FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

SCIENCE FICTION

MAR. – 35c

THE NUMBER OF MY DAYS
A JOHN BRUNNER Novelet

ATTACK ON THE MOON
A LESTER DEL REY Article

we've, also in these last thirty years, advanced from crystal radios with a range of a hundred or so miles to sets so advanced that they can pick up a whisper from space or a broadcast from the other side of the world. Within these last decades we have seen our large cities come close to being the fantastic communities dreamed of by H. G. Wells and those who came after him. So a Space Cop—even a good looking one—shouldn't be such a startling idea.

The existence of a belt of intense radiation in the region of the earth's magnetic field (first discovered by our own satellite, Explorer III) has made it abundantly clear that a very large number of satellites moving on different orbits and at different heights will be required to obtain comprehensive measurements of all the influences of surrounding space. We are of course particularly anxious to speed up investigation of this mysterious radiation zone in view of our own plans for man-carrying satellites.

It is believed that this radiation belt may extend from 250 to 40,000 miles from the earth, reaching a maximum intensity perhaps of six thousand miles above the equator and thinning out towards the poles. To check this and other theories about the radiation belt will require not only many more satellites than have been planned to date, but also rockets capable of leaping vertically into space and measuring the "cross section" of the radiation over various points on the earth's surface.

And this *will* necessitate some sort of "traffic control"!

As Andrew G. Haley, General Counsel of the American Rocket Society, pointed out in an address to the 8th Annual Congress of the International Astronautical Federation at Barcelona, in 1957, "the field of astronautics will progress only as rapidly as international cooperation in the field is accomplished." The necessity is already recognized for "the international regulation of point-to-point earth rocket vehicles," he said. "The very problem of locating instrumentation along the manifold aerodynamic routes, orbits and trajectories, will require the highest degree of international cooperation and regulation for operational efficiency and safety of all concerned."

From this it *isn't* such an immense jump to what science fiction has anticipated these last decades—space cops, controlling traffic in space!

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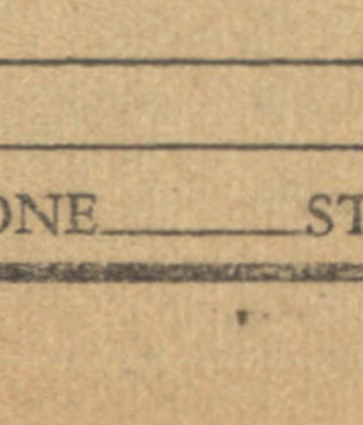

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the number of my days

by . . . John Brunner

Extraterrestrial engineering is what they'll call it — a profession where you will work side by side with Death.

Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days: that I may be certified how long I have to live.
Psalm XXXIX (Book of Common Prayer version).

THIS time I'd had almost a year on earth, when I'd expected at most six months. Whether it was that the cost of living had fallen, or just that I'd been living at a less extravagant rate than usual, I could have gone for another three months before my bank balance dropped below half what it had been when I landed. I never let it get any lower than that. I'd seen what happened to retired XTE's who'd run out of money at the same time as they ran out of work.

But, for two reasons, I signed off and went back to Intercon—the Interplanetary Construction Company. One reason was that Elise was getting entirely too fond of me, and I of her, and in my business that has never been good. The other was that I'd seen the ads Intercon were putting out, and they looked *big*.

So I put in my application as usual, and thumb-printed the contract, and in due time I was told when to report. As soon as that came

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John Brunner once warned against the trend of SF writers to blithely set a story a thousand years in the future—and *forget that the characters are as far removed from us in time as we are from King Alfred. . . . You will agree that this cannot be said about his latest adventure novelet.*

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in, I kissed Elise good-bye, told her the straight truth—that I wouldn't write—and said I hoped she'd forget me in a hurry. There were a few tears, but I didn't pay them much mind, since I'd seen it happen before, and I knew I would never be worth remembering for very long.

Nonetheless, as I stood on the edge of the intercontinental landing ground at Quito after getting off the express from Cambodia, and rang for a cab, I wondered what the hell had possessed me to take up extra-terrestrial engineering as a career. As usual, I came to the entirely honest conclusion that it must have been the money. I didn't give a hoot for that garbage about the challenge of new frontiers and the lure of adventure. In my book, any sane man can pass up his chance at adventure in favor of a life of ease and comfort if he can get that any other way. But then, maybe I'd never been entirely sane.

I'd just seen the cab I'd rung for start to roll over to me from the rank across the way, when there was a hail from behind me.

"Jorge! Jorge Higgins!"

I turned, hoping it wouldn't lose me my cab—the intercontinental had been crowded this trip, and I was running short of time—and saw a dark man in blue coming towards me from the disembarkation point. I waved back at him, and as the cabby pulled up beside me, I told him to wait a moment.

"How's tricks, Jules?" I said as he came within earshot. Jules Rafferty had been with me last trip, and I guessed at once he was on the same business as myself.

He came up, panting—he'd sprinted as soon as he saw I had a cab waiting—and shook my hand enthusiastically. "I'm fine, *amigo,*" he said—he always would try to make me feel good by throwing Spanish at me, even though with his Irish-French accent it sounded more like aboriginal Eskimo. "You're headed for Intercon?"

"Where else?" I said. "Have this ride on me."

"Surely, and thanks," he agreed. I held the door open, and he slipped past me and settled into the worn suspension seating. As soon as I followed, the cabby, who must have caught our reference to Intercon, pulled out into the traffic flow.

As we gathered speed, Jules handed me a cigarillo—one of the strong black Luna-grown ones that most XTE's smoked as an affectation on Earth—and said, "You're signed up for the trip, are you?"

I nodded. "Wherever we may be going. Say, Jules, you're usually on the inside. Do you know what it is, this time? I've been out of reach of the grapevine for the past few months, over in Thailand and Indo-China."

The cab slid round a tight corner before he could answer, and he looked back and laughed at the indignant gestures of a cop on the side of the road. Then he sobered. "Jorge, you know I'd tell you if I could, but I

can't. Nobody, but nobody, seems to know. Not even Lula Graham."

I choked slightly on a mouthful of raw smoke. "Lula Graham? You mean Boss Graham's daughter? Jules, you must really want to know if you've been that close to the source."

"It was all in the line of pleasure," he said with an engaging grin. "She has a weakness for XTE's."

"Okay," I said, spreading my hands. "So she's an easy touch. I've heard a few stories about her, myself. I know she's wild. But you're really sticking your neck out, you know. If Boss Graham catches on, Intercon will be adding one to the death call for this trip and they'll make sure it's you who fill it."

His face froze. "That's not a joking matter," he said stiffly.

I could have bitten off my tongue. "I'm sorry," I said weakly. "I didn't know—"

"Forget it," he interrupted. "Most people don't mind. You couldn't have expected it. It's just that I disapprove—that's all."

He took a rosary from his pocket with a muttered, "Excuse me," and turned to look out of the far window, his lips moving in silent prayer.

I turned away uncomfortably. It wasn't the rosary that bothered me, of course—among XTE's, who lived most of their time on the edge of death, you learned to respect another man's faith, because sometimes it was all he had to hang on to.

But it just went to show how you could live with a man and think you knew him pretty well, and then find out you knew nothing at all, I reflected. I'd been all through the Dome Three construction project on Mars with Jules, and I'd never discovered that he was soured on the death call. But, of course, even the most hard-boiled XTE's had their quirks. Myself, I'd never given a damn for the risks. When it was my turn, I'd go, wherever I was, on Earth, Mars or Luna. But I had my own weak spots, too.

The cab got itself all snarled up in a traffic jam at that point, and I looked at my watch anxiously. We had only ten minutes before we were due to report in for briefing. I started to time the delay, just for something to do. A quiet rustle from Jules gave me the hint that he was back with me.

"You'd have thought Quito, as the largest spaceport on Earth, would have done something about its traffic problem," he said, in as level a tone as if we had not previously spoken. "But not likely. I suppose it's the South American mentality."

"I'm quite used to having one myself, thank you," I answered. "Even if my name is as Irish as yours, I'm eighth generation Bolivian, remember."

He let that one rest. Later he said, rather fretfully, "I wish we could do something about this destination clause in the standard contract, Jorge. It worries me, sometimes, never knowing where I'm going till I leave."

"I've been thinking along those

lines myself," I agreed. "In fact, I talked it over with Hans Harnisch when he was Guild Secretary last year. But we agreed that we couldn't put on the pressure yet because the public likes to think of us as perpetually on call for emergencies, and any binding contract about destinations would upset them. We're still dependent on public opinion, remember."

Jules nodded. Abruptly, he said, "I'm sorry I soured on that joke. I didn't mean to. I know the death call serves its purpose—it makes people take the *no attachments* provico seriously, and that sort of thing—"

"And helps to keep our stock up in the public eye," I broke in. "Never forget that—to the world at large each of us is still a twenty-four-carat hero, facing death with a smile on his lips and a song in his heart."

He grinned rather wryly at that. "I wonder what song they imagine us singing," he said. "But the death call is still one of my personal hates. It seems—well, against nature. It's a usurpation of the power of life and death—"

"It's only a calculated risk. Sometimes it isn't even very well calculated. Besides, it isn't as if they can say *who* is going to die. They can only estimate *how many*."

He nodded in grudging agreement, and we rode the rest of the way in silence.

Eventually the cab pulled out of the pattern and halted against the curb outside the familiar big yellow building, with the name standing across its frontage in letters eight feet high—

INTERPLANETARY CONSTRUCTION COMPANY, INCORPORATED

For a moment or two I looked up at the foreshortened words. I had that old, hateful but wonderful hollowness inside me. It always brought back the first time I went down the long slide we had in the playground of my kindergarten. I'd been as scared as hell, but I'd gone ahead and done it to show that I wasn't. And then I did it again—and again—and even after fifty rides I was still scared, I still held back, I still had to gather myself each time even though I knew I would do it anyway—

This, I thought, is the head of the slide again. Some day I'll turn around and go back down the ladder; some day, I'll know I've had enough. Either that, or the death call will catch up on me.

Put like that, it made me hesitate. I wondered: why not now? Why not go back and find Elise and spin out the rest of that bank account until I died? Or get a nice safe job here on Earth—I was a four-tripper XTE; no one would accuse me of cowardice. I found I couldn't go along with the idea.

I had plenty; I wanted more. That was always the way.

Jules nudged me, and I realized I'd just been sitting there, saying

and doing nothing. Hastily, I came back to reality, got out, and went through the usual routine of persuading the driver that even if extraterrestrial engineers did get paid about ten times what anyone else rated, they were still entitled to cab fare at the legal scale. Then I wasted my advantage on a ten-credit tip, just for luck. XTE's are like that.

I joined Jules on the steps of the Intercon building, took a deep breath, and we went in.

The building hadn't changed, of course. It probably never would. The floor was still imitation marble; there were still gilded doors on the elevators to the right and natural maple doors on the offices to the left. The people who came and went in a ceaseless quiet flow from left to right and right to left might have been the same ones who had been crossing when I'd come here as a green first-timer to join the crew leaving for Suburb Nine of Luna City. But there was a new girl at the information desk in the foyer here, and I was surprised. I shouldn't have been. I reflected that twelve years in one job was a long time—but I couldn't help myself. I had to ask a question.

I muttered to Jules something about meeting him in briefing, and strolled over to the desk, trying to avoid the appearance of hurry. The new girl was pretty, dark, with smooth long hair and a deep tan. She looked up at my approach and said, "Yes, sir? Can I help you?"

"Where's Imelda?" I asked.

It puzzled her for a moment. Then she caught on. "Oh, you mean Miss Jenkins, who used to have this job. She left over a year ago. Went to get married."

"Do you ever see her?"

"I write to her sometimes. She lives in Tasmania now."

"When you next send her a letter, tell her that Jorge Higgins asked after her. Better yet, put this in." I took out one of my official Guild of XTE's cards. As an afterthought, I scribbled a note of congratulations on the back of it. "Will you do that for me?"

"Surely," she said, with a flash of white teeth.

I thanked her, and crossed the hall to the elevators. While I was waiting for one to take me up to briefing, I thought back to a time twelve years ago, when I'd just got back from my first XTE job. I'd been hungry as all hell for the taste of the open air and the sight of a woman—in that order—and Imelda had been around. I had kindly memories of Imelda. Maybe, if I'd had the sense, it could have been me she married instead of—whoever. But it was no good thinking of that.

All the same, it made me feel a little empty.

Just as the elevator dropped soundlessly to my level, I turned and glanced back at the new girl on the desk. Her sleek black head was bent away from me.

I wondered if she'd be around for some young first-timer one day. I

wondered if he would be someone with more sense than I had.

I grew aware that the elevator was on the point of answering another call, and stepped inside just in time. I punched fifth floor on the selector almost without knowing that I'd done it, and I was definitely on my way.

The briefing hall was really no more than a large room, though it was always called a hall by courtesy. It was lined with maps and charts of Earth, Luna and Mars. Three or four years ago, someone had added a blown-up photograph of the clouds of Venus, inscribed with a large question mark, and for some reason they had left it there. At the far end was an office which bore the familiar words "TRIP BOSS," where for the previous three or four months whoever had been picked to lead this trip had been working over the rough outline of the plan. Two or three trip bosses were sometimes planning at once, but the Guild was too small to allow of more than two major projects at a time, plus about fifteen per cent of the membership on emergency call or extended leave on Earth.

I knew everyone here, of course. There were about twenty-five men waiting. A four-tripper gets to call the whole of the senior half of the Guild by their first names, and I'd already guessed from the secrecy and the fact that they had offered me ninety thousand credits a month instead of my usual sixty-five that this was going to be an all-star job. It was, too; none of those here were less than three-trip men.

I walked through the room, exchanging greetings as I went past, and carried on into the trip boss's office. There were two or three other new arrivals just signing the book in front of me. I reached for my pen and waited behind them, glancing around to see who the boss was to be.

I saw Hans Harnisch standing at one side—a small man, German-Swiss, with a fat pink face and bristly short hair, who had been the Guild Secretary the previous year—and called to him. He turned and nodded acknowledgment, and I saw that he held the personnel file for the trip.

This was going to be a *very* big job. They didn't put top executives of the Guild into trip boss posts for Lunar work.

"Am I late?" I asked him. "I got hung up in a traffic jam with Jules on the way from the port."

Harnisch checked the time. "You would have been," he said. "As it is, we had to put the briefing back half an hour to give Bogol and a couple of others a chance to get in from Sydney—the express was delayed by a hurricane on take-off. Look, I daren't stop just now, Jorge—Boss Graham's coming down to see us off in person, and I'm rolling out the red carpet. I'll see you later."

He bustled off to pore over a stack of Intercon report sheets on his table. I found the way clear to the

booking-in ledger, and signed against my name as reporting for the trip. I looked down the list of appointments while I was at it.

TRIP BOSS: Hans Harnisch, PSG.

(That was Past Secretary of the Guild.)

CREW BOSS: Bogol, Igor; Curtis, Rinaldo N.; Rafferty, Jules; U Phwa; Higgins-Hernandez, Jorge.

That gave me a pleasant surprise. I was the only four-tripper among the crew bosses—Bogol was a six-tripper and the rest had all done five. It looked as if I might make trip boss the time after next with a bit of luck.

I ran down the rest of the names, noting that all but three had signed in. Those outstanding were two crew bosses, Bogol and Curtis, and the first new name I had seen—Green, R. R. I didn't know him.

I glanced around the trip boss's room, wondering what it would be like having to do all the thinking for a complete tour lasting about two to two and a half years, even when I had Intercon's unique set of computers to help me. I knew Jules for one would never make trip boss—one of the tasks involved was figuring the death call, and even if it was an almost exact science, I wouldn't have envied any man that.

I put down the ledger and returned to the hall. The usual stack of chairs was propped against the wall—I took one, finished saying my hellos, and joined Jules at the other end of the room.

"I hear Boss Graham is seeing us off personally," I told him.

"That so?" he said in amazement. "That means only one of two things. Either further out, which I doubt, or further in."

I took a moment to digest that. Then I gestured at the big query mark on the photo of Venus. "That? You could be right. You know, Jules, somehow I'm not looking forward to this trip."

"Me neither," said Jules shortly.

We thought the idea over in silence.

Of course, there had already been three Venus expeditions: one fatal, one a fair success and one an unqualified success. But I'd read the reports—of course; if I wanted to stay where I was in the Guild, I had to run like hell to keep up with my subject—and they weren't nice. The very slow rotation of the planet produced stratosphere temperatures varying from about plus a hundred and fifty to minus twenty on the day and night sides respectively; at the surface, the carbon dioxide-high air produced the greenhouse effect and bolstered the noon equatorial temperature to some two hundred plus. The combined effects of unstable air masses and solar tides resulted in weather beside which the tropical hurricane of Earth seemed a gentle breeze.

I was still chewing the idea over and hoping we had made a wrong guess, when the door behind us opened again and Rinaldo Curtis came in—a tall man with hair salted

gray. He scattered the usual nods of greeting as he went with long strides to sign on. After him came another man I knew—Bogol, a Pole. He and Jules threw up their hands at the sight of each other and began to talk fiercely and simultaneously in French.

The door swung shut. In a moment it opened again. Checking through my memory, I realized that R. R. Green—whoever he might be—was still missing.

I turned to look and remained to stare.

He was medium-sized and lightly-built, with a long shock of fair hair, and he wore a neat gray formal suit under a fashionable dark red slicker. He was dressed like a college boy. He looked like a college boy. He looked, in fact, about eighteen.

At first I made the logical mistake—assumed he'd lost his way. Then I ran my eye over him again. In one hand he carried a small jump bag; in the other a fat envelope full of papers. Out of the top of the latter I could see poking, quite unmistakably, the clean yellow parchment of a newly acquired XTE certificate.

While I was getting over my amazement, someone else had noticed him and nudged his neighbor. The latter, perhaps more kindly than the rest of us, called out, "Hey, kid! You looking for someone?"

Evidently he hadn't recognized the parchment.

"Yes—thanks. Mr. Harnisch, I believe." He rolled the *r* like a good *Schweizerdeutscher* himself. His voice was a light tenor. He probably used to sing with the college dance band when he'd had too many beers to feel self-conscious.

The man who had called out must have noticed the parchment then, because I caught him smothering a grin. "Through there, boy," he said without batting an eyelid.

The kid nodded and took the way he had been shown. As he passed by, heads came up right and left to look at him. There was a general quiet rustle as they summed him up—first-timer. Younger-looking than most, of course. They went no further than that for the most part. They couldn't have drawn the conclusion Jules and I had come to from the presence of so many top-liners in one outfit. Jules, however, breaking free of Bogol as the latter decided he'd best go and sign on at last, caught my eye and winked. I nodded, knowing what he was thinking. If his guess had been right, Harnisch would blow his top when he found out whom he had engaged. I expected the kid to come out in a moment with rather a red face. Intercon was a business concern, not a university extension course.

However, apparently Jules's guess was wrong after all, for first Curtis, then Bogol and lastly the kid came out of the office and took their places on the floor. Bogol finished his interrupted conversation with Jules and departed for someone else just as the boy re-appeared. Far from making hastily for the door, he picked up a

chair and glanced around for somewhere to put it.

I signed to him to come sit with us, and he came over at once. He said, "Hello, there."

I couldn't quite decide whether he was kidding himself, whether he was self-confident, or just fresh. Either way, he was a first-timer, and there was an ancient procedure for dealing with those. I didn't like it, myself, but I sure as hell could never have done anything about it.

I introduced myself and Jules.

"I'm Rory Green," said the kid. "Glad to meet you."

"Are you booked on this trip?" I demanded.

He nodded. Jules, who was notoriously rough on first-timers, cut in, tapping the visible end of Rory's parchment and emphasizing its shiny newness. "This your first time out, boy?' he said silkily.

"That's right," Rory agreed.

"Looking forward to it?"

"I'm scared from hell to Pluto," said the kid honestly. That took Jules off-balance, and I had trouble keeping my face straight at his expression. He recovered quickly enough.

"Don't let that worry you," he said smoothly. "Um—smoke?"

He produced his case of lethal Lunar cigarillos. The kid took one with a word of thanks and offered him a light. Jules, expecting the usual reaction to the virulent tobacco, accepted the flame and sat back to await results. There were none. Rory inhaled as if he were pulling on light Virginia, and then inspected the slim black tube critically.

"I remember I used to sneak these from my dad's humidor when I was a kid," he said. "Made me sick as a dog, but I kept trying."

When he was a kid! Dear God, what did he think he was now? If he was putting on an act, or if he really was as self-possessed as he seemed to be, either way there was going to be trouble from this quarter. When you live two years at a time in constant fear of your life, you get to be sensitive about that sort of thing.

But the reference to the cigarillos was interesting. It placed him as having either XTE or spacecrew somewhere in his family. I mused for a second, trying to remember if I'd met a Green in that line of business. Married spacemen were rare enough in all conscience—

Then there was a slow shuffle as people turned to face the end of the room. The door of the trip boss's office had opened, and I could glimpse Hans Harnisch standing aside to let Boss Graham pass. I hadn't seen the big wheel in six or eight years, but I could never mistake him. He was stolid, red-faced, with lively eyes and one of the surest flairs for business in history. Even though he was our employer, and therefore presumably our enemy, as anyone knowing only the other Guilds would have assumed, there had been talk of putting him up for honorary membership one year.

I had never been able to under-

stand how a man like that had come to father Lula Graham, who, though she was a honey, was strictly wild.

Graham took a chair from the wall, refusing Hans's obsequious assistance, and sat down facing us in the corner. Harnisch gave him a worried glance and then turned to look us over. The tension mounted like the blood-pressure of a first-timer.

I sneaked a passing look at our first-timer. He looked as if he were planning a holiday in Bermuda.

Harnisch I knew for a very good engineer, but he would never make a public speaker. He hemmed and hawed for a moment, and then straightened up and said bluntly, "Well, I suppose the first thing you want to know is where we're going. We're opening up Venus."

People sat forward on their chairs. Jules caught my eye and ringed his forefinger and thumb at me, winking.

"I'll skip all the usual stuff about dependents and attachments. It was in your contracts, anyway, and all of you—most of you, that is," he corrected hastily, "have been through it before. I'll get on to the important points."

He pulled down a rolled sheet hanging on the wall behind him. It bore a sketchy map of some ground, a photomontage of infrared survey pictures, and some constructional data. He began to explain. He kept his back to us, and we had to tell him to speak up a couple of times, but when he got on to the technical side his words flowed more freely.

Compared with the last Mars job, this one was simplicity itself as far as the actual building work went. They were calling for only one dome, and that a small one, a two hundred-footer. The third expedition had located what looked like the ideal site for it—a hollow between three small hills, forming a natural windbreak. We were to anchor the dome with struts and braces, carve out six million cubic feet of galleries in the surrounding rock, install three dozen air converters, and build eight miles of wall from local rock to surround what would later be cleared ground. This was to be a pilot project, of course. It was easy to see what pattern future trips would follow: a couple of hundred thousand air converters all over the planet, to unlock the oxygen from the CO_2 and the water vapor from the formaldehyde, some sort of mutated vegetation to keep it that way, and we'd have a planet for the taking in sixty or eighty years' time.

But this was a first time, and the first time is always the worst.

There were half a dozen questions on technical points, mostly from Bogol, who seemed to know Venusian conditions pretty well. I turned to Jules, but stopped the words I meant to say before they reached my lips. He was sitting rock-still, his fists clenched, and I realized that every man in the room was waiting with tense expectation for one last —and important—item.

At length it came. Harnisch turned back to face us, letting his maps roll up again with a snap. He said,

his mouth making a mess of the words, "Now, of course, you want to know the death call. Well, this is a first time, of course, but the exploratory trips did a much better job on Venus than they did on Mars, and the government is underwriting half our expenses, and I think we've covered everything we can reasonably expect. We've budgeted for an estimated loss of thirty per cent materiel—"

Budgeted! As if men were items on an expense account!

"—and one fatal casualty."

It dropped like a fission bomb. The shock was so mixed with relief that it took a few seconds for anyone to digest it completely. Then there was silence, while people remembered the first Mars Dome project, when they had a death call of four and lost thirty out of ninety-six men. But that had been a long time ago, and they hadn't undercalled since.

Which meant—and I trusted Harnisch even more than I trusted the computers which figured the odds for Intercon—that for once we stood a very good chance of all coming back alive.

During the pause, Harnisch had stood down for Boss Graham, who spoke for a few minutes on generalities. Nobody listened. In the end, he toured the room and shook hands with us crew bosses, and we were set.

After he had left the room, there was a sudden buzz of excited talk, and people crowded around Harnisch asking technical questions. I reached for a smoke, letting the tenseness seep out of my nerves by degrees.

"Venus, eh?" said Rory on my right. "That's really something."

I'd almost forgotten him. For some reason I'd been thinking of Elise, wondering whether I was going to run the risk of being caught by the death call and tell her I would be seeing her again after all. I shut it firmly out of my mind, and realized that sitting right next to me was the biggest problem I had met in years.

I said slowly, "Boy, do you know what you've let yourself in for?"

"I think so," he answered with injured dignity.

"Take my advice. I've done four trips—I know what I'm talking about. Walk right out of this room and don't come back till we've gone. Then do your first trip on Luna, the way I did. You stand a lot better chance of living to enjoy your pay that way."

He didn't answer, but his soft chin—he looked as if he hadn't even started to shave—set in an uncompromising line. I knew I wouldn't sell him on that. He was the obstinate type.

I got up and pushed my way through the throng towards Harnisch, catching him just as he was going back into his office. I laid a hand on his arm.

"Can I have a private word with you?" I said.

"Sure—come in." He held the door for me, and when I was past

him, pulled it shut. "Okay, Jorge, what do you want to know?"

"That kid—Rory Green," I said. "You aren't really letting him come on this trip?"

His pale blue eyes, buried in rolls of pink fat, studied me. "Why not?" he said at length.

"Hans, it'll be murder to let a first-timer go along on this Venus project! I know he's got a degree, but what's a degree on this sort of job? Couldn't you have got someone like Chauncey or Krishnasavati—someone who's done a couple of trips already?"

"Forget it, Higgins," he said, suddenly going all trip boss on me. "This job is being done under government subsidy, and we're legally bound to hire the best men we've got. Green has the best certificate I've ever seen—ergo, he qualifies for the trip."

I was about to start threatening to resign if they kept Rory on, when he cut in. "That's the official answer, Jorge. I'll be grateful if you remember it. But speaking off the record, do you know what the name of the navigator on the first Venus trip was —the one that didn't get back?"

I shook my head.

"Green. Catch? If we tried to throw that boy out, he'd sue us from here to Pluto for breach of contract. It's that way."

I chewed it over in silence. At length I said, "All right. Does Boss Graham know?"

"Boss Graham told me the boy asked him as a favor if he could make the Venus trip when it came up."

"There's one thing you can do," I added. "Put him in my crew, will you?"

"That's a very good idea," he nodded. "I'll do that."

"It's not as good an idea as sending him somewhere safe—like Luna —to do his first tour."

"That's Earth's back yard now," said Harnisch. "It wasn't when you did your first trip, Jorge. We called six deaths on that one—remember? We got five of them. Young Green will be a damned sight safer on Venus than you were on Luna."

"I'll tell you this right now, though," I interrupted. "If your death call is correct, I can name the man who'll fill the vacancy."

He looked at me steadily. "If you're right," he said in a dead voice, "God help you, Jorge. You'll never be able to live with yourself again."

I felt cold hands on the back of my neck. I started to answer him, changed my mind, and went out.

For a little while I hated Harnisch and Boss Graham both for letting a quixotic impulse over-rule their common sense, but it didn't last long. When you're confined to the company of the same few dozen men for years on end, you lose the ability to nurse a grudge—or you lose your job. Even if I hadn't been able to forget it as I did, I'd still have acted as if I had. XTE's don't like it if their crew boss quarrels with the trip boss.

We blasted off for the satellite that same evening, and trans-shipped to the Venus fleet a few hours later. It was a five-month run for the first men to do the journey. We could afford to travel at a steady tenth gee the whole way, and with our initial orbital velocity and the push from the boosters which rode off with us from the satellite, it took us a matter of fifteen days. We had five ships—four for landing, one to orbit Venus as a temporary space station for the duration of our tour.

Before we left, I wished we did have five months before landing. I thought I was faced with the problem of turning a cocky, space-blind boy into an extra-terrestrial engineer. But I spent a lot of time with Rory on the trip, and felt a little better at the end of it. Not much—but a little was all I had expected. He knew his theory all right, he could run an assembly sequence in his head, and he was faster with a slipstick than I was. Provided his judgment stayed the way it was, he'd make an XTE yet.

I did one thing which I thought over very carefully before making up my mind. I took Jules off into a corner and told him to make it known that if anyone ribbed the boy hard enough to damage his assurance, he would have to answer to me. I knew ribbing was usually a good thing for a first-timer—I knew it had been for me. But I estimated Rory's opinion of himself as ninety per cent justified, and I'd rather work with a man who believes in his own decisions, especially when he thinks them over, than with one who's forever scared of putting a foot wrong.

About the last thing I told myself before I strapped down for landing was that maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

The landing itself was *rough*. I blacked out two or three times, and wasn't really registering the rest of it, and it brought it home to us for the first time how it was going to be for the next thirty months. We were thrown this way and that by the stratospheric currents; we were bounced and buffeted by the lower air layers; and when we finally woke up after the last spurt of the tubes, there was light outside the ship and we couldn't see a thing.

There was noise, too: the noise of the wind which lifted fine dust from the seared plains of the equator and which would deafen and blind us for the remainder of our stay.

I unstrapped myself stiffly and looked around at my crewmen. They were all in good shape. I had four others besides Rory—Campbell, Pereira, Matsukuo and a West African whom we called Koona because his real name had three tongue-clicks in it and was difficult to get out unless you'd been born to it. Our landing had been automatic, of course, but we also had a human pilot on board—one Winton, who would be a general factotum for us during our stay: cook, communications man, medical officer and housekeeper. I didn't envy him the job.

I managed a weak grin, looking around at the ship which was to be our headquarters.

"Welcome home, men!" I said.

Three of us had homed within the three miles radius that was considered good shooting. The command ship, with Harnisch and two crews on board, had overshot and come down a mile further out, diametrically opposite ours, because of a bad gust during their approach run, but they were all in one piece, and by the time we had manhandled our personnel dome out of the lock and anchored it to what looked like bedrock, though it was hard to tell in the dusty air, Winton reported that he'd picked them up on the radio and that they had unshipped their sandhog for a reconnaissance of the position.

The first two or three days were taken up with domestic chores—tying down the ships, erecting the four masts of a rhomboid antenna to put us in touch with the orbital ship beyond the scudding wrack which passed for a sky, setting up stills for water and a miniature air converter for our oxygen supply. It was routine work, and not difficult, except for the handicap of having to work in sealed suits—not pressure suits, fortunately; those were tolerable in the light gravity of Mars, but would have been impossible here. But it was essential to keep out the dust and to wear an air-mask, of course, and most of the time the dust forced us to work on radar and infrared. It was tough going, but all of us barring Rory were used to that, and he just set his jaw and kept at it.

On the third day, Harnisch called a crew bosses' conference in the personnel dome of his ship—which had to hold thirteen men instead of six, and was large enough to give us elbow room—and gave us the go-ahead.

It was impossible, we found at once, to clear the ground below the dome, because as soon as we shifted the dust, another gust of the continual hot gale would dump it right back in our laps. So we were forced to wade through it, sinking knee- and sometimes thigh-deep, while we carried out the first surveys.

I'd never tried to sink post-holes by radar before, and since our infra-red theodolites were often blinded by the heat of the ground, our first couple of holes were well off. Eventually, though, we had the six most important ones sunk in the raw rock, and covered them with plastic lids to keep them clear. Then we brought up the main spars of the dome, six precisely curved and surprisingly light ninety-six-foot girders. They were too light, it turned out. After three sweaty, swearing hours, in which we had all been knocked off our feet until we ached all over, we had to admit that we couldn't hold them in place long enough for the assemblymen at the center of the dome area to attach them to each other.

It looked as if we'd struck a serious snag before starting.

I absent-mindedly tried to wipe my forehead through a layer of plastic and looked round to the limit of my range. Koona and Campbell, the heaviest of my men, were lying on the upward slant of our girder, trying to keep it steady. Pereira was doing his best to hang on, but he was a lightly built Puerto Rican, and it wasn't much good. Matsukuo was one of the dimly visible figures in the center of the hollow, trying vainly to hold the swaying members together for more than a second at a time.

I felt a slap on my back, and turned to find Rory there. "Mr. Higgins!" he shouted. "Have we got any iron wire with us?"

"God knows!" I yelled back—anything under a full-throated roar would have been lost in the gale. "Why?"

"If we wound the ends of the girders with it and ran a current through, we might be able to use the magnetism to hold the spars for long enough to fasten them!"

It took me a minute to work out the approximate amount of wire we'd need, and the current. Then I worked my way along the rim of the hollow until I bumped Harnisch. The idea appealed to him. More, it worked—or at least, it cut down the speed with which the girders jerked apart from one another long enough to let the assemblymen get them hog-tied. I wasn't around when the rest of the men found out who it was who thought up that dodge, but I imagined that if I'd put an infrared scope on Rory's face, I'd have been dazzled.

As an indication of the pace of the job, it took us ten weeks, near enough, to sink and anchor the struts of the dome. After the main members came the concentric ribs which would hold the cover in place, and angled trusses to spread the not inconsiderable load it would impose.

Harnisch, correctly judging the state of our nerves, declared a party in celebration of the completion of the main structure. It had been found long ago—during the first Lunar project, in fact—that XTE's living far from home and existing on their nerves needed something more than just recreation and a few library books to keep them—not just happy, but actually sane. Our parties were the traditional result. They were less necessary and less frequent on a job like this, with a low death call and a fair approximation to schedule to its credit, but on jobs like the first Mars Dome, when almost every other day you lost a man, it was all that kept the men's nerves intact. A friend of mine who was interested in history once told me that bomber pilots during the World War II reacted the same way, and held boisterous parties to keep their minds off the fact that tomorrow they might not be here.

But ten weeks was only the beginning of the job, and next day we began the really hard task—getting the cover on. It was blowing its usual forty mile an hour khamsin when we started. The cover was

tough fluorine-based plastic, about as flexible as eighth-inch steel plate and much more resistant to abrasion. It had to be. It was also carbon and oxygen inert—likewise. But the impact of one of the sudden gusts which might reach ninety m.p.h. on the broadside of a sheet of it was more than enough to lift a man off his feet. After a week-long struggle, we had got thirteen of the twenty-four sections in place, by lashing each plate loosely to the framework and clawing our way out along the latter, dragging the plates with us and moving only when there was a comparative lull.

It had to happen, eventually, that a gust should spring up unexpectedly and whip one of us off the precarious perch plate and all. It happened—to Bogol, of all people.

One moment he was inching his way along a swaying radial strut, lying on top of the plate and always keeping one hand firmly gripping a support. The next instant a dust-devil leapt up below him, and he had been lifted off the rib and thrown twenty yards, ploughing into a soft bank of drifted sand. Those of us who could see what was happening held our breath and remembered the death call. We had only been here three months; time was still long.

When a couple of his crewmen ploughed their way over to him, they found he had got off lightly, though the loose plate, freed of his bulk on top of it, had been carried off somewhere into the distance like a sheet of paper fluttering in the breeze. Bogol, though, turned out to have slight concussion and a broken ankle, and he was well enough to be back on the job next day, perched atop a rock and lashed down like a pile of loose equipment.

Time passed. The cover went on eventually. Then, while half the crewmen sealed the outside with plastic lay, the rest of us took shovels and began the heart- and back-breaking business of getting the dust out of the inside. It got low enough to be syphoned out with an air-pump, but it did the pump no good at all, and we had to abandon the idea. We finally wound up using brooms, improvised out of spun glass matting and odd bits of metal and wire.

At the six-month mark, the dome was ready, and we marked that with another party—one came in retrospect to count the day-by-day progress of a trip by the number of parties. But the completion of the dome was a quarter of the job only. Compared, to what came next, it was interesting. Roughly speaking, the removal of six million cubic feet of Venusian rock implied cutting, finishing and facing with plastic twelve miles of ten foot by ten foot corridors underground. We had to feel the ground ahead of us every inch of the way. It was soul-destroyingly monotonous, and even by the time the first of the passages was finished, we were feeling the strain. It took us all of the next four months before the first of the subterranean air con-

verters was in place and ready to be started.

We marked that with a party, too. That was a good one. It was the first we'd been able to hold inside the big dome, instead of in our personnel domes, and the psychological effect of eating under what amounted to open sky—at least it was two hundred feet from horizon to horizon—made us happy in itself, even if we were eating off work benches.

Our pilot-cooks excelled themselves, opening the ceremonial cans, and we had a fine meal and plenty of beer and spirits. The fact that they were dehydrated and pumped up to size with distilled Venusian water didn't make them taste as bad as might have been expected.

After we'd eaten, Harnisch made a speech of sorts, and Bogol told a bunch of unprintable Polish folk tales; Matsukuo and another junior crewman held an impromptu wrestling match; and we sang songs to the accompaniment of Koona's finger-drumming on a tin of silicone grease.

It was getting quite late when I looked around the dome and noticed that Rory wasn't there. When I thought back, I realized I hadn't seen him for more than an hour. I felt a bit guilty at that, especially since all the older men were still here enjoying themselves. I'd been paying Rory less and less attention as the months passed, because once I'd convinced myself he wasn't a major liability to the rest of us, I must have developed a block against starting to worry again. When I came to think of it, even the youngest of the others here were seven or eight years older than he was, and I guessed he might feel a bit out of it.

I slipped out from the company and made my way over to the lock, fastening my suit and putting on my mask as I did so. The personnel dome which I shared with the rest of my crew was near the point at which we had landed, and it was a good walk, so I didn't reach it till half an hour later. Making as little noise as possible, in case Rory was asleep, I slipped through the lock and went inside.

Rory was sitting on the edge of the unshipped acceleration couch which served as his bed, his face buried in his hands. On his knee, picture upwards, was a photograph. I recognized it—or rather, I recognized the face it showed. All of a sudden I felt very ill indeed. I wanted to run a long way.

He didn't seem to have noticed me, so I coughed. He sat up with a jerk, and I saw that his eyes were inflamed and red.

The movement knocked the photo to the floor, and he reached hastily for it. He said, "Hullo, Mr. Higgins. Turning in?"

He tried hard to seem carefree, but it was a lousy act.

I was at a loss for words at first. I said, trying to sound casual, "No. I just came over to see if you were all right." My voice sounded uncertain in my ears.

"Me? Hell, yes!" he declared.

"In a pig's arse you are," I said crudely. I shucked off my oxygen mask and opened my suit. Then I sat down on the bed opposite him and indicated the photograph.

"Lula Graham?" I said.

"You know her?" he said in surprise, coloring. He put the picture aside, face down, on the coverlet.

"Yes, I know her." I did only too well. "You're in trouble, Rory. Want to tell me?"

Really, it was appallingly simple when I thought of it. I'd swallowed the story of wanting to follow in his father's footsteps, because it was a half-truth—his father had been killed on the first Venus trip. But that wasn't the actual reason he'd signed on for this trip. It was merely the first, and by a long way the best-paid, which had come up after he graduated, and when you're twenty-one (I'd found out his real age a while back) and desperately in love, time can mean a lot.

The girl was Lula Graham, of course. I recalled vaguely that she was about his age, though I had never stuck my neck out in her direction. I knew, though, that she had a weakness for XTE's; Jules was not the only one she'd been taken with.

Logic: he was not well off; he was head over heels in love with a girl who was an heiress to one of the biggest fortunes in history. If he married her, it might appear he wanted her money. His solution was to do this tour on Venus, stack up a bank balance of his own, and go back in triumph to claim his bride. He was quite certain she'd still be waiting. Apparently, they knew each other pretty well. And, of course, Boss Graham didn't know a thing about it. I would always have given him credit for having sense.

Honor is the damnedest thing.

It might work, at that, assuming Lula had been slandered to me. But even if it did, it stank to high heaven in my nostrils, because there's a very good reason for the "no attachments" clause in an XTE contract. Emotional fixation and complete and utter loneliness just don't go together.

I was scared stiff.

Finally I clapped him on the shoulder. I didn't need to fake sincerity when I said, "Rory, you're the damn best first-timer I've met in four trips. If you're still worrying about the death-call catching up on you, I'll tell you this: I'd back anyone else on the project—myself included—to make his final mistake first."

He looked up at me gratefully and nodded.

I left him there after telling him to go get some sleep. It was all I could do. It wasn't enough. Nothing short of shipping him straight back to Earth would solve the problem for good, and that was impossible. We'd need all the three remaining ships we had—one had been cannibalized to make the dome-ribs—to get ourselves out of here. I dressed up again and went back outside.

For a few minutes I just looked

at Venus and thought what a lousy planet it must be to die on. Then I started back towards the big dome, hoping everyone hadn't gone to sleep. During the walk, I found myself doing something I had never thought I would fall into—thinking of a woman. Elise, to be exact, whom I'd successfully forgotten since the trip began. I shut the memory tightly out of my mind again.

I was lucky. When I reached the big dome, I found only a few people had gone, and Jules and Harnisch, the two men I wanted to see, were playing cards on a bench which still bore the scars left by the dust-pump. They had just finished dealing a new hand when I came up. Jules picked up his cards and inspected them critically.

I glanced around the dome. The only other people left were playing dice half-heartedly on the ground a good twenty feet away.

"Anything?" said Harnisch as I came up.

"Three cards," said Jules. "Good?"

"Sorry. I've got a hundred aces and three cards," said Harnisch. He marked something on a scratch pad beside him. Then he looked up and caught sight of me.

"Hullo, Jorge. Thought you'd gone to bed."

I pulled up a chair and sat down. "Go on playing as if I was just kibitzing," I said softly. "I've rather a problem on my hands, and it wouldn't do if it got around."

Jules shot me a keen glance, but he had enough sense to keep silent. They played a couple of tricks before Harnisch said, "Well?"

"You know Rory?" I was having trouble finding words.

"Of course, we know Rory," said Jules. "He'll make a good XTE yet."

"Stoeck," said Harnisch, laying down another card. He reached for the scoresheet again. "What's wrong with him?"

"He won't be making another trip. He's in love with Lula Graham. He intends to marry her on the profit out of this trip. Go on playing, Jules, and for God's sake don't shout it all over the dome."

Jules laid down another card distractedly, and Harnisch gathered the trick. He said, "Are you sure?"

"Positive," I assured him. I told them what I had just heard from the boy himself.

"That's nasty for two reasons," said Harnisch when I had finished. He played another card. "The first one is the obvious one: with an emotional fixation like that, he may break when we near the end of the trip. The second is—"

"The second is that we all know Lula Graham," finished Jules.

I looked at him steadily. "Is she really as wild as you like to tell people?"

"Yes, Jorge. I'm afraid she honestly is."

They finished their game in silence.

"Last trick is five points," said Jules at length, and began to count

his score. Harnisch did the same abstractedly.

"Eighteen," said Jules sadly. "Look out, that's the Nell you're throwing away, and I think you've counted the Bauer as an ordinary jack."

Harnisch nodded and started again.

"Well, what do you want us to do about it, Jorge?" said Jules.

Harnisch turned his pale blue eyes on me and mutely repeated the question.

I shrugged. "Nothing," I said helplessly. "I just thought you ought to know."

"That's me over the thousand," said Harnisch, toting up the scores. "That's me over the thousand. Yes." He looked at Jules, his face set, expressionless. "You're eight hundred and six. All right?"

I left them to it.

Once I knew, my nervousness became worse and worse. I hadn't even felt so bad on my first trip. All through the slow measure of days that melted one into another, marked only by the fractional progress of the tunnels into the bedrock, I found my mind tied up with the question of Rory.

He was a good actor, I had to admit. He kept his feelings under wraps; never again did he let as much slip as he had that night. Except for a permanent air of strain which you didn't notice unless you looked closely, he gave no sign of the—terror, almost—that must have been building up in him. But it wasn't good. You can't bottle up a desire like that for two and a half years without ending up by having an obsession.

In his mind, it must always have been: suppose it's me, after all? Here's twelve — fifteen — eighteen months gone by, and still we've had only minor casualties: a broken leg, a case or two of silicosis, caught before harm was done. They told us one of us might die! We're all still here—that one may be myself, I may have wasted my life and all my hopes may have gone for nothing . . .

I had it, too. Not that I was worried over dying. But I kept thinking back to the time in the trip boss's office back at Intercon, and heard in retrospect Harnisch saying, "God help you, Jorge—you'll never be able to live with yourself again!"

I watched Rory like a mother hen with her first brood.

We reached and passed the twenty-month mark. Two-thirds of the job gone; seven of the air-converters in place, work in progress on the retaining wall which woud mark out a patch of shelter for the experimental biochemists on the second trip to plant their mutated vegetation. Somehow, without realizing it, we seemed to have picked up a few days ahead of schedule, and even the monotonous keening of the wind and the interminable, eternal driving of the dust could not take the edge off the first faint stirring of hope that maybe we were going to make it sooner than we had been told.

The crews alternated on work under the shelter of the dome and exposed to the elements, once we began work on the outside walls. After the struggle to place and anchor the roughly shaped boulders in the teeth of the gale, it came as relaxation to bend to the cutters and the plastic spreader in the tunnels. I had the bad luck to be working with my crew when the first really bad blow we had yet met jumped up, almost a mile from the dome and exposed on a ridge of rock towards the seldom-seen masts of our big antenna.

At first, it wasn't so bad, but when I'd seen Matsukuo, the lightest of my crewmen, knocked sprawling three times in a row by chance blasts, I edged my way around to the next team's position and spoke to Rinaldo Curtis, the boss. We turned to battening down the equipment, and dived for shelter. After a few minutes, Jules brought in his crew also, and we huddled in the slight protection of an outcropping boulder and wondered how long this was going on.

We'd lost almost an hour's work before we saw a shadowy figure struggling towards us from the nearest personnel dome. He half fell into the middle of our group, and when we'd picked him up, we found it was the pilot of the command ship—a man called Grigorov.

"What in hell are you doing out in this?" demanded Curtis, astonished.

We pieced it together between roars of the wind. Apparently it was time for the daily report to the orbital ship overhead, and though the powerful beam from the latter had come through on time, they couldn't get any answer out of us.

"Wind must have brought the antenna down," said Curtis judiciously. "That's a nuisance, if you like."

"You're telling me!" Grigorov confirmed. "If we can't get back in touch with them, they're likely to come down to see what's happened, and that'd use up their emergency fuel supply."

Jules leaned cautiously out of the shelter of the rock. "I think the wind's dropped," he said. "The best thing we can do is leave the work on the wall for the time being. I'll take the sandhog and reconnoitre the damage. It won't take more than half an hour. Then, when I get back, we can run the crews out there and have the masts up in no time."

"It won't be no time unless the wind goes down more than this," I pointed out.

"Doesn't matter. I'll be safe inside the hog."

He got to his feet, and stood swaying against the gale. "Yes, it's definitely letting up. I'll see you later."

He strode off into dimness, head well down, while we got our equipment together again and went out in ones and twos to survey the situation.

We'd hardly made up our minds to go back to work, however, when

the storm started over, and drove us running for cover. Within ten minutes, we couldn't see each other, though we sat within arm's reach, for the blinding swirl of the sand.

We squatted and tried to sleep. Talking was impossible.

After an hour had gone by, I felt a slap on my back and turned to see Rory leaning towards me, indistinct in the murk. He put his face-mask close to my ear and shouted, "How about Jules?"

I yelled something reassuring in reply, about the sandhog being sealed and safe, but I wasn't as sure as I hoped I sounded. The sandhog was very heavy, and very tough; it wouldn't be overset by the gale, and it had built-in homing devices. But if anything did go wrong, it was the only hog we had, because it was so massive and because fuel was bulky and hard to transport.

I sat and chewed over the idea until the storm really did start to die down, to a point where we could converse again. We moved out and began to retrieve our equipment from under drifted dust, and examined the damage done to our unfinished wall. But Jules did not return.

Two hours after he went out, I called Curtis and suggested we stop work and go look for him, roping ourselves together in case of more bad weather. We strung the combined memberships of our three teams out across a quarter-mile front, and headed in the direction of the rhomboid antenna. We had covered almost half the distance when I felt the tug on the rope which meant someone had found him, and passed it along. Slowly, we circled in on the looming bulk of the sandhog. It was half-buried, and the first arrivals had barely finished scraping the lock clear when I came up. Curtis detached himself from the rope and went in.

He was inside only long enough to look round. Then he pushed his way out again, shaking his head. I went up to him, demanding what was wrong.

"The main shaft of the turbine's fractured," he told me. "He must have got out and tried to make it back on foot. The fool!"

We never saw Jules again. We searched all that day and most of the night, until we were dead on our feet, but the dust covered everything, and he hadn't been carrying enough metal to give us a blip on the sonar. We could picture him, stranded by the breakdown of the hog, which had been run for almost two years without trouble, confidently getting to the ground and starting out during that deceptive lull, back to the big dome, and somehow—somewhere—in the howling of the wind and the battering of the sand, falling, never to rise again.

We were used to the shadow of death. To XTE's it is the very stuff of life. But we missed him, and in our own way we mourned him for as long as we could spare from the job.

And yet that was the fulfilment of destiny. It was the offering to

Kali, the blood-price, the sacrifice to the wind. Beneath our sorrow we were all—despite ourselves—that much happier. The Reaper had his harvest; he would not come again.

The relief, which none of us would have dared to admit, showed itself in our work. We went ahead faster. People began cutting corners, secure in their trust of the mechanical computers and the safety factor of our plan which had combined to call one death this trip. The one who was most relieved, of course, was Rory. I knew he felt the guilt of that relief more strongly than any of us, but I watched him and saw that the burden of his worry had been lightened, and he was less tense, less nervy, than before. My own concern for him lessened as a result—in a way I hadn't noticed, until one day just past the twenty-four month mark.

By then, the big dome had a lived-in air. We no longer used the personnel domes except for sleeping, and lived with our work. The tunnels were three-quarters dug, and the grouting of them with plastic was going ahead smoothly. I was standing watching my crew setting one of the bulky air converters in place on its bed, shouting an occasional correction, when I felt a touch on my arm.

I turned; it was Harnisch.

"I want a word with you, Jorge," he said. "Come with me into the dome."

I followed him up the smooth square passage and out under the smooth plastic surface of the dome.

"Looks almost like home, doesn't it?" he said.

"Blue sky suits my taste better," I answered. "What is it, Hans?"

"I don't like to tear off a crew boss where his men can hear me, Jorge. That's why I had you come here. Have you stopped worrying about Rory Green?"

"Why, yes," I agreed, puzzled. "Not entirely, of course. But since Jules—" I left the rest of it hanging in the air.

Harnisch nodded. "Yes. Since Jules. I budgeted for accidents on this trip, Jorge, but not for plain unadulterated human stupidity." His voice remained perfectly level, but his tone was contemptuous.

"What on earth—?" I began.

"You know what I mean, Jorge. That boy Rory comes pretty close to worshipping you now. I don't think you've been deliberately playing the part of the hero to him—I think it's just the way you've taken an interest in him and watched over him. Either way, the result is the same: he's taken you for an example.

"But if you've stopped worrying about him, I haven't! What do you think he's going to do when he sees you going around sticking your neck out the way you have been these past couple of months? I've had to bawl out half a dozen men since Jules went for taking risks, but I never thought I'd have to do it to a crew boss. Where's your oxygen mask? I know, you put it down somewhere because it was getting in the way and

there's good air in here. What would happen if the wind got in under the lashings?"

I felt my face burning, but I knew he was right. I said, "I'm sorry, Hans. I suppose I'd been worrying so much over Rory I got out of the habit of worrying about myself."

"Possibly. But that's not the only thing I've noticed. There's fluorine in the plastic lay we're spreading. Who told you you could handle it with gloves?"

I glanced down and found that there was a big charred patch on the palm of my left gauntlet.

"On top of that, after Jules went, I ordered everyone to carry a compass whenever they left the dome—even if they were only going back to their quarters. You came over here this morning without yours. I know. I just found it on your locker." He held out one of the little standard gyro-compasses which had been issued for the trip. We should have thought of them before.

I said slowly, "But that isn't mine, Hans! Look!" I took out my own and showed it to him. "I found that one on the floor of the dome last night and took it with me, meaning to ask around this morning and find out who dropped it, but it slipped my mind."

"Well, I'll withdraw that," said Harnisch. "But whoever lost it ought to have raised hell. Here—take it and find the owner, and give him a bawling out. And if it was Rory—well . . ."

I took the compass without a word.

It was Rory's, of course. I should have guessed.

Once the first fear of impending death had flushed away, I should have known it would be replaced by something more subtle. It can get tiring to concentrate for thirty months solid simply on staying alive, but when you're in XTE work, it just has to be done. I kicked myself thoroughly for not knowing that, especially when Rory had something else preying on his mind. I watched him and myself both after that, even when time went by and the work stayed ahead of schedule.

Our materiel losses remained well within the thirty per cent estimate, though the death call had been a hundred per cent filled. We had only occasional mishaps—as when one man put down a bundle of steel strutting during the repair of the radio masts, forgot to mark the place, and couldn't find them under the dust when he returned; and the time we lost a complete air converter and a hundred yards of tunnel because of a pocket of compressed gas in the rock which had somehow slipped our echo-sounder. But by and large we'd been much more successful than we had any right to be.

We were running so far ahead of schedule by the end of the twenty-eighth month that it looked as if we were going to be able to pull out in a good six weeks under the estimated time. We called a final party under the dome to mark the completion of

our surface walls. The following day we only had to set a couple more of the air converters in place, and we could start clearing up to go home. One thing marred the prospect—for some reason which we wouldn't be able to guess at until someone had made a decent study of Venusian meteorology, the wind had got up until our meters ran off the dial at a hundred and twenty miles an hour, and we were having to rely on the very speed of the blast to keep the dome clear. Fortunately, its curve was smooth, and gave dust no chance to settle in big enough quantities to put a strain on the ribs, but there were creakings and howlings all through our meal and the get-together afterwards, and we kept being interrupted by the thunderous noise of the storm. It wasn't only picking up dust, this time—it was throwing respectable chunks of rock.

Nonetheless, that wasn't our worry. The dome could take anything the planet had to offer; the walls were as strong as we could make them. The beacon was up, and the air converters were functioning. The next crews in would find living accommodation prepared and our surplus stores piled ready and waiting.

We weren't going to leave much of the liquor, though. We were putting that away where it would do most good.

It was getting late when I noticed that Rory, though he was making a gallant effort to keep up with us, was feeling the strain. His eyes kept drooping shut, and his head nodded from time to time.

"The best place for you, young man," I told him as severely as I could in my condition, which was well away, "is bed. I'll give you a hand back to the quarters."

He was too tired to argue. But when I had him safely inside the personnel dome again, and had made sure he was sober enough to get to bed without help, he stopped me as I turned to leave.

"Jorge!"

I turned back. "Yes, what is it?" I'd managed to cure him of calling me Mr. Higgins.

"I hear we may be pulling out in a few days. That true?"

"Once the job's finished, which it will be tomorrow, there's no reason for us to stay. You get paid for the full tour, if that's what's worrying you."

"Thanks, Jorge," he said. "G'night!"

When I'd managed to dress up again for the trip back to the big dome, I looked back one final time. He'd taken the photo of Lula Graham out of his locker and put it proudly on one of the supporting ribs. I smiled, a bit wryly. There wasn't any further need to worry about that—not until he got back to Earth, at least. And then—

Time would tell. I said nothing further, but left the dome.

When I got back to the party, they were singing—as usual. All the old stand-bys for such times were trotted out, one by one, in every language

represented: *Frankie and Johnny* in Japanese, from Matsukuo, *Muss i' Denn, Muss i' Denn, Auprès de ma Blonde*—Bogol's version of that started a downward trend which passed through the mildly unrepeatable ones like *Oh, Sir Jasper, Do Not Touch me!* and a blasphemous parody of *La Golondrina* which Pereira sang and I translated for the benefit of the non-Spanish-speaking men present—and wound up with the really dirty ones like *Martian Jill* and the one they call the National Anthem of the Guild of XTE's—*Sweet Susie from South Carolina.* I never knew just how bad the last one could really be until I heard Koona punctuating the double meanings with slaps of his open hand on his makeshift drum.

We were just giving Susie a second going-over when there was an interruption. Something slapped the dome—once; twice—with a sound like a fist driven into a bag of flour, heavy and yielding. We ducked automatically, but the dome held.

At first, I for one was too fuddled to realize what had happened, but Harnisch looked across at Bogol. "That was a good-sized rock," he said softly. "This is really a blow."

Bogol nodded, his face tense and expectant. "If our work can stand that, it can take anything."

We waited, listening, in case it happened again, but it didn't, and gradually the singing began again. I didn't join in. I was looking up at the dome, trying to remember what I hadn't noticed—in which direction and in which order the slaps had sounded. The rock must have been bounced along like a ball of crumpled paper. As far as I could recall, it was running from *there* to *there* . . .

I suddenly had a slow cold feeling of disaster. A premonition, if you like, but since it had already happened, if it had happened, there wasn't much warning about it. I left the group without saying anything, crossed to the lock, and after what seemed like an age I was dressed and outside again.

I walked very slowly towards the personnel dome which had stood at the base of my ship. The wind tugged and tore at me, but I managed to keep my feet somehow. I could have gone faster, even. Somehow, I knew it wasn't worth trying.

When I got close enough to see through the dust, I found that the running, tumbling, rolling rock had driven straight through the wall of the dome.

I lifted up the fallen fabric slowly, awkwardly, with my thick gauntlets. I tossed aside the broken pieces of lockers and the scattered personal belongings which I found, letting the wind have them. I worked towards the far corner, where the outline of a still-upright bedstead held the plastic off the ground, tautly delineated by the driving gale. I got a corner of the plastic up from the ground, and the wind whipped under it, almost lifting me off my feet, but I seized the broken end of one of the firmly-anchored supporting ribs

and then—only then—turned my head down to look.

He lay half on, half off the bed, his mouth open in a choking gasp which had drawn in only useless carbon dioxide and nitrogen and the poisonous formaldehyde. He was quite dead.

In one of his outflung hands was something white, with ragged edges. I took it and turned it over. It was one corner of his photograph.

He at least received a proper funeral, not like Jules, who simply lay to mummify in the dust. We had to bury him inside the big dome, of course. We could never have dug a grave in the open air. But XTE's like to be near their work, so we laid his body under the last of the air converters to be put in, and wrote his epitaph in the almost everlasting plastic around it.

We fished out his official documents and found that he had been born in England, and failing any further information, we read the Church of England service over him. Harnisch, as trip boss, did the office.

As we stood in silence, bareheaded, oxygen masks at the ready, around the body, which for want of a shroud was covered with a piece of the torn personnel dome, I thought: at least it was not my fault, or his or anyone's.

Harnisch's voice handled the English poorly, but he was impressive. The sounds died away without echo in the wide dome. I had heard this service before, on Luna, and it had a *final* ring about it that I have never heard in anything else.

"We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can take nothing out," said Harnisch. The men about him shuffled quietly in the all-pervading dust.

I was waiting for something which I remembered. And finally it came:

"Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days: that I may be certified how long I have to live."

I saw the others stir. That one had gone home!

My mind started to ramble, not really hearing the words, only feeling their meaning. We've found the way to grant the psalmist's wish, I thought, and all it has done is teach us nothing is certain except the fact of death. And yet—

For the first time I saw what Jules had meant when he turned sour at my joke about the death call—so long ago.

"All our days are gone," said Harnisch. *"We bring our years to an end, as it were a tale that is told."*

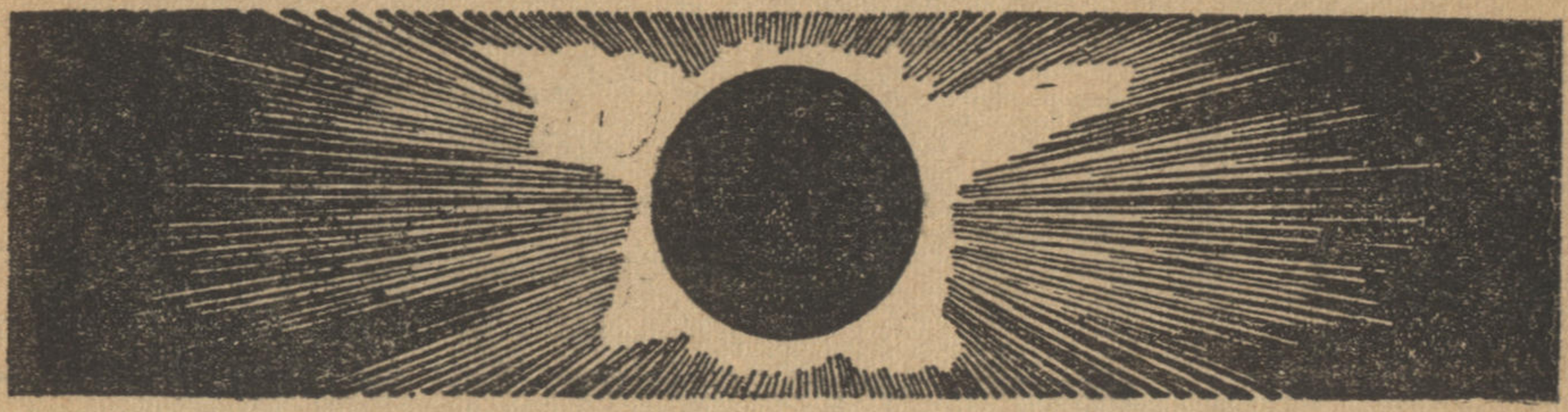
The tale of Rory Green has been told, I thought. Yet this too is a part of the price we have to pay. The blood-price. And it will not be long before all that is needful is paid.

I thought of the people in the telling of that tale: of Lula Graham, who had—in a way—killed Rory, and of myself and Jules. I thought of the honor that had made him come to Venus in search of a fortune so that he could marry. I thought that

in the end it might have been as well for Rory that he did not go back. Later, I knew it was so; but love and honor are not often logical.

"We therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

The plastic bed of the air converter covered the filled grave. We went about our tasks.



LIFE ON OTHER PLANETS?

THE GENESIS and evolution of life have followed a practically inevitable pattern everywhere, according to Dr. Melvin Calvin, the distinguished University of California chemist. Dr. Calvin, known for his pioneering work in probing the chemical processes of photo-synthesis, bases his statement on the knowledge accumulated in recent years about the primordial earth and its atmosphere,—the subsequent evolution of inorganic molecules into molecules of growing complexity,—and the final development of structures having the characteristics of life.

Observational scientific evidence suggests, he stated, existence of plant and animal life throughout the universe. These plants and animals—including man—probably exist on millions of earthlike planets in the known universe, and this known universe is far less than a millionth part of the unknown.

This life—these forms of life—must be roughly similar to earth forms. Assuming a principle of chemistry which must be about the same throughout creation, these forms would have vision and hearing. And there would be living forms capable, like man, of thinking.

Chemical knowledge is now great enough to assert with some certainty that evolution of chemicals up to the living cell has occurred in a predictable and inevitable pattern. If now the development of life both on earth and in the universe will follow this identical pattern, we may keep in mind Dr. Harlow Shapley's estimate that there are in the known universe about 100 million planets which started with conditions like those on earth—having a similar atmosphere and carbon content and being a comparable distance from a star like the sun. We may then find "cellular life, perhaps pre-cellular life and post-human life" in many of these other planets. And still other forms of matter, living but foreign to our present experience.

his brother's weeper

by . . . Robert Silverberg

It would take ten seconds to get to the planet Marathon. And it might take ten years —or a lifetime—to escape.

THE Deserializing Room at Cincinnati Spaceport was, Peter Martlett thought, a little on the bleak side. It was no more than twenty feet square, illuminated by a single hooded fluorobulb, and was bare of all ornament. In the center of the floorspace stood the awesome bulk of the Henderson Deserializer. Two white-smocked technicians flanked it, staring eagerly at Martlett, who had just entered. Behind him sounded the noisy hum of the waiting room he had quitted. There was a lot of deserializing going on today.

"Mr. Martlett?"

Martlett nodded tensely. He was more than a little leery of submitting himself to the Deserializer, especially after what had happened to his brother Michael. But the travel-agency people had assured him that that had been a fluke, one-in-a-million, one-in-a-billion—

"May we have your passport?" said the thinner and more efficient-looking of the two technicians. Martlett surrendered it, along with his accident claim waiver, his identification ticket, his departure permit, and the pre-stamped entrance visa that would allow him to visit

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Robert Silverberg, Chairman of the Hydra Club, New York's SF writers' group, is the author of the recently published STEPSONS OF TERRA *(Ace), the much discussed* THE THIRTEENTH IMMORTAL, MASTER OF LIFE AND DEATH, *and* INVADERS FROM SPACE *(all Ace), and of other works.*

Marathon, where his brother had gone to a hideous death the month before.

Heads almost touching, the pair of them riffled quickly through Martlett's papers, nodded in agreement, and gestured for him to take a seat in the Deserializer. One of the technicians produced a dark enamelled square box a foot on each side and proceeded to attach Martlett's documents to it with stickons. Moistening his lips, Martlett watched. In a very few minutes, he knew, he himself would be inside that box.

The other deserializing technician strapped Martlett firmly into the Deserializer and lowered a metal cone over his head. In a soothing voice he said, "Of course you understand the approximate nature of the Deserializer, sir—"

"Yes, I—"

Ignoring the outburst, the technician continued what was obviously a memorized speech delivered before each departure. "The Henderson Deserializer makes possible instantaneous traffic between stars. The deserializing field induces distortion of the four coordinate axes of your worldline, removing you temporarily from contact with the temporal axis and—for convenience in storage—somewhat compressing you along the three spatial axes."

"You mean I'll be put in that little box?"

"Exactly, sir. You and your luggage will enter this container and you will be placed aboard a spaceship bound for the planet of your destination. Ah—Marathon, I believe. Although the journey to Marathon requires two hundred eighty-three objective years, for you it will be a matter of seconds—since, of course, on your arrival you will enter another deserializing field that will restore you to your temporal axis at a point only seconds after you had left it on Earth!"

"In short," the other technician chimed in, "you enter a box here, are shipped to Marathon, and are unpacked there—total elapsed time, ten seconds. If you choose to return to Earth immediately on arrival, you could do that. If you felt like it, you could make nearly thirty round trips a minute, eighteen hundred an hour—"

"If I could afford it," Martlett said dryly. The round trip fare was nine hundred units, and it was making a considerable dent in his savings. But, of course, the Colonial Government of Marathon had asked him to make the trip, to settle his brother's unfinished affairs. And the shock of Michael's tragic death had been such that he had agreed at once to make the trip.

"Heh heh," chuckled the technician. "To be sure, eighteen hundred round trips *would* be on the costly side! Heh heh heh—"

The two technicians chuckled harmoniously, all the while bustling round Martlett and making adjustments in the complex network of

dials and levers that hemmed him in on all sides. He was just beginning to get annoyed at all the laughter when—

Whick!

—he found himself lying on a plush, well-padded couch in a room walled mostly with curving glass. The sun was in his eyes—bluish-purple sunlight. Green-tinted clouds drifted lazily in the auburn sky. Two smiling technicians in sheen-gray coveralls were nodding at him in smug satisfaction.

"Welcome to Marathon, Mr. Martlett."

Martlett licked his lips. "I'm here?"

"You are. Transshipped from Cincinnati Spaceport, Earth, aboard the good ship *Venus*. Today is the 11th of April, 2209, Galactic Standard Time."

"The same day I left Earth!"

"Of course, Mr. Martlett, of course! The Henderson Deserializer—"

"Yes, yes, I know," Martlett interjected hastily, forestalling yet another rendition of the Information for Travellers Speech. "I fully understand the process." He looked around. "I'm here on request of your Secretary for Internal Affairs, Mr. Jansen. It's about my brother—"

The word was ill-chosen. It triggered a strong reaction in the two deserializer men. They coughed and reddened and glanced obliquely over Martlett's head as if they were very embarrassed. Martlett pressed on undisturbed. "My brother Michael, who was a colonist here until his unfortunate death in a Deserializer accident last month. Do you know where I can find the Secre—"

"He's waiting outside to see you," said the short technician with the swerving nose.

"And we wish to assure you that this office has been cleared of all responsibility in the matter of your brother's—ah—disappearance," put in the tall one with the unconvincing yellow toupee.

Martlett stared at them sourly. "I'm not here to press charges," he said. "Just to settle my late brother's affairs."

He rose, feeling a bit stiff around the knees. Not surprising, he thought, considering he had just spent two hundred eighty-three objective years in an enamelled box one foot square. Gathering up his papers, he stepped out into the antechamber, discovering as he walked that Marathon's gravity was only about two thirds that of Earth. It was all he could do to keep himself from skipping. Skipping, he thought, would hardly look decorous on a man whose beloved brother had gone to an untimely death only five Galactic Standard Weeks before.

The Marathonian Secretary for Internal Affairs introduced himself as Octavian Jansen, a fact Martlett already knew. He was a tall, stoop-

shouldered man of dignified appearance and middle age. His office, he said, was within walking distance of the Arrivals Center, and so they walked there. Martlett enjoyed the springy sensation of walking at two-thirds grav. He threw his head back, breathing in the clean, fresh air. Overhead, colorful birds wheeled and screeched playfully. Swaying palmoid trees lined the streets. Marathon, Michael had often written to him, was nothing more or less than a paradise. Fertile soil, extravagantly satisfactory climate, no native carnivorous lifeforms bigger than caninoids and felinoids, and the women—!

Yes, the women! Michael had always had a good eye for the women, Martlett reflected.

Jansen's office was handsomely furnished. A brace of hunting trophies loomed on one wall, great lowering massive purple-skinned tri-horned heads: Marathon's largest lifeform, the ponderous, herbivorous, harmless hippopotamoids. Sleek freeform chairs faced the freeform onyx-topped desk. Martlett pulled one up.

Jansen said, "May I remark that you look astonishingly like your late brother, Mr. Martlett?"

"Many people thought we were twins."

"You are the older brother?"

"By three years. I'm 30. Michael is—was—27."

For a moment Jansen's eyes dropped respectfully. "Your brother was very popular here, Mr. Martlett. From the day he joined our colony two years ago, he was a leader of the community. And I needn't tell you how much we admired his music! Only next month our local symphony orchestra was to have presented an all-Martlett concert: the Second Symphony, the Theremin Concerto, and a piece for strings and synthesizer called simply *Amor*."

Martlett nodded. Michael's success here was part of an old story. Michael, no more handsome than he, no taller and no more muscular, had always been the gregarious brother, surrounded by admirers and adored by women. While he, Peter, the older brother and presumably the wiser, was instead regarded as a sort of bumbling foster-uncle, not too clever, who needed help in all he undertook. And so it had gone. In a world where a serious composer stood no chance at all against the symphonic computers, Michael had won indelible musical fame at the age of twenty-three. Two years later, he had pocketed a fat fellowship and departed for the pleasant world of Marathon to continue his composing, far from the jarring dissonances of Terran life.

And now, at twenty-seven, he was dead. The older brother, shy, uncertain Peter, had the task of gathering together the reins Michael had abruptly dropped, collecting his belongings, settling his debts.

"Has the concert been cancelled?" Martlett asked.

"Oh, no," Jansen said. "It's being done as a memorial. Your brother was to have conducted himself, but we've hired someone else. It's to be given on the fifteenth of May. I do hope you'll attend."

"Sorry," Martlett said brusquely. "I wasn't planning to stay on Marathon more than a week or two—just long enough to do whatever needs to be done about Michael's affairs. By the middle of May I'll be back on Earth, I'm afraid."

"As you wish, of course." Jansen shrugged mournfully. "I've taken the liberty of assembling a portfolio of bills that your brother left unpaid at the time of his death."

Martlett took the bulky folder from him and opened it. The uppermost bill was from the Marathon Deserialized Instantaneous Transportation Corporation: 110 units charged for a journey from Marathon to the neighboring world of Thermopylae, ten units down and six months to pay.

"I hardly think *this* bill needs to be paid," Martlett said, nudging it across the desk to Jansen.

The secretary looked at it, flushed, and said quickly, "Ah—of course not—an error, Mr. Martlett—"

An error indeed, Martlett thought. That journey had never been completed. Michael had entered the Deserializer on Marathon, and ostensibly was to have arrived on Thermopylae, ninety million miles away, almost at once. But the Deserializer box had been empty when it reached Thermopylae. Somewhere in mid-journey Michael had disappeared, his compressed and deserialized body shunted off irrevocably into some parallel continuum, into that dark bourn from which no traveller returns.

The law in such cases—they were one-in-a-billion occurrences—was plain. The missing party was to be considered legally dead. No one had ever returned who had disappeared in mid-jaunt via Deserializer.

Martlett thumbed through the rest of the bills. They were small ones, but there were plenty of them—a heavy liquor tab, five florists' bills, an invoice from a men's clothier and a larger one from a woman's outfitter, and so on. Evidently Michael had not lost his old touch with the women, Martlett thought.

The total, he computed roughly, was in the vicinity of three thousand units. He could afford the outlay; the royalties from Michael's music, whose performance rights he had automatically inherited, would reimburse him soon enough.

"Very well," Martlett said. "I'll take care of all these matters right away. Now, if there are any other—"

"Yes," Jansen said gravely. "I believe you should know there was a woman. A — well — ah — your brother's—fiancee."

"His *what?* Why, Michael used

to swear day and night he'd never let himself get trapped into marrying!"

"Be that as it may, this woman claims he made a definite promise to her. I think you ought to pay a call on her—ah—in the interests of good form, you know."

Her name was Sondra Bullard. Martlett went to visit her that evening, after he had finished installing himself in his brother's palm-oid-ringed fourteen-room villa. She lived half a continent away—Marathon was somewhat on the sprawling side—and Martlett found it necessary to charter an aircab to get there.

Sondra Bullard's dwelling was modest compared to Michael's—a ranch-type affair that rambled over a few acres of grassy meadow at the foot of a handsome plunging waterfall. A gleaming jetcar jutted from the open garage. Martlett wondered in passing if Michael had bought her these things. He had always been extravagant.

Feeling a little uneasy, Martlett strode up the flag-stoned walk and stepped into the green scanner-field that glowed round the door. A chime sounded within, calling Miss Bullard's attention to the fact that she had a visitor; a moment went by, and then a piercing shriek was distinctly audible.

Martlett felt perspiration begin to bead his forehead. Before he could give way completely to alarm and turn to run, the front door opened and Miss Sondra Bullard peered out at him. She was dressed unsurprisingly in black, and her face was astonishingly pale. She was also, Martlett noted, quite lovely. Michael's taste had always been impeccable.

"You're—Michael's—*brother?*"

"That's right. Peter Martlett. I called earlier, you remember."

"Yes. Won't you come in?" She spoke mechanically, chopping each word off into an individual sentence.

Once he was inside she said, "You—look very much like your brother, you know."

"So I've been told."

"I was frightened when I saw your image in the scanner field." She laughed in self-deprecation. "I guess I thought it was Michael at the door. Silly of me, but you two *did* look so much alike. Were you twins?"

"I was three years the elder."

"Oh."

After a few lame moments of silence the girl said, "Drink?"

"Yes, please. Something mild."

She dialed a filtered rum for him and a stiff highball for herself. While he sipped, Martlett surreptitiously looked around. A lot of cash had been tossed into these furnishings, and it seemed to him he recognized his brother's fine hand—and money—in the decorating scheme. He felt a momentary current of anger; this girl, he thought, had been *milking* Michael—!

Oh, no, came the immediate im-

ner denial. Michael had been nobody's fool. He wasn't susceptible to gold-digging.

Hesitantly Martlett said, "Secretary Jansen was telling me you knew Michael quite well."

"We were engaged," she said immediately.

Since he had been warned, Martlett was able to avoid the double-take. "Odd. Michael never wrote to me about it. Had you known him long?"

"Six months. We became engaged nine weeks ago. We were supposed to be married the first week in June." Her lower lip trembled a bit. "And then—I got the phone-call—they told me—"

A tear rolled down her lovely cheek, and she dabbed at it. Martlett felt uncomfortable. Why, this was almost like paying a call on a new widow! She was in mourning and all.

He said, "I know how you must feel, Miss—ah—Miss Bullard. Michael was a wonderful person—so dynamic, so full of life—"

"And now he's *gone*!" she wailed. "Poof! Vanished off into some other continuum, they told me! Living on some horrible world without air somewhere, maybe!"

"They say it's a quick and painless way to die," Martlett ventured. The words did not soothe her.

The single tear became a torrent; her well-equipped bosom heaved with convulsive sobs. Watching her, Martlett's lips twitched in dismay. Open display of emotion had always been a tribulation for him to witness. He himself felt grief at his brother's passing, certainly, but he had never given way to—to this—

The sobbing became contagious. "I loved him," she moaned. "And he's gone! Gone!" She groped out blindly, fumbled her way onto his shoulder, and let her emotions go. Martlett felt his eyes growing misty at the thought of this girl who had built her whole life around his undeniably remarkable brother, and who now faced nothing but emptiness. Before he knew it, he was crying too.

They sobbed on each other's shoulders for a few moments; then, the fit passing, they straightened up and looked at each other. Her gray eyes were red-rimmed.

"You're so much like him," she murmured. "So tall, so handsome, so—*understanding*."

He felt his face reddening, and nervously moistened his lips. The grief had seemed to fade from her features, and now some other emotion took its place—an emotion Martlett, in thirty years of bachelorhood, had come to recognize with an expert's skill.

Disengaging himself from her, he rose. "I'll have to leave you now, Miss Bullard. It's been a difficult day for me, you understand. But I'il try to see you again before I return to Earth. We've both lost someone very dear to us. Good night, Miss Bullard."

"Why don't you call me Sondra?"

He smiled uneasily. "Good night—Sondra."

"Good night, Peter."

Martlett slept that night in his brother's bed, which was a palatial triple-size monstrosity with a pink velvet canopy and a soothing built-in tranquilophone. Martlett found the murmuring wordless sounds of the tranquilophone distracting, but there was no way to shut the thing off, and finally he fell asleep despite it. He dreamed odd dreams and woke feeling unrefreshed in the morning.

Michael's robot butler had prepared a meal for him, Martlett discovered. He wondered whether the robot was aware that the person in the house was *not* his master. Probably not; so far as the robot was concerned, the human of the house *looked* like Mr. Martlett, answered to the name, and therefore *was* Mr. Martlett. That he was the wrong Mr. Martlett did not seem to matter. Robot brains were not geared to such niceties.

Martlett ate thoughtfully, taking his meal on the veranda overlooking Michael's private lake. Sweet-smelling morning breezes drifted toward him. Michael had written that "it is springtime all the year round on Marathon," and he had been telling the truth. Although this was the first time Martlett had visited one of the colony-worlds, or indeed had left Earth for any reason at all, he found it hard to imagine a planet more lovely than this one. It would almost be a pity, once he had concluded his business here, to have to return to crowded, untidy Earth once again and go back to the weary business of constructing mindless video jingles.

Better, he thought, to stay here in this eternal springtime—

No.

He shut the thought off promptly. Whatever he did, he did *not* intend to become a colonist on Marathon. His place was on Earth. Let escapists like Michael flee to this utopian planet; doubtlessly laziness and indolence triumphed here, and in a few short generations decadence would be rampant.

The butler came slithering out on the veranda, rolling noiselessly on its treads. "There is a phone-call for you, Master."

"For me? Can I take it out here?"

The robot registered confusion for an instant. "Surely you know that there is no pickup connection out here, Mr. Martlett?"

"Of course. Silly of me to forget that!"

He followed the robot inside and, tugging his dressinggown tight around himself, entered the camera field of the vidphone. There was a woman's face on the screen—a rather attractive face, Martlett observed, blue-eyed and framed in lustrous blonde hair.

"Good morning," he said, in a flat, noncommittal voice.

"Oh—you look so much like him!"

"Yes. We almost looked like twins," Martlett said, a trifle edgily. "But I was three years his elder."

"You must be Peter, then. He told me so much about you!"

"Did he? How kind of him. May I ask who it is that I am—"

"Didn't he send you my photo?"

Martlett frowned. "Not that I recall—and I'm sure that I *would* recall, if he had. I'm afraid he didn't."

"Strange," the girl said. "He said he was mailing you a tridim of me. I'm Joanne Hastings."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Hastings," Martlett said blankly, wondering who Joanne Hastings might be.

She furrowed her forehead prettily. "I said, *Joanne Hastings*. You mean Michael didn't tell you *that* either? Obviously he didn't, because you don't seem to recognize my name at all."

An ominous premonition clogged Martlett's throat. In a hushed voice he said, "I'm afraid Michael didn't tell me anything about you, Miss Hastings."

"Call me Joanne. I am—was—Michael's fiancee. We were going to be married in June, you see."

"Oh. Oh, yes. Yes, I see, Miss Hastings. You and he—were going to get married—in June—"

Martlett closed his eyes briefly, and the image of Sondra Bullard wandered unbidden across the inside of his eyelids. Sondra was a brunette. This girl was a blonde. And Michael had been engaged to both of them.

Suddenly Martlett understood many things he had not been cognizant of before. He realized why Michael had abruptly taken that ill-fated journey to Thermopylae. That it had ended tragically was unfortunate, Martlett reflected—but the Deserializer accident *had* saved Michael from a devilishly nasty dilemma, anyway. Both Joanne and Sondra seemed the predatory kind. Had Michael reached Thermopylae safely, they no doubt would have pursued him there—and from there to Mycenae, and from Mycenae to Thebes, and from there to any other world to which he might flee. Poor Michael! Some of Martlett's grief abated. Had Michael lived, he would never have escaped the clutches of the two females to whom he had so inadvisedly pledged his troth.

With tenderness Martlett said, "I understand, Miss Hastings. His death must have been a dreadful blow to you. As it was to all of us, of course; I loved my brother dearly."

Before he had finished his conversation with Joanne Hastings, he found himself accepting a dinner invitation to her ranch eight hundred miles southward, for the next night. She wanted to talk to him

about Michael, and it would have been churlish of him to refuse. He tactfully resolved not to mention to her the matter of Michael's *other* fiancee.

Who called in mid-morning, while Martlett was busily wading through the backlog of Michael's unpaid bills and scribbling checks on the veranda. He had dealt with about half of them already; the expenditure so far had been nearly twenty-five hundred units. His rough estimate of three thousand altogether had clearly been inaccurate. But Michael's symphonies would bring royalties forever, Martlett told himself consolingly, as he crossed the veranda and headed for the nearest vidphone at the robot's beck.

Sondra was inconsolably lonely, she sobbed to him, and wanted him to visit her for lunch that day. "You remind me so much of Michael," she confided. "When you were with me last night I almost felt *he* was here!"

Obligingly, Martlett chartered a jetcar once again and flew to her villa for lunch. The visit dragged on until evening, and when Marathon's single big golden moon had spiralled into the sky she insisted he stay for dinner as well. He began to sense that getting Michael's bills paid might take longer than he had expected, at this rate.

He succeeded in disentangling himself by mid-evening, and flew home deep in brooding thought. The girl seemed perfectly willing to accept him as a substitute for Michael. Most remarkable, he thought. True, there was a physical resemblance so great as to be uncanny, considering the difference in their ages, but as far as personality went they were vastly different. Michael had been flamboyant, witty, spectacular and even a trifle sensational; his older brother tended more toward introspection and sobriety, and most of Michael's women had accordingly shown little interest in Peter's existence. But things seemed to be different with Sondra Bullard, Martlett reflected.

And with Joanne Hastings as well, he discovered the following night, when he kept his dinner engagement with her. He had spent the day in conference with a few of Michael's creditors, people who had neglected to present bills to Secretary Jansen and who now hastened to offer them to Peter.

There was a matter of four hundred units for piano repairs, and three hundred more for music-paper. A liquor and wine merchant had sold Michael five magnums of champagne, imported from Earth, fifty units apiece. And so on and so on. The tab was mounting; Martlett estimated he had paid out nearly five thousand units to the creditors of his late brother in these two days, and he was a long way from finished. He wondered how long it would be before Michael's estate earned back five thousand units in royalties, not to mention the

nine hundred more it had cost him to come out here.

He was in a morbid frame of mind when he reached Joanne Hastings' ranch, but she soon dispelled his mood. She greeted him dressed in a gay and skimpy plastispray outfit that belied her recent loss, and there were cocktails waiting on a tray in the sunken living room.

"You *are* so much like Michael," she told him. "You have the same dark eyes, the same untidy hair, the same way of smiling—"

"Thank you," Martlett said uncertainly. He realized Michael would never have said merely *"Thank you"* in such a situation, but he admitted bleakly to himself that he was not Michael, no matter what these strange women seemed to think.

"It's odd Michael didn't tell you he was planning to marry," she said.

"He never confided much in me," Martlett replied. "Not about such matters, anyway."

"June eighth, it would have been." She sighed. "Well, now it's never to be. Mrs. Michael Martlett —you know, I used to spend hours practicing signing my name that way! But—well—"

A lump was beginning to form in Martlett's throat. She seemed so poised, so resigned now to Michael's being dead, and yet behind the outward mask he could plainly see how deeply she felt her loss. He said, "I wish there were something I could do for you, Miss Hastings—"

"Joanne."

"Joanne. But I can't bring Michael back, can I?"

"No," she agreed, after a moment's solemn thought. "No, you can't. All that talent lost in a moment! What a waste!"

"Yes," he said sadly. "What a waste."

She moved a bit closer to him on the couch, and he decided it would be impolite to edge away. She said, "You're *so* much like Michael, dear."

Dear? he wondered. What next?

He said, "You're upset, Miss—Joanne. Let me pour you another drink."

"Yes, do." She moved closer still. "And pour one for yourself."

Somehow it was not at all surprising when he discovered she had her arms around him, and was maneuvering toward him in a way that left him no alternative but to kiss her.

In the next few days, Martlett discerned a clear pattern taking shape, and it frightened him. Not a day went by without a call from one or both of Michael's fiancees, inviting him for dinner. And he was too innately polite to be able to decline their offers.

But, as he spent his days paying Michael's bills (the figure had mounted to seven thousand five hundred units now, and still the creditors arrived in fresh troops)

and his evenings sipping cocktails with Michael's betrotheds, he realized what was happening. Both girls—each unaware of the other's presence in the scheme of things—had evidently resolved that if they could not have Michael, they very well were going to have Michael's brother. Martlett was an acceptable substitute to them. Each was spinning a web for him, hoping to trap him into the matrimony he had successfully avoided for thirty consecutive years.

The thought frightened him.

He had come to Marathon to bury Michael, not to inherit his fiancees. It had been his plan to settle Michael's financial affairs, not his romantic ones. He fondly expected to return to Earth in a week or two, still a single man. But yet these girls seemed to be pinning their hopes on snaring him. With each passing day they took less care to hide their true intent.

"Do you still insist on going back to Earth when you've tidied up Michael's bills?" Sondra wanted to know.

"My leave was only for two weeks. I—"

"You could tell your employers you weren't coming back. There must be some advertising agency you could work for on Marathon. And we could live in Michael's villa—"

"We?"

She reddened. "Sorry, darling. Slip of the tongue. Have another martini, Peter. This Denebian vermouth is delightful."

Eight hours later he was a thousand miles away, consuming cognac in Joanne Hastings' marbled atrium. He had put off Sondra's increasingly more urgent proposals with vague delayers and demurs, but now Joanne was saying, "Peter, dear, you aren't *really* going back to Earth, are you?"

"As soon as I've finished what I came here to do," he said as stolidly as he could considering the amount of alcohol he had ingested that day.

"Which was?"

"To tidy up the loose ends of Michael's fabric of existence, so to speak," he said.

Her delicate eyebrows lifted a fraction of a millimeter. "But—*I'm* one of Michael's loose ends, darling!"

Martlett sighed wearily. "Let's not talk about it now, Joanne. Play that tape of Michael's symphony, would you?"

By midday of his ninth day on Marathon, Peter Martlett had at last concluded the job of settling the late Michael Martlett's affairs. All the bills were paid, including a three thousand unit mortgage payment on Michael's villa; the total damage had been just under fourteen thousand units, which had wiped out Martlett's savings entirely. Michael's banker had given him the comforting news that he could expect an income of from ten

to fifteen thousand units annually from Michael's musical compositions; the fame of a composer always increased immediately after his death, and in Michael's case the tragic circumstance was sure to create a galaxywide demand for his works.

There was merely the matter of Michael's fiancees to be settled before he left.

Martlett's ethical soul recoiled at the thought of ducking out and popping back to Earth via the Deserializer without even a good-bye, but he knew that was the only possible solution. If he risked calling either or both of them to tell them that he was leaving, he could be sure they would artfully ply their wiles and see to it that he remained on Marathon a while longer.

Women, he thought sourly. They bait their hooks with emotion and watch us wriggle when we're caught.

If he spoke to them, they would surely be able to make him stay. And if he stayed, the question of matrimony would inevitably come up. And—the premise followed in rigorous logical sequence—one or the other of the girls would suffer disappointment, while he himself would undergo the equally grave loss of his freedom.

He saw clearly why Michael had decided to bolt to Thermopylae. Lucky Michael had vanished en route, though! He had escaped both forever. And, as had happened so often in the past, it was Big Brother who had to stay around to face the music.

He considered the situation a while. The gentlemanly thing to do —well, there *was* no gentlemanly thing to do. He had both of his brother's women on his hands, and all he could do under the circumstances was run, and fast. Better to jilt both than one, he thought; that way neither would learn that there had been a rival for her affections all along.

After due consideration he phoned Secretary Jansen and announced, "I'm finished with the job. Every debt of Michael's has been paid and I've arranged for the disposition of his personal belongings."

"Glad to hear that. We're pleased you could make the trip, and I hope you enjoyed your stay on Marathon."

"Certainly," Martlett replied. "A wonderful planet. But my work on Earth awaits me. How soon can I have accommodations on the outward journey?"

"You're in luck—a ship leaves for Earth at midnight. You can show up any time, as late as eleven, to be deserialized and placed on board."

"I'll be there," Martlett said.

He broke the contact, feeling an abiding sense of guilt. *So I'm a cad,* he thought. *So what? I didn't ask them to fall in love with me. They* aren't *in love with* me, *anyway. Just with Michael's image.*

He was half finished with the

task of packing his meager belongings when the phone chime sounded. Activating the controls, he was dismayed to see the blonde tresses of Joanne Hastings in three dimensions and natural color.

"Peter—I hear you're leaving!"

"Where did you get that idea?"

"Don't try to pretend it isn't so! I—I have my sources of information. Peter, darling, why are you going?"

"I told you," he said, trying with only moderate success to put a flinty edge on his voice. "I'm an Earthman, not a colonist. I'm going home."

"Then I'll go with you! Darling, wait for me! Take me to Earth—I'll be your slave! I'm leaving now. I'll be at your villa in half an hour. Don't refuse me, Peter. I can't bear to lose you."

Martlett goggled and tried to reply, but before words would come out she had blanked the screen. He stared blearily at the sleek surface of the dead screen a moment, stunned. Coming here? In half an hour? But—

The phone chimed again.

With numbed fingers he activated it and watched the features of Sondra Bullard come swirling out of the electronic haze. She had heard he was leaving, she told him, and she implored him to change his mind. "Don't go," she begged him. "Stay right where you are. I'm on my way now. I have to see you again in person. I'll be there in half an hour. I love you, Peter."

"Half an hour? Aiee! Sondra—"

Too late. The screen was dead again.

Martlett remained quite still, sorting out the rush of thoughts that rippled through his chilled mind. They had both heard that he was leaving; that meant that most likely both, anticipating another runout a la Michael, had arranged with some underling of the secretary to be notified the moment he announced his intention to depart.

And they were on their way here to persuade him to change his mind. Joanne would be here in half an hour. Sondra would be here in half an hour. That meant—

He knew what that meant. They would *both* be here in half an hour. They were travelling on a collision orbit. And when they got together, critical mass would be reached rapidly.

Well, he thought in desperation, there was a clear path to safety still. All he had to do was report to the deserializing office *now,* and have them tuck him away in the Henderson Field until the midnight departure time. So far as it would matter to him, the elapsed time would be the same—hardly any at all—and he would be safely out of the reach of those grasping altar-eager females.

Martlett smiled. Yes, he thought. That's what I'll do!

He ordered the butler to get the jetcar ready for an immediate trip downtown. And in the meanwhile, he thought, there still is time for a

drink. Something to calm my nerves. I paid two thousand units to settle Michael's liquor bills; I might as well enjoy some of it.

There was a liquor cabinet and dial-bar at the opposite end of the living room. Martlett half-skipped to it and quickly punched out an order for a double bourbon. Nothing happened; and then he recalled he had ordered the bar fixtures disconnected that morning.

Shrugging, he tugged open the panelled door of the liquor cabinet and groped inside for one of the bottles. It was dim and dusty in there; he fumbled for a handhold, finally catching something—

He pulled.

What came out was not a bottle. He had been grasping a lever attached to a square black enamel box, and now box and lever both came out of the cabinet suddenly. He let go of the lever and jumped back. The box had popped open. "Damn," an oddly familiar voice said. "So soon?"

The box expanded abruptly. Martlett edged further back, and in the same moment a man stepped out of the box, stretching as if he had been crouching on his knees a long while and at last was standing up. He was tall—about Martlett's own height. He had unruly brown hair and a roguish smile, and a fine network of laugh-wrinkles around his eyes.

He might almost have been Martlett's twin. He was, in point of fact, his younger brother.

He chuckled amiably and said, "Well, Peter—*you're* the last person I expected to see at this moment!"

Martlett backed up feebly. "Michael! You're—alive?"

"Extremely, dear brother. Would you mind telling me what year this is?"

Weakly, Martlett said, "2209. April 20th."

"Ha! The little vixens! Not even two months, and they've forgotten me already! Pfoo, it's dusty in here! What are *you* doing on Marathon, old man?"

In a chilly voice Martlett said, "After you were pronounced legally dead I was called here to serve as executor of your estate, Michael. I paid out some fourteen thousand units you owed. And now to find you're still alive! What—how—"

"I dare say you think it's ungrateful of me to come back to life, eh?" Michael smiled cozily. "Well, it was good of you to take care of the debts, Peter. This job did cost me a penny or two, and I'm afraid I rather neglected the tradesmen the while."

"What job? What are you talking about?"

"Why, the private Deserializer I had built, of course!"

Martlett put his hands to his head. He felt close to madness; the sudden arrival of his brother, the importuning of those girls, the fourteen thousand units, all seemed to swirl wildly around him. In a

dark voice he said, "Will you explain yourself, Michael?"

"Certainly. There were these girls, you see—Joanne was the blonde, and Sondra the brunette."

"Yes, I know."

"Lovely, weren't they? Anyhow, with my usual carelessness I contrived to get myself engaged to both of them. It was an awkward situation; they both vowed to follow me to the ends of the universe, et cetera, the usual stuff. Damned tenacious lasses, both."

"I know that too," Martlett said.

"Do you, now? Well, to make the matter short," said Michael, "I found it expedient to disappear. I hired a person to arrange things for me, at a fee. He caused it to seem as if I had vanished in some awful way en route to Thermopylae or some such place in this system, when actually I hadn't even made the trip! I was deserialized and locked away in my own liquor closet, y'see, in cold storage, not conscious of the passage of time. There was a timer on the thing which would release me in five objective years—but you surely must know all about this?"

"On the contrary. It's quite new to me."

"But the arrangement was that my fellow would keep an eye on those two girls, and if they both got married before the five years were up he'd come around to let me out of the deserializer field straightaway. And since you've released me, then obviously—"

"No," Martlett said. "I pulled you out of the closet by accident. I thought you were dead."

"But I was only in there two months. And the girls—?"

"Still single. Both of them."

Michael's face turned paper-white and he nibbled at his lips. "You mean they're both on the loose and you've released me? Oh, Peter, you incorrigible bungler! You—"

"Worse than that," Martlett interrupted. "They're both on their way here right now. They've decided to marry me, as long as you weren't available. They'll be here in—" he consulted his watch—"about four minutes, unless they happen to arrive early."

Michael was galvanized suddenly into frantic exertion. "Quick, then! I've got to leave here! If they ever find me alive they'll rip me to shreds!"

The butler suddenly rolled into the living room. It darted a confused glance from one Martlett brother to the other, and, its gears meshing and clanking in bewilderment, it announced, "Two ladies have just arrived to see Mr. Martlett."

"Tell them I'm not home!" Martlett and his brother shouted simultaneously.

"They insist on entering," the robot said.

Michael clutched at his brother's sleeve in panic. "What will we do?"

The outer doors were opening.

The sound of agitated feminine conversation was audible outside. "Don't let them in," Michael ordered the butler. But the shock of seeing duplicate masters had put the robot out of commission; it drooled quietly to itself without obeying.

Martlett said in a voice heavy with defeat, "I guess we'll have to marry them, I suppose. Explain things first—we'll say you miraculously popped back into the continuum—and then marry them. We can't escape, Michael. And we *could* do worse for women, you know."

The voices were coming closer. "I guess you're right," Michael said. Lines of strain showed on his boyish face. "But—good grief, Peter!—*who marries which one?*"

Martlett shrugged. "Does it matter? I suppose we can toss for it."

Sounds reached them: *"Peter, darling, are you in there?"* And *"Who is this horrible woman, Peter?"*

Martlett looked at his brother. It was the first time he had ever seen Michael actually quaking with fear. "Stiff upper lip, boy," he muttered. "It shouldn't be so bad once you've explained."

"*You* explain," Michael said. "I don't dare."

"You'd better dare," Martlett retorted. "You got us into this in the first place. You and your private deserializer."

And there was no getting out, he thought, looking toward the door through which the girls were about to burst. They were trapped for fair. Might as well make the best of it.

Shoulder to shoulder, the Martlett brothers stood their ground and waited resignedly for the enemy to storm the battlements.

THE MORALS OF SCIENCE

SPEAKING RECENTLY at a Unitarian Conference on "The Moral Responsibility of Our Increasing Knowledge," Alfred Friendly, managing editor of the Washington *Post*, pointed out that as scientific knowledge increases it creates a code of morals appropriate to it. This discipline, this code of morals, includes honesty, acceptance of dissent, tolerance, freedom, open-mindedness, and respect for and trust of others. Rather than leading to hedonism and opportunism, the scientific method, he pointed out, leads to an almost puritanical set of morals. In other words, the ethics of science, tested by experience, sets standards of value and conduct without which civilization would fall apart.

attack on the moon

by . . . Lester del Rey

Suppose we do get to the moon first, what happens next? What will a landing on the moon really mean?

BABIES aren't really supposed to have too much sense or judgment until they're at least a year old. They're afraid of loud noises, they're attracted to bright objects, and they don't know either their limitations or their abilities. They don't even know much about distance.

One of the typical little tricks a baby has is grabbing for things. A baby in his buggy or stroller looks up and sees the moon. It's bright, it doesn't make frightening noises. Quite naturally, he reaches for it, grabbing frantically and often crying when he can't get it. Probably from the universality of this behavior has come a folk-expression found in many languages: to reach for the moon, or to attack the moon. It's a fine example of too much ambition for the ability shown.

Such behavior is normal for babies, and is often considered to be cute. But it hardly seems to be either normal or bright for adults—and supposedly superior adults capable of setting our national policy—to do the same. For such people, the ambition should be based on a balance of good reasons for the desire with not too many sound reasons against

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How important is the moon to us actually? Lester del Rey discusses this question in his latest—and perhaps most outspoken—article on the problems we face in this Space Age. Del Rey, distinguished SF writer and editor, is the author of ROCKETS THROUGH SPACE, ROBOTS AND CHANGELINGS, *etc.*

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it. And adult behavior should be limited to what lies within the realm of possibility of achievement without too great a sacrifice of other desirable goals.

Today, in the United States at least, there has been a great effort put into attacking the moon. As I write this, one shot has fizzled, another has been described loosely in the newspapers as a qualified success—which means it failed, of course—and one is about to be tried with official hopes running as high as one chance in twenty-five. Other efforts are being planned by other branches of the Services. And there is even wild talk about shooting for Mars and Venus, on the silly assumption that hardly any more energy is needed for those feats. (The velocities needed to reach the moon, Mars and Venus were worked out long ago, but "modern engineers" on the publicity-release desks know nothing of these, or of the comparative difficulty of achieving them.)

It might be interesting to find out whether there are any good reasons against this shooting at the moon, what the reasons for it are, if any, and whether the possibility of success can justify the expense in other achievements. By our fairly loose standards of adult behavior, these are logical questions to ask.

Certainly there are excellent reasons against such wild endeavors. There is nothing secret about them, either. The same papers which published the schedule of projected moon shots also carried accounts of scientists deploring the whole business.

One of the most important scientific studies of the moon will probably involve the question of whether there is life of any kind there. (Not the type of life superior to ours given us by some saucer fans who claim to have visited the non-existent dark side of the moon, but *any* type at all.) We have some very doubtful evidence of color changes with the moon's seasons—and there is a remote possibility that this is caused by a low form of plant.

A great deal could be learned about the origin and spread of life from the discovery of a few native cells on the moon. But life is tricky stuff. It doesn't have a label on its back side that says "Made in USA" or "Made on Luna." In the case of very primitive cells, it might even be hard to tell whether it was non-terrestrial after even a little time to change or adapt.

Obviously, the less the moon can be contaminated with earthly life and the less time between first contact and a full study by trained men on the spot, the less error there will be. But now we are proposing to send out little ships which can't possibly study the moon fully, but which may conceivably crash into the moon.

There has been much talk of sterilizing such ships, of course, since lip service must be paid to even pure science. Gunk has been squirted to every inside nook and

cranny of the little missiles, to free them of earthly life. And we have been told that the rays of the sun in space will kill off any on the outside or which may be picked up in going through our atmosphere.

This seems reasonable, except that we know already of spores which can withstand the most improbable conditions. One of the theories of the origin of life was that such spores spread through space, and this was based on visibility tests far more severe than will be encountered by a brief passage from Earth to the moon. To make matters worse, these spores are the "seeds" of some forms of life most likely to find a way of existing on the moon.

The guiding brains behind the moon shot have recognized the need to avoid contamination by their efforts; but they've then dismissed it without reason, as being a problem already solved. It isn't solved. It remains a subject that is worrying scientists throughout the world.

At the present moment, the idea of shooting a radioactive warhead against the moon seems to have been abandoned. We can only hope this is true, since another value of lunar study is the exploration of what the normal radiation count is on a world where no atomic tinkering has been done. Once contaminated, the lunar surface can never be used as a check on our own world again.

If there are good and sufficient reasons to make us think we will gain more than we'll lose through possible contamination by early shots, of course, it might be wise to take the chance. But so far as I can determine, there isn't a single valid reason behind this whole attack on Luna.

There are many "obvious" ones. Some are obvious because they have been driven home recently, and others unfortunately because a generation of science fiction readers were fed them by writers (including myself) who hadn't thought things out far enough. The errors of youthful judgment were bad enough, but it hardly seems that they should be repeated and *re*repeated throughout all time.

The first big reason is the dilly of the lot. It is that the moon shot will advance "science." Now there is no doubt that a true expedition, or even a well-equipped lunar probe might give us valuable new data. But as far as science today is concerned, the type of rocket-carried spies we can send to the moon are no better than ones sent out into empty space. The tests of radiation, meteors, temperature, etc., that can be run by travelling a long way out from Earth could just as well be run by sending a ship out toward a position 180° away from where the moon will be. And since this would need less elaborate guidance units to make a reasonable orbit possible, we could probably get more data for the same effort. As far as pictures of the moon are concerned, our present probes can only carry the minimum-detail television installation. It

would barely tell us whether there were craters on the other side—a thing we can be sure of already. True pictures for study from a few thousand miles up might help—but we can't do that yet by interplanetary TV; and since the reentry problem hasn't been properly solved, we can't expect to recover photographic films, even if they could be protected adequately from radiation.

The most useful information at present is the extent and intensity of radiation within the first few thousand miles up. For this, an elliptical orbit within reasonable distances would give us far more swings in any given time, and hence more useful information.

Here, Pioneer was supposed to have done yeoman work. All I know is that the scientists making the most detailed study of Pioneer's data have rejected most of the supposed value. It must be classified as doubtful or undetermined.

The second big reason for the moon shot is to advance the science or technology of rocketry. This makes slightly more sense—it is barely over the zero mark, but it's something at least. Of course, most of the rockets used are patchwork jobs of old models hung on old models, with powder-fuel final stages. But probably some data is gained. Again, however, a blind shot away from the moon's position would be as useful to rocketry, and the saving of needless gadgetry would permit more shots for the same effort, and hence give greater returns. Anyhow, at the present time, distance is less important than the achieving of a dependable rocket which will carry large loads up to a distance of a few thousand miles. The money put into distance records here will do little good, if any.

Do we gain any territory through such shots, even if we succeed? Of course not. A flag dropped on the moon won't claim it for us. A map of the other side from a TV picture won't claim it. The only way to claim the moon is to go there and stay there long enough to police it. Since such an effort is far too ambitious for any chance as yet, we can't claim our satellite; and in all probability, it will remain international.

Finally, we come to the joker that isn't always dealt out among the reasons, but which is the motivating force behind many people's blind acceptance of our efforts. This is the old, old cry of national prestige. (An empire ten miles square has more prestige than a kingdom of any size to most people. A doctor has more prestige than a motor mechanic. And Latin has more prestige than Russian, even though it has less current value to us. Anything can be sold under the label of prestige.)

After our needless and embarrassing loss of prestige at the launching of the first Sputnik, it was inevitable that we should do everything we could to recover world-wide face. And those who claimed this were right. In an age where

there is an effort to win the loyalties and respect of other peoples, prestige is as true a currency as atomic bombs. But the question of what will bring us prestige of any lasting nature has been too little examined. It seems obvious that a shot-put record has more prestige than a slingshot record throughout most of the world, whether it's an honest evaluation or not. And in the same way, a few big satellites in orbit and returning data will carry more long-run prestige abroad than any number of tiny and almost useless probes shot out merely to prove they can be raised.

The reason isn't too hard to understand. When a country puts an extra mile per second onto a hundred pound probe to get it to the moon, it has little practical value toward the achievement of manned space conquest. The most reliable and clever little satellites may be useful and may be interesting—but they don't bring us any nearer the manned ship and the satellite; nor do they bring us nearer the unreal but greatly feared danger of huge forts in space.

A single three-ton satellite would be a major step forward. It would be over half the way toward a working spaceship. And if it could reenter, it would be treading on the threshold of true progress into space.

And so far, Russia has achieved half that weight—but to most of the world, she has done it by a spectacular set of jumps. Her failures are concealed, her successes point toward the dawn of space stations.

The fact that we can get a hundred pounds to go around the moon—when and if we do—has a tremendous novelty appeal. So would a robot who could introduce a new style of rock and roll. But once the excitement of the novelty wears off, there is no solid residuum of achievement, as might be the case with a robot who could guide a rocket missile accurately against an enemy city.

Prestige comes from respect for intent and fear of extent. The lunar probe is too obviously an attention catching device to gain the maximum front page attention for the minimum change in working ability. A Sputnik III, weighing in at almost 3000 pounds is a major breakthrough that says it's only a matter of time until this is going to affect drastic changes in our way of living.

We can even reduce our national prestige by such shots. The very difficulty of succeeding except by luck means that the number of failures—and in this country, well publicized failures—may well inspire contempt for our ability, rather than respect. It is neither good science nor good engineering to flail about wildly and make only an occasional chance strike that cannot be duplicated.

In addition, there is an inevitable attempt to try to make even the reasonable failures seem better than they are. When a grandiose idea

fails, it's human nature to fall back on the excuse that it still got further than could be expected. There will be misleading and half-true statements, in such a case. For a while, such efforts may even succeed. But the long-term result must be amused jokes and cruel debunking of everything.

I am still waiting for an explanation of how an orbit can be established without further use of power which will take a stated 27 hours to apogee and then return to perigee in somewhere between 23 and 23½ hours, as was claimed for Pioneer. The return half of an ellipse governed by earth's pull should be very close indeed to the outward half of the ellipse braked by earth's pull. This would have been obvious to Kepler, Newton and a great many men before the age of rockets—as it is to many in this age of rockets.

Such garbling of facts may be honest; but it always seems to be more common where the goal has exceeded the achievement and the possibility, and frantic efforts to justify the attempt have left no time for calm and honest reporting. Nor can the hysteria of justification convince many in the parts of the world we must influence.

Sure, it would be nice to see even fuzzy and unclear hints of a picture of the side of the moon no man has seen. It would be a lovely gesture to throw a can around the moon, or even to think man had left an old beer bottle on the surface for some future race to see. If this were the most we could hope to do for a long time to come, we might toss reason to the dogs and make the grand gesture.

But there are better ways, and we already know them. Within the next ten years, it will be possible to build a space station. And from that, the problem of getting a real probe to the moon—or even a manned ship for photography and study—is comparatively minor. Perhaps, by a stupendous effort and incalculable waste of fuel, a three-ton probe could be sent directly from Earth, to achieve a speed of six and one-half miles a second. But from a space station, it would be fairly simple, since only two miles a second at most would be needed. In fact, the ship that takes off from Earth to the station would be grossly overpowered for a trip around the moon from the station.

By the most careful analysis I can make or obtain, I find that there are 1), some very real reasons for avoiding a lunar shot at this time; 2), no real reasons why the moon should be attacked, since no long-term gain can be expected; 3), tremendous expenses involved with small hopes of any real success.

Perhaps this isn't quite as silly as the baby's attack on the moon. But the men who spend our money, determine our policy, and are forced to gamble on our future are not expected to be judged in terms of their better-than-average babyhood logic.

Of course, there are good reasons

to them for the attempt. There is unquestionably the rivalry between services which forces them into a frantic scramble for appropriations. Here, even a claimed success that is spectacular—or even a spectacular claim that they are near success—may tip the balance in their favor. The purse strings are controlled by men who cannot evaluate all matters personally, but must bow to what seems like good advice.

This rivalry for appropriations is not a thing of evil. It is a matter of differences of opinion, probably all honest. Each service feels naturally that it has the maximum chance of guarding and extending the welfare of the country. Any service which felt otherwise would be automatically useless. Each feels that the means will at least be justified by the ends.

And above all else is the lingering shock and hysteria that was instilled by the first Sputnik, when we felt our primacy was already certain, and the later Sputniks with their massive reevaluation of what could be done now. An automatic reaction is to do something—anything—that they haven't done, and show we are really ahead in something.

Unfortunately, there is as yet no unbiased and calm single group which can evaluate the plans and decide independently where our best interests lie. Such a civilian agency has been proposed, but it must inevitably be nothing but a proposal until it can have funds and men capable of meeting and beating any individual service to which it should be superior. At present, it merely is a further bone of contention, with each service trying to see that the fourth branch robs the other two, but lets that particular service alone and doesn't weaken any project.

A strange sidelight on this was the recent attempt to take the rocket research staff away from the Army. This was disturbing news to many who felt that the group in Huntsville, Alabama, had achieved the most results for a comparatively small expense. Yet two factors made it an inevitable step. The Army runs its own staff and does much of its own work in developing rockets. The other branches of the Armed Services maintain what might be called policy staffs, and contract out the actual development to independent commercial companies. This means that the only group of scientists available to a Civilian Space Agency is the group now with the Army, since private companies cannot be tapped by mere legal action. It also means that the other branches have their own public relations groups pulling for them, *plus* all the p.r. groups from all the private companies having contracts with those branches.

It strikes me as a strange way to get into space. But then, when I think of it, Isabella's jewels seem like a rather crazy basis on which to finance a trip to discover America.

Unfortunately, there is a time

limit on all this somewhere, and this "Moon or Bust" policy seems oblivious to that. And here is the great danger that lies within the set-up.

As I've pointed out before, the control of the immensity of space must be established within the first few thousand miles above the surface of Earth. The real stepping stone to space must be a space platform, where men can do the full research they must do, where take-offs to distant worlds become economically feasible, and where the development of man into a space animal can be fully established in a way that no man or nation can fail to feel daily and personally.

The first space station will determine who will really explore those other worlds. Without it, only probes can be sent out; with it, actual manned voyages become possible. Without the station, all our efforts are a terrific economic drain with almost no practical result; with the station, the economic return will be equally great, or perhaps even greater, inspiring the willingness to invest in space.

Of course one station will not bar the theoretical possibility of others being erected. But the first one will greatly reduce the real prestige, the economic return, and the need for any other. To recapture equality with a nation having a functioning station might be possible—but the probability would be exceedingly faint.

Russia has at least two advantages toward the creation of such a station. The first is in achievement. Sputnik III shows that she has rocket motors of tremendous thrust which are working and workable (though not necessarily yet reliable). It proved from the moment it rose that Russia was close to the ability to construct supply rockets for building and maintaining a station.

She also has the political-economic set-up which will let her utilize her lead to the maximum advantage, if she chooses. There can be no question of divided working aims or major rivalry that will siphon off funds. And there can be no doubt whatsoever but what she can allocate as much of her national budget for space as is needed, without any chance of a man being kicked out of office in the next election for overspending.

Under such circumstances, and with a rocket motor which could most certainly fire a fairly effective lunar probe, it is interesting to note that no all-out, maximum-effort attack on the moon has come from Russia. Had there been, we should certainly have known of any shots that got well into space.

Money isn't the only key to space, but it has a certain basic power to achieve results which nobody can fail to acknowledge. And it should be obvious that money diverted to shooting for the moon, at the current price of rockets plus tests of rockets, cannot be used for developing the type of rockets and motors

needed if we are to do more than sling hunks of miniaturized tin cans and grapefruit out into space. Likewise, the men who are forced to devote their time to frantic aiming and jockeying for the moon cannot be devoting that time to paving the way for an effective entry into space by men.

There have been vast schemes for super-rockets mentioned in the press. But so far our effort has been to use ships and motors which were already supposedly in existence when Sputnik I went up. (The only attempt to make a true spaceship was Vanguard, and that was such a minimum effort that it can hardly be considered as a serious step toward putting men in space.) The Thor was developed for military use, and has remained little modified except for piggy-back superstructure. The Atlas has promised much, but no one has claimed yet that it is more than a military missile-carrier. The Jupiter, perhaps generally the most successful of our rockets, is also one of our oldest.

Funds are not going into building the maximum thrust spaceships of which we hear rumors. Instead, they are being put into new projects with basically the same equipment that was planned for a satellite launching before the IGY was formed.

Men who should be designing our spaceships — Wernher von Braun would agree, I'm sure—are busy jerry rigging things to get something into space and please, *please* get it a little further out.

Of course, the theory that these are military rockets, and hence all tests serve military ends, comes up. But I'm afraid the cart here is before the horse. If the powder-rocket doesn't win the race in military circles for its instant availability, then surely the maximum-thrust spaceship is effectively a better missile and bomb carrier than anything we have. Consider what could be done to a ship which could take off from the center of the United States and fly around the world above the air, dropping atom bombs wherever it chose. That would be simple for a ship which could lift ten tons of payload plus pilot to the space station.

And then consider the automatic military advantage which such a space station would give. Even without a bomb depot there, it's certain that it could do maximum work in foreseeing attacks and locating the centers to be attacked, as well as in a host of other ways.

Even from the military end, little can be gained from shooting for the moon instead of working for more effective load carriers.

It's possible for the nation which first managed to get a successful probe around the moon to bask in its private glories. There is, after all, the story of the city that felt itself unique. It didn't have the tallest building, the biggest population, the lowest taxes, or the highest literacy rate. It had never had a president born there, and it wasn't the capital of its state. But written deeply on

the hearts of all loyal citizens of that city was the proud boast: "The city with the most miles of sewers per person in the whole blamed world." Some outsiders claimed it needed every inch of the sewers, too, but that was probably a snide comment.

I can see a parallel shaping up. A Usano (which is more or less good Esperanto for citizen of this country) can stand outside his home some night, gazing at the sky while the other side's station goes over for its *nth* time, carrying even a few of our citizens there on a flat fee basis to do some scientific work which we still try to continue. As he looks, a great ship sweeps in from the Moon, carrying with it a hundred men returning from the job of completing the first underground, self-supporting city. Behind the station, the other side is readying the fourth exploration trip for Mars, and the seven ships shine brightly in the last of the sunlight. It is rumored that half of those on the trip will stay to establish a permanent base.

Then the moon comes up, and our Usano stares at it proudly. From his pocket he draws a well-worn copy of a photo, one which shows faint lines that have since proved to be true craters on the other side. And too tiny and blurred to see, he knows there is still our flag in one of them, dropped by automatic machinery from the first successful probe.

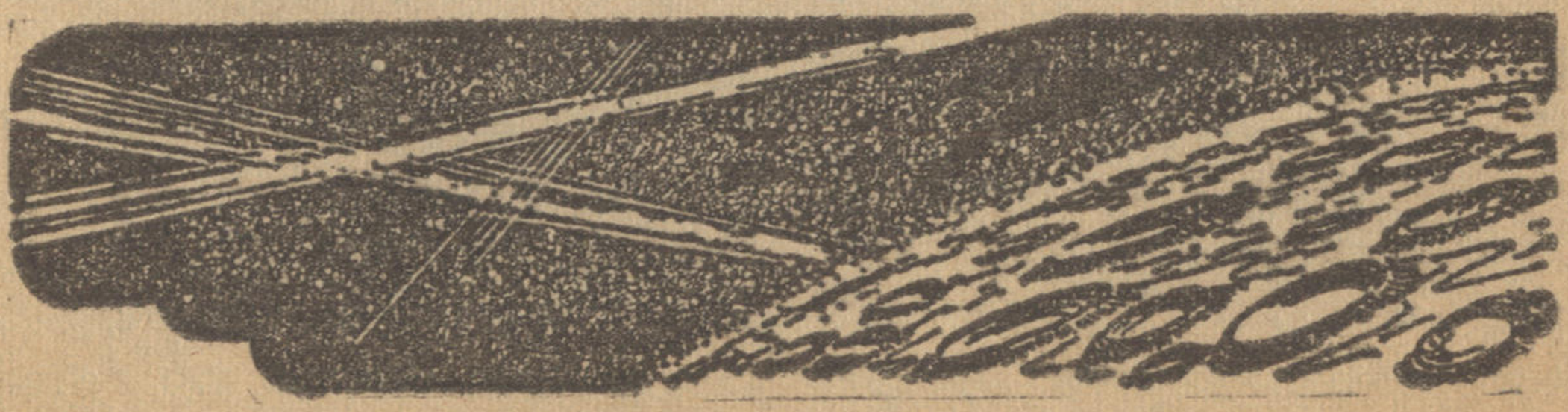
"Proof, doggone you," he says. "Absolute proof. They can't take that away from us. We got there first, and that old moon is rightly ourn."

And after that, he goes inside happily to order some more expensive but necessary drugs from the other side, a product of the Moon.

That's only a nightmare, of course, with no basis in reality. Now, at least.

There is an expression for children who grasp at what they cannot get or what will do them no good. But as I think of it, there is also a word, closely connected with the moon, for those who do the same after they are supposedly adult. It's an old word, but perhaps it still applies.

The word, of course, is lunacy.



interview with an open mind

by . . . Dean McLaughlin

We've all heard of Wolf 359. There's a star that is so cool you couldn't toast a marshmallow on it. Right?

"Now then, Mr. Belcher. You say you're a member of the UFO Observer Corps."

"That's right."

"And what is the purpose of this organization?"

"We watch the sky, and keep a record of all the UFO's we see."

"And—if I understand correctly—UFO stands for Unidentified Flying Object."

"That's right. That's what they are."

"Then the things you observe are . . .?"

"We observe Unidentified Flying Objects."

"Any particular kind of Unidentified Flying Objects?"

"All kinds."

"What kinds are there?"

"Well, first of all, there's the big ships that look like a piece of stovepipe.

"You don't see very many of them, because they don't come down into the atmosphere very often. They're the mother ships. Then there's the big saucers that carry a lot of people. Also, there's the small saucers that only carry two or three people, and the tiny remote-controlled kind that don't have anybody

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Saucer aficionados will please not misunderstand if I quote the writer who says the idea for this little vignette came to him "on the night of Friday, June 13th." Dean McLaughlin is of course the author of the much-discussed HOW TO BE A SAUCER AUTHOR, *which appeared in the February 1957* FU.

inside. Most of the ones you see are that kind."

"These are the Unidentified Flying Objects?"

"Yep. That's them."

"Are there any other kinds?"

"Nope. That's all the kinds there are."

"And you can tell one kind from another?"

"Sure. It's easy once you know what to look for."

"Do you see very many of these Unidentified Flying Objects?"

"Lots of 'em."

"And when you see one, do you report it to the Air Force?"

"We used to, when we first got organized. We quit. They always had some silly down-to-earth explanation. They don't have open minds."

"I see. Now, Mr. Belcher—you say there's people in them? Ordinary human people?"

"Well, not just ordinary. They're telepathic, for instance. And they come from a more advanced civilization than ours. Their science is way ahead of us. But they're human, all right. You ought to see their women!"

"But they're from another planet."

"Yeah. That's right."

"Do you know which one?"

"We haven't really decided on that, yet. Some of us say they're from Venus, or Mars, or maybe Mercury. A few of us think they come from Jupiter or Saturn, or maybe all of them. And there's one or two that think they're from Wolf 359. That's another star, you know."

"Yes. I've heard about it. I understand it's so cool you couldn't toast a marshmallow on it. But what about you, Mr. Belcher? What do you think?"

"Me? I'm holding out for a planet that's hidden behind the moon. You don't ever see it because the moon's in the way."

"But you know it's there."

"Well, nobody can prove it isn't. I mean, you've got to keep an open mind about these things."

"Hmmm. Yes. You have a point there. But I understand some people don't think there are any Unidentified Flying Objects."

"They don't have open minds. I mean, look at the evidence."

"Evidence?"

"Yeah. Everybody's seeing Unidentified Flying Objects."

"They're sure that's what they see? There's no possibility of a mistake?"

"Look—anybody can tell an Unidentified Flying Object when he sees one."

"So you're sure Unidentified Flying Objects exist."

"That's right. Where there's smoke, there's fire."

"Well, smoke, anyway. Tell me, Mr. Belcher. When you're watching for these Unidentified Flying Objects, do you ever see anything you can identify?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. Airplanes."

"Any particular kind of airplanes?"

"Uh, just airplanes, I guess. You mean there's more than one kind?"

"Well, I just sort of assumed it. I mean, there's jet planes, and propeller airplanes, four engine planes and two engine planes, and one engine planes, and passenger planes, and bombers, and fighters, and sport planes, and cargo planes, and private planes—there's a lot of kinds of planes. Can't you tell one kind from another?"

"They all look pretty much the same to me."

"Can you tell where they're from?"

"Shucks, no. They might come from just about anywhere."

"I see. Then you're just not interested in airplanes."

"That's right. I mean, everybody knows what they are and all that. Now these Unidentified Flying Objects . . ."

SO YOU WANT TO GO TO THE MOON?

TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE have already applied to be first in outer space,—twenty-five thousand people (by the time you read this it'll be more) who've written to the President, to the Pentagon, to the National Academy of Sciences and to the men involved in running our various space projects. And written in vain—they've stopped counting the letters by now, according to one Air Force officer—because they aren't planning to pick the man by mail."

The first space traveler will be picked, after a series of obviously extremely thorough physical and mental tests, from among high altitude test pilots or from among the young men now at work in missile laboratories. Or, if a few more years go by, from among the teen-age rocketeers now harassing the Air Force daily.

Tests already conducted by the Air Research Development Command call for a man between the ages of 18 and 28; a physicist, an aeronautical engineer, a pilot or a rocket expert capable of operating the instruments that are to be his only companions—and possibly his salvation—on this first space flight. He must be unafraid of death, capable of standing tremendous strain and tension, and be able to think clearly and to make rational decisions in seconds. He must be of average height, trim physique, his body and its organs capable of standing fantastic speed, pressure, and gravity, and temperature.

Space temperatures, incidentally, vary from 50 below zero at 40,000 feet to more than 2,400 degrees above zero at 2,000,000 feet (i. e., about 380 miles).

the people upstairs

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

There was something subtly different about them. Old Mrs. Danko sensed this, and muttered about the evil eye.

"Good evening, Mrs. Greene," the woman from the third floor said, as the woman from the sixth entered the self-service elevator.

"Good evening, Mrs. Gottesmann," Mrs. Greene replied, not discourteously, but with an absent air so far removed from her usual detached friendliness that the woman from the third was moved to inquire further. Perhaps she would pick up some tidbit of disaster to be relayed to the other tenants as they foregathered at the washing machines in the basement.

At that, Mrs. Greene gave her neatly coiffed head a little shake and smiled. "I'm just tired," she said. "You know how exhausting shopping can be. And those subways!"

Her voice had a foreign accent, but, then, so did the other woman's. Very few native-born Americans lived in this section of New York City, except for the very young who had achieved their nativity during the past decade or so. However, although Mrs. Gottesmann's accent was readily identifiable as German, Mrs. Greene's was hard to place. The neighbors had spent the better part of ten years trying to

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A number of people have suggested that extra-terrestrials live among us. Here is a different kind of story suggesting just this possibility, written from the standpoint of the alien, faced with the necessity of adjusting to a (to him—to her) strange and even distasteful culture.

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place it and had come to their own conclusions.

"Yes, the trains are awful," Mrs. Gottesmann agreed, disappointed. "I try to do as much of my shopping around here as I can." She waited . . . but Mrs. Greene merely smiled in reply.

When the other woman left the elevator at the third floor, the faint frown reappeared on Mrs. Greene's face—a very smooth face, in spite of the fact that it was frankly middle-aged; even the scowl hardly dinted it.

Still frowning, she got out at the sixth floor and unlocked the door to her apartment. "Is that you, dear?" a man's voice called from inside, not in English.

"Yes, Dan," she said, so wearily that her husband came out into the foyer to see what was wrong.

He was a medium-sized, stocky man of about her age, with nothing to give him distinction save the fact that his face was light green. Not a striking light green, but a green that was a perfectly reasonable and appropriate color for a skin—rather a dull green, though by no means olive. And the pupils of his eyes were red—a restrained, almost maroon, red. Back on Milotis, he had been picked for this job as much for the very ordinariness of his appearance as for his ability, and, even without his disguise, he looked strangely ordinary in Earth terms as well as Milotan.

His wife peeled the silk-thin plastomask from her face and slipped off the contact lenses. "I've been to New York to see Dr. Robinson," she said tonelessly.

"You're ill!" He moved closer to her, as if to protect her bodily from the attacking virus. "But I thought we were immune to all Earth diseases!"

"So far as I know, we still are."

A brilliant scarlet flared briefly in Dan's eyes. "It's something organic? Then we must go back. He can't treat you adequately here."

She smiled at him, and her voice was a little easier. "Organic, in a sense. I'm going to have a baby."

She removed her coat.

He took it from her and stood there holding it. "But you're past the age!"

"Evidently not. Either hang up my coat, dear, or let me do it myself."

He opened the door to the closet and, neatly, as he did everything, placed the coat on a hanger; then followed her to the bedroom. All the rooms in the small apartment were furnished in the conventional department store modern—brown monotones and tweedy textures—that the women's magazines had been featuring ten years before, when the Greenes had moved in. Underneath this complete banality, however, there was a slight hint of alienness, something difficult to put a human finger on, and which would not be apparent to the casual visitor except as an emotional impression. Fortunately, the only person who had frequent access to

their apartment was the superintendent, and, since he was in a state of continual rage—at the tenants, at the landlord, at life—he was never in any condition to receive subtle emotional undertones.

Mrs. Greene began to change her clothes, and, as her outer garments came off, it became increasingly evident that she, and, presumably, her husband, were, although humanoid, not so very human after all.

"What are we going to do?" Dan asked. The question was rhetorical; neither one of them had an answer except the obvious and unsatisfactory one.

"Go back to Milotis in disgrace, I suppose," she shrugged. "The Bureau will blame us for not having taken proper precautions, and they'll be right. I have felt old and barren for so long that all that kind of thing really seemed useless . . ." She did not attempt to arrogate all the blame to herself; an equal share of the burden was her husband's, and she meant him to shoulder part of the mental pain, at least.

Dan sat down heavily on the edge of one of the beds. "What did Robinson say?"

"What could he say? He was actually very nice about it—intimated that, if I wanted to 'get rid of my condition,' he would do it, and not report back home . . ."

"It *was* . . . very nice of him."

She turned on the vanity stool—rather, she turned, and it turned with the vehemence of her movement. "But I won't do it, Dan! You know how all my life I've wanted a child, and it was only because I figured by now I would never have one that I agreed to go to this post with you."

"The Bureau must have thought you couldn't have one either," Dan said glumly, "or they wouldn't have posted us here. They only send out women who're sterile or presumably past the age of childbearing . . . But that won't stop them from blaming us," he sighed. "We were lucky, as it was, to have one of our own doctors so close."

Taking up a hairbrush, she passed it over her long hair—her own, though dyed an Earth pepper and salt. The hairbrush was of terrestrial origin—it wouldn't do to have Milotan artifacts lying around—but very subtly altered to fit her needs. "They'll never reassign us to an Earth post, of course," she murmured, "and it will be difficult going home to live because they can't adapt us back." The adaptations—which also comprised amputations—had been such as to make them as much monstrosities on their own planet, as, in their natural state, they would appear on Earth, for their assignment had been intended as a lifetime one.

Dan cracked the knuckles of his hands—wide hands, built to support more than five fingers, and said nothing.

She looked at his face in the mirror. "You want me to get rid of it, don't you?" she asked.

He knew that, if he insisted, she would comply, as she would comply with anything he wanted, for she loved him very dearly—as dearly, in fact, as he loved her. "No," he said, "it's just that I'd been adjusted to spending the rest of my life here. Of course, I don't like it—I don't think anyone really likes being a secret agent—but someone's got to fill the job, and we *are* paid well, and comfortably off as far as living standards go. Much better off than we would be if we went back with dishonorable discharges. And we're used to the natives, even if we can't really like them, either . . . Isn't there anything else we can do?"

Red hope flamed in her eyes; she got up and caught his hands in hers. "You mean . . . keep the child? . . . Robinson would never beam the news back, if we asked him not to," she said, her words tangling with each other in her excitement. "We could get him to make little masks of different sizes, as the child gets older. Of course it'll be expensive, but we can do without some luxuries, and . . ."

He shook his head. "It wouldn't work, May. Perhaps when he's still little it might. You could keep him home, with you, most of the time. But, when he got to be six or so, he'd have to go to school; the law requires it. And there'd be medical examinations and things like that. If Robinson did a good enough job, the child might be able to pass a fairly superficial examination, but we'd always be worrying."

"Mmm. How about a tutor?"

"May, for us to carry on our work, we have to be inconspicuous, average, middle-class individuals. How inconspicuous, average, middle-class would having a tutor be in Washington Heights? Besides, it wouldn't be safe to have him come here all the time unless he were one of our own people, and we're still too thinly scattered on this planet to be able to detach one from his regular duties. Even if we could, it would mean letting someone else in on our secret. No, we've got to go back." He looked around the room, appreciating, for the first time, the comfort rather than the dull alien mediocrity of his surroundings.

"Listen: why *shouldn't* the child go to school?"

He was really alarmed now. "May, are you insane?"

"We can say we're Christian Scientists. They don't believe in doctors."

"Sounds pretty far-fetched to me."

Her eyes were wide and bright. "What, after all, could they do to us at home if they found out and made us come back? Nothing worse than they'd do the way things are now. And this way there's a chance—for the child, anyway."

He looked at his hands. The wrong color for Earth; the wrong number of fingers for Milotis.

"Dan, listen to me," she persist-

ed, with an eagerness he had not seen in her since they were both young; "I think I have the way out. Milotis has thousands of secret agents scattered all over Earth, hasn't it? And they expect to have hundreds of thousands and then millions before they . . . they can start?"

He nodded. "It'll take centuries to get everything organized. But we're not terrestrials; we can plan ahead."

She ignored this. "And each one of those agents has to go through years and years of indoctrination, and, even so, we live in the constant fear that we'll make a slip?"

"Agreed. So . . . ?"

"But one of our people who was born right here in this culture couldn't make a slip because he'd be a part of that culture."

Dan looked at her thoughtfully.

"If we could prove that to the Bureau back home," she went on, "then they could send out young married couples who'd bear their children *here*! It would simplify matters so—don't you see? We could have millions of agents working here much more economically and much more rapidly than the Bureau would ever have dreamed was possible. And, once we prove that, they're bound to forgive us."

"But there's one thing you've forgotten, dear," he said drearily. "The children might identify with the natives . . . and our intentions are, of course, ultimately hostile."

"But how could they possibly identify?"

He shrugged. "Intelligent life-forms tend to be gregarious while they're still in the primitive state, and a child of any species remains primitive for a very long time. Ours might become one of the crowd before he has time to mature."

He paused, weighing the pros and cons, and still unable to find any sort of balance. "Still, as you say," he added, "we've nothing to lose, and so we might as well try it."

"Oh, Dan, darling!" She kissed him—or, rather, performed the Milotan equivalent, for kissing was not a part of their culture.

"I'm not happy about this," he said.

"Neither am I, of course. But what else can we do?"

Eight months later—for the gestation period of Milotans was roughly the same as that of terrestrials—Terence Greene was born. Dan and May Greene had had other names on Milotis, but had changed them to the closest possible Earth equivalents and called each other by them even when alone, so as not to run any chance of making a mistake in public. But Terence Greene had no other name. He was born on the planet Earth, in the United States of America, and was actually a citizen of that country. He was the first Milotan on Earth not to need forged papers, for he had a bona fide birth

certificate. In fact, technically speaking, he was not even a Milotan.

Dr. Robinson fitted the baby with little masks and lenses in a laboratory that was singularly complete for a New Jersey general practitioner and gave him the reputation of a thwarted Pasteur. Fortunately, Milotan babies do not grow as fast as terrestrial ones, since the Milotan life span is about a third longer than the terrestrial, and maturity comes correspondingly later. But the disguises were expensive just the same, and the Greenes could ill afford them.

Moreover, having a first child proved to be a little trying for a couple at an age when they might more comfortably have become grandparents. Milotan babies howled just like terrestrial ones—worse, Dan said, but then he was prejudiced—and had a similar variety of squalid physical needs which had to be tended to by others. Robots would have cared for him on Milotis, but in this technologically inferior milieu the indignities fell upon May, for the Greenes had to conform to Earth customs. And so it was Dan who continued to work and May who stayed at home with the baby.

The loss of her income was a blow, for, although the salaries they received from their terrestrial jobs were supposed merely to supplement the allowances from their own government, living on an alien planet was tremendously expensive. They had to do without luxuries—not some, as May had prophesied, but all. Dan had to give up the tobacco—it wasn't really tobacco but near enough—he had specially imported for him from Milotis, and May, the table delicacies from home, which came repackaged as Rice Krispies and Coca Cola. And eventually they had to start cutting down on necessities, too.

It was May also who had to take Terence out daily in the sun—for even the pale yellow sun of Earth was better than no sun at all—and exchange evasive pleasantries with the neighbors who formed a permanent gauntlet of perambulators and deck chairs outside the house during the daylight hours. And once or twice she took the baby up on the roof at night to look at the distant glimmer that was the hot, bright sun of Milotis, but she stopped when the neighbors began to be curious. Now, more than ever, she could not afford to draw attention.

"You thinking maybe of bringing him up to be an astronomer?" Mrs. Gottesmann asked, as she met Mrs. Greene returning from one of these excursions. She herself was going upstairs to pick up some laundry that had been shamelessly exposed on the roof all day for drying. One of the things that had disturbed May and Dan when they had first come to this planet was the curious lack of reserve of the inhabitants—a vulgarity the Milotans had to learn to deal with, since

all their training as secret agents could not enable them to meet it casually.

"It's a very interesting profession," May said with a gaiety that she did not, of course, feel. "Don't you love to look at the stars?"

"Stars!" Mrs. Gottesmann shrugged, implying that stars were all very well for people who didn't do their own laundry. "Seems to me he can't see good enough yet to look at stars. He isn't growing much, is he?"

"He *is* rather puny," May had to agree, resentful of this slight on her offspring but unable to retort that he was of the normal size for a Milotan child of that age. "Dan and I aren't very young, you know."

"Well, better late than never!" Mrs. Gottesmann suddenly became hearty, for she was capable of kindness when it was obvious and convenient; moreover, she was even older than May appeared to be. "He's a fine boy. Grow up to be a doctor, maybe. Don't let him be an astronomer. Where can an astronomer get a job except with the government or maybe a school, and you know what kind of salaries *they* pay!"

Terence already had his profession, but, of course, she couldn't know that. Dr. Robinson had so altered him, that there was nothing he could do but follow in his parents' footsteps, and, failing acceptance by the government of their world, he was lost. It was a grave responsibility that May and Dan were carrying—one of which they could not help being perpetually conscious.

Terence didn't walk until he was two, talk until he was three. The neighbors took it for granted that he was a backward child, and May, though smouldering, was forced to accept the judgment. And, in a way, she came herself to think of him as retarded; it was impossible to spend ten years in a culture without being somewhat conditioned by it oneself.

She knew well enough that the neighbors talked about her and her husband and her child, as they spoke about everyone in the house behind his back. And yet, she felt, they did not speak of the others in the same way. Did Mrs. Danko mutter "Changeling" under her breath after *all* the babies in the house, and had only this one mother, with ears a trifle keener than human, caught it?

And May could not help smiling as she thought how much more terrible, to these people, the actual truth would be. Fortunately Mrs. Danko was known by the whole house to be—as so many women of her age and circumstances are—not quite right in the head, and so her suspicions, if they were, indeed, directed suspicions and not a general suspicion of the entire human race—to which the old woman erroneously supposed the Greenes to belong—did not disturb May in her

role as a secret agent, only in her role as a mother.

May spoiled Terence because she felt guilty about not receiving the pleasure from him that she had confidently expected; in fact, sometimes she received no pleasure at all, and she wondered whether he was worth all the trouble she—and Dan, of course—had gone to for him, and whether she hadn't been ridiculous and sentimental in not accepting Dr. Robinson's first offer. Then she would be swept by remorse for having let herself think this way, and she would give Terence something that was not good for him but which he wanted.

When the boy began to speak, May and Dan wondered how much to tell him. That he was different, he had to know, and also how very different he was, so that he should know enough to conceal the fact that he wore face and hand masks and contact lenses. But he did not need to know *why* he was different just yet, particularly as they could not rely on his discretion. They told him merely that they came from a far-off place.

"But he should be told the truth as soon as possible," Dan protested. "We should do all we can to prevent him from identifying with them."

"There's time," May said. "He'll find out he's an alien soon enough."

They spoke both Milotan and English at home, so that Terence should know both tongues. He was warned not to speak Milotan in public, but they didn't worry too much about his dropping a Milotan word occasionally, because it would merely be taken as childish babble. And they kept him away from the other children as much as they could.

When Terence was six, there was no help for it: he had to go to school. Although on Milotis he would be the equivalent of an Earthly four-year-old child, Milotan children were ahead of the terrestrial ones in learning aptitudes, and May knew he could not only take his place scholastically, but probably be able to keep it, though not with the conspicuous flash of the prodigy. If he had been a child genius, it would have been complete disaster. But Terence was no genius, merely a self-possessed child, adult for his age because he had spent most of his time with adults and not because of any superior ability beyond the natural superiority of the Milotans.

May enrolled him in a private day school, for she was anxious for him to have the best of the limited advantages offered by the planet. A boarding school was, of course, out of the question. May explained to the principal—a blue-haired lady of uncertain years and unwavering graciousness — that the Greenes were Christian Scientists; hence Terence was not to be submitted to medical examinations. Since the

fees were large, the principal was most understanding.

The first afternoon passed very slowly. May was actually trembling by the time it was the hour to fetch Terence home from school. As he came out of the door, she searched the childish mask for signs of distress. He could not, of course, cry through the contact lenses, but she could tell; however, there were none.

"Did you like school, dear?" she finally ventured, after they had ridden in the car for ten minutes without speaking.

"It was all right," he said.

"Did you—did you get on well with the other children?"

"They were all right. They don't wear face masks or lenses, do they, Mother?"

"I told you they didn't, dear."

"I know. I just wanted to make sure." He ruminated for a moment. "But the teachers do, don't they?"

"No, dear, I told you—just us."

"I thought maybe I was the only kid who had them, but all grown-ups had masks."

"No, dear—we're the only ones in the city."

"You mean even Mrs. Danko doesn't wear a mask? That's her own face?"

May bit her lip. "I'm afraid so, dear."

"Why are we different?"

"We come from far away."

"How far away? Russia? I heard Mrs. Gottesmann tell Mrs. Schultz that we must be from Russia because you and father were so cagey about saying where you came from."

May gave a gasp. She and Dan had thought—in spite of Mrs. Danko—that they were so unobtrusive, so inconspicuous; and here they had been suspect all along. In a way, though, it was good, because the very suspicions provided additional camouflage. And she would never have found out about those suspicions if it hadn't been for Terence. He was developing in the way she had predicted, and eventually he would prove more useful to Milotis than she or Dan could ever be, and the Bureau, she said to herself with satisfaction, would not be able to deny it.

The gauntlet was waiting outside the house in the grimy sunshine when they drove up. "First day of school, hah?" Mrs. Gottesmann demanded of Terence.

The boy nodded and scuffed his shoe along the sidewalk, quite in the manner of a normal human child. May put a protective hand on his thin shoulder.

"How did you like it?" Mrs. Gottesmann persisted.

"All right, I guess," Terence mumbled.

"A private school!" Mrs. Gottesmann looked speculatively at May. "Must be costing you plenty?"

May smiled.

"The public school's good enough for me!" Mrs. Schultz said, tossing her hennaed head. "My Linda and Rory—" she was some-

what younger than the other women and also a more extended breeder "—they go to the public school, and everybody says what fine children they are!"

That wasn't what "everybody" said when Mrs. Schultz wasn't around, since Linda and Rory were the neighborhood terrors, but May could hardly bring this up in self-defense. Nor could she offer the excuses that Terence was delicate or backward, with the boy himself present. She smiled again. "There's so much juvenile delinquency in this neighborhood, you know," she murmured. "Gang wars. You can't be too careful!"

"A kid's got to learn how to take care of himself!" Mrs. Schultz snapped. "Only way to get along in this world!"

May jumped; then recovered herself. "Maybe I am a little overprotective . . ." she murmured apologetically.

There was a resentful pause.

"Too good for public school!" suddenly Mrs. Danko snarled. "Commissars!" And, with a slight confusion between ethos and mythos, she made a sign to ward off the evil eye.

May and Dan had a conference that night. "Yes, the kid is proving to be useful," he said, smiling. "I guess we'd better let the Russian story stand—indicate, without actually saying so, that we're from one of those Balkan states that got swallowed up—and we're lying low because . . . because we have relatives there against whom reprisals might be made."

"Are we to allow Terence to believe that?"

Dan sucked at his pipe. "I suppose he should know the truth," he said dubiously.

They waited a couple of weeks, because Terence was getting along well in school and they didn't want to halt the process—at first, anyway. Then finally, reluctantly, they decided it was time to tell him. "Terence," his father began, "you were wondering where we came from, weren't you?"

"Russia," Terence said promptly.

"No, we don't come from Russia, but from still further away."

"China?" Terence asked eagerly. "Is that why we wear masks? But the Chinese are yellow, not green."

"We come from still further away than that. From another planet, in fact. Another solar system."

Terence stared at his father—uncomprehendingly, his parents thought.

"You've seen the stars in the sky," Dan went on. "Well, we come from one of them."

Terence grinned. "You're kidding, Dad."

"No, I'm quite serious."

"But Miss Chase says all that kind of thing is silly. There aren't any people on any of the other planets, and there's no such thing as space-travel anyway, and we shouldn't read comic books but read

serious stuff and prepare ourselves to become good citizens."

Dan tried again. "There are a lot of things Miss Chase doesn't know."

"But she's the *teacher*!" Terence said.

Dan looked at May. May looked at Dan. One couldn't destroy a child's faith in his teacher, for the sake of the peace, if nothing else.

"Miss Chase says there's nothing wrong with coming from Russia," Terence went on reassuringly. "There are lots of nice people who've run away from there. It's just the government that's bad, and people who ran away from the government shouldn't be ashamed of being Russian, but should work to make Russia a good country like the United States."

May caught Dan's eye, and both of them started to laugh. "I think," she said, "maybe we'd better start studying Russian."

"We'd better watch out, though," he warned her. "Objectively, it might be funny if we're put in jail as Russian spies, but I think I'd lose my sense of humor at that point."

Terence adjusted remarkably well to school. He was allowed to bring home a friend now and again, but his parents, while receiving the other child with complete courtesy, didn't encourage this. They paid a lot of attention to Terence, took him to the theater and museums and the zoo, so that he would not crave juvenile contacts, or, at least, notice how few they were.

Fortunately it was a rather prissy school he attended, and so there were none of the rough-and-tumble organized sports that might damage the tough but not indestructible covering on Terence's face and arms and legs. A child was so much more expensive to disguise than an adult, because so much more of him had to be exposed. May wore the same coat for a third season, and Dan had the car overhauled instead of trading it in for a later model.

Terence learned all the subjects in the terrestrial curriculum, getting marks that were good but not too good. When the Russians put up their first satellite, May and Dan thought that this might convince Miss Chase and, by extension, Terence that "all that kind of thing" wasn't so "silly" after all. But Miss Chase contemptuously dismissed the satellite, as she dismissed everything she could not understand, as "Russian propaganda"; and Terence remained as stubbornly Earthbound as ever. When his parents tried to teach him the geography and history of Milotis, he took it as a joke—or pretended to—and, moreover, as a joke that had long since lost its humor. First he was embarrassed by Milotan, and then refused to speak it at all.

"I've got enough studying to do," he protested, "without wasting time on your silly old Esperanto."

"Milotan, Terence," Dan corrected. "Not Esperanto."

"Same thing . . . We're going to start learning French next term," Terence added with modest pride. "That is, the ones who have linguistic aptitude are, and I have it."

"I told you, May," Dan said afterward; "the kid's identifying. Now he makes believe he can't even understand Milotan. He does not want to be different."

"The time will come when he'll have to face the facts, whether he likes them or not," May replied quietly. "Because he *is* different."

"I wish the time would come when we could acknowledge him back home," Dan sighed, "because then the Bureau might give us an allowance for him." His school bills are getting larger and larger."

He waved the one for the new term challengingly at May. "What's this additional hundred dollars for? 'Extras!' What kind of 'extras' do you call this?"

"Probably French *and* washing, dear," May told him—for the indoctrination of a secret agent included a thorough grounding in the literature of the planet and country for which he was destined. "But you've got to be patient and wait."

"Wait!" Dan protested. "I've been waiting eighteen years."

"Only eight," May corrected him. "Before that, we were just working at our jobs." And she couldn't help thinking back, a little regretfully, to that pleasant, unanxious time.

Actually, Dan didn't have to wait long, although it was May who had to bear the brunt of what happened, since her husband was conformably not home during the day, and it was in the middle of the afternoon that the phone call came from the school.

"Will you please come over here right away, Mrs. Greene?" the principal's voice asked coldly, almost angrily.

"Terence! He's all right?"

"Terence isn't . . . injured, Mrs. Greene. But please come right away; please hurry."

May was frantic. The principal's voice and words had been definitely ominous, and she might not have told May the truth if Terence *had* been hurt, not wanting to alarm her. But if Terence were injured, there was potential harm far beyond the injury itself; even though the Greenes were Christian Scientists, the school would call a doctor—they could not risk a law suit—and then they might . . . find out . . .

Perhaps that was what had happened; that was why the principal had sounded angry, rather than compassionate — angry and . . . frightened, or had May been projecting her own fears? For a moment, she had the mad impulse to get her husband and flee, leaving her child—who had no official existence as a Milotan, anyhow—to his fate. But her duty as a mother

triumphed over her duty to her planet and to her own apprehensions.

"Something wrong, maybe?" Mrs. Gottesmann asked eagerly from her post beside the front door, as May hurried out of the apartment house. The woman and her two cronies craned their necks like hopeful vultures. "The little boy, maybe . . . ?"

"Always said them private schools were no good," Mrs. Schultz observed, wagging her head.

"No, nothing's wrong," May said, automatically trying to keep from antagonizing these creatures, as she had tried for eighteen years, because it was part of her job, and for no other reason. "Nothing's wrong. I'm just in a hurry. I—" She fumbled with the car door. "Nothing's wrong."

As she drove off, she could hear Mrs. Danko hiss something in her native tongue after her, and, although she did not look back, she could sense that the other woman was holding up two fingers after the retreating car.

Terence was crumpled on a bench in the anteroom to the principal's office, his contact-lenses opaque with tears. He looked up blindly, aware of his mother's arrival, but with no apparent sense of relief at her presence.

"Terrence, are you really all right?"

"I—I guess so," he said dully. "Nothing happened. I mean, not really."

"Then, why . . . ?"

There was a long silence. "We had swimming lessons," he said, with difficulty. "They start in our grade."

She looked at him in horror. In spite of all the terrestrial lore she had acquired, in spite of her knowledge that the natives appeared before each other unclothed or nearly so, she had never envisaged the possibility of such a thing happening to her son. The school had seemed so genteel, so minimally alien, that she had not expected so drastic an affront to her own mores from it.

"Mother, I'm different," Terence said. And it was an accusation. *You are different; you are alien; it's your fault I am different and alien.*

"But I *told* you you were different," she defended herself. "Darling, you shouldn't—"

"You might have told *me*, as well," the principal said coldly from the doorway to her office.

"I'm sure Terence will excuse us for a moment," she went on, virtually dragging May into the room and shutting the door. "My dear Mrs. Greene," the words came fast and harsh, with tact too small a thing to be relevant now, "surely you might have had the sense to confide in me that the boy was a—a freak, when you enrolled him. Then this . . . ghastly episode might have been prevented. Naturally I wouldn't have dreamed of

letting him go swimming with the others if I'd known."

She gazed wildly at Mrs. Greene. "Why didn't you tell me? . . . Oh, God," she whispered, without waiting for an answer that May could not give, "so all the things they've been saying about the fall-out from the bombs are true. They've been covering up—don't care what happens to our children, to us, so long as they can keep up in the bomb race."

May could hardly keep herself from laughing with sheer relief. She and Dan had feared discovery so, thinking it would lead to inevitable revelation—but these people were so well channelled into their own mental ruts, that they would accept the easiest solutions, no matter how unfeasible . . . Russians, mutations, even witchcraft, rather than life and science beyond their awareness. The Milotans had stepped too carefully and caused themselves much unnecessary anguish, and Terence had proved this, and Terence would get his reward, for the Bureau, though strict, was just.

But May knew she must not show joy—grief was the suitable emotion for this moment. She cast her eyes down demurely on the thin films that veiled her hands. "It isn't necessarily the radiation from the bombs," she said softly. "You see, I'm rather past the age of childbearing, and at first the doctor thought Terence was a tumor. The X-rays . . ."

"Doctors!" the principal exclaimed, with a savageness beneath which, May discerned, sympathy was dawning. "Always ready with the scalpel and the X-ray. In some ways, I think, they're more dangerous than the bombs!"

"I—I'm sorry this had to happen," May whispered, playing her part to the hilt now, and beginning to enjoy it. "We—we've become so accustomed to concealing Terence's condition that I never thought . . ."

"I understand, Mrs. Greene," the principal said gently, "and I'm sorry if I sounded unfeeling . . . But there was such a horrible scene, and . . . I'm afraid Terence won't be able to stay in this school any longer."

"I understand," May said. "It wouldn't be good for Terence, either. We've been thinking of moving out to the suburbs, anyhow; Washington Heights is getting to be much too dangerous a neighborhood to raise a child in. So we'll transfer him to a school out there, where nobody will know."

"But, for God's sake, Mrs. Greene," the other woman burst out, "when you enroll him in another school, *tell* the authorities what's . . . wrong with him beforehand! They want to help you, Mrs. Greene. They're your friends, not your enemies."

A smile was appropriate at this point, and so May no longer had to conceal her amusement. "Thank you so much for being so sympathetic and understanding," she said, as she rose and shook hands with

the principal. "You can't imagine what a . . . comfort you've been to me!"

"Come, Terence," she said in the anteroom. "Let's go."

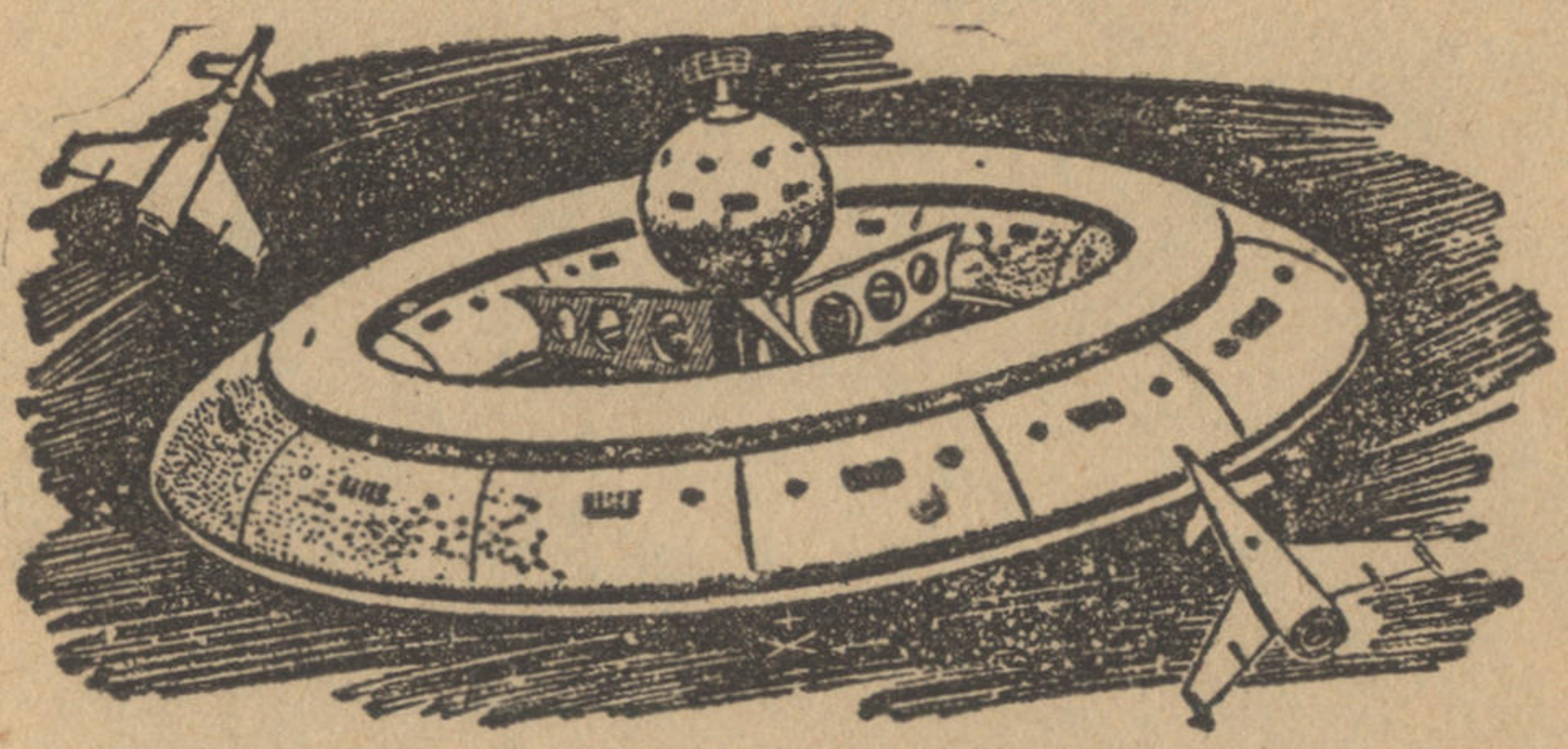
He clung tightly to her hand all the way out to the car.

She hadn't had such a sense of closeness with him since he'd been an infant.

For half the way, he was silent; then, "Mother," he said, in halting Milotan, "tell me about Milotis. There really is such a place, isn't there? Where everybody is like us? You and father weren't making it up just to . . . to . . . ?"

May smiled, a regretfully triumphant smile. "No, dear, we weren't making it up. There *is* such a place as Milotis. Wait till we get home, and your father and I will tell you all about it."

She took one hand off the steering wheel and patted the rather grubby plastoskin that encased the small, mutilated hand of her son. "And tonight," she said, "we're going to send a beam back to Milotis telling them all about you."



NEXT ISSUE—

Louis Golding's THE SWITCH AT THE DOOR

Lee Correy's LETTER FROM TOMORROW

Robert F. Young's THE WISTFUL WITCH

Lloyd Biggle's TRAVELING SALESMAN

and

John Victor Peterson's novelet, THE AMNESIC MEN

—in FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

derelict

by . . . Stuart Palmer

They'd trained and prepared for centuries for this final conquest. The Earth was rich in resources—and waiting . . .

"THE Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold, and his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold . . ." or so at least it went in the old poem. But the ancient Assyrians, ruthless as they may have been, had nothing on the Centaurian warriors of 1959 who came roaring into our little solar system unannounced and uninvited, just as a snake might creep up upon a nestful of fledglings.

The crew of the scout-raider, (a gigantic metallic bubble propelled by a refinement of the photon-drive and armed as no ship anywhere had ever been armed before) had trained and prepared half a lifetime for this moment. They were as efficient and deadly as a side-winder; the 205th day, their time, saw the preliminary casing of the joint pretty well completed. They had done their survey work mostly from the shadows, at the greatest possible useful working distance from their potential targets. They had flitted about quite unnoticed by Earth telescope or radar or anything else; remember how long it took our astronomers to find the planet Pluto after everybody knew it just *had* to be out there somewhere?

Stuart Palmer is perhaps best known for his stories about the one and only Hildegarde Withers, Inspector Piper's very personal cross ("The Riddle of the Hungry Hippo," "The Riddle of the Forty Naughty Girls," etc., etc.). Here, however, Major Palmer turns to Science Fiction.

The Centaurians (actually Epsilon, fifth planet of the star Centaurus I was their origin) had speedily eliminated our outer planets and most of the inner ones as far as any immediate interest was concerned. Of course life did exist on the fourth, in the form of a feeble moss-like growth; maybe the science-teams could usefully study that later. But naturally it was the third planet, the green planet with only one moon, in which the raiders were vitally interested. They had studied it very very painstakingly from afar off, using powerful telescopic cameras, incredibly sensitive electronic equipment, spectroscopes, scanners and half a dozen other instruments for which we have no name.*

They had even been able to pick up a number of radio broadcasts, though unfortunately no television. They knew that Earth was thickly populated, that it had networks of highways and railroads and a multitude of airports and harbors and great cities; it was rich in resources, in oil and minerals and, what was more important, *water* in unlimited quantities. It was a prize of prizes, ready for the plucking.

And, what was even more important to them, its gravity was only slightly less than what the Centaurians were accustomed to, and its temperature variations within the limit of their tolerance except in the polar regions. The air was thinnish, but breathable—according to their instruments. This planet seemed made to order for the men from Centaurus.

For they *were* men! Surprising as it may seem to those of you who still visualize creatures from outer space as sentient octopi or giant insects, talking plants or intelligent birds, the Centaurians were superficially at least not very different from ourselves in structure and appearance. It is not surprising; the same general rules apply all over the Universe and always have; life develops along the carbon-oxygen-hydrogen cycle in a regular pattern. There are certain required evolutionary steps to take before any race can work its way up to an advanced technology, to the civilization level which looks toward space-travel, nuclear fission, and the enslavement of other worlds. Skull-protected cranial capacity, forefeet developed into hands with opposing thumbs, and so on and so on. That is the way it is and must be.

In fact, any member of the crew of the raider, given proper clothing and a strong depilatory and a stronger deodorant, could have walked down Fifth Avenue or Main Street without attracting a second glance. Of course, the Centaurians did have large noses, thin lips and gaping mouths—but these features are not uncommon on Earth. Even their double-thumbs did not exactly make them freaks—polydactylism is not unknown here. They were, of

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*Whenever possible, throughout this record, Centaurian terms have been approximately translated into colloquial English. It is doubtful if there will ever be published a Centaurian-English phrase-book for tourists.

course, covered with thick, glossy fur; since the temperature on their home planet Epsilon never varies more than ten degrees from 60 F. they had never needed clothing and got along perfectly well with their fur and a breech-clout, plus of course numerous belts and straps to bear the weight of small-arms and insignia.

They were highly intelligent, if extremely specialized, strongly social within their own groups, realistic, cold-bloodedly fearless, and totally lacking in any trace of sympathy or empathy. Women to them were harem-houris or slaves; they allowed only engineers, scientists, mathematicians and warriors to grow to maturity and drowned their poets and philosophers in childhood. They were, these Centaurians, as crafty and insatiable as a weasel or wolverine—yes, perhaps that devilish fury of the north woods would be a better symbol for them than the wolf. Such, unfortunately, are our nearest star-neighbors.

They were within hours of paying a somewhat unneighborly call on New York City when it happened. For some time the ship had been hovering well out behind our Moon, making last-minute preparations for the blitz. Weapons all were triggered—the charged nitrogen-fog that could erase every living thing in the greatest city on earth, from man down to microbe, and not even shatter a window-pane, the bacteriological bombs, the super-allergens, the shorter-ranged blasters and paralyzers and all the rest of the latest in peace-makers. And now, at the verge of zero hour, the Centaurians had a stroke of most incredible luck!

They had picked up a blip on the radar-screens!

This was no fragment of a comet's tail, this was no wandering meteor or asteroid. It *was*, it *had* to be, another spaceship!

And it was necessarily from Earth, the only inhabited planet of this system; the Centaurians knew that nobody but themselves, at least in this entire part of the galaxy, had yet found the secret of inter-stellar flight.

When the call to Battle Stations sounded, most of the crew of the raider were engaged in their usual pleasant pastime of speculating as to the bedroom talents of Earthian females and as to the potency of Earthian beverages. But in a second these pleasant dreams were shelved.

Observation fixed the thing on their sights and held it. Control switched down to low-gear fission drive. And the great ship moved in to intercept, with all guns triggered on the unidentified flying object. They soon discovered that the thing seemed on no imaginable true course, nor even on a fixed orbit. But they moved steadily and implacably on; by the second day they could make out that it was a smallish capsule, turning slowly and aimlessly end over end.

"Is derelict," hazarded First Supreme Glorious Captain Wux Ogg-

Ogg, a burly veteran with reddish eyes and the fur of a neatly-combed grizzly-bear. He was elated; this was a better break than he or any of them had ever dreamed of—it was in fact a sort of preview of things to come. For, just as a paleontologist can reconstruct a prehistoric dinosaur from portions of its skull or from fossil leg fragments, so could their science teams reconstruct a whole society from a sample of its technology.

Captain Ogg-Ogg never left the observation bridge after the first sighting of the alien space-vessel, his vast, ursine bulk crowding the navigators and technicians rather annoyingly. But they smiled the Epsilonic equivalent of a smile and hastily apologized when he got in their way; the captain's ideas of corrective discipline, like that of the Mikado's, were apt to be "something with boiling oil in it."

But the navigators had done their work down to the last decimal point, and on the fifth day the vast Centaurian bubble was within two miles of the Earthian vessel, on slowly converging courses. To their amazement, the thing was not much longer than twice the height of the average Epsilonian, which is about five feet seven. "These Earthians midgets only!" roared Ogg-Ogg in high good humor—because overrunning a world full of little people would obviously be duck soup for any invader of their ilk. (Ogg-Ogg had of course never heard of Liliputians; while the culture of Epsilon in many ways parallels that of Earth, there happens to be no equivalent for Dean Swift's *Gulliver's Travels.*)

Cautiously the Centaurian ship nosed around the hurtling metallic capsule, never neglecting the possibility that it might be a stray mine or a trap of some kind. They were ready to return fire, or to reverse blast and disappear in an instant. But the Earthian vessel was silent as a tomb—which in fact it happened to be. The drive was dead, the electronic and electric equipment —if any—was not functioning. The thing was harmless as a dud, obviously.

"Prepare to make contact and take aboard!" ordered Captain Ogg-Ogg. First Semi-Supreme Mate Fygg saluted smartly by slapping the seat of his pants—or where his pants would have been had he worn any, and happily hastened to obey. The raider slowed to the exact speed of the derelict, which happened to be not more than Mach 5, and made contact with looping magnetic grapples. A wide port gaped open for a moment and then closed again; it was as if a hippopotamus had swallowed a grape. Then six burly crewmembers, handling the thing as if it had been an egg, carried it down to the laboratories, where three waiting crews of scientists, specialists among super-specialists, proceeded to take it apart as cautiously as they might have de-activated an unfamiliar bomb.

Group A was assigned to do a

preliminary analysis of Drive and Fuel, plus exterior photography. Group B had Hull, Fittings, and Armament. Group C, most important of all, applied the power of its thirteen massive I.Q.'s to the pilot—or to what was left of the pilot. He was very dead, of course. But luckily for Centaurian research he had frozen quickly enough so that the gradual loss of interior pressure had not caused any explosion of distortion of the body-cells. The intense cold of outer space had preserved him perfectly, for just how long nobody could guess.

It was a tense time aboard the raider. For the crew, after almost five long years betwixt stars, it was a climactic moment. Nobody slept, nobody really showed any interest in mess-call. Speculations were, as they say, rife. From F.S.G. Captain Wux Ogg-Ogg down to Seventeenth Unspeakable Latrine-Orderly Gugg, everybody aboard the raider waited breathlessly for the first report of the task-teams, comprised of the top scientists, the supreme egg-heads, of all Epsilon and its subject planets.

A day passed, and part of another. Ogg-Ogg was beginning to gnaw his talons, quite consumed with curiosity and impatience. But not even the captain would disturb those dedicated men in the three labs, who were working so feverishly around the clock. He did however show his mood by making life fairly miserable for every enlisted man and most of the junior officers who crossed his path.

And then, finally—just as their nerves could stand the awful uncertainty no longer—the signal came. The three groups were at long last ready with their preliminary reports. Captain Ogg-Ogg prepared to receive them in the conference room, surrounded by all his hundred officers, cream of the Centaurian military. It was a mighty show of well-brushed, vari-colored fur, and of magnificently-jeweled insignia, decorations, and trophies. (The Centaurians do not exactly take scalps from their victims, but it is considered *de rigeur* to remove the eyeballs from a deceased enemy and have them petrified.)

Everybody in the room stood at attention as the science-teams filed in—all 36 of the venerable egg-heads. Their faces, under the whiskers, were very grave, as befitted the importance of the occasion. "Hail, First Supreme Glorious Captain—" began the spokesman.

But Ogg-Ogg waved him off. "Cut formalities," he roared. "Report!"

Group A advanced as one, and poured out their findings in breathless gasps. It all summed up to the fact that the Earthship had primitive rocket-type propulsion, with a low efficiency factor, had had assisted takeoff, used liquid fuel (probably alcohol and boron) which was exhausted but original capacity for minutes only, etc., etc. It was indeed, really little more than a toy, a runabout—the sort of project Centaurian children made in voca-

tional school at the secondary level. . . . They bowed to the captain, and stepped back.

Ogg-Ogg was red in the face, his forehead wrinkled with puzzlement. "A toy it is? Is ridiculous! Fuel for takeoff and landing and maybe a bit of steering? Then how in the name of the sainted painted behinds of all the Gods did this peanut of a ship ever get all the way out *here*?" Ogg-Ogg paused, but the question was clearly only a rhetorical one. First Semi-Supreme Mate Fygg held up his paw.

"You may speak," conceded the captain.

"Is perhaps human or mechanical failure, sir? Suppose Earthlings just beginning to experiment space-travel, took flying-shot at their pip-squeak moon, and *missed*? Could be just experimental vessel that went astray, perhaps?"

It was as good a guess as any, but Ogg-Ogg was not in a particularly reasonable frame of mind. "Shut up," he told his over-eager first-officer. "I will do all the perhapsing that is done around here. *Me*, the Ogg-Ogg of Oggs! Next group, front and center!"

Group B stepped forward, and poured out their various findings and conclusions. The weight of the ship was just over 1200 pounds, length twelve feet six inches, diameter five feet. It had been built of heat-resistant but fairly low-grade alloys; similar to stuff the Centaurians had discarded aeons ago. The interior fittings were very simple, almost Spartan, showing clever and precise workmanship but practically on the Do-It-Yourself-Kit level. There was an automatic oxygen system, exhausted now but about enough to keep the pilot going for a week. Food supply exhausted, but presumably had been concentrated fruits and vegetables only. Some H_2O remained in the water container. Simple automatic radio-casting equipment, hooked up to dials registering and recording interior and exterior pressures, temperature, and radiation. Pilot's seat near automatic feeding and watering devices, well-padded with foam rubber, connected to parachute. . . .

"And the arms, the weapons?" burst in Ogg-Ogg.

"There were absolutely none, sir!"

It was incredible, absolutely unthinkable. "No weapons at *all*?" gasped Ogg-Ogg. But they all shook their heads firmly. Yet everybody knew that no man ever goes out into space unarmed, not ever.

"An unarmed spaceship the shape and size of a bathtub, with almost no fuel and with supplies and air for only a week! Now I have heard everything!" cried Ogg-Ogg. "The thing must be a tender, a dinghy lost by some standard-size vessel. Surely is that."

"But, Supreme sir—"

The Semi-Supreme Professor received a smack from Ogg-Ogg that almost broke his neck. "That is all!" said Ogg fiercely. "Last group

—and this better be very good!"

The last thirteen egg-heads stepped forward, saluted—but nobody said anything. The scientists only looked at one another, studied their claws, and one or two of them absently scratched himself. "Speak up!" shouted Ogg-Ogg, "before I order the disposal hatch opened!"

And then they told him the ghastly news. Their words tumbled over one another, the phrases mixed and incoherent, with interruptions upon interruptions. But the terrible, inescapable impact slowly emerged. The thirteen were all in agreement—and by agreement had spoken all at once so that no single one of them would have to bear the full weight of the captain's inevitable wrath.

They had hardly run out of words and breath when Ogg-Ogg gave a yelp of frustrated rage, shouldered them aside like ten-pins and went shambling swiftly down the corridors, down the ladders to the very heart of the immense oval wasp-nest, to the labs. There he looked for the first time on the body of the alien space-pilot—a smallish body, quite humanoid from their point of view, except for its caudal appendage. The corpse had quite thawed out, and was beginning to give off an aroma unpleasant even to Centaurians who themselves smell like rancid goats.

"By the sainted, painted behinds of all my glorious Ancestors—" began Ogg, and then his voice died away. This *was* an Ancestor, a creature long since exterminated and deified on the home planet of Epsilon. And it wore a leather collar, the badge of slavery everywhere.

Ogg-Ogg's wide shoulders sagged, and he sighed a Gargantuan sigh. "Call to Quarters," he said, in a whispering growl. "Prepare to blast. Set course for home; we are finished here." And so it was that the vast Centaurian ship, armed to the teeth with super-weapons that could have brought our world to its knees in a week or less, turned tail and blasted hell-bent back to the safer spaceways of its own system. It was, after all, a matter of obvious expediency. A normal man, an average man, does not match brains with an Einstein. No Centaurian aboard doubted the wisdom, the absolute necessity, of the decision to retreat before it was too late. Only accident had saved them from plunging down on Earth to sure death or worse. They had at last met their Masters. You see, they had not the slightest desire to tangle with the people of a planet who had progressed to the point where even their simians were trained to pilot spaceships!

And the funny part of it all is that the Russians never knew that their lost Sputnik IX, the one dubbed "Monknik" by the newspapers because it carried a small monkey named Petroushka aboard, had saved the world!

For this time, anyway.

plan S for conquest

by . . . Erthre Eljons

A compilation of the documents relating to Cycladia's utilization of Plan S for their conquest of Earth.

PREFACE

The Fissued Plateau Documents, discovered by H. M. Deschaud on the planet Cycladia in the expedition of 2718, reveal new information on the unsuccessful attempt of the Cycladians to conquer Earth. The force of the Universe against which the advanced technological civilization of Cycladia was powerless is identified for the first time.

Pertinent Fissued Plateau Documents (sometimes in the form of abstracts or excerpts), together with revelant items from the historical papers of Earth, are set forth. Although the Documents are fragmentary, a clear picture of the last days of the Cycladian Empire is obtained.

ITEM NO. 1—*Resolution Passed at the 12,766th Meeting of the Governing Committee of the Cycladian Empire*

Subject: Conquest of Earth

In consideration of the recent scientific developments on Earth which show that it is potentially capable of serving Cycladia and in consideration of the large number of Cycladian males who are entitled to participation in Plan S, it is re-

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Mr. Eljons, a Research Scholar, 12th level (employed as a physicist in the Navy's ballistic missile program) *apparently submitted the above in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Superior Academician, Interplanetary History, Conjoint Universities, Northern Hemisphere.*

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solved that Earth shall be conquered and brought into the Empire as the 5,429th servile planet. The Director in Charge of Implementing Plan S is requested to send a team of medical investigators to Earth to determine if it is feasible to apply Plan S to that planet.

(Signed)
Kreasa Urrenga, Chairman
Governing Committee

Author's Note: According to the Fissued Plateau Documents, the above resolution was passed with two dissenting votes, those of the provinces of Coriquia and Upper Stresstle. The delegates from these provinces argued that the Committee should not act to apply Plan S again until a more equitable method of selecting participants had been established. The delegates considered that in the past the Director of Plan S discriminated against their constituents.

ITEM NO. 2—*Abstract of the Manual Entitled* Plan S for Conquest

The Cycladians, when first they embarked on building an empire, conquered planets by methods of force based on their advanced technology. They were successful in suppressing all opposition, but in the process they destroyed the capability of the conquered areas to serve Cycladia. Attempts were made to develop a less destructive method of conquest, preferably one that would reduce the inhabitants to a state of servility without destroying their productivity.

Over a period of almost two thousand years various plans other than war were tried. Populations of planets were annihilated and replaced with members of a servile race. Missionaries were sent to preach the advantages of being a servile planet in the Cycladian Empire. Civil administrations in the hands of native collaborators were established and servility was enforced. Each of the plans required extensive efforts and centuries to develop a servile population that happily and efficiently served Cycladia. Not until Loppe Mallepke made his basic discoveries in eugenics was the perfect plan developed.

Loppe Mallepke discovered that races which live in a slave status for fifty or more generations develop a hereditary trait of servility. Mallepke's followers found that by proper treatment of the males of a single generation this trait could be made dominant in all succeeding generations. That is, when a servile man mated with a non-servile woman, the offspring were invariably servile and they, in turn, propagated servile offspring. These discoveries, coupled with the fact that breeding between the races of the various planets was biologically possible, provided the Cycladians with a peaceful method of developing servile races on alien planets.

The method of employing this plan of conquest, Plan S, was to use teams of servile males to seduce as many of the females as possible on the planet to be con-

quered. The teams operated under the direction of Cycladians who were selected for these highly prized assignments on the basis of their contributions to the Empire. The Cycladians, of course, did not have the trait of servility and could not propagate it, but they guided the servile males, instructed them in the most effective methods of seduction, saw that they got adequate rest between matings and generally ensured that the conquest schedule was met. Several generations were necessary to distribute the trait of servility throughout a planet but once it had been planted the outcome was inevitable.

Author's Note: Although the above manual correctly states that Plan S was an effective method of conquest, this was not the sole or even the principal reason for its enthusiastic adoption by Cycladia. The abstract given below reveals the fundamental reason for the popularity of the plan.

ITEM NO. 3—*Abstract of the Book Entitled* Sexual Behavior of the Human Male and Female of the Cycladian Empire *by Rehu Termyz*

A universal characteristic of the human females inhabiting the planets of the Empire was that they mated only once each year. At all times other than during this single act of union, the female was violently opposed to the sexual act.

The males of the Empire experienced no such limitation on their sexual drive. Their instinct for mating was continually active. Experiments proved that if the average male were given the opportunity, he could satisfy as many as seven females in a single year, providing their periods of mating were fairly evenly distributed in order to allow the male time to recover from his exertions. Because of the limited number of opportunities for mating which were afforded the males, highly active competition for the females as they arrived at their mating periods was a basic pursuit of the social life of the Empire. It was not uncommon for a nonaggressive male to lead a virgin existence, even though he was married. Conversely, there were no virgin adult females in the Empire.

Author's Note: The Cycladian males could not satisfy their desires with the women of the established servile planets because the males of those planets were faced with the same problem and were not servile enough to tolerate such an invasion of their own rights; rebellion invariably resulted. But the extensive use of Plan S did enable the Cycladians selected as team leaders to find females on the planets to be conquered. The situation existing on Cycladia is shown in the following item.

ITEM NO. 4—*Excerpt from a Personal Letter Written in Crezia, Cycladia in 4218*

. . . You girls in Midblomien

should do what we are doing. Only last week Myrtrim Smiltyr, who is one of my best girl friends, reached her time and she had seven men after her. Poor Yame, that's the fellow she finally married, didn't have a chance. Those horrible men locked him out of his own house. Now he'll have to wait another year, but you know he won't. He'll be after me when my time comes.

Our chapter of the Confederated Daughters of Cycladia is going to petition the Governing Committee of the Empire to do something about this, maybe deactivate most of the men. Why don't you get a petition started, too? But don't let them know about it . . .

ITEM NO. 5—*Summary of the Medical Report on Earth*

In accordance with our policy of avoiding all acts which might reveal our identity or generate antagonism, the biological examination was conducted on a female cadaver found in a small village. The body was obtained without incident and returned following the examination. Although the natives resemble our citizens of Cycladia, they are obviously an inferior race. As now developed they would not be able to survive the time transitions of space travel.

It was determined that there is no biological obstacle to the males of the Empire mating with the females of Earth. But the females of Earth are not pure females as are the women of the Empire. It was apparent that the person examined had been at an earlier stage of its life a male. The inhabitants may be bisexual and capable of changing their predominant sex. Moreover, even though middle-aged, the female was still a virgin.

It is believed that the sexual drive of the Earth women, if it exists at all, is far less intense and less frequent that that of the women of the Empire. In all probability mating with these females will prove to be difficult and highly unsatisfactory. This factor, in addition to the low state of the development of the natives of Earth and their inferiority to the people of our Empire, leads the Medical Team to recommend that no efforts be made to conquer Earth.

Author's Note: The medical report on Earth is substantiated in part by the following item from the historical records of Earth for the year 1961.

ITEM NO. 6—*News Report Appearing in the* East Clear Springs Dispatch *of February 4, 1961*

BODY DISAPPEARS MYSTERIOUSLY

The remains of the late Miss Emily P. Peterson, formerly known as Mr. Joe Crooks, disappeared from the Apperby Funeral Home during the early hours of February 3, according to the report of Jake X. Femletti, night watchman. Sheriff Wiley Penington, on investigating the report immediately after

breakfast, found the body unmolested in the chapel of the funeral home. The police and the management cannot explain the temporary disappearance of the remains, but the investigation is continuing. Mr. Apperby asked this reporter to assure all of his friends that the investigation would not interfere with the services offered by the funeral home.

Miss Peterson enjoyed considerable notoriety following her trip to Denmark in the spring of 1960. In earlier years Miss Peterson, who went under the name of Joe Crooks, was employed as a mechanic in a local garage. Following her trip to Denmark she was active as a hair stylist.

ITEM NO. 7—*Minutes of the 12,843rd Meeting of the Governing Committee of the Cycladian Empire*

Subject: Lack of Leaders for Plan S (Earth)

The Director in Charge of Implementing Plan S informed the committee that the unauthorized dissemination of the medical report on Earth, and the resulting rumor that Earth females are bisexual and differ in small measure, if at all, from the males, had created a unique situation. All eligible Cycladian men were demanding assignments to planets with more attractive females, such as those on the planets of Rovilla and Ercuma. The Director had finally succeeded in recruiting ten Cycladians to journey secretly to Earth and make an initial determination of the degree of frigidity of the women and of the most effective methods for the servile males to use in seducing them. But it had been impossible to recruit an appreciable number of men to lead the teams. The Director requested the Committee to authorize a draft of the Cycladian males.

The Committee extended its sympathy to the Director in Charge of Implementing Plan S. It was suggested that he conduct an extensive recruiting program to secure an adequate number of Cycladian leaders for Plan S for Earth.

(Signed)
R. Y. Montzy,
Executive Secretary
Governing Committee

ITEM NO. 8—*Advertisements Employed by the Director in Charge of Implementing Plan S*

MEN OF CYCLADIA —
SERVE YOUR EMPIRE

The challenge of a lifetime awaits you on Earth. Prove your loyalty to Cycladia and prove your virility by seducing the females of Earth. Lead a team of servile males to victory. Enlist now at the nearest post office.

RED-BLOODED MALES
OF CYCLADIA
YOUR EMPIRE NEEDS YOU

Do not be deterred by rumors

of the frigidity of the females of Earth. Team leaders are urgently needed for Plan S. Here is *your* chance to serve *your* Empire. Prove your ability to seduce females in the face of resistance. Lead a team to Earth.

ITEM NO. 9—*Letter from the Governor of the Province of Upper Stresstle to the Chairman, Governing Committee of the Cycladian Empire*

The Honorable Chairman:

The effort to conquer Earth by Plan S has met with disfavor by the citizens of Upper Stresstle. Fortunately a copy of the medical report on Earth was obtained by the staff of the Public Communication System and broadcast to our people. The reaction against sending our men to a planet inhabited by such females has been so intense that even the women are holding protest meetings.

Our men firmly believe that the efforts of this great Cycladian Empire should be directed toward conquering planets with more attractive females.

It is my opinion that the Governing Committee has failed to act in the best interests of Cycladia and Upper Stresstle. Our citizens have not forgotten the discrimination displayed against them in the selection of team leaders for the conquest of Rappharan, despite the fact that the Upper Stresstle males are the most virile in the Empire. The present actions of the committee have irritated them anew.

(Signed)
P. P. Achlleum, Governor
Upper Stresstle

ITEM NO. 10—*Minutes of the 12,879th Meeting of the Governing Committee of the Cycladian Empire*

Subject: Failure of First Team Dispatched to Earth to Return

It was reported by the Director in Charge of Implementing Plan S that the first team of ten Cycladians sent to Earth to evaluate the situation and determine the most effective methods of seducing the females had failed to return on schedule. They were now six days overdue. The Director feared that the agents may have been detected and imprisoned by the natives of Earth. He suggested sending a relief team to Earth at once.

The Committee, fearing that a premature relief team might generate antagonism on Earth, decided to wait an additional four days before taking action.

(Signed)
R. Y. Montzy,
Executive Secretary
Governing Committee

ITEM NO. 11—*Minutes of the 12,920th Meeting (Emergency) of the Governing Committee of the Cycladian Empire*

Subject: Continued Failure of First Team Dispatched to Earth to Return

An emergency meeting of the Committee was held at the request of the Director in Charge of Implementing Plan S. He stated that it was now ten and a half days past the scheduled date for the return of the first team. Although he insisted that he did not want to be unduly pessimistic, the Director stated that he could not ignore the possibility that Earth was acting contrary to the interests of the Empire. He recommended that a task force be dispatched at once to reconnoiter.

The committee decided that a display of force might generate an antagonism that would make the successful application of Plan S impossible. Therefore, the Director was requested to send to Earth a loyal agent who could be trusted to return with information on what had happened.

(Signed)
R. Y. Montzy,
Executive Secretary
Governing Committee

ITEM NO. 12—*Minutes of the 13,117th Meeting (Emergency) of the Governing Committee of the Cycladian Empire*

Subject: Report of First Team Dispatched to Earth

The meeting was classified ABSOLUTELY UNDISCLOSABLE.

The Director in Charge of Implementing Plan S reported that the special agent had returned from Earth. He found that none of the ten Cycladian males were in the quarters selected for them by the medical team—a small hotel centrally located on Earth near the United Nations Building in New York City. Moreover, he detected no evidence of the Cycladians having been recognized as being from another planet. Fortunately the special agent happened upon one of the Cycladians and this man led him to a second member of the team. Both of these men, who were brought back to Cycladia, reported directly to the Committee.

Umel Remiah—Agent Remiah stated that shortly after his arrival on Earth he became acquainted with a woman much like in appearance the redheaded inhabitants of the Province of Crepania. She was interested in his advances and suggested they go to her apartment. Once there he found that he had made a fortunate selection—the female was ready to mate and she was completely different from what the medical report had led him to believe. She displayed an enthusiasm and vigor that he had never found among the Cycladian females. He concluded that Plan S would not only be successful but also pleasant to apply.

Remiah related that after a short rest, when he tried to make his way back to his hotel to recuperate for another conquest, the female refused to let him go. She locked the doors and insisted that he return to bed. In his weakened condition he could not resist the woman who had an appetite and violence that

was contrary to all his experiences. Remiah confessed that he remained in the apartment of the female for more than four weeks, during which time he mated more frequently than he thought was possible. The woman finally released him, and he was found by the special agent under a park bench, trying to gather enough strength to drag himself to a place of safety.

Remiah stated that upon reconsideration he regretted having returned to Cycladia and he was volunteering to return to Earth to serve the Empire. He would appreciate a place on the first ship going that way.

Pym Seish—Agent Seish reported that on the second night after arrival on Earth he gained entrance to a large establishment named Hope College for Women. He observed that the building he entered, a sort of dormitory, was inhabited by a large number of young females, and he reasoned that in such a large number he might find one who had reached her mating period. He was fortunate in locating such a female at once; the first one he met invited him into her room. Seish stated that he did his duty for the Empire, finding the woman surprisingly easy to seduce.

After a short rest he tried to find his way out of the building and back to his hotel. However, in his weariness he took a wrong turn, opened the wrong door and found himself in the room of another young female who, marvelously, was also at her mating period. Although at this time he felt completely incapable of serving the Empire, the female did not understand or accept his explanation and insisted that he treat her as he had treated the first woman. Seish reported that he did his best, only to find himself confronted by a third female who demanded the same thing. From this time on he seemed to have partially lost consciousness. He vaguely remembered a great number of females, all of whom had reached their mating period, and he remembered being hustled from room to room and sometimes being shut in closets and hidden under beds. Finally he was told something about Easter holidays and was allowed, after promising to return in a week, to escape.

Shortly after this Seish was picked up by the special agent and transported back to Cycladia. Seish insisted that his return had been involuntary, he had not deserted his assignment, and he was ready to return on the first ship to Earth to continue his investigations on methods of seducing Earth females.

The Chairman stated that he would like to discuss this information with the Director of Public Health, the Director of Public Recreation, the Special Board for Developments Adverse to the Welfare of the Empire, and the Special Board for Developments Advantageous to the Welfare of the Empire. He believed that the Committee should not act hastily.

The Committee agree unanimously over the objections of the Director of Plan S.

(Signed)
R. Y. Montzy,
Executive Secretary
Governing Committee

Author's Note: The following item could be interpreted to substantiate, in part, the report of Pym Seish.

ITEM NO. 13—*News Report from the* Westbury Weekly News *of May 14, 1961*

FUTURE OUTLOOK BRIGHT FOR HOPE COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

The prospects of an expanded student body at Hope College for Women are very bright according to Dr. H. M. Harrison, President. Many students returning from their Easter holidays were accompanied by friends who expressed a desire to visit the college with the plan of enrolling for the next term.

Dr. Harrison stated that the widespread interest in Hope College for Women was a result of the opportunities offered the young ladies for improving themselves and for entertainment and recreation.

ITEM NO. 14—*News Release by the Cycladian Consolidated Press*

The recruiting offices for Plan S have been flooded with applications from men desiring to aid in conquering Earth. This complete reversal of the situation is attributed to the publication of the reports of Pym Seish and Umel Remiah, members of the initial group sent to Earth to investigate methods of seduction. Mobs stormed the offices in Empire House, Central Cycladia, demanding immediate assignments to Earth. Already efforts are being made in the provinces of Upper Stresstle and Webblur to block the transporting of servile males to Earth and to classify that planet as a resort area for Cycladian males.

The Governing Committee of the Empire continues to refuse to comment on the situation. Reliable sources report that an intensive effort is being made by the government to determine the manner in which the news networks acquired copies of the ABSOLUTELY UNDISCLOSABLE reports of Seish and Remiah.

ITEM NO. 15—*Intraoffice Memorandum (Office of the Governing Committee)*

From: Assistant Executive Secretary, Office of the Governing Committee
To: Chairman, Governing Committee
Subject: Disappearance of Personnel from the Office of the Governing Committee

With regard to your memorandum to the Executive Secretary ordering that male personnel of the Office of the Governing Committee be restrained from making unauthorized departures for Earth, I re-

gret to inform you that the Executive Secretary has been absent for three days. I will bring your memorandum to his attention upon his return. However, I have been advised that prior to his disappearance he procured a five years' supply of vitamin pills.

(Signed)
N. Q. Kreil,
Assistant Executive
Secretary
Governing Committee

ITEM NO. 16—*Edict from the Governing Committee of the Empire*

All flights from Cycladia other than those made by ships of this Committee are forbidden until further notice. The space master is hereby authorized to destroy spaceships violating this order.

(Signed)
Kreasa Urrenga,
Chairman
Governing Committee
of the Empire

Author's Note: During this period a series of news reports were released by the Cycladian Consolidated Press dealing with:

a. The extensive black market in transportation to Earth;

b. Two ships from Upper Stresstle and one ship from Coriquia which were destroyed while making unauthorized departures for Earth;

c. Lectures by Pym Seish and Umel Remiah on their experiences on Earth (the lectures were attracting the largest audiences in the history of Cycladia).

ITEM NO. 17—*Letter from the Governor of the Province of Upper Stresstle to the Governing Committee of the Empire*

The Honorable Chairman:

The Province of Upper Stresstle views with alarm the failure of the Governing Committee to issue an order forbidding the transporting of servile males to Earth, the failure to establish a policy for exploiting Earth for the advantage of Cycladian males, and the failure to arrange for the transportation of an initial contingent of 6,000 Upper Stresstle men to Earth as requested in my last communication. In addition, the government of this province strongly protests your edict prohibiting all flights from this planet. Such an order is clearly unconstitutional and is an intolerable restriction on the freedom of the citizens of Upper Stresstle.

Immediate steps are being taken to muster the Provincial Guard of Upper Stresstle to protect the rights of its citizens.

(Signed)
P. P. Achlleum, Governor
Upper Stresstle

ITEM NO. 18—*Letter from the Governor of the Province of Descupia to the Governing Committee of the Empire*

The Honorable Chairman:

The governing body of the Province of Descupia is aware that the Provinces of Upper Stresstle, Coriquia and Webblur have formed an alliance and have mustered their

Provincial Guard. These acts constitute a direct and insufferable threat to the peace of Cycladia and this province.

It is understood that the above named provinces plan to transport large numbers of their male citizens to Earth despite the edict of the Governing Committee prohibiting flights. Reference is made to the request of this province for authorization to transport 3,700 males to Earth as soon as possible. Immediate approval is requested; Descupia will not be left behind.

The Province of Descupia cannot remain silent while Upper Stresstle, Coriquia and Webblur commit overt acts of war and defiance. This province has mustered its Provincial Guard and it has entered into a mutual protection alliance with the seven provinces lying to the west.

(Signed)
R. R. Streye, Governor
Descupia

ITEM NO. 19—*Minutes of the 13,349th Meeting (Emergency) of the Governing Committee, Cycladian Empire, Held in Secret Retreat No. 6, Northern Cycladia*

Subject: Imminence of Revolt on Cycladia

The meeting was classified as ABSOLUTELY UNDISCLOSABLE.

The Chairman reviewed the efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement of the problem of exploiting Earth to the satisfaction of all the provinces. He discussed the rash impetuousness of Upper Stresstle and her cohorts and the impossibility of persuading them to take a reasonable course of action. He expressed the opinion that the situation was critical and without any practicable solution in view of the demands of the provinces; particularly those of Upper Stresstle. The Chairman believed that armed conflict, which would result in the complete destruction of Cycladia, was imminent.

The proposal that the police fleet attached to the Governing Committee be ordered to attack Upper Stresstle, Coriquia and Webblur and destroy their capability for war was rejected as being impracticable. The police fleet had mutinied and left for Earth three days ago.

The Chairman interrupted the meeting to announce that his intelligence office had positive knowledge that Upper Stresstle and her allied provinces would launch an attack on the other provinces within two hours.

The Committee agreed unanimously that further action was useless.

The members boarded the spaceship stowed in Secret Retreat No. 6 and took the minimum time trajectory for Earth.

(Signed)
N. Q. Kreil,
Assistant Executive
Secretary
Governing Committee

cocktails at eight

by . . . Beth Elliott

The time was running out. A few minutes more and the cold would be unbearable. Her children would be dead.

WHEN the alarm buzzed briefly in Nan's ear, she was instantly awake with the excitement of the day bubbling in her. For a moment she didn't remember why. The buzz sounded again and she reached up, touched the button in the headboard of the bed, shutting off the annoying sound. She slipped quickly out of bed, her feet seeking slippers on the warm plastic floor, recoiled slightly at the ever-present grit of sand. "Wonder how sand gets into the house when air can't get out," she thought.

Slipping on her robe she hurried into the kitchen, hoping this one morning the twins would sleep late. If they did she knew she could get a lot of the spreads made for the canapes. Just as she was thinking it she heard a muffled giggle from the kitchen. Apprehension touched her and she thought. "Oh no, not today!"

As she walked in Pat tried to hide the pie he was making and spilled it. Prepared cereal, glue, flour, sugar and— "Oh boys, not the cheese! Blue cheese from earth! I've been saving it for something special!"

"But Mommy it stinks. We didn't think you'd want it!"

What will *life be like for the colonists on Mars? Santa Fe housewife "Beth Elliott," who supplies a possible answer to this question, is the mother of four boys—no twins, and reports, in a recent letter, that her life is composed mostly of meals, housecleaning—and Scout meetings.*

"No matter what you thought of the cheese, you both know quite well that you weren't supposed to do this." She got some cloths and handed one to each boy. "Mop."

The two little boys struggled in vain with the mess. Finally she gave each upturned bottom a light swat. "All right I'll finish. Scoot. This, young men, had better not happen again. Next time I'll really spank you both."

The four-year old identical redheads scooted while Mommy thought it a good idea. Having tried her patience as much as they apparently thought safe, they played quietly until breakfast. Nan called her family as she began to put the hydroponically synthetic food on the table. Oats that weren't quite oats, eggs that weren't quite eggs and bacon that made no pretense of being bacon.

"You know dear," Don said as he began to eat, "if our scientists hadn't tried to convince us this tastes like something it isn't, it *would* be damned good."

"Well why don't you think of some other names?" Nan asked.

"I know a good one," piped Bill. "The oatmeal looks like a whole bunch of cooked golags. Let's call it that."

"Golags, golags, golags," Pat began to chant experimentally.

"Oh boys," cried Nan with a woman's crawley feeling about the flat slug-like creatures found under most of Mars' rocks.

"But Mommy," protested Pat. "They're good. Dried in the sun and salted—we tried 'em."

"Hush now, both of you. And you get that smirk off your face Don Kelman." She turned furiously toward her husband.

Don laughed but turned to the boys and said, "She's right boys. That isn't a very good breakfast subject. If you're through eating, run and play."

After they left, banging away enthusiastically at one another, Nan sat for a moment looking at the bowl in distaste, then pushed it away. "It was good," she said ruefully. "Oh well, I need to get busy anyway."

"Scared honey?"

She looked at her husband and smiled. "Scared silly! I shouldn't be. I've done enough entertaining but this is the first cocktail party I've given in five years and this one is so important. We've just got to make Mr. Quenton see that you are the ideal man to head their sale of earth-made products on Mars."

"Now don't feel everything depends on this one evening. It doesn't. Relax and things will go better."

"Don't I wish I could!" The household robot, activated automatically at eight o'clock came out of the closet. "Good heavens, here's Quezy! You'd better hurry or you'll be late for work."

As soon as Don left, Nan set the robot to work clearing the table. It was called Quezy for the obvious reason that it was from lot QZ-10672 and was designed to do all

the mechanical housework. This one was also instructed to keep one of its human perception cells in constant contact with the twins. Following instructions it began to put the dishes onto the washing cabinet. It pressed the button that should have begun the scraping, loading and washing. Instead the machine began to squeal shrilly. Nan quickly shut it off and opened it to check. There nestled in a bed of sand was a tin can. Muttering to herself about anyone who would have twins, especially four-year old ones she began to take it apart to clean it. Thirty minutes later it was together and operating.

Nan finished just in time to referee a battle between the small boys. Exasperated though she was, she stopped what she was doing and settled their differences as much as possible, then dressed them to go outside and play. Stuffing children into snowsuits was nothing compared to the oxygen helmets necessary for play on Mars. Similar to a Scuba diver's outfit, but very light in weight, the wearer draws oxygen only when he needs it. Even the very young colonists learned to operate one. Little supplementary air is needed so the tanks were quite light.

After seeing them safely into the yard, digging in the sand, Nan went back into the house, smiling to herself at the pretty picture their red heads made bent intently over what they were doing. She probably wouldn't have been so pleased if she had known what they were hatching. As she didn't, she went happily about directing the robot in its household duties.

Quezy had one fault—unless one of the children cried it had no way of knowing that he was in danger though he could feel their presence. Therefore it didn't stop work when Pat came in alone and ambled through the house to his room. After he had passed, the robot stood still suddenly.

"I think, ma'am, that Bill is in trouble." The robot sounded puzzled. "He cries but it seems so far away—yet he is in the yard." It started toward the front door.

"Pat," Nan called, "Where is Bill?"

"Oh," Pat came galloping back into the room. "I forgot to tell you. Our cave fell in. He's partly under it."

Nan snatched her helmet and followed the robot. There in the yard was Bill—at least the foot and leg part of Bill. The rest of him was buried under a pile of dirt. She began to dig frantically and Quezy efficiently. Terror clutched Nan, illogical terror because the angry thrashing of his legs indicated that Bill was fine. They had him out in a very few minutes and he was yelling lustily back of the face mask. He was red in the face from anger instead of blue from lack of oxygen.

"He pushed me in, Mommy! He wasn't supposed to! We were playing Hansel and Gretel. I was supposed to push him!" His voice rose in a wail. "Make him come back here

and let me push him in!" Completely exasperated Nan swatted his bottom hard.

"Get into that house!" She reached Pat who had been standing uneasily at the front door and spun him around. "You are going to stay out of trouble if I have to lock you in your rooms." She put them in their bedrooms and removed their helmets a little unceremoniously then closed the door on two woebegone little faces.

Nan and the robot went back to work with the muffled sobs of the boys distracting both of them. Quezy, with his built-in command to go to them when they were crying and Nan's conflicting one to leave them alone, was being driven toward neuroses. When the usually reliable machine dropped and broke a vase while dusting, Nan finally relented.

"All right Quezy," she laughed ruefully, "Go get them. I'll get nothing out of you unless you do."

It hurried away and came back in a moment with the twins in tow. They both looked so repentant that Nan said, "I'm going to make some little cookies for tonight, boys. Want to come watch?" They did of course and were soon installed on stools on either side of their mother. Around and at her their nonsensical chatter flowed. She worked on, paying little attention to what they said. Nan moved away for a cookie sheet. She turned back just in time to see Bill tip up the tabasco sauce bottle and shake it vigorously over the almost finished cookie dough.

"Oh no!" she screamed, set each boy down then scolded them furiously. "You will sit right here on these stools until I get your lunch ready. If you haven't eaten it in thirty minutes you are going to take a nap hungry."

True to her word she put them to bed and locked their door. They seemed to realize that she had deactivated Quezy because after a few experimental yells they hushed and went to sleep. Nan remade the cookies while she waited for them to settle down, then turned the robot on. By the time the boys waked the preparations for the party were almost complete and the house clean except the living room.

She put them outside again, then turned to the robot. "Now. All we lack is dusting and waxing this room. Guess I should have waxed the floor yesterday but this Martian sand cuts it so badly it wouldn't have looked it today if I had. Let's move all the furniture into the hall. It'll be easier for you to do it that way."

They worked so hard that Nan felt even Quezy should be sweating. Just as everything was out and the equipment gathered, the robot stopped in that way which meant something was wrong. He stood a moment. "The boys are gone ma'am. One went out of my range one way and one the other. I must go hunt them."

Nan sighed. "Yes, of course. You will find them faster without me. I'll go ahead and finish here."

She went back to waxing, know-

ing that on Mars there was no real danger for the children. There are no open bodies of water—swampy places that were probably once lakes, but none dangerous to children. Since there were no dangerous animals, the only real danger was that they might not be found before dark. No one could stay out overnight unprotected from the intense cold with any chance of survival. Quezy's ability at tracking the boys was so well proven that it didn't even occur to her that he might not get back with the boys in time.

Fifteen minutes later Quezy called in. "I have picked up their trail. They went out a little way in opposite directions, circled around and met again. Their oxygen helmets are by a rock half a mile from the house."

Panic touched Nan for the first time. "Their helmets! They will suffocate! They must have been kidnapped!"

"No, they are alone. They go without the helmets often out of the yard. They do not need them and never have."

"Good Lord! Why didn't they tell us? Or you?"

Quezy hesitated as if puzzled before answering. "The children knew that you would scold if they went out without them. They did not wish to be scolded. The last question I do not understand."

Nan rocked back on her heels and sat for a moment in silence. Being born on the planet apparently had made it possible for them to adjust to the atmosphere. She realized of course that Quezy must have thought she knew. Robots just weren't equipped with the thought processes necessary to realize that if she did know she wouldn't make the boys wear them. Laughter rose in her at the thought of the effort those two must have made to keep her from knowing. Putting on and adjusting an air helmet must have been hard work for a four-year old. "All right, Quezy, call again as soon as you find them. Have you touched them yet?"

"Yes, faintly. I can go much faster now that I have made contact and will probably reach them soon."

With Quezy on their trail Nan worked on without a trace of worry. There was a sense of urgency though because the party was to start at 8:00. "Time's running out," she thought. "I've got to finish this room, bathe, dress and get the boys to bed before people begin to arrive. Oh golly, the boys have to be fed. I forgot about that. Quezy can do that when they get home. Wonder why he hasn't called." Just as that thought crossed her mind the living room speaker began to hum.

"I have found them Ma'am. We will be home in about thirty minutes. I'll come at top speed."

Nan glanced out the window at the sun and fear touched her. "It's nearly down," she thought. "Five minutes after sundown and the temperature will drop to the point they will only live a few minutes." All thought of the plans for the night vanished as she realized how close

it was going to be. "If only I had some way to go meet them. Living this far from neighbors we just must have a second copter." Slow minutes passed. "I wonder if Quezy broke down. Pushing himself at top speed he might."

She had finally reached the frantic point of deciding she would never see her babies again alive, when the door glowed alive in recognition of two blue-cold little boys and their robot. The second they were in the house they began to squirm. "Put us down, Quezy!" The robot stooped and deposited the small boys on the floor gently as if he felt the very human emotion of love. Grubby and affectionate the two came to their mother, trailing mud across the floor. Each one clutched in both hands some limp, once beautiful gieeva flowers, found only in Mars' rare swamps.

When she didn't move they both looked up a little uncertainly and held them up to her. "Here. Do you love us again?" asked Bill.

All the tension of the day dissolved like sugar in hot tea as Nan took a boy in each arm. "How very beautiful!" she cried. Don came in a few minutes later to find her hugging them and laughing. The boys joined her, not quite sure why, but willing to laugh anytime.

With Don's help the boys were soon bathed, fed and ready for bed and the muddy damage to the living room repaired. Bill and Pat saw their peace offering arranged in a place of honor by the couch. The flowers had brightened in water and hardly looked bedraggled at all. When the guests began to arrive the children were kissed and asleep, looking, with their sleep-damp hair and clean peaceful faces, as children do everywhere, be it earth or Mars—deceptively like little angels.

The evening went beautifully, topped by the gieevas. Most of the group had never seen one before much less six in a cluster. As their guests began to leave, one turned to Nan and said in admiration, "Your home runs so smoothly. How do you manage it with twins and still look so young and happy?"

Don put his arm around Nan and the both laughed. Then Nan said, "Trade secret, known only to efficient robots."

universe in books

by...Hans Stefan Santesson

Comments on the new books —on novels and conventions and on other matters which may perhaps interest you.

As Frederik Pohl points out in the introdution to his STAR SCIENCE FICTION NO. 4 (Ballantine Books, 35 cents), it is the business of our science fiction authors to give an answer to the problems which the times and the years ahead will present us with. "And while it is not obligatory on them that the answer be right, it is the basic rule of their business that it must stimulate thought." And this is precisely what Frederik Pohl's impressive anthology will do.

I suspect that Henry Kuttner's excellent A CROSS OF CENTURIES, Edmund Cooper's TOMORROW'S GIFT and, also, Lester del Rey's ironic HELPING HAND will all, each in their way, disturb you. Particularly Henry Kuttner's story.

But there is also James E. Gunn's vivid and very effective THE IMMORTALS (vivid though a restatement of an old thought), and stories by Cyril Kornbluth, Fritz Leiber, Richard Wilson, Miriam Allen de Ford and Damon Knight.

Don't miss STAR SCIENCE FICTION NO. 4.

A further report on some books of interest to science fiction and fantasy readers—and on SF fan activities (no Flying Saucers this month . . .)—all reflecting the many-sided aspects of life and speculative thought and activities in this flowering field still described, today, as Science Fiction.

Old myths die slowly.

Eric Frank Russell's THE SPACE WILLIES (Ace Double Novels, 35 cents) belongs to that school of fiction, popular in the eighties and the nineties of the last century, which admitted that the Indians were brave enough—heathens though they were—but a white man could *always* outwit them, of course . . .

This attitude was understandable in a generation for whom the opening up of the West was still a vivid memory. It was understandable in days when distances were measured in terms of weeks—not hours. It is *not* understandable and the encouragement of it in this field is *not* understandable in this day and age when science fiction has, as we are told, come to a maturity of mind and purpose as the Space Age dawns . . .

This comic book approach to science fiction—this reliance on *opera bouffé* stereotypes—this revival of the quasi-humanoid nightmares that afflicted the field in the thirties—is unfortunate. Though I must add, in all fairness to the author, that Russell does tell a fast moving story within this framework. The companion volume is Russell's SIX WORLDS YONDER, a group of stories.

DEPARTMENT OF REPRINTS. Ray Cummings' BRIGANDS OF THE MOON (Ace Double Novels, 35 cents) is a novel that first appeared in 1931. The publishers rightly describe it as "a masterwork of interplanetary adventure." Yes. It is exciting. * * * Arthur C. Clarke's magnificent novel of the space-ship engineer who has developed such fear of outer space that he can no longer function—THE DEEP RANGE (Signet, 35 cents) has been reissued by the New American Library. They deserve our thanks for this. * * * Henry Kuttner's FURY has been republished as DESTINATION—INFINITY (Avon, 35 cents). Correctly described as "a novel of violence" in Groff Conklin's introduction, it is the story of one man's fight against humanity's drift into universal senility. Not recommended for the sensitive.

Robert Moore Williams' THE BLUE ATOM (Ace Double Novels, 35 cents) is a top-notch adventure story *and* good space opera, a description of a credible society faced by a menace out of the dim and almost forgotten past. Jared Rahmer—Sam Helker—and, for that matter, Caleb Wilson—are perhaps a shade less subtly drawn than they could have been, but this is in keeping with the sprawling framework of this novel about men —and women—who will remind you, of course, of the men and the women who opened up the West. And frontier communities, a thousand years ago, even more so fifty or seventy-five years ago, *or* a thousand years in the future, have of course been and will be communi-

ties with their own mores and with their own ways of life. Robert Moore Williams succeeds in getting this across, in all its roughness and in all its strength, so much more effectively than most. This reader's only regret was that the novel was not longer, but Williams' THE VOID BEYOND AND OTHER STORIES, the companion volume, proved some compensation.

Aiming at the high school reader, Kenneth Heuer has written an extremely interesting report on the heavens as seen from various different places around the world, from New York City, from Helsinki, from the South Pole, from Quito and elsewhere. The author of AN ADVENTURE IN ASTRONOMY (Viking Press, $3.50), a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, lectured and taught at the American Museum of Natural History's Hayden Planetarium, in New York, between 1946 and 1951. The book ends on this interesting note: "And seeing that difference is a universal law, let us also extol the diversity in men, to us creation's most important creatures."

I had planned to comment on the rather interesting conference held in November by the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, at the same hotel, the Sheraton, where they hope to hold the 1960 World Convention if Philadelphia wins at the 1959 Convention in Detroit (more about this in a moment). Forrest J. Ackerman, Robert Silverberg, SF historian Sam Moskowitz and others spoke, and L. Sprague de Camp and *Fantastic Universe* author Harry Harrison (who had just returned from abroad) were in the audience. I believe Harry Harrison's reactions will interest some of you . . .

Dear Hans:

Having returned from the 17th Annual Science Fiction Conference in Philadelphia, I find myself struck between the eyes by a shocking fact.

SF fandom as I knew it is dead.

What I took to be signs of life are only the stirring of the corpse. The old "half-life that transcends the grave." Perhaps I'm wrong. I hope so. I hope countless thousands of readers will leap forward and prove me wrong. All I can do is recount the facts and give my conclusions.

The Philly conference was well prepared and organized. But—outside of the featured speakers—no one mentioned, discussed or apparently thought about science fiction. I never thought I would miss the ardent 12-year-old who wanted to discuss Planck's Constant, or his friend the autograph-hound who only wanted the signatures of Big Name Fen. I missed them in Philly. I missed any conversation or interest that made this meeting any different from an Elk's or Mink Growers convention.

This same no-nothingism re SF

seems to be carried into the fan mags. In the ones I've seen, SF or SF discussion was prominent by its absence. Is this true of all the mags I did not see?

I admit that I have been away from the States and out of touch with matters fenatical. Perhaps this is why I notice the present state of affairs and rush to draw it to your attention. And register my protest.

For the first time in my memory the shoe is on the other foot. A promag must draw attention to fennish failings. For years the fen fought for trimmed edges, the end of Shaverian mysteries, BEM covers and other equally noble causes. But that was a long time ago. The fan activities I have seen in the last few weeks have been completely impotent.

Tell me SF fans of America—are you still virile? Or should Sam Moskowitz write a second and final volume of THE IMMORTAL STORM and close the record forever on your once-noble activities?

Harry Harrison

Functioning independently of the World Science Fiction Society, as reported in this column in the last issue ("We are willing to accept any assistance or advice they may offer us, but we are in no way obligated to, or dependent on them." —*Detention,* Progress Report No. 1), the Detroit Committee is already planning for the World Convention which will be held at Hotel Fort Shelby coming Labor Day Weekend. Willy Ley has promised, the *Detention* Committee reports, to participate in a panel discussion, a University of Michigan astronomer is to speak on the Canals of Mars, and negotiations are under way with the same Dixieland Jazz Band that played at the Masquerade Ball at the San Francisco Convention. Fred Prophet and Roger Sims are co-chairmen of the *Detention* Committee which includes Dean McLaughlin of Ann Arbor, author of HOW TO BE A SAUCER AUTHOR (*Fantastic Universe,* February 1957). I suggest you send your Two Dollars for Convention Membership NOW to *Detention* Treasurer Jim Broderick, 12011 Kilbourne, Detroit 13, Michigan.

Earlier in the year there will be the conference in Washington and the Annual *Lunarcon* here in the East, the Tenth *Midwestcon,* the weekend of June 27th, at the North Plaza Motel in Cincinnati; and the *Westercon,* to be held this year in Seattle during the 4th of July weekend.

Locally, a sizable element in New York fandom will be recovering, as this magazine reaches you, from what promises to be a rather lively affair. The recently organized Futurian Society *(shades of the dim, dim past!)* is sponsoring what is described as the "Fanar-Con, New York's own Beatnick Con," to be held here in the city the weekend after Christmas. The invita-

tion, in front of me as I write, calls on "FANARCHISTS OF THE WORLD—UNITE—YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR SENSE OF WONDER!" We hope to report in the next issue on whether the "sense of wonder" (signally absent in fandom in recent years, for that matter) *was* truly lost . . .

The Constitution of the Futurians, who appear to be distressed by Parliamentary trends in fandom here in the East, includes these provisions — (2) "This Society shall have no purpose"; (9) "The duties of the Secretary shall be to make sure that no minutes are kept"; (14) "Membership is not necessarily confined"; (Amendment I) "Any member may be expelled by any other member declaring, *'I expel thee!'* three times and pointing his finger at the expellee."

I have wanted to comment on the suicide of a young Midwestern fan, reported on in a recent issue of Ted E. White's fanzine, *Gambit,* but frankly hesitate to do so. It so happens that I am not one of those people who generalize, and seldom charitably, on the state of mind of that man or that woman who takes this final step, but I feel it is profoundly disturbing, and a rather unhappy commentary on some undercurrents in our days, that someone this young should have had to face this final agony. To do this demanded courage, more so than is realized, but it also demanded a lack of faith in our society and in the future which is the more disturbing when it is found in someone this young, who had his life before him. Where, to some extent, you can understand an older person coming to this decision, this lack of faith in one's own future and in the future of the society in which you live, is shocking in someone who with his hands and with his mind *could* perhaps have helped to mould that future . . . When I say that an act like this is no solution, I do not mean, please believe me, to moralize. None of us have the right, in the final analysis, to pass verdict on a decision this serious. But you cannot help wondering where the blame *should* be placed . . .

John Brunner, author of THE NUMBER OF MY DAYS which appears elsewhere in this issue, and of SUBSTITUTE GOD (*Fantastic Universe,* August 1958), had this to say about a story in the same issue.

"By the way, on a purely friendly basis, I should be careful about running stories like THE FLYING CUSPIDORS. You're bound to get some cussed person like me saying, 'Yes, not a bad story. First time I read it was in one of the Standard magazines—*Startling* or *Thrilling Wonder*—four or five years ago. The trumpeter didn't talk such ridiculous slang then, of course, and he was with Rusty Mason's

band in the present instead of someone else's up in the future, and the reason why he could play supersonic notes was because he had some fancy dentistry on his lower front teeth and not owing to some unconvincing surgery on his tongue, and the effect of his playing was to make women undress in public, and the writer showed rather more knowledge of the music business, seeing that he was Larry Clinton, composer and arranger best known for his tune 'The Dipsy Doodle'—but the scene where the trumpeter breaks the glass in a barroom mirror was quite familiar . . ."

Any comments, anybody?

Members of the former New York Science Fiction Circle have just reorganized as *Metropolitan Fandom* (or *Metrofen,* for short). George Nims Raybin has been elected President, with David MacDonald serving as Secretary. The group will be meeting the third Sunday of each month. For further information, write to Mr. Raybin at 1326 Grand Concourse, Bronx 56.

DEPARTMENT OF SOME CONFUSION. This column has found some books—not published by trade houses—to be extremely interesting. Marla Baxter's recent MY SATURNIAN LOVER (Vantage Press, $2.50) is an example. On the other hand, I must admit to being rather confused by Aaron Arne's fantasy, FEET OF CLAY (Vantage Press, $5.00) and William P. Heyne's TALE OF TWO FUTURES (Exposition Press, $3.00), both of which have reached us recently. The Norwegian-born Arne describes the adventures in Heaven of Julian Jorgen, "an easygoing, peace-loving American agnostic" (*can* there be a peace-loving agnostic?) which we are assured, may shock us, may stimulate, but which we won't find dull. This reader disagrees.—As for Mr. Heyne's curious TALE OF TWO FUTURES, "A Novel of Life on Earth and the Planet Paliades in 1975," this I am afraid I was mildly distressed by.

There are times when you find yourself wondering what has happened to the writers in this generation who are as facile and probably in the final analysis better writers than those who were "names" yesterday, but who are somehow unable to stir our imaginations and our curiosity about the outside world the way writers like Talbot Mundy (and for that matter Robert E. Howard) did. Mention Mundy's name, and you see a gleam in the eye of the person you are talking to, as both of you think back to JIMGRIM, KING OF THE KHYBER RIFLES, THE LION OF PETRA, and the many other novels that made Mundy's name synonymous with a sense of excitement—I am almost tempted to murmur "a sense of wonder"—curiously absent in the majority of today's "adventure" novels.

There is, incidentally, an innocent quality to the violence in these novels (true also of the Conan saga), a curious innocence obvious in these days when it is more fashionable to dwell lovingly, and in minute detail, on these moments. And this is also true of Mundy's TROS OF SAMOTHRACE, which has just been reprinted, and handsomely so, by the Gnome Press ($4.95, 949 pp.), in their Fantasy Classic Library.

It is true that there *is* a certain school of writing—generally rather long-winded—that you suspect is encouraged by some publishers because the finished product looks good on the living room table. It can be pointed to with pride, lying there next to the book club selection, as evidence of your obvious interest in—or at least desire to be interested—in the world across the mountains. There are of course communities where this is admirable, but unfortunately the influence of this school extends into our suburbs.

TROS OF SAMOTHRACE, I hasten to add, is emphatically not in this category. The publishers, with complete justification, call it "a magnificent novel of lusty, brawling adventure" which is "set 2,000 years ago, when the world was young and its frontiers misty, and when a free man's life expectancy was measured by his own strength and the ability to see through other men's treachery." Romanticists may quarrel with the non-Shakespearean portrait of Julius Caesar which emerges, an ambitious, cold-blooded man who has a high awareness of his own destiny, and purists may quarrel (searching vainly for authority in texts) with the concept that there ever was a Tros of Samothrace, repeatedly blocking Caesar's efforts to conquer Britain. Be that as it may, the Europe and the Rome of Caius Julius Caesar—and of Tros of Samothrace—which we see here, come to life with a vividness found in few novels of more recent vintage. You are with Tros as he fights his way out of trap after trap, and you are with Tros as he argues with the Druids as Britain faces invasion. And you lay the book down at long last, aware that for a while you *have* been in that world that knew an ambitious Caesar—and so many others . . .

Don't miss it!

Walter Dornberger's *V-2* (Ballantine Books, 50 cents) is dramatic confirmation of how close Hitler *did* come to permanently changing the course of history. The factors that prevented this were, of course, apart from the personality of the man himself, the nature of the power-hungry men who surrounded him—their greed and their monumental inefficiency.

If Himmler and the lesser Himmlers had not interfered, it is not inconceivable that the little band of dedicated men around Dornberger, men who lived, breathed and

dreamt only of rockets, WOULD have succeeded much sooner in making the V-2 a reality. Instead, Dornberger was never given full authority until the final days when this "full authority" was in reality too late—and worthless.

We meet Hitler, we meet Himmler, and all the others who were part of this Wagnerian effort to rewrite history in blood. We hear Himmler speak: "The Führer thinks and acts for the benefit of Europe. He regards himself as the last champion of the Western World and its culture. He is convinced that modern achievements in technology, especially railroad, highway and air transport, have made national boundaries unimportant and obsolete." (p. 167) *And* we meet young Wernher von Braun, who had joined Dornberger in 1932, and we are with General Dornberger as von Braun is arrested, twelve years later, charged with sabotage of the A-4 project, and Field Marshal Keitel tells Dornberger: "Do you know that your closest colleagues have stated in company at Zinnowitz that it had never been their intention to make a weapon of war out of the rocket? That they had worked, under pressure from yourself, at the whole business of development *only* in order to obtain money for their experiments and the confirmation of their theories? *That their object all along has been space travel?*" (page 179.)

The late Fletcher Pratt wrote, when the book first appeared, that "—it filled in many of the gaps in my own knowledge of the big rockets, and it will, of course, be indispensable to anyone who wants to understand how and why they were developed."

I agree completely. This is an extremely important book. Don't miss it!

There are times (to digress for a moment) when you think longingly of the dear bygone days when novels like James Blish's A CASE FOR CONSCIENCE (Ballantine Books, 35 cents) were not unique in a field dedicated, at one time, to speculative thought, but it appears that novels like that will continue to be unique for some time to come.

A number of factors contribute to this of course, apart from developments in World Affairs. As a people, we seem to be in a period of transition, a period of reassessment of certain values and of denial of still others. Whatever the causes may be (and no one man or school of writing can be called solely responsible), violence, on a gang and on a group level, *has* ceased to be an isolated phenomenon, and we find ourselves living with the reality of this senseless giggling urge to violence that is a part of the daily headlines.

A simultaneous and equally disturbing tendency is the tendency to abdicate from a sense of responsibility for what Tomorrow can mean, particularly disturbing when

found in SF fandom. Please understand that I am not too concerned about latter-day subscribers to Madame Kollantai's teachings. They will discover, in time, that she (as Madame de Stael before her) was mistaken. But I *am* concerned with this tendency to run away from reality, into the equally unreal dead-ends of violence or negativism. I am concerned because people will be needed to build that vaguely seen Tomorrow, a Tomorrow which demands something more of us than a retreat into our private little vacuums . . . But more on this some other time, perhaps.

An age of science will, of course, breed a new sort of resistance—a global underground—as man plots to free Earth from the domination of the hated aliens from the star-world of Alishang. Kenneth Bulmer's THE SECRET OF ZI (Ace Double Novels, 35 cents), describes the final phase of this resistance movement, led by men some of whom work high in the councils of the aliens, a movement handicapped by treachery—and by dreams. Despite occasional flaws—one or two characters are rather difficult to accept—this *is* an exciting adventure story which I am certain you will like. Some—no, many—will no doubt find Ray Cummings' BEYOND THE VANISHING POINT, the companion volume, pleasantly familiar.

Jeff Sutton (whoever he may be) succeeds in telling a first-rate adventure story with his FIRST ON THE MOON (Ace Novels, 35 cents). It is obvious that the race for the moon will be close, and that every effort will be made by the other side to sabotage our effort—even after we reach there. Out of this Sutton has fashioned an exceptionally credible story of Adam Crag's expedition—and Intelligence's efforts to identify the saboteur before it is too late. Do read this!

Finally, may I pay brief tribute to a wryly humorous man whose work (in apparent contradiction of everything that I said a while ago) *has* become a part of our times. Whether or not you quite *believe* in Pogo, you will soon understand the people who insist that Pogo has always been with us. And perhaps they are right.

Walt Kelly's GO FIZZICLE POGO (Simon & Schuster, $1.) will be welcomed by these and others who share Walt Kelly's feelings about what he rightly calls "the Abominable Snowman of Ignorance."

requiem for a dryad

by . . . Robert J. Shea

From the beginning of time there have been moments like this when Man has come closer to the Nature Forces.

HE WOKE to see the camp doctor looking down at him.

"Mean crack on the skull," said the doctor. "Lucky they pulled you out of the water before you lost a leg."

"Or got killed," said Tommy and the doctor nodded silently. It was like that—working where they float the big timber downstream. Tommy gazed up at the doctor with large eyes that made him seem younger than his twenty-nine years.

He remembered the log jam, how his heart was beating wildly, how he'd wished to hell he was on dry land and not out in the middle of a rumbling cauldron of timber and water.

Then his cork shoes had slipped and he'd fallen over backwards. Someone yelled. Water and sky turned over.

The last thing he'd seen, from a crazy angle, was miles and miles of bright green forest, stretching serenely into the distance.

Now the doctor said, "Maybe you're all right, and maybe not. Every injury to the head is a concussion. You'll stay in bed and we'll wait and see."

He felt fine, except for a slight

In the last issue (and again this time) we explore the survival of a legend as old as the hills, very likely the reason why old peoples—in very old countries—still worship dimly remembered and little talked about personifications of Forces that were old when Man was young.

headache, until nightfall. He was about to fall asleep. The magazine dropped from his hands.

Then someone called him.

"Tommy." A clear, sweet voice sang his name.

He sat bolt upright in the dispensary bed. You didn't hear a woman's voice calling you in the middle of the night with the nearest woman hundreds of miles away. There *was* something wrong with his head.

He wouldn't make a fool of himself, telling anyone he heard voices. He would just forget about it. He lay down. Red and yellow and blue lights danced before his closed eyes.

Like a crystal bell, the voice called again. "Tommy." It drew his name out, made two long and loving notes of it.

He sat up again. Maybe he was out of his head, but suddenly he was very sure that he heard the voice, and, as if to convince him, the voice called a third time.

If it were a real voice, there was someone out there in the woods, and if there were someone in the woods, he could go out and find her, and see whether he was crazy.

He climbed out of bed and pulled on his khaki trousers and his heavy hickory stripe shirt.

He walked out into the bright moonlight glinting cold through the tops of giant firs. His cork shoes were silent as moccasins on the thick carpet of pine needles.

He felt that the whole forest was peopled with shadows, whispering to each other in the wind, drifting in bunches among the tall, ancient trees. The low silhouettes of the one-story camp buildings vanished behind him.

There were moments when he thought he was lost. Then the voice would call again. He'd walk on, silently, intently, deeper into the forest. His brain filled with memories, but they were somehow not his own memories. They were images of trackless forests full of life, joyous life, but not human life. It might have been a few minutes, it might have been hours, that he walked, with the voice calling his name to guide him—

"Tommy."

But he wasn't tired.

Then he came upon one huge old tree, its top overtowering the black roof of the forest.

There was a woman standing beneath the tree. At first he thought she was an Indian girl.

She was pressed against the tree, facing him, her arms reaching back, clinging to the bark. She was nude, and Tommy's eyes widened and his breath stopped in his throat. Indian girls didn't walk naked in the woods at night.

The moonlight made her skin shine like white marble. Her eyes were large and dark, and her black hair swept up, held by a simple circlet of gold. Indian girls didn't wear gold.

Tommy spoke first. "I thought it was the crack on my head made me hear you," he whispered.

Her voice had the undertone of a

lullaby. "It was the hurt in your head, Tommy. It touched your brain and made you able to see and hear me. Once in centuries a man is able to see one of us."

"Of who—?"

"You would have known, in another time," said the woman shining against the black trunk. "You would have called me Dryad. I am the tree, Tommy. I am to the tree what your spirit is to your flesh."

Tommy didn't understand, and he didn't answer. He waited in the pale light and the woods whispered around him.

"This forest is very old," she said, "and men have never come here before. Men kill us. At last men have come into this forest to cut me down. That is what brought you to me. Tomorrow, that is what will destroy me."

"No," said Tommy.

"I have been here with this tree for hundreds of years," she said. "You are the first man who has seen me. Come to me, Tommy."

Slowly she drew her arms away from the tree and reached out to him. He came to her as a man approaches a shrine, reverently stretching out his hands to touch her.

Then, on a bed of pine needles, he gave her a lonely woodsman's love, a logger's fierce love. And she gave him in return the dark wonder of a mystery that was old before man. Somehow, suddenly, he understood, with an instinctive knowledge in nerve and muscle, that her body was not a fleshly body, that she was the spirit living in the giant fir tree, that its ancient, primal life was her life.

He fell asleep in her arms, lying, spent, on the springy mat of the forest floor.

The searing shriek of a donkey-engine's whistle brought him upright.

"You sleep out here all night?" said a bearded man, squinting at him.

Tommy blinked. The lumberjacks had invaded the woods. The air was filled with the whistle and chug of engines and the tramp of boots, the shouts of the donkey-skinners, and the rasp of two-handed saws.

A man in a red shirt swaggered up to the gigantic old fir tree. The early morning sun glinted on the blue steel of his axe.

Tommy's whole body went cold. The man's muscles bulged under his shirt, as he casually, easily swung the axe back. For the first blow at *her* tree.

"No!" Tommy shouted. Wildly he plunged at the man. His flying fists struck solid flesh. The man staggered back.

Someone said, "Hit his head yesterday. Log jam. Must be crazy." A small crowd gathered. They pressed in on Tommy.

The man in the red shirt loomed before him. A huge fist came around. The man in the red shirt was calm and businesslike, as if felling a tree. He battered Tommy into unconsciousness.

Then he was in the dispensary again.

He was alone when he woke up, and he felt his head. It ached, but something was gone. That sense of a world crowded with life that was not human, was gone.

They hadn't undressed him. He stood up and walked out of the dispensary.

He looked down at the river. Thousands of brown-gray-black logs, all alike, rolled in the water, floating downstream to the sawmill. Tears were running down Tommy's cheeks.

He went to the bunkhouse to pack his things. He was leaving the woods. He was through with logging.

trap for the bleeder

by . . . John J. McGuire

They knew so little about him. Three men had seen him and lived. The others had all died, very very slowly.

I SAT under the armorglass dome of my tank, enjoying my final cigarette for the day and not at all enjoying my thoughts.

Petra-on-Mars is no place to think of murder. Though age-worn and crumbling, this city of the Old Race is too beautiful under the moons for thoughts of anything except the mystery of the vanished people who built it. This city of no straight lines, where every curve is a natural flow into another, will some day be the perfect spot for lovers to visit. No, not young people, vibrantly alive, with a future as bright and glittering as their joy in each other; but the older ones, on their last honeymoon, those to whom love is a serenity and a buttress with which to face the questions dead Petra asks.

The only trouble was, I had to think about murder. It was my job, had been for the two years since I had been transferred from Venus, stripped of my Constabulary rank and given this prospector's tank and trailer outfit. I was no longer Lt. Sorge Parsons. I was "Circuit Rider," just another desert rat.

With a man on my mind.

A world isn't such a big place.

John J. McGuire, author of this story of the hunt for a murderer on Mars, will be remembered as the author, with H. Beam Piper, of LONE STAR PLANET (Fantastic Universe, *March 1957) published recently by Ace Double Novels as* A PLANET FOR TEXANS. *He lives in New Jersey.*

Each time I followed a smoke ring until it broke against the top of my tank my eyes were filled with the stars. On all sides a level glance saw the decay of ages. Distance and antiquity, these can make a world a little place.

Except when you're hunting for one man.

Then, no matter how you quarter it, vector the quarters and subdivide the vectors, a world is an awfully big place to go hunting one man.

The Bleeder . . . a name from the way his victims looked after he left them unconscious on their spaceships, with the ports open and the air making a glad rush to the vacuum outside . . . an extremely tall, extremely thin man, from the description of the only three who had seen him and lived . . . and an educated guess that we would find him on Mars.

Beyond that, nothing, except a world to search, a job to do.

I looked again at the stars, again at the flowing loveliness of Petra. I was happy that they both spoke of eternity. It was beginning to seem that we would need it.

Then I killed my cigarette, and with it, my thoughts. When my job began to get me that way, it was past time for bed.

The pillow speaker under my head buzzed arrogantly. At the first snarl I was awake, with an automatic glance toward the clock. The glowing hands read 0410.

I stumbled drowsily to the scrambler. As usual, they call me when I'm sleeping best.

"Parsons here," I mumbled.

"Get a tape ready for hi-speed, Circuit Rider. Cut it as soon as the chief is ready. What he doesn't say, the sub-chiefs will."

"Okay," I answered, a little more awake. If it was the chief at this time of the morning, it was important.

A fifteen-second wait, which I used to prepare the recorder, then a clear high-pitched voice: "Parsons?"

"Yes, sir!" I was crisp and all soldier, because it *was* the chief.

"Where are you, and dammit, Dispatcher, get this map up to date!"

"Petra, sir."

"What are you doing there? We went over those ruins only a month ago, for the tenth or twelfth time."

"I have to be out on Red Desert somewhere, sir, to find the transmitter. So I'm putting in the time booby-trapping this place with the new alarms keyed to HQ. Then if anyone comes in without the neutralizer, you'll know it and can send a jet—"

"All right, doesn't matter anyhow. Get awake and set a full-speed course for Red Lake. The tape will tell you why. And Parsons, you may need that transmitter, so get it ready. Now, Dispatcher, take over here and have Jones keep trying to get me—"

"Ready, Parsons?" the dispatcher cut in.

"Yes, go ahead, but first take a minute to tell me what's up."

"Two words, son: the Bleeder. Now get yourself off and that tape on. And if you're smart, you'll start rolling before you take time to listen to it. You've got a long way to go."

I took that advice. While the hi-speed tape took down the gabble and then the re-talkie translated that on another spool into understandable language, I checked my maps.

The dispatcher was right. I did have a long way to go. Petra is two hundred miles in a straight line across the desert from Red Lake, but no one can take a straight line across Red Desert.

However, the robopilot that ran my outfit could take a police obstacle course at high speed better than I guiding it manually. So I punched in the route, waited the minimum minute to make sure the controls were working, then impatiently turned on the play-back.

What I heard finished getting me awake faster than a slug of benzo-coffee.

Cass Carter—and no one on Mars made a joke to his face about his name—was the wealthiest merchant on the planet. *Had been:* early this morning he had tried to scrub eight years of crime from his soul with the soap of a death bed confession. But he had tried too late. All he had been able to choke out of a phlegm-clogged throat had been a couple of phrases. "The Bleeder . . . now . . . at Red Lake . . . or near it . . ."

The monotone of the tape went on, reciting every known fact on the Bleeder case. Which was in itself important, because that announced they were going to use every available man on the case, including some to whom the details would be new.

But I listened with only half-attention. My mind had another task, to come away from the spell of Petra and be once more that of a man roaming the deserts.

"Circuit Rider" Parsons. One of the hundreds of dreamers combing the waste spaces of a world slowly coming back to life, looking for the artifacts of civilization that had died before our race had begun. Looking for the one big strike that would make me wealthy. Learning in the end that the wandering itself came to mean more than anything that could be found.

At least that is what it had come to mean to me and my primary purpose on the desert had not been to comb yesterday's homes for money today. I had been just a cop in plain-clothes with a sub-sector of a world to search through for traces of a vicious space-pirate.

The Bleeder.

The monotone of the tape had not lasted long. It was a brutal fact that we knew far too little of the Bleeder and, if he had one, his gang.

We had to admit he was a neat workingman. With InterPlanetary Transport no longer allowed to screen its passengers, anyone with the passage money could joy-ride between the planets. So he was able to pick his time, usually when everyone was asleep, to hit the central air-conditioner with a gas-bomb, loot a ship and leave in one of its lifeboats.

It had been no guess to assume that the Bleeder had known someone who could tell him what ships to pick, because he had been choicy. What he had grabbed had been portable, valuable and saleable.

Cass Carter fitted in there two ways, finding out what to take and getting rid of it afterward.

And Carter's death was a pleasant confirmation of our choice of Mars as the planet to search. Constab HQ had made that decision with just these few facts to back them up. Only liners leaving Mars had been hit. The technique indicated someone accustomed to working in lesser-than-Earth gravity. Only on Mars or its moons had lifeboats from those liners been found. Later, only on Mars had we picked up some special, tracer-tagged stuff, sold and in use.

I finished my breakfast by taking a cup of coffee with me to the dome while I made a visual check.

I could have stayed below. The robopilot had already guided my rig through the pass from Petra to the desert and was picking the smoothest way across the dunes. So I went back into character and lifted my binoculars just to see what I could see.

That was how I spotted the bad news a long way off. A sandstorm, going the same direction I was, but traveling faster. I was too disgusted to talk to myself and I'm my own best listener. There's nothing more monotonous than riding out a storm. You can't do anything except sit or sleep, trust to the pilot, and in this case, hope to make good time. I couldn't even listen to the radio because of the wild static kicked up by those dusty winds.

Too full of benzo-coffee to sleep, all I could do was sit.

Twelve hours later, when the storm had left me behind, I grabbed my binoculars to see if I could spot a landmark and get a fix on where I was.

No reason to call it luck. The stuff built into my combo was the very best. Still, I was happy to see that I was only five miles from Bad Teeth Mountains and three north of Broken Tooth Gap.

The habits I had picked up playing prospector and the slant of the sun united to give me another break. As I swung the glasses in a complete horizon check, streaks on the sand to my left oblique caught and held my attention. I kicked the controls over to manual and halted on top of a dune.

No question about it: those streaks could have been made only

by a small ship, say about lifeboat size. And nothing legitimate would land out here, close to the caves of Bad Teeth Mountains. Or if they had, they would have filled the kilocycles with howls for help. Because, like every other prospector, I had kept my regular radio—not the police one—on the general band, I was fairly sure that there had been no such appeals in the past week.

Another trace of the Bleeder?

Could be, I decided; luck had been running against him. Suppose that storm had gone to my left instead of spiraling toward my right? It would have wiped those burns completely off the changing dunes.

So I took the time to mark the exact location of the streaks on my map. Then, still on manual control, I headed for the gap.

They had been waiting in the slanting shadow, I had been riding in the sun. They saw me first and started giving orders.

"M-7 tank and trailer, pull to a stop and elevate your guns!"

They roared single file out of the gap and then rapidly deployed, two light 4's and a 5. The 5 headed directly toward me, keeping himself a narrow target; the 4's split, one racing to my left and the other to my right.

I weighed my chances, my one against their three, and gave them an answer they didn't expect. I turned to angle toward my right. That made me a better target for the 5 at my front, but I could also take a longer track on the tanks to my right and left.

"M-7! Elevate your guns before we start shooting!"

There were two tiny clicks and two yellow lights flashed on. My 75's were on target, I was ready to argue. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Maybe because they recognized my voice, maybe because I didn't bother to drop my trailer, anyhow, their tone changed.

"Listen, take it easy, we don't want any trouble."

"Fine," I applauded them, "neither do I. So just get out of my way, I'm going through the gap."

They stayed stubborn: "We're going to search you first!"

"Don't make me laugh! You're no more Constabulary than I am and nobody else gets into this tank."

"You aren't going through the gap until we search your tank!"

They were damned fools enough to mean it, I decided, and they had me in a rough place. I couldn't merely knock them off: they just might be law-abiding citizens with a local vigilante problem. But I couldn't let them look inside my tank either: my cover as a desert-rat would last just long enough for them to get back to their blasted radios.

There was a way out and I took it. I flipped the tank back into automatic and the guns over to manual. Then I sighted about five

yards in front of the tanks to my right and left.

A big rock in front of the 4 on my left disappeared with a BOOM and a shower of slivers. I jumped back to the other gun and ate a path through the sand for the 4 over there to consider.

Through my throat-mike I said, "That would have left you and me, Mr. 5 in front, and you know the answer to that as well as I do. So let's talk this over like a couple of gentlemen."

"It could be he don't know," a new voice chimed in hesitantly.

"If it's anything new, I don't. I've been in a storm all day," I informed them.

That was an easy way out, so they took it and talked, sometimes all three at once, and I sorted out what they told me.

Boiled down, it came to this: some commentator with more news sense than common sense had taken advantage of a confidential briefing and broken the Bleeder story.

Bad enough, but he went from there to worse.

He had not only yakked to all of startled Mars that the general whereabouts of the killer was definitely known, to be around Red Lake, but he had also thrown in advice on how to catch a criminal. Every citizen in the area was to report all suspicious characters and actions to the nearest police station immediately.

He couldn't have picked a more efficient way to tear our net to tatters. The uniformed police would not dare ignore any of the calls—after all, it might be the Bleeder—but, in effect, it scattered them all over the country-side on wild-goose chases. They couldn't possibly maintain an effective cordon around the area.

I saw what it meant and cut them short so I could call HQ. "Okay, I get the picture. But why did you want to stop me?"

"Just to make sure that you don't have the Bleeder riding with you. We're a Citizens' Vigilante Committee—"

"With nothing on your minds except law and order," I finished for them. "Never a thought of the reward, I know."

No answer.

"And get this," I added, a little sorry now that I hadn't taken them on, "your story's as full of holes as your tanks should be right now. Where did you get that crack-pot mush that the Bleeder would be in a tank going *toward* Red Lake? Hell, he's heading full speed *away* from it if he's got the brains he seems to have."

I stopped for a moment to let that sink in, then said, "I wonder what would have happened if I had been sucker enough to open up and let you take a look inside my can? What kind of accident story would you men have dreamed up?

"You bums do an about-face and head back through the Gap. Even knowing how weak your stomachs

are, I still don't trust you behind me. Roll, boys, roll!"

Naturally, we had been talking on the general band. So they knew as well as I did, that with a lot of Mars listening in, their little get-rich-quick-and-easy dream had gone like a million others when the alarm clock sounds.

Everyone on Mars had called Mater a fancy fool when he had gone to the tremendous expense of importing a convertor big enough to make and maintain a lake. Wise heads had shaken and wise tongues had said that he should have used it on a sure thing, like irrigation for instance.

But they had forgotten, or didn't consider, just how water-hungry people can get. And so they came from all over Mars, willing to pay the luxury prices he charged, to see and use a body of water big enough to swim in.

His place was a dream that made money from the first day it opened. His best customers, men who would work a Martian year on the desert to spend a week at the Inn, were the prospectors, as I was supposed to be.

An attendant guided me with hand-signals to a vacant spot in the garage. But before I got out, I called Mater.

"What's on your mind, Parsons?" Mater had an easy genial voice and a corresponding manner.

"What I have in this tank with me. Send me a cop. I want a witness even with you when I open this box."

"You do?" There was more than a hint of skepticism in his voice. Almost every week someone fresh from the desert went through this with him and so far it had never been worth the trouble.

"I do. And I'm going to tell you what it is. On the general band, so everyone on Mars will know. Then I'll feel safer.

"I've got a child's toy, Mater. Just a child's toy, but it explains why the Old Race never used surface transportation."

I settled back to wait and while I waited, I wondered if our bait was good enough. HQ psych-experts argued that it was. Johnson, the department head, had explained it this way: "This gadget fits his M.O. It's small, easy to move and with a seeming-value almost incalculable."

"Who's going to buy it?" I had wanted to know.

"That's the beauty of it," Johnson had said softly. "The only place he can sell this is to the government. He'll use this to buy the one big thing he should be aching for right now, immunity from prosecution.

"This gadget has more than the high, ripe smell of money. It has the fresher odor of freedom, a way out of the trouble he's in."

"And anywhere he takes it, we'll know where he is," had come from Gilkins, our micro-tech handyman.

"May be hard on the man I leave

it with," I pointed out, reminding them of the Bleeder's methods and record.

"We'll be there," the chief had said shortly. "You may seem to be alone. But we will be there."

A loud banging on the door reverberated through the tank and snapped me out of my half-doze. I picked up the long tool-box and dropped from my chair in the dome to the floor. Standing well to the left, I opened the door and glanced at the mirror above the jamb.

All clear. Only Mater and one of the local Constab sergeants; the talkative one, according to my briefing.

I stepped out and locked the door with my fingerprints. "Might as well leave it open," said Mater soberly. "Every prospector in the hotel will be out on Red Desert tomorrow."

I glanced at my outfit, wondering what he saw.

"There," and he pointed to the treads. "The only place they are using the lichen near here is on the desert."

I looked. The rust-eating lichen which had transformed the sand into the dirt suitable for Terran plants and at the same time given Mars its atmosphere was at work on the treads.

"If you really did get anything," he went on, "I hope you cleaned out the place where you found it. Some of these old boys like Billy BeDamned know the desert well enough to guess which rock you were looking under."

He bit his lip, added, "There's one thing we can do which will help for a while. Besides, I can't have that stuff loose in my garage. Joe!"

A mechanic rolled out from under a sand buggy.

"Put a quarantine coat over Parson's tank and trailer. Now! His iron has the lichen."

No need to tell Joe to get his hustle-bustle on. Before the three of us reached the now useless air-lock doors to the hotel, my rolling home with its hungry moss was being enveloped in a cloudy protective hood.

Red Beach Inn is built like a gigantic E with the long back of the E facing the artificial lake. The right wing, as seen from the garage, was a store which stocked everything from teething rings to tank and trailer outfits.

The center, through which we entered the hotel, was first of all rooms for the help. I stopped at one and said hello to the hotel's mascot and one of Mater's charities. Tall, gaunt Billy BeDamned, an old-timer of indeterminate age, his real name lost in years of wandering. One of the kind that had it so bad that he was willing to work at anything three-fourths of the year just to be on the desert the other quarter.

Then the kitchen, loud to the ears and nose with good cooking.

Through the swinging doors into the crowded bar and dining room.

Our path across the dining room was marked by chatter dying to whispers and roving attention suddenly becoming a fixed stare. But we weren't in the public eye long. We made a broken-field diagonal through the tables to the hallway going to the store. Halfway down the hall we stopped and Mater led us into his office.

"Now," he said, seating himself behind his desk, "let's see what you've got worth the honor of my personal escort."

I put the tool-box on the floor, opened it, put the contents on the table. Two blocks of metal with a pole stuck in each one. On top of each pole was a circle of the same metal as the pole and the base.

"This is a secret?" Mater grunted.

I didn't say anything, just fiddled around until I had the hoops in line, about a yard apart.

"I've seen something like that in reconstructions of the old cities," the sergeant observed.

I picked up a pencil from Mater's desk, touched the point to the center of the right circle.

It popped out of that left hand circle three feet away, then rolled a little bit and fell to the floor.

I looked at Mater and the sergeant, wondered why they didn't join the pencil on the floor.

"Do that again!" Mater could barely get the words out.

I didn't blame him. I had felt the same way the first time I had seen it.

I retrieved the pencil, sent it from the left-hand hoop back through the right. Then picked it up and wrote my name with it. In full.

Mater grabbed the pencil from my hand, wrote with it, shot it through the circles, wrote with it again. Then he accepted what he had seen.

"A perfect matter transmitter!" he breathed.

I nodded.

"Let me try that," said the sergeant. He did and began to believe what he had seen.

"How did you discover this?" Mater asked. "I mean, the fact they're transmitters."

"Accident and half-hunch," I said. "Like the sergeant, I've seen those reconstructions, and when I saw these, I got to fooling around. A key fell out of my pocket and—" I shrugged.

"What's the range of operation? Where did you find it? Are there any more—"

"Hold it," I cut in. "First, let's record a partnership. Fifty-fifty. I've got the gadget, you've got the money. Second, let me get cleaned up on the outside and a good meal on the inside. Then we'll talk facts. But not until then."

His turn to shrug and smile, tolerant from long association with the breed I was pretending to be. "You roverboys are all alike. But in this case I'm lucky. You didn't

add the usual third item to that list."

"Women can wait," I said carelessly, "until we have this settled. Then I'll buy the best, not what you have around here."

Mater was too busy tele-dialing the capitol to lie about the women at Red Beach. It took only a couple of minutes, with the sergeant as our witness to mutual statements concerning no coercion, for us to become half-partners.

As soon as the transaction was recorded, I stood up and announced, "I want a room and a meal."

He waved me out of the office. "Just go over, I'll call ahead."

He didn't question my hurry. It was natural to my role and besides, he was already playing with his new toy.

He couldn't possibly have guessed my real reason, that I wanted out of the road to leave a clear path into the trap for the Bleeder.

The sergeant walked down the hall with me to the dining room. He was, I noted as soon as we hit the crowd, glad to be at my side picking up some of my importance.

And I was important. The signs were there again in the looks and the voices.

The room-registry was at the end of the bar nearest the lake. There was a key and a bell-hop waiting for me.

I kept a straight face when the sergeant suddenly decided that he had to leave me. He gave a sound physical reason for doing so, but I noticed that the condition of his kidneys didn't stop him from having a double-header about three strides down the bar.

A double-header for which he naturally did not pay.

I had no objection. I wanted the news to get around, far, wide and fast. The talkative sergeant would help.

The bell-hop bowed me down the hall to the guest-room wing of the hotel. I dismissed him quickly; I had been there before and didn't need a lesson in the conveniences. Then I killed an hour enjoying the luxury of an unlimited supply of water to soak in, having my clothes cleaned, and easing my nervousness in the massage chair.

Finally I ran out of excuses for not doing it, so I got dressed, checked my pistol and left my room.

Evening had come and almost deepened into night, but the lights in the hall weren't on yet. I walked scared. Every shadow was the Bleeder.

I stopped at the doorway to the bar to take my first drink. It was a deep one but non-alcoholic, made up of lights, noise, the company of other people. And I made a point of studying faces. There was always the chance some one from Venus had drifted in and would recognize "Circuit Rider" Parsons as Constabulary Lt. Parsons.

But the faces were just faces, so

I swaggered in. On my way to the bar, I bumped into Billy.

"When that corner's empty, Billy," I said, pointing to the safe one where a parakeet scrambled up and down a perch, "have a meal ready for me. Start it off with chilled, fresh pineapple, Earth-grown."

I went on from there, ordering the usual wild mixture a man begins to hunger for after eating concentrates a while. Then I turned to the bar.

Six feet of open space was waiting for me. So was a respectful bartender.

I focussed my eyes past his face and described a dream. "I want a beer. A glass of Terran. The glass beaded with moisture, the beer ice-cold, with bubbles sparkling up through it and a good inch of creamy foam on top.

"Then, after I've washed the taste of tank-oil out of my mouth, we'll start some serious drinking."

The dream appeared in front of me and while I sipped, no one spoke to me. For a man fresh from the desert, the first drink was a ritual not lightly interrupted. But the space around me gradually lessened as the beer did and conversations which had stopped with my appearance began again.

On both sides of me the scraps I overheard were about the Bleeder. It was edgy talk, skirting away from the subject of the Bleeder's identity. After all, he was supposed to be somewhere around and—well, who knew everything about his neighbor at the bar?

I drained the last of the glass, breathing deeply as I did. The bartender was opposite me when I sat the glass down, looking for me with wise expectancy.

"Re-fill it," I said.

He cued me with a cocked eyebrow.

"Not just mine, but everyone's," I added.

A light sigh ran along the bar. These were the words they had been waiting for. With them I announced that I was ready for conversation and that I had something to boast about.

But about four yards to my right was a snarl of movement and the sound of a glass hitting the floor.

"I wouldn't drink what he buys if you paid me!"

I knew that voice. Not for sure: tank radio-phones aren't that soundworthy. But I was fairly sure that it was one of the men from the Five.

I turned his way, looked down a bar magically clear of other people.

"Don't tell me you're alone," I said politely. "I thought you worked only with flankers."

Around us, a low laugh. Our talk at the Gap had been on the general band and by now the story seemed to have gotten around.

On his face, a deeper red.

"No tank skin around us now," he answered, "if you want to pick up where we left off."

"What I said then still goes," I

told him. "Run along before I make some holes no mechanic can patch up."

Beside me was a quick breath and a sudden weight on my right arm. A tray full of food and a stumbling man landed against me and then on the floor. Down the bar, the man from the Number Five was laughing as he pulled his gun.

He was still laughing when he died.

I tucked my pistol back under my right armpit, thanked the gods of heredity that I'm left-handed, and reached down to pick up Billy. As I did, I wondered who had tripped him. But there wasn't a chance to make even a guess in the surge of the crowd.

"Was that for me?" I asked and kicked at the tray.

"Yes, sir," he wheezed. "All yours."

"Make me up another," I told him. "Bartender, I'll take my drink with me."

I picked up my new beer and worked my way back to the corner, paying no attention to Billy and a couple of bell-hops cleaning up the food and other garbage from the floor.

That wouldn't have been good manners.

Instead, I parked my back against the wall and took the second beer as carefully as I had enjoyed the first. And while I sipped, I debated the matter of accident or purpose.

I finally bought the incident as purpose. It fitted together too neatly. The tanker who had the solid reason of a tender ego to try and kill me. The quick foot that bounced Billy against what is usually a man's gun hand. The crowd for cover . . .

The parakeet jumped from its perch and scrambled down my arm to the table, hunting for a tidbit. I shifted my attention back to the world around me as Billy sat my first course down.

"Looks wonderful," I told him and it did.

"You need it," he answered.

"Don't hurry with the next course," I said. "I'm taking my time with this."

He disappeared, leaving me to admire the food before I surrounded it. The bowl was buried in ice and filled with yellow-golden, juicy chunks of fresh pineapple. My mouth watered and I stabbed a bite with my fork.

But the parakeet was ahead of me. With a squawk and a jump, it stole that golden mouthful and swallowed it in a greedy gulp.

It had a chance to give me a stare and another squawk, then it fell over, dead.

I couldn't move. I could only sit there, my mouth ready for food, my hand poised to supply it, and my eyes fixed on the dead bird.

Suddenly, I wanted to see Billy.

I shoved my chair back, stood

up, grabbed the shoulder of the man at the next table. "Which way did he go?"

He looked up at me with his face full of fright. "W-w-who?" he stuttered.

"Billy! Which way did he go?"

He couldn't talk, just pointed toward the kitchen.

I started that way in a hurry, bumped into the talkative sergeant.

"Come with me!" I snapped.

"Why?" he asked.

I opened my mouth to tell him, realized how silly it would sound unless I pulled out my identification in this crowded bar. "Skip it. Have you seen Billy?"

He was staring at me as if I were a half-wit. "Yes. Just a minute ago. Going down the hall toward Mater's office."

I heard him call after me. "What do you want Billy for?" But I didn't stop to answer.

When the door to the hallway closed behind me, I was abruptly wrapped in silence. This hall, like the one leading to the guest-wing, was also only dimly lit. There was enough light, however, to show me that the hall was empty.

I ran on tip-toe to Mater's office door, stopped.

The door was slightly ajar.

I touched it gently, moved it a little more open.

Still not a sound. Or, wait, was that the scuffle of a shoe? And something else, like a muffled, leaky faucet dripping.

I pushed the door hard, looked inside with only the edge of my left eye and over the barrel of my pistol.

The off-beat faucet was Mater's throat, irregularly but steadily spouting blood to the uncarpeted floor.

I was too late.

And maybe too soon!

The last thought was a warning which tensed every muscle as I rapidly scanned the room. But although I had seen the last pulse-beat which had lazily shoved the final drop from Mater to the pool on the floor, the corpse and I were alone.

And the transmitter was gone.

"Step inside, Parsons. You were the first here, you've got a lot to tell me."

I recognized the touch against my back as the quick come-and-go of a pistol. I also hoped that I recognized the voice as that of the talkative sergeant.

I held my weapon at "Raise pistol" and spoke over my shoulder. "There's a card in the butt of this gun."

"Let's see it. Easy." The voice was a little different, perhaps because he was on Constab business now.

I moved slowly. My right hand was the essence of innocence as it pulled my ident-card from inside the butt.

I handed it back over my shoulder and hoped that my ears had heard truly. The card was one I would rather be caught dead with-

out, but in some company I was dead if caught with it.

"All right, Lieutenant." The voice ached with reluctance to admit it. "You're clean. What happened?"

"I don't know. I just got here."

We looked at what was in front of us and read it the same way. At least, our chopped phrases fitted together.

Me: "Someone he trusted . . ."

Him: ". . . stood behind him . . ."

"But if he trusted him, then Mater and the Bleeder . . ."

"He has to hole up somewhere between jobs . . ."

"How did he leave here?"

The sergeant saw it first and pointed to the ceiling.

I looked up at the trap-door there, remembered the faint scuffle of feet that I thought I had heard and realized how close I had been to the Bleeder.

Bigger than the sergeant by a full six inches, I was the one to jump to the top of the desk. The opening was still almost two feet above my fingertips.

"Whoever made that jump is taller than you and that fits the Bleeder," the sergeant breathed softly.

I looked again at that dark opening above me. Someone had to follow the direct trail and I could probably make the jump where the sergeant couldn't. Besides, I ranked him, I was in command.

"Call HQ," I said and tensed for the leap.

"Don't bother," came in high-pitched tones from the door. "I told you, Parsons, that I would be here."

The chief, and with him, as usual, his commo-man and his bodyguard.

"Some notes in Cass Carter's files made sure that I would be here," he added. "Some notes that make me sorry I didn't have a long talk with Mater."

The pattern was complete: Billy's irregular trips into the desert, the rocket burns near the caves of Bad Teeth Mountains, a perfectly natural traffic between Mater's small store and Carter's big one . . . It all fitted, with full details later, if we ever caught the Bleeder.

"Get off the desk, Parsons. If he's in that loft now, let's locate his exact position with the tracer-set in the transmitter."

I cursed my stupidity and glanced at what was supposed to be a fancy wrist-watch. Its sweep-second hand was fixed pointing almost directly behind me. I projected that as a line on a mental map of Red Beach Inn.

"The garage!" I yelled, and my jump from the desk gave me a head start.

But we couldn't make it in time, not the way we had to go, the reverse of my trip to the office with Mater. Through the crowded bar, through the jumble of a busy kitch-

en, down the corridor past the room that had been Billy's.

When we got to the garage, we found only Joe, the mech, and he was holding his shoulder.

"Constab!" he roared. "Billy—in a sand cat—" and he waved toward Broken Tooth Gap.

Again I remembered those rocket burns and I knew where Billy was headed. I turned to tell the chief, but he was talking to his commo-man.

"We need some light," he said easily. Then to me, "Relax, this net is tighter than it looks."

He was right. The commo-man murmured into his mike and from way up high three jets screamed down. In widespread paralleled lines they thundered over the desert. From behind each one at three regular intervals a parachute blossomed. Almost at once the desert was lighted by nine big flares.

About a mile and a half away we could see a sand cat kicking up dust.

"You know his voice," the chief said to me and handed over the mike. "You're on the general band. I hope he is."

"Billy," and I kept my voice even, "we can see your cat and you haven't a chance. Better give up."

"That you, Parsons?" It was Billy BeDamned, but in lighter tones, without the wheeze that had been part of his character. "I thought I killed you and if you're Constab, I wish I had."

"Billy, last chance. Turn back!"

"You don't have me yet, Circuit."

But we did. The jet in the middle immelmanned back and in the white light of the flares, I could clearly see the bomb it dropped.

I closed my eyes until the radiance of the bomb was no longer a pressure on the lids and then I opened them. Where the cat had been was a small, growing tower of smoke and sand.

I didn't like what I saw.

"Well," the chief said cheerily, " a few odds and ends to clean up, but that's the main job done."

Yes, there were always a few odds and ends to clean up, and the main job was done, but I still couldn't like what I saw.

I was thinking of the people whom the Bleeder had killed when he had looted the liners, the death that had come to them in their sleep, the ugly death that had given him his name.

His death had come of his own choice. His eyes had been open. His end had been quick and clean.

So I couldn't like what I saw on the desert.

The Bleeder had died too damned fast.

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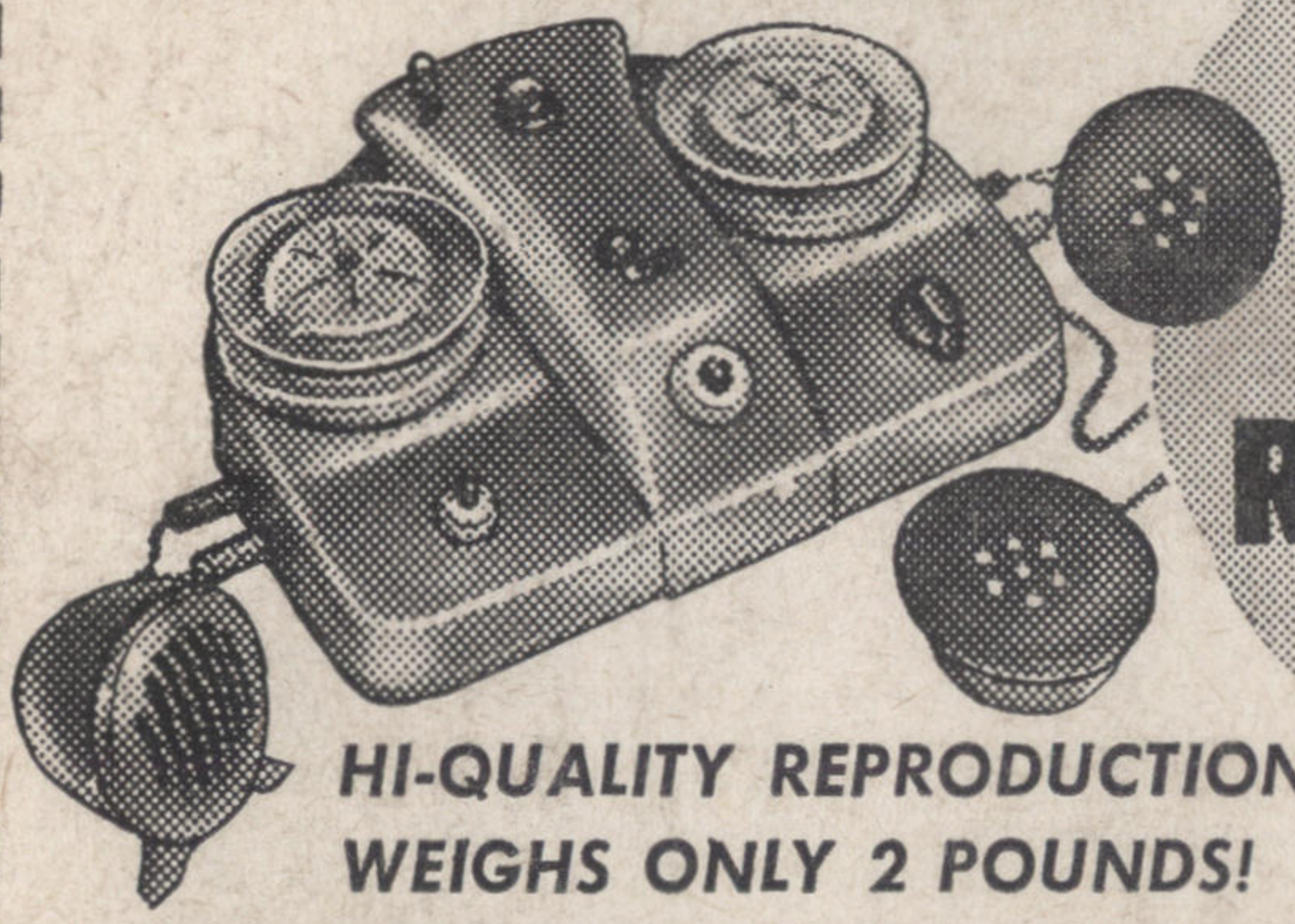

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