miche. I don't like funny stuff. I say under the floor with him." He wore a worn commando knife in a sheath fixed horizontally to his belt buckle. I was pretty sure he was eager to use it.

Miche looked at me. "Not for now, Gaston," he said.

Gros rubbed his chin. "Don't get worried about Mr. Bayard, boys," he said. "We'll have our eyes on him." He glanced up at Gaston. "You might make a special effort along those lines, Gaston; but don't get ahead of yourself. Let's say if he has any kind of accident, you'll have a worse one."

The feel of the spring under my wrist was comforting. I felt that Gaston wasn't the only one in this crew who didn't like strangers.

"I figure time is important," I said. "Let's get moving."

Miche stepped over to me. He prodded my leg with his boot. "You got a flappy mouth, Mister," he said. "Gros and me gives the orders around here."

"OK," Gros said. "Our friend has got a lot to learn, but he's right about the time. Bayard's due back here sometime tomorrow, so that means we get out today, if we don't want the Ducals all over the place on top of the regulars. Miche, get the boys moving. I want things folded fast and quiet, and good men on the standby crew."

He turned to me as Miche bawled orders to the men.

"Maybe you better have a little food now," he said. "It's going to be a long day."

I WAS startled; I had been thinking of it as night. I looked at my watch. It had been one hour and ten minutes since I had entered the palace. Doesn't time go fast, I thought to myself, when everyone's having fun.

Chica brought over a loaf of bread and a wedge of brown cheese from the cupboard, and placed them on the table with a knife. I was cautious.

"OK if I pick up the knife?" I asked.

"Sure," Gros said. "Go ahead." He reached under the table and laid a short-nosed revolver before him.

Miche came back to the table as I chewed on a slice of tough bread. It was good bread. I tried the wine. It wasn't bad. The cheese was good, too.

"You eat well," I said. "This is good."

Chica threw me a grateful smile. "We do all right," Gros said.

"Better get Mouth here out of that fancy suit," Miche said, jerking his head at me. "Somebody might just take a shot at that without thinking. The boys have got kind of nervous about them kind of suits."

Gros looked at me. "That's right," he said. "Miche will give you some other clothes. That uniform don't go over so big here."

I didn't like this development at all. My communicator was built into the scrambled eggs on my lapels. I had to say 'no' and make it stick.

"Sorry," I said. "I keep the outfit. It's part of the act. I'll put a coat over it if necessary."

Miche put his foot against my chair and shoved; I saw it coming and managed to scramble to my feet instead of going over with the chair. Miche faced me, skin tight around his eyes.

"Strip, Mister," he said. "You heard the man."

The men still in the room fell silent, watching. I looked at Miche. I hoped Gros would speak up. I couldn't see anything to be gained by this.

Nobody spoke. I glanced over at Gros. He was just looking at us.

Miche reached behind, brought out a knife. The blade snicked out. "Or do I have to cut it off you," he growled.

"Put the knife away, Miche," Gros said mildly. "You don't want to cut up our secret weapon here; and we want the uniform off all in one piece."

"Yeah," Miche said. "You got a point." He dropped the knife on the table and moved in on me. From his practiced crouch and easy shuffling step, I saw that he had been a professional.

I decided not to wait for him. I threw myself forward with my weight behind a straight left to the jaw. It caught Miche by surprise, slammed against his chin and rocked him back. I tried to follow up, catch him again while he was still off balance, but he was a veteran of too many fights. He covered up, back-pedalled, shook his head, and then flicked out with a right that exploded against my temple. I was almost out, staggering. He hit me again, square on the nose. Blood flowed.

I wouldn't last long against this bruiser. The crowd was still bunched at the far end of the room, moving this way, now, watching delightedly, calling encouragement to Miche. Gros still sat, and Chica stared from her place by the wall.

I moved back, dazed, dodging blows. I only had one chance and I needed a dark corner to try it.

Miche was right after me. He was mad; he didn't like that smack on the jaw in front of the boys. That helped me; he forgot boxing and threw one haymaker after another. He wanted to floor me with one punch to retrieve his dignity. I dodged and retreated.

I moved back toward the deep shadows at the end of the room, beyond Chica's pantry. I had to get there quickly, before the watching crowd closed up the space.

Miche swung, again, left, right. I heard the air whistle as his hamlike fist grazed me. I backed another step; almost far enough. Now to get between him and the rest of the room. I jumped in behind a wild swing, popped a stinging right off his ear, and kept going. I whirled, snapped the slug-gun into my hand, and as Miche lunged, I shot him in the stomach, faked a wild swinging attack as he bounced off the wall and fell full length at my feet. I slipped the gun back into my cuff and turned.

"I can't see," a man shouted. "Get some light down here." The mob pushed forward, forming a wide ring. They stopped as they saw that only I was on my feet.

"Miche is down," a man called. "The new guy took him."

Gros pushed his way through, hesitated, then walked over to the sprawled body of Miche. He squatted, beckoned to the man with the candle.

He pulled Miche over on his back, then looked closer, feeling for the heartbeat. He looked up abruptly, got to his feet.

"He's dead," he said. "Miche is dead." He looked at me with a strange expression. "It's quite a punch you got, Mister," he said.

"I tried not to use it," I said. "But I'll use it again if I have to."

"Search him, boys" Gros said. They prodded and slapped, everywhere but my wrist. "He's clean, Gros," a man said. Gros looked the body over carefully, searching for signs of a wound. Men crowded around him.

"No marks", he said at last. "Broken ribs, and it feels like something funny inside; all messed up." He looked at me. "He did it bare-handed."

I hoped they would go on believing that. It was my best insurance against a repetition. I wanted them scared of me, and the ethics of it didn't bother me at all.

"All right," Gros called to the men. "Back on the job. Miche asked for it. He called our new man 'Mouth'. I'm naming him 'Hammer-hand'."

I thought this was as good a time as any to push a little farther.

"You'd better tell them I'm

taking over Miche's spot here, Gros," I said. "We'll work together, fifty-fifty."

Gros squinted at me. "Yeah, that figures," he said. I had a feeling he had mental reservations.

"And by the way," I added. "I keep the uniform."

"Yeah," Gros said. "He keeps the uniform." He turned back to the men. "We pull out of here in thirty minutes. Get moving."

I went over to the sink and washed the blood off my face. My nose ached. I peered at it in the broken mirror; it was swelling fast. I went back to the table and finished my bread and cheese while Gros paced up and down, taking reports and giving orders as men came and went. Miche's body was hauled away. I didn't ask where.

Gros came over to the table. "OK, Hammer-hand," he said. "On your feet." He handed me a dingy cape. "Stay right with me and do what I tell you." He hitched his trousers up to be sure I wouldn't miss the revolver stuck in his belt.

I stood up. "I'm ready," I said. I draped the wrap over my shoulders, concealing the insignia.

I followed Gros through the small door opposite the stair by which had entered. A low-ceilinged passage led downward, twisting around steel pilings occasionally. Gros lit the way ahead with a fading electric lantern. The rest of the men were in nearly total darkness, but they seemed to know the way. Only a curse now and then indicated a collision in the dark.

We arrived at a wooden panel barring the way. Gros called two men forward, and together they drew back half a dozen heavy barrel-bolts. Gros eased the panel aside an inch and peered out. He signalled to the men to set it aside; everyone was silent now.

Gros hissed at me. "Stay close; do what I do. And get ready to run like hell."

I was at Gros's heels as he stepped down into a room dimly illuminated by sunlight filtering through boards covering shattered windows along the far side. Crates, boxes, and lift vans were stacked everywhere. We moved cautiously through them. I wondered why Gros didn't wait until night to make this break.

We stopped by a massive burlap-wrapped bale, and men silently surrounded it, pushing. It slid to one side with only a faint scraping, exposing a trap door. The lid was carefully raised and propped, and Gros motioned me down. I scrambled over the edge and found a wooden ladder with my feet. Gros came behind me, followed by the men.

I reached a dirt floor, wet and slimy with seepage. Gros pushed

past me, prowled ahead, neck bent under the wooden beams which reinforced the ceiling. We moved on.

Behind, I heard feet sloshing in the dark, men stumbling and groping. They didn't know this route so well.

There was light ahead now, a faint lessening of darkness. We rounded a curve where a great boulder bulged into the passage, and a ragged line of daylight showed.

Gros beckoned the men closer. They bunched up, filling the cramped passage.

"Most of you never came this way before," he said. "So listen. We push out of here into the Street of the Olive Trees; it's a little side street under the palace wall. There's a dummy stall in front; ignore the old dame in it.

"Ease out one at a time, and move off east; that's to the right. You all got good papers. If the guy on the gate asks for them, show them. Don't get eager and volunteer. If there's any excitement behind, just keep going. We rendezvous at the thieves' market. OK, and duck the hardware."

He motioned the first man out, blinking in the glare as the ragged tarpaulin was pushed aside. After half a minute, the second followed. I moved close to Gros.

"Why bring this whole mob along?" I asked in a low voice "Wouldn't it be a lot easier for just a few of us?"

Gros shook his head. "I want to keep my eye on these slobs," he said. "I don't know what ideas they might get if I left them alone a few days; and I can't afford to have this set-up poisoned. And I'm going to need them out at the country place. There's nothing they can do here while I'm not around to tell them."

It sounded fishy to me, but I let it drop. All the men passed by us and disappeared. There was no alarm.

"OK" Gros said. "Stay with me." He slipped under the mouldy hanging and I followed as he stepped past a broken-down table laden with pottery. An old crone huddled on a stool ignored us. Gros glanced out into the narrow dusty street, then pushed off into the crowd. We threaded our way among loud-talking, gesticulating customers, petty merchants crouched over fly-covered displays of food or dog-eared magazines, tottering beggars, grimy urchins. The dirt street was littered with refuse, starving dogs wandered listlessly through the crowd; the heat was baking, early though it was. No one paid the least attention to us. It appeared we'd get through without trouble.

UNDER the heavy cloak, I was sweating. Flies buzzed about my swollen face. A whining beggar thrust a gaunt hand at me. Gros ducked between two fat men engaged in an argument. As they moved, I had to side-step and push past them. Gros was almost out of sight in the mob.

I saw a uniform suddenly, a hard-faced fellow in yellowish khaki pushing roughly through the press ahead. A chicken fluttered up squawking in my face. There was a shout, people began milling, thrusting against me. I caught a glimpse of Gros, face turned toward the soldier, eyes wide in a pale face. He started to run. In two jumps the uniformed man had him by the shoulder, spun him around, shouting. A dog yelped, banged against my legs, scuttled away. The soldier's arm rose and fell, clubbing at Gros with a heavy riot stick. Far ahead I heard a shot, and almost instantly another, close. Gros was free and running, blood on his head, as the soldier fell among the crowd. I darted along the wall, trying to overtake Gros, or at least keep him in sight. The crowd was opening, making way as he ran, pistol in hand. He fired again, the shot a faint pop in the mob noise.

Another uniform jumped in front of me, club raised; I shied, threw up an arm, as the man jumped back, saluted.

I caught the words, "Pardon, sir," as I went past him at a run. He must have caught a glimpse of the uniform I wore.

Ahead, Gros fell in the dust, scrambled to his knees, head down. A soldier stepped out of an alley, aimed, and shot him through the head. Gros lurched, collapsed, rolled on his back. The dust caked in the blood on his face. The crowd closed in. From the moment they spotted him, he didn't have a chance.

I stopped. I was trying to remember what Gros had told the men. I had made the bad mistake of assuming too much, thinking I would have Gros to lead me out of this. There was something about a gate; everyone had papers, Gros said. All but me. That was why they had had to come out in daylight, I realized suddenly. The gate probably closed at sundown.

I moved on, not wanting to attract attention by standing still. I tried to keep the cloak around me to conceal the uniform. I didn't want any more soldiers noticing it; the next one might not be in such a hurry.

Gros had told the men to rendezvous at the thieves' market. I tried to remember Algiers from a three-day visit years before; all I could recall was the Casbah and the well-lit streets of the European shopping section.

I passed the spot where a jostling throng craned to see the body of the soldier, kept going. Another ring surrounded the spot where Gros lay dead. Now there were soldiers everywhere, swinging their sticks carelessly, breaking up the mob. I shuffled, head down, dodged a backhanded swipe, found myself in the open. The street sloped up, curving to the left. There were still a few cobbles on this part, fewer shops and stalls. Wash hung from railings around tiny balconies above the street.

I saw the gate ahead. A press of people was packed against it, while a soldier examined papers. Three more uniformed men stood by, looking toward the scene of the excitement.

I went on toward the gate. I couldn't turn back now. There was a new wooden watch tower scabbed onto the side of the ancient brick wall where the sewer drained under it. A carbon arc searchlight and a man with a burp gun slung over his shoulder were on top of it. I thought I saw one of The Organization men ahead in the crowd at the gate.

One of the soldiers was staring at me. He straightened, glanced at the man next to him. The other soldier was looking, too, now. I decided a bold front was the only chance. I beckoned to one of the men, allowing the cloak to uncover the front of the uniform briefly. He moved toward me, still in doubt. I hoped my battered face didn't look familiar.

"Snap it up, soldier," I said in my best Ecole Militaire tone; he hove to before me, saluted. I didn't give him a chance to take the initiative.

"The best part of the catch made it through the gate before you fools closed the net," I snapped. "Get me through there fast, and don't call any more attention to me. I'm not wearing this flea-circus for fun." I flipped the cloak.

He turned and pushed through to the gate, said a word to the other soldier, gestured toward me. The other man, wearing sergeant's stripes, looked at me.

I glared at him as I approached. "Ignore me," I hissed. "You foul this up and I'll see you shot."

I brushed past him, thrust through the gate as the first soldier opened it. I walked on, listening for the sound of a round snapping into the chamber of that burp gun on the tower. A goat darted out of an alley, stared at me. Sweat rolled down my cheek. There was a tree ahead, with a black shadow under it. I wondered if I'd ever get that far.

I made it, and breathed a little easier.

I still had problems, plenty of them. Right now I had to find the Thieves' Market. I had a vague memory of such a thing from the past, but I had no idea where it was. I moved on along the road, past a weathered stuccoed building with a slatternly tavern downstairs and sagging rooms above, bombed out at the far end. The gate was out of sight now.

Ahead were more bomb-scarred tenements, ruins, and beyond, open fields. There was a river in sight to the right. A few people were in view, moving listlessly in the morning heat. They seemed to ignore the hubbub within the walled town. I couldn't risk asking any of them for the place I sought; I didn't know who might be a police informer, or a cop, for that matter. They had been ready for us, I realized. Gros wasn't as well-hidden as he had thought. Probably the police could have cleared his outfit from the palace at any time; I suspected they had tolerated them against such a time as now. The ambush had been neat. I wondered if any of the 'boys' had made it through the gate.

Apparently word had not gone out to be on the alert for a man impersonating an officer; I didn't know how much Maurice had said when he telephoned for his men, but my bluff at the gate indicated no one had been warned of my disguise.

I paused. Maybe my best bet would be to try the tavern, order a drink, try to pick up something. I saw nothing ahead that looked encouraging.

I walked back fifty feet to the doorless entrance to the bistro. There was no one in sight. I walked in, barely able to make out the positions of tables and chairs in the gloom. The glassless windows were shuttered. I blinked, made out the shape of the bar. Outside the door, the dusty road glared white.

A hoarse-breathing fellow loomed up behind the bar. He didn't say anything.

"Red wine," I said.

He put a water glass on the bar and filled it from a tin dipper. I tasted it. It was horrible. I had a feeling good manners would be out of place here, so I turned and spat it on the floor.

I pushed the glass across the bar. "I want wine," I said. "Not what you wring out of the bar-rag." I dropped a worn thousand franc note on the bar.

He muttered as he turned away, and was still muttering when he shuffled back with a sealed bottle and a wine glass. He drew the cork, poured my glass half full, and put the thousand francs in his pocket. He didn't offer me any change.

I tried it; it wasn't too bad. I stood sipping, and waited for

my eyes to get used to the dim light. The bartender moved away and began pulling at a pile of boxes, grunting.

I didn't have a clear idea of what to do next if I did find the survivors of the Organization. At best I might find out what was wrong with the imposture, and use their channels to get back into the palace. I could always call for help on my communicator, and have myself set back inside via shuttle, but I didn't like the idea of risking that again. I had almost been caught arriving last time. The scheme couldn't possibly work if any suspicion was aroused.

A man appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the light. He stepped in and came over to the bar. The bartender ignored him.

Two more came through the door, walked past me and leaned on the bar below me. The bartender continued to shuffle boxes, paying no attention to his customers. I started to wonder why.

The man nearest me moved closer. "Hey, you," he said. He jerked his head toward the gate. "You hear the shooting back there?"

That was a leading question. I wondered if the sound of the shots had been audible outside the walls of the fortified town. I grunted.

"Who they after?" he said.

I tried to see his face, but it was shadowed. He was a thin broad fellow, leaning on one elbow. Here we go again, I thought.

"How would I know?" I said.

"Kind of warm for that burnoose, ain't it?" he said. He stretched out a hand as if to touch the tattered cape. I stepped back, and two pairs of arms wrapped around me in a double bear-hug from behind.

The man facing me twitched the cape open. He looked at me.

"Lousy Ducal," he said, and hit me across the mouth with the back of his hand. I tasted blood.

"Hold on to them arms," another man said, coming around from behind me. This was one I hadn't seen. I wondered how many more men were in the room. The new man took the old military cape in his hands and ripped it off me.

"Look at that," he said. "We got us a lousy general." He dug his finger under the top of the braided lapel of my blouse and yanked. The lapel tore but stayed put. I started to struggle then; that was my communicator they were about to loot for the gold wire in it. I didn't have much hope of getting loose that way, but maybe it would distract them if I kicked a little. I swung a boot and caught the rangy one under the kneecap. He yelped and jumped back, then swung at my

face. I twisted away, and the blow grazed my cheek. I threw myself backward, jerking hard, trying to throw someone off balance.

"Hold him," a man hissed. They were trying not to make too much noise. The thin man moved in close, watched his chance, and slammed a fist into my stomach. The pain was agonizing; I cramped up, retching.

The men holding me dragged me to a wall, flung me upright against it, arms outspread. The fellow who wanted the braid stepped up with a knife in his hand. I was trying to breathe, wheezing and twisting. He grabbed my hair, and for a moment I thought he was going to slit my throat. Instead, he sawed away at the lapels, cursing as the blade scraped wire.

"Get the buttons, too, Beau Joe," a husky voice suggested.

The pain was fading a little now, but I sagged, acting weaker than I actually was. The communicator was gone, at least the sending end. All I could try to salvage now was my life.

The buttons took only a moment. The man with the knife stepped back, slipping it into a sheath at his hip. He favored the leg I had kicked. I could see his face now. He had a straight nose, fine features.

"OK, let him go," he said. I slumped to the floor. For the first time my hands were free. Now maybe I had a chance; I still had the gun. I got shakily to hands and knees, watching him. He aimed a kick at my ribs.

"On your feet, General," he said. "I'll teach you to kick your betters."

I rode the kick, rolled to the left, ended on my face a few feet away. I tried to scramble up, still faking a little; but not much. I didn't need to. He followed, fists doubled. A real tough guy.

I made it to my feet, tottered, backed away. I wasn't worried about putting up a front; I just wanted a little room.

The man stepped in fast now, feinted with his left, and punched hard with his right at my face. The only way I could dodge it was to drop. Even so, I took a hard left in the chest. I sat down hard, bounced, as the tall man circled, readying another kick.

The others laughed, called out advice, shuffled around us in a circle. There was an odor of dust and sour wine.

"That General's a real fighter, ain't he?" somebody called. "Fights sittin down." That went over big. Lots of happy laughter.

I grabbed the foot as it came to me, twisted hard, and threw the man to the floor. He swore loudly, lunged at me, but I was

up again, backing away. The ring opened and somebody pushed me. I let myself stumble and gained a few more feet toward the shadowed corner. I could see better now, enough to see pistols and knives in every belt. If they had any idea I was armed, they'd use them. I had to wait.

BEAU JOE was after me again, throwing a roundhouse left. I ducked it, then caught a couple of short ones. I stepped back two paces, glanced at the audience; they were as far away as I'd get them. It was time to make my play. The man shielded me as the slug-gun popped into my hand, but at that instant he swung a savage kick. It was just luck; he hadn't seen the tiny weapon, but the gun spun into a dark corner. Now I wasn't acting any more.

I went after him, slammed a hard left to his face, followed with a right to the stomach, then straightened him out with another left. He was a lousy boxer.

The others didn't like it; they closed in and grabbed me. Knuckles bounced off my jaw as a fist rammed into my back. Two of them ran me backwards and sent me crashing against the wall. My head rang; I was stunned. I fell down and they let me lie. I needed the rest.

To hell with secrecy, I thought. I got to my knees and started crawling toward the corner. The men laughed and shouted, forgetting about being quiet now.

"Crawl, General," one shouted. "Crawl, you lousy spy."

"Hup, two, soldier," another sallied. "By the numbers, crawl."

That was a good one; they roared, slapped each other. Beau Joe had picked himself up and started for me now. Where the hell was that gun?

He grabbed my jacket, hauled me to my feet as I groped for him. My head spun; I must have a concussion, I thought. He jabbed at me, but I leaned on him, and he couldn't get a good swing. The others laughed at him now, enjoying the farce.

"Watch him, Beau Joe," someone called. "He's liable to wake up, with you shakin' him that away."

Beau Joe stepped back, and aimed a straight right at my chin, but I dropped and headed for the corner again; that was where the gun went. He kicked me again, sent me sprawling into the wall—and my hand fell on the gun.

I rolled over, and Beau Joe yanked me up, spun me around, and stepped back. I stood, slumped, in the corner, watching him. He was enjoying it now. He mouthed words silently, grinning in spite of his bleeding mouth. He intended to keep me

propped there in the corner and beat me to death. As he came to me, I raised the gun and shot him in the face.

I wished I hadn't; he did a back-flip, landed head first, but not before I caught a glimpse of the smashed face. Joe was not beau any more.

I held my hand loosely at my side, waiting for the next comer. The same fellow who had grabbed me before rushed up. He jumped the body and twisted to deliver a skull-crusher, face contorted. I raised the gun a few inches as he leaped and fired at his belly. The shot made a hollow whop, as the man's feet left the floor. He smashed into the wall as I side-stepped.

The other three fanned out. It was too dark to see clearly here, and they didn't yet realize what had happened. They thought I had downed the two men with my fists. They were going to jump me together and finish it off.

"Freeze, bunnies!" a voice said from the door. We all looked. A hulking brute stood outlined there, and the gun in his hand was visible.

"I can see you rats," he said. "I'm used to the dark. Don't try nothing." He beckoned a man behind him forward. One of the three in the room edged toward the rear, and the gun coughed, firing through a silencer. The man slammed sideways, and sprawled.

"Come on, Hammer-hand," the big man said. "Let's get out of here." He spat into the room. "These pigeons don't want to play no more."

I recognized the voice of Gaston, the big fellow who had wanted to bury me under the floor. Gros had appointed him my bodyguard, but he was a little late. I had taken a terrible beating. I tucked the gun away clumsily and lurched forward.

"Cripes, Hammer-hand," Gaston said, stepping forward to steady me. "I didn't know them bunnies had got to you; I thought you was stringing them. I was wondering when you was going to make music with that punch."

He paused to stare down at Beau Joe.

"You pushed his mush right in," he said admiringly. "Hey, Touhey, get Hammer-hand's wrap-around, and let's shove." He glanced once more around the room.

"So long, Bunnies," he said. The two men didn't answer.

VIII

I DON'T remember much about my trip to the Organization's hide-out in the country. I recall walking endlessly, and later be-

ing carried over Gaston's shoulder. I remember terrific heat, and agonizing pain, from my battered face, my half-healed gunshot wounds, and innumerable bruises. And I remember at last a cool room, and a soft bed.

I awoke slowly, dreams blending with memories, none of them pleasant. I lay on my back, propped up on enormous fluffy feather bolsters, with a late afternoon sun lighting the room through partly-drawn drapes over a wide dormer window. For awhile I struggled to decide where I was. Gradually I recalled my last conscious thought.

This was the place in the country Gros had been headed for. Gaston had taken his charge seriously, in spite of his own suggestion that I be disposed of and although he knew Miche and Gros were dead.

I moved tentatively, and caught my breath. That hurt, too. My chest, ribs, and stomach were one great ache. I pushed the quilt down and tried to examine the damage. Under the edges of a broad tape wrapping, purple bruises showed all around my right side.

Bending my neck had been a mistake; now the bullet wound that Maurice had re-opened with the blackjack began to throb. I was a mess. I didn't risk moving my face; I knew what it must look like.

As a secret-service type, I was a complete bust, I thought. My carefully prepared disguise had fooled no one, except maybe Spider. I had been subjected to more kicks, blows, and threats of death in the few hours I had been abroad in the Dictator's realm than in all my previous 42 years, and I had accomplished exactly nothing. I had lost my communicator, and now my slug-gun, too; the comforting pressure under my wrist was gone. It wouldn't have helped me much now anyway; I was dizzy from the little effort I had just expended.

Maybe I had made some progress, though, in a negative way. I knew that walking in and striking a pose wasn't enough to get me by as the Dictator Bayard, in spite of the face. And I had also learned that the Dictator's regime was riddled with subversives and malcontents. Perhaps we could somehow use the latter to our advantage.

If, I thought, I can get back with the information. I thought that over. How would I get back? I had no way of communicating. I was completely on my own now.

Always before I had had the knowledge that in the end I could send out a call for help, and count on rescue within an hour. Richthofen had arranged for a 24-hour monitoring of my communications band, alert for

my call. Now that was out. If I was to return to the Imperium, I would have to steal one of the crude shuttles of this world, or better, commandeer one as Dictator. I had to get back into the palace, with a correct disguise, or end my days in this nightmare world.

I heard voices approaching outside the room. I closed my eyes as the door opened. I might learn a little by playing possum, if I could get away with it.

The voices were lower now, and I sensed several people coming over to stand by the bed.

"How long has he been asleep?" a new voice asked. Or was it new? It seemed familiar somehow, but I connected it with some other place.

"Doc give him some shots," someone answered. "We brought him in this time yesterday."

There was a pause. Then the half-familiar voice again. "I don't like his being alive. However—perhaps we can make use of him."

"Gros wanted him alive," another voice said. I recognized Gaston. He sounded sullen. "He had big plans for him."

The other voice grunted. There was silence for a few moments.

"He's no good to us until the face is healed. Keep him here until I send along further instructions." The voice spoke in cultivated French, much different than the alley slang of the others. I didn't dare to risk a glimpse; but if I pretended to just be awakening . . . I groaned and moved, then opened my eyes. I was a little late; the men were already passing through the door.

I hadn't liked what I heard, but for the present I had no choice but to lie here and try to regain my strength. At least, I was comfortably set up in this huge bed. I drifted off to sleep again.

I awoke with Gaston sitting by the bed smoking. He sat up when I opened my eyes, crushed out his cigarette in an ash tray on the table, and leaned forward.

"How you feeling, Hammerhand?" he said.

"Rested," I said. My voice came out in a faint whisper. I was surprised at its weakness.

"Yeah, them pigeons give you a pretty rough time, Hammerhand, I don't get why you don't lay the Punch on them sooner."

I tried to speak, croaked instead, shook my head.

"Take it easy," Gaston said. "You lost a lot of blood. Them scalp wounds bleed plenty."

A throb from the back of my head told me where the scalp wound was. I didn't remember getting it.

"I got some chow here for you," Gaston said. He put a tray

from the bedside table on his lap and offered me a spoonful of soup. I was hungry; I opened my mouth for it. I never expected to have a gorilla for a nursemaid, I thought.

GASTON was good at his work, though. For the next three days he fed me regularly, changed my bedding, and performed all the duties of a trained nurse with skill, if not with grace. I steadily gained strength, but I was careful to conceal the extent of my progress from Gaston and the others who occasionally came in. I didn't know what might be coming up and I wanted something in reserve.

Gaston told me a lot about the Organization during the next few days. I learned that the group led by Gros and Miche was only one of several such cells; there were hundreds of members, in half a dozen scattered locations in Algeria, each keeping surveillance over some vital installation of the regime. Their ultimate objective was the overthrow of Bayard's rule, enabling them to get a share in the loot.

Each group had two leaders, all of whom reported to the Big Boss, a stranger about whom Gaston knew little. He appeared irregularly, and no one knew his name or where he had his headquarters. I sensed that Gaston didn't like him.

On the third day I asked Gaston to help me get up and walk a bit. I faked extreme weakness, but was pleased to discover that I was feeling better than I had hoped. After Gaston helped me back into bed and left the room, I got up again, and practiced walking. It made me dizzy and nauseated after a few steps, but I leaned on the bed post and waited for my stomach to settle down, and went on. I stayed on my feet for fifteen minutes, and slept soundly afterwards. Thereafter, whenever I awoke, day or night, I rose and walked, jumping back into bed when I heard footsteps approaching.

When Gaston insisted on walking me after that, I continued to feign all the symptoms I had felt the first time. The doctor was called back once, but he assured me that my reactions were quite normal, and that I could not expect to show much improvement for another week, considering the amount of blood I had lost. This suited me perfectly. I needed time to learn more.

I tried to pump Gaston about my disguise, subtly; I didn't want to put him on his guard, or give any inkling of what I had in mind. But I was too subtle; Gaston avoided the subject.

I searched for my clothes, but the closet was locked and I couldn't risk forcing the door.

A week after my arrival, I al-

lowed myself enough improvement to permit a walk through the house, and down into a pleasant garden behind it. I saw several new faces, men who stared curiously at me, and muttered together as I passed. They seemed neither friendly nor hostile. I caught a glimpse, too, of an elderly female, the housekeeper, I guessed.

The layout of the house was simple. From the garden I had seen no signs of guards. It looked as though I could walk out any time, but I restrained the impulse. I didn't want to get a mile or two, and fall over in a faint; and I needed clothes, papers, information. I wanted my slug-gun, but that was hopeless, I was afraid. I would settle for a pistol, if I could get one. Even that looked impossible. I wondered when I would find out what the Organization planned for me.

One morning Gaston brought me in some clothes to replace the patched bathrobe I had been wearing for my daily exercise. This was a real break for me. I had been assuming that if I decided to leave suddenly, I would have to take the clothes off someone when I left; in my condition, that would be an undertaking in itself.

I still didn't have much in the way of plans. What could I do if I did leave the house? I could try to make my way back into the walled town and re-enter the palace the way I had come out. Once there, I would dispose of the Dictator and, posing as the ruler, order a shuttle placed at my disposal, with an Operator. Then I could return to the Imperium. Very simple, except for a few details.

I walked around the house freely now, using two canes, and resting frequently. There were eight other large bedrooms on the second floor of the house, in addition to mine; only two seemed to be in use. Downstairs, there were two dining rooms, a study, library, large kitchens, and a vast parlor. One room was locked. A wall surrounded the garden. It was a pleasant old place, and I was sure the air of peace and placidity helped in avoiding the attention of the police. It was a clever camouflage, and I thought it would make my departure easy.

By the time ten days had passed, I was getting very restless. I couldn't fake my role of invalid much longer without arousing suspicion. The inactivity was getting on my nerves; I had spent the night lying awake, thinking, and getting up occasionally to walk up and down the room. By dawn, I had succeeded in fatiguing myself, but I hadn't slept at all.

I had to be doing something. I got out my canes, and started to reconnoitre the house after Gaston had taken away my breakfast tray. From the upstairs windows I had a wide view of the surrounding country The front of the house faced a paved highway, in good repair. I assumed it was a main route into Algiers. Behind the house, tilled fields stretched a quarter of a mile to a row of trees. Perhaps there was a river there. There were no other houses near.

I thought about leaving. It looked to me as though my best bet would be to go over the wall after dark and head for the cover of the trees. I had the impression that the line of trees and the road converged to the west, so perhaps I could regain the road at a distance from the house, and follow it into the city. But first I had to know what the plans of the Organization were; I might be able to turn them to my advantage.

There seemed to be no one stirring in the house as I hobbled along with my two sticks. I wandered up and down the hall, then slowly descended the stair. I was about to go out into the garden, when I heard the sound of a motor approaching. I paused and listened. It pulled up in front of the house and stopped. There was a sound of slamming doors, voices; then the car started up, and headed back the way it had come.

I hurried back into the house, and took the stairs fast. I hoped no one saw me, but I was determined not to call my free wandering to the attention of the man whose voice I had heard. It was the same one I had heard the first day here, and I still couldn't place it; but I was sure that it belonged to the Big Boss Gaston had told me of.

I slowed down at the top of the stairs and picked my way along to my room. I got into bed and waited for something to happen. Surely the Big Boss's return meant an end to suspense.

Hours passed, while I sat on the edge of the bed or paced restlessly but silently up and down, canes in hand in case of sudden interruption. Gaston brought my lunch at noon, but wouldn't stay to answer questions.

Occasionally I heard a raised voice, or the sound of footsteps; otherwise, all was peaceful. About three o'clock, another vehicle approached, a truck this time. From my windows I could see only a part of it, but two men seemed to be unloading something heavy from it. After half an hour it drove away.

It was almost dinner time when I heard them approaching my door. I was lying down, so I

stayed where I was and waited. Gaston entered with the doctor. The doctor was pale, and perspiring heavily. He avoided my eyes as he drew out a chair, sat down and started his examination. He said nothing to me, ignoring the questions I asked him. I gave up and lay silently while he prodded and poked. After awhile he rose suddenly, packed up his kit, and walked out.

"What's the matter with the doc, Gaston?" I asked.

"He's got something on his mind," Gaston said. Even Gaston seemed subdued. Something was up; something that worried me.

"Come on, Gaston," I said. "What's going on?"

At first I thought he wasn't going to answer me.

"They're going to do like you wanted," he said. "They're getting ready to put you in for Bayard."

"That's fine," I said. That was what I had come here for. This way was as good as any. But there was something about it . . .

"Why all the secrecy?" I asked. "Why doesn't the Big Boss show himself? I'd like to talk to him."

Gaston hesitated. I had the feeling he wanted to say more, but couldn't.

"They got a few details to fix yet," he said. He didn't look at me. I let it go at that. At least I knew now things were moving.

After Gaston left the room, I went out into the hall. Through the open back windows I heard the sound of conversation. I moved over to eavesdrop.

There were three men, strolling out into the garden, backs to me. One was the doctor; I didn't recognize the other two. I wished I could see their faces.

"It was not for this I was trained," the doctor was saying. He waved his hands in an agitated way. "I am not a butcher, to cut up a side of mutton for you. . . ."

I couldn't make out the reply, but what I had heard was enough. There was something terrible brewing here in this quiet house. I wanted to get on with the job ahead. I wished the Big Boss would get around to talking to me.

They were all out in the garden now; maybe this would be a good time to take a look around downstairs. I wanted to know what all the gear was I had seen them bringing in this afternoon. Maybe I could learn something about the coming move.

I went down to the landing and listened. All was quiet. I descended to the hall on the ground floor, listened again. Somewhere a clock was ticking.

I went into the main dining room; the table was set for three,

but no food was in sight. I tried the other dining room; nothing. I went across and eased the parlor door open. There was no one there; it looked as unused as ever.

I passed the door I had found locked once before and noticed light under it. I stepped back and tried it. It was probably a broom closet, I thought, as I turned the knob. It opened.

I STOOD staring. There was a padded white table in the center of the room. At one end stood two floodlamps on tall tripods. Glittering instruments were laid out on a small table. On a stand beside the operating table lay scalpels, sutures, heavy curved needles. There was a finely made saw, like a big hacksaw, and heavy snippers. On the floor beneath the table was a large galvanized steel wash tub.

The sight of the room frightened me. I didn't like it; it reminded me of a blood-spattered battalion aid station where I had once lain for an hour among the hopeless cases and the dead, while the surgeons worked on the lightly wounded, the ones who might live. They were out of morphine and they had gotten to me after I had lain conscious for more than an hour breathing through a fog of agony, listening to the high wailing screams of the men under the knife.

I didn't understand this; I wished I had stayed upstairs and waited for the Big Boss's proposition. I turned to the door, and heard footsteps approaching.

I looked around, saw a door, jumped to it and jerked it open. When the two men entered the room, I was standing rigid in the darkness of a storeroom, with the door open half an inch.

The flood lights flicked on, then off again. There was a rattle of metal against metal.

"Lay off that," a nasal voice said. "This is all set. I checked it over myself."

"Then it's sure to be loused up," a thin voice answered.

The two bickered and complained as they fussed around the room. They seemed to be medical technicians of some sort.

"They're nuts," Nasal-voice said. "Why don't they wait until morning, when they got plenty sunlight for this? No, they gotta work under the lights."

"I don't get this deal," Thin-voice said. "I didn't get what was supposed to be wrong with this guy's legs, they got to take them off. How come if he's . . ."

"You ain't clued in, are you, Mac?" Nasal-voice said harshly. "This is a big deal; they're going to ring this mug in when they knock off the Old Man . . ."

"Yeah, that's what I mean," Thin-voice cut in. "So what's the idea they take off the legs?"

"You don't know much, do you, small-timer?" Nasal-voice said. "Well, listen; I got news for you." There was a pause.

"Bayard's got no pins, from the knees down." Nasal-voice spoke in a hushed tone. "You didn't know that, did you? That's why you never seen him walking around on the video; he's always sitting back of a desk.

"There ain't very many know about that," he added. "Keep it to yourself."

"Cripes," Thin-voice said. His voice was thinner than ever. "Got no legs?"

"That's right. I was with him a year before the landing. I was in his outfit when he got it. Machine gun slug, through both knees. Now forget about it. But maybe now you get the set-up."

"Cripes," Thin-voice said. "Where did they get a guy crazy enough to go into a deal like this?"

"How do I know," the other said. He sounded as though he regretted having told the secret. "These revolutionist types is all nuts anyway."

I stood there feeling sick. My legs tingled. I knew now why nobody mistook me for the Dictator, as I *walked* into a room; and why Spider had been taken in, when he saw me sitting.

The two technicians left the room. I felt weak and nauseated. I looked at the tub under the table, and then down at my legs. I was trembling. I didn't have to think about making a decision any longer; it was made.

I was leaving now. Not tomorrow, not tonight; now. I had no gun, no papers, no map, no plans; but I was leaving.

It was almost dark; I stood in the hall and drew deep breaths, trying to get hold of myself. My leg muscles twitched and quivered. I pushed the memory of the saw and the tub from my mind. I was getting out.

I thought of food. I didn't want it now, but I knew I would need my strength; I remembered the kitchen, and went to the door. I listened; all was silent. I pushed through the door and in the gloom went to the large refrigerator against the wall. I found a half of a small ham, and a wedge of dry cheese. I took a long pull from a partly used bottle of white wine. It was a little sour, but it helped. I was feeling steadier now.

I dropped my finds into a string bag on the table, and added a round loaf of bread. I selected a sturdy french knife from the drawer, and thrust it in my belt. All set. Let's go.

The kitchen faced the garden, with a back door set just outside the walled portion, a service entrance. That suited me fine; I wouldn't have to climb the wall.

Through the window I could see the men in the garden, standing under a small cherry tree in the gloom, still talking. I considered whether to risk opening the door now; the top half of it would be visible to them over the garden wall. I examined it in the failing light. It was a dutch door, the type that opens in two sections. I tried the latches carefully. The upper one was locked, but the bolt holding the halves together opened easily, and the lower part swung silently open—below the line of vision of the men outside. I didn't wait; I bent over and stepped through.

A short path led off to the drive beside the house; I ignored it and crept along beside the wall, through weed-grown flower beds.

I reached the end of the wall, and through the screen of a trellis checked on the three men; they were walking toward the house. They seemed like ordinary men of substance, having a quiet chat and stroll in the garden before dinner. It wasn't dinner they were planning in the old house though; it was my living dismemberment.

I turned to start out across the plowed field and a dark form rose up before me. I recoiled, my wrist twitching in a gesture that had become automatic; but no slug-gun snapped into my hand. I was unarmed, weak, and shaken, and the man loomed over me, hulking. I didn't know what to do.

"Let's go, Hammer-hand," he whispered. It was Gaston.

The thought of running for it flashed through my mind, but it was hopeless; I was trapped here before I had even begun. This was bitter. I backed away, unwilling to accept defeat, but unable to prevent it.

"I'm leaving, Gaston," I said. "Just don't try to stop me." Vague ideas of a bluff were in my mind. After all, he called me Hammer-hand.

He came after me. "Hold it down to a roar," he said. "I wondered when you was going to make your break. You been getting pretty restless these last few days."

"Yeah," I said. "Who wouldn't?" I was just stalling; I had no plan.

"You got more nerve than me, Hammer-hand," Gaston said. "I would of took off a week ago. You must of wanted to get a look at the Big Boss real bad to stick as long as you did."

"I saw enough today," I said. "I don't want to see anymore."

"Do you make him?" Gaston asked. He sounded interested.

"No," I said. "I didn't see his face. But I've lost my curiosity."

Gaston laughed. "OK, chief,"

he said. He handed me a soiled card, with something scribbled on it. "Maybe this will do you some good. It's the big boss's address out of town. I swiped it; it was all I could find. Now, let's blow out of here."

I stuck the card in my pocket. I was a little confused.

"I'm headed for the river," I said. "I'll kill anyone who gets in my way."

"That's the idea," Gaston said. "We're wasting time."

"You're going with me?" I asked.

"Like the man said, Hammer-hand, I'm with you."

"Wait a minute, Gaston; you mean you're helping me get away?" I couldn't believe it.

"Somebody said I was supposed to keep an eye on you, look out you didn't have no accident," Gaston said. "I always done all right doing what my brother told me; I don't see no reason to stop now just because they killed him."

"Your brother?" I said.

"Gros was my brother," Gaston said. "I ain't smart like Gros, but he always took care of me. I always done what he said. He told me to look out for you, Hammer-hand."

"What about them?" I asked, nodding toward the house. "They won't like it when they find us both missing."

Gaston spat. "To hell with them monkeys," he said. "They gimme the willies."

I was beginning to feel jolly all of a sudden, by reaction.

"Why the hell didn't you say so a week ago," I said. "You could have saved me some sleepless nights."

"That joint is bugged plenty," Gaston said. "You can't say nothing in there. Besides, in case you didn't make it, I didn't want you to have nothing to conceal, if you know what I mean."

"I wouldn't have talked," I said.

Gaston looked at me. "You would have talked, Hammer-hand. They all do."

"OK," I said. "Never mind that now." I was in a mood to push my luck. "Listen, Gaston; can you go back in there and get the clothes I had on when I got here?"

Gaston fumbled in the dark at a sack slung over his shoulder. "I thought you might want that suit, Hammer-hand," he said. "You was real particular about that with Miche." He handed me a bundle. I knew the feel of it. It was the uniform.

"Gaston," I said, "You're a wonder. I don't suppose you brought along the little gimmick I had on my wrist?"

"I think I stuck it in the pocket," he said. "Somebody swiped the fancy gloves you had

in the belt, though. I'm sorry about the gloves."

I fumbled over the blouse, and felt the lump in the pocket. With that slug-gun in my hand I was ready to lick the world.

"That's OK about the gloves, Gaston," I said. I strapped the clip to my wrist and tucked the gun away. I pulled off the old coat I wore and slipped the blouse on. This was more like it.

I looked at the house. All was peaceful. It was dark enough now that we wouldn't be seen crossing the field. It was time to go.

"Come on," I said I took a sight on a bright star and struck out across the soft ground.

In fifty steps the house was completely lost to view. The wall and high foliage obscured the lights on the first floor; upstairs the house was in darkness. I kept the star before me and stumbled on. I never knew how hard it was to walk in a plowed field in the dark.

Gaston puffed along behind me. I spoke softly every few steps to guide him. Before me there was nothing but darkness.

IT WAS fifteen minutes before I made out a deeper darkness against the faintly lighter sky ahead. That would be the line of trees along the river; I was still assuming there was a river.

Then we were among the trees, feeling our way slowly. The ground sloped and the next moment I was sliding down a muddy bank into shallow water.

"Yes," I said, "it's a river all right." I scrambled out, and stood peering toward the west. I could see nothing. If we had to pick our way through trees all night, without a moon, we wouldn't be a mile away by dawn.

"Which way does this river flow, Gaston?" I asked.

"That way," he said. "To Algiers; into the city"

"Can you swim?" I asked.

"Sure," Gaston replied. "I can swim good."

"OK," I said. "Strip and make a bundle of your clothes. Put whatever you don't want to get wet in the middle; strap the bundle to your shoulders with your belt."

We grunted and fumbled in the darkness.

"What about the shoes?" Gaston said.

"Tie the laces together and hang them around your neck," I said. "They'll get wet, but that won't matter much."

I finished my packing and stepped down into the water. It was warm weather; that was a break. I still had the slug-gun on my wrist. I wanted it close to me.

"Ready, Gaston?" I called softly.

"Right with you, chief."

I stepped out into the stream, pushed off as the bottom shelved. I paddled a few strokes to get clear of the reeds growing near the shore. All around was inky blackness, with only the brilliant stars overhead to relieve the emptiness.

"OK, Gaston?" I called.

I heard him splashing quietly. "Sure," he said.

"Let's get out a little farther and then take it easy," I said. "Let the river do the work."

The current was gentle. Far across the river I saw a tiny light now. We drifted slowly past it. I moved my hands just enough to keep my nose above water. The surface was calm. I yawned; I could have slept tonight, I thought, remembering the sleepless hours of the night before. But it would be a long time between beds for me.

I saw a tiny reflection on a ripple ahead, and glanced back. There were lights on in the second story of the house we had left. It seemed to be about a mile away. That wasn't much of a start, I thought, but maybe they wouldn't look in the middle of the river.

I called to Gaston, pointing out the lights.

"Yeah," he said. "I been watching them. I don't think we got nothing to worry about."

They could follow our trail to the water's edge easily enough I knew, with nothing more than a flashlight. As if in response to my thought, a tiny gleam appeared at ground level, wavering, blinking as trees passed between us. It moved, bobbing toward the river. I watched until it emerged from the trees. I saw the yellow gleam dancing across the water where we had started. Other lights were following now, two, three. The whole household must have joined the chase. They must be expecting to find me huddled on the ground near by, exhausted, ready for the table they had prepared for me in the presence of my enemies.

The lights fanned out, moving along the shore. I saw that we were safely ahead of them.

"Gaston," I said, "have they got a boat back there?"

"Nah," he replied. "We're in the clear."

The little lights were pitiful, bobbing along the shore, falling behind.

We floated along then in silence for an hour or more. It was still, almost restful. Only a gentle fluttering of the hands was required to keep our heads above water.

Suddenly lights flashed ahead, over the river.

"Cripes," Gaston hissed, backing water. "I forgot about the Salan bridge. Them bunnies is on there waitin' for us."

I could see the bridge now, as the lights flashed across the pilings. It was about a hundred yards ahead.

"Head for the far shore, Gaston," I said. "Fast and quiet."

I couldn't risk the splash of a crawl stroke, so I dog-paddled frantically, my hands under the surface. They would have had us neatly, if they hadn't shown the lights when they did, I thought. They couldn't see us without them, though, so it was just a chance they had to take. They must have estimated the speed of the river's flow, and tried to pinpoint us. They didn't miss by much; in fact, they might not have missed at all. I concentrated on putting every ounce of energy into my strokes. My knees hit mud, and reeds brushed my face. I rolled over and sat up, breathing hard. Gaston floundered a few feet away.

"Here," I hissed; "keep it quiet."

The light on the bridge blinked out suddenly. I wondered what they'd do next. If they headed along the banks, flashing lights, we'd have to take to the water again; and if one man stayed on the bridge, and flashed his light down at just about the right moment . . .

"Let's get going," I said.

I started up the slope, crouching low. The lights appeared again, down at the water's edge now, flashing on the tall grass and cat-tails. Another appeared on the opposite bank. I stopped to listen. Feet made sloshing sounds in the mud, a hundred feet away. Good; that would cover our own noise. My wet shoes dangled by the strings, thumping my chest.

The ground was firmer now, the grass not so tall. I stopped again, Gaston right behind me, looking back. They'd find our tracks any minute. We had no time to waste. The bundle of clothing was a nuisance, but we couldn't stop now to dress.

"Come on," I whispered, and broke into a run.

Fifty feet from the top we dropped and started crawling. I didn't want to be seen in silhouette against the sky as we topped the rise.

We pulled ourselves along, puffing and grunting. Crawling is hard work for a grown man. Just over the top we paused to look over the situation. The road leading to the bridge wound away toward a distant glow in the sky.

"That's an army supply depot out that way," Gaston said. "No town."

I raised up to look back toward the river. Two lights bobbed together, then started slowly away from the water's edge. I heard a faint shout.

"They've spotted the trail," I said. I jumped up and ran down the slope, trying to breathe deep, in for four strides, out for four. A man could run a long time if he didn't get winded. Stones bruised my bare feet.

I angled over toward the highway, with some idea of making better time. Gaston was beside me.

"Nix," he said, puffing hard. "Them bunnies got a machine."

FOR a moment I didn't know what he meant; then I heard the sound of an engine starting up, and headlights lanced into the darkness, beams aimed at the distant tree-tops as the car headed up the slope of the approach to the bridge from the other side. We had only a few seconds before the car would slant down on this side, and illuminate the road and a wide strip on either side; we'd be spotlighted.

Ahead I saw a fence, just a glint from a wire. That finished it; we were stopped. I slid to a halt. Then I saw that the fence lined a cross road, joining the road we were paralleling twenty feet away. Maybe a culvert . . . I didn't wait to discuss it; I dived for the only possible shelter.

A corrugated steel pipe eighteen inches in diameter ran beside the main road where the other joined it. I scrambled over pebbles and twigs and into the gaping mouth. The sounds I made echoed hollowly inside. I kept going to the far end, Gaston wheezing behind me. I stopped and looked over my shoulder. Gaston had backed in and lay a few feet inside his end. The glow of the headlights gave me a glimpse of a heavy automatic in his hand.

"Good boy," I hissed. "Don't shoot unless you have to."

The lights of the car flickered over trees, highlighted rocks. Through the open end of the pipe I saw a rabbit sitting up in the glare, a few feet away. He turned and bounded off.

The car came slowly along the road. A sharp stick under my chest poked me, pebbles dug into my knees. I watched the lights; the car passed, moved on down the road. I breathed a little easier.

I was on the point of turning to say something to Gaston when a small stone rolled down into the ditch before me. I stiffened. A faint scuff of shoes on gravel, another stone dislodged—and then a flashlight beam darted across the gulley, played on the grass opposite, came to rest on the open end of the drain pipe. I was about two feet inside; the light didn't quite reach me; I held my breath. Then the steps came nearer, and the light probed, found my shoulder.

There was a frozen instant of silence, then the sharp slap of the slug-gun hitting my palm. The steps shuffled back, light stabbing into my eyes as I lunged forward, shoulders clear of the pipe. I caught a glimpse of the car a hundred feet away now, still edging along. I heard a sharp intake of breath as the man with the light readied a shout. I pointed the gun to the right of the flash and the recoil slammed my arm back. The flashlight skidded across the rocky bottom of the ditch as the man's body crashed heavily and lay still. The flashlight was still on. I jumped for it, flicked it off, and dropped it on the ground. I groped for the man's feet, hauled him back toward the pipe.

"Gaston," I whispered. The sound was hollow in the dark tunnel. "Give me a hand." He crawled out the far end, turned and reentered head first. The limp body was pulled away into the drain pipe. I pushed at the feet. I couldn't tell who it was. I was glad it wasn't the doctor; he wouldn't have fitted.

I backed out, ran to the far end, and helped Gaston the last two feet. "After the car," I said. I had what I hoped was an idea I was tired of being chased; the hunted would become the hunter.

I headed up the ditch at a trot, head down, Gaston at my heels. The car had stopped a hundred yards away. I counted three flashlights moving in the edge of the field. I wondered how many there were, whether the driver had remained with the car. We'd soon find out the answer to that.

I stopped. "Close enough," I hissed. "Let's split up now; I'll cross the road and come up the other side. There's only one man over there. You get up in the tall grass and sneak in as close to the car as you can. Watch me and take your cue."

I darted across the road, a grotesque figure, naked, my bundle dangling by its strap from my shoulder. The car's head lights were still on. I was sure no one could see us from beyond them, looking into the glare. I dropped down into the ditch, wincing as sharp sticks jabbed my bare feet. The man on my side was casting about in wide circles, fifty feet from the road. A cricket sawed away insistently.

The car started backing, swung to one side of the road, then went forward; the driver was in the car, all right; he was turning around. They must have come up the road to cut us off, planning to move back to the river, searching foot by foot until they flushed us. No one seemed to have missed the man who now lay quietly in the steel pipe.

The car swung around and moved along at a snail's pace, headlights flooding the road I had just crossed. I hoped Gaston was well concealed on the other side. I couldn't see him. I dropped down to the bottom of the ditch as the lights passed over me. The car came on, and stopped just above me. I could see the driver, staring out through the windshield. He leaned forward, peering. I wondered if he had spotted Gaston. Then I realized he was looking for the man who had been coming along on foot, checking the ditch; he'd be a long time seeing him from here.

He opened the door, stepped out, one foot on the running board. The car was long and top-heavy looking, with flaring fenders. Dust roiled and gnats danced in the beams from the great bowl-shaped headlights. I couldn't just lie here and watch, I thought. I would never have a better chance.

I picked up a heavy stone, rose silently to hands and knees, and crept up out of the ditch. The chauffer stood with a hand on top of the door, looking over it. He turned his back to me, and ducked his head to re-enter the car. I came up behind him in two steps, and hit him as hard as I could on top of the head. He folded into the seat. I shoved him over, jumped in, and closed the door. It was hard to get the coat off him in the dark, while trying to stay down behind the door, but I managed it. I put it on and sat up. There was no alarm. The three flashlights continued to bob around in the fields. The engine was running quietly. I looked over the controls. The steering wheel was in the center, and there were three pedals on the floor. I pushed at them tentatively. The left hand one caused the engine to race a bit as I touched it; the accelerator. Logically, the one on the right should be the brake. The center one must be the clutch. I pushed it in and the car edged forward. I tried the brake; OK.

I let the center pedal in again, and started off slowly; the car seemed to slip in gear, and the pedal went slack; an automatic transmission. I steered to the right side of the road, crept along the edge. Gaston must be about here, I thought. I stared out into the darkness; I could see practically nothing.

I EASED to a stop. The flashlight nearest me swung back and forth, moving toward the bridge. I reached out to the dash, pushed in a lever that projected from it. The headlights died.

I could see better now. The flashlights to my right stopped moving, turned toward me. I waved cheerfully. I didn't think

they could make out my face in the dim beam at that distance. One of the lights seemed satisfied, resumed its search; the other hesitated, flashing over the car.

There was a shout then, and I saw Gaston up and running toward me. The flashlights converged on him as he leaped across the ditch ahead, coming into the road. The lights came bounding toward him and someone was yelling. Gaston stopped, whirled toward the nearest light, aiming the pistol. There was a sharp bam, bam. Both lights on his side dropped. Not bad shooting for a .45, I thought. I jerked open the door and Gaston jumped in beside me. Behind there was a faint shout from the remaining man on the other side of the road, and the crack of a gun. The slug made a solid thunk as it hit the heavy steel of the car. I floorboarded the center and left pedals; the car jumped ahead, then coasted. Another slug starred the glass beside me, scattering glass chips in my hair. I let my foot off, tried again, The car surged forward; the acceleration was excellent. Apparently putting the center pedal all the way in disengaged it. I flipped the lights on. The car shifted up, tires squealing. Ahead, a figure stumbled down into the ditch, scrambled up the other side into the road, waving its arms. I saw the open mouth in the taut white face for an instant in the glare of the lights before it was slammed down out of sight, with a shock that bounced us in our seats.

The bridge loomed ahead, narrow and highly arched. We took it wide open, crushed down in the seat as we mounted the slope, floating as we dropped on the other side. The road curved off to the left, tall trees lining it. The tires howled as we rounded the turn and hit the straightaway.

"This is great, Hammerhand," Gaston shouted. "I never rode in one of these here machines before."

"Neither did I," I yelled back. I kept moving at top speed for a mile, then slowed to fifty kilometers; I didn't want to get pinched. I followed the road another mile or so, and then turned off down a side road to the right, into the shelter of a clump of trees. I set the brake, but left the engine idling; I didn't know how to start it again.

I leaned back and let out a long breath. "Ok, Gaston," I said. "Fall out for a ten minute break."

Concluded next month

LAST ZERo

By DAVID R. BUNCH

It is foolhardy to beard a Sunmaker when he's busy making suns. The least that can happen is that the Sunmaker will need a new Secretary.

A MOMENT, Sir. I beg not to be of trouble, Sir. I am sorry I am compelled to, but—well, Sir, if you please . . .

How dare you to approach me with a niggling air! How dare you to approach! me! when I have my sun clothes on. I'm making suns, you know, today, stars and all like that.

Well, yes Sir, yes, Sir, I know you're busy, Sir. But still it is my duty. I mean, there are things that . . .

Can't it wait until tomorrow-century? Details are such a bother when I'm in the mood for sun making.

Well, if we let it wait, Sir, I'd not feel right, Sir. I'd not feel I'd been fair. I'd think maybe I hadn't kept duty's trust, been absolutely straight with the balance sheet, presented the true clear picture and been an all-out all-star cosmic secretary. A bookkeeper's really what I am, Sir, let's admit it. But I have my side.

Yes, you have your side. And your side is best served by better serving me. And that I really mean. Coming to make reports when I'm all dressed for sun making—how dare!

But this is a grave emergency, Sir. In fact, I think it may be unique.

A grave emergency is unique?

No, Sir, begging your pardon, Sir. I must not argue. But I only mean, or was meaning, Sir, that this grave emergency is a unique grave emergency. I'm almost sure it is.

You're almost sure! Almost sure! You said that last century-week. I'm getting pretty sick and tired of your almost sures. How can anyone up here be almost sure? I'm always sure.

Yes, Sir! But you're sure, Sir. I mean, you're Mr. Sure, himself, Sir. It's no trouble for you to be sure, Sir.

If I didn't know better, I would think you were going to lick and lap my boots in about a minute-century.

Well, no I'm not—unless you ask me to.

Sec., when I'm in the mood for sun making, I find you most disgustingly unstandable. I can stand you sometimes when I'm not making suns. When I'm making cold-ball planets and dead-dust moons, say, you're O.K. I can stand your sniveling, niggling, petty wavering then.

I'm sorry, Sir. I only try to do my job.

Oh, to be always making suns! Why did I ever bother with the other? Suns require no gardening. Suns are there to count on. Oh, to be always making suns; oh, to be out in some patch of clear white eternal space, always making suns . . . (Whispering) Then I could fire this secretary.

Don't you feel well, Sir?

Feel?! Well?! Feel well? Of course I feel well. What an odd question, considering what I am.

I don't think it's odd at all, Sir. I once would have thought it very odd, indeed.

What kind of an odd-ball remark is that? And what are you driveling at?

Begging your All-High pardon, Sir, what I mean is, Sir, when I first came up here to take this job, I didn't understand your personality. I think I do now.

Ah, I see! You know, that makes me most happy in a kind of cold-sun way. My ace boot licker understands my personality. I'm flattered!

I know you're being satirical, Sir. I know, to you, Sir, I'm just a comic flea you like to be cosmic with, gesture at and see hop. But I don't much care now. In fact, I think I'll quit calling you sir, Sir! I may even quit this job. It just now came to me how things are, Mr. Sun Maker.

You see it all clear? Say, that's pretty great. Sometimes I don't even see it all clear myself—except when I'm making suns. You know how many suns you've knocked me out of already with this driveling talk about an emergency? Guess.

I have no idea.

Guess!

One or two.

One or two what?

One or two suns. That's what we're talking about, isn't it?

Ha ha ha ha ha ha. What a misconceptioned star idiot. You-

've knocked me out of a cool century-million with this little blather, that's what you've done.

All those suns won't be? Because of me?

That is correct.

They won't ever be?

No, how could they? The time is gone and they're not here. Oh, there'll be others, of course. But not these.

I'm sorry. But my original business still stands. There is an emergency!

Oh, well—suppose I take off my gloves, lose a few billion more suns forever and give you an audience—

Thanks. To begin with, you don't have as many assets as you think you do, Mr. Sun Maker. That's what I'm trying to tell you. One of your cold-ball planets just blew itself up.

The other day-century?

No, today-now. It happened fast.

I see. And that should concern me, the owner of suns—?

I think it should.

You're making more noise about this than you did awhile back when a whole system fell apart. Then you just made a little zero in the ledger.

This cold-ball planet was quite a planet. It started shooting itself up before it blew apart.

You think that never happened before?

Not quite like this, I believe, Mr. Sun Maker. You see, it started whirling, by design, parts of itself up, and it flung parcels of itself around each and every other ball or sun it was possibly in reach of. You could have told it that was not the thing to do, couldn't you?

The cold-ball planets are not my pride. The suns are my pride.

To make a long story short, the cold-ball planet is no more. How do you want me to count it in the books, Mr. Sun Maker?

Make a little zero in the ledger.

Oh, I fear it's not going to be quite as easy as that, Mr. Sun Maker. The one that's gone is the one I'm from. It's home. Home! That was the one that blew. There were a couple or so billion like me down there when it went.

A couple or so billion like—Oh, no! Oh oh eeeohhh ohhh!!! You mean—?

They might. I've been expecting them.

A couple or so billion like you up here looking for jobs with me! Oh! Oh! Oh! Eeeohhh ohhh!

Be calm, now. Would it be so bad?

Oh oh eeeohhh ohhh!

I see. Well maybe, in that case, Mr. Sun Maker, along with all your sun making, sometime you could make a cool little place they could be in.

Why don't I just kill them? And you?

They say you can't.

Who says? They, who?

I mean, it's the general understanding that we're unkillable. In essence, I mean, if you'll pardon the high talk. You know, little gods.

Little gods. Well, well, well—Say, tell me, since it's come up, did anyone call me God when you were down there getting ready to come up here?

Oh, yes—many. Sort of blindly. Almost everyone, in one way or another, I think.

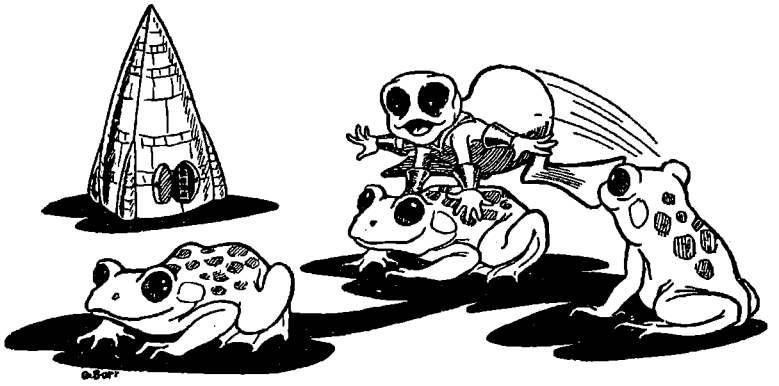
And what do you think of the idea now?

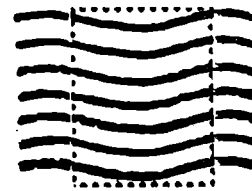
Well, not to be discursive, Mr. Sun Maker, I'd say one learns a lot by traveling, experience is the best teacher, don't go on hearsay every time, and if you want to really know a person, talk to him sometime about a planet that's blown away, about making suns or something. . . .

Harrumph, uhh—here is your letter of resignation, Mr. Secretary, which I have already written for you against this day which I, of course, have foreseen from the Beginning. After you have made that last little zero properly in the ledger, you may consider your duties terminated. And I'll find some way to take care of you and those couple or so billion other—uh, essences, or may my name shrink and shrivel! May I properly die!—Here, as a parting gift, have this little cold-ball asteroid I just now whammed together while we were parting. Luck, now! and I hope you like it in that hot little sun I've assigned you to, that ten-trillionth one on our left. . . .

(And he whirled again to his sun making. This time he had to make a grand one, hotter than all the others, with flames more leaping and high. After all, were not a billion or so of these upstart essences even now, all at once, en route to their reward?)

THE END





According to you...

Dear Editor:

There has been a question bothering me for some months now. Concerning the many stories about fast interstellar flight. Hyperspace. What is it? All writers use the term very often, it seems, but no one ever explains it. Is the engine electronic, chemical, or nuclear? And what are the conditions of existence while in hyperspace? How does it work? Seems as if non-Euclidean geometry is involved here....

Pete LaRouche
1004 Major NW
Albuquerque, N.M.

● *Hyperspace is all things to all people. It is fundamentally a convenient device for getting characters around the galaxy within a space of time which permits the author to have time left over in his hero's life-span for him to do something besides just travel. The common assumption is that hyperspace, (sometimes called sub-space) is a dimension outside of true space in which the normal world is replaced by the hyperspace world. Thus—no light, no communication, etc. To some writers, hyperspace may represent the dimension encountered when traveling* through *the "folds" or "warps" of true space. To others, it may be what space becomes at faster-than-light speeds. Basically, it is an sf convention accepted by one and all just as the "f & l" rocket-drive is. All clear? Blast off!*

Dear Editor:

In the January letter column you say that *Fantastic* and *Fantastic Adventures* are the same magazine. I guess you should know, but if

they're the same how come the Summer 1952 issue of *Fantastic* is numbered Volume 1, Number 1, instead of picking up FA's numbering? Also, in the May-June 1953 issue (Volume 2, No. 3) the small print at the bottom of the inside cover says: *Fantastic* (combined with *Fantastic Adventures*). How can a magazine be combined with itself? I'm reasonably certain that FA was still being published at the same time as the early issues of *Fantastic,* but having back copies only of *Fantastic* I can't prove it.

As for the present, the January issue was pretty good. "The Reality Paradox" looks like Galouye tried to imitate Ward Moore's "Transient" and ended up doing a better job than Moore although I suppose several people would disagree with me on that.

R. G. Wallace
P. O. Box 1535
Cincinnati 1, Ohio

● *Our apologies for confusing an issue which was already pretty confusing. You are right—*FA *was still being published in pulp size when Z-D began publishing* Fantastic *in digest size. They were two separate magazines, however their content was similar and when* Fantastic Adventures *ceased publication, shortly after the first few issues of* Fantastic, *the same type of editorial content continued to be represented in the digest magazine.*

Dear Editor,

Your magazine is one of the finest in the field, but I get so disgusted when I read your letter department that I have to write to you, and tell you what I think. For instance, when reader Paul Zimmer downgrades a fine story like Robert Bloch's "The World Timer" because he made a few mistakes in his biology, it burns me up. I read a story for it's literary value, NOT for a course in Biology 2. And "The World Timer" had such value.

Furthermore, I most certainly do not agree with the policy of author James Blish, that of, "It is the duty of the science fiction author to create concepts which might be of value to working scientists." Mr. Blish throws everything to the winds when writing a story. He has a brilliant scientific mind, but when I read his stories I get the feeling I am reading a college textbook, and not a piece of literature.

Do you see what I mean? Science fiction and fantasy are stories about changes or differences from the norm, and in those types of

stories you must not expect exacting scientific perfection if you want the highest quality literature. You must choose between scientific precision and high quality literature which ranks high among the other forms of writing today. I think I will choose the latter. Those who want scientific detail can read a textbook. Of course, there is a "happy medium" and more often than not, *Fantastic* hits that medium.

Ronald Phelps
916 Lee Ave.
Seminole, Okla.

● *And that—the happy medium—is our constant aim. Of course in* Fantastic *we feel we have somewhat more leeway to be less scientific than in our sister magazine,* Amazing.

(Continued from page 5)

There is nothing to be ashamed of in being a "seat of the pants" editor. Here at Fantastic we resist pressures to run certain types of stories, or certain writers, because in pleasing six readers here, we may alienate six (or six thousand) there. We resist these pressures also because we believe the best stories to print in our magazine are the ones that the editors like themselves—as *readers* themselves. If we like a story, if we enjoy reading it, then we'll buy it and run it on the theory that a large percentage of our readers will also enjoy it. If enough of them agree with us most of the time, we'll have a prosperous magazine. If enough of them don't, we won't. So far, it's nice to be able to report, most of them seem to agree.

* * * *

WE DON'T usually use this space to plug our sister publication, AMAZING STORIES, but this time we do so *for your own protection.* The April issue of AMAZING marks the magazine's 35th anniversary with a special issue of 196 pages at 50¢, and which reprints seven of the great, classic stories of AMAZING'S early days. Stories like Edgar Rice Burroughs' "John Carter and the Giant of Mars"; Philip Nowlan's "Armageddon—2419," which was the first Buck Rogers story; and trail-blazing stories by Eando Binder, Ray Bradbury, Ed Hamilton, David Keller, and others. There will also be a special message from AMAZING'S founder, Hugo Gernsback. If you are a veteran fan, you'll want to read these great stories again. If you are a relative newcomer to sf, you cannot afford to miss this chance to read the classics of the field.

A special award will be presented to *Amazing Stories* on the occasion of its 35th anniversary, Sunday, March 12, 1961, 2:00 P.M. by the Eastern Science Fiction Association, at the YMCA Hall, 600 Broad St., Newark, N.J.

The editors of *Amazing* will be on hand to receive the award. Feature of the ceremonies will be "A History of *Amazing Stories,*" narrated by Sam Moskowitz and illustrated by full color slides.

Among the special guests will be Hugo Gernsback, Frank R. Paul, Lester del Rey, Otto Binder and dozens of other famous sf figures.

This event is open to all readers of *Amazing* and *Fantastic.* For further information write: Les Mayer, 33 Stein Ave., Wallington, N.J.

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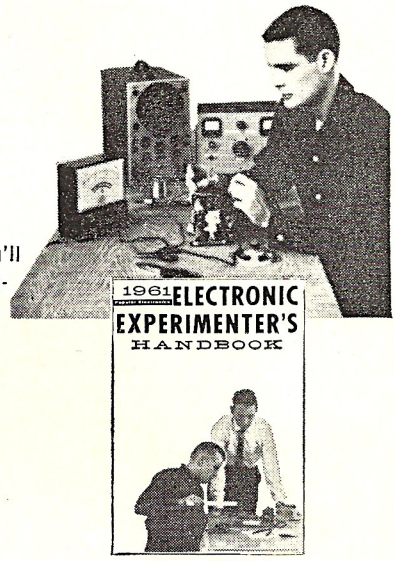

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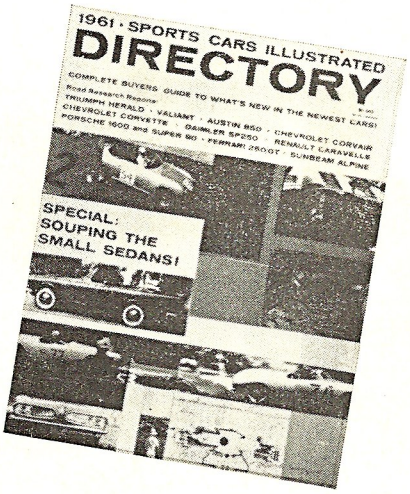

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