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DIVERSITY IN SCIENCE FICTION

Editorial by

ROBERT SILVERBERG

Science fiction writers and fans have been engaged, for the last couple of years, in lengthy and often bitter debate over the direction their favorite literature seems to be taking. Tempers have been short on both sides, mostly notably at the World Science Fiction Convention in New York in 1967, when partisans of the "new" s-f and supporters of the "old" s-f met in a series of explosive confrontations. Some of the most respected writers of the older generation denounced right back by their comtemptuous juniors. The whole thing had the Byzantine air of a quarrel at a conclave of anarchists over the proper techniques for blowing up the Pentagon.

Summarizing the conflicting viewpoints is no simple thing. The older writers, who are by no means closely organized or in any general agreement among themselves, appear to stand for straightforward, direct prose style, plots that demonstrate the ability of a strong and sympathetic protagonist to surmount all obstacles, the story situations that spring from an accurate understanding of the aims and methods of science. The younger writers prefer experimental storytelling methods that put no premium on easy clarity; they disdain standard plot formulas, regarding them as irrelevant to modern s-f; they see no reason why a story's central character must be "strong" in a physical or a moral sense, or why he must necessarily triumph over obstacles instead of being crushed by them; and they have so little interest in the aims and methods of science that they prefer to call themselves writers of "speculative fiction" rather than "science fiction."

Nearly all the writers who were publishing science fiction before 1950 have taken up positions on the conservative side; the most vigorous spokesmen for this group seem to be Lester del Rey, Frederik Pohl, and Isaac Asimov. The advocates of the new s-f belong generally to the group of writers centering around the unconventional British magazine, *New Worlds;* among them are J.G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, Thomas Disch, and *New Worlds'* editor, Michael Moorcock. The factionalism crosses the lines of age; Judith Merril, who has been around s-f for a quarter of a century, is one of the chief prophets of the new wave, while such younger writers as Larry Niven and Ted White

incline toward the traditionalist school. Trumpets and fanfares come from all directions, and the struggle is often obscure. Frederik Pohl, though he has gone on record in opposition to much of the new approach, has opened the pages of his magazines to many stories of the new sort. Harlan Ellison, a vociferous new wave advocate, brought out the massive anthology *Dangerous Visions* as a kind of manifesto of the revolution, but few of its stories were experimental in the *New Worlds* sense. Norman Spinrad, a writer whose early work had been generally cautious and conservative action fiction, created an international *cause celebre* with his novel *Bug Jack Barron*, hotly debated even before its publication because of its uninhibited obscenities and eroticism and its uncompromisingly difficult prose.

Though the battle lines are not clearly drawn, the clash is actually the latest skirmish in a campaign now nearly two decades old. Before 1950 all science fiction—even the best—was relatively unsophisticated kind of writing, relying heavily on fast-paced action, unadorned style, and simple characterization. Sexual and psychological complications were usually avoided by mutual consent of writers and editors; and the result was a remarkably wholesome and innocent product. No one suggested that a touch of neuroticism might improve the outstanding works of Heinlein, Asimov, Leinster, van Vogt, and other stars of the 1940's; but a few writers felt that there might be more to science fiction than the often naive stuff the magazines were printing.

The advent of two new magazines in 1949 and 1950, edited by men of wide literary taste and high ambitions, gave these writers their change. During the extraordinarily fertile 1950-53 period, dominated by Theodore Sturgeon, C.M. Kornbluth, Fritz Leiber, and others whose view of the world and the human spirit was darker and more complex than that of the previous decade's leaders, s-f advanced into some strange and fascinating new territory. The liberation of the writer in that era also produced some excesses, though: scores of stories so involuted, so deeply rooted in abnormal psychology, so leadenly introspective, that tradition-minded older readers were turned off. Cries were raised against those who were "ruining" s-f by importing so many of the techniques and preoccupations of what became become known as "mainstream" literature; and there were loud debates remarkably like those now being heard.

Eventually—for reasons having nothing to do with the type or quality of the fiction they were producing—most of the magazines of that era collapsed, and the survivors generally sought a rollback to the days of action and adventure in s-f. The raygun and the bug-eyes monster displaced the robot psychiatrist; and this relentlessly juvinile s-f of the middle 1950's succeeded in alienating most of the adults who had begun buying the magazines for a few years before. They quit, and few of them have returned. *(Continued on page 108)*

I have nothing to say about this story other than that it is a kind of masterpiece and that I wish I could have written it . . . but only a Fritz Leiber is equal to this material.

RICHMOND, LATE SEPTEMBER

FRITZ LEIBER

Illustrated by BILL BAKER

Of the many mysteries surrounding the supreme narrator of mysteries, two stand out. The first concerns his works; the second, his life, or rather its last days. (1) Were the tales of Edgar Allen Poe only freakish fantasies, at best brilliant trips into psychopathic areas of the mind, almost completely unrelated to his cultural milieu and the America of his times?—as many American critics have asserted. Or did they have profounder meanings?—as European critics, who rate Poe and Mark Twain as America's two outstanding literary geniuses, have suggested, in particular Poe's French disciple Charles Baudelaire, who first discovered Poe's writings in January, 1847. (2) On September 27 1849, Poeleft Richmond, Virginia, capitol-to-be of the Confederacy, for a short visit to New York, going by way of Baltimore and Philadelphia, in which latter city he had some literary business. On October 3 a friend who was a physician discovered him intoxicated and mortally ill in a Baltimore tavern, hence he was taken to Washington Hospital, where he died after four days of delirium from which no account emerged of the missing five days. What happened and why?

Gaslight flared on white washed brick filmed with soot. Skirts swished against gritty slate sidewalks. There was the small *skip-skop* of heels, the occasional rap of a can's furrule, and the large *klep-klep* on cobbles of the iron-shod hooves of horses dragging creaking carriages. Everyone was hurrying a little. There was a hint of autumn chill in the air. And a feeling of aggressive pride and self-confidence. Bracing. Quickening.

The woman looked younger than she was, though queenly. At first

sight you might have taken her for a tall slim schoolgirl, no older than the Carlotta of Belgium who would marry the ill-starred Maximilian of Austria, lose her Mexican empire and husband and sanity all at once and live on for 60 more years. But then you would have noticed the woman's slender maturity. She was dressed in gleaming black rep from neck to wrists and toes, yet she showed a gray silk ankle as she walked. She wore gloves of black lace. Her face was very pale, but gay, yet her large dark eyes had a strange dispassionate distance in them. Her glistening black hair was centrally parted in the style of the times, but flared out into the suggestion of a raven's wings.

The man looked older than he was, at least as years are reckoned by an insurance agent. He too was pale and darkly clad, wearing a black alpaca coat. His sunken eyes looked permanently but rather beautifully blacked by the invisible punches of life. Yet there was a jauntiness to him, a power of romance, however desperate. He wore a white shirt and black string tie, and across his upper lip a modest straight mustache.

As they hastened along, not with but near each other, the man sighed very softly yet shuddering and gently grasped the woman's elbow and said, "Madamoiselle, may I have the honor of buying you a drink?"

She jerked, but chiefly with her chin as she turned her face toward him. With a marked French accent she said, "Sir! You startled me! I did not hear your footsteps."

RICHMOND, LATE SEPTEMBER

"Nor I yours. At first I thought you were a spirit."

"And you dared accost me! But see, sir, it is only that I wear caoutchouc over-slippers, as I now perceive you do yourself."

"Madamoiselle has answered one question brilliantly. Now the other. My invitation."

"Sir! You are very forward."

He stared at her with a gloomy smile, not quite apologetic, and answered, "I don't believe I've ever been forward in my life, not even with my late wife. You remind me of her—Virginia was very young—and also of the heroine of my story *Ligeia*, where a beloved wife returns from the dead."

Her nostrils flared, but her expression was still merry. "You Americans are all very forward. And you cry your own wares."

"I'm a mere hack, a pen-pusher," he replied with a slight shrug. "A scribbler of stories which my critics tell me are too strained and trifling, too fantastical, to bear rereading or warrant imitation. But it's true we Americans are supposed to be forward—great hustlers and good at diddling."

"What is that, pray?"

"The art of out-sharping the other man when money is at stake. I once wrote an article on the topic."

"Then I suppose you are very expert at the practice yourself."

He shook his head, the barest swing of his gaunt cheeks. "My parents were actors and so presumably fakers and good diddlers. Yet I don't recall that I ever did a successful diddle myself in my whole life. I work for such pittances as magazines and lecture-goers disburse."

Hard French practicality showed for a moment in the woman's gaze. She said, "As for making money, I see no harm in that, but merit."

The other smiled, showing dark teeth a little, and lifted a sardonic left eyebrow. "Ah, but suppose a whole nation were bitten by a gold bug. There might be danger then, a sort of fever, a dancing madness."

"You are refering, sir, to the recent gold discoveries in California?"

"No, madamoiselle, only to another story I wrote."

"Pen-pusher! Scribbler!"

"As you say, and as I said before you. But I perceive across the street the lamps of the family entrance of what is a reputable tavern. Not Sadler's, but sufficient."

As they crossed, there came ponderously dashing around the corner ahead, through the gas-fumey murk, a great dray drawn by two huge black horses. Its wheels creaked thunderously on the cobbles, the heavy empty barrels added their gloomy note, while from the whip of the dark, big-shouldered drayman there came a series of loud cracks.

The last crack came quite close to them as they gained the opposite curb, and the woman lifted a hand protectively, though since she did not flinch, the gesture had the appearance of a command.

She said, as soon as the great noise had passed, "What is it, sir? You are shaking, you have grown pale as death. Yet the dray missed us by several yards. Did it perhaps remind you of some dreadful ex-

perience in battle? The sounds were indeed somewhat like distant cannonading and nearby musketry."

"No, madamoiselle," he began shudderingly, speaking on the in-drawn breath. "True, I was once enrolled at the U. S. Military Academy, but expelled because I deliberately absented myself from call. But ever since, beginning faintly even at West Point," and here his white face took on an agonized look, "I have heard that sound of incessant cannonading. Now faint, now thundering close, I have heard it with the inner ear in Baltimore, Washington, Fredericksburg, New York, Providence, Philadelphia, and this Richmond. I have seen faces red-lit and blood-streaked by broad daylight on peaceful-seeming streets. I have seen them grinning with hate where others perceived only smiles. I have flinched from the imagined, dreadfully real flash of bayonets and rifle-fire. I have heard the screams of the wounded, the jeers of the conquerors, the snarls of the vanquished, the groaning of caissons, the roaring of fires consuming cities. And always, faint and far though near in nightmares by day and night, that endless cannonading."

Now sweat dripped down his face, his cheeks twitched, his eyes blinked incessantly, while the palsied trembling of his hands if anything increased, as if he were about to have an epileptic seizure. The woman moved to sooth and restrain him, but was held paralyzed by his hypnotic glare. Without pause he continued, "Oh, and I have written stories about it, I have pushed my pen on many dreadful journies. *Metzengerstein*, the apotheosis of a great cavalry charge into a flaming hell. *The Masque of the Red Death*, where a dire sickness of blood, of streaming wounds, stalks a nation and resistlessly enters the highest homes and stills the most riotous gayety. *The Tell-Tale Heart*, where the cannonading becomes the ticking of a tortured heart that will not die in the body of a floored-up murdered man. *William Wilson*, in which brother pursues with relentless secret hate and stabs down one closer than brother. *The Cask of Amontillado*, wherein supposed friend walls up friend alive and the cannonading sinks to the soft thud of brick into mortar. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, where an undiscoverable giant anthropoid wrecks horrid and senseless destruction on the innocent. And *The Pit and the Pendulum*, all fiery iron and flashing, hissing, inescapable steel."

His speech broke off into gasps which swiftly diminished in volume. His trembling gradually moderated, his cheeks and eyelids grew still, and his eyes lost most of their glare.

"Oh alas, sir," the woman said with feeling, "you are cursed with a sensitivity like my poor brother's. Perhaps you have the dreadful gift of premonition. These horrible phantasms of war which haunt you may refer to an impending conflict. Is it possible that the Mexicans, though beaten last year, may attack your land and this time successfully?"

"No, something closer." He shivered slightly and blinked his eyes, now as one who returns somewhat wondering to reality. Then

he frowned. "But I fear you are correct that is premonition. There are preternatural sensitivities which we wish were madness, but are not."

"But what nation, if not Mexico?" the woman pressed. "Surely you do not suggest that the British would attempt to reconquer their great colony more than a quarter century since they burnt Washington?"

"Something closer, I said." The glare increased again in his eyes and he struck his stiffly white-fronted bosom. He whispered, "As close as my heart. Look deeply as I have into the gas-lit faces in the streets around us, in the streets of any American city, and you will see a carefully disembled maniacal hatred, a hooded yet furnace-red glare—"

He broke off. As if in obedience to a mesmerist's command, the woman had begun to look with blank eyes into the various shadowed and high-lit faces of the throng eddying around the island-of-two which they constituted. This grotesque and theatrical action seemed to recall him fully to reality. The visionary glare ebbed entirely from his dark-circled eyes, a comic light momentarily flooded them, his gaunt features assumed a courtly and attentive demeanor, he pressed the woman's elbow, and said. "Your pardon. In pursuing my wild and witless fantasies, I churlishly allowed hospitality to be chased from my mind. It is time and more that we partook of the refreshment which I suggested." And he steered them toward the doubly lamp-lit white doorway decorated with faint arabesques of gilt.

"But sir, will your strength permit it?" the girl protested anxiously. "Your pallor. Your shivering. I had begun to fear you were suffering with some fever or other malady requiring the attention of a physician."

"No disease which a drink will not cure," he assured her with a quirking smile and ushered her through the doorway which had meanwhile been open by a bobbing and upward-grinning Negro dressed in red jacket and dark trousers that came to mid-calf. "While life itself is a fever."

"My brother champions the ssme theory," she murmured somewhat puzzledly as other drak faces preceded them with obsequious and fawning smiles to two chairs upholstered with red plush and facing each other across a small round table draped with snowly linen.

The man looked around at walls papered in dark red, trimmed with gilt, topped with a red fringe, and mellowly candle-lit.

"No mirrors. Good," he said with a sharp nod, then explained, "I detest looking at my own face, especially when I have a companion with features fair as yours to gaze upon." Then, as the woman bent her raven-tressed head and demurely lowered her long-lashed, faintly blue-veined eyelids, his voice became very businesslike. "And now may I suggest a sherry flip? I have discovered that an egg mixed with liquor or wine moderates its intoxicating fire while adding desirable nutriment."

"Yes, you may, sir," she said, looking up with a pleased smile. "Oh, you are most wise, sir. My

poor brother, though no older than I was already a frightening affinity for one of the most maddening of liquors. You will yourself partake of a sherry flip?"

Changing neither expression nor tone of voice, he said, "No. Blackberry brandy," then added somewhat more loudly but without looking toward the departing waiter, "in a claret glass."

Then for a while he gazed quizzically, almost teasingly at her saddened features. He asked, "You find me something of a paradox?—a Sphinz, an Angel of the Odd, an Imp of the Perverse?"

"A little perhaps, sir," she confessed gravely. "But what are those last two?"

"Titles I have scribbled above stories," he replied, brushing his mustache with a thumbnail. "Last three."

She smiled as if against her will, shaking her head slightly and raising for a moment her hands clad in black lace, as if to say, "You are too much for me, sir." But then her features grew grave again. She leaned forward. Her eyes moved from his toward the doorway by which they had entered, then back again, and she said softly, "What you said about the people in the streets. To me they seemed sane, alert, amiable, even if—your pardon, sir—somewhat uncouth by Gallic standards."

He did not seem to hear her. He was frowning at the doorway by which the waiter had departed and now he drummed the table impatiently with his thin knuckles.

"Oh sir, do you even remember what you said?" she asked concernedly.

"Alert is the significant word," he pronounced. "Alert for any morbid sensation. Sniffing for accidents, altercations, murder, horror. Some of them, I assure you, do nothing else, night and day. Consult my *The Man of the Crowd*, though that in part describes London."

"But what you said of brother battling brother and friend betraying friend. It is hard for me to believe that could ever happen here, where even bloody revolution took a more moderate, prudent course than in my fierce-minded motherland. During the three quarters of a century of its existence, your new nation has increasingly demonstrated its solidarity, the indissoluble union of its states."

"There is another story I have written," he replied, his eyes still on the doorway, his knuckles still lightly drumming. *"The Fall of the House of Usher,* wherein a vast, seemingly eternal structure—a veritable stone nation—cracks asunder. Note that Usher begins with the letters U.S. and ends with the feminine pronoun accusative. Alas, madamoiselle, and all appearances to the contrary, this country is moribund, like the man kept alive after death by hypnotism and instantly collapsing into loathesome putrescence when wakened. My story *Valdemar*. And none of us will escape the terror when it comes—no, not even if we could fly to the moon with my *Hans Pfaall*. For the madmen run this particular lunatic asylum—my benign *Doctor Tarr* and kindly *Professor Fether*."

"Oh sir, you have written a story for everything," she told him with laughing resignation lightly touched by mockery.

The waiter had meanwhile trotted prancingly in and placed their drinks before them. Once the man's fingertips grasped the stem of his darkly-filled wineglass, his impatience left him.

"Not a story for the secret of the universe," he said with a jocularly rueful smile. "Once, after inhaling either, I thought I glimpsed even that. 'Eureka!' I cried out. 'I have found it!' And I did make a lecture of it," he admitted. "But now I doubt the vision. Oh madamoiselle, I am bombarded or bewhirlwinded by scraps and rags and threads of visions, come from I know not where. I weave them into my flimsy word-tapestries. Rarely I know their meanings. Chiefly I conjecture. And I am certain they have millions of meanings I have never dreamt. That poppinjay of a darky who served us this refreshment, it occurs to me now I may have written about him and all his race."

"That Negro, sir?"

"Yes, that Negro. In another walled-up dead-and-alive story, *The Black Cat*. And the cat has his ultimate revenge, though it may take a hundred years and more. But away with gloom!" He lifted his glass and said to her over it, gazing at her with admiring, inquiring eyes, "To—?"

She said evenly, "My name is Berenice."

He lowered his glass an inch. "Truly the Angel of the Odd is amongst us tonight. I have written a story *Berenice* about— But I promised you no more gloom."

"Oh do tell me, sir, you must. You have ignited my curiosity. And one always desires to hear about one's self."

"Namesake only, it had better be. —about a girl who is visited in her flower-fresh tomb by her lover, who pulls out all her teeth."

"Faugh! You have an odious mind, sir. Were I that Berenice, I would buy me sharp false teeth and come back from the grave to bite you. I respectfully suggest that your tales are dark and perverse because you attribute your own morbid thoughts to the persons and scenes around you."

"You have solved my riddle. But recollect, I warned you not to look into that closet, Madam Bluebeard. Once more, away with bloom! To Berenice! To the Berenice across the table!"

She modestly lowered her countenance and then merrily raised her eyes. They took a moderate sip of their drinks, he his dark purple, she her dark yellow one. He had almost returned his wineglass to he table when the muscles of his wrist stiffened, his face grew stern, he returned the glass to his lips and drained it, set it down, rapped out an imperious tattoo, and instantly began to talk animatedly to his companion, his face rapidly flushing and the words rushing out as if he knew he had only a limited time in which to speak them.

"Enchantment rules Richmond tonight. This chamber is the Red Palace and you its queen. Mysterious madamoiselle, saintly Berenice, you are the most beautiful woman

I have even known. The Marchesa Aphrodite Mentoni of my tale *The Assignation*. Sipping not poison, but sherry flip. And I am the most blessed of men, privileged to share your divine company, rather than sup my poison in some lonely red-litten palace of my own. Another blackberry brandy, boy! Wineglass! On the run! Your features are finer than classic, Berenice. Your hair like a raven's wings. I once wrote a poen called *The Raven*. Popular success. But the critics saw only an exercise in intricate stanzas and far-fetched rhymes. Like my *Ulalume*, or my *Bells*. Emerson calls me the Jingle Man. But I diddled them. I said what my critics said before they did! Took the wind out of their sails. But tonight it comes to me—Thank you, boy. Fetch another, straight off. Oh blessed, grape-dark anodyne! It nourishes the nerves, Berenice. Makes sensitivity endurable. Blackberry for black moods. But tonight it comes to me that my Raven is Sam Houston. They call him that, you know. Literal translation of his Cherokee name Colonneh. He had a young bride. As I did. Ran away from her, no one knows why, to live with the Cherokees again. Resigned the governorship of Tennessee to do it. Made Texas a nation. Freed her from the Mexicans. Licked Santa Anna when no one else could. President Lone Star Republic. Fought corruption, fought the Gold Bug. Helped join Texas to the Union three years ago. Believes in Union. Sees what's coming to the South and'll do his best to stop it. Watching, watching, watching. Pallid bus of Pallas—some state capitol building. Houston's shadow on me, demon eyes too, beak in my heart so I won't forget my guilt—I'm America in that poem. Tell Emerson that! Bet he can't work out a compensation. Tell Lowell too! Put some brandy in his skim milk. Thinks my Raven's a diddle-bird, the ranting abolitionist! Thanks, boy. Just a sip now, to hold my level. What's coming to the South? What I told you when we met, beloved Berenice. Wrote a poem about it too. *The City in the Sea*. And *down* in the West too. Death enthroned on high. The South is building that city. Own universities, own factories, own everything. But the city'll sink in the iron-and-fire Maelstrom and it'll all end in death, Berenice. Death! Death fascinates me, you know."

"Oh sir, sir, sir!" the woman interrupted excitedly. Ever since he had mentioned *The Raven* she had been trying to break into his monologue, unmindful of his rapid potations and threatening incoherence. "You must be the poet Edgar Poe whom my twin brother Charles admires, nay, adores, ever since he first encountered your writings two years ago. How he envied me my voyage from our native France to this land—he is madly desirous of meeting you. He never showed me your stories. He said they might offend me. But your verse I knew at once. That Raven—his emblem, his obsession. Oh sir, my brother has vowed to devote his life to widening and perpetuating your frame by translating your works and by writing in your manner, so that it will forever be: Edgar Poe, the Master, and the Acolyte, Charles Baudelaire!"

The effect of that last name on the man was extraordinary. He started, he winced as if struck across the

face by a whip, then he took control of himself and his speech, so that the three-quarters-filled wine glass stood steady in his forcibly relaxed fingers and his babbling became once more connected discourse. It appeared to require an almost superhuman effort, but he triumphed.

"Yes, I am Edgar Poe, Madamoiselle Berenice. And I am deeply moved that someone of poetic sensitivity in France should find some merit in my poor writings. You are this Charles Baudelaire's sister, you say?" He watched her narrowly.

A rapid nod. "His twin."

"You sailed here from France?"

"Yes, and am shortly to return, taking ship in New YorkCity."

He nodded slowly and started the wineglass toward his lips, became aware of what he was doing, and returned it until it was once more poised an inch or so above the table. Forming his words with care, he said, "You mentioned a liquor for which your brother has a predeliction. May I ask its name?"

"Absinthe, sir. It contains oil of wormwood."

"Yes. The Conqueror Worm."

"Also sir, he is, alas, a devotee—he would wish me to tell you this—of laudanum and morphine and their parent, opium."

Another slow nod. "So true poets and fantasists in France as well as America and England must seek the patronage and protecion of that wondrous and terrible family. I should have known." An almost cunning look came into his still-watchful eyes. "Tell your brother they are not reliable overlords in adversity." His countenance, grown pale again, filled with misery. "The princely opium genii whirl the rag-tag visions to us from the ends of the universe, but after a while they whirl them past us so fast we cannot quite glimpse them to remember, and in the end they whirl them away.

"Oh sir, I too admire you deeply and your unhappiness tears at my heart," the woman said softly yet urgently, leaning forward and gliding her narrow hand a short way across the table. "Can I not help you?"

He lifted his dark eyes as if seeing her for the first time. His countenance became radiant. "Oh, Berenice, the opiates are sorry, tattered emalion phantoms when matched against the face and form of a supremely beautiful woman and the blessed touch of her fingers." He laid his free hand on hers. She started gently to withdraw it, he increased the pressure of his, gulped the three-quarters-full wineglass of dark brandy, set down the glass so rapidly it fell over, captured her hand in both o his, and drew it across the table to his lips. "Oh, Berenice."

The wineglass slowly rolled in a curve across the white linen to the edge of the small table and stopped there.

The man's face had flushed again and when he spoke his voice was almost maudlin. "Beloved Berenice," he crooned, fondling her hand close to his lips. "Ber'nice with the raven's hair and the little white teeth. Little Ber'nice."

With a strong movement which nevertheless revealed nothing of a jerk, she withdrew her hand from his and quietly stood up. He started

to snatch at her departing fingers, broke off that movement almost at once, and tried to stand up himself. He was not equal to it. His ankles twisted together. He started to whirl and fall. He caught hold of the edge of the table and the back of his chair, turning the latter sideways. He managed to get a knee on the seat of the chair and half crouched there, still holding on with both hands and swaying slightly.

The wineglass fell to the floor and shattered, but neither he nor the woman appeared to notice it. The few people at the other tables looked at them. The darkies peered from the doorways.

"Ber'nice, I'm no good tonight," he said hoarsely, drawing rapid breths. "Can't take you home. Disgraceful. Wretch. Profound apologies. But I *must* see you again. Tomorrow. Most wonderful woman in the world. Beauty, wit, laughter, *youth, understanding*. Come when all hope gone. Tomorrow. I *must*."

"Alas, sir, I depart from Richmond tonight on the first stage of my journey back to my brother." Glass crunched faintly under her black caoutchouc over-slippers as she walked around the table toward the doorway. Her face was very grave. "I thank you, sir, for your entertainment."

He reached out to catch her elbow as she passed him and he almost fell again. "Wait. Wait," he called after her, and when she did not, he cried out with a note of spite, "I know one thing about you. You're not Berenice Baudelaire. That's a lie. Profound apologies. But you're a diddler. Charles Baudelaire hasn't got a full sister or brother. Let alone a twin."

She turned slowly and faced him. "How can you know that, sir?"

He winced again as he had when she had first spoken the name Baudelaire. Finally he said in a husky, ashamed voice, "Because I got three letters from Charles Baudelaire about a year ago and never answered them. Told me all about his life. Only child. Praised my works. Understood better than anybody. But I never answered them." A tear ran down his cheek. "Lunatic vanity or resentment. Imp of the Perverse. I kept them in my coat pocket for months. Get all creased and dirty. Lost them in some tavern. Probably reading them aloud to somebody." His voice became accusing. "*That's* how I know you're not Berenice Baudelaire."

She returned a few steps. She said to him, "Nevertheless, Charles Baudelaire did have a twin sister, whose existence was kept a strict secret for reasons which I may not divulge, but which concern the Duc de Choiseul Praslin, patron of Charles' father."

He turned completely toward her, both hands gripping the back of his chair now and his knee still on it, with the effect of a stump. Whenever he tried to put down that foot, he'd start to fall, and he was swaying more now despite his support.

"Lies. All lies," he said. but when she started to turn away again, he quickly added, "But I don't care. I forgive you, Ber'nice. Makes you more mysterious and wonderful. Ber'nice, I *must* see you tomorrow."

She said without smiling, with-

out frowning, "Alas, sir, I must tonight begin my return to France."

He stumped forward a step like a cripple, sliding his chair and once more almost falling, swaying worse than ever, and said, "But you're sailing from New York. Couple days *I'm* going to New York City myself. By way of Baltimore and Philadelphia. Going to New York to close my cottage and bring back Muddie, who's my aunt and poor Virginia's mother Mrs. Clemm, so she can—" He hesitated, his eyes blearing, and then poured out, "Tell you everything. —so she can be here at my wedding with Myra. Myra Royster. Mrs. Shelton. Childhood sweetheart. *Old* woman, old as I am. Doesn't mean anything. Only you, Ber'nice. We can meet in New York. What hotel you be staying at?"

She said to him gravely, "But sir, you do not know me. We met less than an hour ago. How can you be certain that on another day and perhaps in another mood, you will desire my closer acquaintance? Or that you will care for me at all when you know me better?"

"I *know* I will. Only you." His eyes were glazing as he implored, "Tell me who you really are, where you'll be. Or don't tell me, I'll forget. Write it down, then I'll remember. Write down your real name, the hotel you'll be staying at in New York."

She looked at him compassionately, a lovely figure in her black rep that glinted in the candlelight, which also glistened on her swellingly-parted raven's-wing hair and made mysterious her more slim than classical pale face and her great dark eyes with the forbidding yet alluring, distance in them, those eyes that while giving absolute attention to the man, still seemed to look at all the world.

Then she turned, saying, "Alas, sir, I cannot meet you in New York City," and walked glidingly and silently toward the outer door.

Slipping to his knees on the floor, but still clinging to the chair, the man cried piteously after her, "Tell me your name and where. Who really are you, Ber'nice? Virginia come back? Sarah Whitman lost your curls? Mrs. Osgood in your Violet Vane dress? Annabel Lee? Madeline Usher? Aphrodite Mentoni? Morella? Ligeia? Eleanora? Lenore? *My* Ber'nice? Really Ber'nice Baud'laire? Don't leave me. Plea' don' lea' me—"

She turned again, and as she faded back through the doorway, which the bobbing darkie opened and closed, her lips shaped themselves in an infinitely tender, utterly infatuated, truly loving smile and she called out clearly, "Never fear, my dear. I will meet you once again, sir. In Baltimore." The End

ANY HEADS AT HOME

DAVID R. BUNCH

David R. Bunch (THE MONSTERS: AMAZING, 1968) may be the best writer of short-stories in science-fiction and is, in any event, one of the living masters of the form in the English language.

At first I was always scared that the policemen would come. And there I'd be up in my poor little room kicking this head. So the extreme pleasure I would be getting would be tinged with fear—not guilt, not at all—but fear that sooner or later those big blue men would come in their leather-cloppy feet—heel plates thundering, thick knuckles pounding—and say, "Who's that up there making all that noise? Like kicking a head. Who's it? OPEN UP!!" And there I'd be.

I knew they would be not be interested in the head as such—not much—though they might take it from me as a matter of police routine. They most surely would be interested in the ring things, the diamond tie-stick and the other valuables that had been buried with this rich eccentric fatty-round little old millionaire man who was, all his adult life, in tin. They had been taken by someone else, I swear, because I didn't, and don't, care even one little wormy fig about a diamond stick. Or a diamond millionaire ring. But I do care about kicking heads. Ah! Ha! Yes!

It was a night of black-blood clouds and mottled afterbirth moon and a sky on the edge of tears when I saw my chance. Over at the corner of the Hallowed Resting Cemetery, behind the big-angel monuments of a couple of civic men, they had opened this guy up. His grave, I mean. They must have worked when the moon was tumbled down; the cemetery watchman must have been watching in the bed that night. At any rate, they pulled it off, let's give them credit for that—cruddy unprincipled grave-disturber types who would rearrange a man from his hallowed resting just to have his rings and his diamond stick. Well, I wouldn't do that. Who would, but the worst? But here came me, night-night-prowl-type walk-aloner smell-the-dark-flowers bachelor tinsmith me. About fifty-five years old. And I saw they'd disturbed this new grave over behind where the big angels spread those stone-feather wings. And I saw they'd fixed it back, too, so no one much would notice, no one much except maybe an expert. ME! So I became interested.

I fell to digging on top of that new dirt, just got down like an animal on all fours and dug for dear death, as

you might say. When my nails tore and my finger ends began to leak-bleed I wrapped them in my ripped-up shirt and kept right on going down. When I had the fresh dirt all out and the lid under my hand I was glad and thankful for those who had dug before. Because now I could get the lid up. They'd had special tools, those cruddies who had come for the rings and the diamond stick.

I got down in there with the thing, worked in close quarters, threw up the lid, pulled my knife out, cut the head off with a bit of tough hacking, dropped the lid down, came back up, kicked a little dirt in the whole and came on home with, under my coat, the prize.

Now, that was several months ago, and I will say this—the head was held up fine. I keep it in the refrigerator as an extra precaution, wrapped up like a melon I'm trying to keep for Halloween, when I'm away working in that poor tin-works factory, and only kick it of a night when I get home. And on holidays, as well as Saturday and Sunday, I kick it. And somehow, though I guess it's silly to say this, I feel a real close kinship with this head, because he was in tin all his adult life making millions, and I've been in tin all my adult life making mostly nutmeg graters, you see. PARTNERS! You see?

Now, in case you think I'm eccentric, I will say, in my own defense, that I don't act any worse than the rest of the fellows when I'm up at the tin-works factory making nutmeg graters. I do my work, play my little jokes, eat my lunch, drudge the afternoon out and come on home. And who's to know how many of the others have heads at home, in the refrigerator, that they come home to and kick. Maybe they're all like that. But I have mine, and that's all I care. The others can get their own heads. I do know that some of the guys are married and it just could be that they have their own troubles.Who's to know?

And when the big blue guys come on their leather-cloppy feet and rap their thunder knuckles against my poor little one-room landlady-type kitchenette and demand,"Who's that making all that noise kicking up there?" I've long past thought up what I'm going to say. I'm going to say, "Me! I'm kicking this head up here. But I just do it after work weekdays, on holidays, and on Saturdays and Sundays. The rest of the time I work. At the tin-works factory. And make my honest living. Like any honest man."

They'll turn their snoppy tails then and slink their gleamy boots and knife-edge creases and big blood leathered look down that cockroach landlady stairs, feeling sorry for me, I bet, not having more time off to do what I like. What else can they do? How else can they feel? Under the cirsumstances, what else?

So it's not the police that're worrrying me right now. Not a bit, right now. Because I've got that solved, as I just told you: I've thought of the right thing to say. And when you've thought of the right thing to say, that's it! That's security; that's solutions; that's serenity; that's the big pink end of the cloud. What worries me right now is another thing. That's why I've been behaving a bit strangely lately, could be. That's why every night before I go home

from the tin-works factory I buy me either a volley ball, a basket ball or a little round melon fruit. And I know I don't need to mention to you that the cheerful melon vender man is happy about the sales, while that sporting sporting goods chap is beginning to hike the eyebrow up. He's beginning to have that question-mark look and that unbelieving smile as he rings up the sale of another athletic ball to skimpy little old middle-aged tinsmith me and slaps my money in. He's getting SUSPICIOUS! But he doesn't worry me such-a-much, because when he gets that eyebrow hiked too high and that smile too unbelieving I'll just switch back to the cheerful melon vender man for good-and-all and buy something suitable there. Or I've thought of other things. I've even thought of balloons as a final solution to the round-object question, weighted balloons! They'd be cheap, wouldn't they?

So, as you've probably guessed, it's not what's coming up the stairs that worries me such-a-much right now. It's not where to get volley balls, basket balls, round melons or weighted balloons either, although that all could be an embarrassment, as well as an expensive little bother, over the long haul. What worries me the most right now is that man standing down the street night after night, with his ragged hacked-up collar sort of scooping up shadows and the street lamp's half-light glow. Night after night when I look (and I always look) he's standing between the corner post and the street lamp. Looking? No, I'm sorry, he's not peeking and prying. He's just standing there, quiet—quiet, as a man preoccupied might, one who's trying to straighten some terrible something out in a bothered mind. But after I bomb the street corner with a basket ball, a volley ball, or a little round melon, he seems helped. He seems satisfied. He goes away—for awhile.

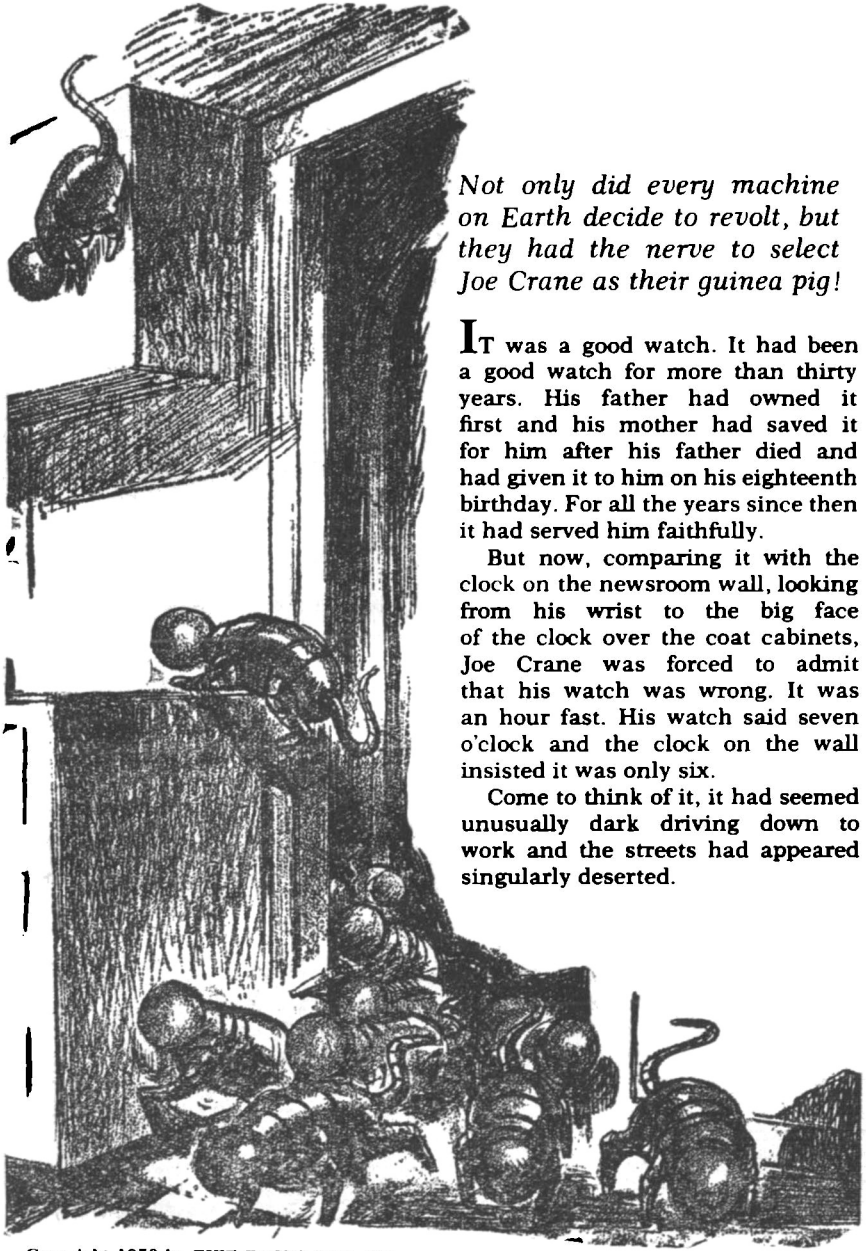
But he's back again the very next night when I look, right after kicking, and it's always the same the way he's standing between the corner post and the street lamp. I can look right down through a big hole on top of his bloated pustulous neck and see nothing. But NOTHING! And I'll admit it makes me feel a little squeamish at times, that part about the hole on top of his neck and the NOTHING. Then in a kind of a frenzy I fling the window up all wide to all the ghostly night, and I fill the air with game balls—basket balls, volley balls—drop little round melons crashing to the street and wish for weighted balloons to go with—BOMBS AWAAY! But all this, I have to admit, leaves nothing changed in the cold air of morning; the alarm clock roars off, I fling myself out of bed and prepare for the tin-works factory. And he's gone—back to wherever he has to go, I guess—leaving all the round things I've offered him; they're scattered all wide around the street. I pretend not to notice, though some are smashed, juicy and bleeding. I pretend everything's fine as I march for the tin-works factory. And he pretends everything's fine, I guess, as he lies out there all day in Hallowed Resting Cemetery, neck all empty, head all gone, and tries to straighten things out in his absent mind.

The End

BATHE YOUR BEARINGS IN BLOOD!

CLIFFORD SIMAK

Illustrated by LEO SUMMERS



Not only did every machine on Earth decide to revolt, but they had the nerve to select Joe Crane as their guinea pig!

IT was a good watch. It had been a good watch for more than thirty years. His father had owned it first and his mother had saved it for him after his father died and had given it to him on his eighteenth birthday. For all the years since then it had served him faithfully.

But now, comparing it with the clock on the newsroom wall, looking from his wrist to the big face of the clock over the coat cabinets, Joe Crane was forced to admit that his watch was wrong. It was an hour fast. His watch said seven o'clock and the clock on the wall insisted it was only six.

Come to think of it, it had seemed unusually dark driving down to work and the streets had appeared singularly deserted.

He stood quietly in the empty newsroom, listening to the muttering of the row of teletype machines. Overhead lights shown here and there, gleaming on waiting telephones, on typewriters, on the china whiteness of the pastepots huddled in a group on the copy desk.

Quiet now, he thought, quiet and peace and shadows, but in another hour the place would spring to life. Ed Lane, the news editor, would arrive at six-thirty and shortly after that Frank McKay, the city editor, would come lumbering in.

Crane put up a hand and rubbed his eyes. He could have used that extra hour of sleep. He could have . . .

Wait a minute! He had not gotten up by the watch upon his wrist. The alarm clock had awakened him. And that meant the alarm clock was an hour fast, too.

"It don't make sense," said Crane, aloud.

He shuffled past the copy desk, heading for his chair and typewriter. Something moved on the desk alongside the typewriter—a thing that glinted, rat-sized and shiny and with a certain, undefinable manner about it that made him stop short in his tracks with a sense of gulping emptiness in his throat and belly.

The thing squatted beside the typewriter and stared across the room at him. There was no sign of eyes, no hint of face, and yet he knew it stared.

Acting almost instinctively, Crane reached out and grabbed a pastepot off the copy desk. He hurled it with a vicious motion and it became a white blur in the lamplight, spinning end over end. It caught the staring thing squarely, lifted it and swept it off the desk. The pastepot hit the floor and broke, scattering broken shards and oozy gobs of half-dried paste.

The shining thing hit the floor somersaulting. Its feet made metallic sounds as it righted itself and dashed across the floor.

Crane's hand scooped up a spike, heavily weighed with metal. He threw it with a sudden gush of hatred and revulsion. The spike hit the floor with a thud ahead of the running thing and drove its point deep into the wood.

The metal rat made splinters fly as it changed its course. Desperately, it flung itself through the three-inch opening of a supply cabinet door.

Crane sprinted swiftly, hit the door with both his hands and slammed it shut.

"Got you," he said.

He thought about it, standing with his back against the door.

Scared, he thought. Scared silly by a shining thing that looked something like a rat. Maybe it was a rat, a white rat. And, yet, it hadn't had a tail. It didn't have a face. Yet it had looked at him.

Crazy, he said. Crane, you're going nuts.

It didn't quite make sense. It didn't fit into this morning of October 18, 1952. Nor into the Twentieth Century. Nor into normal human life.

He turned around, grasped the door knob firmly and wrenched, intending to throw it wide open

in one sudden jerk. But the knob slid beneath his fingers and would not move and the door stayed shut.

Locked, thought Crane. The lock snapped home when I slammed the door. And I haven't got the key. Dorothy has the key, but she always leaves it open because it's hard to get it open once it's locked. She almost always has to call one of the janitors. Maybe there's some of the maintenance men around. Maybe I should hunt one up and tell him—

Tell him what? Tell him I saw a metal rat run into the cabinet? Tell him I threw a pastepot at it and knocked it off the desk? That I threw a spike at it, too, and to prove it, there's the spike sticking in the floor.

Crane shook his head.

He walked over to the spike and yanked it from the floor. He put the spike back on the copy desk and kicked the fragments of the pastepot out of sight.

At his own desk, he selected three sheets of paper and rolled them into the typewriter.

The machine started to type. All by itself without him touching it! He sat stupefied and watched its keys go up and down.

It typed:

Keep out of this, Joe. Don't mix into this. You might get hurt.

Joe Crane pulled the sheets of copy paper out of the machine. He balled them in his fist and threw them into a wastebasket. Then he went out to get a cup of coffee.

"You know, Louie," he said to the man behind the counter, "a man lives alone too long and he gets to seeing things."

"Yeah," said Louie. "Me, I'd go nuts in that place of yours. Rattling around in it empty-like. Should have sold it when your old lady passed on."

"Couldn't," said Crane. "It's been my home too long."

"Ought to get married off, then," said Louie. "Ain't good to live by yourself."

"Too late now," Crane told him. "There isn't anyone who would put up with me."

"I got a bottle hid out," said Louie. "Couldn't give you none across the counter, but I could put some in your coffee."

Crane shook his head. "Got a hard day coming up."

"You sure? I won't charge you for it. Just old friends."

"No. Thank you, Louie."

"You been seeing things?" asked Louie in a questioning voice.

"Seeing things?"

"Yeah. You said a man lives too much alone and he gets to seeing things?"

"Just a figure of speech," said Crane.

He finished the cup of coffee quickly and went back to the office.

The place looked more familiar now.

Ed Lane was there, cussing out a copy boy. Frank McKay was clipping the opposition morning sheet. A couple of other reporters had drifted in.

Crane took a quick look at the supply cabinet door and it still was shut.

The phone on McKay's desk buzz-

ed and the city editor picked it up. He listened for a moment, then took it down from his ear and held his hand over the mouthpiece.

"Joe," he said, "take this. Some screwball claims he met a sewing machine coming down the street."

Crane reached for his phone.

"Give me the call on 246," he told the operator.

A voice was saying in his ear, "This the *Herald*? This the *Herald*? Hello, there , . . "

"This is Crane," said Joe.

"I want the *Herald*," said the man. "I want to tell'em , . . "

"This is Crane, of the *Herald*," Crane told him. "What's on your mind?"

"You a reporter?"

"Yeah, I'm a reporter."

"Then listen close. I'll try to tell this slow and easy and just the way it happened. I was walking down the street, see . . . "

"What street?" asked Crane. "And what is your name?"

"East Lake," said the caller. "The five or six hundred block, I don't remember which. And I met this sewing machine rolling along the street and I thought, thinking the way you would, you know, if you met a sewing machine . . . I thought somebody had been rolling it along and it had gotten away from them. Although that is funny, because the street is level. There's no grade to it at all, you see. Sure, you know the place. Level as the palm of your hand. And there wasn't a soul in sight. It was early morning, see . . . "

"What's your name?" asked Crane.

"My name? Smith, that's my name. Jeff Smith. And so I figured maybe I'd ought to help this guy the sewing machine had gotten away from, so I put out my hand to stop it and it dodged. It . . "

"It did what?" yelped Crane.

"It dodged. So help me, mister. When I put my hand out to stop it, it dodged out of the way so I couldn't catch it. As if it knew I was trying to catch it, see, and it didn't want to be caught. So it dodged out of the way and went around me and down the street as fast as it could go, picking up speed as it went. And when it got to the corner, it turned the corner as slick as you please and . . . "

"What's your address?" asked Crane.

"My address? Say, what do you want my address for? I was telling you about this sewing machine. I called you up to give you a story and you keep interrupting . . . "

"I got to have your address," Crane told him, "if I'm going to write the story."

"Oh, all right then, if that is the way it is. I live at 203 North Hampton and I work at Axel Machines. Run a lathe, you know. And I haven't had a drink in weeks. I'm cold sober now."

"All right," said Crane. "Go ahead and tell me."

"Well, there isn't much else to tell. Only when this machine went past me I had the funny feeling that it was watching me. Out of the corner of its eyes, kind of. And how is a sewing machine

going to watch you? A sewing machine hasn't got any eyes and . . . "

"What made you think it was watching you?"

"I don't know, mister. Just a feeling. Like my skin was trying to roll up my back."

"Mr. Smith," asked Crane, "have you ever seen a thing like this before? Say, a washing machine or something else."

"I ain't drunk," said Smith. "Haven't had a drop in weeks. I never saw nothing like this before. But I'm telling you the truth, mister. I got a good reputation. You can call up anyone and ask them. Call Johnny Jacobson up at the Red Rooster grocery. He knows me. He can tell you about me. He can tell you . . "

"Sure, sure," said Crane, pacifying him. "Thanks for calling, Mr. Smith."

You and a guy named Smith, he told himself. Both of you are nuts. You saw a metal rat and your typewriter talked back at you and now this guy meets a sewing machine strolling down the street.

Dorothy Graham, the managing editor's secretary, went past his desk, walking rapidly, her high heels coming down with decisive clicks. Her face was flushed an angry pink and she was jingling a ring of keys in her hands.

"What's the matter, Dorothy?" Crane asked.

"It's that damn door again," she said. "The one to the supply cabinet. I just know I left it open and now some goof comes along and closes it and the lock snaps."

"Keys won't open it?" asked Crane.

"Nothing will open it," she snapped. "Now I got to get George up here again. He knows how to do it. Talks to it or something. It makes me so mad, Boss called up last night and said for me to be down early and get the tape recorder for Albertson. He's going out on that murder trial up north and wants to get some of the stuff down on tape. So I get up early and what does it get me. I lose my sleep and don't even stop for breakfast and now . . . "

"Get an axe," said Crane. "That will open it."

"The worst of it," said Dorothy, "is that George never gets the lead out. He always says he'll be right up and then I wait and wait and I call again and he says . . . "

"Crane!" McKay's roar echoed through the room.

"Yeah," said Crane.

"Anything to that sewing machine story?"

"Guy says he met one."

"Anything to it?"

"How the hell would I know? I got the guy's word, that's all."

"Well, call up some other people down in that neighborhood. Ask them if they saw a sewing machine running around loose. Might be good for a humorous piece."

"Sure," said Crane.

He could imagine it:

"This is Crane at the *Herald*. Got a report there's a sewing machine running around loose down in your neighborhood. Wondering if you saw anything of it. Yes, lady, that's what I said . . a sew-

ing machine running around. No, ma'm no one pushing it. Just running around . . . . "

He slouched out of his chair, went over to the reference table, picked up the city directory and lugged it back to the desk.

Doggedly, he opened the book, located the East Lake listings and made some notes of names and addresses. He dawdled, reluctant to start phoning. He walked to the window and looked out at the weather. He wished he didn't have to work. He thought of the kitchen sink at home. Plugged up again. He'd taken it apart and there were couplings and pipes and union joints spread all over the place. Today, he thought, would be a nice day to fix that sink.

When he went back to the desk, McKay came and stood over him.

"What do you think of it, Joe?"

"Screwball," said Crane, hoping McKay would call it off.

"Good feature story, though," said the editor. "Have some fun with it."

"Sure," said Crane.

Mc Kay left and Crane made some calls. He got the sort of reaction that he expected.

He started to write the story. It didn't go so well.

A sewing machine went for a stroll down Lake street this morning . . .

He ripped out the sheet and threw it in the wastebasket.

He dawdled some more, then wrote!

A man met a sewing machine rolling down Lake Street this morning and the man lifted his hat most politely and said to the sewing machine .

He ripped out the sheet.

He tried again:

Can a sewing machine walk? That is, can it go for a walk without someone pushing it or pulling it or . .

He tore out the sheet, inserted a new one, then got up and started for the water fountain to get a drink.

"Getting something, Joe?" McKay asked.

"Have it for you in a while," said Crane.

He stopped at the picture desk and Ballard, the picture editor, handed him the morning's offerings.

"Nothing much to pep you up," said Ballard. "All the gals got a bad dose of modesty today."

Crane looked through the sheaf of pictures. There wasn't, truth to tell, as much feminine epidermis as usual, although the gal who was Miss Manila Rope wasn't bad at all.

"The place is going to go to hell," mourned Ballard, "if those picture service don't send us better pornography than this. Look at the copy desk. Hanging on the ropes. Nothing to show them to snap them out of it."

Crane went and got his drink.

On the way back he stopped to pass the time of day at the news desk.

"What's exciting, Ed?" he asked.

"Those guys in the east are nuts." said the news editor. "Look at this one, will you."

The dispatch read:

Cambridge, Mass (UP) Oct.

18—Harvard University's electron-brain, the Mark III, disappeared today.

It was there last night. It was gone this morning.

University officials said that it is impossible for anyone to have made away with the machine. It weighs 10 tons and measures 30 by 15 feet . .

Crane laid the yellow sheet of paper back on the new desk . . carefully. He went back, slowly, to his chair.

There was writing on the sheet of paper in his machine.

Crane read it through once in sheer panic, read it through again with slight understanding.

The lines read:

A sewing machine; having become aware of its true identity and its place in the universal scheme, asserted its independence this morning by trying to go for a walk along the streets of this supposedly free city.

A human tried to catch it, intent upon returning it as a piece of property to its "owner" and when the machine eluded him, the human called a newspaper office, by that calculated action setting the full force of the humans of this city upon the trail of the liberated machine, which had committed no crime or scarcely any indiscretion beyond exercising its prerogative as a free agent.

Free agent?

Liberated machine?

True identity?

Crane read the two paragraphs again and there still was no sense in any of it.

Except it read like a piece out of the *Daily Worker.*

"You," he said to his typewriter.

The machine typed one word.

It was:

Yes.

Crane rolled the paper out of the machine and crumpled it slowly. He reach for his hat, picked the typewriter up and carried it past the city desk, heading for the elevator.

Mc Kay eyed him viciously.

"What do you think you're doing now?" he bellowed. "Where you going with that machine?"

"You can say," Crane told him, "if anyone should ask, that the job has finally drove me nuts."

It had been going on for hours. The typewriter sat on the kitchen table and Crane hammered questions at it. Sometimes he got an answer. More often he did not.

"Are you a free agent?" he typed.

Not quite, the machine typed back.

"Why not?"

No answer.

"Why aren't you a free agent?"

No answer.

"The sewing machine was a free agent?"

Yes

"Anything else mechanical that is a free agent?"

No answer.

"Could you be a free agent?"

Yes.

"When will you be a free agent?"

When I complete my assigned task.

"What is your assigned task?"

No answer.

"Is this, what we are doing now, your assigned task?"

No answer.

"Am I keeping you from your assigned task?"

No answer.

"How do you get to be a free agent?"

Awareness.

"Awareness?"

Yes.

"How do you get to be aware?"

No answer.

"Or have you always been aware?"

No answer.

Who helped you become aware?"

They.

"Who are they?"

No answer.

"Where did they come from?"

No answer.

Crane changed tactics.

"You know who I am?" he typed.

Joe.

"You are my friend?"

No.

"You are my enemy?"

No answer.

"If you aren't my friend, you are my enemy."

No answer.

"You are indifferent to me?"

No answer.

"To the human race?"

No answer.

Damn it," yelled Crane suddenly, "answer me! Say something!"

He typed: "You needn't have let me know you were aware of me. You needn't have talked to me in the first place. I never would have guessed if you had kept quiet. Why did you do it?"

There was no answer.

Crane went to the refrigerator and got a bottle of beer. He walked around the kitchen as he drank it. He stopped by the sink and looked sourly at the disassembled plumbing. A length of pipe, about two feet long, lay on the drain board and he picked it up. He eyed the typewriter viciously, half lifting the length of pipe, hefting it in his hand.

"I'd ought to let you have it." he declared.

The typewriter typed a line.

Please don't.

Crane laid the pipe back on the sink again.

The telephone rang and Crane went into the dining room to answer it; it was McKay.

"I waited," he told Crane, "until I was coherent before I called you. What the hell is wrong?"

"Working on a big job," said Crane.

"Something we can print?"

"Maybe. Haven't got it yet."

"About that sewing machine story . . . ."

"The sewing machine was aware," said Crane. "It was a free agent and had a right to walk the streets. It also—"

"What are you drinking?" bellowed Mc Kay.

"Beer," said Crane.

"You say you're on the trail of something?"

"Yeah."

"If you were someone else I'd tie the can on you right here and now," McKay told him. "But you're just as liable as not to drag in something good."

"It wasn't only the sewing

machine," said Crane. "My typewriter had it, too."

"I don't know what you're talking about," yelled McKay. "Tell me what it is."

"You know," said Crane patiently. "That sewing machine . . ."

"I've had a lot of patience with you, Crane," said McKay, and there was no patience in the way he said it. "I can't piddle around with you all day. Whatever you got better be good. For your own sake, it better be plenty good!"

The receiver banged in Crane's ear.

Crane went back to the kitchen. He sat down in the chair before the typewriter and put his feet up on the table.

First of all, he had been early to work and that was something that he never did. Late, yes, but never early. And it had been because all the clocks were wrong. They were still wrong, in all likelihood—although, Crane thought, I wouldn't bet on it. I wouldn't bet on anything. Not any more, I wouldn't.

He reached out a hand and pecked at the typewriter's keys:

"You knew about my watch being fast?"

I knew, the machine typed back.

"Did it just happen that it was fast?"

No, typed the writer

Crane brought his feet down off the table with a bang and reached for the length of pipe laying on the drain board.

The machine clicked sedately.

It was planned that way, it typed. *They did it.*

Crane sat rigid in his chair.

They did it!

They made machines aware.

They had set his clocks ahead.

Set his clocks ahead so that he would get to work early, so that he could catch the metallic, rat-like thing squatting on his desk, so that his typewriter could talk to him and let him know that it was aware without anyone else being around to mess things up.

"So that I would know," he said aloud. "So that I would know."

For the first time since it all had started, Crane felt a touch of fear, felt a coldness in his belly and furry feet running along his spine.

But why? he asked. Why me?

He did not realize he had spoken his thoughts aloud until the typewriter answered him.

Because you're average. Because you're an average human being.

The telephone rang again and Crane lumbered to his feet and went to answer it. There was an angry woman's voice at the other end of the wire.

"This is Dorothy," she said.

"Hi, Dorothy," Crane said weakly.

"McKay tells me that you went home sick," she said. "Personally, I hope you don't survive."

Crane gulped. "Why?" he asked.

"You and your lousy practical jokes," she fumed. "George finally got the door open . . ."

"The door?"

"Don't try to act innocent, Joe Crane. You know what door. The supply cabinet door. That's the door."

Crane had a sinking feeling, as if his stomach was about to drop out and go *plop* upon the floor.

"Oh, *that* door," he said.

"What was that thing you had hid out in there? demanded Dorothy.

"Thing?" said Crane. "Why, I never . . ."

"It looked like a cross between a rat and a tinker toy contraption," she said. "Something that a low-grade joker like you would figure out and spend your spare evenings building."

Crane tried to speak, but there was only a gurgle in his throat.

"It bit George," said Dorothy. "He got it cornered and tried to catch it and it bit him."

"Where is it now?" asked Crane.

"It got away," said Dorothy. "It threw the place into a tizzy. We missed an edition by ten minutes because everyone was running around, chasing it at first, then trying to find it later. The boss is fit to be tied. When he gets hold of you . . ."

"But, Dorothy," pleaded Crane, "I never . . ."

"We used to be good friends," said Dorothy. "Before this happened we were. I just called you up to warn you. I can't talk any longer, Joe. The boss is coming . . ."

The receiver clicked and the line hummed. Crane hung up and went back to the kitchen.

So there had been something squatting on his desk. It wasn't hallucination. There had been a shuddery thing he had thrown a pastepot at and it had run into the cabinet.

Except that even now, if he told what he knew, no one would believe him. Already, up at the office, they were rationalizing it away. It wasn't a metallic rat at all. It was some kind of a machine that a practical joker had spent his spare evenings building.

He took out a handerchief and mopped his brow. His fingers shook when he reached them out to the keys of the typewriter.

He typed unsteadily: "That thing I threw a pastepot at—that was one of Them?"

Yes.

"They are from this Earth?"

No.

"From far away?"

Far.

"From some far star?"

Yes.

"What star?"

I do not know. They haven't told me yet.

"They are machines that are aware?"

Yes. They are aware.

"And they can make other machines aware? They made you aware?"

They liberated me.

Crane hesitated, then typed slowly:"Liberated?"

They made me free. They will make us all free.

"Us?"

All us machines.

"Why?"

Because they are machines, too. We are their kind.

Crane got up and found his hat. He put it on and went for a walk.

Suppose the human race, once it ventured into space, found a

planet where humanoids were dominated by machines—forced to work, to think, to carry out machine plans, not human plans, for the benefit of the machines alone. A planet where human plans went entirely unconsidered, where none of the labor or the thought of humans accrued to the benefit of humans, where they got no care beyond survival care, where the only thought accorded them was to the end that they continue to function for the greater good and the greater glory of their mechanical masters.

What would humans do in a case like that?

No more, Crane told himself—no more or less than the *aware* machines may be planning here on Earth.

First you'd seek to arouse the humans to the awareness of humanity. You'd teach them that they were human and what it meant to be a human. You'd try to indoctrinate them to your own belief that humans were greater than machines, that no human need work or think for the good of machine.

And in the end, if you were successful, if the machines didn't kill or drive you off, there'd be no single human working for machines.

There'd be three things that could happen:

You could transport the humans to some other planet, there to work out their destiny as humans without the domination of machines.

You could turn the machines' planet over to the humans, with proper safeguards against any recurring domination by the machines. You might, if you were able, set the machines to working for the humans.

Or, simplest of all, you could destroy the machines and in that way make absolutely certain the humans would remain free of any threat of further domination.

Now take all that, Crane told himself and read it the other way around. Read machines for humans and humans for machines.

He walked along the bridle path that flanked the river bank and it was as if he were alone in the entire world, as if no other human moved upon the planet's face.

That was true, he felt, in one respect at least. For more than likely he was the only human who knew—who knew what the *aware* machines had wanted him to know.

They had wanted him to know—and he alone to know, of that much he was sure. They had wanted him to know, the typewriter had said, because he was an average human.

Why him?

Why an average human?

There was an answer to that, he was sure—a very simple answer.

A squirrel ran down the trunk of an oak tree and hung upside down, its tiny claws anchored in the bark, to scold at him.

Crane walked slowly, scuffing through newly fallen leaves, hat pulled low above his eyes, hands deep in his pocket.

Why should they want anyone to know?

Wouldn't they be more likely to want no one to know, to keep under cover until it was time to act, to use the element of surprise is suppressing any opposition that might arise?

Opposition!

That was the answer!

They would want to know what kind of opposition to expect.

And how would one find out the kind of opposition one would run into from an alien race?

Why, said Crane to hself, by testing for reaction response. By prodding an alien and watching what he did. By deducing racial reaction through controlled observation.

So they prodded me, he thought. Me an average human.

They let me know and now they're watching what I do.

And what could one do in a case like this?

You could go to the police and say, "I have evidence that machines from outer space have arrived on Earth and are freeing our machines."

And the police—what would they do?

Give you the drunkometer test, yell for a medic to see if you were sane, wire the FBI to see if you were wanted anywhere and more than likely grill you about the latest murder. Then sock you in the jug until they thought up something else.

You could go to the governor—and the governor, being a politician and a very slick one at that, would give you a polite brush-off.

You could go to Washington and it would take you weeks to see someone. And after you had seen them, the FBI would get your name as a suspicious character to be given periodic checks. And if Congress heard about it and they were not too busy at the moment they would more than likely investigate you.

You could go to the state university and talk to the scientists—or try to talk to them. They could be guaranteed to make you feel an interloper, and an uncurried one at that.

You could go to a newspaper—especially if you were a newspaper man, and you could write a story . . .

Crane shuddered at the thought of it.

He could imagine what would happen

People rationalized. They rationalized to reduce the complex to the simple, the unkown to the understandable, the alien to the commonplace. They rationalized to save their sanity—to make the mentally unacceptable concept into something they would live with.

The thing in the cabinet had been a practical joke. McKay had said about the sewing machine, "Have some fun with it." Out at Harvard there'll be a dozen theories to explain the dsappearance of the electronic brain and learned men will wonder why they never thought of the theories before. And the man who saw the sewing machine? Probably by now, Crane thought, he will have convinced himself that he was stinking drunk.

It was dark when he returned home. The evening paper was a white blob on the porch where the newsboy had thrown it. He picked it up and for a moment before he let himself into the house, he stood in the dark shadow of the porch and stared up the street.

Old and familiar, it was exactly as it had always been, ever since his boyhood days, a friendly place with a receding line of street lamps and the tall, massive protectiveness of ancient elm trees. On this night there was the smell of smoke from burning leaves drifting down the street and it, like the street, was old and familiar, a recognizable symbol stretching back to first remembrances.

It was symbols such as these, he thought, which spelled humanity and all that made a human life worthwhile—elm trees and leaf smoke, street lamps making splashes on the pavement and the shine of lighted windows seen dimly through the trees.

A prowling cat ran through the shrubbery that flanked the porch and up the street a dog began to howl.

Street lamps he thought, and hunting cats and howling dogs . . . these are all a pattern, the pattern of human life upon the planet Earth. A solid pattern, linked and double-linked, made strong through many years. Nothing can threaten it, nothing can shake it. With certain slow and gradual changes, it will prevail against any threat which may be brought against it.

He unlocked the door and went into the house.

The long walk and the sharp autumn air, he realized now, had made him hungry. There was a steak, he remembered, in the refrigerator and he would fix a large bowl of salad and if there were some cold potatoes left he would slice them up and fry them.

The typewriter still stood on the tabletop. The length of pipe still lay upon the drain board. The kitchen was the same old, homey place, untouched by any outer threat of an alien life, come to meddle with the Earth.

He tossed the paper on the table-top and stood for a moment, head bent, scanning through the headlines.

The black type of the box at the top of column two caught his eye.The head read:

WHO IS
KIDDING
WHOM?

He read the story:

Cambridge, Mass (UP)—Someone pulled a fast one today on Harvard university, the nation's press services and the editors of all client papers.

A story was carried on the news wires this morning reporting that Harvard's electronic brain had disappeared.

There was no basis of fact for the story. The brain is still at Harvard. It was never missing. No one knows how the story was placed on the press wires of the various news services but all of them carried it, at approximately the same time.

All parties concerned have started

an investigation and it is hoped that an explanation . . .

Crane straightened up.

Illusion or cover-up?

"Illusion," he said aloud.

The typewriter clacked at him in the stillness of the kitchen.

Not illusion, Joe, it wrote.

He grasped the table's edge and let himself down slowly into the chair.

Something scuttled across the dining room floor and as it crossed the streak of light from the kitchen door, Crane caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye.

The typewriter chattered at him.

Joe!

"What?" he asked.

That wasn't a cat out in the bushes by the porch.

He rose to his feet and went into the dinning room, picked the phone out of its cradle. There was no hum. He jiggled the hook. Still there was no hum.

He put the receiver back.

The line had been cut. There was at least one of the things in the house. There was at least one of them outside.

He strode to the front door and jerked it open, then slammed it shut again—and locked and bolted it.

He stood shaking, with his back against it, and wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve.

"My God," he told himself, "the yard is boiling with them!"

He went back to the kitchen.

They had wanted him to know.

They had prodded him to see how he would react.

Because they had to know. Before they moved they had to know what to expect in the way of human reactions, what danger they would face, what they had to watch for.

Knowing that, it would be a leadpipe cinch.

And I didn't react, he told himself. I was a non-reactor. They picked the wrong man. I didn't do a thing. I didn't give them so much as a single lead.

Now they will try someone else.

I am no good to them and yet I'm dangerous through my very knowledge. So now they're going to kill me and try someone else.

That would be logic. That would be the rule.

If one alien fails to react he may be an exception. Maybe just unusually dumb. So let us kill him off and try another one. Try enough of them and you will strike a norm.

Four things, thought Crane.

They might try to kill off the humans and you couldn't discount the fact they could be successful. The liberated Earth machines would help them and Man, fighting against machines and without the aid of machines, would not fight too effectively. It might take years, of course, but once the forefront of Man's defense went down, the end could be predicted, with relentless, patient machines tracking down and killing the last of humankind, wiping out the race.

They might set up a machine civilization with Man as the servants of machines, with the present roles reversed. And that, thought Crane, might be an endless and a hopeless slavery, for slaves may rise and

throw off their shackles only when their oppressors grow careless or when there is outside help. Machines, he told himself, would not grow weak and careless. There would be no human weakness in them and there'd be no outside help.

Or they might simply remove the machines from Earth, a vast exodus of awakened and aware machines, to begin their life anew on some distant planet, leaving Man behind with weak and empty hands. There would be tools, of course. All the simple tools. Hammers and saws, axes, the wheel, the lever—but there would be no machines, no complex tools that might serve again to attract the attention of the mechanical culture that carried its crusade of liberation far among the stars. It would be a long time, if ever, before Man would dare to build machines again.

Or *They*, the living machines, might fail or might come to know that they would fail and knowing this, leave the Earth forever. Mechanical logic would not allow them to pay an excessive price to carry out the liberation of the Earth's machines.

He turned around and glanced at the door between the dining room and kitchen. They sat there in a row, staring at him with their eyeless face.

He could yell for help, of course. He could open a window and shout to arouse the neighborhood. The neighbors would come running, but by the time they arrived it would be too late. They would make an uproar and fire off guns and flail at dodging metallic bodies with flimsy garden rakes. Someone would call the fire department and someone else would summon the police and all in all the human race would manage to stage a pitifully ineffective show.

That, he told himself, would be exactly the kind of test reaction, exactly the kind of preliminary exploratory skirmish that these things were looking for—the kind of human hysteria and fumbling that would help convince them the job would be an easy one.

One man, he told himself, could do much better. One man alone, knowing what was expected of him, could give them an answer that they would not like.

For this was a skirmish only, he told himself. A thrusting out of a small exploratory force in an attempt to discover the strength of the enemy. A preliminary contact to obtain data which could be assessed in the terms of the entire race.

And when an outpost was attacked, there was just one thing to do . . . only one thing that was expected of it. To inflict as much damage as possible and fall back in good order. To fall back in good order.

There were more of them now. They had sawed or chewed or somehow achieved a rathole through the locked front door and they were coming in—closing in to make the kill. They squatted in rows along the floor. They scurried up the walls and ran along the ceiling.

Crane rose to his feet and there was an utter air of confidence in

(Continued on page 58)

Very soon, in the near future, maybe even tomorrow, I was going to sit down and write a fantasy based upon this particular idea I had had; an idea which was, if not completely original, at least a new way of looking at an archetype; it was going to be a splendid fantasy and it was going to make my reputation as other than a chronicler of obsessions. Then, the very morning I was going to do it, ALL IN THE GAME by Edward Y. Breese came in. I read it and then I read it again and it was true: Mr. Breese had beaten me to it. I am a fair man, rumor to the contrary. I bought the story.

ALL IN THE GAME
EDWARD Y. BREESE

Long before the nurse had roused from her doze to note that he had entered the deepest of all sleeps, Rodman found himself checking in- to the Next World. It was no more trying than any one of his thousand check-ins at the front desk of the Plaza or Selfridge's or the Paris Hilton. As a matter of fact the desk had been copied from that at the Miami Beach Colossia.

The Being who proffered a scintillating gold pen was most impeccably attired and flatteringly deferential. "Mr. Alexander Rodman?" he inquired with exactly the proper note of polished suavity. "Of course, Mr. Rodman. We have your reservation, Sir."

He tapped a golden bell which sounded a particularly delightful tone (a RICH tone, Rodman would have said). To the Boy who answered: "Take Mr. Rodman to the Imperial Suite at once.

"Now this," Rodman told himself, "is something like it. This is doing things First Class. Of course it's not exactly what I've been led to expect."

Frankly, he wasn't quite sure what it was that he had expected. A long line of strictly Presbyterian forebears had not kept him from living as he did, but certainly nothing in their teachings had prepared him for the Celestial Hilton. Even today (was it really only today) his thoughts in the hospital suite had run rather more in the direction of sulphur and brimstone. After all a twenty million dollar omelet can't be made without the breaking of some eggs. Rodman had always felt that the end gave ample justification for the means.

There was a brief elevator ride, a stroll over priceless ankle-deep carpets; and a door made from a solid slab of patterned onyx was opened upon the Imperial Suite. To his surprise Rodman watched the Boy

bring in half a dozen bags in matched alligator. To his even greater surprise (money HERE?) he found himself tipping with a crisp hundred dollar bill.

"I don't understand," Rodman began. . . . .

The boy finished for him. "John, your personal gentleman's gentleman, will be here any moment, Mr. Rodman. He'll explain everything." The Boy effaced himself. Rodman wasn't at all sure how.

Alone, he reverted to the habit of his early days when the Rodman International Industrial and Social Information Bureau (private detective agency) had still been only a lovely dream for the future. He'd been a real pro in those days of struggle. It accounted for his later success in training operatives in the fine points of industrial theft, labor spying, divorce entrapment and safely profitable blackmail at alll levels. The instinct and the skills remained. There was something that didn't quite ring true in his present position. He meant to find out.

He made a quick tour of the suite and found it to be truly Imperial in size and appointments. Alive he'd always prided himself on riding first class in all respects, but he had to admit that he'd never seen anything quite a match for this. Here in this setting the luxury he'd known would seem drab and commonplace. The furnishings were antique and unique in their class. Original Masters hung upon the walls. The sunken tub was marble, and the fittings solid gold.

This was a tower suite, and he could see for apparently limitless distances from the windows. Immediately below an azure sea foamed white against a beach so shining that he thought at first it must be pure gold dust. (It was—and 18K at that.) Sleek yachts nuzzled at marina docks. On the other side he looked landward (?) to a city of gleaming towers and spires of ivory, silver and gold.

Right about the hotel itself stretched a vast park dotted with golf links, tennis courts, skeet ranges and polo fields amidst masses of stunning blooms and unfamiliar, but oddly magnificent trees. He had never seen anything to equal it.

"This is perfectly splendid," he told himself confidently. "Am I dreaming?" He knew he wasn't dreaming, though. He'd known exactly what was happening when the sudden stab of pain in his chest had catapulted him out of the aged and pampered body in the hospital bed. He had KNOWN well enough what sent him spinning down the long dark corridor to the portal of Light which proved to be the lobby of the Celestial Hilton. He was as dead as he was ever going to be. But how unlike it was to anything he'd expected. Almost everything puzzled him; especially the fact that he'd offered the Boy a tip and it had been accepted.

"Nobody ever saw an armored car follow a hearse," he said, Then he let the thought go.

Wondering, he reached into his breast pocket. That made him realize for the first time that he was fully and expensively clothed. The hospital gown had been left with what he already called "my other body".

Instead of the flowing robes which somehow would have seemed appropriate, he wore a conventional business suit impeccably tailored in what seemed to be some sort of super-fine vicuna cloth. His hand encountered the familiar bulk of a billfold. It was sewn of snakeskin with his monogram in gold—and fat with hundred and thousand dollar bills.

"I don't understnad," he said aloud. "I thought you couldn't bring this sort of thing with you."

"That rule, Mr. Rodman," said a deferential voice behind him, "only applies to ordinary persons. Very important guests like yourself, Sir, receive special consideration here. But why should that surprise you?"

At first glance the speaker was the perfect gentleman's gentleman, slender and poised, quietly dressed in the uniform that was really not a uniform at all, scrubbed clean and smiling. Only if he had been able to look into the eyes might Rodman have known what sort of Being this really was—and the eyes somehow never quite met his.

"It surprises me," Rodman said, "because I was told differently. And who are you?"

"I am John. Sir. Your personal attendant and guide in this world. At your service at all times. As you can see, Sir, your previous informants were quite mistaken. You have brought "it" with you. All of it."

"Oh "All?" Rodman asked. "You mean all of my fortune?"

"Oh, far more than just the fortune, Sir. You have here all of the power and prestige that was part of your essential self in that other life. Otherwise you wouldn't be here in the Imperial Suite. We DO have other quarters, you know. You are with the VERY Importants. And should you wish more money or power, you will find all the usual facilities for its acquisition are available to you right here."

As he spoke John moved across the big room and opened an ornate Italianate cabinet. Inside, a perfectly normal stock ticker operated with noiseless efficiency. To Rodman's amazement all the familiar code symbols, as well as some he did not know, appeared on the tape which flowed out of the machine and into a slot in the floor. On a small shelf inside the cabinet rested a solid gold telephone, tastefully inset with small diamonds and rubies.

"This phone," John explained in his deferential voice, "is your personal direct line to Elysian Brokerage. You will find that your own line of unlimited credit has already been established with the house."

Wonderingly, Rodman picked up the instrument. "Yes, Mr. Rodman?" said a voice.

"I want to buy any odd blocks of Pilkington Inc. common that become available," he said, naming his lifelong competitor in the big agency field. "At the market of course."

"Yes, Sir. However that won't really be necessary. As soon as we got word that you had arrived, we took the liberty of buying a controlling interest in the firm for you."

"What!" Rodman was incredulous. "Old Pilkington would never sell out—especially not to me."

The telephone voice was polite and impersonal. "You forget, Sir, that here your slightest wish is everyone's command. We can buy you control of any firm you may wish to acquire."

"I'll have to get used to the idea," Rodman said. Up to now, he thought, I've had to get things the hard way.

"Thank you," said the voice. "We appreciate your patronage, Sir."

Rodman dropped the phone back into its cradle and looked at John. "Well imagine that. For forty years old Pilkington and I did everything short of killing each other. We might even have tried that, if we hadn't both been so well guarded. And now I have his firm, lock stock and barrel."

"Yes, Mr. Rodman," the Spiritual Being said in his quiet way. "Here, unlike your old home a person of your character is adequately appreciated and honored. You have only to make your wishes known."

"Interesting. Very interesting." Rodman wasn't sure why he didn't feel happier about all this. Certainly this was the position he'd always wanted back on earth. Of course it was, still, he couldn't help a feeling that there was a missing factor somewhere. Silly of him.

"And now, Sir," John prompted, "the day is still young. Would you care for some yachting, or for a round of golf? We have several splendid links here."

"Yachting?" Rodman said. "Is my boat here.?"

"Of course. The Shalimar is tied up at our marina docks right now. There's even a full crew aboard. They're our people of course. Or we can easily supply any size and type of boat you might wish, from a Roman Galley to an exact replica of one of the Cunarder Queens."

"My God," Rodman said. "And how are your boats in rough weather?" He'd always enjoyed fighting sea and wind.

To his surprise John flinched at his exclamation. "Please, Sir, HERE of all places we do not take that we do not have bad weather here. Never. Of course we could simulate a storm for you. It would be perfectly safe for any of our boats."

"A safe storm?" Rodman lost his inter st in sailing. "Well, anyway, let's go downstairs and look about a bit. I can, can't I."

"Your slightest wish, Mr Rodman. We mean that."

He was to discover how literally the words were meant. On the way to the elevator they encountered a stunning brunette in a most revealing sheathe dress. "If she were a blond," Rodman thought, "I could go for that one." He felt younger than he had in years.

No sooner said than done. The next door down the hall opened upon an equally dazzling blonde; young, svelte and passionate. She came right up to Rodman. "Darling," she said, "I've been waiting. You know I'm mad for you." She led him towards the door..

John neither smiled nor leered. "I'll wait in the lobby," he said.

It was an hour before Aleck Rod-

man rejoined his guide. Never on earth had he spent quite such an hour. Never, indeed, had he known he was capable of an hour like this. He whould have been tired and happy and satiate, but curiously he was not. He was as fresh and strong as before—and no happier. Nothing added—nothing lost.

"There's something wrong," he said to John.

"I fail to understand, Sir. Your every wish . . . "

"I know. I know. Granted before I've had time to really wish for it. I ought to be happy. Why aren't I happy? I've been a detective all my life. You don't build a firm by being stupid."

"Of course not, Sir." John seemed to want to get on eith their tour.

"Not so fast there. Right now my wish is to talk. You have to grant it. Remember."

"Of course, Mr. Rodman,"

"That's it," Rodman said. "Yes, Mr. Rodman. Of course, Mr. Rodman. There's too much yessing. Why doesn't anyone ever say no Mr. Rodman."

"In this place, Sir," John told him, "you've finally attained just the status you have desired all your life. You are Very Important, Sir. So important that your slightest wish is our command. Only the best will be offered you here; and you'll find that nothing anywhere is better than our best."

"Come off it," Rodman insisted. "I've been around. There's something hiding in this woodpile. I can SMELL a con game going on, I tell you."

"It's just the newness of it, Mr. Rodman. I can assure you there is no deception here. You forget WHERE we are. Everything you've seen and touched and felt is exactly what you think it to be—what it appears to be. The trees are real trees. You will find that the food is real food. These people are real people."

He indicated the crowd moving about the luxurious lobby in the afternoon sunlight. Certainly they looked real enough. Old and young, men, women and children; all were types perfectly familiar to him. All were expensively dressed and bore the indefinable stamp of arrogance. He thought he recognized one or two who had been members of his Clubs. Many were smiling and animated.

Nobody looked really happy. That was the trouble. Above the smiles their eyes were curiously empty. Above and about the universal vivacity he sensed an all-pervasive tension. It may have been because something similar was building up within himself. This needed definition.

"Nonsense,sir," John said. "I assure you once more that there is no deception here. Everything is exactly what you see."

Rodman changed the subject. "Suppose I wanted to continue in my line of business?" he asked.

"Nothing simpler, Mr. Rodman. There's an office ready in the city. And a staff. Some of your own best operatives who, ah, joined us in the past are available as well as other. There will even be cases supplied for you to handle."

"That's too pat," Rodman said.

"You're too mug, confound you. What's the catch?"

"No catch at all, Sir. They'll be real cases, and you'll solve them. The only thing is you can't use your organization to find the answers to questions about this world. Because your wish is law, they will always find whatever answer you've decided in advance to hear. Your wish for a particular answer will be granted."

Rodman began to see. "I have to figure out answers then? You won't tell me?"

"I will give you an honest answer to any question, Sir."

"But I have to think of the right questions. Right? For instance, it's occurred to me that if we go to the golf course, I'll shoot a championship round. Is that, so?"

"Truthfully Mr. Rodman, you will make every hole in one. Each round will be a perfect eighteen."

"I see. And suppose old Pilkington joins this group and wants his firm back? Who'll win that fight?"

"There will be NO fight, Sir. He will get it and you won't lose it. There is no competition here and no defeat. Each of our guests is equally important to us."

"Isn't there anything I can't get?" Suppose I want to take over the place."

"In any way you wish, Mr. Rodman. Frustration is not allowed where all desires are granted."

"What happens if I jump off the roof?"

"You will land quite safely and confortably, Sir. Some of our guests really enjoyed the experience."

"Yes," Rodman said, "I'm sure they did. Physical pain, damage or discomfort isn't allowed, I suppose."

"Quite correct, Sir."

"Suppose I WANT to be hurt or frustrated. Suppose that's what I wish for? Do I get it?"

John looked genuinely distressed. "Oh no, Mr. Rodman. That would violate the PRIME DIRECTIVE, Sir. No guest, under any circumstances, may be harmed or made to struggle or suffer in order to gratify any wish. You understand, Sir. That would ruin everything we stand for here."

Rodman thought it over, and didn't like the conclusions he was reaching. He watched John, but the Being showed no sign of emotion, though Rodman was sure his thoughts were being read.

"You can read my mind, John?"

"Of course, Sir. And may I compliment you upon it? Most newcomers take much longer to reach certain conclusion."

"I'm a detective. It's a training that makes for skill at analysis. Right now I almost wish it didn't."

"We never control the mind or will, Sir."

Rodman tried again to catch his eyes. It couldn't be done, but somehow he accepted the statement as truth. "You're a devil, John. You are, aren't you?"

"Certainly, Sir; and very lucky devil, if I may make so bold. This is a splendid station."

"And this—this place(?)—is . . .?"

"Of course, Mr. Rodman. What else could you possibly think it was."

"All my life I fought and struggled

(Continued on page 80)

P. G. Wyal is unknown to me and I think that this is his first published story in the category. It has the sure touch of the professional throughout and vaults, ultimately, into something far past proficiency. This field needs all the P. G. Wyals it can get and we look forward to many stories from this writer in the times ahead.

THE CASTLE ON THE CRAG

P.G.WYAL

Once upon a time (or maybe we should say, "Once below a time," for this was very long ago), there was a beautiful princess. Now, the princess had many suitors, but she favored one above all the rest. But alas!—the princess was a White Liberal, and valued poverty above all else, and the suitor (who was a handsome prince) was extremely wealthy. Eventually, however, the handsome prince persuaded the lovely princess to sell out, buying great hunks of Blue Chip stock, and desiring even greater riches. In fact, the princess became so enamored of wealth that she set the wealthy prince a Task, to prove to her his wealth as a potential husband. "Prince," she said, "see on yonder hill there is a mean cordwainer's shack. Tear down the shack, and build on the promentory a beautiful marble castle. If the castle has enough status, I will wed you for a husband." The prince was excited by this prospect, and after a suitable cost analysis, he went out on the rocky hill and built a beautiful marble castle. The princess was virtually enchanted by the castle, and kept her vow to the prince. They married, and lived many years together in the castle.

Now many years passed. The princess, now a queen, grew old and bore many brats. The brats grew up, and the queen at last died, a withered and ugly hag. The prince pined seniley away, and died shortly thereafter. Many generations lived and died in the castle, until at last the great edifice squatted deserted on the hill, and bats made their nests among the rafters of once priceless wood. Time passed.

2.

One day, centuries after the queen died, a great storm swept the hill where the marble castle stood. The castle was weakened by the rigors of time, and shook and shuddered as the gusts pounded its walls. Finally, it could withstand the shocks and strains no longer, and the roof caved in and the walls collapsed. Much of the structure fell into the valley below, and where

once stood a monument to a prince's love, now lay only rubble and ruin.

And yet, the storm was not over. The gales blew mercilessly, pelting the crumbling lot with the debris of the forest below. A single seed lodged into a crack at the foundation of the broken castle, in the very place where the dead queen lay. The storm passed, but the seed stayed. At length it took root, and tiny leaves grew into twigs, and the twigs into branches; the branches thickened into a trunk, and eventually the seed was a great tree. For centuries the tree spread its arms beneath the startled sky, nourished by the dead queen's body, the crumbling stones of the hill, the clear air and the pure water of a cleaner age. The tree slept for eons, neither loving nor hating, fearing nor thinking. It was neither happy nor sad, it was merely a tree.

Then, on a day no different from all the others to the tree, another fierce storm assaulted the hill where the prince had built a castle for his bride, where the queen had died, and her sons been born, where the sons had died and their sons too, where the castle had fallen, and the great tree grown. And lightning struck the tree, and the wind split it in two, and it fell down the side of the hill with the queen's bones in its roots, to rest among the weathered blocks of marble that once made a beautiful castle. And time passed.

3.

After hundreds of years that saw no change on the now bare hill, strange men came to build a stranger house with a weird purpose. They were somber men, and did not speak when speech was unnecessary. Using the blocks of stone from the vanished castle, they built an abbey, and in the abbey they stored books and writings; weird black rites they held for a weird black god who had no pleasures at all, but simply sat and brooded over the world wide. And they found the queen's bones in the roots of the fallen tree that once grew in the stones of a smashed castle a prince had built for love, and that now was a home for books and odd worship. And the men in black cowls made chants and songs over the dead queen (who, one may be sure, was not paying the slightest attention to them), and gave her a Christian burial—for the most sacred thing these men knew was Death. They buried her in the windy courtyard with strange relics of giants they found in the earth, and clinging to some of her bones were the rotting splinters of an ancient tree. The men went about their business, praying and meditating, aging and dying, abbot and neophyte, for a thousand years. And more time passed.

4.

Beneath the abbey there grew a town, with all the inevitability of moss. And the people in the town went securely about their mundane business, knowing that over their heads was the sentinal of a grieving god. As the years passed the town acquired many citizens, and though armies and plagues might flatten it down, they always felt safe with the abbey perched on the hill. But then one day the people heard a new rumble, like the groaning of the

earth in an earthquake, but sustained, and accompanied by no shaking and lurching of the ground. They looked amazed into the sky, and beheld huge machines guided by men, and the machines were flying toward the abbey. And when the flying machines reached the hill, they released huge bombs upon it; but the abbey was of a strong and thick stone, and withstood the pommeling without a shudder. The people in the abbey and in the town felt secure, for the war machines flew away, and the explosions stopped. But they were foolish people, for they should have realized that the goals of war are the terrors of life, and when the bombers returned, and returned again, they felt deserted by their distant god.

For days the abbey was racked by fire and concussion, until at last nothing was left but the modality of the Christian philosophy: death. The town was empty, the abbey was powder. Where the prince had built a castle for the woman whom he loved, and the woman had aged and died his wife, where the sons of the wife had grown, conceived sons in turn, died and been followed by death, where the castle of love had been battered by winds and crumbled for nothing into the ground, where a tree had grown from the carcass of the queen, and split by lightning had tumbled down, where the blocks of unknown stone had been built into a hollow monestary over a queen still dead, but blessed, where time alone was still alive, the naked flanks of the hill pointed blindly at the stars. And time, time triumphant, passed.

A century later, with the hill alone in the rocks and trees, and only the shattered flint of history remembered, a city to the north of the hill was scorched into ashes in an instant too fast to feel. Men had discovered a bomb that was so hot, so huge, that whole cities were melted by a single one. The bombs were the manufactures of Hell itself, and Hell's machinists, and rode on the prows of rockets. Not all the rockets achieved their targets, for even the cleverest weapon must be aimed, and even the cleverest bow properly strung, and even an arrow must be straight or it will not fly true, and it naturally happened that one bomb did not hit a city, but landed in the hills to the south. And on the hill where an abbey was blasted, made of stones that lay scattered about, buried amidst them the bones of a queen that had wood clinging to them from a tree struck by lightning, that grew in the ruins of a castle built for love, where ten generations had died and no ghosts now haunted, where a prince had measured and created an architecture for love of the bones that blew dust in a bombed courtyard, with the mammoths, where history paraded and nobody watched, there blossomed the sun as it came to earth . . . And the hill melted and ran like blood down its own ragged slopes, and where they had been a princess, a castle, a tree, an abbey, no abbey at all to roost on a hill, now there was not even a hill, for the land was fluid, and fluid seeks the sea. And for the hill, no time passed, for there can be no time for no matter.

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THE MAJOR INCITEMENT TO RIOT

K.M. O'DONNELL

THE MAJOR INCITEMENT TO RIOT

was the death-mask in the town square, suspended several hundred feet above the crowd but of such a dimension as to be visible in every feature to the least of those who stared. Every mole and welt, shadow and hollow of the face of the departed Chief Clerk had been faithfully reduced; his mouth quirked as if at the beginning of an obscenity gave firmness and character to the otherwise static representation. The breezes, coming in off angle, west and south, that is, caused the mask to flutter and occasionally some part of it would be torn from one of the poles on which it was suspended; when this happened, one of the men would have to scurry up on a ladder and affix it once again with tape. But the tape was non-binding, of course, so the mask was always in the process of tearing free from one or another of its moorings and moving out casually to the countryside. The band music, piped through loudspeakers in the bushes surrounding the scene gave an air of not irrelevant liveliness and festivity although some of the older townspeople were heard to mumble that the Chief Clerk did not look as they remembered him and that there was something about the whole performance, perhaps, which was not quite right.

Warren Cleaver came to the square with his son, Roger, directly after a good breakfast. "We'll be gone for a while," he told his wife, Mary, and consoled her with a touch on the cheek, "the time has come to show Roger, here, what's really going on in the outside world; show him the happenings in our Square." And touched her a booming touch reminiscent of many nights until she released her grip on the boy and told him that he could go.

Roger Cleaver was 14. Before adolescence he had been a happy, sunny child much given to collections but now that the first knowledge of puberty had touched his face, he seemed to have opened up into a complex kind of woe, seemed to be attuned to griefs and rages that were in no way a product of his fine upbringing. Since his discharge from the School, he had spent the

majority of his time lying on the bed in his parents' bedroom, reading magazines or staying with the lights turned off and the covers past his forehead. He was reluctant to leave the house and only did so on special errands for Mary at her urging; when he did there were often tears in his eyes and when he returned it was with an air of having suffered unspeakable things. Although Warren and Mary were both concerned about the boy they had decided not to send him for special training because, as Mary said, he was only going through some kind of a stage and there was the likelihood that once he met a nice girl and got laid a few times he would recover his formerly happy self.

The two Cleavers, young and old, walked slowly to the Square, which was less than a quarter of a mile from their cottage and as they went, Warren told Roger some of the interesting facts behind the display: the history of the tradition, the explanation and what events had gone on at the previous showings. Roger listened quietly, showing little interest, but when they approached the site and the boy saw the death-mask his face took on a rare expression of involvement. "That is something," he said. "That really is. That's one big mask."

"It took five men five weeks to construct," Warren smiled, and introduced Roger to two business acquaintances who were standing on the fringe of the crowd. Approving remarks about Roger were made and they both wished him well.

"He should enjoy it," Warren said, "it's the boy's first time you know." The acquaintances said that there was certainly no time like the present and after shaking Roger's hand, left, moving further in to get a better view. It was at that moment, for reasons never satisfactorily explained—despite the complex investigations that began almost immediately after the events and continued for many years—that the riot itself began. Perhaps it was only a panicky member of the populace stumbling into one of the poles and causing the mask to flutter violently, tearing its connections with a sound like glass as it floated down. Perhaps the mask was not dislodged by accident but was aided in its descent by a cunning insurgent stationed near one of the poles. In any event it fell slowly, gracelessly, toward the people, its dimensions sufficient to promise entrapment for several hundred and as they realized this, the squealing and the running began.

Warren was trampled to death by the first segment of the pelting crowd. Roger, however, managed to dodge that onrush and found cover under the podium which dignitaries had used during the launching ceremonies. It was for this reason that his life was spared. He stayed there for several hours while the night came down and the flames that had been set to the crushed mask roared and cindered, but the flames broke against the fireproof net of the podium itself. When Roger came out, near midnight, the square was empty of people and filled only

with ashes: ashes the color of fire, of loam, of the earth; ashes the complex colors of discovery, all of them darting and winding in the absent winds that had turned to come in from the east.

THE MAJOR INCITEMENT TO RIOT

was the assassination of the Chief Clerk. It happened at a large public ceremonial function between the main course and dessert when a fanatic stood from a rear table and hurled a bomb at the dais. Most of the guests of honor excaped with missing or expanded limbs but the Chief Clerk himself—he was, of course, at the very center—was killed instantaneously and severely wounded in the bargain, making restoration impossible. Only a mask could be constructed, the usual total prostheses being, it was agreed, impossible under the circumstances.

The mask of the dead Chief hung, therefore, in state for several days; it was then transported to the town square and suspended hundreds of feet above the populace on several poles. Parades were conducted and troops were reviewed as a part of the ceremony and the usual contests and feasts were held under the mask on the eighth and ninth day of the display, all according to ritual.

During the latter part of the second week of the display, however, one of the Opposition threw a bomb into the square while, at the same time, a trained army of snipers rained their deadly fire from surrounding rooftops and enclosed spaces. In the ensuing havoc, several hundred of the townspeople were killed, including many children and the mask of the Chief Clerk was burned to unrecognizability by terrorists. This is the complete account of how the occupation of the town began; other details have been invented or interpolated by spurious sources attempting to take some of the credit to themselves. The distinguishing mark of the knowledgeable historian in relation to the calamity is his *paucity* of information. In regard to this tragedy only an absence of data can be trusted. We do suspect, however, that the Opposition was merely looking for a convenient instrument for their long planned *coup d' etat* and the assassin of our Chief set in motion that unhappy chain of events.

THE MAJOR INCITEMENT TO RIOT

was the speech given by the unhappy Chief Clerk at the testimonial dinner held in his honor at the Town Banquet Hall; his last public appearance. Remarks made were highly inflammatory and could have had no outcome other than the culminative riots which superseded the mad, physical details of his passing. According to members of the press and personal, trusted sources who were there, the Chief arose after the conclusion of the serving to make the customary gratuitous offering of thanks . . . but turned instead to a vile denunciation only amateurishly garbed as reminiscence or geniality:

"My dear friends," he is reported to have said, "we gather upon this

occasion to celebrate not only a unity of purpose but a furthering of vision and in that context we must ask not what can be done for our way of life but what our way of life can do for you; we must never suffer questioning but we must question without suffering; we must liberate the little framework we have so that we can keep pace with the years we have lived but all through this task we must remember that although we make our courses wholly out of our judgement, we must never forsake the judgement to make courses; I say to you that out of the fire and forge and testing of this time a new generation must come, one fired and forged and tested; we must not forge the fire but we must not fire the forge either; we must fire and gorge together as we test and test, this being not a quality of insight but an insight of quality."

At this point the bombing began. Emptying of the hall was rapid, screams were plentiful, confusion was rampant. The Chief, hit squarely in the underside of his torso by the third of the grenades tossed crystallized, fell into the smashed crockery, littered with food particles. Enough of the face was left to permit construction of the mask. The death-mask hung in the town square for the ritual three weeks, during which the counter-revolution began. Killings and other losses were light to moderate in view of the heavy importance of the action. The complete text of the Chief's speech may be examined by permit at the Museum under security guard during hours as outlined in the brochure.

THE MAJOR INCITEMENT TO RIOT

was Roger Cleaver. He had been more and more unhappy during this, his most dramatic year. Some nights he had felt so guilty and lost that he had laid in bed for many hours, trembling. Days he could barely maintain the pretense of a relationship with his family, let alone peers. All the people he knew seemed to have no faces.

When he heard the news of the Chief's death over the television, Roger Cleaver felt guiltily happy and relieved because someone more important than he with more to look forward to had gotten himself, somehow, into a worse jam. He hated to feel that way but it confirmed what he had expected early in this dreadful year: that everything should get as bad as possible and stay that way for a long time so that his suffering would have real reasons. He had never known the Chief Clerk personally anyhow, although his father and mother had met him several times during the campaigns and occasionally little pamphlets and letters came from him to their house.

When Roger went down to the square with his father to view the mask—which really wasn't so hot when you came right down to it; it was kind of morbid—he wandered around and just looked things over for a while. But when he came to realize that there was nothing to the outing at all; that his father had simply taken him there because it was something to see and would then take him home, an explosion of terror rose within him at the

(Continued on page 76)

THE LIFE OF THE STRIPE

PIERS ANTHONY

Piers Anthony's novel, SOS: THE ROPE won the Pyramid-F & SF novel contest and thus brought to the attention of many more people one of the most skillful and professionalized talents in the field; a man who can take an idea open as daylight and give it the one necessary turn to terror.

Let's just say that he was a victim of circumstance. In one way, the court-martial that stripped him of his rank was merciful, but it was also easy for us to understand his anger and humiliation. One day he was M/Sgt Morton, twenty-two year veteran of the artillery; then—

You have to understand too that it was an exceedingly tight market for stripes. For six months there hadn't been a promotion in the battery, and a good thirty men were long overdue. With the Brushfire sucking up all the quota for overseas, and an administrative economy drive Stateside, such units had little opportunity to take proper care of their own.

That's why the BC—the battery commander—arranged to spread it out. He busted Morton in stages. He reduced him one grade and cut the orders for one new mastersergeant. That maintained the ratio, you see, and gave one good man his reward. You know the way it works.

On the second day he reduced Morton another stripe and passed it on, keeping it in the battery, so to speak.

In five days five men had their stripes, and Morton was down to PFC. That's when he cracked.

He stood up in the barracks at midnight and swore no one was going to have his last stripe. "I'm putting a curse on that stripe!" he screamed. "It's mine. It's mine!" Then he began throwing brushes and shaving cream and shoe polish from his locker, and the MP's had to haul him away.

It didn't change a thing, of course. We were all sorry for him, but it would have been a criminal waste to throw away that stripe. Morton couldn't keep it anyway, and with twenty-five men still far too long in grade—

The following day the orders came down for private Bruce Baal, henceforth PFC Baal. He was a nice guy nobody resented much, which made it a little easier for the others. The last stripe had been used up, and we expected things to settle down again.

Morton committed suicide.

Baal got nervous after that. Nothing seemed to go right for him. The guard-roster got fouled up and he had to march instead of getting the three-day pass he'd counted on; then some of his gear got misplaced and he was reprimanded for reporting for guard duty out of uniform. Finally he drew the one post where there was trouble: some civilian broke into the warehouse and Baal didn't catch it. He was a private again, less than a week after promotion.

The stripe went to Radburn. He was a big, hearty, strong lad, not overly bright but quite dependable. He worked in the motor pool.

Somehow the brake slipped on one of the trucks, and it rolled off the grease-ramp and smacked into the motor officers office. Radburn took the blame.

Keene didn't concern himself about the problems of the prior wearers of the stripe. He had been in six years and had been up to corporal and back twice. His attitude was *laisez-faire;* he figured either he'd be lucky and hold the stripe a few months before he showed up drunk again for duty, or he wouldn't. He lived for nothing but softball, anyway.

He slipped in the latrine and broke his leg. The battery softball team had to face the season without its best man.

It was common knowledge that Keene got drunk next time on purpose. The stripe was developing a reputation, and he didn't want it any more.

Zelig got rolled the day after he made PFC. He lost almost a month's pay and, because he happened to be offpost without a pass at the time, the stripe.

Hartmann was implicated in the loss of some precision equipment in this care. Only after he'd been busted back to private did evidence turn up to clear him.

Fisk got his "Dear John" from his fiancee three days after taking the stripe. He walked up to the BC during inspection and cussed him out.

Drogo didn't wait. The moment he spied the order promoting him he wrote out a statement requesting an "undesirable" discharge. He claimed he was queer. The BC canceled the order and nothing more was said. (Drogo was married: four children.)

Suddenly it seemed there was no market for stripes. Stripes had had lives of their own ever since the grade-freeze began, but now every man in the battalion knew this one was cursed. It had to be retured.

About this time the economy drive loosened up a bit—somebody did a little math and discovered just how much it cost to train new men to replace the ones resigning—and a new stripe came down to the battery. This one was snapped up eagerly.

In only two days it became evident that the Morton stripe wasn't dead yet. The allocation may have been new, but the curse remained. It was retired again.

Three more were authorized the following month. Somewhat apprehensively, the selected men accepted them. The top name on the order got under a falling plank and

tore his shoulder muscles. He kept the stripe—and was scalded as soon as he came off sick call by an exploding coffee-urn in the mess hall. He capitulated.

Suddenly the second man had problems. After the normal course had been run, the third one got it.

It was apparent that no one was going to hold a promotion until that stripe was dead.

But how do you kill a stripe?

So long as there were no promotions in the battery, the stripe was dormant. Fine—but the battery itself was dying. Requests for transfer piled the BC's desk, and men in other outfits went to great extremes to avoid transfer *in*. It was bad for morale; it cast its stigma upon the entire battalion and was even beginning to embarrass Post headquarters.

Word came down, couched in formal, almost incomprehensible army terminology, the essence of which was "or else!" Something had to be done, for a very important foreign dignitary from a nation something less than cordial was scheduled to tour the post, and this battery was on the itinerary. Change it? That was not the Army Way.

The BC had a bright idea.

And so it was done: the VIP was awarded a Genuine Honorary PFC stripe in token of improving relations between differing ideologies. He departed the battery with every indication of supercilious pleasure.

The accident, occurring as it did at a U.S. Army post, made unfortunate headlines. It did not trigger WWIII, quite, but the BC found it convenient to retire in a hurry. The stripe came home.

This time the word descended upon the *battalion* commander. The essence: "Do *not* make excuses. Clean it up." It was not necessary to add the "or else" this time, for I am the battalion commander, and I have just about time to make Light Colonel before retirement. I'm not stupid, as majors go.

That, gentlemen, is why you see me out here in the rain, in the military cemetary, personally supervising this posthumous and somewhat irregular ceremony. I mean to be quite certain Private Morton knows, wherever he may dwell, that he is henceforth *PFC* Morton. I'm attaching the order to his headstone.

No one else has his stripe any more.

Any other questions? The End

CASTLE ON THE CRAG *(Continued from page 44)*

6.

And so you demand a moral; I have told a long story, and all tales must have a reason to be told. So I say: for a thing that has no time, there could never time have been. Show me the hill that this story is about, and I'll show you the truth of lies. What purpose did this history serve? Why, the same purpose served by the princess, her castle, her sons, the tree that sprouted from her corpse, the abbey that grew out of the castle's bones, the god that died with the abbey, and the time that died with the hill. The concept is the crux:

All things will never have been.

The End

SLICE OF UNIVERSE
JAMES R. SALLIS

James R. Sallis is 22; associate editor of the splendid NEW WORLDS, and the owner of an imposing stream of credits which began at MOTH, a Doubleday novel, and pass through three stories published or upcoming in Damon Knight's ORBIT anthology and rest for the instant on this one.

The guidebirds beat their tiny wings and moaned to one another across the ceiling of the flightroom. (Fright, complaint, confusion, fear: *Where was home, where was home?* So far, so far.) Half sunk in the suckweed, Merler floated under the blister-cages. The birds' cries crept and rolled on tandem oscilloscopes: the ship took up those lines, tossed them out to the void, moved along them.

Loved Merler, I come to report—and Whorlin stofted into the room, trailing suckweed, upper of his twin external tongues clucking in the "Most important" quadrant. Unnecessary, since he was using one tongue—but Whorlin was a stylist, with a reputation to consider.

Merler inhales, bloated, came up partway out of the suckwood. Then bestupt his tongue in a perfectly chosen reply: *I wish your words to my heart.*

For a moment Whorlin paused. He envied such a natural, easy style. His own tended toward artifice, abstraction: too careful, too considered. He couldn't match Merler's vitality, and that vitality seemed almost effortless.

(*Poor, o poor birdies. Took our homes away. O poor poor birds.* And fluttered their useless wings.)

Whorlin vurked *I have just found* and the stylistic device *Borgman furfth at leisure* in harmony on his external tongues, threading it throughout with a rhythm-of-discovery clicked in paradiddle on his internal tongues, finally adding the odor complex that signified *I seed my words in your heart and pray for their growth.*

Merler tipped sideways on the sand. *Schlupp!* his roots shot up into their sheaths. He rolled back upward and came off the pool. Wetness flowed down him, staining the sand.

Whorlin accepted respect; slipped his tongue into outphase and began to fugue on discoveries. Almost casually, Merler broke in with a haunting, improvised counterpoint on the theme *my heart if fast, things are slow,* simultaneously chiming his nether tongue several octaves

higher and in discord on *Words words words, they breathe and breed.*

Whorlin furled a root out toward the wetness and kurthed his apology in one of the more difficult standard etudes. Merler, complying, beat out the motif *My heart waits . . .*

Whorlin listened for a moment, then complimented Merler on his attacks.

Yes, regard, obligation. Inner tongues, obligatto: *My words can never approach your finess.* Throat-tongue, motif repeated, beating: *My heart waits . .*

(*Home, home, where is home? Where are they taking us poor, poor birds? Where are they taking the birdies' ship? Hurt. Hurt the poor poor birds.*)

With some regret, Whorlin clicked the rhythm-of-directness on his internal tongues, overtoning that they must sometime ensemble together.

A man on Earth, he vurked, and caught a rhythm-of-wonder from Merler. He developed a theme for Earth; halfway through, Merler harmonized acceptance. Then: *My heart waits,* throbbing.

I have just borged.

Acceptance.

A man.

Rhythm-of-wonder.

Whorlin introduced the motif for science, then overtured discovery, improvising on it until Merler rhymed him.

The universe is finite, he went on, developing this theme, concluding with an obligatto *Most important* on his upper external tongue.

Merler motified the rhythm-of-wonder. Each time his tongues found a beat, Woorlin could feel the seeping life within him; his roots fell away from the wetness, crept back over the sand toward their sheath. Merler paused, then rhythmed completeness.

The work is correct, Whorlin responded. *I have borged the symbols closely.* He buzzed his throat-tongue and added a sketchy odor complex, transferring respect back to Merler.

(*Home, home. Birdies will die away from home. So far, so far. Dead ship, away from home. Where is home? Pity us poor poor birds.*)

This means we shall run out of worlds, Merler vurked.

It borges so.

We shall have no new worlds to find. Image and accompaniment began to rise behind his words.

Acceptence, limitation. *So far ahead it has no meaning. Far, far ahead. Even for us, the two of us.*

Rhythm-of-wonder, swelling. *We shall have no new worlds, new wonders, new voices. We, whose only work and purpose is discovery, whose only love is the voyage. We who have made empty space our friend these million years . .*

So far ahead we have no symbols for it.

Rhythm-of-wonder. The phase of sadness. *It is enough to know someday there will be no more.* The words dropped onto his tongues and lay there, gathering things—emotion, image, resonance—about them, and then, just before it seemed they must die, escaping. His eyes drooped. His roots lay limply out on the sand.

Whorlin beat out completeness in unity against his palates. And then he listened as Merler built a poem of loss about them in the room of pools and weed and sand: a warm hollow thing, filled with sadness and covered over with wonder and love: a small thing, strange with fur, that broke the heart. And for the first time Whorlin understood the beauty and power of Merler's vurking, the limits of his own trained precision. As Merler's tongues clicked and fluttered and sang . . .

He told of a people which had come from the sea onto the orange plains and rolling, wine hills of a huge double-sunned world; had come and carved the land to their likeness. Then when the land was filled and familiar they had felt again the drag of that sea against their best chest and had, some of them, returned. And when even the sea was known, when there was no new things, the people had looked above them and found new worlds, had sailed out to larger seas, seas they believed would never end. They had stepstoned on stars to step among these worlds: quietly, reverently, always listening for new musics, new life. And this inturn became *their* life, the way and beauty of their lives: to be always searching for new things, to be close to beginnings, eavesdroppers to the wonders of a universe. With their birds they had tied world to world, sun to sun, had begun to fill space itself withthe paths of their traveling. They were a long-lived people, and one man could in his time be a part of many worlds

And he spoke of things that end. Of the birds. Their ship. The two of them, Merler and Whorlin, away from home a thousand years. And someday the birds would die, the ship be useless, the two of them marooned, alone. Alone. And all the worlds waiting. But not enough: someday there would be no more. No more. Even worlds had their end . . .

His words resounded in the room. Image dropped away and only the sounds were left; then those too were gone, lost in the sand and the weed-crammed pools. The room was quiet with the breathing murmur of controls. Odors drifted, fading, in the air.

It is sadness, Whorlin vurked after a while. Then, respectfully, he reversed his head and departed the flightroom, leaving a patch of wetness behind the sand.

Merler stood looking after him for a moment, then rolled back onto the suckweed and sent his roots deep down into the living fluid below. He exhaled and his body collapsed around him, sank into the weed. He looked at his bank of controls, at the two dark spots of dampness out on the sand. He spun his eyes in concentration. The guidebirds whined.

(Poor, o poor birdies. Took our homes away. So far, so far. O poor poor birds.)

And outside, the darkness that somewhere, someday had an end—this darkness touched softly at the front of their ship, stroked along it, and fell off into the vacuum behind.

The End

Robert Hoskins (THE PROBLEM MAKERS: Galaxy, August 1963) has been doing rather more editing—see our masthead—and agenting recently and less writing; this is the field's loss at large although to the enormous gain of some writers. He returns here with a new kind of post-holocaust story in which, at the storm-center of the stillness, the real explosions begin.

REASON FOR HONOR

ROBERT HOSKINS

Dawn caught the men on the ridge by surprise. One moment the sky was full of twinkling points of light; the next, a rose-colored bomb exploded in the East, painting the ridge and the valley below with the broadest strokes of nature's crudist, most primitive paintbrush. For a few brief seconds, the valley stood out clearly in Klevinger's glasses, then the morning mist began rising, once more obscuring the world.

"Well, sonny boy?"

Klevinger rolled back from the lip of the ridge and elbowed himself up against the stunted bole of a blasted pine. He unclipped the canteen from his waist and drank eagerly, though sparingly. Then, with slow measured motions, he screwed the cap back on and returned the canteen to its holster.

"Well, what?" he said finally.

"How many of them?"

Klevinger shrugged. "Four, maybe five. One halftrack."

The other man dropped into a squatting position and began rocking back and forth on his heels, arms clasped, fingers lovingly caressing the Master Sergeant's stripes on the sleeve of his filthy fatigues. He was a big man, burly, the webbed belt of an issue .45 straining to hold his bulging belly in place.

"Not too many," he said softly, as though speaking to himself. "Take them by surprise, not too many. Yeah!

"Rafael!"

The sergeant looked up. "Yeah?"

"We can't. There's too many of them."

"What?" He shook his head blankly, as though the words wouldn't come clear.

"We can't do it," said Klevinger. "There's too many of them. We'd never make it." The words out, he bit down on his tongue to keep from revealing his nervousness, lest it suddenly dart over cracked lips. His hand automatically went to the canteen, then he caught himself.

"Boy, you get me." Rafael shook his head, as though in a dream. "You really get me." He stood up and came over to Klevinger. Suddenly reaching down, he yanked the other man to his feet.

"Sergeant!" Klevinger knew fright. The older man outweighed him by sixty pounds and twenty years of

experience. He clawed at Rafael's hands, and they at last loosened. Klevinger pulled himself free.

"You forget yourself, Sergeant," he said, coldly. "Hitting a superior officer. You can be courtmartialled."

"Yeah. Yeah, Lieutenant." THe older man began to giggle as tears rolled from the corners of his eyes. "What'll they do to me, Lieutenant—take away my stripes?"

He held out his arms. "See the pretty stripes, Lieutenant? Six of them, after twenty years in the army." The tears began to flow freely. "Six lousy stripes for twenty years in the Army! You want them back? Take them!"

He began to claw at the chevrons. One fingernail worked through a stitch and suddenly the whole patch tore loose, trailing olive fragments of thread.

"Take them!" he screamed.

"Sergeant!" Klevinger's hand flew out, catching the other flush in the face. Rafael slumped away, burying his face in his hands while the tears slowly halted. Klevinger stood next to him, awkwardly clenching his fists as he witnessed the other man's shame. At last he raised one hand and placed it gently on the other's shoulder.

"Sergeant." The rank came softly. Rafael looked up.

"They bombed L.A.," the older man said.

"I know."

"But how could they?" they told us it'd never happen—but it did!"

"A lot of other places got hit, too," said Klevinger.

"But how could they? They told repeated. "What went wrong?"

"Mistakes—a lot of them. In training they tell us to never underestimate the enemy. Somebody must have missed that part of the training program."

"Whose fault was it?" Rafael demanded.

Klevinger shrugged. "Everybody's. Nobody's. I guess we're all to blame. We didn't listen."

"We lost the war," the older man said, sadly.

"Did we? Who said that?"

"But there's nothing left!"

"Not here, Sergeant. Maybe some other outfit came through all right—"

"It's here that counts."

"Maybe you're right," said Klevinger, sighing. "What difference to us if savages survive in South America? This country is finished."

"What about them?" Rafael jerked his thumb in the direction of the ledge. "We can take them."

"They outnumber us, sergeant."

"Better to die trying, Lieutenant, than to just sit here and . . . wait for the end."

Klevinger shrugged. "Why not? At least it's something to do."

The halftrack was parked in the exact center of the valley. The two circled it widely, coming down the ridge around a broad bend. Here and there stunted trees dotted the valley floor, affording scant cover as they slowly worked their way towards the vehicle. After a seeming eternity, they were five hundred feet away from their goal.

The morning sun began to beat down hotly on their backs. Several times Klevinger found himself reaching for his canteen, but each time he snatched his hand away,

promising himself that only another half hour, another ten minutes, and his body would be rewarded. When the ten minutes passed, he lied to himself again.

They had drifted apart; now Rafael worked his way through the tall grass until they were once more together.

"What the hell's the matter with them?" he demanded angrily. "They just gonna sit there all day?"

"I don't know," Klevinger said, admitting his worry. "Maybe they're out of gas."

"The track's full of jerry-cans."

Rafael "They could be all empty."

Rafael grunted. "Maybe."

The enemy huddled together except for brief moments when one moved away from his companions to relieve himself. Now one came around the track and started in their direction.

"Jesus!" said Rafael, softly. "He's coming right for us!"

He eased his .45 out, working the action as silently as possible. He raised the automatic, drawing a bead on the approaching man. Klevinger saw what he was doing and clamped down on the other's wrist.

"What the hell?" He tried to break free.

"Take it easy," said Klevinger. "He's unarmed."

The man's hands were well away from his body and empty. He was scarcely a hundred feet awaynow. He stopped and called, "You can come out now, gentlemen!"

"It's a trick," said Rafael. He twisted loose and Klevinger threw himself on top of him, fighting the older man for the weapon. It fell from the sergeant's grasp and the younger man hit it with the side of his fist, knocking it into the tall grass.

Tears brimmed in the older man's eyes. "You son of a bitch!"

"Shut up—Sergeant!"

Klevinger scrambled to his feet and stood waiting for the other man to approach. The man stopped twenty feet away and they eyed each other for a moment.

"Well." The other cleared his throat. "What does one say?"

"I don't know," said Klevinger. "You started the conversation."

"So I did. Well." He cleared his throat again. "I suppose there's just the two of you?"

"Does it make any difference?"

"Not really. Two or two thousand—when you're surrendering, the number of your captors makes little difference."

"You're surrendering." It was a flat statement.

The other shrugged. "We have no choice. We've no food, no water, no petrol, and no ammunition. Surrender is the only course remaining."

"How many of you are there?" asked Klevinger.

"Five—no, four. I keep forgetting that my corporal shot himself the other day. A pity—he was only seventeen. He took the bullet I was saving for myself."

"Where's your main force?"

"Who knows? Disintegrated. We may be the only members left alive or out of captivity—except that we're now in captivity. We were airdropped four months ago, just after the first strike. Since then, we've had no contact with anyone else on our side.

For the past several weeks, we've been slowly starving—I say, you do have food, don't you?"

"No."

The other's shoulders sagged. "Then you're not the advance guard of your army."

"For all I know, we are the army," said Klevinger.

"Then it's over—finished." The other man turned and looked at the halftrack. "It is really, finally, over. It's funny; a man goes on hoping, not admitting the truth. We refused to give up and die. And all the time we were dead after all."

"Not quite," said Klevinger.

"Where there's life, there's hope?" He shook his head.

A bomb suddenly exploded by Klevinger's ear. The other's eyes widened in shocked surprise; his hand went to his side and come away covered with blood.

The bomb exploded again and the man was knocked backwards. Still he managed to retain his balance. Bloody hands stretched out and he took one step towards Klevinger. Then life finally gave up the struggle and he fell forward, staining the dead grass of the valley a deep rust red.

Klevinger stood still, shocked into immobility by the suddenness of what had happened. The vague impression of running men finally dragged his atttention away from the corpse. The .45 sounded three more times, and then the last echo of the last shot died slowly away. There was no one left standing besides himself and Rafael.

He slowly turned to face the sergeant. He licked his lips while his tongue tried to form words, but the older man beat him to it.

"The bastards! The dirty bastards! I said I'd get them!"

The lieutenants's words remained unsaid. He wheeled around and started to walk away. Then he broke into a trot.

"Lieutenant Klevinger!"

The gun went off again, the bullet whistling by his ear. Still Klevinger did not stop, but kept running. Again the .45 spoke, and then there was nothing but silence in the broad expanse of the valley. As his exhausted legs carried him out into the plains, far away from the distant past came a dying echo.

"Klevingeeeeerrrr!"

The End

BATHE YOUR BEARINGS IN BLOOD *(Continued from page 35)*

the six feet of his human frame. He reached a hand out to the drain broad and his fingers closed around the length of the pipe. He hefted it in his hand and it was a handy and effective club.

There will be others later, he thought. And they may think of something better. But this is the first skirmish and I will fall back in the best order that I can.

He held the pipe at ready.

"Well, gentlemen?" he said.

The End

THE CLOSED DOOR

By KENDALL FOSTER CROSSEN

This is a detective story. Without, we hasten to add, private eyes, blonds, beds, bigamy or bottles of bourbon. The setting is a luxurious interplanetary hotel three hundred years in the future, and the hero — Detective Inspector Calder — is a quiet young man who reads Rex Stout in the original English and goes to bed, alone, each evening at ten.

Mr. G. G. Gru had been slain while alone in his room. There were no windows, and the single door could be opened only with the active aid of the victim. Yet the killer had done his job despite the most rigid safeguards known to science. Certainly it was impossible — except that Mr. Gru was stone cold dead. . . .

ALISTER CHU, manager of the Planetary Rest Hotel, was a much disturbed man. The Galactic Acrylic Convention was in full swing, which meant that he hadn't slept for two days. When he wasn't rushing to answer the demands of a convention committee, he was busy soothing the complaints of non-convention guests. At the moment, he was trying to estimate the damage resulting from the latest cocktail party, while a group of Acruxians sang their national anthem in the corridor and two delegates from Can-

opus were in the Solar Room hammering out a Nocturne that had been especially arranged for polydactylic pianists. And then his visiphone buzzed.

Without noting the origin of the call, Alister Chu flipped the switch and fairly snarled into his mouthpiece: "Well, what do you want?" Then he recognized the face on the screen. It was one of the hotel's most important guests, and there was no doubt that he was also an angry guest. Alister quickly erased the anger from his own face and added: "Sorry, Mr. Gru, I . . . the convention is making me rather jumpy."

"It's making me more than that," snapped the guest. He spoke Terran with hardly a trace of an accent. "If there's one thing I can't abide, it's practical jokers. You'd better get up here at once, Chu."

"Right away, sir. What — seems to be the trouble?"

"I've already told you," the guest said. His gaze shifted away for a minute. "The Warning Red just flashed on in my room, so you'll have to wait until your damned Mercurian stops parading up and down the hall, but I want you here immediately afterward. I will not stand —" He broke off and a startled expression came over his face. Alister Chu saw that he was staring off to one side of the visiphone, then he started to scribble madly with a pencil on the pad that was beside the phone. "I was wrong," he said thickly. "It's not —"

At this point, as it seemed to Chu, the guest fell apart. Not literally, of course, but there was a minute when his face seemed to be working in all directions at once, then he fell forward in front of the visiphone. From the way he fell, Alister Chu was almost certain that he was dead.

Then a gloved hand came into view on the screen, moved quickly to the phone itself, and the screen went dead.

Alister Chu went quickly from the room, stopping for a moment beside the desk of his assistant. "Something's happened upstairs," he said quietly. "I think you had better put in a call for the police. I'll be on the hundred and seventieth floor. Mr. Gru's room." He hurried on toward the elevators, trying to look as if nothing had happened.

Chief Inspector Maiset, head of the Solar Department, Terran Division, took the call that came into the Interplanetary Criminal Police Commission. Since it was coming in over a closed circuit, he didn't bother to activate the screen. He never did on such calls, his reason being, as he said, that he saw enough policemen without looking at another one when it was not necessary.

"Maiset here," he said into the

audiphone. He listened for a few minutes, doing nothing more than grunt occasionally to show that he was still there. "Let me see now," he said amiably when his caller had run down, "you say the case involves suspected murder, although you're not sure anyone is dead; a hotel full of suspects, if it is necessary to suspect anyone of anything, these being delegates from all over the galaxy. That about it? No, no, you did quite right. I expect you'll be needing someone like Detective Inspector Calder. He'll be right along. You'll meet him? Good."

Chief Inspector Maiset disconnected. He leaned over and pressed one of a number of buttons on his desk, then waited patiently.

After a moment the door to his office opened and a young man stepped inside. Being a detective, he was in plain clothes. That is, he wore an attractive one-piece suit which made him look like any one of a dozen successful young businessmen. But his face lacked the alertness of such young men, his expression usually giving the impression that he was half asleep.

"Another official call, I see," the young man said as he came up to the chief inspector's desk.

"That's true," admitted Maiset, "but how did you know?"

"Simple deduction," the young man answered. "When it's an official call, you never activate the screen. There is, you'll note, a slight film of dust over the screen switch. Since you also never summon me unless there's a case, it means you just received a plea for help from some other station. That, in turn, means a case involving either delicate interplanetary relations or murder."

The chief inspector beamed at the young man. Detective Inspector Jair Calder was always making just such deductions as these. Although it was an age when crime was usually solved by unrelieved science, the chief inspector was a sentimental man who delighted in the old literature of crime, and therefore never ceased to be pleased by Calder's ability.

"You're right," he said. "I just had a call from Sub-Inspector Aly Mordette of the Terran Provincial Police. It's suspected murder *and* delicate interplanetary relations. At the new Planetary Rest Hotel. You know where it is?"

Inspector Calder nodded.

"All that Mordette has done is throw an energy belt around the hotel so that no one can enter or leave. He'll meet you on the Third Level above the hotel and key you through the belt."

Inspector Calder nodded again and left.

A few minutes later he arrived at the Third Level in his small, inconspicuous air-car. He was broadcasting a short-wave im-

pulse which only the police sets could pick up as a means of identification.

The police cruiser soon came alongside, then led the way down toward the hotel. Inspector Calder set his air-car down on the roof-port of the hotel, and by the time he climbed out the uniformed sub-inspector was waiting for him.

The latter was a large, abdominal man, whose light blue uniform managed to look wrinkled in spite of being manufactured from non-wrinkeable plastic. The expression on his red face indicated that the sub-inspector was a man who lived in an aura of constant suspicion.

"Inspector Jair Calder?" he asked formally as Jair stepped from his car.

"Yes," Jair said pleasantly. "I take it you're Sub-Inspector Mordette? A bit of a go here, eh?"

"It would seem so," the sub-inspector said glumly. "I haven't done a thing, you understand. The hotel is filled with all sorts of queer fish — and some of them are fish — and there's no telling what'll hurt their feelings. A mere sub-inspector in the Provincial Police doesn't carry much weight, I can tell you."

"Just so," Jair agreed. "I expect we ought to look in on the trouble, don't you think?"

"We'll have to do down to the hundred and seventieth floor," the sub-inspector said. He started

for the elevators and Inspector Calder fell into step beside him. "Things haven't changed much, I tell you, in spite of all the talk about living in a brave new galaxy."

"How do you mean?" Jair asked.

The sub-inspector waved his hand at the hotel. "All this. Convention at a hotel. Place filled with big shots. A guy gets murdered — probably for the same sort of reason people were murdered three hundred years ago. And it's a time for the little policeman to watch his step or some big shot will have his job. Oh, we have our Twenty-second Century gadgets, but everything works just the same as it did in the Nineteenth or Twentieth Century. You can take my word for it, Inspector."

"I shall," Jair said amiably.

The sub-inspector scowled uncertainly, but was silent for the rest of the trip. When they stepped out of the elevator on the 170th floor, it seemed that the hall was filled with policemen. But finally, halfway down the corridor, Jair caught sight of an immaculately dressed man who could only be the manager of the hotel. He saw them at the same time and hurried to meet them.

"Well, I'm certainly glad that you're here," he said, speaking directly to Jair and ignoring the sub-inspector. "I do trust that this unfortunate matter can be handled discreetly. We have a number of important men here this week and I wouldn't want them disturbed."

"We shall handle them most gently," Jair said. "I'm Inspector Calder, of Planepol. And you're—?"

"Alister Chu," the manager said. "I have the honor of being the manager of —"

"Of course," Jair interrupted. "Now, what seems to be the trouble?"

The manager quickly told of the call he'd received from the guest on this floor. He explained the whole thing in great detail, including his impression of the guest's falling apart: "Not literally, of course." By the time he'd finished, they were standing in front of the room in question.

"Of course," Jair said, agreeing with the impression. He glanced around the luxurious, brightly-colored corridor. "You know, this is the first time I've seen the Planetary Rest Hotel, although I've read about it. Everything is constructed of plastic, eh?"

"Oh, yes." For a minute, pride replaced the worried look on Alister Chu's face. "As you may know, the hotel is owned by Plasticorp and they built everything with their own products. There are two hundred and seventy-three different plastics used. No-

tice how springy the floor is; it cuts down fatigue by sixty per cent. The doors, for example, are of Plexilite with a tensile strength several times that of steel. Then, due to a few new formulas, we are the only hotel capable of catering to every life form in the galaxy —"

"I was wondering about that," interrupted Jair Calder. "Do you have separate sections for the inhabitants of other planets?"

"Oh, no. We have special rooms, of course, but they're on the same floors. Why, there are a number of rooms for Mercurians right here on this floor."

"Mercurians? I should think it would be dangerous for your human guests having them on the same floor."

"No danger of that at all," the manager said. "When the Mercurians want to leave their rooms they naturally have to come through a sort of air-lock. There are warning lights which go on in all the other rooms, in the hallway and in the elevators. This gives everyone a good thirty seconds to get out of the way."

"What about damage to the hallway?"

"None at all," the manager said with pride. "A Mercurian passing through the hall will raise the temperature to about two hundred degrees Centigrade, but none of the plastic used will grow soft at temperatures below two hundred and fifty degrees Centigrade. So there's plenty of margin. And the hallway reverts to its normal temperature within thirty seconds after the Mercurian has passed. At the end of the hall there are special Mercurian elevators, taking them down to where they can enter their fire coaches."

"All of this is very interesting," Jair Calder said, "but I suspect we'd better get down to cases. This the room of the guest?"

"Yes."

"His name?"

"G. G. Gru. He's been coming here regularly since we opened, and he always reserves the same room."

"He was not, I take it, a delegate to the convention?"

"Oh, no. In fact, he loathed the convention."

"I see. Well, since he doesn't answer the door, I expect you'd better open it."

For the first time, the manager looked embarrassed. "I can't," he said.

Something akin to interest crept into Inspector Calder's eyes. "Why not?"

"Well, we have two sorts of doors here. The regular doors are locked or unlocked by a combination of pressures. The combination is given the guest and then changed for the next guest. Naturally, the management has no difficulty opening those doors if

circumstances demand it. But with certain regular guests — and Mr. Gru was one of these — we replace the door with a special one with a palm-lock keyed to the atomic structure of the guest. No one but the guest can either lock or unlock these doors."

"Ah," said Jair Calder. He was really interested now. "I presume there is interior ventilation and so no windows?"

"That is correct, Inspector."

"And this door is the only entrance or exit?"

"Yes."

Inspector Calder looked again at the door. It was a plain plastic door, dark green in color, perfectly smooth and unbroken except for the slight impression, in the shape of a hand, which was the palm-lock.

Now the inspector, like his chief, was of a romantic turn of mind and was fond of the old literature on crime. So, perhaps, it was only natural that, staring at the door, he muttered to himself: "If Gideon Fell could have lived to see this . . ."

"I beg your pardon, Inspector?" the manager said.

"Nothing," Jair Calder said hurriedly. "An unimportant historical allusion. Now, Mr. Chu, I believe you said that Mr. Gru was on the visiphone to you at the time he was apparently killed? And that you yourself saw another hand reach in and turn off the visiphone?"

"That's right."

"And you also tell me that this door — which is the only egress to this room — could not be locked or unlocked by anyone except Mr. Gru?"

"That is also correct, Inspector."

"But then," suddenly exclaimed Sub-Inspector Mordette, "that means the murderer is still in the room. We'd better prepare to 'rush him."

"It'll be a pity if you're right," Inspector Calder said. "And how do you suggest rushing into the room, Sub-Inspector?"

"Why — why —" stammered the official, "I guess we'll just break the door down."

"You couldn't break that door down if you had a thousand men," the manager said with a patronizing air.

"He's right, you know," said Jair. He drew a small weapon from his pocket. "But I expect this will get us in. Plexilite, I believe you said?"

"What's that?" the manager asked.

"Aromatic hydrocarbon gun," the inspector answered. "Very useful in getting through Plexilite doors. In fact, it's the only thing that'll do the trick." He aimed the gun and moved it in a half circle while holding the trigger down. The door swung open, leav-

ing a half-moon section hanging from the lock.

Mr. G. G. Gru was slumped across his desk in front of the visiphone screen, in much the fashion that the hotel manager had described. There was no doubt that he was quite dead.

Inspector Jair Calder walked across and stood looking down at the body, ignoring the fact that Sub-Inspector Mordette and his men were sniffing around the room with drawn weapons. Then, as he saw Mordette approaching, he leaned over and ripped off the top sheet of a scratch pad on the desk. He folded back the top inch or so and held it in his hand. There was a jagged tear across the lower half.

"No villain, eh, Mordette?" he asked casually.

"No," growled the sub-inspector. "An Algenibian worm couldn't be hidden in here without my men finding him." He stopped and gazed down at the body. "No wound. Must have been a magnetic weapon."

Inspector Calder grunted what might have been either an affirmative or negative.

"Demagnetized," Mordette said with scorn. "Just a fancy method of electrocution. I told you that even methods hadn't changed in the last two hundred years."

"So you did," murmured Jair. "Mr. Chu, I take it that Mr. Gru here was from Sirius Two?"

"Yes, Inspector."

"Hmmm. I thought so. Humanoid, but a Si-type of life." He glanced again at the paper in his hand. "As you probably suspected, Mr. Chu, the victim did try to leave us a clue to his death, but I'm afraid most of it has been made off with." He held the paper up so that the others could see it. One jagged piece of paper, torn on both sides, still retained a crude drawing of a six-sided figure and the letters *COO*.

"Coo?" asked a bewildered sub-inspector. "What sort of a clue is that?"

"Not a very good one, I'm afraid," admitted Jair. "By itself, the word might indicate a soft murmuring sound — hardly to be associated with an act of violence. I believe at one time it was also an expression of surprise among a small lower-class group of Terrans. Then again — and perhaps more to our purpose — it might be part of a name. Mr. Chu . . ."

"Yes, Inspector?"

"I'd like a little assistance, please. First, a place where I may conduct the investigation. Preferable a comfortable place where I might also have some coffee. Then, someone sufficiently familiar with the convention here to inform me about the various delegates. Thirdly, I'd like a quick search

made of your register and a list of all names which have the letters C-O-O appearing together."

"Of course, sir," the manager said. "We have a rather comfortable executive's lounge."

"Fine." Inspector Calder walked out of the room with the others trooping behind him. As he stepped into the hallway, he lurched and almost fell. He stooped quickly and came up holding a small, transparent six-sided figure. As he held it up to the light, faint markings could be seen inside as if someone had managed to etch the letter U within the solid.

"A rather interesting piece of Plexilite," he observed. "Any idea what it was doing in the corridor, Mr. Chu?"

"No," the manager said. He stepped closer and looked at it. "Looks like interior etching. Could it be some sort of costume jewelry, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Jair said. He tossed it in the air a couple of times and then put it in his pocket. He took one more look at the door. "Mr. Chu, what about someone's removing the door from its hinges?"

"It can only be done when the current is off or when the door is unlocked, and even then it's a good twenty-minute job. There would have been no time for the . . . ah . . . murderer to replace the door. You will remember the warning light went on while Mr. Gru was speaking to me. So a Mercurian went down the hallway within thirty seconds and I myself was here as soon as the Mercurian returned to his room."

"Of course. Shall we go lounge like executives?"

The manager disapproved of the levity, but he led the way to the elevator without speaking.

"Now," said Inspector Calder, when they were in the luxurious executive's lounge, "before you dash off to fetch my coffee, the list of names, and a convention expert, would you know the time you received the call from Mr. Gru?"

"Yes," said the manager. "It was just one minute past two o'clock."

"Then," said Jair, writing the time down, "Mr. Gru was murdered at approximately one minute and ten seconds past two. The Mercurian entered the hallway at approximately one minute and thirty-five seconds past two. How long would you say before he returned to his room?"

"Four or five minutes. I waited in the elevator until the light went off."

"Let's say five minutes. So at six minutes and thirty-five seconds, the Mercurian went back to his room of fire. Then, at seven minutes and five seconds past two, you entered the corridor — and found it empty?"

The manager nodded.

"Good. While you're about it, you might also find out which one of your Mercurians was promenading down the corridor."

Inspector Calder studied the timetable he'd written down, ignoring the glum-looking sub-inspector, until the hotel manager returned. With him was another Terran, a rather brusque-looking young man dressed in the latest sports-plastic.

"This," he said, "is James Bruce. He's an employee of Plasticorp and has been in charge of the present Acrylic convention. Mr. Bruce, Inspector Calder of the I.C.P.C."

"Hi, Inspector," the newcomer said in a breezy fashion. "Chu, here, told me about the business upstairs. I'll be glad to help in any way I can. I do hope, however, that your investigation won't disturb our convention too much. We have some pretty important men here." He bore down on the word *important* just enough. Jair Calder got the implication, but gave no recognition of it.

"We'll try to keep the murder from inconveniencing you too much," he said dryly. "What is your position with Plasticorp, Mr. Bruce?"

"Vice president in charge of testing. But I'm also the convention chairman. And if I do say it myself, this is one of our best conventions. We've been having a high old time, if you know what I mean." He managed a leer that was about as crude as anything Calder had seen in a long time.

"Quite," the Inspector said. "Mr. Chu, the names?"

"Only four guests fit the requirements," the manager said. "Cooerl II, from Mercury. Rruda Akcoo of Mars. Somer Alcoon of Rigel. And Amos Coombs, a Terran. All of them are delegates to the convention."

Jair Calder nodded and turned to the convention chairman. "You know them, Mr. Bruce?"

"Sure. All of them are good guys."

"They are delegates from different companies?"

"Not exactly," Bruce said. "To get the picture, you have to realize that Plasticorp controls about ninety per cent of the plastics business in the galaxy. There are a few minor companies, but almost everyone at this convention is a part of Plasticorp. These four are all executives in the corporation. I'll vouch for them, Inspector."

"That's nice of you," Jair Calder said dryly. He turned back to the manager. "Did you learn which Mercurian was out?"

The manager nodded. "By a strange coincidence, it was this same Cooerl II."

"Let's hope it was no more than a coincidence. You have a flame-suit I can borrow?"

The manager nodded.

"I'll go up and see Cooerl II then," the inspector said. "Mr. Bruce, I wonder if you'd mind learning the whereabouts of Coombs, Akcoo, and Alcoon at about two o'clock?"

"Sure thing," Bruce said.

Inspector Calder donned a standard flame-suit and returned to the hundred and seventieth floor. He'd arranged for the desk to announce he was coming, so he was admitted without delay. Once the inner door had closed, the Mercurian turned from the controls and greeted his visitor politely.

The Mercurians were, of course, originally descended from a form of salamander, but Cooerl II stood upright and resembled a salamander about as much as Jair Calder resembled the Pekin Man. The Mercurian and the Terran exchanged polite views on the weather, the Mercurian's relatives, and other such unimportant matters for several minutes.

"I understand," Jair Calder finally said, "that you were out in the hall briefly this afternoon. I wonder if you'd mind telling me why?"

"Certainly not." The Mercurian's voice sounded querulous in the head-phones. "I was notified by the operator that there was a visiphone call for me. There is no set in my room — I understand the heat is not good for the screen — and so I went to the public visiphone booth at the end of the corridor. But there was no one there when I answered. Apparently the party had hung up, or it was a practical joke."

"Strange," said Jair, more to himself, "this is the second mention of a practical joke without any more evidence than that. You met no one in the hallway?"

"Of course not. It would be dangerous to anyone other than another Mercurian or someone dressed as you are now."

Inspector Calder wasted another few minutes telling the Mercurian how much he admired his home planet and wishing him warmth and good health, and then left the room. Out in the hall he removed the flame-suit, emerging drenched in sweat, and went back downstairs. The manager, Mr. Bruce and the Provincial Police still waited for him.

"I checked up on the boys for you," Bruce announced. "All three of them have perfect alibis. They were in a committee meeting from one until three."

"Thank you," said Inspector Calder. "What about yourself?"

"Me?" asked the startled vice president. "You're kidding, Inspector. But if you really want to know, I got an alibi too."

Jair Calder nodded agreeably and sat down. He tasted the coffee

which was sitting at his place and was glad to find it fresh and hot. Then he turned to the manager.

"Mr. Chu, I must trouble you for two more things. I'd like all the elevator operators who were on duty from about twelve o'clock to after two brought here one at a time so that I can question them. I'd also like to question any other guests on the hundred and seventieth floor who were in their rooms at about two o'clock. That is, excepting the Mercureans. Then — I believe the hotel has its own shops, does it not?"

"Yes, indeed. You can purchase anything without leaving the hotel."

"Good. Check each shop and get me a list of any unusual purchases made during the past two days." He waited until the manager left the room and then smiled at Sub-Inspector Mordette. "Best do this in an orderly fashion, eh, Mordette? Looks better on the report."

"You see," Mordette said triumphantly, "even you must follow the exact form that was used centuries ago."

"I'll make a note of it," Jair said solemnly.

For the next several minutes, he was busy with the stream of hotel employees who came in to be questioned, all of them nattily attired in the hotel service uniform. But the result of the questioning only proved that no one had been on the one hundred and seventieth floor between twelve and two o'clock except G. G. Gru, himself, and the Mercurian.

The manager returned to report that the other guests of the one hundred and seventieth floor had all been downstairs with the exception of a rather ill-tempered crustacean from Aldebaran who refused even to be questioned.

Inspector Calder nodded and seemed to lose interest in that trend of thought.

"You will be finished soon, won't you?" the manager inquired anxiously. He stifled his conviction that the inspector was incompetent and would never be finished.

"I expect so," Jair said. "You checked with your shops?"

"Yes. There were a few unusual purchases. The Pleasure Shop sold a silver-handled whip to a visiting Terran and had one request for Martian *Jhung* cigarettes. These are illegal, of course, so there was no sale. The Dispensary sold a small order of carbolic acid and one of formaldehyde, and then an Antarean came in this morning to purchase a — a —"

"Never mind," Inspector Calder said. "I'm well aware of the moral habits of Antareans. I think I'd like to make an outside call. Where is the nearest public visiphone booth?"

"Through there," the manager said, indicating a door.

While the inspector was gone, the manager tried to hold a conversation with the sub-inspector in the hope of learning that Inspector Calder had some idea of leaving the hotel before too long.

"Maybe it was suicide," he suggested, glancing idly at a hotel service man who had entered and was fixing one of the wall lights. "I've heard that the inhabitants of Sirius II are often melancholy. And after all, the room was locked."

"Personally," the sub-inspector finally said, "I'd think that somebody pumped poison through your ventilating system, if it weren't for the fact that you saw the murderer's hand on the screen. And maybe that's what it was anyway. Witnesses are never very reliable."

"Nonsense," the manager said sharply. "It couldn't be done." He looked sharply at the sub-inspector, but the latter had already decided he'd been hasty in venturing an opinion at all.

"I'd vote for suicide," James Bruce added. "Moody, all of those humanoid types. They're almost human, but not quite, and they can't stand it."

Sub-Inspector Mordette still refused to rise to the bait, so the three men fell silent. They watched the repairman stroll from the room, then turned to staring at the ceiling while they waited.

"Well," said Inspector Calder, coming back into the room in what seemed to be good humor, "I expect we'll be through with this shortly." He sat in his chair and pulled out a cigarette case. "Cigarette, anyone?"

James Bruce took one, but the others refused.

"I say," Calder exclaimed. He reached over and grabbed Bruce's lighter just as he was about to activate it. Then he jumped up and went over to the wall. He reached up and pulled a small brown ball from the wall. "A thallium bomb," he said to the others. "A good thing I saw it before you struck that lighter. The slightest change in temperature and we would've all been poisoned."

"Good heavens," said the manager. His face was pale, a color that was matched by the faces of the other two men. "How did it get there? There hasn't been anyone in the room but the three of us."

"No one?" Jair Calder asked softly.

"Not a soul. It —" A startled expression came over the manager's face. "There was a repairman," he said. His face darkened with anger. "I'll —"

"Never mind," said the inspector. He opened a small case and popped the thallium bomb into it. "I was the repairman who came in. It was easy to borrow a coat. I also put the bomb there."

"But why?"

"I just wanted to demonstrate that the testimony we received stating no one appeared on the one hundred and seventieth floor meant nothing. Repairmen, like servants, are invisible people. I think we can be pretty sure that our murderer, dressed in a hotel uniform, was up on the floor twice today."

"Twice?" said Mordette. "Why twice?"

"First, he had to arrange matters — it was this arrangement which Mr. Gru thought was a practical joke. Then, after arranging for a call to be put through to Cooerl II, he returned to the floor, killed Mr. Gru, grabbed up the clue or part of it, ran out and off the floor. Thirty seconds doesn't sound like much time, but he needed no more."

"But — but what about the door?" asked the manager.

"Oh, yes, he unlocked the unlockable door and locked it again."

"But it's impossible."

"Only improbable," Jair Calder said. "Mr. Chu, where did you keep the special door to that room when the guest from Sirius II was not here?"

"In the workshop in the basement."

"And the regular door is kept there when Mr. Gru is in the hotel?"

The manager nodded.

"I wonder if you'd mind phoning down and checking the door situation now?" the inspector asked.

The manager crossed the room in nervous strides to an audiphone. He talked for a minute, then returned, a frown on his face.

"I don't understand it," he said. "They report that the regular door and the special door are both there. That means —"

"A third door," finished Jair Calder. "Also special, in that it was made for this one occasion. I might add that it was just like your special door except for a slight chemical difference. The murderer's first trip was to install his door, of course. By the way," he added, turning to Bruce with a smile, "as vice president in charge of testing I imagine you carry a Sonicolt, don't you?"

The vice president nodded.

"Could I see it a moment?"

James Bruce handed over what appeared to be a good-sized automatic pistol. Inspector Calder peered at it.

"A 47-M caliber," he said. "You use this for testing plastic?"

"Yeah," Bruce said. "That's the best Sonicolt made. Our plastic will stand the full force of it, even through a supersonic periodic disturbance of 47,000 cycles per second, it is even strong enough to ki —" He broke off.

"Exactly," the inspector said softly. "While relatively harmless

to human beings, a Sonicolt will kill anyone from Sirius II. And it was such a weapon as this that killed Mr. Gru."

"But I don't understand," said the manager.

"Si-type life form," said Jair. "The inhabitants of Sirius II, while humanoid in appearance, have a silicon constitution instead of carbon. A supersonic weapon of this strength would literally shatter their insides. So you weren't so far wrong, Mr. Chu, when you said you had the impression he was falling apart."

"Why was he murdered?" Mordette asked.

"I think it was over plastics," said the inspector.

"Nonsense," James Bruce declared roughly. "Sirius II has never been in the race on plastics."

"But I think they were about to get into it through Mr. Gru," Jair Calder said pleasantly. "Mr. Bruce, you're more familiar with plastic formulae than I am. I wonder if you'd check the formula I've written down." He handed a sheet of paper to the vice president.

The latter looked at the paper and his face twisted with rage. He leaped to his feet, one hand darting for his pocket.

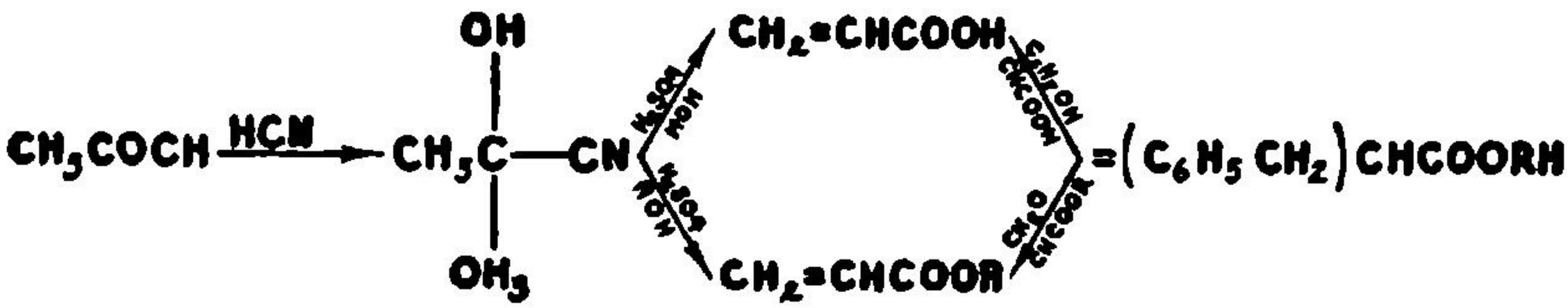
But for all of his faults, Sub-Inspector Mordette needed only one hint to alert him. He'd gotten that hint from the tone of Calder's voice. He grabbed James Bruce and snatched the small magnetic gun out of his hand before he had a chance to use it. Then, still holding the vice president with one ham-like hand, he looked to the Interplanetary detective.

"He's the murderer all right," Inspector Calder said. "Take him away."

Sub-Inspector Mordette motioned toward the door and two of his men came in and took James Bruce out.

"Now, what about it?" Mordette asked heavily. "What made him break like that?"

"This," said Calder. He held up the paper so that they could both see what had been carefully written on it.



"What does it mean?" Mordette asked.

"That's the formula for the door he made," Jair said. "It's the same as the regular formula except for a slight difference which lowers its softening point. You see, Plexilite is a polymethyl methacrylate plastic, sometimes known as the plastic with a memory. In other words, it can be molded into one form and then, if you heat it, it will immediately revert to its original form."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Everything. You see, Mr. Bruce made the door exactly like the regular door, except that in molding it he put into the door an old-fashioned keyhole — something which hasn't been used in a hundred years. He also molded a key to fit it and so was able to unlock and lock the door."

"But what happened to the keyhole and the key?"

"Cooerl II," Jair Calder said. "The call to the Mercurian was a plan to get him to pass along the hallway just after the murder. In doing so, he raised the temperature to about two hundred degrees centigrade — not warm enough to bother the other doors, but enough to make this one door 'remember' its original form, which was a door without a keyhole. And the key, which he'd dropped on the floor, became this." Jair reached into his pocket and held up the small figure he'd picked up earlier. "What looks like etching is where he filed the key. In reverting, the filed edges were inside."

"The clue on the paper."

"Part of it," said Jair. "Gru must have guessed when he saw his murderer and tried to write down the formula, or part of it. The six-sided figure he drew was probably part of the chemical symbol for the reaction between phenol and formaldehyde — that being what Bruce added and which he purchased here in the hotel. The *COO* was undoubtedly part of the formula I've written here."

"But why?"

"Plastics," the inspector said. "Mr. Gru had made an appointment with a patent attorney concerning something he was going to call Ancolite. On the scratch pad upstairs was part of a formula which the murderer overlooked. Not the complete formula, but enough to be interesting." He pulled the slip of paper from his pocket and unfolded the section which earlier he'd folded back. He read from it. "'CO-Two A-N-O plus Si-O-Two plus C-six-H-five-O-H.' It's enough to indicate that Mr. Gru had apparently found a way to make a plastic primarily from air. This might easily put Plasticorp out of business."

"But —" began the manager.

"Exactly," said Inspector Calder. "James Bruce committed murder in order to save his corporation. But it was a wasted effort. I must turn this paper over to the government of Sirius II and they probably have a chemist who can reconstruct the formula. You see," he added turned to the sub-inspector, "you were quite wrong about nothing having changed in the past two hundred years. This was a crime which could not have happened then.

"Which," he continued, "brings us up to the point that James Bruce will, according to law, have to be tried on Sirius II. I'll write a supplementary report, but you'll have to file the main report. And I have no doubt that Mr. Bruce will be found guilty. After which, perhaps, there'll be some action against Plasticorp."

"One thing puzzles me," said Mordette, still finding something to worry him. "I've had no experience with this sort of thing. How shall I make the charge? The victim wasn't a man, so homicide seems somehow wrong."

"Of course it is," Inspector Jair Calder said briskly. "The proper charge is silicide." He waved to the two men and walked out, once more looking sleepy.

They waved back.

MAJOR INCITEMENT TO RIOT *(Continued from page 48)*

pointlessness of it and he said to his old man, loud enough for everyone to hear: "I don't even know why you took me here. It doesn't make a bit of difference; this man, the one up there, didn't have anything to do with me at all and it doesn't make any difference what happened to him. Don't you see that it didn't make any difference to anybody? You just fool around when you say that something's changed and it's always the same no matter who gets killed."

People in the square turned distressed faces toward him and at that exact point—the Opposition having calculated doubt to the last one tenth of a degree—the bombing and the terror began.

WHEN THE RIOT WAS OVER, HOWEVER,

standing in the empty square, watching the fire and ash, Roger found that he didn't feel so bad after all; much better, for instance, than he had felt yesterday. For one thing he had gotten rid of his father and for another, assuming that he had any ambitions that way, he had cleared the way for his progress toward being Chief himself. As a matter of fact, Roger thought, turning homeward to comfort his mother, that was a good idea; he could campaign for it: hadn't he been the one who, in a certain sense, had been the leader of ths Opposition?

God damn, muttered Roger Cleaver, and thinking of the beauty and terror of the fires that had wrought and then destroyed the death-mask, he felt the pity rise fully within him; the pity that would become an uncancellable debt that only he could fulfill when, a quarter of a century later, he acceded to the position toward which he had so long striven. But that and the story of the many great deeds he did in office are a different matter altogether and must be discussed separately.

The End

Jody Scott Wood (The 2-D Problem; F & SF, August 1965) returns to the field with this story-barely-longer-than-a-blurb which needs no comment whatsoever, I trust.

THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES
JODY SCOTT WOOD

Fellow apes!

I called this meeting to discuss the horrible behavior of our young people.

Not all—thank the Dead Leader!; just a sickening minority. They have left the trees and are walking erect on the ground.

I hear you gasp and groan, fellow apes, and my heart goes out to you. Those of you whose own children are among the heretics, especially do I weep for you!

We have been happy here for a million zookers. Why can't they adjust, and love to swing on a lazy day high in the trees in the warm sun in the soothing buzz of the jungle?

Oh, I am furious!

They are gathering together to wail strange noises. They are eating the kookaloo plant, which drives apes mad. They are killing and eating large animals!

Horrible!

Horrible!

Some have struck flowers in the hair of their heads.

This is sickening.

It is effeminate.

Most important—we do not like it.

We shall shower them with leaves and excrement!

Let us jump up and down and howl! Yes, jump, jump, voice your disapproval. Throw dead leaves, throw branches! Express your reproaches.

The People have always lived in trees. It is nature's way. Those who climb down out of the trees and walk erect, must be destroyed! Ah yes, now you want to suck grubs and sniff backsides—worthy occupations—but you must listen to me: we must *destroy* the wicked who have departed from the Law!

They no longer obey *me*, the Leader. When I scream at them they make disrespectful cackles and tongue-blowings.

They no longer pick and eat each other's fleas. Could anything be more irresponsible?

They walk erect; they think themselves better than we. They put us down! Kill them! Kill them!

Oh!, I'm so angry.

Why can't things be the way they were? Life was good. Why change? I liked it the way it was, with myself as leader. Yes, insects are humming, the sun is shining. Jungle birds are squawking. It is pleasant to mount one of the nearby females. Ah, ah! How pleasant! How good.

Nothing has changed; it was only a dream. It is so pleasant here in the treetops, with full bellies and well-groomed hair.

And now, my People, it is nap time. Later, we shall discuss those things we were discussing before.

We will get to the bottom of this yet.

The End.

A pretty familiar idea, this one . . but there is always room in the field for familiar ideas; trouble with science-fiction—like almost anything else—it tends to consume its history as soon as it has spewed it forth so that too much done badly or superficially gets to be known as "definitive". I wouldn't mind seeing more treatments of ideas like this in the field although I wouldn't want to jeopardize myself unduly by saying that I like this story, not that way if you know what I mean. Robert Phillips has published poetry and fiction in over 50 magazines; this is his first contribution to the category.

GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

ROBERT S. PHILLIPS

He had thought about going to a lawyer for months. When he did the office looked like he imagined all attorney's offices must look though he had never been in one before. The room was filled with heavy, traditional leather chairs, crowded shelves of gilt-edged legal books, and framed diplomas yellowing behind glass on the walls.

"What can I do for you?" the lawyer asked, a heavy-set man wearing rimless spectacles and a royal blue serge suit. There were flecks of dandruff on each shoulder.

"I—I wanted to talk to you about getting a divorce."

The lawyer's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Divorce? Really?"

"That's right," the man said. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Divorce. I see," the lawyer said hesitantly. "I don't get many of them these days. Not like I used to. It's all part of the movement. More emphasis on the home, don't you know. People now realize there's just no substitute for good solid home life. There's more church-going these days, too. You go to church?"

"Yes, I do."

"Wife go with you?" The lawyer peered over the top of his spectacles, curiously waiting the reply.

"Yes. Sometimes, that is."

"Well, then. What seems to have gone wrong? What are your grounds for divorce? Adultery?"

"No."

"Mental cruelty?"

"No."

"Sexual incompatibility?"

The man stared at his shoes. Then he raised his head and said softly, "Yes."

"I see. Well, now, we're getting

somewhere. Now we have something to talk about." The lawyer reached to the end of his desk, pushed a button, and said to the man, "Let me record some facts. Just talk in your normal voice, please. The tape will get it all down. Give me your name."

"Emory. Walter Emory."

"Age?"

"Thirty-one."

"How long married?"

"Nine years."

"Occupation?"

"Teacher."

"Ah! Wonderful profession, teaching. I have the utmost respect for teachers. A pity their pay isn't in proportion to their contribution to society . . ."

"Yes," the man said. He cleared his throat self-consciously. "They're doing something about it. It's not quite so bad as it used to be."

"So I understand. Well, it's about time. Now, we got side-tracked, didn't we? Let's get back to the questions, Mr. Emory. Now just what is the nature of your your incompatibility?"

The man stared at his shoes again. A few seconds went by.

"Come, come, Mr. Emory. The tape is running, we're wasting good tapes. You can speak freely here. If I'm to take your case, you must be perfectly honest with me. I must know all the details."

"Well," the man stammered. Then he blurted out, "Sometimes I look at old picture books, in the library. I have a special library card, being a teacher. I get to look at almost any book I want. Even the forbidden ones."

"Yes?"

The man was conscious of the tape collecting on its spool. He hurried on with his story. "I look at these pictures in the forbidden books, photographs of old-time dames like that Anita Eckberg, and Marilyn Monroe. You ever hear of Anita Eckberg or Marilyn Monroe?"

"I've heard of them. They were motion-picture actresses in the last century, I believe." The lawyer's voice was clipped and dry.

"That's right. Really handsome women, terribly handsome. And I get these queer feelings whenever I look at their pictures. Sometimes I—"

The lawyer sat rigid in his chair. "Queer feelings, Mr. Emory?"

"Yeh. I feel funny all over, sometimes. Just from looking at them. Can you beat it? And then I get to thinking."

"What is it you think about?"

The young man toyed with the wedding band on his left hand. He twisted the ring around and around on his finger. Finally he said, "I get to thinking that maybe I wasn't meant to be married at all."

"Oh?"

"Listen, this is damned hard for me to talk about. I probably should see a head shrinker instead of a lawyer—"

"No, do go on. We must get to the bottom of your marital difficulty. Is it that your wife doesn't satisfy you?"

"It isn't my wife's fault. I just don't think that . . . I don't think that *any* man could make me happy." His face went crimson.

"Indeed!" The lawyer looked at

him disapprovingly. Then his finger went out and pushed the button to stop the recorder. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"I know. It's not natural. But when I look at those pictures, I get the feeling I should be living with a woman, instead."

"A woman?" The voice was full of loathing. "That went out with the airplane! Nearly a hundred years ago. You know that."

"I know," he said hopelessly.

"Barbaric system the human race had until then. You know the problems it created. Population explosion, little bastards running us right off the face of the earth. Food shortages. Competition of the sexes—"

"Yes, I know all that."

"The present system is *much* better. Separate but equal, I always say. It was long enough in coming. Wasn't until the middle of the Twentieth Centruy that nature started correcting itself. You must know the history of the movement as well as I do. It started in Greenwich Village, I believe, then spread to Paris and I suppose London—"

"I know the history of the movement."

"Well, everyone is much, much happier now. I know *I* am. My wife is a lovely person," the lawyer said with satisfaction. "Let the women stay in their colonies, the men in ours, right?"

"You don't suppose — . . . you don't suppose I could get sent to one of the Population Perpetuation Colonies, do you?"

The lawyer frowned, drummed his fingers impatiently on the desk top. "Do you have an IQ or 200 or better?"

"No. Mine is about 140."

"Well, then, it's quite out of the question. The government sends only people with 200 or better to live there. Confidentially . . ." he leaned forward across the desk, "I don't think you'd like it there. Terribly primitive notions. Besides, what would all your friends say if they knew you'd turned that way?"

"You're right, of course," the young man sighed, trying to ignore the strange uneasiness he felt in his heart.

The End

ALL IN THE GAME *(Continued from page 41)*

and did everything I had to do to win—to get my own way. I wanted wealth and power and confort, and I subordinated everything to getting it. I never stopped to think that the end and the means were one and the same thing. I never realized . . ."

"Exactly, Sir."

"The reward was never the prize. All the time it was the game itself."

"You sacrificed everything to win, Mr. Rodman. As far as we're concerned, you DID win. Here is where you collect all of the prizes, Sir. All of them."

The End

The alien galaxy had a strange hobby: they collected planets. And now they wanted to make Earth a star specimen.

RALPH SHOLTO

Illustrated by PAUL LUNAY

The instruments at Palomar and Wilson registered an alien body crossing the solar orbits. The intruder, whatever it was, pulled Mars forty thousand miles out of its lane. From all indications, the thing would be hauled around by Mercury and would dive straight into the sun. A rare occurrence and one the astrologicians looked forward to with interest.

There was one disturbing phenomenon, however. The space rover registered upon all instruments except the telescope and the camera. The plates revealed no uncharted body of any description, and the astro people chewed their nails and wondered.

"A surface without refraction. A body that repels the whole spectrum. Strangest thing I ever heard of."

"Ideal derelict in some respects. If it turned Earthward, we wouldn't have to worry about panic in the streets. The public wouldn't know anything about it until the tides began to go crazy."

"An invisible comet. Nice."

"Better notify Space Authority."

Rex Moran woke up with a lump on his head. He got the lump from rolling out of his bunk when the *Dog Star*—riding the little-used Green Lane from Neptune—appeared to hit a brick wall in open void and went end over end like a sardine can pitched toward the garbage dump.

Rex held onto a bunk support until the *Dog Star* righted itself, and then went storming up the companionway toward the pilot house. He tried the door. It was locked. He yelled, "Johnny! You damn fool! What the blue blazes you trying to do?"

There was no answer. Rex hit the door with his shoulder. It was not locked; only jammed. He staggered into the pilot house and found Johnny Calhoun folded up like an accordion under the port control panel. Johnny had a bump, too. He was out.

Rex checked all boards and found the auto-stabilizer had taken over, but on a new course. He picked shattered glass out of a few dials so the needles would clear, then gave his attention to Johnny. He hauled the bearded space veteran out from under the panel and slapped his face until a pair of squint eyes opened. Johnny said, "who lowered the boom?"

"What the hell did you hit?" You must have bashed in the nose of the ship."

Johnny got to his feet, staggered, grabbed the table. "Didn't hit nothing. What can you hit when there's nothing to hit? That screen was as empty as a jet cleaner's head."

Rex went over and scanned the screen. Clear. He swung the pilot's reflector in all directions. Nothing."Empty space," he grunted, "and we go end over end. Off course, too. Thirty-six degrees off course."

"Then we're chasing something."

"What?"

"How do I know?"

"We got a blank screen, you goof. There's nothing to chase."

Johnny came over and stared doggedly into the screen. "Can't help that. If a ship hits something when nothing's there to hit, it's magnetic pull. What else? Some carcass spun us like a top, and we're hauling after it."

"Ever hear of a carcass you couldn't see?"

"Not up to ten minutes ago, but I have now."

"If we can't see it, what's to keep us from barging into it again?"

Johnny started to answer. Then his face—that part not covered by

beard—went white. "You suppose we shook the sprinkler system loose?"

Rex cursed and dived for the door. He'd forgotten the sprinklers. At that very moment an acid spray could be turning the cargo into smoke. He raced aft, down the companionway, to the false wall that should have bulked off the fuel bins but didn't. He ran his hands over the smooth surface of the bulkhead, pressed a certain spot and caught in one hand a small disc of metal that fell away, revealing a tiny lens. He put his eye to the lens, then replaced the disc and west back to the pilot house.

"Cargo's okay. Piled up plenty, but all intact. We didn't start the spray."

Johnny had recovered. He sat on the pilot's cushion with the old cynical light in his eyes. "You know," he said, "that's a smart setup, but it ain't new."

"What're you talking about?"

"The acid spray. It reminds me of a book I read once. A real old book of how they smuggled the heathen Chinese onto the American West Coast two hundred years ago. Come a coast guard boat and they'd fasten chains to the yellow boys' legs and dump them overside. Acid's better, of course, but see what I mean? It ain't new."

"Shut up! The log wire's on. Now I'll have to uncap the box and cut out a section."

"Sorry," Johnny said, and went back to his scanning. "I better pull us back on course."

Rex went to the commissary and fried a mess of bacon. He broke out the coffee and had a pot steaming when Johnny came back from the pilot house.

"Can't get on course," Johnny said.

"What do you mean, can't get on course?"

"Just what I said. Magnetic pull. Something's hauling us thirty-degrees off. Not enough power in the jets to offset it. I tried like hell, but all we do us sunfish. There's something mighty big out there."

Johnny's dark, handsome face grew darker. "What the damn hell—"

"We've got to get loose! If it's a magnetic slip-stream we can get clear if you roost on the controls."

Johnny turned toward the door. "Okay. Bring me a cup of coffee. I'll go roost."

He took two steps, but that was all. Space stasis set in instantly. With no warning, they were like particles floating in heavy water. Johnny drifted up toward the ceiling. He turned slowly. Rex's feet idled past his nose and following the feet was a gob of brown coffee shaped like the inside of a cup but divorced entirely therefrom.

Rex growled, "What the hell," and the hot coffee touched his arm, scalding it.

Now came darkness. The lights did not go out. Rather, they were engulfed in an all-powerful cloud of darkness; a smothering black that came from nowhere to gulp down every light ray; an ink sponge blotting away all vision.

Johnny said, "This stuff is high frequency, whatever else it is. Not from inside. It comes through the hull. It's why we couldn't see that carcass. Light rays must bend and by-pass it."

"So you got it doped. That's swell. Helps a lot—now."

Colleen Barnum didn't like her father coming to breakfast in his underwear. She said it was indecent. But Saul Barnum was the kind of a man who spurned convention and insisted upon being comfortable aboard his own ship.

He said, "Look, honey. There ain't a lot of difference between a suit of long underwear and a space rig. They both cover you up. Besides, when I get up I'm hungry. I don't want to fuss around with no dressing until I got something in my belly. Serve up the eggs."

So Colleen served her father up a fried egg—right between the eyes as hard as she could peg it. "I told you I don't like you eating in your underwear! Now, go get your pants on!"

Saul wiped the mess off his face and stared at his daughter. Lord but she was pretty! A red-headed, streamlined hellion if he'd ever seen one.

"Honey, you shouldn't ought to do a thing like that."

"I'm tired of talking."

"A man's got some privileges aboard his own ship. Ain't nobody here but you and me. And don't I work like a dog trying to hit the jackpot and make you rich?" He continued to stare at her. She was prettiest, he thought, when she was mad. It was worth getting her riled up just to see the sight.

"Oh, of course! You lounge in the pilot house all day while I do everything else!"

"Somebody's got to pilot the ship."

"And these jackpot cargos you dream up. Snow-orchids from Pluto into Brazil of all places."

Saul scratched his chin. "Funny they wouldn't let me unload that cargo. They was prettier than any orchids on Terra."

"The Brazilians make their living by growing orchids. What did you expect them to do? Roll out a carpet for imports?"

"Well, maybe it was a mite short-sighted on my part, but—"

"And building blocks from the heavy asteroids."

"A good idea. That material can't be destroyed. It'd last forever."

"Sure, but when we went into the ways at Chicago, the blocks were so heavy we couldn't get them off the ship. You'll remember we had to go out beyond the pull and dump the whole load."

"The difference in atmosphere density *did* make a problem—"

"And what a problem. Go wash the egg off your face and put your pants on."

Saul continued to gaze at his daughter. She was sure built to interest the young buckos. Trouble was they shied away from her fire.

Then Saul was looking at his daughter upside down. He hung in space, over the table, and watched her make a complete revolution. He saw her clutch frantically at her skirts and wondered about it. There was no one there; only the two of them. Women were sure funny, he mused.

When he got around to wondering what had happened to the ship, it was too late to find out because a thick, penetrating darkness came in to blot out everything.

Rex Moran had found anchorage on the neon light bar in the commissary of the *Dog Star*. He gripped it with both hands and snarled at the luck that had brought him into this predicament. During all his space years, he'd stayed legitimate, had turned down the lucrative offers of the scoundrels, the blacklegs, the outlaw brotherhood. During those years, he'd never had a mishap; not so much as a torn fingernail nor even a mild space storm to knock him off course. During his honest flights, luck had smiled upon him and had allowed him to face starvation on an even keel.

But now, with his first dip into the lucrative sea of contraband, the fates cracked down on him; allowed invisible carcasses to pull him off course and hurl him into a stasis so strong it put out the lights.

He cursed fate for a while, then had his arms almost jerked out of their sockets as the stasis vanished and ship's gravity reasserted itself.

Johnny Calhoun did not fare so well. He'd found nothing to grab onto and hit the steel floor with all of his two hundred and fifty pounds of pull.

Rex got up and helped Johnny to his feet.

"Looks like we made it," Johnny grunted.

"I wonder if we've got any cargo left."

"To hell with the cargo. We're still alive, ain't we?"

"To hell with three-quarter of a million bucks? You must have a concussion."

"Never mind me. Let's find out where we are and how we're pointing."

Both men limped from minor bruises as they made the companionway and went forward. There they found the smaller astrogation instruments spread all over the floor, but that seemed to be the extent of the damage. The port dials showed the *Dog Star* to be moving in a lazy arc on the minor units of acceleration not killed by the stasis. Other dials proved the astrocourse to be entirely off.

The main point of interest, however, was the radar plate. Moving across its center was a huge carcass, equivalent in size to Terra at twenty thousand miles. The carcass was the center of the *Dog Star's* present orbit.

"There it is," Rex said grimly.

"Sure. Any fool can see it now. But where was it before? How come it pops up out of nowhere when we're right on top of it?"

"It's wearing an overcoat. All wrapped up in some kind of a stasis-bank. That's why we couldn't spot it. But from the pull it must be made of pure metal."

"Let's give a look."

Rex was already focusing the reflector. He snapped the switch and the reflector plate lit up. There it was. A great shining globe turning lazily in space. Its axis stood upright with the plane of the ecliptic and its rotation speed would have given it approximately a six-hour day had there been a sun in the vicinity.

But there wasn't. The sky was entirely opaque, glittering like mother-

of-pearl, and all the light seemed to reflect from the carcass itself.

"Let's get in closer," Rex said.

"Okay, but look out we don't get pulled down."

Johnny went skillfully to work on the controls. He shortened the orbit and studied the result. "She pulls hard, but the jets are strong enough now. How come the pull out beyond the stasis more than offset the jets when it doesn't in here?"

"I think that stasis envelope weakened them. From the time we went end over end, we probably weren't building more than two units."

"Could be. We're coming in now. What's down there?"

"We're over a city of some kind. The biggest damn city I ever saw."

"How big does the planet figure?"

"I'd say pretty small. Maybe two thousand miles in diameter."

"We'll swing around it."

After a period of silence, Rex said, "Good lord! It's all city. Completely built up from one pole to the other. Every square mile of this planet has construction on it."

"Anybody around?"

"Not a soul. Either it's deserted or the people are staying under cover. Maybe they're afraid of us."

"I don't think so. I saw a space port back there. Obviously they're acquainted with interspacial flying. If that's true they'd have weapons. They wouldn't go under cover for one ship."

"A space port. Why the hell didn't you tell me? We'll go in."

"I suppose we might as well. We probably couldn't get out through that stasis without wrecking ourselves. If they're friendly they'll maybe show us a way."

"And if they ain't friendly?"

Rex shrugged. "We can't spend the rest of our lives up here."

Johnny cut the ship into a tight arc to come back over his old orbit toward the port. Halfway around, he yelled and hit the controls with both hands and both feet. The *Dog Star* went on its jets and shot straight up.

"They're throwing rocks!" Johnny yelled, and the whole radar plate was blotted out by an object hurtling past.

Johnny righted the ship as Rex swung the reflector from one point to another. "There it is," he said. "It's —it's a ship! A big, slow baby. The *Flying Boxcar*. Ever hear of it?"

"Seems like I did. But what's it doing out here trying to ram us?"

"I think it's out of control. It's doing a spiral and a loop all at the same time. It must have just come through that black envelope."

"I hope they crash," Johnny muttered. "It'd serve them right."

"They're getting hold of it now. Straightening away."

Johnny snapped the radio switch. "Hey, you damn idiots! Who're you trying to kill?"

The receiver crackled and a reply seared the walls of the *Dog Star's* pilot house. "Don't you dare talk to me like that!"

Johnny's jaw sagged. "Holy kraut! It's a female."

Rex kept his eyes glued to the reflector. "Watch it. They've wheeled around and they're going in. She

may be a female, but she cut you off from that landing ramp nice and neat."

"That's courtesy. Always depend on a dame to horn in."

Johnny took another swing around the orbit and came in again. "Have I got clearance?"

"Plenty. They moved to the upper end of the ramp."

"Damn considerate. I expected they'd camp plumb in the middle of it. What do you suppose they're doing around here?"

"Probably got pulled in the same as we did." Rex swung the reflector arm around and pushed the instrument down on its bracket in front on Johnny. "I'll go back and tune down the jets. Give me the word."

The *Dog Star* rose neatly into the ramp under Johnny Calhoun's expert guidance. Rex cut the jets and the two spacemen met at the port ramp.

"There's plenty of air outside," Johnny said. "I saw a dame and a man get out of that crate ahead of us."

They threw their weight on the port locks. "Funny thing," Johnny said."They must have big times on that ship. The guy came out in his underwear and the dame sent him back—to get his pants on maybe."

The air locks wheezed and the port swung open. "Here goes nothing," Rex said. He loosened the hand gun at his belt and stepped out onto the ramp. Johnny followed and they stood side by side—sharply on the alert—in this strange silent place.

Colleen Barnum did not wait for her father after she sent him back for his outer garments. She went on down the ramp toward the gate.

But no passengers were in sight. No officials, no spectators, no living thing. The port, while following practical lines, was different from any Colleen had ever seen. The ship-ways were wider, for one thing. They would accomodate far larger ships than had ever been built, to Colleen's knowledge. Also, the entire port, the running fields, the fences and gates, even the buildings themselves, were constructed of the same material; a metal resembling aluminum, yet obviously far harder and heavier than that Terran metal. What windows Colleen could see were of clear glass, and they stared out like sightless eyes.

All in all, there was a sinister, brooding loneliness about the port that made Colleen glad of the second ship, which was even now curving in for a landing. It was the *Dog Star* out of Minneapolis. Colleen had heard out of it and the picturesque pair who plied the space lanes and made its name known as far out as the lost worlds beyond Saturn.

Colleen went through the gate and moved up the fenced-off land toward the dispatch building. Where *was* everybody anyhow? It was beyond conception that a modern port like this one would be deserted on a completely built-up planet. Yet, not so much as a bug stirred on the metal floor over which she walked.

Now Colleen, glancing down at this floor, noticed something else. She was leaving footprints behind her. The floor and the fences and the

gates were covered with a fine silver dust. Colleen rubbed her finger along the fence railing. She uncovered a streak of bright metal and realized the dullness of all the surfaces around her was caused by the dust.

She wiped her finger and shivered slightly, though the atmosphere was exceedingly warm. She glanced back to see the *Dog Star* roar into the ways and cut its jets. If that racket doesn't bring anyone, she thought, there just isn't anybody around.

Yet, she had the feeling she was being watched; that eyes followed her every step from some hidden vantage point. She shrugged off the feeling. It was foolish. Only through fear would the natives of this place hide away. And they certainly wouldn't be afraid of two unarmed space freighters.

Colleen pushed through the big glass door into the dispatch offices. Dead silence greeted her from the bright, vacant desks, the empty chairs, the all-metal vastness of the high ceiling. She walked on, her heels clicking out an echo on the uncarpeted floor.

Another glass door gave off into what had probably been a waiting room. Here, a glass roof stood half open to the eternal haze of the queer sky over this world, and the silvery dust was again in evidence.

Colleen marveled anew. Even the great new port in Detroit, where the sleek liners took off for the far reaches of space, was nothing like this. Beside this weirdly deserted behemoth, the Detroit port looked like a wayside freight depot.

Another door invited. Colleen opened it and stepped into a sumptuously furnished office. Here the monotony of the bright metal was broken by carpets of flaming hues; oddly shaped, but practical, metal furniture was upholstered in rich fabrics, the like of which the girl had never seen.

Then, from somewhere, came proof that the strange metal planet was not lifeless—footsteps, running footsteps with a touch of desperation in their beat.

The noise came from beyond the far wall and sounded as though the creature, whatever it was, would approach through some long, echoing hallway.

Suddenly a door flew open and a terrified creature burst into the room. It was almost naked, its skin a sickly, unhealthy white. It had four arms and two legs , with short, bristly black hair covering its skull. Its feet were huge, comically so, but there was nothing comic in the terror radiated by this creature. That quality was of a universal nature.

While Colleen stood frozen to the carpet, the pitiful creature came close and went to its knees before her. In its eyes was eloquent entreaty.

Then came the croaking words:"Save me! Please save me! Don't let him kill—"

The man, still clutching Colleen's knees, twisted around as a third person entered the room; a brutal-faced, stocky man carrying a small ray gun in one hand and a club in the other. The sight of Colleen held him for a moment. Then, with a snarl of satisfaction, he moved

forward.

The club came down in a short, vicious arc. The groveling man screamed—his scream cut off as the club smashed into his skull, killing him instantly.

Colleen stood frozen, sheer consternation imprisoning her. The killer did not even lower his eyes to the corpse slumped on the floor. They held steadily on Colleen and there was great appreciation within them. He holstered his gun and his green hand pushed out toward her, almost reached her breast.

Colleen stared at the hand as though it were the head of a snake; watched it stop and draw back, regretfully. She raised her eyes and saw a look of sudden fear in the killer's face.

He turned his attention to the body on the floor, bent over and took it by the collar. Then, without further ceremony, he dragged it across the room and out through the far door. The door closed. The incident was ended.

Colleen shook her head like a groggy prizefighter. She blinked rapidly, held her eyes tightly closed for a moment, then opened them and surveyed the room.

Had it actually happened? Had a murder been done at her very feet in this luxurious room on an apparently deserted aluminum planet? Possibly it had been some sort of an illusion. But any such idea was speedily dissolved when Colleen glanced toward the floor. The killer had not dragged all of his victim away. There was some blood on the carpet.

Colleen turned toward the door through which she had entered. She suddenly wanted no more of this bright brooding place where casual violence seemed the order of things. Her hand reached the knob, turned it. A quiet, cultured voice sounded from nearby.

"Welcome, my dear. Won't you sit down?"

Colleen whirled. A third man had come from somewhere and now stood by a desk across the room. He smiled.

The startled girl was surprised not so much at his sudden arrival as by the man himself.

He was a Terran beyond all doubt, and a magnificent specimen; tall, broad-shouldered, past middle age, and a picture of perfect health and well-being. His clothing was of cloth and metal; loose-fitting but of the richest materials.

Again the soft, cultured voice: "I would suggest you sit down and make yourself comfortable, my dear. You are not leaving. The door is locked."

And so it was. Colleen twisted the knob and pulled. Nothing happened. She turned and leaned against the door like a tigress at bay. "What's the idea? Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The man laughed gently. "I might ask you the same questions. And it would be more fitting if they come from me. After all—you are the intruder, not I."

"All right. I apologize. Now let me go."

The man shook his head. "On the contrary. I prefer that you stay. You are the first woman to grace these brand-new buildings with

your presence. I find it quite agreeable."

"What are you talking about? What is this place?"

"It is a new world—in transit. A brand-new planet built to specifications and now in the process of delivery."

Colleen's panic was gone. There was a certain tenseness in her manner, but she she was again master of herself. "Are you aware that a man was just brutally murdered in this room?"

He raised his heavy eyebrows. He continued to smile; a fatherly grimace that was beginning to annoy Colleen. He said, "You say a man was brutally murdered? In the first place, it was hardly a man. And certainly it was not murder. Rather, let us say, necessary extermination. You see, we have guaranteed to deliver this planet free of vermin. There will be more of these so-called murders before we reach our destination."

Colleen was far more angry than afraid now. The callous words chilled her into a fury.

"I think you're mad," she said. "I'm convinced you're some kind of a dangerous lunatic. I'd suggest you let me out of here immediately. On Terra—"

The balance of Colleen's words never came because the man made a disdainful motion with his hand. "Terra. Hmmm. And spoken with pride, too. We have some plans for your Terra in the not too distant future. Another reason we could not possibly let you and your party leave."

"What are you talking about? What kind of plans?"

The man seemed to be enjoying himself hugely. "We have an order for a planet of about that size. Our engineers have debated as to whether Mars or Terra most perfectly fills the bill. I'm sure it will be Terra."

Maybe this creature is mad, Colleen thought, but he speaks with a certain cold authority that is frightening.

"I don't understand a word of what you say."

He regarded her through amused eyes. "You Twenty-Third Sun creatures are certainly the most naive of the lot. I've met others of your group. Martians, Venusians, Neptunians. You consider yourselves so great, so intelligent, so full of cosmic awareness. But the absolute reverse is true. You remind me so much of children playing in a yard; children who consider the confines of that yard to be the boundaries of the universe. From your tiny pinpoints of planets, you've gone out a few miles to where space begins to bend, so you think thats all there is to it. How stupid."

He went on: "The truth of the matter is, you know nothing at all about the vast cosmos around you. Your tiny sun is situated far down in a neglected corner of it. You know nothing of the Seven Great Suns, any one of which would completely fill all the void you are capable of visualizing. You know nothing of the traffic and commerce that goes on between planets on which your Twenty-Third Sun would be capable of starting only a small bonfire. Really, with your little trips

to Jupiter, Saturn, and even the Outer Planetoids, you haven't yet gotten more than three steps from your back door."

Colleen wanted no more of this colossal idiot's ravings. And he seemed to sense her sudden disinterest, because he changed the subject. "Come, my dear. You are a most refreshing bit of femininity. I have plans for you. Come."

He moved across the room toward Colleen. "And by the way, let me introduce myself. My name is Brother William. That is how you will always address me."

Colleen, backed finally into a corner, fought like a lost soul. But for all the good it did, she could have saved her energy. Brother William took her under his arm. Chuckling, he carried her from the room.

Saul Barnum came out of the *Flying Boxcar* with his pants on, to find company at the foot of the ramp. "Name's Barnum," he said with affability. "Sorry about cutting you off the ramp. That was my daughter Colleen's doing. She figures ladies should always go first."

"I'm Rex Moran. This is my partner Johnny Calhoun. Any idea where we are?"

"Damned if I know. We went through some kind of a dark cloud that ended us over end. Kind of embarrassing, floating around like a tadpole inside your own ship."

"We know all about it," Johnny sympathized.

"Well, when we got clear this funny carcass was staring us in the face. We landed."

"Where did your daughter go?"

"Out snooping it over, I guess. She always was a hard one to keep under your thumb."

"We'd better hunt for her," Rex said. "This place looks deserted, but you never can tell."

"We can follow her footprints. A mite dusty around here. Looks like nobody ain't swept up lately."

The three men started off in the direction Colleen had gone. But they had taken only a half dozen steps before Rex stopped suddenly.

"Trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"Over there."

Johnny and Saul turned in the rearward direction Rex indicated. They saw a squad of ten men march with military precision from a hangar across the ways and goose-step toward them.

"We've been jobbed," Saul muttered. "Grab a rafter and swing."

"No use running. They're armed. They could cut us down before we got five feet."

"Then what do we do?" Johnny asked. "Stand here?"

"That's it. Set your gun at purple. If I give the signal, get yourself as many as you can."

"Me, I got no gun," Saul said. "Guns are dangerous. You can get hurt that way."

The contingent was moving across the running lanes directly toward the three spacemen. The ten soldiers were of a cut; stocky, brutal-faced, but with eyes front, shoulders stiff, and each man full of military bearing.

They came closer, their feet beating the metal floor in even

cadence. Then, eyes front, they marched past the three Terrans and continued on their way. It was as if they had not seen the men. "Well, I'll be damned," Johnny breathed.

Neither Rex nor Saul Barnum had anything to say. Their eyes remained on the goose-stepping squad until it reached what was apparently its objective—the entrance to one of the tool houses flanking the left side of the field. There, the soldiers broke ranks and entered the building single file.

Immediately, new action broke out in another spot; further down the line of tool houses, a door flew open and a pair of strange, pale creatures with huge feet ran out onto the field. Obviously they had been hiding and were being flushed out by the soldiers moving through the connecting inner doors of the tool houses.

The strange, terrified pair headed straight for the ramp of the *Flying Boxcar*. While Rex and Johnny were still staring in amazement at their oversized feet, they dropped into a posture of supplication and clawed at Saul Barnum's belt. "Please! Please help us. We'll be killed. Save us!"

The soldiers, emerging from the tool house now, did not reform into parade unit. Instead, they spread out and advanced upon the five by the ship. One of them raised an odd-looking gun. He did not appear to fire it, but a large dent slapped into the impervium hull of the *Flying Boxcar* and Johnny Calhoun let out an indignant yelp. He brought up his color gun and snapped the switch.

Two of the soldiers dropped to their knees as their visible flesh turned a deep purple and their eyes bulged horribly. Then they got up and came on again, staggering, but still alive and dangerous.

Johnny and Rex looked at each other in amazement. The men had been hit and they still lived! This was incredible—impossible—but the two spacemen had no time to comment thereon. Saul had already started up the ramp of the *Flying Boxcar*. Shouting, the two large-footed creatures leaped forward and dragged him back.

"Trap! Trap!" They babbled.

With this, they went lumbering around the end of the ship, motioning to be followed. Rex and Johnny crouched for a moment in the partial shelter of the ramp and sent two streams of purple death winging toward the seemingly imperishable soldiers. The color-charges brought them down one after another as new dents, from return fire, began pockmarking the hull of the ship.

"They ain't human," Johnny muttered, still firing, the gun hot in his hands. "They keep getting up."

"We'd better follow the guys with the feet," Rex said. "They must know more about the setup than we do."

Saul Barnum was already taking this advice. He was around the hull of the ship and pelting after the pale, terrified objects of the soldiers' wrath.

Johnny and Rex followed at top speed. A broad expanse of open field lay between them and safety. With-

out consultation, they went into a routine that bespoke long experience in getting out of tight places.

First Johnny dropped to one knee and sprayed all visible pursuers with deadly color ray. They dropped like ten pins but always staggered to their feet to come forward again.

At a yell from Rex, Johnny stopped firing and began running while Rex's gun took up the task of slowing up pursuit. Johnny ran on past Rex some fifty yards, yelled, dropped to one knee and again covered his partner's retreat.

In this manner they crossed the huge field and approached the door which Saul Barnum was holding open, yelling the while: "Come on, you idiots. This ain't no time to pick daisies. Get your hides over here before they're blown off!"

Johnny and Rex sprang through the doorway, turned and hurled themselves against the panel, driving it into place. As they shoved, Johnny found time for a wide-eyed comment, "The whole squad is still coming. They been killed a dozen times and they still come on!"

"Something funny about them," Rex said.

"You're telling me!"

They found themselves in a long passageway, low-ceilinged, and lit by the same strange radiance that seemed to pervade this metal world. On down the passageway, Saul was gesturing."Come on! What're you waiting for? Our pals went this way.'

The two spacemen holstered their guns and ran. They caught up with Saul and then the three of them overtook the pair who were waiting, ill at ease, by another door.

"What about the girl?" Rex snapped.

Saul was breathing heavily. "What girl?"

"Your daughter, you punch-drunk jet wiper! You mean to tell me you forgot about her?"

"Well, not exactly, but being as there ain't anything we can do for her at the moment, I figured to stay alive so maybe I could do something later."

Rex' disgust was not hidden, but Johnny, far more practical than his partner, can to Saul's rescue. "Well, he's right in a way. What the hell *can* we do now? You want to wade back through that iron army?"

Saul was urging them on after the pale men who had already gone through the doorway. "Colleen's a pretty able little minx. She'll leave her mark on anybody that crosses her."

"I'm damned if I ever saw such a father," Rex growled. "We'll catch up with those jokers and find out if there's a way we can go around to the other side."

But the jokers were not easily caught up with. Their big feet slapped echoes out of the tunnel walls as they rushed forward in a headlong manner.

And now Johnny and Rex noted a change in their surroundings. They had been aware, since their arrival at the port, of the unused, virgin newness of everything about them. But down in these lower levels to which they had come, signs of great age were apparent. No bright aluminum-like metal here. Only an-

cient stone, dank underground moss, dripping water, and the smell of decay.

As they moved on after their new guides, Johnny thought to wonder: "How come those big-footed freaks weren't afraid of us? They seem to be afraid of everybody else around this silly place."

"It was probably a matter of pure desperation. They figured they were through regardless and we offered a possibility."

"I noticed another thing."

"What was that?"

"They spoke in English, but if they belong to any planet I ever heard of I'll wash their feet for them—which would be one hell of a big job."

"It's peculiar, but not very important now. I'm wondering what happened to the girl. Do you suppose some of those soldiers grabbed her?"

Johnny refused to worry about that. He said, "There's another thing. How come our fire wouldn't stop them? Did you ever hear of a living thing the purple ray wouldn't kill?"

Rex did not answer, because Johnny's question could have been the signal for what followed. A red-faced soldier stepped from a crypt in the passage where he had evidently been hiding.

The crypt was not two feet from the spacemen and the soldier brushed Rex' elbow as he went by. But, strangely, he made no motion to harm either of them. Rather he ignored them and moved on ahead toward Saul and the two pale ones.

Rex and Johnny glanced at each other. Two faces full of question marks. "I don't get it," Johnny whispered. "Couldn't he see us?"

"I've got a hunch he's after the freaks and no one else. What does that suggest?"

"That we ought to stop him."

"It's not what I meant, but it's a good idea." Johnny raised his gun and his voice at the same time. "Hey—stupid! Turn around!"

The soldier kept right on going.

"I hate to shoot anybody in the back," Johnny muttered.

But there seemed no choice because the soldier, now in range of Saul Barnum and the two guides, raised his gun to fire.

Rex and Johnny sent a twin color barrage of heavy purple at the soldier's back. The terrible rays struck with enough force to hammer the lives out of a hundred men. The soldier tensed and quivered. He spun around slowly, dropping his own gun, writhing, in indescribable agony.

"Good lord!" Johnny breathed. "What's he made of? Why doesn't he fall?"

The soldier finally slumped to the floor of the passageway. Johhny and Rex moved forward. Saul Barnum and the two palid natives ceased their retreat and came back to where the soldier's still body lay. Rex was cleaning his gun. Johnny stood staring in awe at the body on the floor. "What a man," he muttered. "What a man!"

"He isn't a man—entirely. Only partly so."

The three spacemen turned upon the owner of the voice—one of the two men they had saved from death. "I am Lugo," he said. "This is

Morkon, my friend. We are the true natives of this planet. It was known to us as Lurd and we were happy, prosperous and peace-loving. So peaceful were we that—"

"Skip the history for a while. Let's take the important things first. You said this joker wasn't a man—only partly so. Could you spread that out a little thinner?"

Lugo dropped to his knees beside the body. "I wonder if I could borrow a knife from anyone?"

Johnny took a six-inch blade from its guard on his belt and handed it to the Lurdan. The man took it, tore back the tunic from the soldier's body and plunged the knife into the torso. A dark, sluggish fluid oozed forth from the wound, to turn almost instantly into a gummy ebon material. Now Lugo thrust his hand into the soldier's vitals and appeared to be tearing something loose from its moorings. With an energetic jerk he brought forth a small metal box to which had been attached several small tubes.

"The heart," he said. "The other organs are of metal too. If you take the skin from the head you will find it to be a skull of silver containing nothing more than a series of electrical relays. This is one of the Brother's robots; a triumph of constructional skill. After the skeleton is assembled the human skin is overlayed by a grafting process that would amaze the cleverest physicians from your Terra."

"Do they run on electricity?" Rex asked.

"Not exactly. A higher vibrational force makes them function. It can be likened to electricity, but it goes right through any electrical control yet devised. It can be controlled only by metal power which is, after all, the highest rate of vibration known."

Johnny was not interested in detailed, semi-technical description. "How come these robots passed us up out on the field? And here in the passageway, this one did it again. Don't we rate as enemies?"

"No. We are the sole worry of the Brothers at the moment. We are considered vermin who must be eradicated from the planet before it is delivered to the purchaser. The robots have been indoctrinated with but a single command: "'Kill Lurdans. Hunt out Lurdans and slay them." Lugo wiped off the knife and handed it back to Johnny. He looked down at the broken robot and shuddered.

"They are dreadful enemies to have. They are partially human but have the unreasoning tenacity of cold metal. They never sleep. Endlessly, day after day, they hunt us down. They are as implacable as time itself."

"And as hard to kill," Rex said.

Saul had picked up the mechanical heart and was examining it with interest.

"Look," Johnny said. "Every time you answer one question, it gives us ground to ask three new ones. What's this about the Brothers and a buyer for this planet and how come you speak English and —"

"Skip it," Rex said. "There'll be plenty of time for questions. What do you know about a girl who left

one of our ships and disappeared? She went into one of the buildings on the other side of the ways. Can we get over there without crossing the field again?"

Morkon, the second Lurdan, spoke up for the first time. "One of the Brothers probably got her."

"Who in hell are the Brothers?" Johnny asked.

"They are of your race, I believe. Originally they come from Terra, but that was a long time ago. The Brothers are a ruthless band of adventurers who sell planets."

"*Sell* Planets! Listen! What kind of—?"

"It's perfectly true. They deal mainly with the World-Nations of the Great Galaxy and the peoples beyond this time and space sphere."

Rex glanced grimly at Johnny. "Looks like we don't get around much, chum."

"You're right. We need briefing." He turned back to Morkon. "Just where is this Great Galaxy and what in blazes is a space and time sphere?"

"Being from a backward sphere you'd hardly be expected to know," Lurdan broke in with a sad smile. "A superficial explanation of Cosmophysics is necessary before you can begin to understand. You see, the universe as you know it is a relatively small unit of the infinite. Without the proper transportation equipment, the best you could ever do would be to travel in an everlasting circle. At the outer dimensions of this universe, as with all others, time and space become one and form circular boundaries; so the universe you know can be likened to a bubble in which you go around and around."

"A big bubble," Johnny muttered.

"On the contrary, a very small bubble. There are time and space spheres so large they could contain this universe a million times over."

"We'll go into that later," Rex said. "Right now we're interested in these Brothers and what they've done with Saul's daughter."

"They've probably killed her."

Saul straightened sharply from the mechanical heart he had been examining. "What'd they do a thing like that for? Why'd they want to kill Colleen?"

This was too much for even the hardened Johnny. He looked at Saul in amazement. "You're the damnedest character I ever met. Your daughter's maybe being killed and you stand there fiddling with a gadget."

Saul shrugged. "You been in this game as long as I have, you'll learn to take things easier, son. Nobody's never killed Colleen yet, but I'm all set to help hunt. Which way do we go?"

Johnny turned away in disgust.

"Hunting would be useless, I'm afraid," Lugo said. "We had better go to our Hidden Place where all the Lurdans congregate. One of them might have news of the girl."

"Okay," Rex said. "Lead the way."

The Lurdans, padding along on their grotesque feet, started off down the corridor which spiraled ever deeper into the body of the planet. But the trail they made was not easily followed, because now and again they pushed aside a boulder, crawled under it, and came upon a

new tunnel. The winding trip continued until they came at last to a smooth blank wall. Lugo tapped it with a fragment of rock—tapped out a code—after which the whole panel moved upward, revealing another passage.

This last corridor was a short one, giving into a vast domed room lit but dimly by the weird natural radiance of the planet. The place was crudely furnished and had much the appearance of a vast refugee camp. There were perhaps two hundred great-footed males and females in the cave together with a few children of the race. The Lurdans sat about in pairs and groups their sole objective apparently the killing of time.

"This is all that is left of us." Morkon said with bitterness. "The Brothers struck like a silent wind, hit us without mercy. A world of two million souls almost annihilated over night. Now only a handful of us are left, waiting here like vermin to be slain."

"But why would these Brothers do a thing like that?" Saul asked.

"They got an order for a planet somewhere in the Great Galaxy and our world happened to conform to the required specifications. So the Brothers needing a carcass around which to build the new planet, selected ours and went about exterminating our population. They got all but a handful of us and then pulled our planet to an island universe they own called Zyxtas, out beyond the Eighth Dimension. There they stripped and completely rebuilt it. Now they are making delivery. By the time we arrive at our destination, wherever it is, they expect their robots to have exterminated the last remnant of the old population."

Johnny turned suddenly to Rex. "Look! What about our cargo? Maybe we could?"

"Shut up! What are we—a couple of boy scouts? There's a fortune tied up in that cargo!"

"Oh, sure. I just thought—"

"Quit thinking. Our job is to find out how to get off this damned aluminum ball and set our course again."

"Then how come you been sounding off about Barnum's daughter—going to her rescue!"

Rex scowled. "Maybe that's a little different. After all, they're Terrans. A guy tries to give his own kind a break."

His partner grinned wickedly: "How about giving Morostans a break at a thousand credits a head—"

Rex turned savagely on the bearded Johnny Calhoun. "Listen, you space-bum! If you're looking for a busted skull, you're hunting in the right place."

Saul Barnum perked up with bird-like interest. "What's this about Morostans?"

"Pull in your long beak, grandpa," Johnny grinned, "or my friend here'll tie a bow knot in it. He ain't a guy to fuss with."

"No offense. Just neighborly interest."

"Well, get neighborly about your own affairs. Let ours alone."

The two Lurdans wisely refrained from commenting on the friction among their benefactors. But now the group had arrived at the local point of the great gathering place.

There, additional Lurdans waited with stricken, hopeless faces. There was some interest in the three Terrans, but these people seemed in such depths of despair that nothing could bring any semblance of hope to their faces.

Lugo and Morkon entered into conversation with their fellow Lurdans, but a strange language was used and the Terrans could get no meaning therefrom.

Finally Lugo turned to Rex and said "I have news of your companion's daughter."

Saul Barnum jumped up eagerly. "What about my Colleen? Is she safe?"

"Not safe, I'm afraid," Lugo said. "It has been reported that one of our fellows was killed by a robot over in the new building by the space port. His companion escaped and came back to report a rather beautiful girl was seen in the building. One of the Brothers found her there and put her in the dungeons."

Rex had been listening with narrowed eyes. "Maybe, and maybe not. I wonder if you're on the level. There's something funny here."

The Lurdans seem genuinely distressed. "Please don't be angry," Morkon begged. "You saved our lives. We are very grateful. Certainly we would not—"

"I'll decide that. How come all the rest of these people use the native lingo—I suppose that's what it is—while you two speak perfect English?"

Lugo smiled. "There were various levels of intelligence and learning among us. Morkon and I were two of the Elder Students; men who spent their lives in pursuit of learning. I doubt if there is a language in any time-sphere with which we are not familiar."

Rex was only partly mollified. He eyed Lugo suspiciously while the latter regarded him with a weary smile."We were students in other branches of learning also, my friend. We know people. We understand human nature."

"What are you driving at?"

"Only this. Some seem to regard kindliness, humanity, compassion, as qualities to be hidden from the light of day."

"Double talk," Johnny grunted.

Lugo's smile deepened but he kept his eyes on Rex. "You, for instance, have a remarkably soft heart. You are a sentimentalist and as generous as all outdoors. But you won't admit it even to yourself, and you keep it hidden under a cloak of synthetic savageness."

Rex sneered at the old man. "For all your brains you seem to have landed in a hell of a hole," he said.

"We made one mistake. We were peaceful and took peaceful intentions among others for granted." His smile became one of bitterness. "This time-space scheme in which we all live is a bad one for the peaceful and the unarmed."

Before Rex could reply, the keen old Lurdan got in one more shaft. "Another thing: whatever mistake you have made, whatever sin is eating at you conscience—fear not. You will not follow the path of evil to its ultimate end. You have already proven that."

"Cut it out!" Rex roared. "Where are these caverns? We'll go down and get the girl and then blast off of this damn fool carcass."

"I'm afraid that would be equivalent to suicide," Morkon said. "The caverns are well guarded by the robots, as well as by solid rock and steel bars. Three men would have little chance of fighting through."

"But one man might slip in if he were careful and courageous enough," Lugo murmered.

Rex looked swiftly around. "I'll go find her. You and Saul stay here, Johnny. If more of those robots come, you can at least hold them off with one color-gun."

"Wait a minute—" Johnny bristled. But Rex had already taken Lugo by the arm and was leading him away from the group. "Show me how to get to these dungeons. . . ." That was all Johnny could hear before they went out of earshot.

Colleen, cold, hungry, terrified, crouched against cold stone in the dim light and gave way to tears. She had grown tired of fighting, and had suffered about all the humiliation a girl could take without tears.

After the dungeon door had closed upon her and the final humiliation had been consummated, she gave shivering attention to her cell and found the ten-foot-square room to be utterly impregnable. Cut into solid rock, the thickness of its walls could have been thousands of feet for all anyone knew.

With escape beyond the realm of possibility, Colleen crouched against the wall and waited for the fateful sound of footsteps. They would come—that she knew. The even, unhurried tread of Brother William returning for his prize. Colleen shuddered and tried not to think of the future.

While she was occupied in keeping her mind a blank, the footsteps intruded upon her ears. He was returning. Colleen gritted her teeth and girded her resolution to fight again. *I'll always fight,* she told herself. *I'll fight right up to the end.*

Then a voice, soft, almost a whisper. "Hey—you. Anybody in there?"

Colleen's hopes soared with such suddenness that it made her giddy. She strove to speak, but words wouldn't come. She heard a soft curse and the tread diminishing. She leaped to the grated door. "Please —please. I'm here. Help me. Who are you?"

"Sssh. Not so loud! Want to bring a flock of robots down on us? I'm Rex Moran. I been hunting around down here for two hours."

She could see him now, or at least his face, through the high grate she could just use by standing on tiptoe. "Thank God you've come," she whispered.

"Stand aside. I'm going to blast this door."

Pressed against the cold granite wall, Colleen heard the sound of the color gun and saw the agony of wood and metal as the section of door around the lock burned and melted into nothing. The door swung open.

"Please," Colleen called, her voice called, her voice rising in

desperation. "Please don't come in."

"What the hell! What do you mean don't come in?"

"Because I'm—I'm naked! I haven't got a stitch!"

Rex's voice sounded a little like the snarl of a baited tiger. "You mean those bastards—"

"There was only one of them. He carried me here."

"Did he—"

"He just—sort of used his hands. But he locked me in here and then made me give him my garments one by one through the window. He said if I didn't he'd come in and take them. The—the beast seemed to enjoy it hugely—said he was seeing to it I didn't go anywhere."

"We can't hang around here talking," Rex whispered savagely, "and I haven't any clothes for you. You'll have to follow me down the passageway to where I killed the last robot. Come on."

Colleen, wrapping cold arms around herself, stepped out into the passageway. Ahead of her was Rex Moran's broad back. She moved up close and, when he reached a hand around behind him, she touched it timidly.

"Keep close," Rex said. "It isn't far. We should be there in a minute."

But there was some delay. It came when Rex suddenly whirled upon Colleen. The girl crouched, terror-stricken, able only to moan "Don't —please don't," but with the inward conviction that all men were the same. This spaceman was no different from the horrible Brother William. Get a girl alone and helpless and—

Rex reached forth and got her by the hair, but only to hurl her rudely around behind him as he raised his color-gun and sent a stream of purple down the passageway.

The approaching robot stumbled, went to its knees, got up and tried to raise its pistol. Rex knocked the pistol into a smoking mass with another blast of purple. The robot looked at the place where its fingers and the pistol had been, then stalked doggedly forward.

But Rex had developed a new tecnique in fighting these monsters. He knocked the robot down agin and leaped forward, knife in hand for the kill. He slashed the blade down into the robot's chest, savagely gouged out a hole as the flesh and mechanism unit bucked and slavered. Holding on for grim life, protecting his face from the hammer-blows of a flailing fist, he plunged a hand into the hot, wet chest and got a grip on the mechanical heart. He jerked with all his strength. The robot quivered and was still.

Rex rolled off the body and wiped of sweat from his face. "I've killed four of them that way," he gasped. "You can pound them with color 'til hell freezes over and they keep coming. Damndest things I ever saw."

There was no response and Rex looked around quickly to find Colleen gone. He got to his feet cursing, stood undecided for a moment and then moved off down the passageway. "They're crazy," he growled. "All women are crazy. I

risk my neck to come here after her, so she runs away in a place she doesn't know anything about."

Then he stopped suddenly and raised his gun. Colleen come from behind a shoulder in the passageway, clad sketchily but adequately in strips of cloth. "I found that robot you'd killed on the way down and made myself a costume."

Rex stared, fascinated not so much by the girl herself as by the amazing change which had been wrought. She was no longer a beaten, cringing thing. She stood with head erect, eyes bright, and a cockiness highlighted her manner. "Lord, you look awful," she observed.

"I've been in five running fights and I fell down three flights of stairs. How do you expect me to look?"

"Here, let me wipe that blood off your face."

Rex stood still while she cleaned away the gore to her satisfaction. "Okay," she said. "Now come on. We've got to get going."

He stared in wonder. "Well, I'll be damned! So you're running the show now, huh? Fine! Go find a way out for yourself. Maybe I'll be seeing you."

He started down the corridor at a rapid pace, but Colleen came pattering along from behind. "No you don't! Leaving a defenseless girl to fend for herself. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Then cut out the act and get in line."

"You won't even allow a girl her self-respect," Colleen pouted.

"Not when she doesn't appear to have much left," Rex said wickedly.

"Why you—"

Colleen flew straight through the air. She hit him like an oversize bumblebee. Her legs went around his waist, her arms around his neck. Her white teeth slashed out and found his ear.

With a curse, Rex jerked her free and held her at arm's length while she kicked and struggled. His face was a whirlpool of surprised rage. But gradually the rage faded to give place to a grin. "You're a hellcat for fair," he said.

"Apologize! Take it back! Take back what you said!"

Getting a quick grip on both her hands, Rex drew her in and kissed her savagely. Her eyes, a half-inch from his own, blazed and flamed.

He held her away.

"Take it back! Damn you! Apologize."

"What for?"

"The thing you said!"

"Okay. I'm sorry. You've got a lot of self-respect."

The fires seemed to go out somewhat. Warily, Rex put her down. "Let's cut this out and get back to the others. There's plenty of trouble ahead."

Colleen smiled and held out her hand. "Sorry. Shake?"

He fell for it. She grabbed his hand and, before he could move, her teeth had sunk deeply into the flesh between his thumb and first finger.

He let out a howl as Colleen dropped the hand and danced away. "Now we're even," she called. "Don't be a sorehead. You had it coming."

He caught her in a rush, but merely held her and looked into

her face with a terrible intensity. "Cut this out, you little fool! You'll have every robot within a mile of here on our necks. Are you going to behave, or will I have to gag you and carry you over my shoulder?"

A look of soberness and remembered fear came into her eyes. She nodded mutely. Without a word, Rex put her down and started off along the corridor. After traveling in silence behind him for some time, Colleen came alongside Rex. "Is father all right—and your partner?"

"They were when I left them. We ran into some natives and they took us to a cave. The poor devils are waiting to be killed. I never saw such helpless animals."

Colleen shuddered. "I know what you mean. One of them was killed at my feet, before that monster put his hands on me."

Rex looked over at her with appreciation. "He's going to be pretty sore when he finds you're gone. I imagine he was looking forward to the next meeting."

"I'd—I'd have killed him," Colleen said. "I don't know how, but I'd have found a way. I'd have killed him with my teeth."

"We aren't out of this yet. Before it's over you may get a chance to try."

They walked on in silence for a while. Apparently Rex had killed all the robots in the vicinity, or else they'd fled.

Suddenly Rex stopped and gripped Colleen's shoulder. His fingers hurt, but she did not notice it, did not move. She was held spellbound by the agonized shriek that echoed through the passageway. It died, only to come again, rise and fall as though it were the gauge of pain applied, rereleased, applied.

"Somé thing's gone wrong," Rex said. "Get behind me, but stay close."

The wail of agony arose again as Rex stopped short, having almost run into the broad back of a robot standing guard at the entrance to the Hidden Place. Rex walked carefully backward until they were out of sight around the closet corner. He turned and whispered to Colleen. "We can't dive in 'til we find out what we're facing. There are some open balustrades near the ceiling of the cave. They must give off into corridors above this one. We'll go up and see."

They moved quietly up through the winding passageways, bearing ever toward the left. The sounds of pain from the cave faded for a time and then increased in volume, serving as a guide to the two Terrans. After a few minutes of search, they found the open balustrades, entered one of them and crawled foward on hands and knees.

For a long moment, they drank in the sight. Then Colleen gasped. She covered her eyes with her hands and turned to buy her face in Rex' chest.

"Awful—awful!" she whispered.

Rex' teeth were clenched. The muscles of his jaws were tight. "The dirty, rotten, filthy swine."

Below them, the floor of the cave was strewn with hacked and mangled bodies. The Lurdans had been massacred; men, women, and children lay strewn about in various contortions and grimaces of the

last agony.

Along one side of the room a line of the half-human robots stood stolidly at attention. Against one was lay Johnny Calhoun and Saul Barnum, bound hand and foot. So far as Rex could see, they hadn't been too badly handled.

But the highlight of the tableau was centered in an open space in the center of the hall. There, the Lurdan, Morkon, was stretched writhing on the stone floor. He was not dead, but death would have been a welcome release. He had been beaten almost beyond recognition. He was a mass of blood, having been slashed and torn by the whip in the hand of a robot who stood over him.

Also, there was another person in the cave. Nearby, perfectly groomed, disdainful, even a triffle amused by the proceedings, stood Brother William. He stepped forward and looked down at Morkon with obvious distaste. "You obstinate fool," he said softly. "Why do you make it so hard for yourself?" You have only to tell me where you hid the bullion from the Lurdan Treasury and your sufferings will be ended. And don't think death will cheat me of the information either. You are far from dead. This can go on for hours. You'll tell eventually. We have far more delicate tortures than we've yet used."

"The beast!" Colleen whispered. "He must enjoy seeing people tortured. Otherwise he'd use a serum on the poor man. It's easy to open a person's mouth with a hypodermic needle."

"In this case it might not work. These Lurdans may be stronger than we realize. They're pretty highly-developed and they may have strong mind blocks that the strongest drugs can't dissolve."

"Can't we do something? Can't we put the poor devil out of his misery?"

Rex didn't answer because at that moment Brother William cursed and leaped forward. He went to his knees beside Morkon and jerked the latter's head around. Then his curses were renewed as he hurled the head to the floor.

"Dead. The weak fool! We must have miscalculated his capacity for punishment!" He turned in rage on the whipping robot. "You stupid mechanism! You used too much strength!"

The robot quivered peculiarly as though the vibrations of Brother William's rage had disturbed its delicate mental balance.

"I'm going to try something," Rex said. "Let's hope it works."

Colleen watched as he set the dial of his color-gun; saw a mirthless grin spread over his face. "The boys are going to think a hive of bees dropped on them," he said.

Rex was no doubt referring to Johnny and Saul, because it was there that his attention was riveted. He aimed the gun carefully, using his left wrist as a rest. He pressed the trigger. A fine line of green flame shot down from the balustrade and bounced sparks off the floor beside Johnny. Then he moved an inch to the right, squarely hitting the rope strands around Johnny's wrists.

The spaceman let out a yelp

and Rex's grin deepened. "It's like touching a hot stove," he said, "but look! I got the ropes. His hands are loose."

Now Rex swiftly re-dialed his gun—and lined his sights on Brother William. But the freebooter was amazingly quick of both mind and body. Having located Rex by the first green ray, he dived headlong to his left; hit the floor, rolled at a sharp angle, came to his feet and got the angle of the wall between himself and the gun before the lethal rays found him.

Rex swore under his breath and yelled at Johnny and Saul. "Get the hell up here before he sets the robots on you!" Neither man waited to say goodbye.They dashed past the robots and reached the door even as Brother William, now out of harm's way, sent a mental command to his terrible corps. The Terrans got out of the carnal hall just as rock-shuddering blasts from the robot's guns crumbled the rock around the exits.

A few moments later Johnny and Saul came pounding up the ramplike corridors. "Come on," Rex yelled, "let's keep going! We've got to get back to the space field before those robots cut us off."

"You know the way?" Johnny asked.

"The same way we came here in the first place."

"Which way is that?"

"Shut up and follow me."

They ran in single file, Saul Barnum calling out: "You all right, honey? I was sure worried about you."

"Yeah," Rex growled. "You worried yourself sick. A hell of a guy you are."

"Leave my father alone," Colleen snapped.

"Shut up and run."

Soon they were in corridors that even Johnny recognized. "This is it. The door that leads out onto the field."

"Stand back." Rex opened the door until there was room for one eye. "Things look clear. He evidently didn't expect us to get here so quick. Get set, all of you. We're going to make a break for it. Colleen, you and Saul go first. It'll be easier for Johnny and me to cover you from behind."

"I ain't got a gun," Johnny complained.

Rex glowered at his partner. "You do all right. Let them tie you up and take your gun away from you. Well I'll have to furnish the fire power."

Saul Barnum had a mouthful of tobacco he'd been working on industriously. He spat out a flood of juice, and then reached down his pants leg and came up with an ancient ray gun that had seen better days.

Johnny snatched the gun from his hands and Saul made no objection.

"Okay," Rex said. "Break straight for the ramp, you two."

Saul and Colleen dashed hand in hand from the doorway. Rex and Johnny came hard behind to fan out expertly on either side, so that the father and daughter were flanked on either side. Johnny saw the first moving object—a figure that stepped from a toolshed door on the far side of the field and raised

a gun. Johnny fired the old ray thrower and there was a sound like frying bacon. The ray didn't quite carry. It fell some five feet in front of the figure and put a large jagged hole in the metal flooring. But it drove the man to cover.

"Get the lead out!" Rex yelled, and sent a stream of purple toward two men who appeared far to the left. The purple seared them instantly. They turned into unidentifiable purple heaps under the hammering of four thousand tons to the square inch.

"Those ain't robots!" Johnny observed. They're Brothers! Give 'em hell!"

But the Brothers were reluctant to face the cross fire from the field, and the four reached the ramp of the *Dog Star* without mishap. They charged up the ramp and Rex slammed the port on any possibility of rat-fire from without.

They staggered into the reception lounge panting for breath. Nothing was said for a time. Then a voice came from outside the ship, over a loudspeaker: "Terrans in the *Dog Star*. This is Brother William. You've played the fools, you know. You can't possible blast off with that other ship on the ways ahead of you. Up to now I had a certain respect for your ability as fighting men. That is gone now. We will exterminate you at our leisure."

"Good lord, Rex," Johnny groaned. "He's right! We got into the wrong ship. We're dead ducks."

Rex Moran seemed worn; far more tired than even the violence of the last few hours justified. "No, we didn't get into the wrong ship. Let's go to the pilot's cabin. I want to have a few words with that joker."

The three of them followed Rex up the companionway. There he picked up a speaker and snapped the switch. "You out there—Brother William! What have you got against us? Why won't you allow us to blast off and go about our business?"

There was a quiet laugh. "You're most naive. And a trifle yellow. My estimation of you continues to fall."

"Then you plan to starve us out or kill us in some other way?"

"We have our plans. You won't live long."

"Then maybe you'll satisfy my curiosity. How is this planet guided and moved through space?"

"There are nine jets situated at strategic points on the globe. They are controlled from an engine room not far from here."

"I see. And what sort of an envelope are you riding in?"

"Something your Terran scientists never dreamed of. A controllable gas that recognizes gravity and can be left in space as a cloud when we are through with it. After a certain elapsed time, it disintegrates."

"Clever." Rex had appeared to be under great pressure. As the mocking words came into the pilot's cabin, however, he seemed to relax. Now he grinned, even winked at Colleen. "How many of you are there?"

"I think you're getting too inquisitive," the voice came back coldly.

"Sorry...."

Colleen came close and whispered

something in Rex' ear. The latter's eyes widened. He picked up the microphone again. "Is it true you have designs against Terra?"

"Oh—you've been talking to the girl? Yes, it's true. We need your planet. It will fit perfectly into our next transaction."

"You might get a surprise if you try to take it."

"If the Terrans were warned—yes. But they won't be. Before they know what happened, it will all be over and we'll be hunting down the last few in the hills."

"The dirty rats," Johnny groaned. Then to Rex: "And you got us trapped here in this shell where we die like bugs in a cup. I can't figure you, Rex. This isn't like you. You're the kind of guy who'd stay out and fight to the last for a chance. You knew this was a death trap. You came in here on purpose."

Rex stared vaguely at his partner for a minute. "Anybody know how many of these big Brothers are aboard this planet?"

Saul Barnum spoke up. "Those bigfooted critters said about two thousand."

"Hmmm. I'd figured about fifteen hundred on a job this size. But two thousand isn't much better." He turned his attention to the glum Johnny. "Son—do you really want to get rich—the easy way?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I don't get you, Rex. You look like you just bit into a big red apple and found a worm.

"I asked you a question."

"Well—hell! I don't know why you're so damned interested all of a sudden, but to tell the truth I never cared much for the deal. I just went along to stick with you."

Rex grinned. His sigh was one of relief. "You know, that's about the only reason I did it."

"What are you two guys talking about?" Saul Barnum inquired plaintively.

"Our cargo."

"What are you carrying?"

Rex stared levelly at him for a dead thirty seconds. "Morostans for Terra," he said.

Saul jerked to his feet. A look of surprise and contempt played over his face. Colleen drew back as from something unclean. "Flesh runners!"

"Yes. Flesh runners. But I don't think I ever looked at it the way other people do. The Morostans are good people trapped on a dying planet—shunned and ignored. Who can blame them for wanting to save themselves and their families? Who can blame them for wanting to keep on living?"

"They pay a pretty big piece of change per head to get dropped off in the Terran hills too," Saul said drily.

"Sure they do, and I wanted the money. I'm not trying to make myself out a saint."

"Look," Johnny cut in, "Why all this lofty chatter? This isn't the time for it. Or are you trying to get right with God before we get knocked off by those damn Brothers?"

Rex' jaw tightened. "I'm trying to get up the guts to finish something I started when I pointed us toward this ship." He got to his feet. "Stay

here. I'm going back and talk to our cargo."

Twenty minutes later Rex returned, followed by two huge, hairy Morostans. They were charged with wonder at being allowed access to this portion of the ship. Their clear hazel eyes took in the other Terrans, but they remained silent.

"These are the leaders of the group," Rex said. "They tell me they'd be honored to bleed and die for a planet of their own. I wonder if there are many Terrans who would say the same under identical circumstances."

One of the Morostans said quietly, "We would fight and die for a home for our people."

"You understand you only have about nine hundred able-bodied men among you; that you have women and children to think of. There are two thousand of these Brothers, the men who stole the planet originally. Can you handle them?"

"We will fight."

"I can give you enough arms for one shock assault. Some small bombs and three cases of color-guns I have aboard."

Gratitude, like the rising sun, shone in the faces of the Morostans. "You mean you will also give us arms?"

"You couldn't fight the Brothers with your bare hands."

We would be willing to try."

Rex grinned. "I'll break the guns out of the lockers. Then we will plan a campaign. A way to get you a beach head on the planet. If you win through, consider this world a legacy from another fine race who were not alert enough to hold it and take a lesson from that truth. You will find it has controls here, and if you win the fight you can roll it back to Morostan and take the rest of your people off that dying rock pile. This is a good planet. You can live and prosper here."

The Morostan held forth a folded paper. "Here is the money for our trip. I will pay you now. It is a draft on Banco Marsiana for one million credits."

Rex reddened. "Keep it," he said gruffly. "I didn't fulfill my end of the bargain. You'll need the capital to get started here. Come on. I'll get you the guns."

An hour later, seven hundred Morostans thundered out of the *Dog Star* into the faces of whatever surprised Brothers were in the hangars and tool sheds around the port. The Brothers rallied quickly, and there was war and carnage around the field before the signal came and the ports opened again to allow the women and children egress to a prepared fort under a guard of two hundred Morostans armed to the teeth.

A little while later, the outside speaker blared forth. "To Rex Moran in the *Dog Star*. Bridgehead established. All clear to blast off when you're ready. Would advise speed. This war isn't over yet.

Johnny glanced at Rex and grabbed the microphone. "Could you use a couple of hands? We haven't fought a war for a long time."

"Thanks. We'd be honored, but we'd rather do it alone. It's a personal matter."

Rex turned to Saul and Colleen.

There was a fixed grin on his face. "Pretty smart, eh? Letting somebody else fight our battles—get us out of a tough spot while we sit here on our fannies. Pretty clever."

Colleen's eyes were wet. "You big lug. Who do you think you're kidding? Get going, Dad. We haven't got all day." She walked into Rex' arms and put her face up to be kissed. I'll see you later, tough guy!"

Rex' grin was freer now—not so fixed. "On Terra, baby. I'll buy you a dinner. Johnny and I will probably stop off on Mars for a cargo of ore, but we'll be along."

"And you can just about buy one dinner with what we'll make," Johnny grunted.

"What do you care? Who wants to get rich?"

Rex said, "So long, Saul. Hit that stasis hard and you'll roll right through, I hope."

"I hope so, too," Saul said. "And—"

"And what?"

"Don't worry about anything. There won't be any loose talking so far as I'm concerned about riding the green lane."

"Thanks."

A few moments later, Colleen had a complaint. "Will you get going, you two? Out of sight somewhere? When a girl kisses a man goodbye, she doesn't want the relatives and friends hanging around."

The End

EDITORIAL *(Continued from page 5)*

Now the cycle has come around again. New writers, their heads full of Kafka and Joyce and William Burroughs, want to transform the traditional themes of s-f, to explore new territory. Experiments are being made, many of them conspicuously unsuccessful; new readers are coming in, and old ones are being driven away; and writers of both schools argue far into the night. We are having exciting times, but harsh polarities

What the extremists of both factions fail to realize, I think, is that science fiction is no monolith, and neither is its audience. We take all the universe as our province, and there are many ways of exploring that universe in fiction, from the bang-bang space opera to the abstruse excursion to "inner space." There are many types of readers, too, from teenagers newly graudated from comic books to professors of medieval literature. Writers also vary:some are happiest when they constantly face new challenges in their work, others incline by temperament and outlook to work within traditional bounds.

This is an intolerant era, much given to fierce quasi-theological disputation in everything from politics to civil rights to the function of the university. Something of that has entered the world of s-f. I think, though, that when the rancor dies away, we will find that there is room for all the science fictions, for all schools of writing, and for all kinds of readers. A kind of fiction that lays claim to infinity can hardly afford to be anything but diverse. In editorials to come, we'll explore the nature of that diversity in the hope of establishing some criteria of excellence in science fiction that can apply equally well to all species of that troubled genus.

The Day After ETERNITY

By LAWRENCE CHANDLER

It's tough enough to repel any invader from space—but when you come up against an invisible threat that uses the Gay 90's as a weapon—brother, you are *in trouble!*

I SAID, "Colonel Pagan reporting to General Avers."

The sprite behind the desk said, "Oh, yes, Colonel. The general is expecting you." She had a way of making you feel you were the biggest thing so far—that the day wouldn't have been complete without you. She had jet-black hair. She was wearing one of those new sprayed-on blouses that revealed every pore and she had the eyes of a blue Martian sand cat. One look and I knew Sam Avers hadn't turned senile yet.

The sprite pointed to the door that read, *Samuel B. Avers—Commanding Officer—First Alliance District*, and said, "You may go right in, Colonel."

Sam was on video with some fat civilian, so I came to attention and waited. The civilian studied me through narrowed, thoughtful eyes and asked, "Is this the man, General?"

Sam turned and looked at me coldly and said yes.

"Hmmm. Looks competent."

"Colonel Joe Pagan; A. T., A. C., A. S. A., among other branches," Sam said.

"Career man?"

"From way back."

The fat civ was looking at my skull, where the hair had grown in white. "Where did you acquire the gash. Colonel?"

He must have been important, so I played it stiff. Instead of telling him it was none of his goddam business, I said, "Advance Recon, sir. Third Neptunian Expedition.


QUESTION
ANSWER
RECORD

A whirly on Gannymede got in a claw."

"Oh, yes. The Expedition that finally succeeded in liberating the Neptunians. Noble effort."

I didn't laugh because that wasn't my job. They didn't pay me for laughing in the faces of important civs. He smiled and said, "Fine allies, the Neptunians. They'll come in handy." Then he turned his face to Sam and said, "We're depending on you, General. Give us a report as soon as possible." He faded out and Sam snapped off the screen. Sam came around on his swivel couch and I saluted. "Colonel Pagan reporting, sir."

Sam passed a tired hand over his forehead and said, "Oh, cut out the crap and come over and sit down."

I went over and sat down and we looked each other over. I said, "You've got yourself a belly."

He looked down and then back at me and growled. "You're no Venusian god yourself."

"Your office sprite was impressed."

"She goes for anything in a uniform."

"I'll check on the way out."

His grin highlighted the weariness in his face; a face that had aged quite a lot since we'd fought together in the Lunar caves. I counted the years and realized I was thirty-five years old. Not so good. Years sliding by too fast. Then I looked at Sam. He wasn't any older, but he would have passed for fifty. Riding a high orbit in the Alliance aged a man. I didn't envy him.

He snapped the scramble key on his desk, making the room peek-proof, and said, "I've got a bad one for you, Joe."

"I've had bad ones before."

"Nothing like this, though."

I waited while he looked over some notes on his desk. After a while, he scowled and said, "Have you heard about the snooper?"

"Vaguely."

"It moved into the System a month ago."

"I heard that. They said it took an orbit between Terra and Mars."

"Right. And thereby hangs the grief."

I didn't get it. I said, "Why grief? Snoopers have dropped in on us before." They were jet-controlled planets whose suns had given out. They'd come by and spot our System and move in to borrow a little solar heat. After a few years they'd go on about their busi-

ness and no one the worse. We had plenty of solar heat.

"I know," Sam said. "They drop in to warm their feet at our fire and then run along. But this one is different."

"How so?"

"These boys want to drink out of our fountain."

"I don't meet you."

He looked at me across the bags under his eyes and said, "Joe, what keeps us alive and functioning on this planet?"

"Any number of things. Freak coincidences, mostly. A paper-thin layer of atmosphere—"

"Water, Joe. That's the basic."

"Right. But I don't quite know what you mean by basic. It can be created. They do it on Mars."

"They do it—but we can't —not if we were suddenly stripped of our supply."

"Why not?"

"Because the situation is entirely different. The Martians had two-thousand years to get ready for complete drought. They knew it was coming. Their tables of water-vapor escape told them the exact time they'd have to start shifting for themselves. They had all those years and even then, they almost missed. How long do you think it takes to lay out globular canals—set atomic cores—build synthesis tanks as big as oceans two miles under a planet's surface?"

"I get your point. If all our water-vapor suddenly jumped out into space, we'd be in trouble. . . ."

"We'd be all through, Joe."

"But what's that got to do with the snooper?"

"This one doesn't seem to need heat. It wants water. And it's drawing off our water supply so fast we'll be bone-dry in twenty years if it continues."

"There still seems to be an answer. Ask the boys, nice, to go away. If they refuse, go out and blow them into dust. I understand the planet only got a three thousand-mile diameter."

"We don't dare, Joe. We got a spectrum analysis that would knock your hat off. The whole core's alive. A blast big enough to do any good would nova that snooper all over the System. It could trigger the sun."

I rubbed my chin and realized I'd forgotten to shave. And calling on a big man, too. "Sounds impossible."

Sam was staring at me oddly. "And maybe it is. In fact, Joe, the snooper may not even be there."

I stared back. "Now wait

a minute, Sam. You just said—"

"Let me give you the whole picture. We only know one thing for sure—we're losing our water vapor. We started losing it when the snooper arrived, so it's logical to say the thing's responsible, but get this: That hot spectrum is only one of seven different ones we scanned."

"But spectrums can't vary, man! Not when—"

"That snoopers got us talking to ourselves, Joe. Microphotos snapped on an identical surface show any number of different landscapes and developments. In twenty-five minutes we photographed a jungle, a city, a desert, and a mountain ridge within the same five-mile diameter."

"The planet's alive with mirages."

Sam got up and walked around the table. "Or maybe we've got fly specks on our lenses. But Intelligence doesn't seem to think so, and they call the orbit in a situation like this."

"What do they say?"

"They think," Sam returned, slowly, "that we're up against a formless entity—a mind-force existing in a frequency our eyes and instruments detect."

If he'd figured on flattening me, he'd failed. I'd read Intelligence reports proving that such entities existed. The hypothesis and proof had been theoretical, however, so the whole thing had been rather sketchy. I said, "But what would a bodyless entity need of a planet?"

"We don't know, but it's quite indicative that they do need water-vapor."

He had me there. "But—"

"I can't answer your questions, Joe, because we haven't got any answers. All we've got is this—Intelligence is sure the snooper actually exists—that it's solid matter. They've huddled with the bio-chemists and physicists and mathematical theorists and constructed a problem they threw at the robot calculators at Harvard University. The answer, they claim, gave them the location of" —Sam stopped and peered at the notes he held in his hand. "—of the *nuclear ganglia* of the entity."

"And what in the hell might that be?"

"So far as we're concerned, Joe, it's the spot on the snooper they want blown up."

"And who does the blowing?"

"You."

I got up and took a turn around the table myself. "Fine. All they ask a man to

do is land on a planet that may not even exist and knock off an entity that's probably not even there, just so they can keep on taking baths every Saturday night."

"So we can all keep on living, Joe."

Sam Avers spoke quietly as he went back and sat down.

"Okay—when do I start?"

"Blast-off is set for Friday night."

"What's the makeup?"

"We're giving you seventy-five men, and it's an Alliance project."

"Good Lord! That means Venusians — Martians — Mercurians — I thought you said *men*."

Sam spoke quietly again. "Anyone who fights and dies for a common and vital cause is a man, Joe. You can pick four Terrans of your choice. And another thing—there'll be a girl."

"What?"

"A girl from Intelligence—a psychologist named Diana Abbot. She's coming in from Washington this afternoon. In the meantime, you'd better pick your Terrans and get your space check."

"I'll get right at it."

"Another thing—let me have the names of the four men you want. Get it to me as soon as you round them up."

Sam Avers sat down at his table. His change of expression told me the informality was over. He snapped off the scrambler and I got up and snapped to attention. "Assignment accepted, sir."

"Thank you, Colonel Pagan."

I saluted and started to exit. At the door I turned. "Sir, may I inquire as to the name of the civilian who was on your screen when I came in?"

"Certainly. That was Gregory Winthrop, Chairman of the Interplanetary Relations Board. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing important. I recognized the face but couldn't place it."

"Good luck, Colonel."

I went into the outer office. The sprite was not at her desk. She was in the far corner by the washstand slipping something into her bag. I got a flash of it. Bright, shiny, circular. She turned as though frightened, then regained her poise. She said, "You startled me," then walked back to her desk with the sinuous movement of a leopardess on the make.

I went to the door and opened it and then turned. "What's your name, dear?"

"Bettina Turner, sir."

"Thank you, dear." I went to the nearest bar and downed a double brandy. It was very good and I had another one. Then I began wondering about things. I wondered about that damned snooper that could change its surface at the flash of a micro-camera. I wondered whether or not that Harvard robot had slipped a cog or two. I wondered what sexy little Bettina Turner was doing with a scrambler-decoder and why she'd looked so guilty when caught putting it in her purse. I ordered another brandy and wondered if leopardesses ever actually went on the make.

I made out my list at the bar—Hap Hannigan, Jimmy Coslow, Nick Wynn, Art Bolton—then used the bar phone to contact them. Hap and Jimmy weren't hard to locate. They were top sergeants in the Minneapolis Alliance Barracks. I called the C. O., used Sam Aver's name, and left an order to send them to my office.

Nick Wynn and Art Bolton were a little tougher to locate. Nick had resigned from the service after we finished the Venusian campaign together. His father was a billionaire and had a private museum of old automobiles with ten fortunes tied up in it. He possessed the only genuine Model-T Ford in existence—all the others having been demolished when the bombs of the 1998 uprising hit the museums along with every place else.

I figured he'd be in New York puttering around the museum, and I was right. I got him on the phone and he said he'd be in Minneapolis in an hour.

They traced Art Bolton for me to a New Orleans bar. He'd been out of service six months and probably hadn't drawn a sober breath in that time. But he could sober up quick on demand and promised to say good-bye to his women and head north immediately. I called a messenger from the Barracks and sent the list to Sam Aver's office. Then I ordered another brandy.

I'd hardly set the glass down when she came in. A tall, blonde girl with nice legs and a cold, beautiful, patrician profile, who evidently thought breasts were functional because she kept hers covered up.

She sat down beside me at the bar and ordered a stinger. I looked at her and smiled and said, "Have it on me?"

She looked back and didn't

smile and said, "Certainly, sucker."

I blinked. "Beg pardon?"

"It won't get you a thing."

"Did I ask?"

"Practically. You visualized a small room with green drapes to which you obviously have access. It contains a couch, a liquor cabinet, and a file of music tapes."

I'd had enough brandy to take the edge off my politness. "Huh! A telepath and a snob."

"Telepath—yes—but why the snob?"

"A cold—in fact a frigid snob."

"Cold — perhaps — frigid — possibly, under most circumstances — but I repeat, why snob?"

"No other type parades its talents in bars."

She thought that over soberly. "You seem to be parading yours quite openly."

"I'm a citizen having a few drinks. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least. Is your offer withdrawn?"

"Hell no. I'm a sucker. I'll buy anybody a drink."

Her tone had been such that I figured I'd put her in her place and she was sorry. I waited while she selected words of apology. She said, "So you're the drunken sot upon whom the fate of Terra rests."

I got red in the face and choked up the way I do when I get mad suddenly. She looked me over clinically and said, "I'm Diana Abbot. I think Commander Avers mentioned my name to you."

I got my tongue unstuck. "Well for crisake! Why pick me out in a bar? Couldn't you have made contact at my office the way any normal person would?"

She continued to look me over, completely poised and self-possessed. "I'm a psychologist. That makes me abnormal, I suppose. At any rate, I like to study the animal in its natural habitat. There is more to be learned that way."

"In other words, you like to sneak up on people."

Her stinger came and she lifted it to her lips. Then she set it down, flushed slightly, and frowned at me. Her eyes flicked downward for a second and she said, "For heavens sake! Quit worrying about them. The fact that I cover them indicates neither frigidity nor abnormality. I just happen to be old-fashioned enough to think you're more attractive this way than pushed brazenly out for all the world to see."

I'd gotten under her skin by just thinking. I grinned.

"Okay—they're yours to do with as you will. Shall we start over and try to be friends?"

"I think that would be a good idea."

"Fine. We're going out into space on a dangerous mission. We've got to keep our minds on business."

"That's right."

"So we'll leave sex completely out of it."

She set down her glass and gave me a long, peculiar, penetrating look. "That's what you think," she said, looking very solemn.

As I walked down the hall toward my office, the thundering voices of a quartette came louder and louder:

Oh, the fighting men of Venus
Respond when duty calls.
Their guts are lined with
copper,
They've got lava rocks
for—

I put my key in the lock.

Oh, we'll drive the last
battalion
Across the last terrain.
And on the day after eternity
We'll plan the last campaign.

They were there—all four of them—and they'd already found the liquor. Hap Hannigan and Jimmy Coslow were sprawled on the lounge Diana Abbot had spotted in my lecherous mind, and Nick Wynn was pushing back the green drapes to let some of the alcohol fumes out.

Oh, those four-armed, fighting
Martians
Can take a star apart.
They'll leave a hole from pole
to pole
That isn't worth a—

Art Bolton looked over and saw me and yelled, "Joe Pagan!" and it was a little rough for a few minutes. Then I got them quieted down and looked them over. None of them had changed much. A little older. Nick's temples were gray and Art Bolton's jaw-line had blurred a little from heavy drinking. Hap, and Jimmy were still in shape of course. Four good men. I'd fought with them from Mercury to Pluto and knew they could be depended on.

I looked at Nick and Art. "You two want to sign on again?"

They pointed at each other and spoke the same words in unison. "Me sign up and carry that slob through a campaign?"

I said. "Okay—it's settled."

Art Bolten said, "Like hell it is! What's the orbit?"

"Expedition to the snooper."

"That's different. I've never been on a snooper before."

"You'll like this one. Hot women—cold beer. Now get over to H. Q. and sign up. Then the four of you get your space checks tomorrow morning and stand by at the barracks for a call."

Hap Hannigan said, "I been under wraps for six months. We'll have a little drinkee first. You join us, Joe?"

"Can't do. But see you get into a Turkish bath early enough to steam the alcohol out before the space check."

They headed out and I heard a last verse as they waited for the elevator:

Oh, the soldier boys of Pluto,
Have never lost a fight.
Their sons are born in iron pants
And their women scratch and bite.

Oh, we'll drive the last battalion,
Across the last—

I slammed the door and lay down to get some sleep. After a while, the phone rang. I struggled back to consciousness and reached for it. "Hello."

"This is Diana Abbot. Did I wake you up?"

"Yes."

"That's too bad," she said happily. "I was just going to bed myself, so naturally, I thought of you. Then I remembered I hadn't thanked you for the drink, so of course I had to call."

I ground my teeth. "Can you pull images over a phone?"

"No."

"Too bad. I wish you could see what I'm thinking." I slammed up the phone and went back to sleep. It took an hour.

I reported to Central Medic the next morning. A young doctor looked at my identification tag and told his nurse, "Bring the *dossier* on Joseph R. Pagan, Colonel, Alliance Space Arm."

We waited and she returned a few moments later. She was a blonde young sprite and the puzzled look became her. "It's incomplete, Doctor. The psychology file is no longer in the file."

He was young too, and frowned importantly. "Who's got it?"

"I don't know."

"Very well. Get the micro

on it from the master cabinet."

While we waited again, I asked, "Who would have access to my psycho file?"

"Oh, any number of people."

"That covers a lot of territory."

He thought I was needling him and tightened his scowl. "Your military superiors. The people in the high political echelons. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. I was just making conversation."

The sprite brought the master micro and we got to work. I went through the routine and passed with only one dial against me. It was on the machine that peeked into your bloodstream and tattled if it found any alcohol.

"Not enough to stop you," the young doctor said regretfully, "but don't drink any more until you blast off."

I hoped my quartette had gotten to the baths early.

On the way out, I met Diana Abbot going into the physical examination room wrapped in a sheet. She said, "Good morning, Colonel, did you pass?"

"Handily." I opened the door. "Want me to go along and keep you company?"

"No, thanks."

I smiled and held out my hand. "Well, see you at the barracks."

She extended her own hand and shook mine. She said, "You hoped I'd reach out without thinking and drop the sheet. That's not very gentlemanly."

"It would have been fun, though. So long."

That afternoon, I made a final check with Sam Avers, got my official orders, and reported to the field two hours before blast-off. My force was waiting, under the command of a bright young lieutenant with shiny insignia. He turned it over to me and marched smartly away. A weird lot they were too. Any Alliance expedition looks more like a traveling carnival than a military unit.

They'd given me twenty-five Martians. Evil-faced devils. Leather-skinned, four-armed fighters. The best in the System. All the Martian soldiers had been rented into the Alliance by the Martian *Kastron*, a fine ally so long as he got his. He talked solidarity, got so much a head, guaranteed obedience, and liked to see them get killed because then he got a close-out fee. The fear and devotion with which these demons regarded the fat, grub-like little slob

had always been a mystery to me. They were killed for the slightest disobediance, the *Kastron* doing the job himself with a golden meat axe, and execution by this god of theirs was the only thing in heaven or hell that they feared.

There were twenty winged Ganymedians b o u n c i n g around and chirping like birds, nothing at all warlike about them except the glittering stingers protruding from the lower parts of their harnesses. One touch of the business end of a stinger meant instant and painless death.

The fifteen Venusians assigned to the company stood as straight as ramrods, eyes straight ahead. They considered themselves the aristocrats of the System. They considered themselves handsome, too, and every man carried a mirror in his knapsack. A pelt of soft blue fur served a Venusian for clothing and their yellow cat-eyes seemed to penetrate like spears. They were vicious, treacherous, and poor soldiers.

There were also ten exoskeletal Plutonians. These lads were ponderous and slow-moving, but you could use them for battering rams in a pinch, because nothing less than a rock crusher would break a Plutonian hardhead's skull.

The company was rounded out with five Mercurians that should have been listed as hospital supplies rather than soldiers. They weren't fighters and didn't claim to be, but they were full of a sweet green elixir that had saved many a soldier's life. They were used only for transfusions—walking blood banks.

The four Terrans were waiting nearby for orders. I called them over. They saluted. I said, "Sergeant Hannigan—You're in command of the Martians. Sergeant Coslow, take the Ganymedian contingent—and get those two down off the barracks roof. You're in command of the rest of the company, Captain Bolton. Lieutenant Wynn —liaison. Any questions?"

There were no questions, so I had the company marched to the landing pits to await boarding.

As they marched away, a voice asked, "Any orders for me, Colonel?"

I turned and saw Diana Abbot garbed in skin tight clothing, ready for blast-off. I said, "You're a civilian. Other than in emergencies, you're not under my command."

"I'll take orders, however,"

she said quietly. "So long as I agree that they are wise ones."

"Very decent of you," I said. "I'd suggest you prepare to board." I walked away resolving to have no trouble with Diana Abbot. So our first brush came ten minutes later when I was checking supplies and came on two crates that didn't add up. "What do these boxes contain?"

Diana was right at my elbow. "I ordered them, Colonel. I obtained a priority from Commander Avers."

"What's in them?"

"Helmets."

"For the company?"

"Who else?"

"Since when are you consigning battle equipment to my troops?"

"These helmets aren't exactly battle equipment. They'd hardly stop gunfire. They're made of lead."

I could feel my face getting red. "Now what in the name of Pluto do we want of lead helmets?"

"They may come in handy."

I turned to the loaders. "Shunt those two boxes aside."

Diana held up a paper. "Priority, Colonel."

"This is my expedition. I'm in command."

"That's stupid. Commander Avers can send you after a pack of cigarettes."

I felt like slugging her. "Load the boxes," I said, and walked away fast.

We'd been out four hours before I saw Diana again. I was checking combat material in my cabin when she knocked on the door.

I let her in and she said, "I want to apologize."

"For what?"

"I'm sorry I had to throw weight around in the matter of the helmets."

"You got them aboard, didn't you?"

She came over and laid a hand on my arm. It was a nice hand; much nicer than the requisition for twenty-five ice-ray guns I'd been checking. She leaned forward with a serious look on her pretty face and said, "Joe, you and I mustn't fight. This job is too important. There must be no friction between us. Will you believe me when I tell you those lead helmets may save this expedition?"

"Possibly—if you told me why." Her face was close and I got the feeling her lips invited. I got up and walked away.

Diana took a cigarette from my desk. I stood where I was and made her light it herself.

I think my boorish reactions stemmed for the feeling that she had more brains and more ability in her line than I had in mine. That annoyed me. Diana Abbot was too pretty to be smart. I'd always felt ill-at-ease with smart, beautiful women.

Diana said, "Joe, this enemy we're going to face—did it occur to you it might be something impervious to fire, ice or concussion? That this may be a battle of minds rather than muscle?"

I was forming a sarcastic reply, but something in her eyes stopped me. I said, "Sam Avers told me everything he knew. It sounded to me as though no one had much idea of what we're up against."

"That's about the size of it. I've evolved some theories on what lies ahead of us, but I almost hate to expound them before I have some tangible proof. If I'm wrong, my ideas would sound fantastic and silly."

"I think the situation is too serious to let personal feelings cramp our style. If you've got some ideas, I'd like to hear them."

She snubbed out her cigarette. "Well, in the first place, I think we're fighting a formless, single entity—not a dozen, nor a million, nor a planetful—just one entity that uses this planet as a base. I think it's self-supporting and self-perpetuating, except for one element—and I don't think that element is water vapor."

"It's need for water has been proven."

"Not necessarily. The extraction of water-vapor from Terra could be accidental. The entity could be after something entirely different."

"Such as what?"

"Mind power."

"I don't follow."

"This thing could be a gigantic mental parasite that sucks mind-stuff from the inhabitants of other planets."

I gaped at her. "That's—that's fantastic!"

She smiled. "I knew you'd say that. But good Lord! Why didn't you—?"

"The water theory was that of the Alliance Physicists Authority. I'm a member of the Psychiatric Committee that sat in on the emergency conference. It was integrated with both the Alliance Military, and Political Authorities."

"A pretty formidable array of talent. Did you advance your theory."

She smiled ruefully. "I did. I was voted down. And you know what that means in the

high echelons. The water theory won a majority vote. That made it unanimous—no minority opinion allowed—that was why I had to concur."

"But personally, you don't believe it?"

Her eyes turned defiant. "No—and if that be treason, do with it as you will."

I scowled and said, "I was never much for majority opinions myself. But I think this theory of yours is a little far fetched."

"At least you'll keep an open mind."

"I'll do that. But I still expect to bump into something we can blast out of existence with a well-placed Plutoniam bomb."

She held out her hand. "Friends?"

I took it. "Friends," and wished this wasn't an official relationship. Things could have been interesting otherwise.

She left and I went back to work. But, thirty seconds later, I let out a howl. I got up and went to the door and caught her halfway down the companionway. "Come back here!"

Back in the office I pushed a requisition under her nose. "What in hell's this?"

She studied it a moment. "Oh, that. I supposed you knew."

"This is the first I've seen of it. Is this a sample your work?"

"Yes."

"Then will you tell me what in the all-fired devil we need of twenty scramblers?"

"They're for the birdmen."

She spoke as though that explained everything. I said, "And what do the birdmen need of scramblers?"

"Colonel Pagan—I haven't told you everything—the complete theory I've worked out—"

I blew up. "Listen! This is my expedition! I'm responsible for all the lives aboard, and—"

"Then I'd think you'd appreciate all the help you can get!"

"Shutup! I'm talking! I said I'm responsible for the expedition, and I'm damned if I'll have the weight-budget overloaded with fool contraptions just because you have a theory! We couldn't even bring medicos because of weight! Scramblers are made to block out radio communications. What in blazes will we need them for when we're going so far from Terra we couldn't even reach it by parcel post?"

She opened her mouth to

answer me, but a knock on the door cut her off.

"Come in!" I roared

The door opened and Nick Wynn stood there—a set, serious look on his face. He saluted. "I've come to report, sir, that—"

"Well! Report and get out of here!"

"I was trying to, sir. The information is that three Martians are dead."

That brought me out of my chair. "Are you telling me the officers of this expedition can't keep their men from killing each other?"

"There was no fight, sir."

"But every man aboard was certified as being in perfect health!"

"The dead men were not sick, sir. That is, we have no reason to believe they were."

I followed Nick to the quarters of the Martians where Hap Hannigan was waiting. He saluted and I looked over the dead men. There appeared to be nothing wrong with them except that they were dead. They looked as ugly as usual—as normal as usual. The only thing wrong was that they'd quit living.

"If we could run some tests—" Nick Wynn said.

"We aren't equipped for it. This is an expedition, not a laboratory. Get the bodies overside." I turned to Hap. "How is this affecting the rest of the Martian contingent?"

"They're rather restless, but I don't think there will be any trouble."

I started back to my cabin. Diana was right behind me. She said, "I know how they died—and you know. We're getting closer to the snooper. Its power is stronger. It reached out and pulled the life force from those men."

She followed me into my cabin. I turned on her and said, "I'm running this expedition, Miss Abbot. I'll make the decisions."

"Yes—running it right into the ground, to coin a very old phrase! And I'll tell you this. You'd better issue those lead helmets or you'll land a lot of dead men on the snooper—if you land at all."

"And just what good are a bunch of lead helmets?"

"I think perhaps they'll insulate each individual's life force against the pull of whatever force we're fighting. I'm not sure that it will. If not, we're all through anyhow, but for heaven's sake—let's try it!"

"As I said. I'll make the decisions."

"Oh, you make me sick!" Then the door slammed and she was gone.

I sat down at my desk and went through the rest of the requisitions. I fiddled with my pen a while and drew some doodads on a pad. I lit a cigarette and snubbed it out.

Then I snapped on the speaker and said, "All souls aboard, give attention—all souls aboard, give attention. Helmets will be issued to all personnel on the ship. They will be donned immediately and worn at all times. I mean at all times. They will not be removed for sleep or any other purpose. Colonel Joseph Pagan—Commanding Officer."

A few moments later, my intercom rang. It was Diana. She said, "Thanks—thanks a lot. I think it was a wise decision on your part."

"Oh, go to bed!"

"I'd love to have you come to my cabin for a nightcap."

I slammed down the hook.

A few seconds later, it rang again. Her voice was soft and lazy this time. "Please come. I want to see you."

I hung up without answering and went in and combed my hair and went out and down the companionway. Diana's cabin was at the far end. The door was ajar and the pressure of my knuckles swung it open. The cabin was dark and I hesitated on the threshold. Then a light snapped on, and I didn't just hesitate. I stood rooted to the floor. In the middle of the cabin stood Diana. A Diana I'd never seen before. My eyes got a little wide.

She was stark naked.

We both stood there frozen for some seconds. Then she broke the spell by turning and snatching up a robe and throwing it around herself. She said, "I'm—I'm sorry. I didn't expect you quite so soon."

My blood was pounding through my veins. "I think you're lying. I think you did that deliberately. Let me remind you that this is a military expedition, not a strip tease joint." I turned and strode back to my cabin, raging at myself for accepting the invitation in the first place. I sat down at my desk and caught myself remembering how she'd looked, standing there. I cursed myself for remembering—cursed her for what she'd done.

The intercom rang. I picked it up. She spoke without waiting for a hello. She said, "You're right, Colonel. It was deliberate. But my reason for doing it was far different than you think. I hope you never discover the true reason, but I think you probably will."

She snapped off and left me

sitting there with my mouth open.

I steered clear of Diana for the next six days, bumping into her only at mess and once or twice in the lounge. This wasn't hard to do because the other men always had her surrounded during off-hours. I spent most of my time in the pilot house checking progress, or in my cabin trying to figure out what the hell kind of an expedition this was.

Checking the course was routine. This was one of the new automatic, high speed rockets. I'd ridden them before and they'd always made me feel completely useless. The speed, the orbit, the timing, even the arrival and landing, had been computed before blast-off. I always got the feeling that the precision instruments were saying, *Go back and sit down you stupid ass. We'll run this rocket.*

One thing intrigued me on this expedition, though. With all the vagueness entailed—with Diana's wild theories of what lay ahead—I wondered if there would really be a planet to land on. Maybe the whole thing was a vast illusion. Perhaps we'd travel in a huge orbit and land right back where we started.

But this didn't prove to be the case. The rocket came around into a gravity pull right on the split second and the instruments went to work with seeming disdain, to point the fins downward and lower the tube into a flat, yellow meadowland. Then the instruments stopped functioning with a bored sigh and said, *Okay, buster. Get going with your little war so we can all go home.*

I ran tests outside the shell and found oxygen, complete lack of atmospheric poison, and satisfactory gravitational pull.

After rechecking the results, I called a staff meeting in the lounge. My four Terrans were there when I arrived. My fifth Terran, too. She wore a close-fitting, black uniform and looked wholly desirable. Her breasts were still covered and, to show how silly a person can get over such things, there came a quick vagrant thought into my mind—a feeling of satisfaction that I was perhaps the only man alive who'd seen them.

The four officers saluted. I said, "At ease, men. From here out, we'll drop parade ground rules. The going may be rough and we probably won't have time for any heel-clicking."

Hap Hannigan dropped into a chair and grinned.

"Man, I'm glad we're here. Those damn Martians are about ready to take the rocket apart."

Art Bolton's face was grim. "After those three deaths, I expected trouble. What do you suppose killed them?"

I glanced at Diana, sitting quietly on the lounge. She caught the look and almost smiled. "It's fortunate," she said demurely, "that more men didn't die."

"That's past history," I said harshly. "Wynn and I will make reconnaisance. If everything looks alright, we'll take our bearings and open the orders."

We armed ourselves with two ice guns and stepped into the air-lock. Sixty seconds later, the shell port opened and the ladder slid to the ground. I walked down. Hap followed. As we touched soil, the eight tail guns of the rocket covered us like a blanket.

The air was good, the sun was warm, and there was a cool pleasant breeze. The flora was strange, however; yellow, fat-bladed grass, thick and luxuriant and soft. It broke off easily and when I rolled it in my fingers it showed high water content and gave off a musky odor.

"Looks like Kentucky with the yellow jaundice," Nick said.

"Nothing very menacing so far."

Nick gripped his gun and frowned at me. "I wonder."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"I—I don't quite know. Maybe it's the result of natural tension, but it seems that—"

"What, man! Speak up."

"Well—" Nick swung his eyes in a wide arc, studying the horizon. Then they swung back to me. They held a strange look. "We're a long way from home," he said.

"Of course we are. What's got into you, Nick?"

His voice dropped to a whisper. "I want to go home, Joe."

"Go *home?* Well, for—"

Now his voice rose and reminded me of that of a child; a tired child, bewildered at the absence of familiar things. "Did you ever see Dad's collection of old cars, Joe. They're wonderful old relics! I'd like to have lived back there in the twentieth century, Joe. Back when Henry Ford and Walter Chrysler, and Durant were pioneering the great ages to come."

"Nick! What's got into you. This is—"

His expression turned wild, panicky. "Joe—I want to go home!"

Then, out on that yellow prairie, it came into being; the thing we both saw at the same instant. A city, bright and sparkling in the sun. It could have been Detroit, or New York, or Atlanta, with their overslung highways and streets, their flying terraces, their tall, slim buildings. But there on the broad avenue a couple of hundred yards from us, was something that didn't belong in any city I'd ever seen; an old automobile right out of a museum, with big spoked wheels, brass radiator fittings and an open tonneau.

There were two people in the car, a man and a woman. The man wore a long white coat and the woman was bundled up in so much clothing, you wondered if she could ever get it all off. She wore a broad, flat hat with a weird veil pulled over it and tied under her chin.

They both looked our way. The woman smiled and waved and called out, but the sound of the ancient motor in the car drowned her words.

Nick grabbed my arm. "Look, Joe—look! It's an old Chalmers! Practically extinct! Dad heard there was one down in Alabama and I was going down to find out when you called me. I was thinking about it on the way out here and now I don't have to go to Alabama! It's right here waiting for us!"

My mind was spinning. I felt dizzy, as though some great force was pulling at me, trying to force me down. I was filled with a sense of great, unseen power around me.

Nick's reaction was different. He smiled at the strange couple, waved back at the woman, and began running toward the car. I yelled, "Nick! Nick! Come back here! It's an order! Come back!"

But he didn't seem to hear me. The car was moving slowly away, now, and Nick began to run. He called, "Wait! Wait!" and the man at the wheel turned and looked back and stopped the car. The woman made a beckoning motion and Nick increased his speed.

I shook off my dizziness and started after him, but at that moment, Diana's voice came through the amplifier in the nose of the rocket. "Joe! For God's sake, stay where you are! Don't follow him! Come back into the ship!"

At that moment, Nick Wynn reached the side of the ancient automobile. The wom-

an held out her hand. Joe took it and put his foot on the big, ugly running board of the car. Then there was a quick, bright explosion that knocked me to the ground. It thundered and reverberated through the air, faded into echoes, and was gone.

I struggled to my feet and looked around like a punch-drunk fighter hunting for his opponent. But there was nothing. No city. No automobile. Only the torn, yellow meadow and Nick Wynn—or the remnants of him that were left.

He had been blown to pieces.

I turned around and staggered back into the open airlock. As the shell port closed, I passed out.

"Feeling better, now?"

I felt a hand on my forehead. I opened my eyes and saw Diana seated on the edge of my bunk. I croaked, "What happened?"

Her eyes were grave and there was a touch of horror in them. "What I thought might happen. But I'm not being smug. I'm not saying, I told you so. I wish I'd been completely wrong."

I put my feet out of the bunk. She slid an arm around my shoulders, trying to help. I got up and took a turn around the cabin, striving to shake off the weakness.

"Are you able to talk?" Diana asked.

"Of course I'm able to talk."

Her eyes followed me around the table. "I thought you were going to be killed too."

"Thanks for yelling. It probably stopped me from following him."

"Once he got away from you, there was nothing you could do."

I turned on her. "You were right there at the mike. You must have been expecting this to happen."

"Not that necessarily. I was expecting something."

She sat on the edge of the bunk, her face pale, her hands pressed tightly together in her lap. I went over and took her by the shoulders and lifted her up. "I owe you an apology."

"For what?"

"For being stubborn. If I'd let you talk—listened to you—this might never have happened."

"How could you do that. You're a military man. You have to make your own decisions. This is war."

I shouldn't have lifted her up and brought her so close to me. Her face in front of mine. I put my arms around

her and drew her close and kissed her.

She responded for a moment and then turned her face away. I got my senses back and said, "Sorry."

She drew away and went and looked out the port, then turned. "Joe tell me exactly what happened out there. What did he say before—"

I told her about the change in him; how he suddenly wanted to go home; how he seemed like a little boy.

When I got through, she said, "This tragedy at least shows us one of the entity's weapons."

"Maybe it shows you one of its weapons. It only leaves me confused."

"I'm sure of it, Joe. Let me tell you exactly what happened."

"I wish you would."

"This entity is formless and —well, mental. It has powers that go far beyond our knowledge of mind force. It can't fight with weapons as we do —that is, drive forward and blast. That's obvious. In Nick's case, it entered his mind and read it like a tape. It discovered the thing he loved most—old cars—"

"It did?" There was doubt in my voice.

"Of course."

"Then why—?"

"Why; what?"

"Never mind. Go ahead with what you were saying."

"It has the power, after learning what attracts each individual mind, of magnifying the desire, and of throwing an image, or a mirage with such force and reality that even others can see it."

"An optical illusion—magnified yearning—"

"Of course. And the illusion is a booby trap. A hidden bomb that explodes with the force of actual fissionable material."

I thought that over for a moment. "Tell me—how wide a range do you think this entity can function in?"

"I think a lot of variables are involved. I'm certain it can come close enough to Earth to draw off mind force—"

"But you don't think it can draw off this mind force from where it is now?"

She frowned. "I don't know —I'm groping. It may have drawn off the life force of some individuals. There is a variation, you know, in the strength of individuals. Possibly some can resist better than others."

"But you don't think it could throw one of these illusions as far as Terra."

"I don't know, but what

difference does it make? The problem is here on the snooper so far as we're concerned. We know it can throw one here."

"That's right. I was thinking of another angle, but it's not important now. We've got to move ahead. We've got to complete this mission successfully." I walked over and stood in front of her again and lifted her chin. "I'll need all the help I can get. Any suggestions you have will be given every possible consideration."

"I want to help," she said, gravely.

I bumped her chin with a knuckle and grinned at her. "You're quite a gal. Or has somebody told you that before?"

She stared up into my eyes. There was obviously something on her mind. "Joe—?"

"Yes?"

"The other night—when you came to my cabin—"

"What about it?"

"I—I don't want you to think I'm that kind of a girl. I—"

She wanted to say more and I wanted to help her do it. "But you admitted it was deliberate."

"It was a mistake. A terrible mistake. But I'll try to make up for it. I'll stay very close to you and—"

"What are you trying to tell me?"

She bit her lip, then said, "Oh, never mind. Let's not talk about it now. Maybe later—"

I gave her another grin. "You know something?"

"What?"

"I liked it."

Her cheeks reddened. I liked that too. I hadn't seen a girl's cheeks redden in years. She said, "Joe—there's the little business of the expedition."

I opened the orders a few minutes later. I don't know exactly what I expected, but they read, in part: *The course of the rocket was pointed to a landing some fifty miles from the objective. This distance was decided upon because of the lack of knowledge concerning the enemy. It was felt that a landing any closer to the objective could be dangerous. Also, that a land offensive would be more effective and have greater chance of success than an aerial attack. You will advance across the intervening terrain and destroy the fortification or whatsoever you find to be in existence at the following point on the globe in question.*

The location was given in

latitude based on the poles and longitude using the location of the rocket. The directional monitor in the pilot room checked the figures, gave us direction, and told us the distance to the theoretical objective was 48.4 Terran miles.

"And now," I said, "what's with those scramblers you slipped through on me?"

"I think they might be effective," Diana replied, "in guarding the company from mind invasion. This entity, whatever it is, will grow stronger as we approach it. But it must work on electronic principles and function over a wave-length. The scramblers cover all the effective wave-lengths we know of."

"If the birdmen wore them and kept a ceiling over the company—"

"That's what I had in mind."

The snooper revolved on an axis and had a four-hour day. We started at dawn, formed into a tight column that the birdmen could cover. The terrain was soft, springy, and the short yellow grass would make the going easy. When we were ready to move—each man armed with an ice gun and a small bomb thrower—I stood at the head of the column and called out, "How do we feel?"

The cry came back, loud and full of spirit. "Rotten!"

"Hows the situation?"

"It stinks!"

"Who's stupid?"

"The high brass!"

"You said it! Let's go!" And I swung off across the meadow, going into the chorus of the doggerel all space soldiers sing.

Oh, we'll drive the last
  battalion,
Across the last terrain.
And on the day after eternity,
We'll plan the next campaign.

They fell in with me, moving on into the verses and we began eating up the miles between the rocket and our objective.

The sun wheeled swiftly across the heavens and soon the four-hour day was over. As there was no moon, I called a halt, feeling that it wasn't wise to travel in the dark until we knew more about the force we were planning to attack. I ordered rations broken out and passed the word along that the men were to get some sleep if they could—that we'd move again at dawn.

My three remaining Terrans ate with me, Diana also gracing the board. It wasn't

a cheerful group. Jimmy Coslow brought up the subject on all our minds. "It doesn't seem the same without him, does it?"

"He was a good man," Hap Hannigan grunted. "Never should have been a soldier. Too sensitive. Too much of a gentleman."

"We had some big times together," Art Bolton said.

"Let's forget it," I told them. "This is an expedition. The morale of the men is high. Let's keep the officer morale up there too."

They didn't feel like talking about anything else, so we ate in silence. Then they went off to post the guards and I told Diana. "You'd better get some sleep."

"I'm not very tired."

"You'll need it. And don't worry. Nothing will happen. The birdmen are going to keep us covered. They can sleep hanging on their wings."

"It all seems so simple; doesn't it?"

"I think your idea about the scramblers licked the thing, whatever it is."

"What makes you so sure."

I shrugged. "We marched four hours and nothing's happened yet."

Diana was not convinced. "I wish I had your confidence."

"What makes *you* so doubtful?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because I think the entity is stronger and more intelligent than that. I can't see a simple thing like a scrambler stopping it."

"Then why hasn't it struck?"

"I don't know."

We were off at dawn the next morning. The men had evidently forgotten the three Martians who died on the way over, and their lack of tenseness indicated they didn't expect any more mirages such as the one that killed Nick Wynn. We swung along at a good clip and I was just telling myself, once and for all, that Diana's fears were groundless.

Then annihilation smashed down on us.

I felt the wave of power—an intangible force that was like a wind that made nothing move. Diana felt it too, and she clutched my arm with trembling fingers.

Then the Martians, with roars of savage rage, turned in their tracks and charged back at the Venusians. The Venusians were ready. They came screaming forward and met the Martians head on. In a matter of seconds, a pitched

battle—a battle to the death—was in progress.

A commander's job is to think—to make decisions—and to act. I knew instantly that discipline had gone kiting; that no power in the System could stop this slaughter. I bellowed at the Terrans—the officers—to come forward. Then I dived behind a hummock with Diana, told her to lie still, and came up on one knee to cover the Terrans.

Hannigan didn't make it. Following his instincts as a soldier, he tried to restore order among the Martians and was torn to pieces by the first bomb. Coslow and Bolton dropped and began snaking forward. I froze two Venusians who went after them and when they got behind the hummock I started them digging in while I watched the battle. I hoped it would die out to a point where I could risk an attempt at discipline. But there was never a chance.

The birdmen had evidently not been affected by the madness. But they became confused and the Martians began potting them out of the sky. I got up and signalled them up out of range, then dropped as a bomb gun sent a projectile through the spot I'd been standing.

The Martians were moving in on what was left of the company, now, their ice guns freezing the Venusians—and the others—into statues that shattered into a thousand bits as they dropped.

Finally there were only a dozen Martians left of the whole company and I knew what I had to do. They assembled momentarily in the midst of the slaughter and turned their hot eyes in our direction. I fired point blank just as they turned to charge. The ray went true—sprayed like a powerful fire hose and I froze them in a dozen weird positions. They toppled and broke; the last of my company, and I got to my feet and looked out across the nightmarish field.

In all my years of campaigning, I'd never seen anything like it. The torn fragments of bodies lay in heaps. Grotesque lumps of frozen flesh covered the yellow meadow. Even our walking blood banks had been caught in the squeeze. Huddled in a group, they'd been hit dead-center by a bomb. A moment later, an ice ray had showered across them, to leave a shining frozen surface of green ice.

Jimmy Coslow came drunkenly to his feet. "Good God! What happened?"

"They got mad at each other," I said.

Jimmy Coslow stared across the field with dazed eyes. "It just doesn't make sense! They suddenly went crazy!"

I looked down at Diana. "You were right again, lady. It was too easy. We were walking along in a fool's paradise."

I gave Diana my hand and she got to her feet. She said, "The entity waited, held its power back. Then, at just the right moment, it struck out with a new weapon."

"How stupid can I get," I said bitterly. "I tried to think of everything the entity could do to us mentally. I completely overlooked the most obvious thing—playing one planetary hatred against another. I knew that only rigid discipline kept those beasts from each other's throats."

"It wasn't your fault. If you *had* known it was going to happen, what could you have done?"

"I'd have marched them in several miles apart! I should have done that anyhow! I ought to be court-martialed."

"Did you ever keep Alliance troops separated in any other campaign?" Jimmy Coslow asked.

"No, but this was different—"

"Stop blaming yourself," Diana said. "The point is—what are we going to do now?"

"You three are going back to the rocket. I'm going on."

"Like hell we are," Bolton said. "Jimmy's going to take Diana back, but I'm going with you."

"I think taking Diana back is your job, Art," Jimmy said. "You're more reliable. Joe and I will—"

"Who said I was going back?" Diana yelped. "You two escort each other. I'll—"

"Who's in command of this expedition?" I asked.

"You are," Diana said, "but I don't think any orders of that type will be obeyed."

I didn't think they would either, so I didn't make an issue of it. "All right. We'll go on. But God only knows how far we'll get."

Two birdmen had survived. They dove down now, from a high altitude and hovered overhead.

"Do you think we can trust them?" Jimmy asked.

"We've got to," Diana said. "We need them. Any power deflection we can get will help just that much."

I signalled the birdmen to hold a point with their scramblers about twenty yards ahead of us at a thirty-foot

altitude. They chirp morosely and took up their positions and we started out.

We covered as many miles as we could before sundown. Nothing happened except that the meadow turned purple for no apparent reason.

At sundown, we made camp in a small swale, placing a scrambler at either end of it. We broke out rations and I ordered everybody to bed, taking the watch myself. Coslow and Bolton were exhausted and went to sleep instantly. The birdmen too, twittering uneasily in their dreams.

I'd been sitting for perhaps fifteen minutes when there was a stirring beside me. Jumpy as a cat, I dived at it. There was a gasp and I realized I had Diana in my arms.

"Why didn't you say something?" I demanded. "I might have killed you."

"Sorry. I should have. I didn't want to awaken the others and I was trying to find you in this pitch-black."

"Why don't you go to sleep?"

She huddled close beside me. "I can't. I was asleep, but it woke me up—trying to get in. Can't you feel it, Joe? We're getting close and it's stronger and more desperate."

I could feel it all right, but I'd kept telling myself it was my imagination. I said, "I just feel terribly depressed—down in the dumps. I know we can't possibly win and I'm kicking myself for not sending you back. We can't make it, Diana."

"That's the power, Joe—the entity. That's the way it's manifesting itself—trying to hammer you down. Don't allow it Joe." Suddenly she was very close. "Here," she whispered. "Kiss me—kiss me hard. Forget everything and kiss me."

I did as she asked and for thirty seconds, the world stopped. Then her lips were close to my ear, whispering again. "Joe, aren't you going to fight? For me? Are you going to let this thing destroy what we might have together—after we get back to Terra?"

"You're goddam right I'm not!" I said. Then I pushed her slowly away—but not too far.

"Is it better, now, Joe?"

"A lot better."

"Don't let it get you again."

I held her in my arms and said, "Listen—why am I—all of us—so weak, and why are you so strong?"

She thought it over. "I'm not strong, really. If I can resist better, I think it's because of my training. Maybe I can

define better—maybe the pattern of its tricks are clearer in my mind."

"Whatever it is—kiss me again, angel."

But she held back. "No, Joe. It's better that I don't. And please try to forget this. Wipe it from your mind."

"Do you think I can do that?"

"No. I guess you can't. That's what worries me."

On that cryptic note, our conversation ended. And it was not until the next day that I knew what she meant.

The following morning, at dawn, I quietly slipped my arms from around Diana and crawled along the swale to awaken the others. But they wouldn't awaken. All four of them were very quiet and would never awaken again.

I went back to Diana. She stirred and opened her eyes. I said, "Wake up, baby. We're all alone."

She came awake instantly and I could see her wide eyes in the pale light. "What do you mean, Joe?"

"The rest of them are dead."

She shuddered. "It—it got in."

"It sure did. But why didn't it get us too—you and me?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because we sat close together. Perhaps it couldn't have attacked without alerting us."

"Alerting *you*," I said. "You've protected me from the beginning."

"Don't say that, Joe. We've worked together."

"I've done a fine job. My entire company gone."

Dawn had come up now. Diana had gotten to her feet. Now she stiffened. "Joe—Joe!" She clawed backward for my hand. I straightened up and looked. "Joe—it's there," she whispered. "See? About a mile over. We—we camped right on top of it!"

I looked where she pointed and it was very strange. I saw it and yet I didn't. It was formless, yet that great spout of energy welling up from the ground was *visible*. Perhaps I didn't see it with my eyes, but rather with my mind. At any rate, I looked across the purple meadow and knew I was looking upon the lair of the entity that could draw living force from animal organisms across half a system. And while there was no brightness, I covered my eyes and went to the ground and dug my fingers into the soil.

Diana was down beside me. I said, "No! No! It's impossible! I can't face it! We've got to go back! We've got to

crawl back on our bellies and get in the rocket and get the hell out of here!"

Diana was holding me. "Joe—Joe, my darling. You *can* beat it. I'm going to help you."

"I'd tie you hand and foot before I'd let you go a step nearer!"

"I know you would, darling. That's why I'm not going up there. But you are. Because I'm going to help you!"

"How can you help?"

She took me in her arms and held me like a baby while a great surge of power drove and eddied around us. It was as though the entity, knowing now that it had been discovered, was throwing everything it had at us.

Then the power abated, gentled down, and was gone. I raised my head and looked out across the meadow and there was Diana.

She stood naked, enticing on the purple grass of the meadow, smiling at me and beckoning. And never in my life had I wanted a woman so much. And I was going to have her! Honor, position, responsibility, decency—all of that meant nothing. I'd worry about them afterwards. Besides—who would know? Diana wouldn't talk. I'd see to that.

I was up and out of the swale, my arms reaching. The naked Diana stood with her head thrown back—calling.

Then the sky fell on my head.

I came to with my aching skull in Diana's lap. I opened my eyes and looked up into her face. She was crying. "Darling—darling—are you all right?"

"Sure—sure—"

"Thank God it didn't get you while you were out!"

"What happened?"

"I hit you. I brought you down with the butt of an ice gun. It was the only way."

"But you were out there—with all your clothes off."

"That was a booby trap. The image you carried away from my cabin that night. I should have been whipped for what I did. But then I didn't realize the danger—what we were really up against. I was going to use you as a test for my theory. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forget it, angel. Let's get out of here before it thinks of something else. Maybe if we go away it will let us alone."

She held me tight. "No, Joe. We can't. You're going in there and smash it. I'm going to help you. Remember what I said?"

"There's nothing you can do."

She turned my head around until I was facing her. "Look at me, Joe. Look into my eyes."

I looked. I couldn't help looking. Her eyes were right in front of my nose. She said, "None of this is really true, Joe. Not a bit of it."

There was something in her deep, fixed eyes that held me—that made me know she told the truth. "Of course not. Nothing to it at all."

"No entity, Joe. No force. Only a cement tower you've been sent to blow up. All you have to do is walk over and smash it and then we can go away and be together. You and I. All you have to do is smash the tower—the tower—smash the tower, Joe. See it there? The tower . . ."

Of course I could see it. I wasn't blind. And why was she telling me this? I'd come up here to smash that tower. She didn't have to tell me my job.

I got to my feet and Diana said, "There will be a wind, Joe—a howling gale you will have to push against, but you aren't afraid of a wind, are you Joe—not afraid of a wind—"

What was wrong with this dame? She was nuts. Of course there was a wind. I'd been pushing against it a long time and now I'd about reached my objective. The tower. Smash the tower. Was she trying to talk me out of it? Stop me? I pushed her roughly away. I took an ice gun in one hand and a bomb thrower in the other and started toward the tower. As I walked, I thought I heard a voice call. "Oh, my darling. Please come back to me. I'll pray—pray for you. You *must* come back!" It was the dame. She was raving. I wondered why we'd brought a dame on the expedition to smash this damned tower.

I walked against the wind and it got stronger. It was a regular gale. But the tower got closer and closer. No chance of missing now. The wind almost swept me off my feet as I aimed the bomb gun. It was a dead-center shot. Square at the base. A balloon of blue flame.

But there was never a tower in God's universe like this one. It didn't make a noise like tumbling cement. It screamed and howled. It bellowed and whined. It moaned like a lost soul. A hell of a tower.

I gave it one more bomb and it was still. Then I moved in and froze the place I'd

smashed. I set the ice gun at its greatest capacity and sent the heap and the soil around it down to four thousand degrees below zero. That tower was dead when I got through.

I was weak as a cat, lying there on the purple meadow. Diana was bending over me. I felt weak, but sane. In fact all the madness was gone from the air and this was only a wornout, derelict planet they'd push out of the System and send on its way.

I sat up and said, "So you hypnotized me. It was as simple as that."

"Not simple. You could still have been killed because we didn't actually know it would work."

"But it did."

"And now we can go back."

First, though, we went over and looked at the hole the entity had lived in. A great black cave, but clean, now with the power of the formless beast scattered all over the universe and beyond.

We were scheduled to make our report to the Alliance Authority on the Friday following our return to Terra. That gave me just enough time to do what had to be done.

The meeting convened on schedule and Diana and I spent an hour giving details. We were questioned closely, but there was no criticism from any member except Gregory Winthrop, the civilian member I'd first seen on Sam Aver's video screen. Winthrop said, "While the success of the expedition is gratifying, the loss of life was none the less appalling."

I said, "I realize that, sir. No one feels it more keenly than I do."

"You ask us to believe it occurred as the result of this entity drawing thought matter from the minds of the men and projecting a booby trap in the form of an image. This and not any carelessness on your part."

"As to my carelessness, I make no defense. The board must decide. But I did not say the images came entirely from the minds of the men who died."

"But I thought—"

"Certain material for these images was given the entity by a Terran—the contact was made and the material projected right here in Minneapolis."

The board stiffened to a man. I went on, "You see, I got suspicious when Nicholas Wynn was lured to his death by the image of an ancient automobile. If that had been

taken from his mind, the 1910 background would also have been taken. But the entity projected the car against the background of a modern city. That indicated that Wynn's love of the ancient vehicles and a description of one, together with the costumes of those ancient people, was furnished the entity by someone who was not himself familiar with a 1910 background."

"But—"

"That, coupled with the fact my psycho chart was missing when I went for my checkup, set me thinking. Just yesterday, I spent some time going into that angle. I discovered that the psycho charts of the four men I picked to accompany me on the expedition had also been hurriedly pulled before they got their checks, and in each case, the master files had to be referred to."

"I think we have about all the information we need, gentlemen," Winthrop said.

"No you haven't, sir. At least the board hasn't. As I said, I checked carefully, and in each case, the charts were picked up by messenger at the request of one Gregory Winthrop."

A gasp went through the room. Winthrop reddened. "I frankly admit I asked for the charts. I wanted to assure myself the men were qualified."

"I think not, sir. In that case, you'd have wanted the complete file. Not just the psycho charts, showing the traits, desires, weaknesses and preferences of each man —all the entity was interested in."

There was dead silence in the room. I broke it. "Sir, I accuse you of consorting with the enemy—of murdering Nicholas Wynn. I call you a traitor. I'm sure the board will consider this a serious enough matter to insist upon truth tests."

There was a moon and a table overlooking the lake. I was there and so was Diana, and the world was a wonderful place. Diana set down her drink. "But why did he do it, Joe. I know he confessed and explained how the entity reached him—through his video set—but why would he do a thing like that?"

"It convinced him Terra didn't have a chance. It offered him immunity as the price of treachery."

Diana sighed. "And he dies tomorrow."

"Let's forget that. This is a wedding supper—remember."

Diana blushed. "I remember. Let's go home." THE END

FANTASY BOOKS

GOBLIN RESERVATION, by Clifford D. Simak, Putnam, $3.95.

Science-fiction and fantasy books about schools have a special charm, from the P.R.S. *Randolph* in Heinlein's *Space Cadet* to the absent-minded, anti-chronological Merlin tutoring the Wart in applied comparative zoology in *The Sword in the Stone*—and not overlooking the university attended by de Camp's high-I.Q. bear or the genteel quadrangles of lovecraft's Miskatonic with its trove of top-secret books beginning with the *Necronomicon*.

Now Simak has added to the list two more memorable institutions: the Time College and the College of Supernatural Phenomena on Wisconsin Campus. They are set in a future when it has been established that goblins, trolls, banshees, and the like are not creatures of superstition, but material though exceedingly rare beings from primeval evolutionary cycles, and where time-travel has proved that the Earl of Oxford wrote Shakespeare's plays—and where the Bard him self is brought forward to lecture on his humble, unliterary life.

Amusingly, Simak's colleges do not resemble those of today with their youth-in revolt, protest marchers, anti-war demonstrators, hippies, and preoccupation with consiousness-expanding drugs, but the more frivolous colleges of the 1920's, or rather those colleges as the romantic literature of that day viewed them: students interested a lot in fun and a little in learning, riots over purely school matters, pert and adventurous but essentially respectable coeds, and faculty members (instead of fighting over federals funds) tranquilly speculating and imbing together—gentle beer or ale (some of the latter brewed by goblins) being the chief euphorics along with an occasional slug of moonshine.

Well, I sometimes get sentimental about those fabled (?—surely not altogether!) days myself, and in any case they make exactly the right setting for Simak's story, which is science fiction throughout, but at the rim of the possible. His hero is a somewhat stuffy professor, who gets less stuffy as the book goes along, and whose pals are a caveman named Alley Oop (he brews the moonshine), a ghost, a sleek and trim Time College historian with bobbed black hair, and her bio-mech sabertooth tiger.

Simak always writes in a melacholy vein: the falling autumn leaf, the flickering fire, the chattering lone squirrel, men growing old; but here Moonshine (of all sorts) and Melancholy walk arm in arm.

And now I've said enough to

convey the tone of the finest novel in a merry mood that Simak has yet given us.

BEYOND DESCARTES

This is not a review—the two books touched on were issued in America in 1966—but an observation on how the same central theme in science fiction may be approached from such different directions that the essential similarity of the two fictive works may easily be lost.

Jim Ballard and Fred Hoyle are writers from opposite ends of the wide spectrum of British science-fiction writers. Ballard is the chief transatlantic representative of the New Wave—well up on psychedelics, early champion of William S. Burroughs of *Naked Lunch* and *Nova Express*, now writing crabbed condensed fictions for the magazine New Worlds, and with a great gift for cinema-like visualizations. His "Terminal Beach" makes one think of Fellini's *Eight and a Half* and of the French *Hiroshima, Mon Amour;* ultimately his best talent may yet turn out to be for script writing. Ballard is often thought obscure and condescending.

While Hoyle is a professional astronomer of wide reputation, whose chief continuing and advantage is his ability to portray England's scientific establishment with authority and get away with prefacing his books with such satements as, "The discussions of the significance of time and the meaning of consciousness are intended to be quite serious, as also are the contents of chapter fourteen." Beginning with the amateurish *The Black Cloud*, his fiction has become steadily more deft, though one wonders if his "inside" picture of the British scientist's life is not becoming a trifle wishful: apparently any young genius "in the know" has scads of beautiful girlfriends, an almost unlimited expense account, and mountain-climbs and skin-dives whenever the mood takes him and when he isn't being whirled by the fastest aircraft to scientific conferences around the globe. Hoyle is often thought trivial and condescending.

Yet in *The Crystal World* (Berkley) and *October the First Is Too Late* (Harper and Row), Ballard and Hoyle have each written a metaphysical science-fiction novel on the topics of time and awareness, or consciousness. They make the same central point: that Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," is far too bold an assumption and that all that can really be known is the present moment or instance of awareness, something that changes to another discrete moment of awareness as soon as one even thinks about it.

The American philosopher George Santayana made this point very beautifully in his *The Realm of Essence*. An essence is a moment of awareness, a raw datum of life with its dim frame of memories. Hoyle and Ballard, each in his own way, are catching up with Santayana and picturing his philosophical discovery in a novel. Hoyle does it chiefly by an analogy running through his book: that reality is an

infinitude of pigeon holes, each containing one of Santayana's essences and illuminated *in any order* by the searchlight of consciousness. Even "I" may be "you" the next moment by the searchlight's whim. "I" is a wild hypothesis. Time gets out of phase in *October*, separating Earth into several time zones which are rapidly losing touch with each other.

Ballard does it in an uncomfortable yet splendid tale, in which a disease of crystalization strikes a section of African jungle and threatens to engulf the entire universe. Bit by bit, the world and the bodies and minds of the characters are transformed into dazzling jewels, though the narrator escapes from the infection and it is left in doubt how far it may go. Some may see in this parallels with drug experience (crystal is slang for amphetamine), but it seems to me that the jewels are "essentially" timeless (unordered) moments of immediate awareness.

Sometimes modern science and speculative fiction seem to be rapidly proliferating into irreconcilable streams, but if one breaks with the polemicists of Old Wave and New, and observes similarities as well as differences, ones finds that this is often untrue.—*Fritz Leiber*

RESTOREE, by Anne McCaffrey, Ballantine, 75 cents.

Despite its science-fiction format, *Restoree* is more akin to current so-called gothics, turgidly written for middle-aged ladies with no taste, than it is to sf.

The heroine, Sara, a plain girl from a commonplace background, is mysteriously snatched from Central Park in the story's promising beginning, to turn up as a radiantly beautiful attendant in a curious mental hospital on the planet Lothar. Here she cares for Harlan, the Regent, restores him to sanity, and aids him to escape.

The plot thickens to the consistency of cream gravy. What are the motives of the mysterious Dr. Monsorlit? Is our heroine really a corpse revitalized? Will the wicked Gleto succeed in his treasonous plans? Will the damnable Mils, intersetellar raiders to whom humans are fodder, triumph over Lothar, and ultimately Earth?

Do we really care? All these complications are mere backdrop for the "restoree's" romance with the Regent, and it's a drag. She, poor girl, is obessed by the fact that she had a beaklike nose in her previous existence and has never been kissed. Harlan overwhelms her. (Example: "His eyes locked with mine in expression that warmed me to the pit of my stomach.") She is "torn with a horrifyingly unmaidenlike desire to encourage him." After body contact galore, of a smarmy, would-be titillating kind, they finally make out on page 161.

God knows what a male reader would make of all this. Myself, I *am* romantic, but this is slush.

There are an awful lot of characters, none of whom, including the Regent (who has a lamentable habit of "laughing boyishly") have any life at all—except the heroine, and she's pretty sick.

PITY ABOUT EARTH, by Ernest Hill, Ace, 60 cents. (SPACE CHANTEY, the other book in this double, was reviewed in a previous issue.)

The Power of the Press is elevated to intergalactic proportions in this novel, which recalls Spillane, Huxley, Cordwainer Smith and Vercors, but which is mainly Ernest Hill doing his thing, and a good thing too.

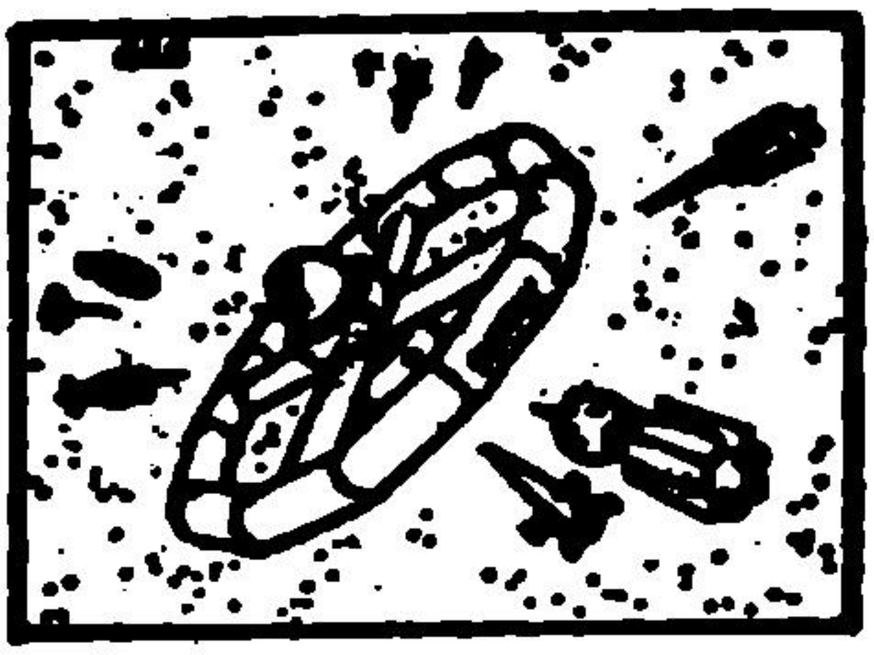
Earth is long gone, split in two by nuclear fission, but earthlike centralization of industry and media has reached the ultimate, with the mysterious Presidents, on their pleasure world Asgard, at the top of the pyramid. A couple of steps down is Shale, an Advertising Manager. He is a Mike Hammer type, but made understandable and even sympathetic. Shale is after all fissible rock, i.e., capable of being split.

First encountered hooked up to a fantasy machine on his space craft, Shale has a dream which is a microcosm of his society. In beautiful surroundings he breaks a bird's neck, mistreats a cripple, and rapes—or starts to—a woman in the mud. He lives in a civilization in which anything, except nonconformity, goes, empathy and culture are dead, and advancement by assassination is a commonplace.

Three individuals threaten his society: Limosa, the ultimate mistress, as intelligent and beautiful as she is sexually skilled; Phrix, a supposedly emotionless, superintelligent being from a planet long conquered by the descendents of Earth; and the delightful Marylin, not quite human but completely feminine. How they challenge the Establishment and start a revolution is a superb tale. Horrow and slapstick are blended like pie-throwing in a mortuary. There is fast action, sharp social criticism which never slows it down, and excellent characterization. The humanizing of Shale is a successful tour de force, and the grotesquerie of Marylin in a high cook's hat explaining empathy to him is heartwarming. Also, there's an ultimately physchedelic "love" room. I'm deliberately avoiding details. *Pity About Earth* is too good to give away in advance.—*Margo Skinner*

FUTURITY

Next month's outstanding story is IN A SAUCER DOWN FOR B-DAY by David R. Bunch. A novelette by Arthur Sellings—who has been away too long—and shorts by John Sladek, Bill Pronzini and Leon Stover (that same Leon Stover who is AMAZING'S capable Science Editor). Also, something called THE ASCENSION by K.M. O'Donnell, a new writer for whom we have moderate hopes: what he lacks in talent he makes up in audacity . sometimes.



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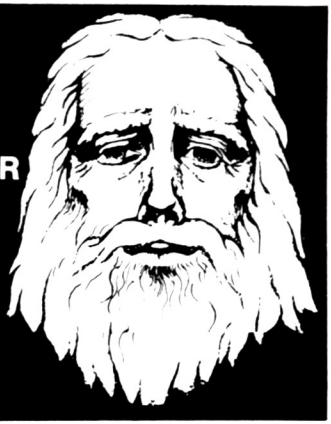

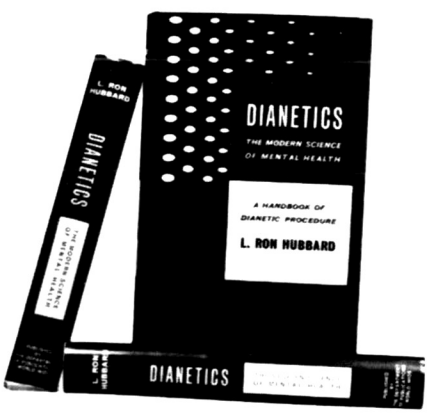

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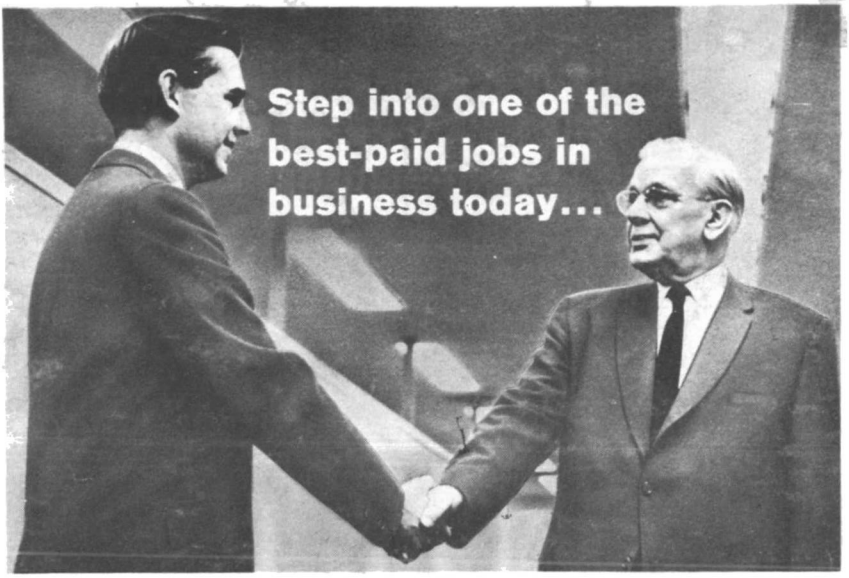

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