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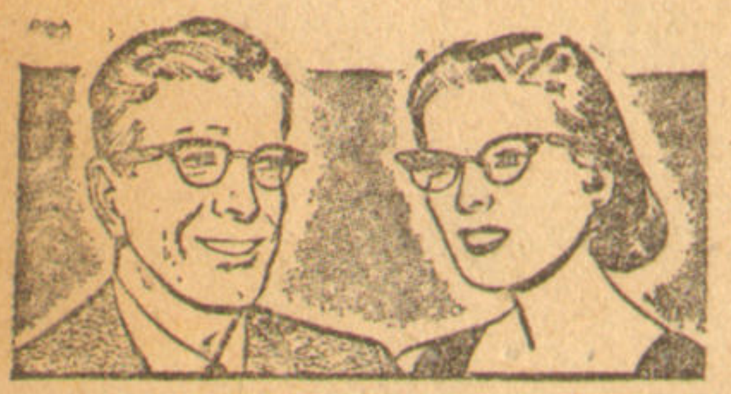

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world in the balance

by ... HARRY HARRISON

These strange and sinister beings had been infiltrating all walks of life, waiting for the time to strike and conquer

THEY were just finishing test number 1,937 when the explosions began. A low rumble at first, then a louder *Crrummp* that vibrated the laboratory windows. Of the four people in the room, only John Baroni looked up, a tight line of worry between his eyes. He looked around at the others; Dr. Steingrumer at the control board, Lucy Kawai assisting him, and young Sandy Lewis recording the test data in a loose-leaf book. John tried to draw a measure of reassurance from their untroubled attention, but he couldn't. He had heard those sounds too often in the past, and he knew what they were. His voice was low when he told them.

"That's not thunder we're hearing...it's high explosive."

They turned their heads toward him one by one, each with the same blank look of unbelieving. Before he could explain, it became unnecessary. There was a high, fast rumble that started far off then roared up the scale of loudness. John recognised it with the old feeling of tight-

Writer-Editor Harry Harrison, who now lives in Mexico, returns with this tightly written and fast moving story of an invasion from Outer Space. The aliens had planned everything so carefully. Their agents were ready and waiting. But they had not counted on Sgt. Baroni!

ness in his gut—and at the same instant knew it wasn't going to hit too close. He was braced when the explosion came and the campus outside was as bright as noon for one instant. Then the shock wave hit and one of the windows blew out with a crash of falling glass. Sandy and Dr. Steingrumer jerked back and Lucy gave a short, high scream.

In the shocked silence after the shell exploded the phone started to ring, the jangling sound cutting through the rumbling that still continued in the distance. John went to answer the phone while the others hurried to the window to look out.

The message was very short and the man at the other end hung up as soon as he had finished. John slowly replaced the receiver and tried to make sense out of the whole thing. It made sense alright, but the wrong kind. He didn't like his conclusions. Cutting off his thoughts he called across the room.

"Sandy, that was for you. Didn't say who he was, just asked if you were here. When I told him he said, "Scramble at the bas— urgent!" and hung up."

They all knew what that meant, Sandy was a pilot in the Air National Guard. When he grabbed his coat and ran out they knew it was no test or maneuver. The door had closed behind him before John realized he should have been warned to watch his step. The firing was coming from the direction of the air field.

"The radio," Dr. Steingrumer said, "we must find out what is happening." He switched it and twisted the stations while it warmed up. All that could be heard was background hum and static.

"The radio's broken," Lucy said. But there was no belief in her voice. John said it for all of them, voicing the unspoken fears.

"The radio is all right—it must be the broadcasting stations—they're all off the air. It sounds like war. Guns firing from the air field, national guard alerted, and the radio cut off. I guess that's the only answer." There was no excitement in his voice as he said it, just the sick reality of a man who has seen all he will ever want to of war and killing.

"Is it...the Russians?" Lucy's voice was soft but high pitched with tension.

John could only lift his shoulders with a shrug of despair as he turned to look out the window. The rumble was continuous now and red flame lit up the horizon. They all looked out across the snow covered grounds of the university and further on to the peaceful New England town of Bayport, and tried to equate it with explosions and war. It seemed impossible. No

more shells had come their way since the first and they couldn't see where it had hit.

Voices were shouting in the distance and they could hear an occasional car engine starting then moving away. They didn't feel the cold January air blowing in through the window.

It was Dr. Steingrumer who broke the spell. He put his hand in front of his eyes and turned away to pick up the phone. After a minute of clicking the connection bar he replaced the handpiece carefully.

"There is no dial tone, the phone is not working now. Let us cover that window, it is getting very cold in here."

They worked fast, glad of something to do, and when it was finished they turned to John for instructions. He realized why. Dr. Steingrumer was the Physics Professor and this was his lab, yet both he and his assistant, Lucy Kawai, now turned to him for help. It wasn't graduate student John Baroni they were looking to, it was Sgt. Baroni of the U. S. Infantry. They remembered his war record and the stories about him in the paper. With a twisted grin he realized that one shell had made the former sergeant more important than the famous professor.

There was nothing he could tell them, nothing they could do until they knew what was going on. The test was only half finished...they could go on with their work until there was some news.

"A good idea," Steingrumer said and turned to the control board. Lucy and John followed him and they picked up where they had left off.

The control settings had been made and recorded. John took a new tube from the factory shipping carton and placed it on the bakelite stage in the heart of their machine. He waved to Dr. Steingrumer who thumbed the switch that activated the final stage. The power needles flickered over then dropped back to their pins when the current was automatically cut at the end of five seconds.

The only sign of operation was a slight hum from the coils around the plate. They knew from experience that nothing detectable happened to the bakelite plate, there was no radiation or charge that could be detected by the massed instruments of the lab. Yet something happened to the glass test tube. An instant before it had been whole: now it was resting on the plate broken into a hundred fragments. There had been no sound, no tinkle of broken glass. Just the soundless change from one state to another.

"Reaction C," John said, "That's the rare one. We have only had three C's out of almost 300 of these 6,000 amp tests."

He entered the reaction in the book and carefully put the pieces of glass into an envelope for later examination. The dials were set for the next test and he pulled another test tube out of the box. He worked automatically because he was thinking—thinking hard. The explosions outside were forgotten but they had their affect on him.

For over a week an idea had been skirting the edge of his mind, he had pushed it away because it seemed too improbable. If it had been true Professor Steingrumer would have thought of it, the machine was his invention. Now things were changed a little bit. There had been an emergency and they had looked to him for leadership. He still looked up to Dr. Steingrumer, but part of the old awe was gone. His theory might be plain hogwash, still he was going to give it a hearing.

Nothing happened to the next two test tubes and he marked *A* in the book for each one. The tube after that vanished completely when the power was applied and he wrote down *B*. With each test completed his resolve became greater. By the time they had finished the series and the power was shut down he had made his mind up.

"Doc, what do you think is really happening to these test tubes?"

Steingrumer looked up, blinking, he had been working the results of the night's work into the overall series. He thought for a moment.

"I have no positive theory as to their actions, though there are one or two suppositions. It might be a matter of spatial orientation—you remember the original theory about which the machine was constructed?"

John smiled, "I remember the math, though I can't say I understood it all. Simply speaking, I guess, you were trying to tie in duration and continuity as the uniting function between magnetism and gravity. The field generated by the machine would, hopefully, change the attraction of gravity on the test object. Yet the weight and magnetic field remain the same—though something does happen."

Steingrumer frowned down at his figures. "True, but..."

"Let me finish Doc, this idea sounds so strange I have to say it all at once. Duration is another way of saying time. If you didn't change the weight or magnetism, well—maybe you changed the *time* of the test tubes!"

Lucy started to laugh, then stopped herself. There was confusion in her voice.

"Do you mean that this might be a...*time machine?*"

Before he could answer her there were dragging footsteps outside. The door crashed

open and Sandy Lewis was leaning against the frame. His coat was dirty and torn, blood dripped down the left sleeve. He was pale with shock and the dirt on his face stood out in black streaks. His voice trembled and they could hardly make out the words.

"Dead...all of them. Dead."

Swiftly John tore open the blood stained coat sleeve. The wound, it looked like a bullet hole through the upper arm, didn't seem too bad. Sandy was suffering mostly from lack of blood. There were bandages and sulfa in the lab first-aid kit, John began dressing the wound.

There was a coffee pot simmering over one of the bunsen burners. Without being asked Lucy poured a cup and added a generous shot of grain alchohol. They waited until he had finished the coffee and some of the terror had gone out of his eyes before they questioned him.

"What happened at the field," John asked.

It took Sandy a few seconds to answer, his jaws worked silently, then he spoke. Once he had started the words poured out in a rush.

"My motorcycle was right out in front so I started it and headed for the air field. I had always figured if there was a scramble while I was here at the university I wouldn't go to the main gate, I could save almost two miles by hitting this side of the field. There's no gate there but I was sure I could get my cycle through the barbed wire fence—it only has three strands. Well that's what I did, not paying much attention to the gunfire because those back roads are rough when they have a little snow on them. I made it through the fence easy enough then went tearing down the north-south runway. There was something black on the runway, I stopped and saw it was two dead airmen in a burned-out jeep. Then I began to notice shell holes and signs of fighting right there on the field. The best idea seemed to be to leave my cycle where it was and go ahead on foot, I had no idea what I was walking into.

"It was quiet enough on the ramp, though there was a lot of shooting near the barracks and the main gate. I looked into hanger 2 and I almost passed out. All the pilots I knew were in there and a lot of the reserve guys. They were dead—all of them. It looked like somebody had gotten them all in the hangar than used a couple of machine guns. It was awful.

"I almost came back then but I wanted to find out what was going on. I went as close as I could to the main gate and I was damn glad I hadn't tried to get onto the field that way. There was a machine gun in the MP shack and another around the corner of the ad-

ministration building. They would let a car in then bracket it between both guns. The guys driving down to answer the scramble call didn't stand a chance."

"Who was firing the guns, Sandy?" John had to ask him.

"I didn't know then—I found out when I got back to the line. There were four big ships parked there and a fifth landed while I watched. Someone must have spotted me because a gun opened up, that's when I got it in the arm. I made it back to my cycle and came back here.

"Those ships I saw, they didn't have wings or props—and the one that landed came straight down. I may sound nutty as a fruit cake, but a lot of screwy things are happening tonight. I don't think those ships are from any country at all—I think we're being invaded from space."

They all talked at once after that and it took a few minutes for John to realize that if he was going to find out anything else, he would have to find it out for himself. He would have to see to it that things were organized before he left. While he was pulling on his topcoat he told Steingrumer where he was going.

His hunch had been right, someone had unlocked the administration building and a lot of students from the frat houses were milling around, talking excitedly. They seemed to have no idea what had happened and were glad to shut up and listen to him when he stood up on one of the desks and got their attention.

They were stunned but they believed him. Maybe they had reservations about the invaders from space—but so had he. There was no doubt that *something* was happening, and until they had official word they would have to look out for themselves. Without realizing it, John took the lead and made the plans. There were guns in the R. O. T. C. armory and some ammunition. He broke the lock on the door with a hammer and saw that the guns were parceled out to the men who knew how to use them. They were old issue .30-06 bolt action rifles, but they were in good shape. John took one himself, and a bandolier of ammunition.

The science building had its own power plant so it seemed the best bet for a stronghold. City power was still on but it could go off at any time. He posted guards then led the rest of the armed students back to the science building. They made a strange group crunching through the fresh fallen snow; students in blazers and jeans—with rifles under their arms. Most of them kept glancing in the direction of the field. The fire had died down but something was burning with a red

glare. There wasn't much talking.

When he had seen to the building's defenses, John went downstairs to the first floor physics lab. Dr. Steingrumer was scratching out equations at his desk and didn't even notice him come in. There was the smell of hot solder from the workbench where Lucy Kawai was bread-boarding up a piece of equipment. Her frown of concentration broke into a smile when she saw him.

"I'm adding another amplifier stage to this table radio and I've wound a couple of short wave coils. Even if the commercial stations are off the air the amateurs will be carrying on with battery power. Maybe we can find out what is happening outside of Bayport."

For a long time John had tried to stop himself from falling for this little Hawaiian-Japanese girl, but he had long since given up the battle. The combination of a physicist's mind in that beautiful body was too much for him to resist. It seemed incredible o him that she should feel he same way.

"That's the best idea I have heard all night, Lucy. See what you can get. I'm going to run into town and try and get some information there, I'll do it as fast as I can."

He saw the fear in her eyes, but she didn't say anything. When they kissed good-by she held him a little longer. Sandy had left his keys in the motorcycle's ignition, so John took that instead of a car. Lucy listened as the exhaust roared down the drive, then turned back to her work.

When he was half way to town all the street lights went out, he turned his headlight off too. It was a moonlit night and the snow gave back enough reflection to drive by. Someone fired at him just as he was turning off the highway, they missed and he didn't stop to investigate, just gunned the motor.

As soon as he reached the business district he pulled into an alley and killed the engine. He had seen a lot of people in the streets but they were all dead. Most of them looked like civilians. He unslung the rifle from across his shoulders and checked to see that the clip was in position. After charging a slug into the chamber he thumbed off the safety and moved out towards the street.

It was like Italy again. The same dark streets and the crumpled bodies in the moonlight. He moved from doorway to doorway, silently and with a skill that was too much a part of him to be ever lost. John 'Gino' Baroni, the Italian kid from the New York streets who had gone back to Italy to learn to kill. Now he was back in the

states, using the skills he had acquired in that long, slow crawl with the Fifth Army.

The car was riding without lights making no sound in the muffling snow. When it came around the corner he was flat behind a stoop and had his gun on the driver. It moved slowly away and he didn't fire. He couldn't tell who—or what—was driving. He crawled the rest of the way to the Police Station.

When he saw the street in front of the station he knew what Sandy had meant about the Air Field. The uniformed cops had been lined up, probably standing at attention, when the machine guns had opened up. The brick wall of the station was pock-marked and chipped, the sidewalk soaked in blood where the policemen had fallen in rows. Only a few had managed to get their guns out.

It was like combat again and he had the same numb yet wide-awake feeling. When the station door started to open he melted back into the shadows.

The Chief of Police came out and there were two *things* with him, one on each side. The moonlight didn't show detail and John was just as glad. They were as tall as a man and walked erect on what looked like two legs. The resemblance ended there. Their heads were knobbed and bristling, more like a lobster's than a human being's. Smooth and light green and hard looking.

They reached the sidewalk and turned away from John before he could unfreeze himself. He stepped out of the shadows and raised the gun by reflex, the way you step over and crush a spider with your heel. When the last slug was fired he lowered the rifle and looked at the two things on the sidewalk. They had stopped trying to crawl and liquid was running from their bodies, staining the snow. The Chief of Police, Foster, just stood there dazed. John grabbed his arm.

"They're both dead Chief, you're safe now—if we can get out of here before any more come." Without letting go of Foster's arm he kicked at the head of one of the Invaders, it was hard eskoskeleton. Foster pulled his arm free of John's grasp and grabbed out his revolver. The bullet tore by John's head, deafening him. Before the policeman could fire a second shot John's bullet had caught him high on the chest, he dropped to the pavement.

John looked down at him and realized for the first time that there might be such a thing as a traitor to the human race. Foster hadn't been a prisoner of the two Invaders, he had been with them. There was the sound of running feet from inside the Police Station and John just made it to the corner with

Foster in time. The man was unconscious but still alive; breathing deeply with a bloody froth on his lips. He had the information they needed—if John could get him back to the campus alive.

Carrying the big man wasn't easy, and it was too slow. John took him three blocks from the station and propped him behind he pump in a deserted gas station. He was back in ten minutes with the motorcycle and pulled the Chief up behind him. It was hard to ride with all that dead weight, but he managed it by putting Foster's arms over his shoulders and holding them with one hand.

Nobody stopped him and no more shots were fired. Once on the highway he made good time and circled around behind the University in case he was followed. When he stopped the cycle at the science building Foster was dead.

Two of the students helped him carry the body into the physics lab, Steingrumer and Lucy looked up in alarm at the bloody corpse. John kicked the body over with his toe so that the sightless eyes stared at the ceiling and told them what he had found in town. While he talked Dr. Steingrumer kept looking at the dead man, then he bent over suddenly and pushed his pencil into the bullet wound in the chest.

"John, do you have any idea what this could mean?"

He pulled the flesh aside with the tip of the pencil and John looked into the bloody hole. His bullet had hit a rib and gone on into the body. There was a scratch on the rib where the bullet had struck; the rib was made of metal.

One of the students, MacDonald, was a second year medical student, he did the autopsy in the sink. He laid open the corpse with fast strokes of the scalpel. They found the results a little hard to believe.

Chief of Police Foster wasn't human, he never had been. His surface anatomy and musculature looked human enough—but that was all. Every bone in his body was made of strong, non-ferrous metal, obviously manufactured. There were even what looked like serial numbers stamped on some of the bones. The internal anatomy, inside his thorax, defied description. Some organs looked vaguely familiar to MacDonald, most of them were completely alien. John watched as long as he could, then turned away with disgust. He slumped down, tired, in the front office, and Lucy brought him a cup of coffee.

In a few minutes Dr. Steingrumer joined them. A gray winter dawn was just touching the window.

Lucy was the first to speak.

"It must be the same all over the country, probably all over the world. Every ham I picked up on the radio had the same story, even the one in England. Sudden ruthless attack with most of the military and the police killed immediately. A few of them talked about traitors, one of them said he saw the local radio station blow up. One amateur I heard said he was in Maryland and that an atom bomb hit Washington D.C. He cut off suddenly and I lost him. That has been happening to most of them. At first they were all talking, cutting into each others frequencies, then one by one they started to cut off. There were only a few still on the air when I listened last."

"Stop me if I'm wrong," John said, "But I think the whole thing is pretty clear now. It's an invasion, it looks like it was well planned—and it also looks like they are going to win.

"These Invaders, whoever or whatever they are, are as ruthless as wild animals—only they make a science of it. They manufactured their own fifth column and planted it here on earth, men like the Chief of Police. Their biological science must be centuries ahead of ours. It looks like they are capable of taking one of their own kind and make an incredible number of physical changes without harming the patient. To create a *thing* like the Chief they would have to remove their normal shielding and supporting eskoskeleton and insert an artificial skeleton. The muscle attachments would have to be reversed, skin constructed—a thousand things done that we couldn't even imagine. That's an incredible amount of work to go through to plant a few fifth columnists—*unless those agents are 95% of the invasion.*"

They looked at him with wide eyes, barely comprehending what he meant. He was excited.

"The whole thing makes an awful kind of sense once you start to think about it. Their fifth column proves that they are long on biological science, the fact that all the killing we know of was done with our own weapons indicates that they might be short on the physical sciences. They may even have stolen their spaceships from a more advanced culture. And they worked this invasion in such a way that they don't have to fall back on their own resources.

"First they create their agents and land them secretly on earth. One by one they kill key figures here and substitute their own agents. When everyone is in position they strike—a sort of planet-wide judo, using our own strength against us. The commanding officers of small

groups like police or air field forces call in their men—and kill them. Large military installations and I imagine all national capitals are blasted with their own H-bombs. All communications are destroyed, even radio amateurs are sought out one by one and k i l l e d. When the first slaughter is over their ships land and their own troops help mop up.

"They can't afford to show any quarter at all, they just kill anyone who offers resistance. With all communications out the entire world consists of isolated pockets of resistance. One by one they will be wiped out, until these Invaders control the entire world."

While John talked, Lucy's face had grown paler and paler. She breathed her question in an almost inaudible voice.

"What can we do...isn't there any hope?"

"There's no way of telling yet. Perhaps their plans didn't go perfectly everywhere and they are still opposed by large forces. Also local armed groups like ours here. The Invaders will surely have to face guerrilla warfare even if they do destroy most of the military. We haven't lost yet."

John's words brought a measure of relief to the people who were listening; it didn't help him. He had seen the destruction the Invaders had caused in this little town —if it was that way all over the world... With an effort he forced his mind away from the thought. All they really could do was fight and hope.

Dr. Steingrumer had retired into his own world again; he seemed to be the happiest one of all of them. His notes were spread out on the desk and he was staring at them vacantly. John went out to check the guard posts while Lucy started to clean up the coffee things.

When John came back they were both in the main laboratory, an air of suppressed excitement filled the room. Steingrumer waved wildly to him as soon as he appeared in the door.

"Your idea about the machine John—I think you were absolutely right! I have been checking the math and it is the only explanation that fits. We have here a machine that is a Time Line Transposer, the first one in the world..."

"What did you say it was?" It was all going too fast for John, this discovery on top of the invasion.

"A Time Line Transposer, that is a much more accurate term than time machine, if my theory is correct. The time line, or continuity, of those test tubes was looped back out of the present to join itself in the past. Then the single time line continues up to the present."

John was getting excited too; for the moment the invaders were forgotten.

"I follow you so far, Doc, but how does that explain the vanishing and broken tubes?"

"Very easily. If you examine the records you will see that the more power we applied, the more *B* and *C* reactions there were. Let us assume for the moment that *more power* equates with *further* back.

"The further back a tube goes before it rejoins its time line, the more chances there are that something will happen to it before it reaches our time again. The theory of an infinite number of possible universes *must* be true. When we send these tubes back they are whole, apparently most of them stay on the main time line. They merge with themselves as they existed then, and continued down the time line until we take them out of the box and put them in the machine. Other tubes reach a crossroad in time and move towards a different future—perhaps we help to create the crossroad by our experiments. Some are broken in laboratory accidents—these are the ones that appear in a number of pieces. Others are broken or removed from the field of the machine, they stay in another possible future and never return to the time line that leads to the present. As far as we are concerned they vanish."

Steingrumer continued with his theory, launching into a barrage of formidable mathematics to explain it, but John wasn't listening. He was working on a theory of his own—one prompted by the night's events—and with the birth of the theory there was also born a bit of hope.

"Professor," he said, "Could an animal be sent back through the machine if it was big enough?"

Caught in mid-equation, Steingrumer halted and thought a moment. "Of course it would work, though we could only tell by experimentation if the process would kill the animal or not."

John was out of the room as he finished speaking. In a moment he was back from the biology lab with a cage of white mice.

"Let's find out," he said.

The mouse was tied to the stage with a piece of nylon cord and the machine set for minimum power. When the switch was thrown the mouse blurred for an instant, but seemed unchanged otherwise. It sat in John's hand, cleaning its whiskers, and he told them the final and logical step in his theory.

"If it won't kill a mouse, the chances are that it won't kill a man. And if a man went back to the right time—and the idea of parallel universes is true—this invasion of earth could be knocked out before it got started."

It took a minute for the idea to sink in, then they all

started to talk at once. All the talk added up to one thing; the idea was fantastic —but it had to be tried.

Prof. Steingrumer began working on the figures for the large machine while John went out to round up engineering and physics students to help in the construction.

When the machine and the theory had been explained, enthusiasm began to replace the despair that held them all. At another time they might have scoffed at the idea, but now they grasped at any straw, no matter how flimsy, that would help them out of their living nightmare. They came in a group at a time, students and professors both, and watched a demonstration. When they left they were fired with hope, like ancient crusaders after a visit to a miracle-working saint. They had something to believe in and something to fight for.

Two days passed before the big machine was ready for the initial experiment, forty-eight hours of hard work and bloody fighting. There had been some skirmishes near the campus when small enemy patrols had tried to approach the building. Four students were dead but there were two new alien bodies for the pathology lab to take apart. After the first skirmishes there were no more attacks. The defenders knew that the next attack, when it came, would be with overwhelming firepower. There were other fighting groups still in action, they heard the continuous firing of cannon, when they were wiped out the enemy attention would turn to them.

There was one commando-type raid into Bayport, just before dawn of the second day. Necessary equipment was hijacked from an electronic supply house and rushed back to the university by truck. Nine students and the Professor of German were killed.

At minimum power the machine worked perfectly on mice and rabbits, though one rabbit did come back with a bloody scratch on his ear. No particular signifigance could be attached to this so the controls were set for the first experiment with a human subject. John was determined to go himself and was only talked out of it by the convincing fact that he was still needed at the switchboard of the jury-rigged machine. A chunky student, captain of the first football squad, got the job.

He hunched down on the plate and smiled when the switch was thrown. His figure blurred for an instant and the only observable change was the fact he was no longer smiling. John rushed over to him.

"What was it like—what do you remember?"

"What was *what* like...I'm

still waiting for you guys to pull the switch and make me immortal!" he said.

A silence ran around the room that was broken only by Prof. Steingrumer's g r i m voice. It was like the crack of doom.

"I was afraid something like this might happen...but I did not wish to speak until we were sure. When the body moves to the past and merges with the past, it is *submerged*. There is obviously no physical change in the body or we would have observed it. There is also, unhappily, no mental change. All thoughts and memories of the present are wiped out in the transition."

It wasn't going to work. All their sacrifices had been for nothing. The ugly mood of despair was almost a physical presence in the room. Lucy looked to John, trying to think of some way to help him. He had the same beaten, unhappy expression as everyone else in the room, but when Lucy caught his eye there was a remarkable change.

For an instant his eyes unfocused and his features went limp. Lucy started towards him, then saw an expression of amazement and joy spread across his face. Before she could say anything he had leaped to his feet and drew everyone's attention.

"Hold it...hold it...the machine *works!*" Before anyone could speak he rushed on.

"I just did it—I just came back from the future!" He glanced at his watch. "In just about sixty-five minutes I will be getting into the machine and returning to this time. But we have to get Doc Schlimmer from the psych lab up here first—he's with the squad at the main gate now."

At John's insistance a runner went for Schlimmer, while he explained what had happened—and what was going to happen.

"When the mind of the time line traveler goes into the past it is merged with and overwhelmed by the then existing mind. The inertia of time, that's what you called it doc—or will call it—you'll have to excuse me if I get my tenses fouled up. The future-mind is submerged, *but not destroyed.* Apparently it continues to exist somewhere deep in the subconscious. These memories can be restored by post-hypnotic suggestion. That's what Schlimmer did—and is going to do. He supplied the deep hypnotic suggestion that all of these memories would return when the right stimulus was applied. Lucy was the stimulus he used, as soon as I saw her the buried m e m o r i e s returned."

Doc Schlimmer hurried in at that moment and when he understood what was needed he sent a student for the equipment he used in his hypnosis demonstrations. It was

he who first put the finger on the paradox.

"John, you have just traveled back from the future and told us what to do to enable you to travel back from the future. But if you hadn't told us you never could have done it—it seems to be a complete circle, without a beginning. Where did it start?"

They were still trying to figure it out when John went into a deep trance and had the suggestion planted. He made the trip through time at the exact minute he said he would.

The attack came five minutes later, just when they were beginning to have their first hope for the future. Planes first, bombs exploded on all sides, then artillery blasting through the university wall. Like all Invader attacks it was sudden and ruthless, designed only for destruction.

One of the first bombs killed Lucy, driving a great chunk of metal through her brain. John held her in his arms and was barely aware of Steingrumer pulling at him, his voice a thousand miles away.

"John—we can still do it. We can defeat them and she will still be alive. Quickly though...quickly!"

The words had sense and he responded to them. While Steingrumer was setting up the machine for maximum power, Doc Schlimmer put him under again and implanted the suggestion that would restore his memories.

Still foggy from the deep trance John staggered onto the transmitting plate. Events seemed to have no more reality than a dream—the students backing into the room, firing and falling. Schlimmer picking up a gun from beside one of the bodies, then dropping across it before he had a chance to fire, his grey hair red with blood.

There was no feeling of transition. The carnage and the sounds of battle vanished like a broken film from a movie screen. They were replaced on the instant by normal quiet of the laboratory. John stood by the workbench, for some reason overly aware of the electronic tube in his hand. The wood covers were gone from the broken windows and sunlight streamed in. Lucy was helping Steingrumer wire a unit.

He had done it—his memories had moved back in time. The tube in his hand must have been the stimulus that restored the memories.

They were terrible memories. For a second he wilted before the picture of Lucy dead and his friends being slaughtered, until he realized that he had it in his power to change all that. He might be able to if he had the time. There was an open newspaper on the desk behind him,

a fast look told him it was January 3rd.

There was less time left than John had hoped for. Less than two weeks, the invasion had been on the morning of the 16th. The maximum power of the machine had only displaced him thirteen days. He could have used more, but this would have to be enough.

For a few minutes he debated whether he should try and explain to the Professor and Lucy, then he decided not to. It would be almost impossible to make them understand what was going to happen, and would only waste time. He would have to go it alone.

No one noticed when he slipped out of the lab and went to his room in the dorm. It was quiet there and he cud[illegible]d his mind over a cold bo[illegible] of beer. In an hour he had a plan, it was a simple one. His battle experience had taught him that kind had the least chance of going wrong.

A quick note to Lucy was his cover story; a sick relative in Boston, he would be gone for a few days. A razor in his coat pocket was all the luggage he could afford to take. On his way out he stopped on the floor below and knocked on the door of 121. There was no answer. After taking a quick look around he put his shoulder against the door and broke the small lock with one push. It was Bill Dorrance's room, he was working his way through school and had a job as a Special Policeman in the evenings. John found his .38 revolver in the closet and slipped it in an inside pocket. It was a dirty trick on Bill, but too much was at stake to worry about that.

When the Boston Express pulled out an hour later he was sitting in the first coach carefully going over the plan.

They were very polite to him at the Regional Office of the F.B. I., even when he refused to state his business. It took him almost two hours to get to the top man, he would never have done it at all if he hadn't shown his papers and dropped hints about the hush-hush work they were doing at the university. Ever since Hiroshima the F. B. I. has had an overwhelming interest in physicists.

Gregg was the man's name, he looked like any other business executive until you realizd that 90% of his bulk was not fat and felt the controlled strength of his grip. He was as polite as everyone else, even though it was obvious he had broken off other work to see John.

"Please sit down, Mr. Baroni, and let's see if we can straighten out whatever is bothering you."

John gave him a wry smile, "I'm afraid that is going to be a bigger job than you can possibly imagine." He lighted a cigarette and launched into

his carefully prepared explanation.

All mention of the time line machine was omitted, it wasn't necessary and was too big a chunk to swallow easily. This was the case of where a small lie was better than a big truth. He told Gregg about an imaginary conversation he had overheard between the Chief of Police of Bayport and an officer from the Air Base.

"...I couldn't hear everything they said, but it was enough to convince me they were working for a foreign power. The Chief was unhappy and seemed like he wanted to get out, but the other man had some kind of hold over him. I'm sure if you pull in the Chief and interrogate him, he'll give the whole thing away. If I'm there at the time I can ask some questions that will pin him down completely."

John knew the whole thing sounded a little crack-potty —but he also knew they couldn't ignore it. What they would probably do is arrange a quiet meeting with the Chief to feel out the truth. Then he would *really* give them something to think about.

The only mistake Gregg made was in not realizing that a man could go from the infantry to the laboratory. He let his eyes flicker for an instant as he pulled the gun out of the desk drawer and John fired first. The bullet caught Gregg high in the forehead and killed him instantly.

There was always too good a chance that any high authority John talked too, could be an Invader. It had taken quite awhile to convince himself that he had to fire first. Too much depended on him alone, even if he was wrong he had to fire and kill an innocent man. The tell-tale gleam of metal in the bullet hole told him quickly that an innocent man had not died.

A second door from the room led out into the hall, even as he went through it he heard the other door opening behind him and the sound of shouting voices. There were no shots and when he went out through the lobby there were no signs of pursuit. Evidently the Invaders were in complete control of the office and wanted no public alarm out for him.

They would want him for thenselves.

Back in his room at the cheap hotel where he had registered under a different name earlier in the day, John sank wearily onto the bed. They knew who he was now and were after him. And he had only twelve days left.

What he did next depended on the Invaders. If they could put in a substitute Gregg fast enough he would need a new plan. All he could do until he

knew one way or another was wait.

Two long days and three insomniac nights later he found the notice he was looking for in the paper. *Gregg, Ephriam...dead of a heart attack...Andersson's Funeral Chapel.* He needed the body of an Invader for proof and now he knew where to find one. Evidently they hadn't found a substitute so they repaired Gregg and gave him a quiet death.

Later in the day he took a bus out to the suburbs and stole an inconspicuous car. Driving slowly back to town he reached the business area at the height of the rush hour. He had to drive past Andersson's Funeral Chapel three times before he spotted the man he wanted, then he parked a block away.

John had been pretty sure that no one had seen him in the crowd, still he kept his hand on the gun in his pocket for the first two hours. Once the traffic began to thin out he took out a newspaper and pretended to read.

He hoped he was outthinking them this time, if he wasn't he was as good as dead. They would expect him to make an attempt to get Gregg's body, and were probably prepared for him. There was a good chance they hadn't carried their thinking the one step further that he had.

It was after nine before the lights went out in the funeral parlor and John was chilled to the marrow. He turned on the motor and the heater, but kept his attention fixed on the funeral parlor door. Two men came out together and caught a cab; he ignored them. The tall man he had spotted earlier in the day came out about ten minutes later and locked the door behind him; John carefully slid the car into gear. The man began walking and when he turned the corner John's car was about twenty feet behind him.

The street was filled with stores, all closed now, but a few pedestrians were still going by. In spite of them it was probably the best spot, he couldn't take a chance on losing the man. John pulled ahead in the car, then stopped at the curb a few hundred feet further down. He turned the lights off but kept the motor running.

Watching carefully, he opened the door just as the other man came even. The man stopped abruptly and his eyes widened with surprise. He started to say something, but his words were drowned out by the roar of John's gun and he died instantly with a bullet in his brain.

It took only a few seconds to shove the body in the back seat and drive away. Nobody tried to stop him, in fact few people in the street seemed to have realized what had happened. Whoever—or whatever—it was in the back seat

was dead. Dissection at the university had proven that the Invader's brain was lodged in the skull like homo sapiens'. Two blocks on, John stopped for a moment and let his flashlight flick into the bullet hole. An invader, his plan had worked. The dead man had seemed to be the boss in the funeral parlor, the odds were all in favor of his being an invader—planted there to take care of their alien bodies.

Two hours later he stole a different car and by dawn he was driving into the suburbs of Washington D. C., the Invader's body in the trunk.

In eight days the invasion would begin.

The next step was going to be the hard one. He had to approach someone with authority—but how could he be sure which authorities weren't Invaders. The fact that the Capitol was due to be A-bombed during the Invasion gave him some hope that they hadn't penetrated completely. But they were undoubtedly there in some strength.

He finally settled on the State Department as the one branch of government that *should* be almost free of Invaders. They would be in the military and the law enforcement agencies, but there seemed to be little reason for having agents in State. It wouldn't be hard to test the theory.

Leaving the car in a lot he made a list of likely men, simply by copying of the names of department heads from the board in the State building lobby. He checked these against the phone book for home addresses and spent most of the day looking up the residences that looked most promising. Martin Oliver seemed to be the best bet.

Oliver lived in a modern apartment building in Alexandria and, from the size of the flat, it seemed a good chance that he was a bachelor. More important, there was no doorman and the building had an automatic elevator.

As soon as it was dark, John parked down the block from the building. He didn't watch the door, he had no idea what Oliver looked like, instead he kept any eye on the windows of the apartment. He tried not to doze off, but found he couldn't stop himself. It was a little after ten o'clock when he snapped out of a doze and saw that the lights were on.

Waiting until the street was clear, he parked across from the entrance and checked the lobby. A man in a tux was walking up and down. This lasted for almost a half an hour and John was almost ready to shoot him before a woman joined him and the two drove away in a cab. After one quick look he shouldered the Invader's body and

carried it into the building. The elevator was still at the ground floor, he went in and thumbed 8. When the doors ground shut he took a deep breath.

There was no one on the eighth floor, he carried the body out and dropped it against Oliver's door. The door bell made a thin buzz in the distance.

It must have been Martin Oliver himself who opened the door, a short man with a young face and graying hair. John ground the barrel of the revolver in Oliver's stomach and pushed him back into the room, dragging the body after him. There was another man there, taking some papers out of a briefcase, and his face reflected Oliver's shocked expression.

John could only handle one at a time. "Where's the closet?" he asked.

Oliver waved weakly at a door and John pushed the other man through it, keeping them both covered at the same time. While John was pushing the sofa against the closet floor, Oliver regained his voice.

"What the hell is going on here...who are *you?*"

"I'll ask the questions first," John said, "And I hope we will be able to talk after that. Sit down behind that desk—or better still, kneel behind it."

Anger flushed Oliver's face and he started to protest. John shut him up with a wave of the gun and pointed to the body on the floor.

"I killed him—with this gun—and will do the same for you if you try *anything*. Now get down."

When Oliver was kneeling behind the desk, John pulled the man's arm taught across the top. He pulled the pack of razor blades from his pocket.

"This will hurt," he said, "But not half as much as a bullet. So just hold still. If I'm wrong I'll be happy to apologise."

With a quick motion he pulled the razor blade down the back of Oliver's index finger. There was a gasp of pain as John forced back the edges of the cut. He sighed with relief.

White bone gleamed in the finger, it was quickly covered with blood. A thump from behind him reminded John of the other man, still locked in the closet.

"Who is he?" John asked.

"My assistant, Drexel. He came back with me tonight to finish up some business..." The answer came reluctantly.

"Let him out, we'll see how well he takes the test."

The shaking Drexel didn't take it well at all. He grabbed for John as soon as his finger was cut, this—and a quick glimpse of golden metal—were enough. A single shot

tore away his face and there was another Invader corpse in the room.

It took almost an hour to get the idea across to Oliver. He wasn't convinced until John piled Drexel's corpse into the bathtub and did a little crude surgery. When Oliver had finished throwing up he began to believe. Anytime after that when his belief wavered, one look at Drexel was enough to restore it.

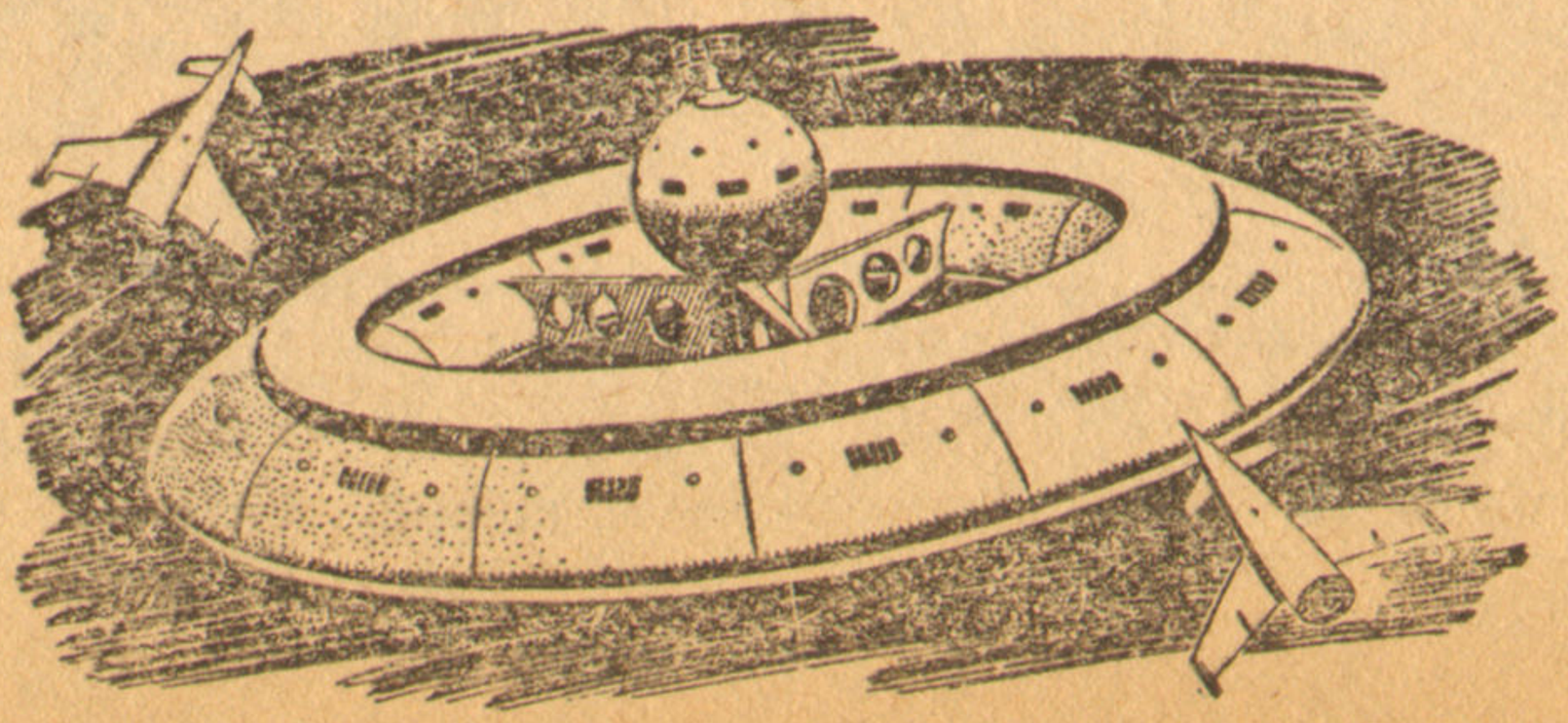
Three hours later they made an emergency call on the Secretary of State and threatened him with a pistol. When his temper had died down and they had bandaged his finger, Oliver launched into an explanation. He wasn't easy to convince, but at last they had him willing to listen to reason. They returned to Oliver's apartment a little before dawn, accompanied by three security guards who sported bandaged fingers and puzzled expressions.

The Secretary had been in the army, so he didn't throw up when he saw Drexel. After that he wasn't hard to convince. While he and Oliver were planning who to approach next John fell asleep in his chair.

The Invaders were defeated. It was one of the bloodiest world-wide wars in the history of the human race, but it was won. After the third day of Operation Clean-up the Invaders caught wise and began fighting back. Sporadic and deadly as the battles were, they didn't have the advantages of surprise and attack from space. Apparently the Invader attack was scheduled for January 16th and the attacking ships couldn't arrive sooner. When they did arrive most of them were blasted before they could land.

The war was won—on this earth, but John remembered another earth on a different track in time, that had died that this one might live.

When he and Lucy looked at the crowds on Victory Night he remembered the other Lucy who had died in his arms, and his happiness was that much less than the rest of the happily celebrating world.



holiday

by . . . *MARCIA KAMIEN*

It was a frightening experience. Where were the towering obelisks and the waving purple grainfields? It was all so strange and different!

HIS name is Fed. He's still only a schoolboy; the day is beautiful and furthermore, it is a Holiday. So, early in the morning—at the time when his mother is usually still trying to get him out of bed for school—he is outside, at the carport. He takes his flat little scooter and heads for the runway.

"Fed!" his mother calls from the house. "Fed! Don't go too far. There was an accident..."

"Yes, mother." The reply is automatic; he doesn't even turn his head to look at her.

"Stay in this sector, do you hear?"

"Yes, mother."

"Do you have a map...is your radio working...your father is worried..."

The voice flows over him, becomes fainter as he wheels the scooter out onto the ramp. He sets the controls for the Park, guns the motor and in one swift continuous movement, he lifts the scooter and waves in the general direction of the figure on the front porch. In an instant, he is 500 feet up.

In the Park, there are four

Marcia Kamien, who admits to SF being her one addiction, returns with this story of some appealing youngsters who play where they shouldn't. Miss Kamien, copywriter for one of New York's best known advertising agencies, hates cats but is interested in Egyptian and Etruscan antiquities.

of them, scooters left casually on the grass while they gather around Garf, son of a commercial pilot. His hands move with excitement as he adjusts the engine in his machine.

"It's really very easy," he says, unable to keep a slight boastful note from his voice. "You just adjust the control wires a little. I watched my father...he doesn't know I know how."

"Does it work?"

"Does it work! I'll say it works. Last night, when the family was gone, I took off from our house, flipped the switch and boom! there I was, clear over in Sector 4."

"Sector Four!" Fed echoes with the others. Sector Four. A long ways away. Even in the family sedan, the trip usually takes a good four hours. And now Garf knows how to fix their scooters for *overdrive*. Overdrive...the very word holds multitudinous stars in it.

"We can explore," Fed says eagerly. In a minute he and Garf are bent over the wiring system in his scooter.

When some time later, all the necessary changes have been made and they are all preparing for the take-off, Fed feels one small qualm. "Garf," he says with great casualness, "are you sure it works?"

"Of course I'm sure! You flip the switch you're in outer space; you set your controls and flip it again—you're down again, only far away. We can go clear round the world and get back in time for lunch!"

"What the heck, Fed," adds one of the others, "we ain't babies. We know what outer space is!"

"Yeah," Fed agrees weakly. The little fluttering in his stomach gives one last bump and subsides. Tonight, when he gets home and the family is all seated around the table, *then* he will tell them. Such an adventure! How proud his father will be!

Soon four s i l v e r-g r a y scooters are high up, flashing as they dip and whirl around each other in an ariel game of Tag. On the ground, nobody gives them more than a passing glance. Just children at play. Then one adult, on his way home for siesta, looks up shading his eyes against the glare of twin suns and blinks in confusion.

"Spots before my eyes," he mutters. "Could have sworn I saw four scooters just a minute ago."

They are in overdrive.

For Fed, there is the slight almost sickening lurch, against which he closes his eyes. And when he opens them again, the night of space shows in flat blackness t h r o u g h the port. He switches his radio on. "F-E-D...I'm It...watch out!"

They laugh and play, four tiny stars infinitesimally flashing as they roll and pitch, dive and swoop around each other. But even space-Tag becomes tiresome.

"Let's go back down," someone says breathlessly. "To Sector Four."

"Yes, let's...let's...let's..."

Again the faint nausea, the tiny bump and they are down, down in the blaze of sunshine, over a large ocean.

"I don't recognise it," Fed says over the radiophone. "We must be on the other side of the world." He is swept with awe. All by himself, he has done this. And with no trouble. His father ...his father will pretend to be angry, of course. He'll frown and growl: "Who do you think you are, you young pup, to try a crazy trick like that?" But secretly, he will grin and soon after supper, he'll make an excuse so that he can go out and brag to all his friends. "My son," he will say, "my son. Do you know what that fool kid did?" And they will all gape and make surprised noises and agree that Fed will surely be an ace pilot when his training year comes up.

Then they are over land and they decrease altitude, sweeping low over the green and yellow chessboard fields; making figure-eights around the toy-block buildings and the twinkling little patches of sun-glazed water. They laugh and joke and chase each other.

It is such a beautiful day. Fed glances out of the port with a great fondness. This is what life is for—this is why the world was created. To be gold and blue and sparkling...to give off that warm and comfortable aura of living, gilded in the light of the sun.

The Sun. Fed is frozen in his seat. His heart ceases for a moment and then begins again, pumping heavily in his ears. He closes his eyes ...perhaps it is a dream. Surely when he opens his eyes again, slowly, carefully, it will all be right. But like all his nightmares, when his eyes are open, nothing has changed. It is still the way it was.

"The sun..." he croaks over the radio.

"The sun?" one of them answers, laughing. "What about—" And then there is utter silence. Then, a scream:

"One sun! One sun! Only one!"

They poise in the air for the space of two breaths, silver motes suspended like man-made stars. In that lifetime, the miniature landscape expands, becomes too frightening clear to Fed. As if time itself had slowed down, he can scan the scene, seeing everything, all the weird dreamlike strangeness in minute detail. The off-color

green in the grass...the odd-shaped buildings...the trees that are different than any he has ever seen before.

Then they move. Swiftly, they scream through the atmosphere, over lakes and deserts and mountains. And nowhere, nowhere is there anything familiar to see. Once, Fed notices a tiny figure waving frantically...for a blurred moment and they are hundreds of miles past him. Him...her...It? He tries to imagine what that... person might look like. He shivers. "Mother," he whispers and begins to cry.

"Now," a voice says over the radio. "Outside!" Four switches are pushed, four lurches and again, the denseness of space. It is more blank, more friendless than before, and without a word, without a pause, they all switch again.

Fed closes his eyes, feels the bump and cautiously, opens them again. He looks out of the port, almost afraid. And cries again in relief. There! There, he shouts soundlessly. Home! One sun just setting, the other high in the sky. The obelisks and the waving purple grainfields. Everything as it should be, the way God intended it to be.

"We're home," Garf says sheepishly. "Everyone here?"

"Uh—look, fellas, I'm sorry. Just—ah—don't say anything to nobody?"

"No!" the response is explosive.

"See you tomorrow. In school." Never has that word —school—been pronounced with such tenderness.

"See you tomorrow. School." they echo, and head for home.

Fed's mother accepted wordlessly the frantic hug her son gave her. She patted him on the head and turned to her pots cooking. "What did you do today?" she murmured. "Anything new?"

"No. No, no. Nothing." He shivered again. That alien place...there was it, he wondered. I'll never go *there* again, he promised himself.

In Phoenix Arizona, the accountant for Wear-Rite Budget dresses ran into a police station.

"Flying saucers!" he yelled. "For God's sake, flying saucers! Four of them! They're attacking."

The Sargeant at the desk took everything down and politely sent the man away. He scratched his head and grinned a little.

"Maybe the paper can use this for a Silly Season story," he said to himself. "Attacking!" And we'll be having six-headed monsters from Mars pretty soon. Flying saucers, my foot!"

He laughed aloud. The idea of a race of men coming from another, more advanced, planet always amused him.

ape's eye view

by...ROBERT F. YOUNG

It looked bad for the strange youngster, until his opponent screamed as if some one had stuck a knife through his eyes.

TODAY you'd never guess that Appleseed Corners was once the scene of an occult phenomenon. It's only been a month now since the entity swooped down out of the blue and ate poor Pinky Fields, but the people around here have gone back to their usual ruts and their favorite TV chairs already, and nobody even speculates any more as to why the entity ate such a scrawny specimen of humanity as Pinky when there were so many fatter and healthier specimens standing around. I suppose that I'd be back in my own rut and chair too, instead of writing this, if I hadn't ransacked the attic yesterday for my fishing tackle and happened to run across an old book.

It was a book I hadn't read since I was a kid and it wasn't at all the kind of book you'd have expected would throw any light on Pinky Fields and the entity —or anything else, for that matter. Yet the minute I read the title I got a new slant on the entire incident.

I'd better start with Pinky

Robert F. Young, author of WISH UPON A STAR, the lead novel in our December 1956 issue, works in a machine shop in upstate New York, and writes stories, after work, which often criticise the machine age. Here is a gentler story, however, our cover story, about a strange boy.

Fields. Not that he's much to start with, but I've got to start somewhere. I was in the same grades with him all through grammar school, and all through high school, so I guess I knew him about as well as anybody did. I never liked him though. No one did. He was too stand-offish for one thing, and too much of a physical wreck for another. And then there was that pink skin of his. You just couldn't get used to it no matter how hard you tried, though I guess none of us ever tried very hard. Calling him Pinky didn't help matters much either, but I don't know what more appropriate nickname you could give a kid whose complexion resembled a ripe peach without fuzz.

Pinky was a foundling, and the old timers used to tell it around that the reason his folks left him on the Fields' doorstep was because they couldn't stand the sight of him. But I don't think anybody paid much attention at the time, because that was the same summer the meteor landed in Ernie Crumley's apple orchard and ruined four of his best McIntoshes. What with the government mineralogists digging up the place and sifting ashes (that was all they ever found), and the newspaper photographers taking pictures, and the city people snooping around every Sunday, Appleseed Corners probably had too much on its mind to bother about foundlings. Anyway, the Fields took Pinky in and brought him up. They'd lost their first child and couldn't have any more, so I imagine that had a lot to do with it. Maybe they were even glad to get him.

As I said, I went to school with him, but I don't have any clear recollection of him before the fourth or the fifth grade. In one of those grades—I'm not sure which—I had the seat behind him, and I remember staring at the back of his small round head and marveling at his hair. That was another freakish thing about him. It wasn't enough that his complexion should resemble a fuzzless peach; his hair had to resemble the fuzz.

The next thing that sticks in my mind is his dumbness. In reading class, when the teacher called on him to read a paragraph or two, you'd think he was the village idiot, he read so slow. I can still see him standing there by his desk, his wizened face screwed up, his forehead plowed with little wrinkles, his shriveled lips twisting as though they hurt him, and his skinny arms sagging with the weight of the primary reader.

Not that reading was the only subject that gave him trouble. Every subject gave

him trouble. He couldn't add. He couldn't subtract, he couldn't remember history dates, he couldn't get grammar through his head, and to this day I don't think he ever did figure out the difference between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. He just couldn't do anything. And yet he got by. Somehow, someway, and by the skin of his undersized teeth, he got by.

I suppose he seemed even dumber than he was because you'd naturally expect a kid with such a scrawny body to have a few brains to make up for it. His reflexes were so slow that if you threw a baseball or a basketball to him it was pretty sure to hit him—usually in the face—before he even realized you'd thrown it. He couldn't even chin himself on the horizontal bar, and he ran like a sixty year old man with lumbago. He was hopeless. Around the fifth or sixth grade the coach took pity on him, or gave up in despair—I don't know which—and got him permanently excused from all athletic activities.

It doesn't take much imagination to figure out what the other kids were doing all this time. As I said, they didn't like him anyway, not only because he was different, but because for all his mental and physical inferiority he still seemed to think he was better than anybody else. One day it would be ink smeared on the nape of his neck and the next day it would be a pencil point jabbed into his arm, and every day, day in, day out, it would be persecution by the local example of what psychologists like to refer to as agressive-neurosis.

At that time, the reigning bully in Appleseed Grammar School was Harve Randall, and with a kid like Pinky Fields available, no bully ever had it so good. And then one day—

I like to remember that day, because while I didn't like Pinky Fields, I didn't like Harve Randall either. In fact, I think I liked him even less than I liked Pinky. It was in May and school had just let out, and Harve had just begun his daily defamation of Pinky's physique. "Chicken ears," he said, elbowing him in the ribs. "Rabbit teeth!"

Pinky didn't say anything. He just kept on walking. Harve followed. "Peach head! Yellow belly...Wanna fight?" he added hopefully.

Pinky paused, and right away a crowd began to gather. Nobody really expected anything much would happen, but nobody wanted to take a chance on missing a possible massacre. Besides, it was too early to go home.

For a moment Harve was so taken aback that he

couldn't say anything. He just stood and stared at the smaller boy, his puffy eyes round with astonishment, his jaw even slacker than usual. But it didn't take him long to recover himself. He stuck out his chest and knotted up his fists. "I'll knock your teeth down your throat!" he said in the best aggressive-neurotic tradition.

Slowly, solemnly, Pinky laid down his books (he was always behind on his homework). He tightened his own fists into little white knobs and raised them in front of his face. If he was afraid, he didn't show it.

Harve laughed, and swung contemptuously. Anybody else would have seen the punch coming and would have dodged it easily, but not Pinky. The blow caught him in the neck and sent him toppling and in an instant Harve was on top of him, pummeling away like mad. All I could think of was a young gorilla attacking a muscular dystrophy victim.

It looked bad for Pinky and little as I liked him I couldn't help feeling sorry for him and wishing I was big enough to pull Harve away. And then, all of a sudden, Harve stopped punching and started to scream. It was the shrillest scream I'd ever heard—the kind of a scream a person might give out with if somebody stuck a knife through his eye. But Pinky hadn't done anything so far as I could see, though he did seem to have some kind of a hold on Harve's head—if you can call p r e s s i n g your thumbs against somebody's forehead a hold.

Harve thrashed around for a while, though he didn't scream any more, and then—I don't know why, because there wasn't any sound—I got the impression that something snapped inside his head, and right after that he lay still. I don't mean he passed out, or anything like that. He just stopped thrashing around and lay there on his back as though the school lawn was the most logical place in the world to lie down on.

Pinky had removed his thumbs by then, and now he picked up his books and got to his feet. His nose was bleeding and his cheek was skinned, otherwise he was none the worse for wear. He walked off without saying a word, leaving the rest of us standing there with our jaws hanging almost to our knees.

Pretty soon Harve seemed to get tired of lying in one position and he rolled over on his side. There were a couple of dandelions growing right by his nose and he picked one of them and held it up and stared at it. From the look that came into his eyes you'd have thought it was the most beautiful flower in the world instead of just a plain dandelion. After

a while he sat up and fastened it in one of the buttonholes in his shirt, then he got up and walked away as though there wasn't anybody else in the whole world besides him. To this day I don't think he realizes that there *is* anybody b e s i d e s him. There's always a blank look on his face when you pass him in the s t r e e t, and all he ever does, when he's not working on his father's farm, is look at trees, watch birds, and pick flowers.

Well, you'd naturally have expected Pinky's popularity to take a turn for the better after that. But it didn't. Nobody picked on him any more, that's for sure, but nobody liked him either. And then too, his victory over Harve never got the publicity it deserved, because the very next day Abel Struey snagged a skeleton when he was plowing the south patch he'd let go fallow twenty years back.

According to the coroner's statement in the Appleseed Corner's Gazette, the skeleton was that of a small woman, or girl, and had gone undiscovered from five to ten years. There was no evidence of foul play, and in a way that was disappointing because there's nothing like a good local murder mystery to stimulate intellectual activity in a place the size of Appleseed Corners. Even so, kids and grown-ups talked of nothing else for a whole week, and by that time Pinky's victory was ancient history.

The next thing that comes to mind about Pinky is his dislike for girls. All boys dislike girls at a certain age—or if they don't, they pretend to —but Pinky seemed to despise them, and the older he grew the more he seemed to despise them. The girls in his grammar school classes, and later on in his high school classes, weren't by any means the most beautiful girls in the world, but they weren't the slimy reptilian monsters he seemed to think they were either. Yet whenever he looked at one, he actually shuddered.

But I don't think any of the girls ever noticed. They were too busy shuddering themselves.

That brings me to Pinky's high school days.

To say that his high school days approximated his grammer school days would be almost, but not quite, true. He went on being awkward and conceited and e v e r y b o d y went right on d i s l i k i n g him, but as the subjects grew h a r d e r and more complex, his dumbness began to fade. Not that he ever became s m a r t—he graduated with an average in the low eighties—but compared to the way he'd been before, he *seemed* smart. And the odd part of it was, you got the impression that if he'd gone on

to college he'd have become smarter and smarter. But that's a matter for pure speculation, because he never went to college. He went to work on his father's farm instead. And now we'll never know, because a month ago the entity ate him.

Everybody knows about the entity by now—about the way it swooped down into Appleseed Corners on that hot Saturday afternoon and scooped Pinky right out of the crowd of shoppers with its long red tongue and swallowed him whole. I didn't see it myself—I had to repair the north pasture fence and couldn't get to town that day—so I have to take other people's word for the way it looked. According to Mrs. Hitchcock, who runs the post office, it was as big as Ben Snedley's new barn, had six enormous blue eyes, a big slavering mouth, and no body. But Abe Moorehouse, who tends bar at the Horse and Wagon, has a different description. He says that the entity had green eyes, was at least twice as big as Ben Snedley's new barn, and had three golden legs and a long silver tail. I don't know about Abe, though. He does a lot of sampling when he's behind the bar and is liable to see anything.

Anyway, I've talked to most of the people who were in town shopping that day and I've come to the conclusion that none of them saw the same thing. Either the entity came and went so fast that no one got a good look at it, or everybody was so scared they couldn't see straight, or both.

You'd have thought an event like that would furnish conversational material for at least a year in a place the size of Appleseed Corners. But when it became fairly evident that the entity wasn't going to come back down and eat anybody else, and the army and the F.B.I and the sanitation worker, who won the $64,000 Question in the H.P. Lovecraft category, had all gone back to wherever they'd come from, people around here stopped standing on the streetcorners, talking and watching the sky, and went back to their usual ruts and their favorite TV chairs, and now no one ever even mentions the entity any more.

As I said, I'd probably be in my own rut and chair too—in fact, I'd probably be watching TV right now instead of writing this—if I hadn't ransacked the attic yesterday and happened to run across this old book. Ever since I picked it up, I've been thinking of Pinky Fields and the entity in a different way and I think I've got the answer to what really happened.

Pinky's dumbness is the key. If he'd been unusually brilliant in his schoolwork, people would have paid more attention to him and maybe

someone would have connected his unusual brilliance with his unusual body, and then gone one step further and connected both qualities with the meteor that landed in Ernie Crumley's apple orchard. But it never occured to anyone that the meteor might have been something more than an ordinary hunk of metal, or that Pinky might be something more than an ordinary foundling because you'd naturally assume that any child of a race of people intelligent enough to develop space travel would make human children look sick when it came to learning the three R's, playing games, and being the life of the party.

But think for a minute. Suppose an airliner crashed in some remote spot in the Belgian Congo and caught fire and burned. Suppose there were only two survivors—a mother and her infant son. There aren't any native villages in the vicinity; there's no civilization of any kind. The highest form of life is a tribe of apes.

Now suppose the mother was badly injured in the crash and knows she is going to die. Her son, however, is unhurt, and if she can find some way to keep him alive until the rescue ship comes, he'll be returned to civilization. So she does the only thing she can do. Before she dies, she puts him some place where the apes will find him, hoping they'll adopt him.

So two of the apes find and adopt him and the kid survives. But he's different from the rest of the tribe, and he knows it and they know it. He conforms to ape society and tries to do as the apes do. At first you might think that, being human, he would be able to do as the apes can do and be able to do it better, and that when it came to absorbing ape lore, he would be a star pupil. But think again.

About the only things the apes could teach him would be the best way to find a grub under a log, how to climb a tree, how to get from one tree to another tree, and so forth. How talented do you think this kid would be in any of those subjects? Wouldn't the apes think he was pretty dumb? And wouldn't the younger apes chitter at him and pick on him every time they got the chance?

Now suppose that one of the younger apes is the anthropoid equivalent of an aggressive-neurotic and keeps pestering the kid all the time. The kid realized that he'll have to do something or he'll never have any peace. Out of desperation, he figures out a simple wrestling hold—say a hammer-lock—and when the showdown comes, he breaks the ape's arm. The apes wouldn't be able to understand what he'd done, to say nothing of being able to

understand how he'd done it. But they'd start leaving him alone.

So from that point on, the kid grows up unmolested. Pretty soon, though, the male apes start noticing another peculiarity about him. Every time he looks at a she ape he shudders.

Now I know that a man can look at a she ape almost any day in the week and not be particularly revolted. But suppose that every time he looked at one he was reminded of the fact that some day he would probably marry one. How would he look at her then?

Anyway, the kid continues his jungle education, and as the years go by, enough facts accumulate in his mind so that he can start using his superior reasoning powers and begin to think. He still seems dumb to the apes, but not quite so dumb as he seemed before. It begins to look as though some day he may be a whizz at finding a grub under a log, but it is still extrememely doubtful if he'll ever master the fine art of brachiating.

And that brings us to the rescue ship. For the sake of comparison we'll have to assume that it took nearly thirty years for the rescue party to get organized and make the flight to the jungle. Finally, though, the ship lands in a clearing close to the spot where the first ship crashed, and lowers a red gangplank. The kid, instinctively recognizing his own kind, runs up the gangplank and into the ship's belly, and all the apes hanging in the nearby trees think the ship ate him and wonder why it didn't eat them instead.

And that's the way it was with Pinky. When the "entity" swooped down into Appleseed Corners, it didn't stick out its tongue and lap him up the way it seemed to the natives. It merely protruded its equivalent of a gangplank and Pinky ran up it and joined his own kind. He'd probably seen enough humans by then to last him the rest of his life.

The book I found in the attic? You've probably guessed the title by now, though in developing the analogy. I had to take a lot of liberties with the plot and the main character. In case you haven't, its "Tarzan of the Apes".

If there are imaginative writers on Pinky's world, maybe one of them will get an idea for a similar book when the news of his adventures gets around. But since Pinky's ancestors climbed down from the trees at least a million years before ours did, the book is bound to have a slightly different title.

"Tarzan of the Men" would be my guess.

day of reckoning

by . . . *MORTON KLASS*

I wondered if he remembered the thirty lashes he had ordered, so long ago, when I had knelt much too slowly.

THIS was the day. Finally. Forty-seven years it had taken, and no one would ever know how many millions of lives, but the day was here and I had lived to see it.

Four of my bully-boys—honored veterans of the hardest fighting—stood stiffly behind me as I sat there at the head of the scarred wooden table. Age and the long years under the Rogg whips had taken the strength out of me, but I kept my back straight, for I was proud of the boys behind me, with the whips of their former masters tight in their fists, and I was proud of the human race, and of myself, too.

I stared across the table at the slumped figure of Guja Hi, *former* administrator of Earth, his scarlet cloak drooping dejectedly from his once-arrogant shoulders, and I said:

"Terms? You know our terms, Rogg. Get off this planet, you, and all your kind. This isn't your planet any more. Earth belongs to Earthmen."

The Rogg's black, pupil-less eyes sought mine, and a grey pallor shaded the normal fish-belly whiteness of his face.

Morton Klass, author of this story of angry men, was formerly in the Merchant Marine and has been writing SF for several years. At present working for his Ph.D. in Anthropology, he will be in the West Indies this summer on an extremely interesting research project in Trinidad.

A Rogg showing fear? Deep in the inmost recesses of my mind I rejoiced. *Crawl, Guja Hi, my former master—crawl!* I thought savagely. *Remember the thirty lashes you ordered given to me, twenty years ago, when you inspected the mine I was slaving in, and I didn't fall to my knees quickly enough?*

Guja Hi worked his lipless mouth nervously for a moment, and began, *"Ko k'ula tha—"*

"Speak a human tongue!" I snapped, rising to my feet. "The day of the Rogg is finished on Earth, and so is the sound of his voice!"

I understood what he had started to say, of course, for along with their starships and burn-guns—and whips—the Roggs had brought a contempt for all languages but their own, and had imposed that one on all their human slaves. All humans knew it, but none would speak it voluntarily, for it carried to our ears only the agonized screams of men and women, only the sobbing of a raped planet.

Guja Hi spoke again, this time in fumbling, pre-conquest English, and the words —distorted though they were by his alien throat—were a heart-breaking reminder of the dead past. In my youth, before the coming of the Rogg, I too spoke English.

"Our ships," Guja Hi said. "Our machinery—power stations—homes—what is to become of them?"

I answered him in Earth-wide, once the humble argot of displaced slaves from a thousand diverse lands, now the proud language of a self-freed race.

"Everything belongs to us," I said. "We'll cram you and all the Rogg survivors left in our prison camps into a few freighters, with enough food to keep you until you get back to your own system, but that's all. Everything else—we keep."

"But—that would leave us empty-h a n d e d!" He stammered. "You know we came to Earth with all our possessions. If you send us to our native world with nothing but cloaks on our backs you'll be sending us to starvation or slavery!"

He was right, of course. We've learned little about conditions back on the Rogg home planet—masters rarely discuss such matters with their slaves—but c e r t a i n things were obvious. Two hundred needle-nosed Rogg ships had landed, that black morning in 1966, and besides overwhelming armament and impenetrable defenses, they had contained the families and household possessions of the Roggs. The invaders had been colonizers as well as conquerors. The fact that no other ships had ever followed, even when the Roggs

were going down before the insurgent humans, spoke for the lack of interest on the part of the home world in the affairs of the Roggs on Earth. A few of the original ships, converted into freighters, made the trip home occasionally, but obviously only to trade the raw materials of Earth for the luxuries of the mother planet. Slaves do not have to be in the confidence of their masters to learn their ways. The Rogg had only contempt and servitude to offer anyone weaker and with less resources than himself, and that went for another Rogg, too.

I sat down slowly, handling my aged, broken body with care. "What happens to you is none of our concern," I told him. "You want your ships and your goods back? Return our blasted cities, our dead brothers, our children destroyed in your mines and your fields!"

My voice was rising dangerously, and I fought to keep it under control. What had been done, had been done. We were the masters, now.

"This is our day, Guja Hi. You ravaged our planet, blasted our homes and our industries, took what you wanted when you wanted it—because you were the Roggs. Well—we are Earthmen, and now we take what we want!"

Guja Hi was on his feet, towering two feet higher than any human, his scarlet cloak rippling.

"But the terms of the surrender!" he roared. "We were promised our lives if we put down our arms. You're sending us to death! *L'th knaji rohi'i*—"

A whip cracked sharply above my head, and the Rogg stiffened and became silent. From behind me came Jimmy Vladek's bellow.

"Sit down, you Rogg scum, and keep a civil tongue when you address the Chief, or I'll slice your ears off!"

I turned slightly and rested my hand on Jimmy's brawny forearm. "Easy, son," I said gently. "This is the day we boot them off the planet. We've won the war. We can afford to relax now."

He subsided, muttering, and I smiled at him before I turned back to Guja Hi. I have a special affection for the youngster, not only because of his heroic behavior during the Uprising, but because I had known his grandparents.

That was back in the early years, of course, right after the Roggs had completed their subjugation of Earth and had begun the process of scrambling the population indiscriminately into the Rogg slave plantations and mines.

For a moment, Jimmy's glowering face reminded me of his grandfather's on the day we'd first met. I had been heaved unceremoniously into

the slave pen adjoining Guja Hi's uranium mine in what had once been the Belgian Congo. Dimitri had stood over me, a great welt across his face still livid from the Rogg whip. *"Americanski!"* he'd snarled, and turned his back on me. He had believed, of course, that the Americans collaborated with the invaders.

If some of the other slaves hadn't held me back, I would have leaped for his throat, for I was just as certain that his people had been in league with the Roggs.

We used to talk about it a lot in the years that followed, Dimitri and I and Chao and the others. The Roggs had intensified the hatreds between groups of humans, but they hadn't originated them. The invaders had merely taken advantage of the prevailing conditions on Earth.

Look at it from their point of view. Unable to survive in their original home—overcrowding, competition too fierce, failing natural resources, or whatever the reason—they'd come upon an ideal new home. The dominant race, though primitive in Rogg terms, had enough command of technology to have fought off the invaders eventually. There were just not enough Roggs for a real war. But the human race, when the Rogg arrived, were on the verge of a suicidally fierce internal conflict. All the Roggs had to do was contact—secretly—the leaders of all the opposing sides, present information, real and fictitious, about the warlike preparations of the other humans, and promise invincible Rogg support to each group. Then, cleverly, the Roggs themselves dropped the first three hydrogen bombs.

Squatting at night on the filthy floor of the slave pen, we talked it all out. All over the ravaged planet, in mines and mills and fields, from the freezing wastes of the Arctic to tropic pest-holes, the same whispering discussions were going on, the same agonizing realization was arrived at. We had divided ourselves. We had conquered ourselves.

In the glimmering light of forbidden candles the enslaved remnant of humanity whispered softly, to avoid alerting the Rogg guardian robots. And when, at last, we knew—when all humanity knew—the Oath was born.

All men are my brothers. I shall never lift a hand against another human.

The Rogg shall be driven from Earth.

No one knows where it first was formulated. Some claim it had a thousand simultaneous origins, and they may be right. But it spread across the planet with unbelievable speed, and was sworn to, solemnly, secretly, under the very whips of the Roggs.

I am an old man, and my mind tends to wander back to the past. Across from me, Guja Hi shifted uncomfortably on the hard slave's stool, and my attention snapped back to the present, to the day of triumph.

"When you Roggs surrendered, Guja Hi," I said slowly, "you had no choice, and you knew it. You were barricaded in the few mansions which still remained standing. We humans were in control of your ships, most of your robots and machinery, and all the food supply. We could have starved you out, we could have smashed starships against your protective force-fields, we could have inundated you with waves of bare-handed people until your generators went down under the load. We preferred to promise you your lives if you surrendered."

I stared at him angrily, and my voice rose again. "We wanted to put an end to the thing, quickly! Can you understand that, Rogg? We were sick of suffering, death —we were sick of you! We wanted to get you off our planet, so we could get to work sweeping it clean of every sign of your presence!"

Guja Hi huddled deep into his cloak.

"I was your master," he said thickly. "I treated you as a master treats his slave. I don't deny that. But, in your own history, humans have enslaved humans. At the very least, we allowed most of you to live. You're s e n d i n g us to our deaths!"

"If you'd studied our history a little more carefully," I told him, "you'd have discovered that slave-masters have a tendency to die at the hands of their slaves on Earth."

It occurred to me suddenly that I had touched on the most important mistake the Roggs had made. Unfortunately for them, they'd conquered us too easily, and they never really worried about us after they were in control. Oh, they kept robots among us at all times, and they forbade gatherings for any reason among their slaves, and they kept religiously to their system of breaking up slave groups, of shuffling us around every couple of years, to insure against any *sub rosa* organizations being formed. All humans were to become strangers, alone among strangers.

But robots are machines, after all, and can be circumvented, and formal gatherings are not the only way in which matters can be discussed and decisions reached. And the slave shuffles actually helped us, once things got going, to spread ideas, decisions, and even instructions.

We surprised ourselves, as much as the Roggs. Man had no idea of what he was capable, once he put his mind to it. Within five years after

the Rogg conquest, no man, no matter where on the face of the globe he was sent, ever felt he was among strangers. Elaborate, though undercover, ceremonies of welcome were worked out. Close bonds of friendship, understanding and trust were developed within weeks of new acquaintance. Every slave pen on Earth was home to every human slave.

Within ten years, the new language, Earthwide, had sprung up and was known to every human. I doubt if the Roggs ever knew of its existence, for around them we slaves spoke only in their tongue. And the Roggs had no human friends. This was partly their own doing, for they treated us all alike, with the same contempt, arrogance and swift punishment. There were no human traitors.

Within twenty-five years, mankind had its own laws, courts, government—unified and universal for the first time in its history.

Forty-seven years after the conquest, the human race was able—at one world-wide signal—to rise up and overthrow the aliens who had subjugated the Earth at the time of its greatest strength—and division.

In the darkness outside the former slave hut where I was closeted with the Rogg commander, people were growing restless. I could hear them murmuring, moving about. My meeting with Guja Hi was only a ceremony, after all, making official what had in fact already been accomplished.

I rose to my feet with a feeling of finality. For a last moment, I stared at the rude, dirty walls and smelled the foetid odor. The past was dead, and I must bury it swiftly.

"You will assemble your people at daybreak," I told Guja Hi. "They may take the cloaks they wear, and nothing else. Three freighters will be ready, stripped of all armaments, and containing only enough fuel, food and other essentials to get you to your home planet."

The Rogg opened his mouth but I motioned him into silence.

"Be grateful we are allowing you to depart alive, Guja Hi. Believe me, there were many delegates who voted for a violation of our promise to you. If they had had their way, you and all the other Roggs would be dead now."

I placed my hands on the scarred top of the table before me. "If you're afraid to go home, Guja Hi, go somewhere else. That's your business. But remember this—don't come back to Earth! Any Rogg who enters this solar system will be put to death upon discovery!"

"And you can tell them to expect us out there!" Jimmy Vladek growled behind me.

I nodded. "He's right, Guja Hi. If you get home, you can tell the rest of the Roggs we're not satisfied yet. We have a bit more to collect, some day, for damages inflicted."

The Rogg commander turned away and seemed to stumble as he moved toward the door. And as I watched him, feeling triumphant, proud, strong even in my old age, my mind gathered up the forty-seven years and spread them out before me.

And I did a strange thing.

I surprised even myself, and I knew that few people would approve or even understand, but I am an old man and I have lived through much suffering, and this was my day of triumph as well as the world's, and if I wanted to humor an old man's whim it was my right.

I stepped around the table to Guja Hi, and he paused with his hand on the door and looked at me. As I approached him, my mind ranged back over the forty-seven years of the Rogg, and I saw all the brutality of the conqueror. I remembered all the whippings, all the sickness, all the deaths. I saw again all the lost cities and villages, all the wiped-out cultures and never-to-be-restored ways of life.

But I saw something else, too. I remembered humanity as the Rogg had found us. Snarling, afraid, with our hands on our weapons, killing being killed. More alone than the most miserable slave in the most degraded Rogg slave pen.

And I remembered Earth-wide, our brave new tongue, and I thought about the ceremonies of welcome and friendship which would never be forgotten as long as men existed. I saw the young people, the new—*human*—race which had grown up out of the minglings and the shufflings and the dispersions.

Most of all, I remembered the Oath—not the last part; that would be forgotten now that the Rogg was no more—but the first, the important part: *All men are brothers. I shall never lift a hand against another human.* That part would last, I knew.

So I walked up to the startled Rogg, and for the first time in forty-seven years I took the hand of the invader in my own and I shook it.

"Good-bye, Guja Hi," I said. "And thanks for everything."

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commuter's problem

by . . . *HARLAN ELLISON*

John Weiler worked for a trade association. Very much a man in a grey flannel suit, something like this just never could happen to him . . . .

THING was all I could call it, and it had a million tentacles.

It was growing in Da Campo's garden, and it kept *staring* at me.

"How's *your* garden, John," said Da Campo behind me, and I spun, afraid he'd see my face was chalk-white and terrified.

"Oh—pretty, pretty good. I was just looking for Jamie's baseball. It rolled in here." I tried to laugh gaily, but it got stuck on my pylorus. "Afraid the lad's getting too strong an arm for his old man. Can't keep up these days."

I pretended to be looking for the ball, trying not to catch Da Campo's eyes. They were steel-grey and disturbing. He pointed to the hardball in my hand, "That it?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, yeah! I was just going back to the boy. Well, take it easy. I'll—uh—I'll see you—uh—at the Civic Center, won't I?"

"You suspect, don't you, John?"

"Suspect? Uh—s u s p e c t? Suspect what?"

I didn't wait to let him clarify the comment. I'm

Harlan Ellison, though still only in his early twenties, is without a doubt one of the most widely known and discussed writers in the field. Author of an astonishing number of stories, Ellison returns, here, with this story of a bewildered suburbian faced by the strange and unknown.

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afraid I left hurriedly. I crushed some of his rhododendrons.

When I got back to my own front yard I did something I've never had occasion to do before. I mopped my brow with my handkerchief. The good monogrammed hankie from my lapel pocket, not the all-purpose one in my hip pocket; the one I use on my glasses. That shows you how unnerved I was.

The hankie came away wet.

"Hey, Dad!"

I jumped four feet, but by the time I came down I realized it was my son, Jamie, not Clark Da Campo coming after me. "Here, Jamie, go on over to the schoolyard and shag a few with the other kids. I have to do some work in the house."

I tossed him the ball and went up the front steps. Charlotte was running one of those hideous claw-like attachments over the drapes, and the vacuum cleaner was howling at itself. I had a vague urge to run out of the house and go into the woods somewhere to hide—where there weren't any drapes, or vacuum cleaners, or staring tentacled plants.

"I'm going into the den. I don't want to be disturbed for about two hours, Char—" She didn't turn.

I stepped over and kicked the switch on the floor unit. The howling died off and she smiled at me over her shoulder, "Now you're a saboteur?"

I couldn't help chuckling, even worried as I was; Charlotte's like that. "Look, Poison, I've got some deep thought to slosh around in for a while. Make sure the kid and the bill collectors don't get to me, will you."

She nodded, and added as an afterthought, "Still have to go into the City today?"

"Umm. 'Fraid so. There's something burning in the Gillings Mills account and they dumped the whole brief on my desk." She made a face that said, "Another Saturday shot," and shrugged.

I gave her a rush-kiss and went into the den, closing and locking the big double doors behind me.

Symmetry and order are tools for me, so I decided to put down on paper my assets and liabilities in this matter. Or, more accurately, just what I was sure of, and what I wasn't.

In the asset column went things like:

Name: John Weiler. I work for a trade association. In this case the trade association is made up of paper manufacturers. I'm a commuter—a man in the grey flannel suit, if you would. A family man. One wife, Charlotte; one son, Jamie; one vacuum cleaner, noisy.

I own my own home, I have a car—1955 Pontiac two-tone,

and enough money to go up to Grossingers once each Summer mainly on the prodding of Charlotte, who feels I should broaden myself more. We keep up with the Joneses, without too much trouble.

I do my job well, I'm a climbing executive type and I'm well-adjustedly happy. I'm a steady sort of fellow and I keep my nose out of other people's business primarily because I have enough small ones of my own. I vote regularly, not just talk about it, and I gab a lot with my fellow suburbanites about our gardens—sort of a universal hobby in the st[illegible]s.

Forty-seven minutes into town on the train five days a week (and sometimes Saturday, which was happening all too frequently lately) and Lexington Avenue greets me. My health and the family's is good, except for an occasional twinge in my stomach, so most of the agony in the world stays away from me. I don't get worried easily, because I stay out of other people's closets.

But this time I was worried worse than just badly.

I drew a line and started writing in the liabilities column:

Item: Clark Da Campo has a million-tentacled staring plant in his garden that is definitely *not* of normal botanical origin.

Item: There has never been a wisp of smoke from the Da Campo chimney, even during the coldest days of the Winter.

Item: Though they have been living here for six months, the Da Campos have never made a social call, attended a local function, shown up at a public place.

Item: Charlotte has told me she has never seen Mrs. Da Campo buy any groceries or return any empty bottles or hang out any wash.

Item: There are no lights in the Da Campo household after six o'clock every night, and full-length drapes are drawn at the same time.

Item: I am scared witless.

Then I looked at the sheet. There was a great deal more on the asset side than the other, but somehow, after all the value I'd placed on the entries in that first column, those in the second had suddenly become more impressive, overpowering, alarming. And they were so nebulous, so inconclusive, I didn't know what it was about them that scared me.

But it looked like I was in Da Campo's closets whether I wanted to be or not.

Three hours later the house had assumed the dead sogginess of a quiet Saturday afternoon, three pages of notepaper were covered with obscure but vaguely ominous doodles, and I was no nearer an answer that made sense

than when I'd gone into the den.

I sighed and threw down my pencil.

My back was stiff from sitting at the desk, and I got up to find the pain multiplied along every inch of my spinal cord. I slid the asset-liability evaluation under my blotter and cleaned the cigarette ashes off the desk where I'd missed the ashtray.

Then I dumped the ashtray in the waste basket. It was Saturday and Charlotte frowned on dirty ashtrays left about, even in my private territory.

When I came out the place was still as a tomb, and I imagined Charlotte had gone into the downtown section of our hamlet to gawk at the exclusive shops and their exclusive contents.

I went into the kitchen and looked through the window. The car was gone, bearing out my suspicions. My eyes turned themselves heavenward and my mind reeled out bank balances without prompting.

"Want to talk now, John?"

I could have sworn my legs were made of ice and they were melting me down to the kitchen linoleum. I turned around and—that's right—Da Campo was in the doorway to the dining room.

"What do you want?" I bluffed, stepping forward threateningly.

"I came over to borrow a cup of sugar and talk a little, John," said Da Campo, smiling.

The utter incongruity of it! Borrowing a cup of sugar! It was too funny to equate with weird plants and odd goings-on in the house across the street. It took the edge off my belligerence quite effectively.

"S-sure, I suppose I can find the wife's sugar." Then it occurred to me: "How do you know my name?"

"How do you know mine?"

"Why I—I asked the neighbors. Like to know who's living across the street, that's all."

"Well, that's how I know yours, John. I asked my neighbors."

"Which ones? The Schwachters? Bill Heffman? Dave Brown?"

He waved his hand absently, "Oh—just the neighbors, that's all. How about that sugar?"

I opened one of the cabinets and took out the sugar bowl. Da Campo didn't have a cup, so I took one down—one of the old blue set—and filled it for him.

"Thanks," he said, "feel like that talk now?"

Somehow, I wasn't frightened of him, as I was by that sheet of items. It was easy to feel friendly toward the big, grey-eyed, grey-haired man in the sport shirt and slacks.

Just another typical suburban neighbor.

"Sure, come on into the living room," I answered, moving past him.

When Da Campo had found a reasonably comfortable position in one of Charlotte's modern chairs, I tried to make small conversation. "I've never noticed a TV antenna on your house. Don't tell me an inside one works over there. No one this far out seems to be able to make one of those gadgets bring in anything decently."

"We don't have television."

"Oh," I said.

The silence hauled itself around the room several times, and I tried again. "Uh —how come we never see you at the new Civic Center? Got some sweet bowling alleys down there and the little theatre group is pretty decent. Like to see—"

"Look, John, I thought I might come over and try to explain about myself, about us—Ellie and me." He seemed so intent, so earnest, I leaned forward.

"What do you mean? You don't have to—"

"No, no, I mean it," he cut me off. "I know everyone in the neighborhood has been wondering about us. Why we don't go out much, why we don't invite you over, everything like that." He held up his hands in fumbling motions, as though he were looking for the words. Then he let his hands fall, as though he knew he would never find the words.

"No, I don't think anyone has—"

He stopped me again with a shake of the head. His eyes were very deep and very sad and I didn't quite know what to say. I suddenly realized how far out of touch with real people I'd gotten in my years of commuting. There's something cold and impersonal about a nine-to-five job and a ride home with total strangers. Even total strangers that live in the same town. I just looked at Da Campo.

"It's simple, really," he said, rubbing his hands together, looking down at them as though they had just grown from the ends of his arms.

"I got mixed up with some pretty strange people a few years ago, and well, I went to jail for a while. When I came out I couldn't get a job and we had to move. By then Ellie had drawn into a shell and...well, it just hasn't been easy."

I didn't know why he was telling me all this and I found myself embarrassed. I looked around for something to break the tension, and then pulled out a pack of cigarettes. I held them out to him and he looked up from his hands for a second, shaking his head. He went back to staring at them as I lit a cigarette. I was hoping he

wouldn't go on, but he did.

"Reason I'm telling you this is that you must have thought me pretty odd this afternoon. The only thing I have is my garden, and Ellie, and we don't like living as alone as we do, but it's better this way. That's the way we have to do it. At least for a while."

For a second I got the impression he had skimmed the top of my mind and picked off my wonderment at his telling me the story. Then I shook off the feeling and said, "That's understandable. If I ever *did* wonder about you and Mrs. Da Campo, well, it's something I won't do any more. And feel free to drop over any time you get the urge."

He looked sort of thankful, as though I'd offered him the Northern Hemisphere, and stood up.

"Thanks a lot, John. I was hoping you'd understand."

We shook hands, I asked him if he wanted to call up the Missus and come over for dinner, but he said no thanks and we'd certainly get together again soon.

He left, and I wasn't surprised to see the cup of sugar sitting on an end table where he'd set it down.

Nice guy, I thought to myself.

Then I thought of that s t a r i n g plant, which he hadn't explained at all, and some of the worry returned.

I shrugged it off. After three weeks I forgot it entirely. But Da Campo and I never got together as he'd suggested.

At least not at the Civic Center.

Da Campo kept going to the City on the 7:40 and coming back on the 5:35 every day. But somehow, we never sat together, and never spoke to one another. I made tentative gestures once or twice, but he indicated disinterest, so I stopped.

Ellie Da Campo would always be waiting at the station, parked a few cars down from Charlotte in her station wagon, and Clark Da Campo would pop into it and they'd be off before most of the rest of us were off the train.

I stopped wondering about the absence of light or life or smoke or anything else around the Da Campo household, figuring the guy knew what he was doing. I also took pains to caution Jamie to stay strictly off-limits, with or without baseball.

I also stopped wondering because I had enough headaches from the office to take full-time precedence on my brain-strain.

Then one morning, something changed my careful hands-off policies.

They had to change. My fingers were pushed into the pie forcibly.

I was worried sick over the Gillings business.

The Gillings Mills were trying to branch over into territory held by another of our Association's members, trying to buy timber land out from under the other. It looked like a drastic shake-up was in the near offing.

The whole miserable mess had been heaped on me, and I'd not only been losing my Saturdays—and a few Sundays to boot—but my hair was, so help me God, whitening, and the oculist said all the paper work had wrecked Hell with my eyes. I was sick to tears of the thing, but it was me all the way, and if I didn't play it right mergers might not merge, committments might not be committed, and John Weiler might find himself on the outside.

Mornings on the train were a headache and a nightmare. Faces blurred into one runny grey smear, and the clickety-clack didn't carry me back. It made my head throb and my bones ache and it made me hate the universe. Not just the world—the *universe*! All of it.

I unzipped my briefcase and opened it on my lap. The balding $25,000 a yearer sharing the seat harrumphed once and gathered the folds of his Harris tweed about his paunch. He went back to the *Times* with a nasty side glance at me.

I mentally stuck my tongue out and bent to the paperwork.

I was halfway through an important field agent's report that night—just barely might—provide the loophole I was seeking to stop the gobbling by the Gillings Mills, and I walked out of the station with my briefcase under my arm, my nose in the report, with a sort of mechanical stride.

About halfway down the subway ramp I realized I didn't know where the bloody Hell I was. Hurrying men and women surrounded me, streaming like salmon heading to spawn. I was somewhere under Grand Central's teeming passageway labyrinth, heading for an exit that would bring me out into the street somewhere near my building.

But where the devil was this?

I'd never seen any of the signs on the tiled walls before. They were all in gibberish, but they seemed to be the usual type thing: women, big bold letters in some foreign language, packaged goods, bright colors.

I lost interest in them and tried to figure out where I was.

I'd gone up through the Station and then down again into the subway. Then there'd been a long period of walking while reading that damned report, and thinking

my p r a c t i c e d feet knew where they were going.

It dawned on me that for the last few years I'd been letting myself go where my feet led me each morning. Yeah, but my feet were following the subconscious orders of my head that said *follow the rest of the commuters.*

This morning I'd just followed the wrong batch.

A string of yellow lights spaced far apart in the ceiling, between the regular lights (but this was the first time I'd seen neons in the subway passages) indicated the way to a line of some sort. I followed the lights for a while (wait a minute, those weren't neon, what *were* they?) until I looked down at my watch, for perhaps the hundredth time that morning, and realized it was past nine. I was late for the office.

Today of all days!

I started to get panicky and stopped a grey-suited man hurrying past with a sheaf of papers under his arm.

"Say, can you tell me where the exit onto 42nd and Lex—"

"*Derlagos-km' ma-sne' eph-or-j u l v, e s p e r i n d,*" he drawled out of the corner of his mouth and stalked past.

I was standing there stupidly till the next couple people cast dirty looks at me for being in the way.

Foreigner, I thought, and grabbed a girl who was walking with typical hurried secretarial steps. "Say, I'm trying to get out of here. Where's the 42nd and Lexington exit?"

She looked at me, amazedly, for a moment, shook my hand loose from her coat-sleeve, and pattered off, looking once over her shoulder. That look was a clear, "Are you nuts, Mac?"

I was getting really worried. I had no idea where the blazes I was, or where I was heading, or how to get out. I hadn't seen an exit in some time. And still the people continued to stream purposefully by me.

Subways had always scared me, but this was the capper.

Then I recognized the arrows on the wall. They were marked with the same kind of hyphenated, apostrophed anagrams on the billboards, but at least I got the message:

THIS WAY TO SOMEWHERE!

I followed the crowd.

By the time I got to the train, I was in the middle of a swarm of people, all madly pushing to get into the cars. "Hey, hold it! I don't want to—! Wait a minute!"

I was carried forward, pressed like a rose in a scrapbook, borne p r o t e s t i n g

through the doors of the car, and squashed up against the opposite door.

If you live in New York you will know this is not an impossibility. If you don't, take my word for it.

The doors slid shut with a pneumatic s i g h and the train shot forward. Without a jar. That was when I began to sweat full-time.

I had wondered, sure, but in the middle of downtown Manhattan you just don't expect anything weird or out-of-p l a c e unless there's a press agent behind it. But this was no publicity stunt. Something was wrong. Way off-base wrong, and I was caught in the midst of it.

I wasn't scared, really, because I didn't know what there was to be afraid of, and there was too much familiarity about it all to hit me full.

I had been in a million subway crushes just like this one. Had my glasses knocked off and trampled, had my suit wrinkled, had the shine taken off my shoes, too often to think there was anything untoward here.

But the signs had been in a foreign language. No one I'd been able to accost would talk to me in anything but gibberish, and most of them looked at me as though my skin were green. The train was definitely *not* an ordinary train. It had started without a jerking rasp. If you know New York subways, you know what I mean.

That was unusual. That was fantastic!

I bit my lower lip, elbowed my way into a relatively clear space in the car, and for the s e c o n d time in my life dragged out my square-folded lapel hankie to mop my face.

Then I saw Da Campo.

He was sitting in one of the plush seats, reading a newspaper. The headline read:

SELFGEMMEN - BARNS-NEBBLE J'J'KEL-WOLO-BAGEDTAR!

I blinked. I blinked again. It was Da Campo all right, but that newspaper! What the Hell was it?

I made my way over to him, and tapped him on the shoulder. "Say, Da Campo, how the deuce do I—"

"Good Tilburr all mighty!" he squawked, his eyes bugging, the newspaper falling to the floor. "How the—what are—did you follow—Weiler!" He went of in a burst of that strange gibberish, gasped and finally got out, "What are you doing here, for God's sake, man?"

"Look, Da Campo, I got lost in the subway. Took a wrong turn or something. All I want is out of here. Where's this train's next stop?"

"Drexwill, you d a m n e d fool!"

"Is that anywhere near Westchester?"

"It's so far away your best telescopes don't even know its' island universe exists!" He was getting red in the face.

"What?"

"The planet Drexwill, you idiot! What the Hell are you doing here?"

I felt suddenly choked, hemmed in, like a fist was tightening around the outside of my head, squeezing it.

"Look, Da Campo, this isn't funny. I've got an appointment this morning, and the office is waiting for me to—"

"Understand this, Weiler!" he snapped, pointing a finger that seemed to fill the universe for me. "You'll never make that appointment!"

"But why? I can get off at the next sta—"

"You'll never make another appointment back there." His eyes flicked back toward the rear of the car and I found my own drawn in that direction. The fear was crawling around in me like a live thing.

He seemed to be grinding inside. His face was screwed up in an expression of distaste, disbelief and pity, "Why? Why? Why didn't you leave well enough alone? Why couldn't you believe what I told you and not follow me?" His hands made futile gestures, and I saw the people near us suddenly come alive with the same expressions as our conversations reached them.

I was into something horrible, and I didn't know precisely what!

"A u d i t o r! Auditor! Is there an Auditor in the car?" yelled Da Campo, twisting around in his seat.

"Da Campo, what are you doing? Help me, get me off this train, I don't know where I'm going, and I have to be at the office!" I was getting hysterical, and Da Campo kept looking from me to the back of the car, screaming for an Auditor, whatever that was.

"I can't help you, Weiler, I'm just like you. I'm just another commuter like you, only I go a little further to work every day."

The whole thing started to come to me then, and the idea, the very concept, dried my throat out, made my brain ache.

"Auditor! Auditor!" Da Campo kept yelling.

A man across the aisle leaned over and said something in that hyphenated gibberish, and Da Campo's lips became a thin line. He looked as though he wanted to slap his forehead in frustration.

"There isn't one on the train. This is the early morning local." He made fists,

rubbed the thumbs over the tightened fingers.

A sign began flashing on and off, on and off, in yellow letters, over the door of the car, and everyone lowered his newspaper with a bored and resigned expression.

The sign blinked HUL-HUBBER on and off.

"Translation," said Da Campo briefly, and then the car turned inside out.

Everything went black and formless and limp in the car and for a split split-second my intestines were sloshing around in the crown of my hat and my shoe soles were stuck to my upper lip. Then the lights came back on, everyone lifted his paper, the sign went dead, and I felt as though I wanted to vomit.

"Good Lord above, what was *that?*" I gasped, holding onto the back of Da Campo's seat.

"Translation," he said simply, and went back to his paper.

I suddenly became furious. Here I was lost in a subway, going—if I was to believe what I had been told—somewhere called Drexwill. I was late for the office, and this thing had overtones that were only now beginning to shade in with any sort of logic. A mad sort of logic, but logic nonetheless.

And the only person I knew here was reading his newspaper as though my presence was a commonplace thing.

"Da Campo!" I screamed, knocking the weird newspaper out of his hands. Heads turned in annoyance. "Do something! Get me off this goddamned thing!"

I grabbed his coat lapel, but he slapped my hand away.

"Look, Weiler, you got yourself into this, you'll just have to wait till we hit the Depot and we can fish out an Auditor to help you.

"I'm just a lousy businessman; I can't handle anything as snarled as this. This is government business, and it's your headache, not mine. I have to be at work..."

I wasn't listening. It all shaded in properly. I saw the picture. I didn't know where I was going, or what it was like there, but I knew why Da Campo was on this train, and what he'd been doing in my town.

I wanted to cry it was so simple.

I wanted to cry because it was so simply terrifying.

The train slowed, braked, and came to a hissing halt, without lurching. The doors opened and the many commuterly-dressed people who had been crowded into the car began to stream out. The entire trip couldn't have taken more than twenty minutes.

Then I thought of that "translation" and I wasn't so

sure of my time estimate.

"Come on," said Da Campo, "I'll get you to an Auditor." He glanced down at his wrist, frowning at the dial of a weirdly-numeraled watch. He whistled through his teeth for a moment, as the crowd pushed out. Then he shoved me after them resignedly. "Let's hurry," he said, "I haven't much time."

He herded me before him, and told me to wait a moment while he took care of something. He stepped to the end of a line of men and women about to enter a small booth, one of about twenty such booths. A dilating opening in the booth admitted one person at a time.

In a few moments the line had diminished, as men went in one side wearing suits like my own grey flannel, and emerged from the other clad in odd, short jackets and skin-tight pants. The women came out in the equivalent, only tailored for the female form. They didn't look bad at all.

Da Campo went in and shortly came out. He stepped to my side, dressed like the others, and began pushing me again.

"Had to change for work," he commented shortly. "Come on."

I followed him, confused. My stomach was getting more and more uneasy. I had a feeling that the twinge I'd occasionally felt in my stomach was going to develop into an ulcer.

We stepped onto an escalator-like stairway that carried us up through a series of floors where I saw more people—dressed like Da Campo—scurrying back and forth. "Who are they?" I asked.

Da Campo looked at me with pity and annoyance and said, "Commuters."

"Earth is a suburb, isn't it?" I asked.

He nodded, not looking at me.

I knew what it was all about, then. A fool would be the only one unable to see the picture after all the pieces had been laid out so clearly. It was really quite simple:

Earth was being infiltrated. But there wasn't any sinister invasion or displacement afoot. That was ridiculous. The only reason these aliens were on Earth was to live.

When I thought the word "alien" I looked at Da Campo. He appeared to be the same as anyone of Earth. These "aliens" were obviously exactly like us, physically. Physically.

Why were the aliens on Earth to live? Again, simple.

Why does a man who works in New York City go out to Westchester after 5:00 every day? Answer: the city is too crowded. He goes to the suburbs to live quietly.

"Is—uh—Drexwill crowd-

ed, Da Campo? I mean, are there a lot of people here?"

He nodded again and muttered something about serious over-population and why didn't the stupid Faenalists use their heads and bring things under control and wasn't that what he was paying his Allotments for.

The escalator was coming to another floor, and Da Campo made movements toward the exit side. He stepped off, and I followed. He gave me a quick glance to make sure I was following, and strode briskly away.

All around us people were coming and going with quiet purpose.

"Da Campo—" I began, trying to get his attention. His nonchalance and attitude of trying to brush me off were beginning to terrify me more than all the really strange things going on around me.

"Stop calling me that, you fool! My name is Helgorth Labbula, and if you refer to me again with that idiotic name I'll leave you here and let you fend for yourself. I'm only taking my time to get you to an Auditor because they might construe it as my fault that you wandered into the Suburb Depot." He glared at me, and I bit my lip.

We kept walking and I wondered what an Auditor was, and where we were going to find one.

I found out quickly enough. Da Cam—er, Helgorth Labbula spotted a tall, hard-looking man in a deep blue version of the universal short jacket and tight pants, and hailed him.

The Auditor walked over and Da Campo talked to him in soft tones for a moment. I watched as the man's eyes got wider and wider, as Da Campo's talk progressed.

"Hey!" I yelled. They both looked up, annoyed.

"I hate to say anything," I said, "but if I'm right, you're talking about me, and I don't like this cold-shoulder routine, not one little bit." I was sick of all this rigamarole, and me stuck somewhere a million miles or more away from my office, and everyone acting as though I'd done it on purpose and I was a nuisance.

"Now talk in English so I can understand, will you?"

The Auditor turned cool grey eyes on me. Stiffly, as though he were unaccustomed to speaking the language, he said, "You have stumbled into something by chance, and though it is not your fault, dispensation must be arranged. Will you please come with me."

He stated it, didn't ask it, and I had no choice.

We took a few steps, and the Auditor turned to stare back at Da Campo who was watching us balefully. "You,

too," the man in the blue tunic said.

"But I have to be at—"

"You will be needed for a statement. I'm sorry, but it's official."

"What am I paying my Allotments for, if you Auditors can't handle a little thing like this?" He was getting angry, but the Auditor shrugged his shoulders, and Da Campo trudged along behind us.

We came up off one of the escalators, into the light of triple suns. Three of them. Burning all at once. Triple shadows. That was when I realized how far away, more than a mere million miles, and how strange, and how lost I was.

"How—how far from Earth are we?" I asked.

The Auditor answered absently, "About 60,000 light-years."

I gawked, stopped dead in my tracks. "But you toss it off so lightly, as though it were around the block! And you don't live that differently from us! I don't understand!"

"Understand? What's to understand?" snapped Da Campo with annoyance. "It was a fluke that discovered Translation, and allowed us to live off Drexwill. But it didn't change our culture much. Why *shouldn't* we take it for granted? We've lived with it all our lives, and there's nothing odd or marvelous about it."

"In fact," he added, glaring at the Auditor, "it's a blasted bother sometimes!"

His tossing it off in that manner only made it worse for me.

I thought of the distance between me and my office, realizing I hadn't the faintest idea how far away it was, but knowing it was further than anything I could ever imagine. I tried putting it into mundane terms by remembering that the nearest star to Earth was only 4 light-years away and then trying something like:

If all the chewing-gum wrappers in the world were laid end to end, they'd stretch from Earth to—

But it only made things worse.

I was lost.

"I want to go home," I said, and realized I sounded like a little boy. But I couldn't help it.

The Auditor and Da Campo turned to look at me at the same time. I wished I had been unable to read what was in their eyes.

But I could. I wished I hadn't been able to, really.

They hurried me down a street, if street it was, and I supposed that was what it was, and into a bubble-like car with a blue insignia, that sat by the curb. It ran on a monorail, and in a few sec-

onds we had left the Depot behind.

We sped through the city, and oddly, I didn't marvel at the fantastic architecture and evidences of great science, though there were enough of both. From the screaming ships that split the morning sky to the cone-within-helix buildings rising on all sides.

I didn't look, because it was so restful for the first time in my life not to worry about offices, and commuting, and bills, and Charlotte's ashtray fetish, or any of the other goddam bothers I had been heir to since I was able to go out and earn a living. No treadmill. No responsibility.

It was good to lie back in the padded seat and just close my eyes. Even though I knew I was in deep trouble.

We drove for a while, and then something occured to me.

"Why don't we just translate where we're going?"

The Auditor was looking out the window abstractedly, but he said, "Too short a jump. It only works in light-year minimums."

"Oh," I said, and sank back again.

It was all so logical.

Something else popped into my mind. The sheet of liabilities under my desk blotter.

"Uh—Da Campo," I began, and shrank back at the scathing look he turned on me.

"The name is Helgorth Labbula, I told you!"

The Auditor smiled out the window.

"Want to tell me a few things?" I asked, timidly.

Da Campo sighed once, deeply, "Go ahead. You can't be any more trouble to me than you have already. I'm twenty kil-boros late already."

"What was that in your garden?"

"A plant, what do you think?"

"But—"

He seemed about to explode with irritation. "Look, Weiler, you grow those runty little chrysanthemums and roses, don't you? Well, why shouldn't I be entitled to grow a native plant in my garden? Just because I'm living out there in the sticks doesn't mean I have to act and live like a barbarian."

The Auditor looked over, "Yes, but you were warned several times about growing native plants in Suburb Territory when you signed the real estate release, weren't you, Helgorth?"

Da Campo turned red.

"Well, that's—what I mean is—a man has to have *some*—" He stuttered into silence and looked at me with wrath.

"How come we never saw any smoke from your house?"

"We don't use imbecilic fuels like coal or gas or oil."

I didn't understand, but he cleared it up with the answer to my next question. I said, "Why don't you ever go out,

or show lights at night, and why do you pull those drapes?"

"Because the inside of our house isn't like yours. We have a Drexwillian bungalow in there. A bit cramped for space we are," he said, casting a nasty look at the Auditor, "but with regulations what they are, we can't expect much better. We have our own independent heating system, food supply, lighting system and everything else. We pull the drapes so you won't see when we turn on all the units at once. We have to inconvenience ourselves, I'll tell you.

"But at least it's better than living in this madhouse," he finished, waving a hand at the bustling city.

"I rather like it," I said.

The Auditor glanced over at me again, and for the second time I read his eyes. The message hadn't changed. I was still in trouble.

"We're almost there," he said.

The car slowed and came to an easy stop before a huge white building, and we got out.

Da Campo held back and spoke to the Auditor again in tones that indicated he wanted to leave.

"It will only take a short time. We need your statement," the Auditor told him, motioning him out of the car.

We walked up the wide, resilient steps.

After a wearying progression through the stages of red tape, statements, personnel, and official procedure which reminded me strongly of Earth, we came to an office that seemed to be the end of the road.

Da Campo was uneasy and kept damning me with his eyes when he wasn't looking at his watch.

We were ushered in, and the Auditor saluted the pale-faced man behind the desk. "The Head Auditor," said the blue-uniformed man, and left us. I noticed that the official had grey eyes, like Da Campo and the Auditor. Was that a dominant on Drexwill?

"Sit down, won't you?" he said, amiably enough.

Da Campo blurted, "I really must be going. I'm quite late for my work and if you don't mind I'd like to—"

"*Sit*, Helgorth, I have something to say to you, too."

I was grateful they were speaking English.

The Head Auditor crossed long arms and glared at Da Campo across the desk.

"You know you're partially to fault here."

Da Campo was indignant. "Why—why—what do you mean? I gave him a perfectly-logical story, but he had to go and stumble into the Suburb Depot. That wasn't my—"

"Quiet! We leave you commuters pretty much alone. It's your lives and we try not to

meddle. But there are certain regulations we have to keep enforced or the entire system will break down.

"You knew you weren't to grow any native plants out there. We warned you enough times so that it should have made an impression. Then to boot, you became a recluse out there. We ask you to make certain advances to your neighbors, strictly for purposes of keeping things on a level. But you wouldn't even go shopping!"

Da Campo started to protest, but the Head Auditor snapped his fingers sharply, causing the man to fall silent. "We checked your supply requisitions through Food Central, and we were going to drop you a memo on it, but we didn't get to it in time."

The pale-faced man tapped his fingers on the desk, "Now if we have any more trouble out of you, Helgorth, we're going to yank your Suburb Ticket and get you and your wife back into one of the Community Towers. Is that clear?"

Da Campo, suitably cowed, merely nodded.

I thought of the fantastic system they had devised. All Earth turned into a suburban development. Lord! It was fantastic, yet so simple and so obvious when I thought about it, my opinion of these people went up more and more. This explained all sorts of things I'd wondered about: hermits, bus lines that went nowhere, people disappearing.

"All right, you can go," I heard the Head Auditor say.

Da Campo got up to leave, and I turned to watch him. "So long, Da Campo, see you at home tonight," I said.

He looked at me strangely. The message hadn't altered. "So long, Weiler. I hope so," he said, and was gone.

I half-knew what he meant.

They weren't going to let me go back. That would be foolish. I knew too much. Strangely, I felt no fear.

"You see our predicament, don't you?" asked the Head Auditor, and I swung back to look at him. I must have looked at him in amazement, because he added, "I couldn't help knowing what you were thinking."

I nodded, reaching for a way to say what I wanted to say.

"We can't let you go back."

"Fine," I smiled a bit too eagerly. "Let me stay. I'd like to stay here. You can't imagine how fascinated I am by your planet."

And it was then, right in that instant, that I recognized the truth in what I'd said.

I hated Earth.

I hated the nine-to-five drudgery of the closed office and the boring men and women with whom I did business.

I despised the trains and the vacuum cleaners and the

routine. I despised the lousy treadmill!

I loathed, detested, despised, abhorred, abominated and in all *hated* the miserable system. I didn't *want* to go back.

"I don't *want* to go back! I want to stay. Let me stay here!"

The Head Auditor was shaking his auditing head.

"Why not?" I asked, confused.

"Look, we're overpopulated now! Why do you think we use the Suburbs out there? There isn't room here for anyone like you. We have enough non-working bums on our hands without you. Just because you stumbled into one of our Depots, don't assume we owe you anything. Because we don't.

"No, I'm afraid we'll have to—er—dispense with you, Mr. Weiler. We're not unpleasant people, but there is a point where we must stand and say, 'No more!' I'm sorry." He started to push a button.

I went white. I could feel myself going white. *Oh no,* I thought! I've got to talk!

So I talked. I talked him away from that button, because I suppose he had a wife and children and didn't really like killing people. And I talked him away from the killing angle entirely. And I talked and talked and talked till my throat was dry and he threw up his hand and said...

"All right, all right, *stop!* A trial, then. If you can find work here, if you can fit in, if you can match up, there's no reason why you shouldn't stay. But don't ever expect to go back!"

Expect to go back? Not on your life!

Then he shooed me out of the office, and I set about making a place for myself in this world I'd never made.

Well, I've done pretty decently. I'm happy, I have my own apartment, and I have a good job. They've said I can stay.

I didn't realize it, all those years, how much I hated the rush, rush, rush, the getting to the office and poring over those lousy briefs, the quiet nagging of Charlotte about things like the ashtrays, the constant bill collectors, the keeping up with the Joneses.

I didn't realize how badly I wanted out.

Well, now I'm out, and I'm happy.

Thanks for l i s t e n i n g. Thought I'd get it straight as long as you needed the story to open my charge account. I'm here and I like it, and I'm out of the suburbanite climbing-executive rush-rush class. At last I'm off that infernal treadmill.

Thanks again for listening. Well, I've got to go.

Got to get to work, you know.

first landing

by . . . *ROGER DEE*

Castle's job was to explore Venus as extensively as possible in the five days allotted him — and to survive . . .

HE had thought at first that they would surround him in the sweltering gloom of wind-driven fog, but they did not. The broken circle of their approach left one direction always open for further flight.

Castle, crouched in sweating indecision among moisture-slimed toadstools more than tall enough to hide his dwarfish pursuers, listened to the shrill gibberish of their yelling and felt his first real panic.

They were bent not on cornering him but on driving him. Where?

Not toward the distant empty spire of the *Themis*, nor toward the nearer wreckage of the helicar that had crashed him into a skeleton, fog-hidden tree. They were herding him, like bearers beating the bush about a dangerous animal, toward their village.

He caught a ghost of motion between hazy toadstools and stood up quickly, cursing himself for having lost his handgun and infra-red goggles—along with the helicar's infinitely more important aux-

The final world conflict of 1981 *had fallen just short of disaster. It had eliminated war by eliminating boundaries; the press of mutual need had substituted for belligerence a practical humanitarianism. Roger Dee reports on Castle's first days on Venus, and on what he discovered.*

illary power pile—when he crashed into the tree. Without the goggles he could see less than a hundred feet into the roiling murk of fog; without the gun he was defenseless, a ready target for the first barbed spear.

Another small shadow drifted up to his right and drove him on hastily through his dim nightmare of boulders and toadstools. Pursuit went with him, invisible but audible, until suddenly there was no need for further chase.

He had been closer than he guessed to his destination when the helicar crashed. But not to the village he had postulated, to the aboriginal community he had set out to photograph as the logical completion of his survey.

Castle halted, flight forgotten, confounded by possibilities not guessed at before.

There was no village, no rude grouping of stone huts or thatched kraals. There was something infinitely more disturbing—

A ship.

Castle had been making his fourth entry in the Themis' log when the natives discovered his ship and came close enough to set off her proximity alarm.

He had expected them and was ready. He clapped on the infra-red goggles that made it all possible to see through the driving nightside murk of Venusian fog, caught up his handgun and cut his control-cabin lights before the natives could have approached closer than a hundred yards.

They had stopped at the clamor of his alarm bell and stood, stumpy and ghostlike in the rushing sea of fog that hid the plain and the river beyond, waving incomprehensible gestures toward the open hatch where Castle watched. There were only three of them this time, none over thirty inches tall but disturbingly manlike for all their smallness, pallid and bearded and utterly naked in the sweltering heat. He could only assume that they were armed with the same barbed javelins they had brandished at him when they had rushed out at him on his field trip of two days before, but if so they made no display of them now.

Castle mopped perspiration from his face and considered their antics, wondering what lay behind so open an approach. Two days before —Earth time, not the dragging twenty-day cycle of Venusian rotation—they had reacted differently, four of them rushing upon him with a wild shrilling of gibberish and a waving of spears that had forced him to halt them with a handgun blast until he could reach the safety of his helicar.

Simple caution, because there could be no assessing the motives of a species com-

pletely alien to experience, permitted him only one conclusion now.

It was a trap.

The band he had brushed with that first time would have reported his presence. A council of their—tribe?—would have planned a course, settling upon such a ruse as this to draw him into the open.

Others might already have run closer under the clamor of the ship's alarm, hiding behind the fins that housed the helicar. They could be crouching there now, ready to cut him down when he stepped out.

The din of the alarm rasped Castle's already frayed nerves and he stepped back from the hatch to shut it off. In the sudden quiet that fell there was no sound beyond the unceasing sigh of fog-blinded wind sweeping from the daylight side of the planet toward the mountains to the west.

When he returned to the port the three natives had moved perhaps ten yards closer, near enough to assure him that they were unarmed.

One of them cupped his palms together and shouted between them, the sound floating up high and muffled through fog and wind. The words were gibberish, but their tone so laden with human-seeming urgency that Castle for a moment was tempted to discard suspicion and go to them.

Caution prevented. He thought of the probable others crouched in the fog about the *Themis'* supporting fins with weapons ready, and the prospect brought a fresh spate of sweat to his forehead.

He could not risk going out to them. Neither could he leave the little autocthons lurking about the *Themis;* the control cabin was too warm for comfort even with the port open, and he could not afford to seal it and waste precious power on refrigeration.

Castle took the only course left. He leveled his handgun and fired a careful shot, far enough to the left of the shouting natives to assure him that the blast could do them no injury but near enough to drive them away in fear of a closer try.

The fog billowed with the brief red glare of detonation. The unending wind brought him a sharp smell of burned explosive and the sound of small feet scurrying for safety.

There was no similar scrabbling among the toadstools about the ship, leaving him to conclude either that he had been mistaken in his suspicion of ambush or else that the ambuscaders had not fled with the others. He listened intently for a time and heard nothing beyond the steady moaning of wind.

And finally, because no other course was tenable, Castle went outside and made a wary tour of the ship's landing area. Finding nothing, he returned and carried out two small audio pickups, placing them where they must warn him of approach even above the clamor of his main alarm.

That done, he went back to his hammock and his log.

Being long on method and short on imagination—qualities which had weighed heavier than he knew in his selection for this first World Bloc landing on Venus—Castle resumed his log entry at the point of interruption:

...completing preparations for helicar investigation of native settlement, which seems to lie in the hills to the north. All routine samplings are now completed and filed; there remains only to determine the strength of these autocthons before I am ready for my return flight.

Have just been interrupted by the ship's proximity alarm, to find three apparently unarmed natives outside. They shouted gibberish—I wish now that I could have recorded it for Base study, since I know nothing whatever of linguistics—and seemed anxious that I come out. I was forced finally to fire a shot close enough to drive them away, but, recalling that the blast I gave them two days ago might have killed or injured some of them, was careful this time to do no damage.

They ran away at once, and when they had gone I checked my landing area and set up audio alarms to warn of future parties approaching under cover of the ship's main alarm.

The inconclusiveness of it annoyed him and he turned back to the first entry made after landing, rereading earlier details as if he might find in them some solution to his present difficulties. That first entry read:

20:41, 17 May, 1990—Initial testings completed on twelfth hour after planetfall, full results filed under Environmental Data. Enough here to say that gravity is barely less than Earth's, air safe but uncomfortably warm and humid. Unfortunately the Themis set down on the night side, which is covered entirely by a windy fog impenetrable beyond one hundred yards even with infra-red goggles. Dayside, as I saw briefly in landing, is equally windy but unobscured below stratospheric cloud-level and seems a fair enough country of mountains and grassy plains, with rivers and shallow seas too light in color to be markedly salt. Vegetation seems to be perennial, dying during the twenty-day night cycle and making way for a great variety of fungi, mainly toadstools, that live on

the resulting refuse. My glimpse of dayside indicates that greenery springs up again with sunrise and the dissipation of fog.

One further item of importance: A check of my fuel pile confirms almost precisely the consumption estimate made by Base engineers. On my return flight I shall have power enough, by abandoning my helicar and transferring its auxiliary power pile to the ship's main plant, to set up a stable orbit about Earth. A few ounces less fuel and return would be out of the question, a circumstance which leaves me reluctant to use the helicar except when vitally necessary because to lose that pile would be disastrous.

The second entry dealt at length with Castle's dayside explorations and confirmed his earlier postulation of a twenty-day growth cycle. It was a beautifully simple, if uncomfortable, ecology: new vegetation sprang up from old roots, greening rapidly as the fog receded before the sun; at dusk zone, grasses and thickets of bamboo-like reeds and occasional towering trees wilted and browned, making way for myriad fungoid forms which set at once about assimilating the organic debris. Castle had made numerous tests of river and sea water; the seas were hardly salt and the rivers not at all, but both bore important mineral traces that could make Venus an invaluable source of elements fast disappearing from Earth.

The final item of that second entry, even to one as unimaginative as Castle, was bitterly ironic:

...I think it safe to say that Venus is geared almost entirely to a chlorophyll-saprophyte ecology. There are a few animals, the largest a herbivore about the size of a small sheep, but apparently no insects or reptiles. There is no evidence at all of intelligent life.

His third entry proved that conclusion almost tragically wrong, recounting in terse detail the events of the field trip during which he had been set upon by a howling band of pygmy natives and driven from the hills in peril of his life.

Castle's troubles dated from that entry.

The nub of his dilemma, paradoxically, lay on Earth rather than on Venus.

Discovery that the planet was already inhabited offered the first complication: Castle's job was to explore as extensively as possible in the five days alloted him and to report on possibilities for colonization, but no protocol had been set up to guide him in dealing with a pack of jabbering dwarfs. In addition to his personal dan-

ger and the risk of losing the helicar's precious power pack, Castle now faced a third and less easily resolved problem—that these autocthons might be numerous enough and troublesome enough to incline World Bloc toward diplomacy rather than outright occupation, and that he might fail to assess that cultural strength at its proper value.

The final world conflict of 1981 had fallen just short of disaster, but in the falling had accomplished what generations of pacifists had failed at: it had eliminated war by eliminating boundaries, wiped away the hostilities of a world by wiping out a large part of it, and by the press of mutual need had substituted for belligerence a practical humanitarianism.

It was as well, Castle thought, that those few abortive prewar flights from Earth to Venus and Mars had failed. Succeeding, the strains of terrestrial politics would have been transplanted to the new worlds; exploitation rather than colonization would have been the watchword and indigenous life forms would have been brushed bloodily aside in the struggle. It was different, now.

That difference dismayed Castle. In keeping with his love of method and his lack of imagination he owned a direct and uncompromising disposition, and the shaping of an extraterrestrial diplomacy was completely beyond him.

Caution forbade any attempt to deal directly with the little beggars; far too much was at stake to warrant the risk. His only course left was to learn their strength as nearly as possible and trust that his findings would be adequate to guide World Bloc experts in the planning of future procedure.

He ended his fourth entry with that decision:

Time is too short for temporizing. I shall take the helicar over those northern hills, forming what estimate I can of native strength and cultural advancement. That done, I shall return to Earth and let more competent men deal with the problem I have uncovered.

The entry completed, he set out on his northern reconniassance, piloted his helicar into a towering leafless tree and was driven, dazed and shaken, his handgun and goggles lost in the crash, from its wreckage.

To find at the end of his flight what he had least expected to find in this fogbound desolation—another ship.

The ship was fully as large as the *Themis*, but of

radically different design. Castle, staring thunderstruck at the squat silvery bullet-shape of it, found the bare fact of its presence enough to distract his attention even from the threat of the pygmy cordon closing in on him from behind.

His first wild thought was that it might be another ship from Earth, launched without his knowing. Then he saw the tiny machine at its base, a Lilliputian caterpillar crawler with cleated tracks and glassite dome, and the hope died stillborn. That crawler might accomodate one man—provided that man stood not more than thirty inches and weighed less than fifty pounds.

The inference left Castle more at sea than before. These jabbering pygmies were not natives at all, then. They had come to Venus as he had come, by ship.

By ship, from what place?

Sounds of pursuit closing in made him aware that he stood in the open, unprotected even by toadstools. The high unintelligible voices had closed their broken ring; they called behind him and to either side, and now, the pursuit over, before him, from beyond the alien craft.

Still no one appeared between Castle and the ship. They meant him to go to it, then. The relentless pressure had been designed to that end.

But for what purpose?

Panting, Castle crouched down among towering toadstools and weighed the possibilities. They must have known that he had lost his handgun and goggles, else they would not have dared to press so hard on him through the fog. They could have speared him a dozen times during the chase, but had not.

Why? Because they meant him to *enter* that ship?

Again he was at a loss, baffled by the unbridgeable gulf that divided his own logic from the alien. What kind of people would come here in a silver ship equipped with caterpillar field crawler and God knew what other high-level technological gear, yet would hunt him, naked and shouting, with spears?

The ship waited like an enigmatic silver bullet. A port, half the size of the *Themis*' but still adequate to receive his own bulk, stood blackly open. A sound of stealthy approach behind him forced the issue knife-sharp and clear before him. Go, or stay?

"No choice," Castle said aloud. Wind and fog muffled the words, made his voice sound in his own ears like a stranger's.

The sound behind him was repeated, closer still. Castle, before pressure of panic could shatter his resolution, gripped his courage tightly and stood up.

"All right," he said. "If I must, I must."

They followed silently, closing in from the fog. There was a metal-runged ladder made for tiny feet, an open hatch that crowded his shoulders and a control cabin beyond as large as his own but stripped to the metal of every furnishing that might decay in the rank humidity.

The little man lying on the deck was mother-naked, his beard spread like a damp brown mat over the pallor of his chest. One leg was splinted with copper tubing lashed tight with wire. The other was puffed and bruised, scored with recent lacerations. He had been sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, but the sound of Castle's entry waked him and he opened light rational eyes that filmed at once with unmistakable tears.

Three other little men came into the room behind Castle, their spears discarded.

One of them said something unintelligible in a high, questioning voice and held up a short-stemmed familiar thing that Castle, expecting some weapon more potent than spears, found for the moment utterly impossible to accept.

The little man on the floor interpreted the question, his own English halting but shockingly clear.

"Igor asks," he said, "if you have tobacco."

Methodical to the last, Castle finished his fifth and last entry before closing his log:

...worked out surprisingly well, since the remaining fuel rods of the other ship, together with the helicar's pile, give the Themis ample power to lift us all to Earth orbit.

The real wonder is that my passengers are still sane, especially after my firing on them and crippling Fyor two days ago. None of the others speak English, and with Fyor confined to ship they must all have been frantic at seeing escape slipping away.

It seems ridiculous now that they should have seemed so numerous and hostile, when the four of them were only trying to make me understand their predicament. But ten years of living on Venus—they came in 1980, when coldwar security measures kept everything of importance out of the news—had rusted all their power equipment and rotted their clothing.

Actually, and ironically, it was the very system they used to arrive at maximum crew strength with a minimum of weight that is responsible for my error.

For who, after all, would expect to find a shipload of Russian midgets marooned on Venus?

terror over hollywood

by . . . *ROBERT BLOCH*

What had happened? What would be the fate of this beautiful woman who had come so close to the frightening secret of "the top ten"?

THE first time I saw Kay Kennedy was at Chasen's, several years ago.

She wasn't Kay Kennedy, then. In fact, I can't even remember what name she was using during that period—something like Tallulah Schultz. And she wasn't a brunette, either, but a blonde. MM had just come into vogue, and like Mamie van Doren and Sheree North and five thousand others, this girl had platinum hair and a bra-cup size far along in the alphabet.

I ran into her quite by accident, because she happened to be sitting at the bar with Mike Charles when he hailed me.

"Sweetheart! C'mon over—I wanna murmur sweet nothings in your shell-like ear." He rose unsteadily as I approached, gripped my arm, and slapped me on the back.

I have been in Hollywood many years, and I still do not like to be addressed as "sweetheart" by other males, nor do I enjoy being slapped on the back.

But I grinned and said, "Hi, lover-boy!" and punched him in the ribs. As I say, I have

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Robert Bloch, well known Science Fiction and Fantasy writer, returns with this startling explanation for the survival of Hollywood's legendary indestructibles. Have you never wondered why some actors go on, year after year, long after even younger men withdrew admitting their age?

---

been in Hollywood many years.

"What'ya drinking?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Oh, that's right, you don't drink, do you?" He turned to his blonde companion. "Funny, this character never takes a drink. Doesn't eat, either. What do you do, boy—live on H?"

I sighed. "Ulcers. A bland diet."

He laughed again. "That's right. You're a producer. Bland diet for you. Lucky I'm a director. Blonde diet for me." Then he turned to the girl, mumbled her name so that I couldn't catch it, and said, "Darling, I want you to meet Eddie Stern—the sweetest guy in the industry."

I smiled at her and she smiled at me, and it meant absolutely nothing. That is, it meant nothing to me and I was fairly certain it meant nothing to her. Nobody ever remembers the names of the independent p r o d u c e r s. A few, like Selznick and Kramer and Huston, get established through publicity channels, but most of us are anonymous.

So this little blonde pirouetted her eyelashes and exhaled and I was prepared to let it go at that. But all at once she opened her mouth and said, "Edward Stern. Of course. I've seen your pictures ever since I was a little girl. MOON OVER MOROCCO, and LONELY CITY, and—"

She rattled off the names of eight films, without once wrinkling her blank forehead.

I confess I wrinkled mine. "What are you?" I asked. "A child prodigy?"

"I just happen to like movies," she told me. "I study them, don't I, Mike?"

The director pinched her arm. "That she does, that she does," he agreed. He grinned at her. "Baby, how'd you like to be my star pupil? I guarantee you'll be working under an experienced teacher."

"I'm going to be a star, some day."

"Sure," Mike said. "I promised you, didn't I?"

"I'm serious," she answered. And she was. She faced me. "That's why I'm interested in every phase of production. And I've always admired your work, Mr. Stern. I rank you right up there with Hal Wallis."

I nodded "So you know his name, too, eh? Frankly, that surprises me."

"She probably knows his wife's name," Mike said, in a disgusted voice.

"Of course. He married Louise Fazenda. She was in RAIN OR SHINE, with Joe Cook. And Mr. Chasen, who runs this restaurant, was Joe Cook's stooge in the same picture."

That threw me. The girl wasn't pretending, she *did* know pictures. I've known Hal Wallis since before he married Louise, but the gen-

eral public doesn't. For that matter, how many people remember Louise Fazenda? She's gone from common consciousness even though some of her contemporaries—Crawford, Cooper, Gable—are still around.

I decided it might be worth my while to talk to this girl after all. But Mike Charles had other ideas.

He stood up and grabbed my arm. "Come on over here a minute, pal," he said. "Little private conference, huh?" As he pulled me away he called back over his shoulder, "You don't mind, do you, precious? Order y'self another drink."

We moved toward the end of the bar, and I said, "Where'd you find her, Mike? She interests me."

"That goat?" He laughed. "Don't waste your time. Just another movie-struck kid. Reads the *Reporter* in bed." He sobered. "Look, I got serious business with you."

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"Ed, I want a job with you."

"Directing?"

"What else? You know I'm good. You know my credits."

"So does everyone else in town, Mike," I told him. "Why haven't you picked up something in the last six months?" I stared at him. "Is it the drinking?"

"No. I never used to drink at all, you can ask anyone. I just started after DOOMED SAFARI, when the word went out that I was poison with the majors. You heard about that, don't try and kid me."

"All right," I said. "I heard. But I never did find out why."

"Silliest damned thing. I just committed the unpardonable sin, that's all. DOOMED SAFARI was one of these African things, see? And as usual, we had a sequence where the hero and the heroine are making their escape down one of those rivers. So I goofed."

"How do you mean, goofed?"

"Well, I was going to be arty and different, so I did the whole sequence *without including a single shot of crocodiles slithering off the banks into the water.*" He sighed. "Naturally, you just can't get away with making an African picture without that shot in it. Ever since then I've been dead. Like that guy over at MGM years ago who made the mistake of calling Lassie a bitch."

I didn't know whether he was ribbing me or not; Mike was always a great ribber. But he was serious about one thing. He wanted a chance.

"Please, Ed," he murmured. "I've got to make another picture soon. I've been around for twelve years, but you know this business. Twelve months without a credit and

I'm washed up for good. Help me."

"I don't have anything lined up at the moment," I answered, truthfully.

"But you know I'm good. You know about the three times I've been runner-up for the Academy—"

I shook my head. "Sorry, Mike. Nothing I can do."

"Ed, for the first time in my life, I'm begging. I belong in the industry, I've been around ever since I was a kid. Started as a grip, went on to cutter, spent eight years as an assistant until I got my chance. Then twelve years on top. And now they slam the door in my face. It isn't fair."

"It's Hollywood," I said. "You know that. Besides, I'm just a little independent producer. I don't swing any weight in this town. Why come to me?"

He was completely sober now. His eyes rested on me steadily and his voice dropped. "You know why, Ed. It isn't just that I want an assignment from you. I'd like to have you talk to your people about me."

"My people?"

"Don't try to play dumb. I hear things. I know what you've got. And I want in. I think I deserve in, on my record. I *belong*."

I couldn't face his eyes any longer. I turned away. "All right, Mike, you might as well know. I *did* talk to my people, as you call them, several months ago. We studied your case thoroughly. And—they voted you down."

He uttered a short laugh, then smiled. "As they say in Mexico, that's the way the *cojones* bounces. Thanks for trying, anyway, Ed. See you around, sweetheart."

I got out of there because I didn't want to spend any more time with Mike Charles. I wanted to talk to his girl again, yes, but at the moment I couldn't stand being around him. For some reason I felt as if I'd just passed the sentence of death upon him.

Perhaps it was foolish of me to take that attitude, but when I read about his suicide the following month, I wasn't surprised. A lot of them commit suicide after coming to me. Particularly if they know —or guess—the truth.

But Kay Kennedy didn't commit suicide.

I don't know who she hooked up with after Mike Charles hung his brains on the ceiling with a .38, but he was the right one, for her. Within a year her name *was* Kay Kennedy, and her hair was its natural reddish brown. I began to watch her. One of an independent producer's main jobs is to watch people who are coming up in the field. Watch and wait.

I watched and waited another year before I ran into her again. It happened at Romanoff's, one evening.

She'd already had her first big success, in SUNSHINE, and she was sitting at one of the good tables with Paul Sanderson when I came in.

Paul halloed across the room and I went over, and when he introduced her he didn't mumble her name. And this time she didn't flutter her eyelashes, either.

"I've been waiting for a chance to see you again, Mr. Stern," she said. "Of course, you probably don't remember me."

"Yes I do," I told her. "Did you know Joe Cook had Chasen with him on the stage, in HOLD YOUR HORSES, and FINE AND DANDY?"

"Certainly," she responded. "But I don't think he was in ARIZONA MAHONEY when Cook did it for Paramount. That was a little stinker, by the way."

"Yes it was," I agreed.

Paul Sanderson stared at the two of us, then rose. "I think I'll leave you two lovebirds for a moment," he said. "Besides, I have to go to the men's room."

He got up and stalked away.

"My new leading man," Kay said. "Of course, he isn't exactly new, is he?"

I shook my head. "Been around about as long as Gilbert Roland, I guess. But he still looks good, doesn't he?"

"Very." She gazed up at me. "How do they do it?"

"How does who do what?"

"You know what I mean. How do some of them manage to hang on forever? People up there in the Top Ten, box-office leaders year after year. Don't they ever get any older?"

"Of course they do. Look at the ones who die off—"

Her eyes narrowed. "That's what you want me to do, isn't it? That's what you want everyone to do. To look at the ones who die off, and forget about the dozen or so who are always around, always have been around. The ones who remain stars for fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years and still play leads. And a few directors and producers, too—deMille, people like yourself. When did you come to Hollywood, Mr. Stern? 1915, wasn't it?"

"You've been reading my mail," I said.

She shook her head. "I've been talking to people."

"What people?"

"Well, your friend Mike Charles, for instance. Your *late* friend." She paused. "The night I met you, after you went away, Mike got pretty high. And he told me a couple of things. Said there was a little inner group out here that controlled the situation. They called the shots on the top people, decided who stays and who goes. And he said you were in with that group. He said you'd just given him the word that he'd have to go."

"He was pretty high that night, like you told me," I murmured.

"He wasn't high the night he killed himself."

I took a deep breath. "Some people get delusions. That's one of the steps along the suicide route."

"This was no delusion." Kay Kennedy watched me calmly. "I want to know the truth."

I toyed with a napkin. "Suppose there was something to the story?" I asked. "Oh, nothing preposterous, like an inner sanctum arrangement where a few key people controlled all the big plums in Hollywood—you can see on the face of it that's ridiculous. No director or producer or star can depend on a contract or publicity to keep going; the public has to make the final decision. But let's suppose that there *are* a select few whom the public cherishes, and that there are ways to stay in that group. Let's even go so far as to say that I might know something about the method." I stared at her. "If so, why should I tell you?"

"Because I belong in that group," Kay Kennedy whispered. "I'm going to be a star, a big star. And I'm going to stay on top forever."

"Big talk, little girl."

"I talked just as big when I *was* a little girl. Go ahead and laugh! That's what my parents did. But I made my father quit his job and bring me to the Coast. He worked nights in a factory to give me dramatic lesson fees, until he died six years ago. And my mother took his place, at the same factory, so I could still have my tuition. She died last year, of the same thing. Silicosis. That factory wasn't a healthy place."

She lit a cigarette. "Do you want to know the rest? Do you *need* to know the rest? The names of the clowns like Mike Charles who I let push me around on the way up? The names of the hole-in-the-wall agents, the greasy bookers, the stag promoters, the casting-directors for blue films? Do you want to know how I got my first decent address, my first wardrobe, my first car? Or would you rather hear about that nice guy in the Air Force I bounced because he insisted on getting married and having a family?"

I smiled at her. "Why bother? As you say, I've been out here since 1915. I've heard the same story a thousand times."

"Yes. But that's not all the story, Ed Stern. There's another part, the most important part. I *am* an actress, and a good one. I'm going to be a better one in another year or two. Do you think the studio would take a chance on me with a property like Paul Sanderson unless they knew I was going to make it? I'm ready to hit the top, because

I'm prepared. And that's the way I like to be—always prepared. So now I want to know one more thing. When I hit the top, how can I stay there?"

I glanced across the room. Paul Sanderson stood there, deep in conversation with two men who obviously would never be escorted to one of Mike Romanoff's tables. They were short, swart, and stocky, and their hands were shoved deep in the pockets of their trousers. Paul was smiling at them as he spoke, but they weren't smiling back.

Kay Kennedy followed my gaze. I grinned at her.

"Why don't you ask Paul when he gets back?" I suggested. "Maybe he can tell you."

"Then you won't."

"Not yet, Kay. I don't think you're ready yet. If you get to be as big a name as you say you will, then perhaps there's a chance. Until then—"

"All right." She returned my grin. "But I *did* find out what I wanted to know. Mike Charles told the truth, didn't he? There *is* a secret."

She glanced across the room. "And Paul knows it too, doesn't he? But the reason you suggested I ask him is because you're sure he wouldn't tell."

"Something like that."

She focussed her attention on me again. "Funny about Paul Sanderson. I might have guessed he'd be one of your people, as Mike put it. He was the first star I remember seeing in the movies, way back in the '30s. And here I am today, all grown up and playing opposite him, and he doesn't look a bit different."

"Makeup," I said. "Those Westmore boys are great."

"Oh, it's not that. I know he wears a toupee. But he's so different on the set and off. When he's working he never gets tired, never complains. I can be dying under those lights and he isn't even sweating."

"You learn to relax," I said.

"Not that much." She leaned forward. "You know, all the time we've been together on the picture, he never made a pass at me?"

"How come he's taking you out?"

"Flack's idea. Good publicity." She paused. "At least, I thought that's all it was until tonight, when we got together. And that's what I meant when I said it was funny about Paul Sanderson. He's been on the make for me all evening long. And he's drinking, too. If I hadn't worked with him and gotten to know him, I'd swear it wasn't the same guy. How do you explain that?"

"I don't," I told her. "Let's ask him." I turned and gazed across the room. But Paul Sanderson was gone. So were the two men.

I stood up very quickly. "Excuse me," I said. "I'll be right back."

But she wasn't buying. "You saw them too?" she murmured. "Those men with him? Think there's something wrong—"

I didn't answer her . I was walking across the room. I didn't bother with the hat-check girl, but went outside and grabbed the first attendant I saw. "Mr. Sanderson," I said. "Did he come out just now?"

"Just leaving." He pointed to a black limousine rounding the exit-lane.

"That's not his car."

"He was with a couple of other men."

I jabbed him in the ribs. "Get my car, fast."

Kay Kennedy dug her hand into my left arm. "What's happening?"

"That's what I intend to find out. You go back inside and wait. I'll r e t u r n—I promise."

She shook her head. "I'm coming along."

The car rolled up. There was no time to argue if I wanted to keep the limousine in sight. "All right, get in."

We made the exit. The limousine had turned right and was picking up speed. I trailed it. The car cut left, going still faster. I followed.

"This is exciting," Kay told me.

I didn't find it so. It took all my concentration to keep up with the car ahead—and more speed than I could summon here in town. A delay or a ticket would be fatal now. I twisted and turned, always a full block behind, as the limousine swerved and doubled and sped forward until it reached the canyon entrance far to the north. Then it really began to move.

"Where are they taking him?" Kay gasped. "What are they trying to do—"

I didn't answer her. I had my right foot on the floorboards and both hands on the wheel; my eyes were on the hairpin turns, and I kept thinking, *the damned fool, I knew I couldn't trust him, I never should have chosen him in the first place.*

But it was too late for self-reproach now, too late for anything at all unless I could overtake the car ahead. By now they must have known I was following, of course, and that probably decided them. They'd reached the top of the canyon when it happened.

I didn't see anything because my car was a good two hundred feet behind as they rounded the last curve. But I heard it. A muffled sound, in three bursts.

Then we rounded the turn and I could see the limousine pulling away, going down the straight stretch on the other side of the canyon. Its tail-lights were like two little red eyes winking in farewell.

I didn't try to follow it any further.

Instead I pulled up at the edge of the road, pulled up alongside of the black, huddled figure that had been tossed from the speeding car like a discarded doll.

This doll had a hole in its forehead, and another in its chest, and a third in its belly. It was limp and shapeless, and its limbs were doubled up grotesquely beneath the torso.

Kay started to scream and I slapped her face. Then I got out of the car and picked up the doll. I opened the rear door and dumped it into the back seat.

Kay didn't look at it, and when I climbed in front again she didn't look at me. She just kept sobbing over and over again, "He's dead, they killed him, he's dead."

So I slapped her again.

That sobered her. She put her fingers up to the side of her face and said, "Your hands are cold."

I nodded. "I'm glad your powers of observation are returning," I told her. "Apparently you lost them for a moment just now. Or else you might have noticed something. Paul isn't dead."

"But I saw him—that hole in his forehead—the way he was lying there, after they threw him out of the car—"

She started to glance toward the back seat, but I grabbed her shoulder.

"Never mind," I said. "Take my word for it. He's still breathing. But he won't be for long, if we don't get him to a doctor."

"Who were they?" Kay murmured. "Why did they do it?"

"That's a question for the police to answer," I replied. And started the car again.

"Police." She whispered the word, but she might just as well have shouted it. I knew what she was thinking. *Police, publicity, scandal, Parsons, Hopper, Graham, Skolsky, Fidler.*

"Do—do we have to go to the police?" she whispered.

I shrugged. "No, we don't. But the doctor will. Bullet-wounds must be reported."

"Isn't there some doctor who'll keep his mouth shut? I mean—"

"I know what you mean." I drove grimly, turning back onto the highway and heading through Bel Air. "And I know a doctor."

"You'll take him there?"

"Perhaps." I paused. "On one condition."

"And that is?"

I glanced at her. "No matter what happens, you forget all about this business tonight. Never ask any questions, either. No matter what happens."

"Even if he—dies?"

"He won't die. I promise you that." I looked at her again. "Now, do you promise me?"

"Yes."

"All right," I said. "Now I'm going to drop you off home."

"But shouldn't you get to the doctor first? He's lost a lot of blood—"

"No questions," I reminded her. "Home we go."

So I dropped her off. Getting out of the car she was very careful not to turn her eyes in the direction of the back seat. "Will you call me?" she murmured. "Let me know how it—turns out?"

"You'll know," I assured her. "You'll know."

She nodded vaguely, and I drove away. I went straight to Loxheim and told him the whole story.

Dr. Loxheim was understanding, as I knew he would be.

"Gambling debts, no doubt," he nodded. "The *verdammten* young fool. But it iss difficult to find someone completely trustworthy. And now you must find another. It will take time, and until then we must be very careful, all of us. Have you told Paul?"

"Not yet," I said. "First I thought we'd better get rid of the body."

"Leave that to me." Loxheim smiled. "There will be no trouble. I am sure that the ones who did the killing won't talk." Then he frowned. "But what about the girl, this Kay Kennedy?"

"She won't talk, either. I have her promise. Besides, she'd be afraid of the publicity."

Dr. Loxheim puffed on his cigar. "Does she know he's dead?"

"No. I told her he was merely wounded."

He expelled smoke rapidly. "Still, she knows he was thrown from a moving automobile. She heard the shots. She at least saw his forehead, if not the other wounds. And this iss Friday night. Do you think she'll be able to remain silent when she sees Paul Sanderson walk on the set on Monday morning?"

I lifted my hands. "What else could I do under the circumstances?" I asked. "But you're right. When she sees him Monday, it will be a shock."

"A great shock," Loxheim agreed.

"Do you think I'd better be on hand then?"

"Definitely. I think you had better be on hand from now on, to watch her."

"Whatever you say."

"Good. Now leave me There is much to be done."

"Want me to help carry in the body?"

Dr. Loxheim smiled. "That will not be necessary. I have carried them in before."

Monday morning must have been pure hell for Kay Kennedy. I was on the set, working with Craig, the free-lance who was bossing the camera assignment. I watched Kay

when she came in, and she looked all right.

I watched her when Paul Sanderson showed up, and she never cracked. Maybe that was because she'd noticed I was there. Anyway, she managed to get through the morning, somehow. At noon I dragged her to lunch.

We didn't eat at the commissary. I took her over to Olivetti's, in my car. No point in detailing the course of events. What matters is that we talked.

"I think I've got it figured out," she told me. "Ever since Saturday, when there was nothing in the papers, I've been thinking."

"There wouldn't be anything in the papers," I reminded her. "Who was there to tell them?"

"Oh, somebody would," Kay Kennedy said. "If Paul Sanderson had to stop production on a picture for a month or two, they'd cook up a story to explain things to the press. But there wasn't a word. So I guessed the truth."

"Which is?"

"Which is that the man who was with me the other night, the man who got shot, wasn't Paul Sanderson at all. Remember, I was telling you how different he seemed to be off the lot, almost as if he were another person entirely? That's it, of course. He *was* another person. Paul Sanderson's double."

I didn't say anything.

"That's right, isn't it?"

I avoided her gaze. "Remember what you promised me—no questions?"

"I remember. And I'm not asking you questions about the other night. I'm not asking you if the double died, or if he was already dead when you talked to me. I'm not asking how you got rid of the body. I'm merely asking you about Paul Sanderson, who wasn't really mixed up in this affair at all. Now, was he?"

She ground her third cigarette into the ashtray.

"You smoke too much," I said.

"And you don't smoke at all," she told me. "And you don't drink, and you haven't even touched your sandwich. Try and pretend this doesn't mean anything to you!"

"Very well," I said. "It means a lot to me. More than you know or can possibly guess." I leaned forward. "Are you sure you want me to answer your questions?"

"Quite sure."

"Very well. The man was Paul Sanderson's double. Had been for several years. As you yourself observed, Paul is getting along. He has to save himself for his work. When it comes to public appearances, going to parties and making a show for the usual publicity routine, the double took over. He was well-paid, perhaps too well. Apparently he gambled a lot. Apparently he welched a lot—or at least,

once too often. Does that explain things?"

"Some of them. Why his voice sounded a bit different, for one thing. Although he had an uncanny physical resemblance to Paul."

"He was carefully selected," I told her. "And there was a bit of plastic surgery, too. A very competent doctor—"

"The same doctor you were going to take him to the other night?" she asked.

I realized I'd said too much, but it was done.

"Yes."

"Would his name happen to be Loxheim, by any chance?"

My mouth hung open. "Who told you?"

She smiled at me. "I read it. Remember when I said I'd been doing a lot of thinking since Saturday? Well, I did a little checking, too. On Sanderson. And on you. I got hold of your press-book at the studio Saturday afternoon. It's all down there in black and white. Black and yellow, really. Some of your press-clippings are pretty old, darling. Like that one from way back in 1936, when you had that accident playing polo. At first they thought you were going to die, but a few days later was this notice about your being moved from Cedars of Lebanon—to the private hospital of Dr. Conrad Loxheim."

"He's a wonderful man," I said. "He pulled me through."

"1936," Kay Kennedy said. "That's a long time ago. You were an independent producer then, and you're an independent producer now. At least, everyone says you are. How come you've never made a picture on your own since then?"

"But I have, dozens—"

"Your name has been listed as an associate," she corrected me. "Actually, you haven't financed a thing. I checked."

"So I dabble a bit," I conceded.

"And yet you're still a big man in Hollywood. Everybody knows you, you swing a lot of weight behind the scenes—and this in a town where nobody stays on top unless he's active."

"I have connections."

"Like Dr. Loxheim?"

I tried to keep my voice down. "Look, Kay, we made an agreement. You're not to ask questions. What do you want to know these things for, anyway?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "I told you the reason why the other night. You've got a secret I intend to learn. And I'm not letting go until I find out."

Suddenly she put her head down on the table and began to cry.

"What's the matter?"

Her voice came to me, faint and muffled. "You hate me, don't you, Ed?"

"No. I don't hate you. I admire you. You've got guts. You showed it this morning when Sanderson came in. You showed it the other night when you snapped out of your shock. And I'll bet you've showed it all through the years, on the way up."

"Yes." The far-away voice was a little girl's voice now. "You understood, didn't you, Ed? When I told you about my folks, I mean? I wasn't being hardboiled. I didn't want to see them die. It—it tore me to pieces inside. Only there's a part of me that can't be hurt. The part that makes me keep going, makes me keep reaching for the top. No matter what I have to do to get there. Oh, Ed, help me!"

She lifted her face. "I'll do anything you want, I promise. You can take charge of my career, I'll ditch my agent, give you any cut you want, fifty-fifty, even."

"I don't need money."

"I'll marry you if you like, I won't—"

"I'm an old man."

"Ed, isn't there something I can do, some way I can prove myself? Ed—*what's the secret?*"

"Believe me, the time hasn't come to me again. We'll see." Maybe ten years from now, when you're established. Right now you're young, beautiful, everything is just beginning. You can be happy. I want you to be happy, Kay, honestly I do. And that's why I won't tell you. But this much I promise. Keep going. Make good, the way you intend to. And in ten years, come to me again. We'll see."

"Ten years?" Her eyes were dry now, her voice harsh. "You think you can fluff me off like this for ten years? Why, for all I know, you'll be dead by then."

"I'll be around," I promised. "I'm tough."

"Not tough enough," she flashed. "I'll wear you down."

I nodded. She was right, of course. I could see that. She wasn't going to be stopped.

"And if I don't get the truth out of you," she continued, "I'll go to Loxheim myself. Something tells me I ought to meet that man."

I nodded again. "Maybe you're right," I said slowly. "Perhaps you ought to meet him, soon."

It wasn't easy for me to sell Dr. Loxheim the deal. Still, when I gave him all the facts, he finally had to agree.

"We have too much at stake to take any chances," I said. "You know that."

"What about the others?" he reminded me. "They are entitled to a say in the matter."

"Let them take a vote, of course. But it's the only way."

"You think this girl iss worthy?"

"Of course I do. Normally we'd take her in anyhow, after another eight or ten years. She's on her way up, you'll see. The only thing is, like I've explained, she won't wait. So we get her now."

"If the others are willing."

"If the others are willing. And they'll agree."

They did agree. We called a meeting that very night, at Loxheim's place, and everyone showed up. I told my story, and Paul supported me. That was enough.

"When does this happen?" Loxheim asked.

"The sooner the better. I'll make the necessary arrangements right away. You can expect her in about a week."

And it was a week, to the very day, that I brought her in. Right after her picture was finished. Right after she was scheduled for a four-week vacation. Right after I'd personally escorted her over to Frankie Bitzer, my agent, and had him sign her up on a long-term.

After that we went for a drive.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"To Loxheim's place."

"Ed—does that mean I'm going to find out the secret?"

"That's right."

"What made you change your mind?"

"You."

"You do like me a little bit, don't you?"

"I said so, didn't I? And if I didn't like you, I wouldn't be letting you in on the secret. I'd have you murdered instead."

She laughed, but I didn't join in. Because I was telling her the truth.

Dr. Loxheim was waiting for us downstairs in his office, and he was very cordial. I'd made Kay promise not to ask questions until he had finished his examination, and she cooperated magnificently. He took a blood-test and a skin-graft, and did a tape-recording of her voice and even snipped off a lock of her hair.

Then he went on to a case-record session that lasted over an hour. He was very thorough, of course: not only did he get her complete history, plus all the names of acquaintances, but also a sort of inventory of her personal tastes—including some color choices and the brand-names of her cosmetics and favorite perfume.

All this was unnecessary, really, but he was the methodical type and wanted to be prepared for any emergency. I could see his point; if something went wrong and we had to make a fast, last-minute switch, he'd have the necessary data on hand.

But nothing had ever gone wrong in the past, and I was fully confident now. Besides, Kay didn't object. She thought she was being psycho-analyzed, I guess.

Finally, when it was all over, she stood up.

"Well, I've answered a lot of questions," she said. "And now it's my turn to ask a few. First of all—when do I find out about this secret?"

She was looking at me, but it was Dr. Loxheim who answered her. "Why, right now, my dear," he said. Coming up behind her, he deftly inserted the needle at the base of the brain.

I caught her as she fell, and we carried her into the surgery.

It takes about four weeks for the entire process. I'm afraid poor Loxheim didn't get much rest.

As for me, I was busy on my own—quieting her studio, spreading the carefully-prepared story about her incognito vacation in Canada, and doing my own private interviewing. I spent a lot of time interviewing, but finally I came up with someone who satisfied me.

Then I had nothing to do but wait until the 29th day, when I could see her. Loxheim had kept her under drugs and sedation throughout, of course, but he assured me that for the past twenty-four hours she'd had nothing.

"She is quite normal," he assured me.

"Normal?"

"A figure of speech." He smiled. "I mean, I believe she iss in a condition where she iss capable of assimilating the truth." He paused. "Are you sure that you don't want me to tell her?"

I shook my head. "This time it's my responsibility."

"You will be careful of shock? She has come through everything wonderfully thus far, but one never knows. You remember how Jimmy took it when he found out—?"

"I remember. But he's all right now. They get used to it, once they realize the significance."

"But she iss still so young."

"I warned her." I sighed. "God knows, I tried. And I'll tell her now, in my own way."

"Good luck," said Dr. Loxheim.

I left him and went into her bedroom.

She was resting quietly. Her head was on the pillow, but no sheet covered her body—just the long gown. Her eyes were open, of course, and they looked the same to me. Everything looked the same. Her voice hadn't changed, either.

"Ed!" she said. "He told me you were coming, but I didn't believe it."

"Why shouldn't I come?" I smiled down at her. "You're well again. Didn't he tell you that, too?"

"Yes. I didn't believe him then, either."

"You can b e l i e v e me, though. You're well, Kay. Come on, sit up! You can get up if you like. You can get

dressed and go home, anytime you want to now."

She sat up very slowly.

"That's right," she murmured, in a small voice. "I *can* sit up. But Ed, there's something funny about it. I don't feel anything. That's why I wasn't sure, Ed. I don't seem to have any feeling. I'm just —numb."

"It'll go away," I assured her. "Once you get out, get some exercise and fresh air."

She stood up, and I grabbed her arm. "Take it easy, now," I cautioned. "You haven't been on your feet for a long time—bound to be a bit stiff. It's like learning to walk all over again."

Her feet moved jerkily, but she had coordination of a sort. I helped her to a chair. She sat down as if she had never done so before in her life. Her eyes went out of focus, briefly, then steadied.

"There," I said. "You see?"

"Yes. I'm okay, I guess. But Ed, I still don't *feel*. I mean, it's like my foot is asleep, only all over."

"Don't worry about it."

"And that's not all, either. Ever since I've been awake, I've *stayed* awake. For days and days. I told Dr. Loxheim about it, asked him to give me some kind of sedative, but he wouldn't do it. Claimed it was dangerous. So I've just stayed awake, night and day. Peculiar thing is, I don't seem to be tired."

I nodded.

"In fact, I don't seem to be *anything*. I'm not a bit hungry. Or thirsty. And I don't even—"

She hesitated, and I patted her shoulder.

"I know all about that, too. It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?" She frowned. "Ed, what *happened* to me? Dr. Loxheim wouldn't tell me a thing. I know he did something to me in the office —when was that, how long ago? And I think I had an operation. A long, long operation, or many operations. I just can't remember." She paused. "When I woke up, this last time, and stayed awake, I tried to remember. But I couldn't."

"That bothered you?"

"Yes. And something else bothered me even more. I wanted to cry, and I couldn't." Her eyes were wide as she looked up at me. "Ed, tell me the truth. Did I go off my rocker? Am I in some kind of sanatorium?"

I shook my head.

"Then what happened? *What happened to me?*"

I smiled. "What you wanted to happen. You learned the secret."

"The secret?" She remembered, all right. I could tell she remembered everything up until the time the needle hit home, so I wasn't worried any more. She'd come through, and I'd be able to talk to her now.

"Yes," I said. "Loxheim's

secret. Our secret. The secret you wanted to learn, so that you could get into the Top Ten and stay there. Don't forget, Kay, you said you were willing to do anything if you could make it. Well, you have. So you mustn't be frightened."

"What did Loxheim do to me?" she asked. Her voice was calm, controlled. "Who is he, anyway?"

I sat down next to her. "I'm somewhat surprised you don't know," I said. "You seem to be such an expert on motion pictures. Still, I guess the technical experts never rated much attention, particularly back in the early days of the talkies.

"That's when Loxheim came over here. He did some work on animation for a couple of studios, about the time Cooper and Schoedsack were turning out KING KONG. His specialty was lifesize figures; he had a few original processes of his own that were too expensive for the Germans to try. Well, they turned out to be too expensive for us to try here. It was marvelous stuff; not just papier-mache and machinery, and not just clockwork either. After all, he was a physician and a brilliant one. Surgery and anatomy and neurology—the works. But there was no place for him in spectaculars.

"He opened up a little clinic in Beverly Hills as soon as he managed to get a license to practice, and went back to surgery. Plastic surgery—that was the most profitable. Built up a few faces and along with them, a reputation. He made money. And on the side, he continued his studies. And gradually, he perfected the process?"

"What process?"

"Let him explain it. I still don't pretend to understand all the technical jargon. What I do understand is what the process has meant to me. And to the big names—the stars you were wondering about, the ones who seemed to be able to go on forever. People like Sanderson, and a dozen others.

"We formed sort of a closed corporation, Kay. Just a few of us—those able to afford the kind of an operation that costs two hundred thousand dollars to perform. Those who could see the advantages of remaining on top for twenty years or longer, staying young and fresh while their doubles went out and did the routine things to allay everyone's suspicion. You never suspected it, did you Kay? Even after you found out about Sanderson's double, you never suspected Paul. You yourself told me he didn't drink, didn't sweat under the lights, never got tired, never made love. And still you didn't realize the truth. I can tell you also that he never eats, never sleeps. Because he doesn't have to. Not with his brain and vital or-

gans harnessed to a synthetic nervous system in a synthetic body."

Her hand went to her mouth, then dropped.

"That's the secret, darling. The big secret of the biggest names. Only a few of them keep going, because only a few of them were willing to take the risk, pay the price. Only the ones who placed fame and stardom above the petty pleasures of so-called 'living'. Only the ones who were willing to give up eating and drinking and sleeping and loving—because they ate, drank, slept and loved fame alone.

"You said that's the way you felt, Kay. You weren't willing to wait ten years until you were old, ready for the junk-heap. You begged to have the secret now. And you have."

Kay stood up. She moved jerkily, like a doll.

"Easy," I said. "You'll have to learn how to control yourself. Not that you'll chip or break—the housing is almost indestructible. But there's a different balancing-system, and the ears lack the semicircular canals. Also your depth of focus is altered."

She gaped at me. "I thought I was mad," she said. "But I was wrong, wasn't I? You're the crazy one, Ed. Admit it. Telling me I'm some kind of automaton—"

"Take a pin," I suggested. "You'll find you won't bleed."

"Where is Dr. Loxheim? I want to see Dr. Loxheim at once."

"Relax," I said. "He'll be in presently. You can have all the proof you want. Tonight we'll call a meeting and get the whole gang in, Paul and the rest of them. Sort of get acquainted a bit. All but Betty— I forgot, she's turned off this month."

"Turned off?"

"Yes. That's part of it, don't you see? To rest. Conserve energy. Let the doubles do the work, between pictures. You last longer. Of course we can't allow any star to remain on top more than twenty, twenty-five years at the most, because then the public *would* get suspicious. After that, they just retire. But they can last indefinitely, if they rest. Loxheim says maybe two or three hundred years. Without aging, mind you. So it won't be so bad, once you get used to it. Ask Paul."

She reeled across the floor. "Paul. Betty. They're all friends of yours, eh?"

"Associates, darling." I smiled. "That's *my* secret. You asked me once how it was that I was still a big name in Hollywood, yet hadn't made many films on my own in years. It's because I happen to have these associates. All of them are indebted to me for the opportunity to remain on top. All of them work through my agent, Bitz-

er. I get my percentage. Just as I will from you."

She was trying to open the door now, trying not to hear me. I felt very sorry for her, but I continued to smile. I had to remain calm, for her sake.

"Don't do anything rash, Kay," I advised her. "Think it over. Tomorrow you'll feel better. Then you can meet your double and we'll start making the necessary plans."

"Double?"

"Certainly. I told you a double is necessary. I have selected an extraordinarily talented young lady for the role. Not only does she bear a remarkable physical resemblance to you, but she also has considerable histrionic ability of her own. Through studying your pictures she's managed to pick up most of your mannerisms, and the rest she can acquire from first-hand observation. She has your voice down pat from Loxheim's tape-recording, and she's memorized all the material you gave him on your life, habits, and tastes. You'll supplement that. Work things out together."

I paused. "And by the way, I don't think we need worry about her behaving foolishly on her own, like Paul's double did. This young lady happens to have a criminal record, and I know about it. Also she knows that I know. So you see, she'll stay right in line. I think you're going to like her. I certainly hope so, because you'll probably be living together for a good many years." I walked over to the door and drew her away. "Might as well stop trying," I said. "The door is locked."

Now she faced me and I read unreason in her eyes.

"Double," she whispered. "So that's it! Now I begin to understand. It's a trick, isn't it? You've got a double, all right, and you and Loxheim and this agent Bitzer are all in on it together. Paul Sanderson too, probably. You think you can drive me crazy —or at least get people to think I'm crazy, if I tell them such a story. And meanwhile, you pull a switch, put this double in my place, pocket the money."

I put my hands on her shoulders. Staring her right in the eyes, I shook my head.

"No darling. That's a wonderful idea for a plot, but it isn't true. What's true is that you're an automaton now. And once you face the fact, you'll find it isn't as bad as you think. I know."

"You?"

"Of course. Why do you think I control the secret? Because I was the first. Loxheim was my friend, and after the accident in the polo game, he came to me at the hospital where I lay dying. I gave him permission to take me to his clinic, gave him permission to experiment. When it was

successful, I realized what he had—what could be done with the process, once the right people were approached. And through the years I've done just that. There are only a dozen or so, as I say, but we're the insiders. We're the secret rulers of Hollywood, the walking shadows, the dreams that never die. We're the immortals who welcome you now to our company."

She wasn't ready yet, she couldn't accept. I saw it in her eyes.

So I took my hand away from her shoulder, fished in my pocket, and pulled out the pin.

"Here," I said. "Test yourself."

She stared down at the pin and her face worked. "No," she murmured. "It's another trick. It's all a trick, a trick to drive me crazy. I'm not a robot, it can't be, how can you stand there and smile at me, how can you lie like that, stop smiling, stop it, *stop it—*"

And then she reached out and swept the pin from my hand as her arm came up. Her nails clawed at the side of my face.

After that she stood there and screamed until I pressed the top of her head. The scream died away and she collapsed. I left her where she fell and picked up the phone.

Loxheim answered.

"Well?"

"Hysteria, of course. But she'll be all right. I think we can call Bitzer tomorrow and tell him to sign her with the studio for a new deal. Be down in a moment."

I hung up. Then I opened the closet door and got out her new box—the one Loxheim had built, with the velvet lining and the airholes. The respiratory system still works on oxygen principle.

I fastened the loops around her neck and hung her up. Just before I closed the lid I took another look at her. She was great. And she'd look just as great ten years from now, or twenty. Like a million bucks. A million bucks at the boxoffice.

She belonged in the Top Ten, all right.

For the first time I was satisfied I'd done the proper thing. I put her away and headed for the door, whistling.

Just before I went out I remembered something. I walked over to the mirror and sure enough, there it was. Poor kid, I didn't blame her for getting upset, seeing it was the first time.

When she clawed me, she'd ripped a few strips of plastic off my cheek, exposing what was beneath.

I stood there looking at the bright, gleaming metal for a moment, then turned away and started downstairs.

god of the mist

by...EVELYN GOLDSTEIN

His eyes burned as he remembered the days when men had sacrificed living victims as the shouts rose to the skies.

TERRIFIED eyes gleamed out of the darkness of the Parchee burrow. Kohler with swiftness surprising in a big man, leapt from the igneous path, plunged his hand into the hole, grabbed the small animal by the long ears and dragged it out, paws kicking futilely in air.

"Parchee meat," he gloated.

He turned to his smaller companion, a few paces behind on the narrow rock-path. "Start a fire, Ahuila, here's food."

He held the animal to eye level enjoying the helpless pawing and the soft panic squeals. After a moment he pulled his stilo-gun from the holster and flicked the button that released the knife. Deliberately he laid the sharp blade to the fur and began to c a r e f u l l y skin the living beast.

"ZANTHU!" The horrified cry brought his knife to a stop. He turned impatiently.

"Now what, Ahuila?"

The boy's soft m o u t h worked. Slim, like all Venusians, he seemed frailer now for his golden eyes were sick. He pointed to the squealing parchee. "Kill it!" he said, "Do not torment it, Zanthu!"

Evelyn Goldstein, Brooklyn housewife and Science Fiction writer, turns to another—and more secret—aspect of Venusian life, with this story of what happened when a violent man, a fugitive from justice, both committed wanton, ruthless murder and offended against the Gods of Venus.

Kohler shrugged huge shoulders. "You're too squeamish. Get used to the sight of blood," he advised, "There's gonna be lots of it when I become god of your village." His knife resumed its work.

The parchee shrieked in almost human pitch.

"Kill it! Kill it first!" Ahuila was almost sobbing. Then, before Kohler could guess his intentions he caught the knife hand plunging the blade into the tortured animal. It died instantly.

"Why you yellow Veni!" Kohler dropped the parchee and the stilo-gun, caught the boy by the throat, gave a twist. Ahuila went limp. Kohler flung him down. He cursed in a mixture of Venusian and his own Earth tongue and lashed out with a savage foot that sent the prone boy rolling into a shallow dry gully, arms and legs flopping limp. Then he bent to haul the slack weight to him. Ahuila's head lolled back, mouth agape, golden eyes open and sightless.

Kohler looked into the beautiful young face, and his mouth twisted with hatred.

"Dead!"

He shook the other in bitter rage. He hadn't meant to break his neck. All that fuss about a parchee they were going to cook and eat anyway!

He lifted his eyes to the mountain crest with its wreath of tenuous mist. Somewhere in the peaks up ahead was Ahuila's village. Now he had to find it alone!

The Earthman hefted the dead boy to his shoulder and trudged up the volcanic incline, following the natural route that led past outjutting porous rocks. He heard the rush of water before a turn gave him sight of a fountaining geyser. Warm spray splattered him. The sudden sight of the water came as no surprise. The entire way, since their escape from the lowlands prison toward the northern mountains, had been dotted with hot springs and miniature geysers.

Kohler approached as the column started to lose height. He flung the corpse into the spray, watched it being sucked into the receding column and out of sight.

Now let the Earth Police search for a body.

Earth Police!

He gave a short laugh of contempt. He could picture them tracking the swamp and jungle lands, thinking that, like all escapees, he would make for Hellsport, outlaw territory where the E. P. were powerless.

But his plans had changed after they had thrown Ahuila into the same dirty windowless bared stone cell with him.

"What they got you in for?" he had growled at the boy.

The other had crouched against the wooden-slatted door, hands out, as if crucci-

fied. His eyes, big and golden, expressively simple like all Venusians, were fixed on the seven-foot Earthman in awe.

It tickled Kohler's vanity, although his great size had always been a source of amazement on Venus, where the people were like perfectly formed, beautiful children. And, like children, the deep thunder of his voice created terror or instant obedience in them.

He thundered his question again now.

It got results in a stammered flow of a fluid Venusian dialect with which Kohler was totally unfamiliar. But he got the drift.

Bread. Ahuila had stolen some bread. He had thought it would be such an adventure to get out of Vahuhya, to see what lay outside the mountain. But he had not reckoned with the hunger and the dirt, and greed of the town ruled by the Earth uranium monopoly.

Kohler grinned. He verged on saying: "Know what I'm here for? Murder! Killed the foreman. Crushed his head in like an egg—with my bare hands!" He wanted to hold his hands out for the other to see the gnarled, giant fingers with stiff black hairs. He would have liked to see horror grow in those innocent limpid eyes, and see the boy shrink away as he clenched and unclenched his hands like claws of a crane. But an innate instinct stopped him, and in a moment he was glad he had not spoken, for the boy suddenly prostrate himself at his feet crying:

"ZANTHU, let me go back to the mountains. I will never leave Vahuhya again. I will trim the salt plants from your sacred waters!"

The boy touched slender hand to mouth—salute of Venusians to a god. Kohler stared. It took a while for him to grasp the significance of Ahuila's words and gesture.

Among Venusians worship was a private affair of each district. But the hand to mouth was the universal tribute to godhood. For whatever reason—whether his giant height, or his skin burnt red-black, like the obsidian hills, by the humid winds of the planet he—Kohler—had been mistaken for the god-incarnate of Ahuila's particular clan.

With a little more careful conversation Kohler learned that the boy came from the Volcanic Mountains to the north. This fact alone was surprising since most Venusians preferred the low areas near swamps and rivers where they could give constant moisture to their extremely thirsty skins. Their remote ancestors had been acquatic and natives with webbed digits and gill slits were not unusual even today.

Vahuhya! The name rolled pleasantly on Kohler's sensuous lips. Zanthu, god of Vahuhya!

He had grinned at his first worshipper. "Wanna see a little magic to get us out of here," he had told Ahuila.

Wide-eyed the boy had watched as Kohler shouted for their jailer, a sullen Earthman, who approached with drawn stilo-gun.

"I don't wanna be locked in with no Veni," Kohler had shouted. "Put him in another cell or I'll kill him!"

"Dry up!" the jailer replied.

"Oh yeah! Don't say I didn't warn you!"

He had launched himself upon the unsuspecting Ahuila, making a great pretense of striking him, while the boy babbled mercy of his god. The jailer cursed, and unlocked the door. That was what Kohler wanted. He turned, seized the jailer expertly about the throat, and squeezed till the man went limp. Then he took the stilo-gun and, motioning the Venusian out of the cell, locked the unconscious man in. In the ever cloudy murk of the planet's daylight they crept through the shadows of houses till they got to the underbrush at the edge of the town. From there on Ahuila took the lead.

But now Ahuila was dead. The way back was closed. His only hope lay in finding Vahuhya. Kohler doggedly continued the torturous climb.

Shadows under the ever shadowed sky grew longer. He plodded up, eyes constantly seeking the higher ground. Even his strong corded legs gave under the grueling trek.

Once he reached a narrow ravine whose slopes were dotted by weird calcerous cones. He had to twist and squirm his big body between to reach the next rise. Panting he came to the top, resting his head between his arms on the soft rock ground. After a while he lifted his head. And there it was...

The Lake of Zanthu!

From the crest where he lay he could see the Lake like a fevered jewel below him. Red mist hung fiery over the water. Clustered on the far bank, semi-circular to the banks, were octagonal dwellings of wood with roofs of pastelled sinter taken from the mountainsides that rose in vari-colored terraces to form protecting bowl-sides.

With quick resurgence of strength Kohler slipped and slid down the crumbling wall of breccia. At the base, just at the edge of the Lake, he came to a slithering halt. For a moment he thought fatigue had unhinged him.

Right ahead was what appeared to be the dark back of a man. After the first amazed moment Kohler realized it was a tall mass of eroded rock, so curiously formed as to look

human. He circled the rock and gasped...

Face to face with his own likeness!

Freak volcanic action had carved an image out of obsidian. Zanthu, rock pinnacle, guardian of the Sacred Lake. Amid lesser goblin shapes it towered, with a face beaten into red-black lines by the elements.

Now Kohler understood Ahuila's obeisance. Here was nature's undisputable evidence to Kohler's godship.

Turning, he looked across the mists that now hid the small village. Elation made his heart pound. All the cards were running his way.

Carefully he knelt at the Lakeside feeling the water—warm as body temperature. He stripped the dusty clothes from himself, immersing his long length to wash away the grime. He would come into his godhood cleansed. When he emerged, shaking the droplets away, he looked more carefully at the statue.

The villagers had clothed the loins with a multitude of minute leaves of the salt plants that abounded in the lake shallows. The painstaking task of twining the small stems into a garment took Kohler's thick fingers many hours, yet he never lost patience.

At last it was done. He was clothed like his counterpart.

He circled the Lake, mists beading him with fine moisture. At the further end he became aware of thin high singing. As he drew near the outlines of a structure grew out of the mist. It was the largest of the dwellings he had glimpsed from the ridge top. Several window-like openings were covered by filmy material which blew out with the wind so that he could see a congregation of people on the inside. Theirs were the high sweet voices raised in a singing prayer. He could not catch the words but the oft repeated name of Zanthu made him realize he had come in the midst of their services.

Good! He could not have timed it better.

He peered into the circular room. There was a crude raised dais—apparently an altar—upon which was carved a crude figure roughly resembling the great statue of Zanthu.

Standing before the altar was a Venusian, his naked body chalked with many designs, and around his loins was the same covering of leaves from the salt plants as worn by his god.

Behind him, cross-legged upon the floor, were the villagers, golden people, with the same guilessness as Ahuila.

Oh, it would be easy to rule these.

The chalked Venusian—evidently the priest—dropped his arms, and motioned. For the first time Kohler realized

that a girl was standing in the shadows of the altar.

She moved with a lithe grace that made Kohler's eyes gleam. He noted the roundness of her hips under the long fibered skirts of the silken Tuva plant. Her pink tipped breasts were bare under the scarce covering of a lei of scarlet and blue mancha flowers.

Venusian women were strictly out of bounds to Earthmen. It was part of an ancient pact between the Earth interests and Venusians, and one so rigidly enforced that it had never been broken. Kohler had often, like many an Earthman, looked with longing upon the small golden women, but they were as elusive and as strictly confined as the laws guarding them were strong.

In her hands the little priestess bore a glittering tray on which savory offerings steamed. She lay the tray before the god-figure. Kohler's nostrils twitched. He realized how hungry he was and how long since he had eaten.

Long-strided he made for the entrance. He stood gigantic in the doorway, completely closing out the light. The priest, facing his congregation, was the first to see him. Under the chalk marks the color whitened, and his eyes bulged.

The villagers turned their heads. As one, they gasped:

"ZANTHU!"

He strode toward the altar and they scattered to either side of him. The smell of the offering was tantilizing.

"I—Zanthu—accept your offer!" His great voice filled the room. The villagers murmured and fell flat before him too awed to lift their eyes. The little priestess sank to her knees covering her face. Only the priest stood erect. His mouth worked for a minute before the words came out so low that only Kohler could hear:

"Who are you?"

Kohler's eyes narrowed. "ZANTHU," he answered.

The priest shook his head. "You do not talk like our clan."

Speech. The Earthman had not figured on this, that his accent was different, that he was unfamiliar with the dialect. He determined to bluff it out.

"Do you question your God?" he roared.

The congregation quivered as under a storm. But the priest stood his ground.

"I do not know who you are, but you are no God!"

Black rage swept over Kohler. Godhood within his reach—food to fill his empty belly and Venusian women his for the taking—and this fool of a priest challenged it.

"Die, false priest!" he cried. "Die by the magic of Zanthu!" He pulled the stilo-gun from its concealment in his loin cloth, and beamed the priest

cleanly through the head. Without a word the Venusian toppled dead before him.

There was a horror stricken gasp, then the congregation bolted for the door, pushing and milling. The little priestess bent to the dead priest. She touched him, then straightened, shuddering, and would have fled after the others, but the Earthman's great black-haired hand circled her wrist like steel.

"Not you," he said. "You are dedicated to your God." And he laughed softly.

Thus did Kohler take up residence in the shrine of Zanthu. Luala the priestess became his trembling slave, messenger between himself and the people. The shrine he declared inviolate, so that none dared approach. The body of the priest he himself cast into the Sacred Lake waters. Then he commanded his people to fashion a bell by which he might summon them to his worship.

Every day he asked: "When will the bell be ready, Luala?"

Her full red mouth quivered when she answered: "They are working fast. I will tell them to hurry more." And she would run on bare brown feet out the door.

In the open square around which the houses clustered the fires of the bell forges burnt. Usually the women gathered here to do their weaving and plaiting of garments, to tell their simple bits of gossip; the men to do their simple bartering of the crops of the individual fields or ornamental stones worked out of hardened breccia from the hills. But now they went out in two streams of workers—those who dug into the terraced slopes for copper and those who worked the fires making the burnished metal pliable.

Progress was slow. Kohler grew hard with impatience.

He ordered Luala: "Tell them if they don't get finished by tomorrow I will call fire out of the earth to burn them at their forges."

She paled. Ran to exhort her people to greater speed.

There was no sleep in Vahuhya that night. Even the women took turns at the fires. But with the deadline close they seemed far from the goal.

"Zanthu," Luala begged, "have mercy on them. They cannot finish in time. Please do not call the fires upon them."

He laughed into her pallid face.

He stayed at the doorway long hours, watching the never dying forge fires, and the sweat streaked groups working in terror to avert his wrath. With dawn the little priestess grew babbling in her fear for her people.

"Zanthu! Kind, gracious, lovely God, give them more time. Visit me with your anger, but do not burn the village."

For a while he enjoyed her fear. After a while the endless pleas began to grate against his ears. He kicked at her savagely. She shrank back for the moment, was silent for the moment, then crept near, begging again.

"SHUT UP!" he shouted, and caught her a swift cuff over the mouth. She coughed blood from a bitten tongue. Her great golden eyes raised again in appeal. "Mercy!" It was like a croak.

In a fury he lifted her by the shoulders, slapped with his open hand, one cheek, the other, back and forth, back and forth, and her head rocked under the blows till her body sagged, and her eyes closed. But the rage was upon him. He battered her, head and body, open fist and closed, until his hands were red with her blood.

After a while he stopped, looked at the limp thing he held—the blackened tongue, the toothless mouth, the swollen face. There was breath in her yet, but all beauty was gone. The sight disgusted him. He pulled out his stilogun, placed it at her temple and fired.

No one saw him leave the shrine. No one saw him fling the dead priestess into the sacred red lake. But when he returned he saw the villagers marching toward him, chanting his name, merry children, their task complete—the bell was finished.

He raised his hands, palms out. They stopped, waiting uneasily. He let them wait, deliberately. In the stillness no one moved. Then he spoke, his voice carrying over them, rebounding from the hillsides:

"Luala, your priestess has given herself to the spirit of the bell so that you might finish in time. For that she will live forever, and her voice will speak to you in the toll of the bell. But now—" his eyes swept from woman to woman, "I will choose a new priestess. Send to me your maidens that I might give honor to one."

Deliberately he moved back into the doorway of the shrine, to wait at the altar for the flower of their women.

His days passed idyllically. Seritah, the new priestess, was more beautiful than Luala, even younger.

The villagers had fashioned for him a couch of beaten iridescent metal they had mined from the open pitted slopes. They had cushioned it with soft baya leaves draped over with yardage of filmy material. They brought him offerings of food and brewed him the deliciously potent drink from the Tuva fruits. They made him ornaments of firestone and micalite, the two most precious stones of Venus. And, however, they clothed him, he ordered that they likewise ornament the obsidian statue.

For a while he was content to lie on his couch letting Seritah feed to him the sacrificial foods, or cleanse his body with the warm waters from his sacred Lake. He amused himself by speaking to her in his native Earth tongue, a language she did not understand, and therefore took to be divine. He recounted the adventures he had had, the places he had been. When he recalled some particular deed he would roar with sudden laughter that sent her shrinking back in terror.

"This being a god isn't so bad," he said one day to her uncomprehending ears. "But back on Earth the gods had a little more excitement than you ever work up here. Not just singing and bowing to the floor. Why, they had special festivals, dancing and singing, big bonfires. Lots of hooting and hollering. Gave it a little color."

He reached out, pulled the blue mancha flowers out of her hair, so that it came cascading down to her bare shoulders. He ran his fingers through the silken pile, twining and tugging it as he talked:

"Why, I remember reading in history about this group of Mayans. Made sacrifices to the sun-god. Had living victims. And cut out their hearts."

His own words rang in his ears. Kohler grew silent. His fingers gave a convulsive clench that pulled a great fistful of the golden hair. Seritah gave a scream of pain. But Kohler did not hear. His eyes were brooding on the altar and the sacred water that bathed the little replica of Zanthu. Seritah continued to whimper till it penetrated his concentration. He turned burning eyes to her. Her head was at an angle from the tautness of his pull. He did not release his cruel grip. Instead he pulled tighter so that her head came back, all the way, and he could stare into her pain-filled eyes.

"Know what?" he etched the words. "I'm going to put some life into this godhood. Gonna have a festival. Gonna do it up right like I read in books." He released her with a suddenness that sent her reeling. "We're gonna have hootin' and hollerin', dancin' and drinkin'. And know what else? I'm gonna pick me a bevy of priestesses, and really set up a heaven."

He decreed the time of the festival at a not too distant day—the time of the harvest of the Tuva fruits.

Tuva, the main crop of Vahuhya, grew juicy and golden, large as a man's head. From the fresh fruits the Tuva drink was made. The pit contained a sweet nut that was used as a confection. The silken fibers that grew around the fruit were carefully combed and spun into material. Tuva harvest was a

time of rejoicing. What more fitting period to claim as sacred to a god.

He commanded the women to deck themselves in flower garments, and the men to build an altar of stone beside his statue. The best fruits of the harvest were to be tribute to him. He himself fashioned the drums of wood and tanned hide of the parchee. And he taught some of the young men to beat a savage tattoo that would stir the blood.

He coached Seritah on how to lead the procession that was to wend its way from the village to the newly erected altar. He himself would officiate as his own high priest.

The Day dawned with the usual pall of the planet's days. Ever present clouds hung lower over the surrounding peaks, and the red mists of the lake seemed, if anything, angrier. For hours the villagers carried their plaited baskets of perfect Tuvas to the altar. The perfume of the pink tinted fruits made the air rich, like wine.

To each donor of fruit Kohler gave a large quaff of the Tuva drink. It amazed him that it brought only a flush to their skins but did not fill them with headiness as he himself experienced after a drought.

At a signal the women came forward, a flowerlike procession in their mancha costumes. They came singing, as Kohler had commanded, and Seritah led them to the foot of the altar.

Slowly the drums began to beat, adding a throbbing note to the singing. For a moment the women's voices faltered. Kohler frowned. Seritah made a convulsive movement and the singing went on, but it held a troubled note as though the women hesitated.

What was the matter with them anyway! Kohler lifted his hands and began a meaningless chant which was signal for the men to come dancing out of the village to surround the women. He meant this to be a love orgy as he remembered was given to pagan Earth gods. But when the men finally did get the signal they came with a bewildered shuffling that caused the women to stop singing altogether. Glaring down from his altar of stone Kohler chanted his gibberish in a more thunderous voice.

That only caused his congregation to mill around fearfully, completely at a loss as to how to obey him. Even the drummers he had so carefully taught faltered, adding uncertain tempo to what he had meant to be compulsive. With a snort of disgust he came down from the high place.

He would show them himself!

He came to the foremost of the young men. "DANCE!" he shouted.

The youth made a few fum-

bling motions of obedience. This was not inspirational! Kohler caught his arm, flinging him back and forth violently. "DANCE HARD!"

Instead the boy, as soon as he was released, fell at Kohler's feet. Insensed, the big man lashed out with a suddenness that caught the youth flush, smashing his jaw.

The crowd moaned. But Kohler ignored the mutilated youth. He turned to the next man in line, pointing imperiously to the woman beside him. "Take her!"

The man only stared.

In a fury the Earthman reached out, pulled the flowered garment from the woman. "All of you!" he roared at the men, "That's what *you* must do!"

They shrank from him, every eye mirroring disbelief. He seized another woman, tore off her garments, then another. Suddenly the ranks of women broke. They scattered, high voiced, crying. He was left with the mancha blossoms in his hands. Savagely he flung them down, seized the man nearest to him, and lifting him by hips and neck, brought him down like a Tuva stalk, over his knees, breaking his back.

He reached. But there was no one in his reach. As far as he could see his congregation was fleeing. Roaring, he pursued, but their small bodies were lithe, their feet swift as geyser. In hardly a moment they were gone, up over the terraced slopes, among the boulders of geyserite, beyond the peak rim.

Kohler shouted angrily. Ran. Wherever he saw a movement he made for it, killing lust upon him. But it was only the nodding of the mancha flowers, the rustle of the salt plants. He was a god without worshippers—alone with an altar of stone and a statue of obsidian.

Leave him, would they! He would show them!

He pounded along the silent, red-misted Lake. Back to the village—an avenging god. From house to house he went, each one open and desolate. And when he emerged each house carried a hungry hot core of flame that ate at the materials, licked at the walls, blackened the floors. He came to the last house at the edge of the village. And then he looked back. Fire was dancing a sacrificial rite to the tune of his violent heart.

Disobey him, would they!

Let them come sneaking back in the night. Everything they had would be gone, consumed in the bonfire of Zanthu's festal day.

He stood at the edge of the lake, laughed with the irony of his joke. Over the roar of the flames, and his own mad laughter he did not hear them approach. They shouted over and over again, till he heard.

"DON'T MOVE, KOHLER!"

Laughter froze on his lips. Slowly he turned.

Coming to him with drawn stilo-guns were a dozen uniformed men. The Earth Police!

"No!" he screamed. "You can't be here! You're looking for me in the jungles!" He closed his eyes to shut them out.

Their leader's tone was wry. "Not the jungles—thanks to your message."

Kohler's eyes flew open. His lips framed the question! "Message?"

The leader held up something. In the red fire glow at his back Kohler saw the skull with the stilo-hole bored in.

"This came out in our reservoir, fed from the mountain springs. We received two of them. One's a woman's. Venusians don't own stilo-guns. But we might have searched the whole mountain without success if you hadn't sent up your fire-signal." He pointed to the smoking, burning red village.

Kohler's face writhed. If he had not been such a big man he might have cried.

Suddenly he turned to make a break. But before he moved a dozen paces their weapons spoke. The impact of the bullets turned his giant body like a twister. Momentum carried him back and back to the very edge of his sacred lake.

The last human words he heard were: "We'll pick up your bones in the reservoir at Earth camp, Kohler!" Then he toppled into the waiting water. The red mists swirled madly, then closed—quiescent—as though nothing had passed through, nothing at all...

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versus

by . . . *EDWARD D. HOCH*

He had built an empire throughout the universe by being against people, against Martian, Earthman and Roxman. Now it was over.

MR. Albert Zadig, president of the Interplanetary Betterment Association, finished reading the morning Telanews and pressed a button on his wide gleaming desk.

"I'm ready for the mail, Miss Ordo."

"Very well, Mr. Zadig... Ah, Mr. Heney is out here, waiting to see you."

"Send him in."

What could Heney want at nine o'clock in the morning? Al Zadig lit a cigarette and glanced through some papers on his desk. Presently the door was opened by Miss Ordo, closely followed by Heney.

"Boss, I gotta see you right away."

Al Zadig looked up from the papers. "What's up, Heney?"

Miss Ordo deposited a small stack of letters on the desk and then withdrew.

"Boss," Heney was saying, "something awful's happened."

"What?"

"The Space Patrol knocked off three of our ships last night."

Al Zadig's hand clenched

The Space Patrol had struck and Al Zadig's world was beginning to totter. Turn to any half-dozen magazines and you'll probably find Edward D. Hoch—listed among the authors. Mr. Hoch who lives in Rochester, N. Y., is active with the Mystery Writers of America.

into a fist. "What happened?"

"I don't know. It must have been planned in advance. They moved in on all three ships exactly at midnight Rox time. They arrested seventy of our men. They got Morgo and Franco, too."

"Damn!" Al Zadig picked up the tela-phone. "Get me the General of Police at Rox."

He watched the screen before him until presently a familiar face appeared. "General, this is Al Zadig of the I.B.A."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Zadig."

"What the hell's the idea of raiding three of my ships last night?"

"Mr. Zadig, your ships were carrying on illegal gambling activities. You have been warned before about these matters."

"What the hell are you trying to pull, anyway?"

"Mr. Zadig, I would advise you to seek another planet for your....business."

Al Zadig flipped off the switch and dropped the phone into its cradle.

Heney was worried. "What does it mean, boss?"

"I don't know, Heney. I've been paying the General five percent for the last two years, and now he double-crosses me!"

"What do we do now, boss?"

"Get out here and let me think."

He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. Three ships gone. Seventy men. But it wasn't the ships or men that worried him. It was the fact that the General of Police was apparently no longer on his payroll.

He opened his eyes and glanced at the stack of mail. Reports from agents on three planets, plans for a new space ship that could hold a thousand people and had a complete night club on board, in addition to three rooms for gambling.... A letter from a girl he'd known years before, back home. She wanted a job for her husband.... And then there were the usual threatening letters, from people who'd lost money on his ships, or who'd won money and then been robbed on the way back to their planet.... A letter from a politician who wanted his support....

And another letter, in a plain envelope, from a man named Mr. Snow. "I will visit you at ten o'clock on the morning you read this," was all it said. Another letter from some nut! Al Zadig tossed it back on the desk.

He walked over and watched the two teletype machines by the window. The odds on today's races were coming in. He tore off a sheet of the figures and

walked back to the tela-phone.

"Miss Ordo, get me the space track."

Presently, the screen showed him a view of the space track office, where the finest rocket racers in the universe were gathered for the yearly meet. But there was no one to answer the call. The room was empty.

"Where in hell is Vengo? Where....?"

Suddenly, the teletype machines stopped their clatter and were silent. He ran over to them. They had stopped in the middle of listing the daily odds.

He shook them and kicked them, but it did no good. He went back to the tela-screen and found it blank.

"Miss Ordo! Miss Ordo!"

"Yes, Mr. Zadig."

"Where is everyone? Get me Cazan at Rox."

"Yes, Mr. Zadig."

Cazan's wide face appeared on the screen.

"Cazan, this is Zadig. What in hell's the matter? There's no one at the space track, and the teletypes have stopped."

"I was just going to call you, boss. The Space Patrol's closing down everything. They knocked off the whole setup this morning."

"They can't do that! Don't they know they can't do that? I've been paying the politicians and the police for years. What's the matter with them all of a sudden?"

"I don't know, boss. It started last night."

Al Zadig flipped off the switch and sat in silence.

He cursed the General of Police and all the rest of them.

Presently one of the blue lights on his desk panel began to flash.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Zadig, there's a man here to see you. He says his name is Mr. Snow."

Snow?

"Snow?"

Snow! The name on the letter! He glanced at the clock. It was two minutes to ten.

"Send him in, Miss Ordo."

The door opened slowly, and a middle-aged man with white hair came in. He looked like money to Al Zadig. He looked like a banker or a lawyer.

"You Mr. Snow?"

"That is correct, Mr. Zadig."

"I got your note. What do you want?"

"I felt obliged to call upon you this morning to explain things."

Al Zadig was getting impatient.

"Who in hell are you, anyway?"

"My name is Snow. I.... own various enterprises on the planet Mars and also on the planet Earth."

"So what are you doing here?"

"On our way back to the planet Mars in the space taxi,

we were attacked by another ship. They took the money, and....during the attack, my wife was killed...."

"Sorry to hear that."

"You should be, Mr Zadig, you should be."

Al Zadig glanced about the big desk, hoping for an interruption from one of the colored lights. But none came. Finally, he pulled open a drawer and took out a pile of bills.

"Here. Here's ten thousand Rox-dollars. That should take care of everything."

"I'm afraid it doesn't, though, Mr. Zadig."

"Well, how much—"

"I already have what I want, Mr. Zadig...."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Mr. Snow gestured toward the silent teletype machines. "Your empire has crumbled, Mr. Zadig. By nightfall all of your gambling ships will be in the hands of the Space Patrol. Your racing activities are already finished and your friends are being arrested at this very moment."

"You're crazy!" Al Zadig stabbed wildly at the buttons on his desk. "You're crazy!" But no answer came to his rings....

"Mr. Zadig, you have built an empire throughout the universe by being against people. You have been against law and justice and the common man. You have been against the rich and the poor, the Martian and the Earthman and the Roxman. And you rose to power, because there are enough people in this universe who have a price—who value their own security above the common good. You bought everyone you needed for the success of your activities—the General of Police, the public officials of Rox and the neighboring planets, everyone who might interfere with you."

"That's right," Al Zadig shouted, "and you can't destroy the work of years in a single day."

Mr. Snow smiled. "Oh, but I can. Because you see, I am for the people. I am for everything you are against. In my own way, I suppose I have built an empire comparable to yours. Only mine is an empire of good, of schools and hospitals and churches."

"What...?"

"I am, perhaps, the richest man in the universe, and after my wife's death I had only one goal to devote my work toward....I have devoted my life to your destruction...."

"You're crazy."

"No, I am quite sane. It took a long time to discover your identity, and even longer to study your organization. It took me a year to do it, but now you're finished."

"What did you do? What did you do to the General and the rest? Why have they turned against me?"

Mr. Snow smiled, and his

thoughts seemed to be far away. Far away... Somewhere where a woman waited...

"I simply paid them more money than you did...."

"More money...."

And Al Zadig's hand dropped and came up holding a machine-pistol.

Mr. Snow turned and started for the door. "Goodbye, Mr. Zadig...."

"Wait a minute, Snow. I'm got something for you...." And Al Zadig aimed the machine-pistol at the man's back.

Mr. Snow paused at the door and turned for a second.

"No, Mr. Zadig. I do hate to disappoint you, but I also paid Miss Ordo to remove the cartridges from your weapon..."

And then he was gone.

Al Zadig watched the door slid shut and he felt the machine-pistol slip from his fingers and then he turned and walked over to the silent machines and stood for a long time gazing sightlessly at them....

snakes alive

by...HENRY D. BILLINGS

Dan froze in horror at the slithering sight. A carton had crashed open, and six or seven cobras were let loose.

DAN Ellerman watched the sweep hand of the time-scope rush around the dial toward the end of one long, lonely hour and the beginning of another.

The stubborn set of his jaw belied the langorous lounging of his lean frame in the control chair of the express freightercruiser.

He watched with mounting irritation the winking of a crimson light on the radio panel.

"Wink away, you red devil," growled Dan, in the half mutter of men who have no one else to talk to in space ships. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Nothing the space director would want to hear. Blink on, blast you. I could be back home in Texas, blasting off to the Dancearama with that redhead at Spaceporter's House.

"But here I am, half way between space station one and the Moon. Alone. Alone with this rattle-transistored radio and these confounded cobras."

Dan's muttering was interrupted by the radio.

"Freighter Five C, this is

One summer day, a few years ago, nearly a dozen cobras escaped while being delivered to a Missouri animal dealer. Henry D. Billings, then a police reporter on the Springfield Leader and Press, covered the story. Billings, a commercial pilot, has long been interested in space travel.

space station one. Over. Space station one to Freighter Five Cobra. Do you read? Over."

Leisurely, Dan dialed his seat to the radio position. Lazily, he shopped around for the mike button. Deliberately, he drawled:

"Space station one, this is Freighter Five (ugh) Cobra. Why the f r a n t i c antic, friend? Over."

"You're 15 seconds late with position report, Freighter Five Cobra. Timescope malfunction?"

"Thanks for the excuse, but negative. Just dimension dreaming. Position, coordinates X-24, Y-3. Everything normal. Over."

"How's your cargo? Over."

"Snakes alive, I suppose. I'm not too chummy with cobras. Over."

"Roger, Five Cobra. Radar verifies position. Imperative you stay on course. Moon messages urgent need for Cobra venom. Space station one, out."

"Roger, Five Cobra, out."

Deftly, Dan snapped off the mike button with his foot, giving the radio panel an unfriendly kick in the process.

Three-quarters of a century ago, Dan's ancestors cursed short wave intrusion into their railroading, never admitting its convenience.

Dan, whose blunt independence f o r t u n a t e l y was matched by an uncanny skill at astrogation, considered radio as just another company spy in cahoots with radar and telescanners.

His agile astrogating, surpassed only by clever syncopating with the cute redhead, kept him on the payroll of Galaxy Spaceways.

The blunt independence marooned him on the riskiest freight runs and off passenger liners with their fair and frightened passengers and fancy uniforms.

Another infernal red light. It was the warning signal on the forward telescanner. Dan tuned the view plate to maximum brightness and magnification.

The image e r a s e d his bored self pity. An asteroid, almost too big to be caught by magnification, was barrelling his way on collision course.

Dan felt the steering rockets go into action as radar picked up the obstacle's frightening image and flashed a warning to the electronic steering control.

With characteristic distrust of things automatic, Dan automatically fired two emergency steering rockets to be sure of clearing the space ship killer.

He breathed again only when he saw the bulk sweep by the port and stern scanning screens.

Almost immediately, the radio's evil eye began blinking again.

"Freighter Five Cobra, this is space station one. What was that blip on our radar? Why did you change course abruptly? Over."

Dan, busy rearranging gear which slid all over the ship from the acceleration, jabbed the mike button angrily.

"Space station one, this is Freighter Five Cobra. Took evasive action from large asteroid. Returning to course zero five zero. Over."

"Roger, Freighter Five Cobra. We read your deviation as 15 degrees. Must have been a pretty big asteroid. Over."

"Affirmative. Used two emergency rockets in addition to automatic steering. Over."

"That wasn't necessary, Five Cobra. That electronic steering has better judgment than you have. Repeat, imperative you stay on course. Moon messages..."

"I know, I know...'urgent need for cobra venom.' Roger, Freighter Five Cobra back on course. Out."

"Space station one, out."

Still angry, Dan slammed a chart case back in place. Then, a supersonic silence settled again in the ship. The faint humming and clicking of the instruments, perhaps noticeable to a visitor, were so familiar to Dan they were part of the silence.

Gradually, the silence seemed to assume substance —an evil shape seen in Dan's imagination.

The pilot trembled suddenly, fighting a feeling he was being watched.

At the fueling station, mechanics had kidded him about his cargo.

"You'll be looking behind you all the way," one had promised. "You'll probably fly this thing right into the moon. Or overshoot and orbit around Venus."

Now, with the moon still in the distance, Dan wanted to look around.

"It's silly," he muttered. "I checked those cobra cartons myself. It would take a terrific jolt to knock them open."

A jolt! The asteroid evasive action! Violent acceleration! Gear gadding all over the ship! Dan looked around.

He froze in horror at a slithering sight. A carton had crashed open against a bulkhead and six or seven snakes were sliding over one another in a corner of the cabin.

Dan closed his eyes. He opened them slowly. The nightmare remained. As large as life—and death.

Dan was no naturalist. But he knew cobra venom could kill faster than a long blast-off count.

The snakes, annoyed at being awakened so roughly, were spreading their hoods. Ugly things which give them

an appearance as evil as their reputation.

Dan, moving carefully, caressed the mike button.

"Space station one, this is Freighter Five Cobra. Mayday, Mayday. I repeat, Mayday. Asteroid evasion broke one cargo crate. Snakes loose in cabin. Mayday, Mayday."

"Freighter Five Cobra, this is space station one. Roger on your distress call. Radar has you at coordinates X-55, Y-17. Correct? Over."

"Hell, I don't know...Affirmative, that's about right, I guess. How about some help? Over."

"There's a herpetologist on the station. We're sending for him. How many snakes are at liberty? Over."

"Hold on, I'll count 'em... Hell, I don't know how many. It looks like several thousand. Guess it's closer to six or seven. Over."

"Have they spotted you? Over."

"Hold on, I'll ask...Hell, I don't know. They're falling all over each other, exploring one corner. Is there cobra anti-venom aboard? Over."

"Stand by, we're checking that...Roger, Stores and Provisions has serum listed for your flight. Stored in stern first aid kit. Over."

"Oh, Roger, tell S. and P. thanks heaps. And ask them if the cobras will lie still and let me step over them to reach the serum. Over."

"Freighter Five Cobra, Dr. Johannson reports cobras are shy snakes, but aggressive in close confines. Venom is injected with chewing motion on flat surface such as the hand and foot. Over."

"Laugh this one off. Dr. Johannson reports venom can cause death within three to five minutes, depending on where you're bitten...How about de-gravitating the ship? Over."

"Negative. Snakes between me and de-gravitation controls. Besides, don't know whether I'd rather have these guys crawling or drifting. Over."

"Roger. What about weapons? Over."

"No sidearms. All weapons in survival kit, also in stern, also on far side of snakes...Listen, these things are sliding my way. They've either seen me or they're tired of their crowded corner. Come up with something fast, for God's sake. So help me, before I let one of these devils chew on me, I'll blow up the ship. Over."

"Appreciate your position. Hold out as long as you can. We're setting up an experiment..."

"I'm playing hide and seek with hooded killers, with no place to hide, and you experiment? Over."

"We're going to try to charm your cobras into docility until you make your

landing. The ancient Indian fakirs used weird music and swaying movement. We're going to try ultrasonic vibrations and television test patterns. Over."

"That's the craziest thing you g a d g e t guys ever dreamed up. But hurry and try it..."

Dan's voice sank to a terse, terrified whisper.

"...One... of... these... t h i n g s...is...creeping... across..my.. foot..."

"Hold on, Dan. Hold on. Don't scream. Don't even breathe. Over."

"He's over, too. Whew! But another one's coming. Hurry it up. Over."

"Roger, dim your cabin l i g h t s. Tune your cabin speaker and TV screens to max. volume and brightness. And pray. Over."

Wishing it were over, Dan carefully followed instructions. Warily, he watched his silent passengers. They were as deliberate as death.

A second snake sliding toward Dan reared suddenly and puffed up its hood. Dan shivered as he stared into lidless eyes, as dark and cold as outer space.

Dan heard nothing in his earphones, but a pulsating pull on his nerve ends told him the ultrasonic vibrations had begun. Dan tore his eyes from the merciless stare of the serpent. He saw the TV screens sway with an undulating pattern of wavy lines.

Dan thought the picture looked nothing like swaying of snake charmers he had seen portrayed in ancient films. Maybe, Dan told himself, the s n a k e s haven't caught that movie.

The snake rearing in front of Dan turned toward the nearest screen. The killer hesitated. Then it began swaying slowly, in perfect tempo with the wave pattern.

As Dan watched, the other passengers reared and joined in the weird dance.

"Freighter Five Cobra from station one, are you all right, Dan? Over."

"Roger, space station one," whispered Dan. I think your crazy stunt is working. If you were a female-type redhead, I could kiss you. As it is, I'll buy you the biggest Cosmic Cocktail in the galaxy. Over."

"Roger Five Cobra. Radar shows you nearing moon orbit. Think you can get it down? Shall we land you automatically? Over."

"Negative, thanks. If you guys can charm a covey of cobras by remote control, the least I can do is land your ship. Over."

"Roger, Five Cobra. Director messages a 'well done.' Says to advise Ellerman to re-submit passenger transfer application. Over."

"Roger, and ain't radio wonderful? My past opinions about you guys are over, and out."

ROCK AND ROLL ON PLUTO

Some of the older people got upset the other day. They thought something was happening up on Mount Karakorum. Some even thought the volcano was going to erupt, and all because "great clouds of smoke" were reported over the mountain.

It was all so silly of course, because this is what really *did* happen.

We've strayed a good deal from the old ways out here on Pluto. They banned dancing the second year the colony was here—some character convinced the Board of Governors that it interfered with a "fuller dedication to the high aims and purposes" of the settlers. They banned popular music soon afterwards. Somebody had discovered that the energy spent in playing could be c h a n n e l e d into "more constructive" pursuits.

Bless them. But they could not keep the young ones down of course.

My father told me once how he and Hank's father, Harry Davis' father and some of the others, used to go up on top of the mountain and play the forbidden instruments, loud and clear, stomping their feet in time to the music and shouting their defiance to the winds. When they got older, they sort of drifted away of course, but the idea lived on.

A bunch of us, both boys and girls, had gone up there that night. George had brought his trumpet—a real Museum piece—and Hank had taken his father's sax with him, a great big golden thing that must have worked overtime in great-grandfather's day but had laid for years, gathering dust, up in the Harris attic, until we'd discovered it.

Yes, as I said, we were up there that night. And dancing. We were stomping and we were stamping and perhaps the music was getting a little hot at times.

Every now and then we'd play some of the old tunes that had survived, from generation to generation. There'd be slow, stately melodies for when the musicians would get tired, and then we'd swing back into the good old "hot" rhythms.

I remember noticing the snow was flying at one point —but we didn't care.

We were laughing and we were rocking....

STEPHEN BOND

my martian cousin

by . . . *MARK REINSBERG*

Gerda was an attractive girl, with blond almost flaxen hair, and that soft white complexion you get on Mars.

MIKE was mad. We were waiting at the interplanetary customs house, three hours after the Mars ship landed, and cousin Gerda still had not appeared.

"Ridiculous waste of time," he snorted. "Let's go home. Leave word for her to take a taxi."

Native-born Venusians are frightfully time-conscious, but I couldn't blame my husband. I was highly irritated myself.

"I'd like to, Mike. I'd like to just walk out on her. But after all, she's a relative and she's traveled seventy million miles to see us. In wartime."

Mike stood up, glaring at the liner parked outside the city dome. The space fish was practically deserted now. The last passenger, the last crew member, had long ago disembarked. Only a few space-suited maintenance men clambered over the hull on scaling ladders.

"I'm leaving," he said abruptly. "To hell with your relatives! I don't care if she came all the way from Aldebaran. I'm leaving."

I didn't argue; you don't

Chicago's own Mark Reinsberg, associated with Shasta Publishers, Science Fiction house, returns with this story of the annoying Martian cousin who invited herself to visit relatives on Venus. Why? Gerda, while undeniably attractive, was obviously a patriotic citizen of Mars!

with Venusians. I just remained seated, pretending to watch the rolling, pewter-colored landscape of Venus. In a minute he came back and sat down heavily.

"Stupid, stubborn woman!" he exclaimed. "Who ever heard of anyone bringing a greg to this planet?"

"She's very fond of it, Mike. It's her pet. You know how fond of those animals Martians are."

"We don't want 'em here," Mike said v e h e m e n t l y. "They're germ carriers. Bugs from Mars. First thing you know we'll have a plague."

"Oh come on! I'm sure they're doing a good job of decontamination."

Mike refused to be rational. "But that's what's so inconsiderate about the woman. She's only going to be here three days. Why didn't she agree to put the animal in quarantine? Then we wouldn't have had to wait around here all this time—like a couple of..."

I interrupted, laying a hand on his wrist. He was a handsome man; I still thought so after nine years of marriage. Thick, wavy black hair. Rugged masculine features. Olive complexion. Wide b r o w n eyes. There was something especially appealing about him when he was vexed, nettled, angry. Then his eyes flashed and his short, m u s c u l a r physique rippled with energy.

"Honey," I said, "I'll phone her again and see how much longer she thinks it will—"

But I could see that he was staring beyond me, and I turned and saw Gerda emerging from the customs office. The greg was perched on her shoulder, and she was petting it consolingly, and her face had an expression of hard-fought triumph.

"Gerda, darling!"

"Kathy, dear Kathy!"

We ran to each other and embraced. The greg made an "eepy" s o u n d and scooted down her back.

Gerda had the musty smell of decontamination. I didn't want to be catty about a cousin I hadn't seen in twelve years, but I couldn't help noticing one thing the years hadn't changed. She always was the kind of person who offered a kiss and then at the last instant turned her cheek so that you ended up kissing her.

Mike was standing nearby appraising Gerda, and from his expression I deduced he found her the type it was easy to forgive a lot.

"Gerda, I'd like you to meet my husband, Mike. Mike, this is my Martian cousin."

"Welcome to Venus, Gerda. Awfully sorry you had to go through all that rigamarole."

One minute ago he was ready to toss her out of the airlock into deep space, and now he was giving her the big personality smile. The dog

couldn't take his eyes off her.

Well, Gerda was an awfully attractive girl. You had to admit that. She was taller than I was, with blond, almost flaxen, hair, emerald eyes, and that very soft white complexion you get in the weak sunlight of Mars. My figure may have matched hers once upon a time, before the children maybe, but on Earth where I was born, mamma would have never allowed me to wear such tightly c o n t o u r e d clothes. Even on the bathing beach.

"The swine!" spat Gerda. "Imagine making such a fuss about my little Phobos." She patted the greg, which had again perched on her shoulder and was making a faint buzzing sound.

"Well you see, we have to be so extremely careful in a sealed city like ours," Mike said apologetically. "You know, micro-organisms breed like mad in this atmosphere, and we—"

"Nonsense!" said Gerda. "You don't think Phobos is carrying any micro-organisms. Why, on Mars we have the most advanced, hygienic civilization in the solar system!"

It tickled me to see Mike trip up on his own diplomacy.

"I'm sure you have," he backwatered. "It's just that—"

"You know what the trouble here is," said Gerda, "it's your terrible climate."

Mike l o o k e d surprised. (Oxy-synthesis is his field.) "What's wrong with it?" he asked.

"Too hot. Too humid. When it first hit me, when I got off the ship, I nearly fainted."

"I'm surprised to hear that. According to our research, sixty-eight over ten is best for human efficiency."

"Oh, you're quite wrong there. On Mars we keep it much cooler, much drier, and our e f f i c i e n c y is unsurpassed." Gerda sniffed the air and shook her head conclusively. "No, you have an unhealthy climate here."

I could see that Mike was going to argue the point, so I headed him off.

"Gerda, what a lovely outfit you're wearing. How wonderful to see you! Shall we see about your baggage?"

We got into our tiny Vac, after Gerda had walked a gauntlet of incredulous male stares in the local terminal, and rose into the air. I don't think Gerda realized how privileged she was to view our city in this manner. (Mike has one of the six air permits in Venus Secundus.) We climbed almost vertically until we were almost touching the top of the great transparent dome.

I've traveled, as most people have, through the vastness of interplanetary space, but something about flying up in our little Vac made the height exciting, dizzying.

Outside, in every direction

hung the perpetual clouds of Venus, a leaden gray ceiling that shuts out both sun and stars as the planet slowly, slowly turns through a day and a night that are each 192 hours long. I could observe the first warning, shadowless signs of sunset. For an instant I hungered for the clear, starry nights of Earth.

I suppressed the thought in a quick reflex.

"Gerda, look down. Isn't it beautiful?"

I pointed at the pattern of streets—regular, planned concentric circles; at the green kidney-shaped parks and swimming pools; at the one-story roofless houses that they used to tell so many jokes about on the mother planet.

Gerda grunted. "It's very small."

Mike spoke. There was a touch of pride in his voice. His father had been one of the original pioneers. Mike had been born on Venus—one of the very few.

"No," he said, "Venusec isn't a large community. We have about seventy-five thousand people, most of them children and young married couples. Like ourselves." He pointed. "You see that small hemisphere over there? Well, that's the auditorium now, but thirty years ago it was the original settlement. In thirty years more, who knows whether a dome twice this size will be large enough."

"Lowell, Mars, where I live, has twenty-two million inhabitants," said Gerda.

Mike was annoyed. "Well, of course, size isn't everything."

"We have quality as well," said Gerda. "Mars has the best. Of everything," she added with a nod. The greg hopped to her other shoulder.

Mike fumed. "Well, damn it, if you feel that way, why did you even bother with Venus? And keep that lousy animal away from me, will you please!"

"Mike!" I shouted.

Gerda turned to me stonily. "Your husband is very rude."

"Don't take it too seriously." I waved deprecatingly. "He's just very sensitive about the question of Venus' future. You know, there were all sorts of plans for development and expansion. And then the war started, and we were thrown pretty much on our own resources. You understand."

"Ah, the war, we must have a talk about the war."

"There below is our house," I said gratefully.

We started to descend.

Our place is really one of the nicest in Venusec, a six-room layout in free form, intermingled with dwarf variety fruit trees. I brought them over myself—packed the seedlings right in with my trousseau. It doesn't have much of a lot, of course, but we do have our own private patio, and there Mike had set up an

inflatable wading pool for the kids. We could see them splashing about merrily as we landed.

I'm not sure whether it was jealously or hate or just failure of comprehension that I saw in Gerda's eyes.

"Surely you are not permitted to waste water like that?" she muttered. "On Mars that would be a criminal offense."

Things went a little better after supper. I think I can give some of the credit to my own cooking; I fished back into my childhood memory and came up with one or two foods which Gerda liked then, and she still did. And you can say what you will about 'hydroponics is hydroponics'. Venus *has* a magnificent topsoil. Abundant in all the trace elements. Of course the soil is lifless and inert outside our tent, but inside—. Two years ago we women ganged up on the city administration and got them to assign us a garden plot. You should see, and taste, the results.

Unaccountably, Gerda made a hit with the children.

She was the first Martian they had ever met. Alice is eight and Donnie is five, and they both peppered her with the simple questions that are hardest to answer. Like, *Where is Mars?*

"Well," began Gerda, "Mars is the fourth planet."

Fourth? Fourth biggest? The fourth one that God made?

"No, honey, the fourth one from the sun?"

The sun? What's that?

"That's the source of light and heat at the center of the solar system."

What's it look like?

"Well, it's a star, one of the millions of stars in our universe. Only we're real close to it, so it's very large."

A star?

"Haven't you ever seen a star? No, I guess not."

I **broke** in laughingly. "Neither have I, for about nine years."

Gerda shook her head seriously. "This is no place to rear children. Where they can't look up and see the stars. Where they can't even see the sun rise."

She looked inquiringly at Mike.

Mike sat back in the conservative (that is to say, overstuffed comfortable) chair. The conversation with the children had disturbed him, for in truth his own conception of the universe had been the same as theirs until his college years on Earth, where we met.

"Some day," he said quietly, reflectively, "we'll tear away the clouds."

Alice piped up: "Mommy, how can you and Aunt Gerda be cousins if you live on different planets?"

"Yes," said Mike, "just how are you two related?" His

eyes twinkled and he was of course asking another question altogether.

"Originally," I said to Alice, "all people lived on one planet, the planet Earth. And then some people got in space ships and went to live on Mars and Venus. And it happened that my mother, who lived on Earth, had a brother. And he went to live on Mars, and that's where Aunt Gerda was born."

"I think you ought to tell children the scientific truth," said Gerda. "Originally, all people lived on mars. And some of the Martians went to live on Earth, where they founded a colony. And the people who lived on Mars died out, but they left the ruins of a great civilization behind them as proof of their genius. But in the meantime, the colonists on Earth forgot where they had come from."

"Oh Gerda, that's all in your imagination."

"Oh no it's not. We have excavated great cities. We have found many, many inscriptions. Our archeologists have proved it."

This was the kind of propaganda Mars had been putting out since the start of its war with Earth. I couldn't let it go unchallenged.

"Don't you think it's strange that no responsible archeologist from Earth ever came across this evidence, in the hundred or more years of colonial rule? And now, just in the last two years your own people seem to be finding ruined cities right and left."

"All it shows," said Gerda, "is how blind and inefficient the Earth administrators were, and how much Martians can accomplish by themselves when free of colonial rule."

"Gerda," I said wearily, "say what you will about ancient cities of the dead past, we are still Earthmen at heart."

"I think not."

Mike was off to work before Gerda awoke the next morning. I use the term morning in a technical sense, of course. Outside it was steel-gray Venusian twilight.

I held him for a moment at the kitchen door.

"I'm terribly sorry about this," I said for about the tenth time. "I had no way of knowing."

"Forget it, darling. You didn't invite her."

"That's true. She invited herself. Sent me a radiogram from the middle of space." A freshly painful experience recalled itself. "And that horrible pet of hers, that greg—. What it did to the rug!"

"I'll ask one of the chemists to come over."

"We'll never get that stain out. You never can get out an alien organic." I felt resigned, then once more indignant. "Notice, she didn't offer one word of apology."

"Don't let it bother you," Mike said cheerfully, pecking me on the cheek. "At least we can still c h o o s e our friends."

He could be cheerful. He was going to work. I was stuck with her for the rest of the day.

When Gerda finally arose it was nearing lunchtime. "I did not sleep too well on your guest couch. There is too much gravity here."

"I'm sorry you were so uncomfortable that you could only sleep eleven hours."

The sarcasm was lost on her. "I was disturbed also by the bright light," she added. "Is it always daytime in your city? Do you not ever turn off the dome illumination?"

I handed her a cup of chemcoffee. "We need it for photosynthesis. Natural light is too weak here."

"You sleep with the lights blazing in your face? Every night?"

"We draw the c e i l i n g blinds. There was one in your room. It didn't occur to me that you would be unfamiliar with that invention."

"On Mars we do not have such primitive arrangements."

"Toast?" I said with considerable restraint as I offered her the plate.

It was perhaps a good thing that our n e i g h b o r Jean dropped in about that time. She was of course curious about our visitor, who had received a few lines in the arrival-departure column of our newspaper. She stared at the beautiful Martian in open admiration.

"What do you think of Venusec?" she asked, proudly, expectantly.

I was immediately sorry for her.

"Not worth the trip," said Gerda. "On Mars we have so much more."

Jean was crestfallen. "Of course you must remember that we are a pioneering community."

"If that is so, then why are the women not working as well as the men?"

"Most of the women do work," I said. "But Jean's child is under two, and of course I took the day of in your honor." In point of fact, there was no law that said married women had to work. There was considerable social pressure, however.

"What kind of work do you do?" Jean inquired, well on the way to hostility.

"I am studying for my doctorate at Mars University. My field is colonial administration."

"I didn't know Mars had any colonies," Jean said.

"We will have," said Gerda.

Alice and D o n n i e came home for lunch. Alice was still glowy-eyed about our visitor. "I told teacher about Aunt Gerda from Mars, and she would like to know if Aunt Gerda can come to school tomorrow and tell our

class all about Mars. Can she mommie?"

"Aunt Gerda is only here for a very short time, and she'll be very busy," I said, trying desperately to ward this off.

"Oh but I'll be glad to talk to her class," said Gerda. "Alice, dear, tell your teacher I accept the invitation."

When you come right down to it, there isn't very much in the way of sights in Venusec. Not sights that would impress a foreign visitor. We have our library and our city hall and our park and our subterranean network, along with our schools and workshops and mines. The really dramatic things that go on in our city happen in the laboratories, where our scientists battle it out with the environment of Venus. Trying to conquer the clouds. Trying to start a plant-life cycle that will change the planet's atmosphere to something humans can breathe. Trying to find mineral resources that Earth has need of, that would make our colony economically self-sustaining. How can you show these things to a foreign visitor? In a sense, there's nothing to show.

I heard there was an Earth ship coming in that afternoon, so I took Gerda dwn to the port to watch the landing and the unloading of cargo and passengers.

Halfway over, Gerda balked. "I don't want to see an Earth ship. We are at war with Earth. Earthmen are our enemies."

"Then maybe," I said jokingly, "you ought to consider yourself a spy. This could be a new model spaceship."

Absurdly, Gerda gave this some consideration. "That is a worthwhile thought," she said at last, nodding her head soberly.

We went to the sightseeing turret and watched the giant squid settle down to ground on pillars of rocket flame.

"I am surprised," said Gerda, "that they can still get past our blockade."

"You got past theirs."

"Yes, but Mars and Venus are in close opposition now, and Earth is on the other side of the sun. That is why my visit was possible."

A sudden, significant smile appeared on her lips. "Yet, you know, Kathy, this war will not last much longer. We will soon bring Earth to its knees."

I know that Venus is supposed to be neutral in this fight, but I am an Earthgirl. I didn't want to see Earth on its knees, not before people like Gerda. My pulse quickened angrily.

"Come along," I managed to say civilly. "Let's see if I know any of the passengers."

We walked to the waiting room. In truth, the odds were good that I would recognize someone. Our city is small,

and Mike's job is important, and we entertain, or are entertained by, most of the doers of Venusec. I was not surprised, therefore, when I bumped into John Druff, swinging an ever-present briefcase to match his lengthy strides.

I latched onto his wrist. "John, this is a young lady you must meet." John is a bachelor. I made the introductions.

"Gerda is a student from Mars. Colonial administration. John is our city's legal representative on Earth. You two should have a lot in common."

John Druff was one kind of man who valued women for their intellectual attainments, but I knew he wouldn't penalize Gerda for other types of attainment as well.

"How long do you plan to stay?" asked John with happy anticipation.

"I must leave the day after tomorrow."

John's disappointment was unconcealed.

"You must work fast," I advised him. "Make a date for this evening."

I knew I was doing him a dirty trick, but it was a matter of self-preservation. He'd hate me for a while, but in the long run there would be forgiveness.

"Gosh, tonight is impossible," John said with genuine regret. "I must make a report to the council."

"An emergency?"

"Something like that." He saw my fright. "No, not a bad development, just something that requires immediate action."

"The Earth-Mars situation?"

"Well, yes, I guess it's no top secret. I can tell you, anyway. Looks like Mars and Earth are ready to negotiate a settlement. They've asked us to act as mediators."

My heart leaped. "Really? How wonderful!"

Gerda was frowning. "That I cannot believe."

"It's true," John averred. "I've just returned from Earth, and the situation is this: both Mars and Earth have withdrawn their respective blockading fleets. There's still some fighting in the asteroids, but I think both planets are acting in good faith."

Gerda smiled, and for some reason I found what she said a little sinister, as though she knew something we didn't. She said: "Ah yes, I think I understand."

John looked at his wrist and adjusted his watch to Venus time. "Listen, I have to run. But how about tomorrow night, Gerda? Would you like me to show you the town's one and only nightspot?"

"Yes," said the beautiful Martian, "I'd love it."

That evening the three of us again sat home and wrangled. Gerda was trying to make some special point about

Earth's tyranny, and Mike, to my disgust, was half agreeing with her. So I was on the defensive and did a lot of shouting, and I guess this upset the children.

Then Gerda, doing what she thought would be helpful, let Donnie play with the greg, and the filthy little rodent scratched him on the arm. And we spent a half hour disinfecting the scratch, with as much care as if it had been a bullet wound. All the while, Gerda infuriated both of us by leaning over the operation, muttering:

"It's just a tiny scratch. You people make such a fuss over nothing. Phobos is a clean animal. Donnie petted him too hard and poor Phobos got frightened. He's really a very gentle animal. Ah, you people, what a fuss you're making over a little scratch."

It was thick, black, unstarry night over Venus, and the temperature outside the luminous dome was falling below zero. We all went to bed in a pretty bad mood.

If I had hoped to avert Gerda's speech at the grammar school that morning, all hope vanished when Alice's teacher phoned the Martian to confirm the time.

We set out on foot across a tree-shaded parkway. "Have you thought about what you will say?" I could scarcely conceal my misgivings.

"There is no problem there," said Gerda. "I will tell the children about my planet's ancient history, and its resettlement, and now its fight for freedom."

"Surely you won't fill their minds with that old propaganda line."

Gerda turned in her tracks. Whatever she started to say was drowned out in the sudden wail of a siren. It was a sound chilling to the hearts of every inhabitant.

I started to run. "Quick! Follow me!"

Gerda obeyed. We dashed through the park. "What's happened?" she panted.

The siren poured out its warning anguish. I had no breath to explain, but ahead of us stood a field house. People from the immediate area were pouring into the entrance. We were halted momentarily by the throng.

"The dome!" I exclaimed to Gerda. "Something has punctured the dome!"

Without trampling or panic, but with steady, businesslike pressure from the rear, we descended stairs to a gloomily-lighted cavern.

"The city is in danger?" asked Gerda.

"Lord yes! If the hole in the dome is large enough, our air will escape and we'll be breathing pure Venus carbon monoxide!"

"Where are we? Are we safe here?"

"These are the subterranean tunnels built for just such an

emergency. They connect every section of the city."

We had moved a hundred yards into the shaft before I vented my anxiety for the children. Of course they were just as safe as I was, in a similar shelter beneath the school.

"And your husband?" queried Gerda.

"He's part of the emergency crew. He's probably at the trouble spot right now, in a space suit."

Somehow, thinking of the city being in the hands of Mike and other capable men made me feel a little better. The all-clear siren sounded an hour later.

It was a wretched experience, but it did have one compensating feature. Gerda never got to give her speech.

As soon as we returned home I phoned Mike. He hadn't come back yet, so I left a message.

"On Mars," said Gerda, "we handle these situations differently. We are all acclimated to our planet's atmosphere."

Jeanie came over, disconcerted and out of breath. "Have you listened to the radio? They say the hole was man-made!"

"No! Who would want to destroy Venusec?"

"It wasn't a very big hole. It was right near the space port. They say they found some things used by whoever did it."

Mike finally called. "It wasn't anything very serious in itself," he said. "It's just the fact that someone went ahead and did it."

"Have you any idea who?"

"This is a part you won't like. One of our boys found a drill bit and scraps of wire and pieces of the detonator. We've had them examined in the laboratory." Mike hesitated. "They're definitely of Earth origin."

I was shocked for a second. "Oh but that's ridiculous! Why would Earth want to destroy us?"

"Who knows? Anyway, those are the facts. And remember, darling. There's an Earth ship parked not a mile away."

I was furious at the insinuation. "Now you remember something. There's a Mars ship parked even closer." I hung up.

Jean and Gerda had overheard my part of the conversation.

"Surely you're not suggesting that Mars had any part in this," Gerda demanded.

"I know this much," I said, leveling at her. "If I were a saboteur, I'd know better than to leave evidence lying around —unless it were the kind of evidence I wanted to be found."

"You think," said Jean, "someone wanted to give Earth a black eye?"

"Yes. Someone who wanted to inflame public sentiment.

Someone who didn't want Venus to act as impartial mediator."

"Preposterous!" snorted Gerda.

"Them's my sentiments," I retorted.

John Druff came for Gerda at seven o'clock, and I don't know which of the three of us was more grateful—I, Mike, or Gerda herself. We were all at sword's point over the afternoon alarm.

Then Donnie came in with a perplexed, boyish expression. "Arm hurts, mommie." He made a wing-flapping motion with his elbow.

"What did you do to your arm?" I asked inattentively. "Bump it at school?"

I was trying to read the newspaper account of the incident.

"Hurts, mommie."

"All right, honey, let's see it." Then I realized and my heart skipped a beat. "Donnie let me see it!"

It was the arm the greg had scratched.

"Mike!"

My husband came flying.

"It's inflamed," he said.

"Call the doctor," I said.

"Now don't get excited, honey. It's not badly swollen. Any scratch can get this way. You don't have to start thinking it's some rare Martian infection."

But even as he said this he was lifting the receiver.

Doctor Raymond was no world-renowned specialist, but he was a competent physician and a personal friend.

"To me it looks quite superficial," he said, dropping Donnie's arm and patting him on the behind to run along.

"That's what I told Kathy," said Mike. "Any scratch can get inflamed like that."

"On the other hand," said the physician, "this could be no trifling matter."

Mike was agape. "You mean—"

"Kathy is quite right to be concerned about this. There's an alien life-form involved here. We don't know if the claws are toxic. That is to say, there are men who certainly know, but I don't know. I've never treated a greg wound before.

"Is there anyone on Venus who does?" I pleaded.

"No, Kathy. What I suggest is that you wait another day. Donnie has no fever, no other symptoms now. If the arm is any worse tomorrow, or if he shows any toxic symtoms...what you ought to do, just to be on the safe side, is consult a Martian specialist."

"Where?"

"On Mars. Or Earth maybe."

I was over my tears, and Donnie was sleeping soundly, when John brought Gerda home. John wore a disgusted expression.

Gerda was drunk. She plumped down in Mike's easy chair and started to discourse on free love.

I left Mike with the burden and took John aside in the kitchen. "Forgive me?"

"Never!"

"Well, it's only nine-thirty. You couldn't have seen much of the town."

"We didn't get any farther than dinner at the Solar Club. Oh, I assure you, nobody there wanted us to leave. She was a floor show all by herself. Sang Martian folk songs."

"Listen, John," I said with a shift to the serious, "there's something I want to ask you. Donnie's sick. He may have to go to Mars for medical attention. If the doctor says its necessary, can you get us emergency clearance to leave tomorrow?"

John is a flexible, resourceful personality. He considered for a moment. "Yes, I can. Call me as soon as you know. Only, for Donnie's sake, I do hope it isn't necessary."

"Thank you, John," I said, teary-eyed. I squeezed his hand. We returned to the party.

How Gerda had shifted from free love to the war again, I will never know, but we walked in on the old Earth-imperialism theme, with new variations.

John had had enough and he excused himself on urgent official business, though not before Gerda had trapped him at the door with a sloppy interplanetary kiss. I don't know, but I think that must have confirmed John in his bachelorhood right then and there.

I really must have been dozing with my eyes open, for I suddenly awakened to something Gerda was saying, and it chilled me worse than the afternoon siren.

"...the real reason Mars has withdrawn her blockade, and I know I can tell you this in confidence because you are a true friend of Mars, is because of the secret weapon."

"Secret weapon?"

"I mustn't tell you, because you are an Earthwoman and an *enemy* of my planet, but Mike, you are friend of my planet, aren't you Mike?"

"Well, I've always been sympathetic with your struggle for independence," said my husband truthfully. "I'm convinced that Earth has always had her own interests at heart, rather than those of the colonists. We have had the same problem here, too."

"Then you agree that we're right in fighting Earth?"

"Yes. You always have to use force to get freedom. I'm convinced of that."

"Good!" said Gerda, her eyes glowing. "Then listen to this. We have something that will bring Earth to her knees. And we're going to use it. Soon!" She slapped the end table with her hand. "And there won't be any more Earth."

I sat on the edge of my seat, trembling. "You don't mean that."

Gerda smiled and held up a finger and nodded her head several times.

"If Mars has a secret weapon, how is it that you know about it?" I demanded with scornful skepticism.

"I know. I am very well informed. I have many friends in the government, and the fleet. I know many scientists, too."

"I can well believe it."

"Don't take this too seriously," said Mike. "Gerda's a little high."

Gerda flared. "You don't believe me! Well, let me tell you. I know what I'm talking about. In another twelve days you'll see."

I was frightened. She was drunk but she did have some inside information. Terribly vital information.

"What'll we see?"

She waved her hand. "Earth will be no-o-o-o more."

"And just how do you propose to accomplish that? By withdrawing your fleet?" I tried to project a taunting disbelief.

"That's just a stategy, a strategy. That's just to lower their guard."

"Then who will drop the bomb, if none of your ships is around?"

"It's not a bomb, you silly girl. It's nothing that has to be dropped. We just put it in space in Earth's orbit and let Earth run into it."

"They'll see it, they'll see it and blast it out of the way. Earth people aren't that stupid."

"You're wrong. They won't see because it's too small. It's smaller than a dust mote."

I laugh in Gerda's face. "A dust mote destroy Earth? You *are* drunk."

"Not one, but billions, trillions. A whole cloud of 'em, ten thousand miles wide! We planted them right in Earth's path. They'll poison the atmosphere! They'll kill all the Earthmen! You'll see! You'll see!"

"Nonsense. There isn't anything that could do that." I looked anxiously at Mike.

"Oh yes there is," insisted Gerda, angrily sitting upright. "Moleculized radioactive cobalt will do it. And there's no defense. Ask Mike. He'll tell you."

I looked at my husband. He rubbed his chin contemplatively. "That could do it, Kathy."

Gerda smiled peacefully and sank back in her chair. "I told you it could."

Still smiling, she shut her eyes. She had passed out.

"This is frightful. We must warn Earth."

"A warning won't do Earth much good."

"Is she right? Is there no defense?"

"Well, it would be difficult. But something could be done."

"Good. Then the sooner they get word, the better. Is

Interplanetary Radio open this late?"

"I don't know."

"I'll call and find out. Meanwhile, you work out the message."

"To whom?"

"Why, to someone of importance who they'll listen to. Not a stranger, naturally. Pick out one of your scientist friends."

"Kathy, I don't want to do that."

"What?"

"I'm not getting involved in this."

I was s t u n n e d. "You wouldn't warn Earth?"

"I'm not interested in Earth. What made you think I was?"

My lips quivered. "Mike."

"I say let Earth fight her own battles. My father was fed up with it when he came to Venus. I have no loyalties to Earth."

"Well I have," I said hotly.

"Then you send the message."

"You know they wouldn't listen to me. Who am I? They'd call me a hysterical woman. But you have a name, professional standing. They would listen to you."

"First of all, how do we know Gerda is telling the truth? It's very unlikely she'd know about anything this important. Probably some junior officer made the story up to impress her."

"Mike, we can't take a chance. We must alert them."

"And then what happens if this is a false alarm? What happens to my name and professional standing then?"

"That's a very minor risk considering the stakes."

"Kathy, I told you. I'm not going to get involved in this."

"My God! You'd see a whole planet wiped out without raising your little finger!"

"They mean nothing to me personally."

"Little children like Alice and Donnie? Millions and millions of them. Innocent little kids exterminated while a slob like Gerda beats her chest. Will you do nothing for them? Will you see them die in agony while their parents die helplessly beside them? Mike, will you do nothing?" Could this be real? Could this be my husband?

Mike stared but his eyes would not meet mine. "You're oversentimental. I think you need some rest. We'll talk about it in the morning."

"Very well, Mike."

"Will you put Gerda to bed?"

"Yes, Mike."

I half-hoisted, half-dragged the Martian girl to her couch. The greg was asleep on her shoulder. It stirred uneasily as I lifted it gently into my arms. Cradled like a baby, I carried the greg into the bathroom. Then I filled the washbasin and held the creature's head under water until it ceased to squirm.

When Mike got up he was anxious to see Donnie's arm.

"Kathy, the redness seems to be spreading. Don't you think?"

"No, Mike, it looks about the same to me."

"Move your arm, son. How does it feel?"

"Hurts."

"Kathy, are you sure that isn't more swollen than it was last night?"

"No, but I'll keep Donnie home from school so I can keep a close watch on it."

"Good idea."

"You go to work. I'll give you a call if there's any change."

"All right. Say, what about Gerda?"

"Still sleeping."

"Fine. Then I don't have to say goodbye to her. When does her ship leave?"

"Four. I'll get her there in a taxi."

"Fine. You'll call me about Donnie?"

I nodded and he pecked me on the cheek. As soon as I heard the Vac start I picked up the phone and began dialing.

"John? This is Kathy. Remember our conversation last night? Well unfortunately, I will need your help. Yes. It's considerably worse. We must leave right away."

An hour and a half later we met John at the space port. He had accomplished miracles. We had cut through all sorts of priorities and red tape to get our tickets. He had revalidated my old passport, obtained our emergency clearance, and even wangled a waiver of currency regulations. Finally, he greased our way through customs so that nobody even bothered to open our baggage, the little that we had.

We shook hands and I thanked him, and blessed my good fortune in having such a man for a friend. Then Donnie, Alice and I hurried to board the ship.. for Earth.

We blasted off, and I went to the ship's radio room and sent Mike this message:

WE ARE ON OUR WAY TO EARTH TO JOIN FOUR BILLION OTHER PEOPLE WHO MEAN NOTHING TO YOU PERSONALLY. I AM SURE I CAN FIND A GOOD SPECIALIST THERE FOR DONNIE. IN CASE YOU WANT TO YOU CAN REACH ME CARE OF MOTHER AND DAD. .PLEASE SEE THAT MY MARTIAN COUSIN GETS ABOARD HER SHIP. LOVE. KATHY.

I returned to our cabin where the children stood before the port hole, filled with wonder at a universe they had never known.

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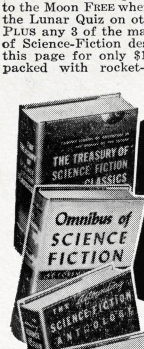

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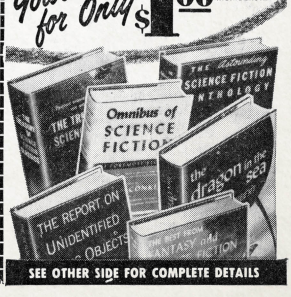

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